



Farmers Suicide- A Case of Indignity, Non Recognition and Humiliation

Shruti Joshi

University of Allahabad, Allahabad, INDIA

Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 27th December 2013, revised 22nd January 2014, accepted 25th February 2014

Abstract

Prof. Gunnar Myrdal, Nobel Laureate once remarked, 'It is in the agricultural sector that the battle for long-term economic development will be won or lost'. This subtle remark emphasizes the substantive requirement of agricultural progress as the basis of long-term economic development. Development in general and particularly in agricultural sector has to be sustainable, inclusive and perpetual. However, the irony is that the peasantry which feeds the entire humanity and creates the source for their survival, today themselves faces a crisis of extinction. Farmers suicides represents the most tragic culmination of this crisis. Facing crop failures, drought, lack of easy credit, high input cost etc., farmers are battered by indifferent administration and apathetic political class and slaughtered by a three pronged attack of indignity, non recognition and humiliation.

Keywords: Indignity, recognition, humiliation, corporate feudalism, globalization.

Introduction

A leading newspaper reports¹, "The farmer, identified as Bharat Patel, had hung himself with a rope in his farm in Sarol village. The body was spotted by a farm labourer who later informed to the villagers about the incident. Olpad police took statements of the family members and started the investigation.

Victims father Mohan Patel in his statement before police said his son had taken loan from a local cooperative society for farming and was growing paddy crops. Due to the breakage in the Kakrapar division water canal, the irrigation Water was not supplied to the agricultural field as a result of which there was a crop failure. He was under tension since the last few days and also stopped talking to family members too".

This along with many is instances of farmers taking their lives, unable to bear the burden of debt and loss. The suicide of farmers tells poignant and revealing tales of our country and the desperation that marks the lives of so many millions. Lackluster approach of administration, woeful access to affordable credits, corrupt middlemen, and indifferent political class is among the factors that have pushed farmers to their breaking point. However, a deep analysis reveals that this problem of farmer's suicide is closely linked with the much larger and less talked issues of indignity, non recognition and humiliation. This paper will focus on the causes and problems of this burning issue and will link it with complex issues like indignity, non recognition and humiliation.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this paper is analytical based upon secondary data. Since the present study deals with much emotive issues like dignity, non recognition and humiliation as

the underlying cause of growing instances of farmers suicide, a deep analysis of these concepts and their connect with the given problem is required. For this I have mostly relied on journals, newspapers, articles and books related with this burning issue.

Discussion

"Growth with a human face", 'Growth coupled with equity', 'development and social justice'- these are some ideals which are projected as the ultimate goals by every existing government. But are these really considered guiding principles by our policy makers or are just populist fake promises which are well illustrated in papers but seldom translated into practice.

We are trumpeting the country's vault with modernity, with projected growth of 9%. The much hyped IPL series, the launch of stylish Delhi metro, the burgeoning Bollywood industry of million turnover, the organisation of formula one race, the increasing number of high net worth individuals(HNI) among the world, are some glimpses of India shining. But is this the real Bharat? We are witnessing a powerful disconnect, a gap between haves and have more on one hand and the dispossessed and desperate on the other. The spate of farmers suicide reflects this dichotomy.

Apply the new Census totals to the suicide data of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and the results are grim. Sample: A farmer in Andhra Pradesh is three times more likely to commit suicide than anyone else in the country, excluding farmers. And twice as likely to do so when compared to non-farmers in his own State. The odds are not much better in Maharashtra, which remained the worst State for such suicides across a decade.

Five States account for two-thirds of all farm suicides in the country, as NCRB data show. These are Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The share of these 'Big 5' in total farm suicides was higher in 2011 than it was in 2001. At the same time, the new Census data show that four of these States have far fewer farmers than they did a decade ago².

