


## Is There a Way Out for the Indian Farmer?

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**Abstract:** *Farmers in India have been demanding fair treatment by the state ever since the nation came into being. Who are these farmers? What are their interests and where do the current reforms fit in the long list of agricultural policies by the Indian state? These are some of the questions that this paper delves into by unpacking historical, geographical, and political complexities that affect agriculture and the farmers. This research article is a continuation of the farmer series by the author from the previous two volumes of Prabuddha, providing a comprehensive overview of the state of farmers in different regions and whether an all-India approach to understanding farming and farmers' issues is going to help at all.*

I would like to begin by giving salutations to the Punjabi farmers and also to the farmers everywhere. Right now, there are 130 million farm households in China. In India, we will never arrive at a proper figure. Figures for households which actually hold some land would be something like 100 million but the landholdings as such are around 140 million. Those who are engaged as main labourers or what are called marginal labourers (who spend less than 6 months in farming work) would be another 150 million people. These people are also farmers and many of them have small landholdings. They are mostly Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs). People do not pay much attention but Adivasis have more share in land in proportion to their share in population, whereas Dalits (SCs) have less share. However, Dalits have more than 8% land in India. So, to say that there are no Dalit farmers in India will be inaccurate. Average landholding size in India is 1.08 hectares (All India Report on Agricultural Census [AIRAC], 2015-16). This figure has come from the parliament, the minister of agriculture said this in February 2020. The actual average landholding will be much lesser. All these people who own 1 acre or less, which is the majority of the Indian farmers, and they say they are 60% or so but in reality, they constitute 80% of the Indian farmers comprising largely of SCs and OBCs who till their own land and till other people's land as labourers. That is a very large population.

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My concern is primarily with these sections, whose primary investment in agriculture is their labour, whether as landholders or not, that is irrelevant to me. Because it is their labour which is undervalued. The era of the Jajmani system and landlords has passed away to a great extent except in some pockets. It is the state which is the de facto landlord of all the land in India, like in the British time and the Mughal time. Those who make a certain kind of income from farming are mainly upper caste farmers whether in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana or Maharashtra. My concern is primarily with the Bahujan farmers who make for the majority of farmers. And among Punjabi farmers not all are large landholders, they are mostly small landholders and many of them belong to the Jat community but there are OBCs and SCs also among them. Because they share a class interest when it concerns MSP or state protection and they have to negotiate with the state, the ultimate landlord. To clear things up, my concern is mostly with the farmer as labourer among all other kinds of labourers who engage in agriculture.

All other kinds of labourers are not held responsible for the final results. The farmer who commits suicide is held responsible (culpable, actually) for both productivity and non-productivity, for producing too much or not producing enough. This farmer falls somewhere between a small landholder and a tenant. This farmer has always been on the precipice of destitution and he has always been overexploited. So, it is a combination of factors which results in this exploitation. The state which says it will give you a minimum support price (MSP, which we shouldn't understand as 'minimum' compensation for the farmers' labour) but it does not work for all kinds of crops. It only works for two kinds of crops, which is wheat and rice. Even with wheat and rice it doesn't work in all the states, apart from Punjab, Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh and a few other states. In Bihar it has been removed but even when it was there it did not work. In many other parts it is non-applicable. The mandis are a place where farmers go to sell their produce such as these crops—rice and wheat. Mandis too are institutions which have not worked in 90% of India. These are all facts which are known. Despite all these problems and no support to the Indian farmer from the government and no support from any 'wise people' as Babasaheb used to say about the intellectual class, the Bahujan farmer has been consistently doing his job of feeding the country. Even during such catastrophes as the Corona pandemic, when all other sectors failed, and nearly a quarter of India's GDP was shaved off, it was only the Bahujan farmer who delivered.

