

India Farming: The Real Problem May Often be Different from Its Outward Manifestation

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Asia-Pacific Research, January 20, 2021

[Countercurrents](#)

Region: [South Asia](#)

Theme: [Society](#)

While trying to find sustainable, durable solutions to problems which have been building up over a long time, it is very helpful to keep in mind that the outward manifestation is not necessarily the real problem or its core. This is very evident in the context of farming where a number of serious problems have been building up over the last several decades.

In many areas the seeds and crop varieties which had evolved keeping in view the specific agro-ecological conditions of an area have been displaced from the fields of farmers. The self-reliance of farming communities in terms of the most basic input of seeds has been lost in vast areas. If the market provides only seeds which grow well only with chemical fertilizers and with even more specific pesticide and herbicide requirements then this has to be followed regardless of the economic costs and health hazards that may be involved. These changes increase pressures on farmers to change the cropping calendar based on new changes imposed from outside, and this in turn increases the pressure for ever-increasing mechanization of farming, which is facilitated by the availability of luring credit, inviting small farmers to invest more than they can afford in costly machines, with heavy payback schedules. This increases costs of farmers and risks of farmers considerably, and the increasing possibility of debts piling up. This problem increases with high interest rates, corruption in credit, sales of products of dubious quality, uses of heavy handed methods for recovery of loans.

With the excessive use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, organic content of soil declines, friendly organisms which keep on contributing to enhancing fertility and organic matter suffer holocaust and overall natural fertility declines, so that desperate farmers have to spend more and more on chemical fertilizers to maintain yields. Poisonous pesticides kill friendly insects and birds, including invaluable pollinators, in huge numbers, even as harmful targeted pests may develop immunity. Hence over a period, the factors that contribute to farming bounty without any economic costs decline, resulting in depletion of natural fertility and rising of costs.

The focus of technology based development leads to neglect of social dimensions of progress. Inequalities have existed for a long time resulting in concentration of land in the hands of a few households in many villages, although the situation may be better in some other villages. Often there is neglect of sections considered to be lower in rural social hierarchy, who are often also landless, leading to increasing alienation and sometimes even hostility. Farmers often forget the livelihood needs of landless farm workers needs while going in for expensive mechanization, while landless workers become more inclined towards

migration based livelihoods. There are growing fissures in community life as various sections form their own wider support groupings. Even though debts are rising, there is an increase in cash passing through hands. In some cases this leads to a rise in unaffordable wasteful expenditure, and what is worse, in increasing consumption of liquor and other substance abuse. Superstitions and regressive trends proliferate despite the outward signs of modernity, and when frustrations increase due to economic problems or social alienation/humiliation, these can be easily directed towards religious fundamentalism, communalism, sectarianism and the followings of various dubious, self-styled godmen and gurus, or else find another kind of outlet in crime.

All these accumulating problems create a distressing and tense situation when farmers do not get a fair price, or get less than expected or promised price for their produce. This may happen due to cheating by business interests, or a failure of government resulting from inefficiency, failure to allocate adequate resources for this purchase and the necessary infrastructure. In a situation of the government having very inadequate support for ensuring fair price for all, the bigger and more influential farmers corner the bulk of the benefits using various tricks. One of these is that taking advantage of the inability of small farmers to wait their turn in government purchase, the bigger farmers or traders may buy the produce of the small farmers at a much lesser price than the announced government price, and then sell it to the government in due course in the name of small farmers. Hence government records may continue to show significant procurement from small farmers, while the reality may be quite different.

As the immediate problem is the denial or delay of what is perceived to be a just and remunerative price, the entire focus may shift to this for getting some immediate relief, or else it may shift to writing off, or least postponement, of some loans or interest payments due to farmers. This is a response to the most obvious and visible current manifestation of the problem, and not to the many-sided, complex realities of the wider, deeper problem of rural distress and crisis.

It is important to realize this wider dimension of the existing problems, so that solutions do not remain confined to only those aspects which are more dominant at the level of outward manifestation and visibility. A much more holistic, comprehensive, deeper response is actually needed at several levels.

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