The issue is complex and linkages are many. The reasons for such dismal condition of farmer's are- i. As much as 80% of India's farmland relies on flooding during monsoon season, so inadequate rainfall can cause droughts, making crop failure more common³. ii. In 2012 the ICAR and the CCRI stated that for the first time farmer suicides could be linked to a decline in the performance of Bt cotton, and they issued an advisory stating that "cotton farmers are in a deep crisis since shifting to Bt cotton. The spate of farmer suicides in 2011-12 has been particularly severe among Bt cotton farmers." As of August 2012, technical experts appointed by the India Supreme Court have recommended a 10-year moratorium on all field trials of GM food, as well as the termination of all current trials of transgenic crops³. iii. More recently Vidarbha was in the media for a spate of farmer suicides in recent years ostensibly because of the falling Minimum Support Price for cotton. The problem is complex and root causes include lopsided policies of the World Trade Organisation and developed nations' subsidies to their cotton farmers which make Vidarbha's cotton uncompetitive in world markets. Consequently Vidarbha is plagued by high rates of school drop outs, penniless widows left in the wake of suicides, loan sharks and exploitation of the vulnerable groups³. This phenomenon is termed as "the suicide economy of corporate globalization. iv. There is failure of institutional delivery of credit to the farmers. Farmers across the country are facing many hurdles in availing farm loans While farmers in some states are still ignorant of the availability of farm loans, some state governments have a lackluster attitude towards ensuring access to agriculture credit. A few banks say their necessity to check the mounting non-performing assets (NPAs) is coming in the way of meeting the 18 per cent credit target for agriculture. v. Studies have shown that even in the most progressive and agriculturally developed states like Punjab, 78 per cent of farmers have availed credit from non-institutionalized sources such as relatives, *arhtiyas* (grain brokers), agro inputs dealers and private moneylenders. The rate of interest charged on credit is quite high which results in indebtedness. The burden of indebtedness in rural India is great, and it falls mainly on the households of rural working. vi. For many, the move from food crops to cash crops proved fatal. This is the canvas that Prof. K. Nagaraj of the Madras Institute of developing studies calls a "predatory commercialization of the country side" – the farmers had been its prey. vii. Increasing cost of agriculture inputs like seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, etc. viii. Reduced price of agriculture produces. ix. Difficulties in processing and marketing. x. Absence of proper crop planning

There is, thus, a need to stop this decade long onslaught on farmers but doing so without addressing the larger issues is to try and mop the floor dry with the taps open.

It is quiet ironical that farmers who toil the land day and night, mixes their blood and sweat to satisfy the needs of million are themselves being ignored, their problems left unaddressed. The interest of farmers is not recognized and even if they are recognized it is only when agrarian crises reached its peak and farmers were left with no other option than to take their own life. What was then left to be recognized- the interest of dead peasants? Or the interest of those farmers who lived their entire life with the hope that their problem will be recognized some or the other day and died with the hope that their death could act as an eye opener for the government authorities towards their distress? In a way farmers life goes unrecognized and their death unlettered. Suffering from the feeling of self abasement, arm twisted by moneylenders and unrecognized by the society and the state, farmers are tormented by the "trishul" of indignity, humiliation and non recognition.

A case of indignity: "There are farmer suicides happening in the delta districts and very clearly distress in agriculture is a major/ important reason for all suicides. It seems that farmers who had committed suicide thought that they have run out of all options and lost hope to lead a life with dignity"⁴.

This clearly illustrates the correlation between the growing instances of farmer's suicide and the issue of indignity.

Indignity means something that humiliates, insults, or injures the dignity or self respect. Generally, indignity consist of disgrace, habitual ill treatment, studied neglect, intentional disrespect, abusive language, malignant ridicule, and any other plain manifestation of settled hate and estrangement⁵.

As opposed to this, dignity in terms of Kant has a moral connotation. In his view, human beings have "an intrinsic worth, i.e., dignity," which makes them valuable.

Actually, Kant's concept of human dignity has two components: humanity and dignity. "Dignity" (*Würde*) designates a value that has no equivalent-i.e., that which is "beyond price." As he puts it in a famous passage of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*

"So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means"⁶.

In the modern world, Universal Declaration UN 1928, Article 1, also states, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

In India, the Supreme Court has clearly stated that the provisions of Article 21 do not just mean ensuring right to life but it also promises a life of dignity and respect.