Now, from film stars to various kinds of 'other' celebrities, apart from various lumpenised elements in the sangh—they are denigrating the Indian farmer to such an extent that we are made to understand clearly what kind of society we have built. Earlier, mostly, there used to be respect but nothing apart from respect. In the recent times, in the past two decades, chief ministers and other politicians are saying a lot of derogatory stuff about farmers, about people committing suicide, looking at the official figures of suicides (real figures will be 2-3 times higher). We know the desperation of the farmer if we remember the Tamil Nadu farmers who held a protest in Delhi for months and the way in which they tried to humiliate themselves and displayed their despair.

That is the actual representation of majority of farmers in India: Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana etcetera. These are arid plains and the farmer here has to work a lot. Some pockets in India like the Punjab, a few districts in coastal Andhra, the Kaveri delta in Tamil Nadu and some pockets in Bengal which have always been fed by irrigation projects built on rivers. Their surpluses have always been excellent and they have naturally developed dominant social forces in their areas and have also helped shape politics at an all-India level. So, these are the farmers who will always have a bigger voice but even those voices are not being paid attention to. I think this is one of the last fronts of the Punjabi farmers, the farmers of the two and half states where the green revolution supposedly happened, that is, Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh.

The first two states do large scale procurement of cash crops, especially rice. That potential has been exhausted for the last 20-30 years and there have been suicides, especially among those growing cash crops like wheat, rice, cotton, chilies and such crops which are supposed to yield high returns and are supposed to have high marketable value. All these have deceived the small farmer. P. Sainath has documented that this farmer has invested so much beyond his capacity by making tube-wells, duplicate seeds and all other kinds of investments. All this has been building up. There is a major macroeconomic issue here.

I looked at a comparable country in terms of population, which is China, naturally. China has fewer people involved in agriculture: 130 million households whereas India has over 200 million people which will actually mean 150 million or so households. This is a dangerous situation where China is less endowed by nature and India has such a large arable area. China may be much bigger in size than India but only 10% of its area is arable. Whereas India has 12% of the world's arable area. It has good sources of water and sunny weather all through the year. And our people have grown so many varieties of crops over thousands of years. That is one of the primary reasons that it has been attractive to the foreign invaders in the past. It was always agriculture which marked the biggest contribution to any economy, say 100-200 years ago and before that it would have been much more significant. China has only 130 million people involved in agriculture but by way of foodgrains it produces 30% more than us, more wheat and rice. It also exports. China is facing problems but despite so many problems it doesn't have the same kind of soil, weather, environment, and ecology. It has other tougher problems but it has produced so much more. It has organized itself so well that there are fewer people in China's agriculture who need income from China's agriculture.

In China agricultural contribution to its GDP is 7%. It is going towards the western mode where fewer people are engaged in agriculture or fewer people need income from agriculture or are dependent on agriculture. When you look at the United States of America, less than 1% GDP comes from farms. The total agriculture and related industries' contribution to GDP is not more than 5%, which means it is not the actual raw grain which gets such results. It is what is done to add value through processing, transporting etcetera. In European Union also there are only 97 lakh

people that are in farming. There again the contribution of agriculture to GDP is 1% or so. In eastern countries which are also advanced, such as Korea and Japan, the same profile exists. In China, Korea and Japan, when you look at the economic sector-wise profile, industry plays a huge role in absorbing any new workers coming from the countryside. 39% of China's GDP comes from manufacturing; in Japan it is 29% or so; and in Korea it is a similar number. If you look at these people you realise the west is not such a suitable model.

There was a time when America had 70% of its people dependent on agriculture. That was in the 1800s. In 1840-70, 78% people were dependent on agriculture. By 1870, it was less than 50%. They progressed so fast. That has been a direct result of the industrial revolution. In the last 73 years the Indian farmer has produced more food than we need. 15-40% of all the food produced is wasted in one or the other way. Government quotes a conservative number, but we can safely say it is a lot. So, a lot of the food produced by the farmer is wasted but the farmer is fulfilling his duty. All the Bahujan farmers are fulfilling their duties. Are we fulfilling our duties towards them? That is the question that never arrives.

