

Farmer Suicides and Distress in Agriculture

A Wake-up Call for India

From 1995 to 2010, in a period of 16 years, 256,913 farmers have committed suicide in India. Even during the period from 2004 to 2010 which is celebrated as the fabulous 9% growth story of India by the government, media and global elite, the farmer suicides have continued at an even higher rate – about 17,000 every year. Even today, one farmer is committing suicide every half-an-hour. What is the meaning of an “aam aadmi” government and “inclusive growth” when the farming community which forms 65% of the population is excluded? This is a burning question in front of India today.

The farmer suicides are only an indicator – for every farmer who takes the extreme step of suicide, there are 1000 others who are in a similar state of distress. A government study in Maharashtra showed that 2 out of every 3 farmers are in distress and 1 out of 4 in extreme distress. It is important to understand that this crisis is policy-driven – the promotion of unsustainable models of agriculture which impose high costs on the farmers and destroy the soil and water, the gradual withdrawal of support systems for the farming community in the past 15 years, the lack of focus on rainfed regions which constitute two-thirds of India’s cropped area, the failure to address the problems of tenancy and land rights, the large-scale displacement of farming community from their land in the name of “development projects”, and in the past decade, handing over natural resources like land, water, forest and seed to corporations, promoting Genetically modified crops and other proprietary technologies.

It is time for the government, the policy-makers and urban elite to recognize some facts.

- The truth is that India remains an agrarian nation with more than 60% people dependent on agriculture;
- Unless the distress in agriculture sector is addressed, none of the stated policy goals can be achieved – whether Rural Employment, Food Security, Health, Tribal Empowerment or even Urban development;
- The current model of high-input chemical agriculture has spoilt our soils (about 25% of the land has become saline and waterlogged), poisoned our water and farms, making agriculture unsustainable.
- For the consumers, the current model has only provided increasingly non-nutritious food laden with harmful chemicals which are often 100 times the allowed levels, with increasing rates of cancer, kidney problems, infertility, diabetes, obesity and heart disease.
- It is a myth to expect millions of farmers to leave agriculture and find other jobs – despite the much-touted economic growth, the organized sector still provides jobs only to 9% of the population, and in the past 20 years, the industry has been able to create only 25 million new jobs which is only 4% of our working population;
- With the distress in rural areas resulting in forced migration, even the urban areas cannot sustain;

So the only way forward is to push for Rural Renewal based on rejuvenation of agriculture and sustainable livelihoods of the small farmers and agricultural workers. Various successful experiences across India show that this is indeed possible. For this we demand a Kisan Swaraj Neeti.

KISAN SWARAJ NEETI

It is clear that the Western model of agriculture cannot show the way forward for India – with its high environmental and health costs, and enormous subsidies to support a few agri-businesses and only 2% of the population. On the other hand, pioneering work in various states, including successful large-scale adoption of community managed sustainable agriculture by small farmers and women farmers in A.P. and many profitable farmer institutions, show that India can build an alternative path that can be a model to other countries. The new approach should be based on 4 pillars, all of which are recognized as essential to be simultaneously put in place: (a) **income security** to all farming households, (b) **ecological sustainability** to preserve the productive natural resources, (c) **people's control over agricultural resources** including land, water, forest, seed and knowledge, and (d) **ensuring non-toxic, diverse, nutritious and adequate food for all Indians.**

1. Economic Sustainability and Income Security for Agricultural families

1.1 Farmers Income Commission: A statutory permanent commission should be formed with mandate of ensuring a minimum living income for all farming households – including small farmers, tenants, agricultural workers.

- 1.2 Promote Sustainable low-cost agriculture based on local resources**, with a decisive shift away from the high input-intensive, high-risk model of agriculture which has pushed the majority of small farmers into crisis.
- 1.3 Strengthen MSP and Procurement mechanism** and extend to all major crops, not only paddy and wheat as it is now. Adequate Price Stabilization Fund should be allocated for market intervention.
- 1.4 Price Compensation for food crops:** To ensure food security for the nation, it is essential to provide fair price to farmers who grow food crops. A Minimum Target Price should be set for each food crop; when the price realized by farmers from market or government is less than the Target price, the difference should be paid to the farmer directly. This can be done without increasing consumer prices and for all food crops even without procurement.
- 1.5 Provide adequate Disaster Relief** as per the recommendations of Hooda committee.
- 1.6 Ensure effective Crop Insurance** for all farmers, including tenants and non-loanees, providing premium subsidy.
- 1.7 Promote effective farmer institutions** for production, processing and marketing
- 1.8 Invest in rural infrastructure** for Storage, Marketing, Procurement and Processing, through farmer organizations
- 1.9 Provide Social Security for all Agricultural Families** including health care, old-age and disability pensions.

2. Ensuring Ecological Sustainability of farming

- 2.1. Implement a time-bound plan to transition Indian agriculture to ecologically sustainable models** – at the rate of 10% of cultivated land area each year – establishing support systems and incentives to enable this.
- 2.2. Phase out all Toxic Agri-Chemicals:** All Class-I and Class-II pesticides should be banned and others phased out according to a time-bound plan. Support rapid expansion of NPM (Non Pesticidal Management of crops).
- 2.3. Declare moratorium on the commercial release of all GM crops.** Enact a comprehensive law for ensuring bio-safety in the context of the GM trials as well as processed foods entering Indian markets.
- 2.4. Focus on rain-fed agriculture and drought adaptation:** Special Mission for Rainfed agriculture with adequate budget allocations, establishing support systems for dryland crops millets, pulses and oilseeds.
- 2.5. Allocate 50% agri-research funding immediately towards Ecological farming.** Democratize and make the NARS institutions accountable towards sustainability of agriculture and small farmer livelihoods.
- 2.6. India's response to Climate Change and the National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture** should focus on resilient systems, local varieties, ecological farming and biodiversity, instead of "climate-proof" GM crops.

3. Ensure protection of communities' rights and resources

- 3.1. Intellectual Property Rights of any form should not be allowed on seeds and seed producing technologies**, and knowledge belonging to the farming community. The agreements by state and central governments and public research institutions with seed companies like Monsanto should be immediately cancelled.
- 3.2. Empower Government to regulate seed prices and royalties paid for technology licenses** through explicit provisions in Seeds Bill, with the power delegated to State governments.
- 3.3.** Promote farmer-breeders and release farmer-bred varieties through the formal system; promote Community seed banks or seed centers at panchayat level for seed exchange.
- 3.4. Stop Forcible acquisition and diversion of agricultural lands to non-agricultural use.** Replace Land Acquisition with a pro-people Act based on prior informed consent. Mandatory land audit should be done every five years.
- 3.5. Implement Forest Rights Act effectively.** Forced displacement of *adivasis* and destruction of invaluable forest land for industry and mining should be stopped.
- 3.6. Stop Privatization of Water resources;** Prioritize drinking water and agriculture; small water bodies such as tanks should be developed and maintained under community control.

4. Ensure safe, nutritious, diverse food for all

- 4.1 Ensure safe, non-toxic food** for all citizens by phasing out all toxic technologies in farming and effective functioning of Food Safety and Standards Authority.
- 4.2 Recast all food security schemes including the PDS** into decentralized systems of local production, procurement, storage and distribution, while including millets, pulses and oilseeds as an integral part.
- 4.3 Ensure consumers' right to informed choices** with regard to chemical residues and GM foods through proper standards and labeling regimes.

Contacts: Kiran Vissa (A.P.): 09701705743; Anand Mazgaonkar (Gujarat): 02640 -224442, 02640 -220629; Pankaj Bhushan (Bihar): 09472999999;