At this juncture, it needs to be understood that, the assumption of equal dignity is based on the idea that all humans are equal, worthy of respect. But the case of agrarian crises shows completely a different picture.

For instance, farmer leader in Wardha, Vijay Jawandhia once remarked,⁷ “ If I were given a choice, I would like to be born as a European cow, but certainly not as an Indian farmer, in my next birth. There a cow gets a US\$2 subsidy per day and enjoys all comforts. And here, in India, a farmer is a debtor all his life. Post his death, his son inherits his debts and has to borrow money for his funeral”

This clearly illustrates the psyche of Indian farmers who considers their situation in their own homeland worse than that of animals in foreign land. The indifference of governmental authority towards peasants problem, make them feel subhuman and thus lower their self esteem.

In fact human dignity includes autonomy- the ability of each individual to determine for him or herself a view of good life. But the reality is that farmers don't even get the right to determination and can't make their dream of good life come true under the growing pressure of debt and price hike. Loss of autonomy or independence, psychologically leads to loss of mental clarity. From here stems a feeling of burden which ultimately results in lack of control over one's self.

In other ways, there is a strong association between an undermining of dignity and depression, anxiety, hopelessness, feeling of being a burden on others, overall poorer quality of life and desire for death.

In this regard, the former judge of the Supreme Court Shivaraj Patil stated, “The denial of the basic human right of ensuring a life of dignity is the main reason for the increasing number of farmer suicides. The Government should understand that farmers want water for their crops not tears, farmers want electricity, not ‘shocks’ and farmers want a remunerative price for their produce, not alms, All that farmers want is a life of dignity and nothing more”⁸.

A Case of non recognition: The problem of low self esteem and indignity stems from a larger issue of non- recognition. Acts of recognition influences many aspects of our lives. Evidently the various ways we are recognized (and recognize others) play an important role in shaping our quality of life. Recognition theorists go further than this, arguing that recognition can help form, or even determine, our sense of who we are and the value accorded to us as individuals⁹. The feelings of self-worth, self-respect and self-esteem are possible only if individuals are positively recognized for who they are.

Hegel in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821), argues that recognition is an essential factor in the development of ethical life (*sittlichkeit*)¹⁰. According to Hegel, without recognition we could not come to realise freedom, which in turn gives rise to right⁹. For Hegel, recognition is the mechanism by which our existence as social beings is generated. Therefore, our successful integration as ethical and political subjects within a particular community is dependent upon receiving (and conferring) appropriate forms of recognition.

According to Charles Taylor, recognition is an indispensable means of understanding and justifying the demands of various identity movements. Consequently, for many political theorists, recognition becomes an integral component of any satisfactory modern theory of justice as well as the means by which both historical and contemporary political struggles and civil rights movements can be understood and justified. He further argues that recognition shares a special relationship with dignity. Because identity is ‘partly shaped by recognition or its absence’, then ‘Non recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being’¹¹. Taylor refers recognition as ‘a vital human need’ and states that misrecognition ‘can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred’¹¹.

Taylor's uses these insights to construct a politics of equal recognition. He identifies two different ways in which the idea of equal recognition has been understood. The first is a politics of equal dignity, or a politics of universalism, which aims at the equalization of all rights and entitlements. In this instance, all individuals are to be treated as universally the same through recognition of their common citizenship or humanity. The second formulation is the politics of difference, in which the uniqueness of each individual or group is recognized.

Axel Honneth also agrees with Taylor that recognition is essential to self-realization. “For it is only due to the cumulative acquisition of basic self-confidence, of self-respect, and of self-esteem... that a person can come to see himself or herself, unconditionally, as both an autonomous and an individuated being and to identify with his or her goals and desires”¹².

The above arguments clearly manifest the importance of recognition for ensuring dignity, self esteem and self realization, failure of which leads to estrangement and alienation.