At this particular and very critical moment where so many people are involved. Over a crore people are agitating in Punjab, Haryana and western U.P. and that is when all the social media is waking up and talking about agriculture and farming despite Sainath making it very fashionable 20 years ago. There is a large problem for those in academia to understand this situation. Because, there are countries where less than 10% people are engaged in agriculture and any major upheavals can be aided or succoured by those engaged elsewhere. In India it started with nearly 90% people involved with agriculture and now some 60% of our people are engaged in agriculture (Some say this figure to be 48% while others consider this figure to be 42% or less, but this depends on particular regions). The number of people dependent on agriculture has been decreasing and that is a sign of progress but it has been decreasing at a much slower pace than it should have happened. I remember in my childhood when India reached the population of 54 crores or so, the number of those engaged in agriculture was 40-45 crores or more. But here lies the paradox: the relative number of rural households (population) engaged in agriculture has decreased, but the absolute number has actually increased.

In absolute terms, the number of people that are somewhere involved or dependent on or looking to agriculture as a primary source of income has actually doubled! So we have failed as a society (in creating more gainful, dignified livelihoods or employment for a major chunk of the population in 70 years) and there is no university which wants to understand this or can understand this because their perspective is wrong. They do not see it from a Bahujan perspective and they will never understand. Because these 50% of people only get 15% or 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the national income, which naturally means everyone of them, on an average, earns 1/6<sup>th</sup> of what you or I, probably earn; what a peon in the government earns.



You can also see how incomes of agricultural households in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Gujarat, apart from the BIMARU<sup>2</sup> states, are so low, driving so many farmers in these states to suicide, despite all kinds of interventions by the governments. Industrialization in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Bengal started nearly 150 years ago, but the number of people depending on agriculture is still so very high. Look at Bengal, it is the worst with Rs 3980 per month. In the north, Bihar has Rs 3558 per month and Uttar Pradesh has Rs 4701 per month. This is the same belt that has been producing migrant workers, if you notice.

I had written earlier also that these farmers are fulfilling their duties and it is not that they are unproductive or they are less skilled or less knowledgeable and they don't know 'scientific methods', they don't know the latest technology and all that (Bedide, 2019). They may not know anything but they are more than predicting the size of your hunger every year, better than any university in the world and better than the Bombay Stock Exchange and better than the NITI Aayog. They are predicting how much all the people will need by way of food every year. Because every year they have been producing enough food for us and more.

How have they been doing that despite their own living standards going down and how they are dependent on so many people who are outsiders: the pesticide seller, the seed seller, the fertilizer seller, the moneylender; all this could be one trader. Then there are cooperatives or the bank if your credit is still good enough. All these people humiliate the farmer every year especially in areas where the farmers are not much unionized like in Punjab and there isn't one community which is leading everything, like the Jat community is doing. Everywhere else like Bihar it is not the same. It is not that Bihar is not producing enough food for the Bihari people. They are producing more than enough, their productivity levels have been going down. Their productivity levels have been going up in wheat and rice but it is just to keep certain external demands. They could do much more. I am not even comparing it with the west.

What I am trying to say is: across Asia, whether it is Laos or Vietnam in the east or America and Latin America in the west or China to our north, our productivity is among the lowest. If we get on an average 3000 kg of wheat from an acre, Laos and Vietnam get much better than us and Japan, Korea and China get almost double of our productivity. America has four times our productivity in many crops. South American countries such as Brazil, Chile, Argentina also do much better. Only countries that do worse than us are African countries. So, we are the worst, even though we claim to have grown all this stuff for thousands of years but our productivity is one of the lowest

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<sup>2</sup> BIMARU is an acronym used for the states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Drawing from the Hindi word bimar or sick the acronym came into use in the 1980s to convey the sickly state of the economic health of the mentioned states.



in the world. This is despite the fact that our farmers go through all the hardships and produce enough food for us and some more.