In case of farmers, the act of non recognition prevails on two planes, firstly not recognizing farmers, individually as a dignified and worthy being and secondly not recognizing them collectively as a class with distinct needs and demands. In this regard the irony is that, the government in the ‘initial phase’ never recognized farmer's distress and considered farmers suicide as yet another case of mishap. A series of unnatural deaths and media hype brought the question of agrarian crises and subsequent farmer's suicide into limelight. Subsequently,

without recognizing their root problems and addressing their needs, huge compensation packages were announced in haste.

The most cruel thing was that instead of recognizing farmers as the backbone of economic structure and empathizing with their grief, there were allegations from some quarters that people are taking their lives to 'gain' from compensation. What a contradiction in terms- 'lose your life and gain from it'.

It is quiet disheartening that farmers who toils the land throughout their lives, could not find solace even after their death, their death being ridiculed in the name of so called "compensation politics". This was even shown in a much acclaimed satire 'Peepli Live'. Suppose for one moment we assume this crazy theory to be true, what does it say about our 21st century modern society? A farmer, ending his life, getting some lakhs for his family, securing their future, rather living with them? It speaks less about them and far more about us. It even contradicts the fact that a series of suicide occurred in 2000-01, even when compensation has been stopped. This preposterous argument of 'gaining from death', measures not the 'gain' of the farmers but the loss of humanity. This clearly illustrates the profound indifference towards the suffering of others of this 'me first' decade.

A Case of humiliation: "Heavily indebted, Kuljit Singh killed his wife and teenage son with a machete and then committed suicide by consuming a poisonous fumigant, recalls Baldev Singh, the Sarpanch (mayor) of Sakraudi Village. As the indebtedness increased-4% per month (48% annually) compounded half yearly is the going rate-Kuljit could not take the humiliation, tension and the pressure of the money lender and found escape only in suicide"¹³.

"In Mandikhurd three farmers have so far committed suicide for fear of loss of reputation and humiliation caused by financial straits, debt, attachment and tension"¹³.

"Social humiliation, isolation contributes to farmers' suicide-The suicide committed by a 45-year-old Sikh-Jat farmer of Punjab (name concealed), was not only because of the debt he owed, but also a change to semi urban lifestyle coupled with social humiliation and psychological isolation were some of the main causes, which force him to take this extreme step"¹⁴.

These incidents clearly reflects how humiliation, self abasement pushes farmers to their breaking point. Humiliation means the enforced lowering of a person or group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honour or dignity. To be humiliated is to be placed, against your will and often in a deeply hurtful in a situation that is much worse, or much 'lower,' than what you feel you should expect. Humiliation entails demeaning treatment that transgresses established expectations¹⁵.

Humiliation attacks a person's core dignity, inflicts very deep emotional wounds. There by forcing him into passivity and helplessness.

It is beyond doubt that the fear of humiliation appears to be one of the most powerful motivators of individual and collective human behavior. So powerful, indeed, that people kill themselves to escape humiliation and others, even against their deeply held principles. It indeed leads to the invasion of the self.

A Three Pronged Attack: According to Panch Mahabhoot concept, each and every individual is made of five elementary component- orbit, air, water, fire and earth. Since each individual is composed of these five elements, each and every individual is equal, has the right to self respect and ought to be recognized as a dignified self.

Living with dignity means holding one's head up in the company of others. This entails having recognition from others, having their respect, having a say in decisions, and having responsibility for one's decisions¹⁶. Our dignity is threatened, when we experience humiliation and infantilization, when our presence goes unacknowledged, when we are unduly subject to the paternalistic will of others, and when we are denied the opportunity to employ our reason in making choices that affect us.

In case of farmer's suicide, the entire problem is given an economic angle and not for one instance are the emotive problems of indignity and shallow self esteem given importance. This kind of non recognition further becomes the source of their humiliation.

The dignity of farmers is lost pleading before the zamindars and being humiliated by the sahuks. On the top of it, farmers who are the bedrock of Indian economy, are professionally not recognized, their services not appreciated (Agriculture generates 58% of employment but constitutes just 8% in GDP share). Under this three pronged attack, farmers are left with no other option than to end their life.

Slanted Priorities and Half Hearted Efforts: When this problem assumed a herculean shape, government started suggesting steps to mitigate it.

Since farmers suicide is always given an economic angle, steps to mitigate it were also superficial and economic in nature. In this regard, huge compensatory and relief packages were announced, but administrative hassles and red tapism diluted this effort to a large extent.

At the same time, officials of the region grappled by the crises, gave superficial solutions which were quite intriguing and even entertaining. For instance, "Bhajan kirtan programme were announced by the officials of Yatvatmal region of Maharashtra, as a part of their "Atma Visvas Jagriti abhiyan".

The aim was to boost the morale of the farming community, now rocked by a series of suicide.

Adding fuel to the fire, were the hilarious efforts by the social forestry department, suggesting farmers to grow crops, not according to the climatic conditions or soil texture, but according to their favorable zodiac signs.

This not only reflects the administration's half hearted efforts but their intellectual bankruptcy. Taking recourse to fate, without addressing the root cause, is no solution to come out of this burning crisis.

Efforts were also made to 'counsel' the distressed farmers, this time with the help of psychologists and doctors. In one village after a long discussion with such team, a farmer asked them, "You have given us great advice on so many things. On combating stress, curbing our drinking and so on. And you have asked so many probing questions. Let me ask one- Why farmers who produce the nation's food are themselves starving". The government and administration indeed have no answer to this question and needs a serious introspection.

Feelings of indignity, non recognition and humiliation clearly are part of human emotions. Thus to eliminate them, it is necessary to attack the acts, institutions and sources of such ill feelings.

Under globalization, the farmer is losing his social, cultural and economic identity as a producer. Farmers have now been relegated as a 'consumer' of costly seeds and chemicals sold by powerful global corporations through powerful landlords and local money lenders. This fateful combination is leading to 'corporate feudalism', the most inhuman, brutal and exploitative convergence of global corporate capitalism and local feudalism, in the face of which the farmer, as an individual victim feels helpless. Even the bureaucrats and political class comes to the rescue of these global corporate giants, reducing farmers as a cog in this industrial age.

The state punishes small time moneylenders but invites corporate giants who turn to become their own commercial arms.

In name of industrialization and development, huge acres of land are allotted to 'SEZ', which are often ridiculed as 'special elimination zone'.

Farmers do not get legitimate price for their rightful produce, but crores of rupees on excise and corporate tax are gleefully waived of the corporate industries.

Even their attempt of ventilating their grievances and needs are ridiculed by sections of political class and suppressed by indifferent administration, as it happened during the recent 'jal satyagrah'.

Actually agriculture as a service and farmers as a class has always been given a foster treatment, even by the planners of our economy. From monetary point of view, the share of agriculture sector in the economy remains at 14.1 % of the GDP. The share of agriculture sector in the economy has been declining in the country's gross income while industrial and services sectors' share have been on a rise constantly. From livelihood point of view, still 58.2% people of India depend on agriculture sector. This makes it more important sector than industry and services. It means that 58.2% of the population lives on only 13.9% of the total income of the Indian economy- this fact clearly substantiates the reason why the people who depend on agriculture are poor.

The reason for this long term neglect of agriculture sector bears its root to the post independence era. Agriculture was not recognized as the prime moving force (PMF) of Indian economy, a status which was conferred to industries, immediately after independence. Arguments were given by several quarters viz, by choosing industry as the PMF we were going to industrialize the economy as well as modernize our traditional mode of farming. Also the dominant ideology around the world as well as in the WB and the IMF, at that time, was in the favour of industrialization as a mean to faster growth. This issue is still debatable and some scholars do feel that agricultural sector could have been a logical choice. The country was having the natural resource of fertile land, fit for cultivation and the human resource involved did not required any higher training. Once masses were able to achieve a level of purchasing capacity, India could have gone for expansion of industries. The People's Republic of China did the same in 1949 and one could see its level of development. It seems ironical that how India could not have opted, agriculture, as PMF, when its leadership has fought the independence movement on the Gandhian fervor of villages, agriculture and rural development and was highly influenced by Gandhian socialism.

It was only in the last decade of the 20th century when major changes took place in the world economic ideas about the agriculture sector. In wake of this, the Indian policy makers announced in 2002, that now onwards, agriculture will be the prime moving force of the economy. But the ailment was too late for the malady so malign.

New Agriculture Policy 2000, National agricultural insurance scheme, 1999-2000, Bharat Nirman, Second revolution or Rainbow revolution, and more recently the much hyped, National food security mission, Direct cash transfer scheme, Land acquisition and rehabilitation Act are some measure taken to save the farmers from the marsh of uncertainty and insecurity. Time will tell, whether these measures are efficacious enough to rescue these tireless toilers or are yet another vote seeking rhetorical measures.

Conclusion

Need for another Agriculture: Under such a situation, the fate of Indian farmers remains in dilemma. There is a need to stop treating farmers as a productive commodity, as a mean to fulfill the end of economic growth. Farmers ought to be recognized as human beings of flesh and blood, individuals having power of self determination and choice that will help elevate their low dignity and lost self esteem. It needs to be understood that crop failures, drought, debt are not new to farmers. These are ills with which they are born and against which their fight continues. Even during British raj, farmers and peasants movement were started. What is new is the deliberate neglect, disregard, non recognition, humiliation of this neo liberal, market driven 21st century India, towards the farmers in a nation where the slogan of 'Jai jawan, jai kisan' once echoed high. Fighting a battle with outsider is tolerable, but nothing is more heartbreaking than fighting within your own nation, for your rightful place, identity and recognition.

The challenge before is huge and solution is must. Apart from economic solutions, like relief packages, loan waiver schemes, easy access to institutional credit, agriculture insurance, affordable prices of agricultural inputs, sustainable price for agricultural produce etc., and legal solutions like land acquisition and rehabilitation Act, efforts has to be made at social and emotive level. Farming as a profession must be recognized and like any other profession, scientific and focused efforts should be taken to rejuvenate it. The interface between farmers and administration should be improved so that they feel to be the part of this larger society and nation.

It is necessary to stop the war against small farmers. It is necessary to rewrite the rules of trade in agriculture. Feeding humanity must not depend on the extinction of farmers.

A new incarnation of agriculture is necessary...an agriculture that protects farmers, that provides a space to let them live with dignity and gravitas, that enables them a platform where their rights are recognized and their sweat rewarded, and that furnishes them a land where , in words of Ravindranath Tagore- "The mind is without fear and the head is held high."

References

1. The Indian Express, Sunday (2013)
2. Sainath P., In 16 years, farm suicides cross a quarter million, *The Hindu* (2012)
3. Farmers' suicides in India, Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (2013)
4. Thozhilalar koodam, A blog on labour issues in india, (2013)
5. Rhinehart V. Rhinehart, 197 Pa. Super. 558, 560 (Pa. Super. Ct. 1962)
6. Kant I., Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals 4: 434-435; translation, slightly emended, in Kant, Practical Philosophy, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 80 (1996)
7. The rising imports of suicides, *India together, The news in proportion*, (2006)
8. Shivaraj Patil, Ensure that farmers live with dignity: *The Hindu*, Special Correspondent, (2009)
9. McQueen P., Social and political recognition, Queen's University, Northern Ireland (2011)
10. Hegel, Georg W.G., Elements of the Philosophy of Right. Trans. H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: CUP,1821 (1991)
11. Taylor C., *The Politics of Recognition*, Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition. Ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 25-73 (1994)
12. Honneth A., *The Struggle for Recognition: The Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Cambridge: Polity (1995)
13. A bitter harvest: Farmer suicide in India, *Development Report #15*, Posted janvier (2007)
14. Social humiliation, isolation contributes to farmers' suicide, *Times of India* (2011)
15. Lindner E.G., The concept of humiliation, its universal core and culture- dependent periphery, *The Core and Periphery of the Concept of Humiliation*, 4 (2001)
16. Ober J., *Three Kinds of Dignity*, Stanford university, 2, (2009)