There is a situation here where we need to understand that for the last 10 years at least and for the last 30 years private investment in agriculture, that is, the farmer's own investment in agriculture—buying new machines or investing in new technology—is near zero. Public investment by way of government improving infrastructure or government giving subsidized equipment to farmers, scientific knowledge sharing via agricultural universities, even that is at a very bare minimum. Despite all that the mainstream media propagates this idea and those in central universities and other universities propagate this idea that the farmer is pampered with subsidies and all. The key subsidies that go into farming are fertilizer subsidies and sometimes pesticides subsidies that the central government or the state government gives; and seeds that the farmer has to buy now, he no longer can grow them at his own farm. That has gone away because he can no longer employ people at such a large basis so he is no longer the landlord that you may have in your mind, from all the bad Hindi films and bad Brahmin 'research'.

These pesticides and fertilizers that he buys involve subsidies to the companies selling those fertilizers and not to the farmer. This needs to be understood very clearly. Second thing is the banking credit which they talk about. They are not there! Before nationalization in the late 1960s, Indian private banks used to lend around 8-10% of their whole loans to agriculturalists and it was of course for big landlords who needed that cash. Nationalization was more of a sham. They had opened banks in every nook and corner of the country, especially in agriculturally vibrant states. They also formed cooperative banks and other banks and they also had lots of policies and legislations to help, support, but it never went beyond 15-20%. Priority sector lending is a big sham and cooperative lending is a bigger sham because they are only meant for big farmers who are just 5-10% of the total farmers. Then we also hear some wags talk of MSP being a kind of freebie. Let it be understood that MSP is a 'minimum' support price and it has never been followed in toto anywhere. It was supposed to keep the prices of these crops above a certain minimum level in the market, but it has done the exact opposite of that: keep prices in the market lower than the government's procurement prices.

Most of the grain is sold outside the mandis and most of all the crops other than wheat and rice are majorly sold outside. State governments on their own initiatives try to procure certain crops, like cotton is procured in Maharashtra and sugarcane. This is to protect the richer farmers. So, on an average, the farmer gets less than what a student gets from the post-matric scholarship amount per month. Essentially, he has been working on less resources, facing much more hostility and he has many more masters now. As I said, the money lender also doubles up as the pesticide seller and fertilizer seller; he is also the advisor in agricultural extension. He offers agricultural extension by telling the farmer what crop to plant. It is a question of subjugation which can't be relieved through

legislation and parliament, or executive interventions which don't recognize the farmer and his human rights.

Last thing we come to is MSP. Whatever support the government promises in the budget to the farmer we should understand it is the food security intervention, not a farmer security intervention. Food security bill is actually to cater to all these Fair Price Shops under the government programs which, in the last budgetary allocation, was around 1 lakh 50 thousand crores which is much less than 1% of the GDP. This allocation is supposed to serve the needs of 75% of the rural poor or the entire rural population and 15% in the cities as per the Food Security Act 2013. So, much less than 1% of your GDP goes towards this but even this is projected as some kind of support for both the poor and the farmer, when it is neither, actually speaking.

MSP, in a way, is a government intervention which also results in a complex web of government failures and market failures in which the ultimate sufferers will be farmers because MSP itself is an acceptance especially after the formation of National Commission on Farmers in 2004 which is being headed by M.S. Swaminathan. It was M.S. Swaminathan who was supposed to look into the issues of farmers and suggest ways of improving their income. This circus has been going on for the last 70 years in one way or the other. The institution of M.S. Swaminathan commission itself means that MSP policies until then had failed completely. MSP is supposed to secure a fair price or a minimum support price for the farmer. Usually, the farmer doesn't calculate. When you are paid a government salary, you are given all kinds of allowances, plus you are given PF, gratuity etc. After you retire and you are no longer able to work you are paid pensions every year which is sometimes more than helpful. MSP doesn't provide all that. It says on an average the farmer may have paid for all these inputs, paid for so much labour, fertilizer and it doesn't even take into consideration the transportation to the mandi, so let him be paid a little extra, as a kind of baksheesh, I suppose.

It is something a farmer has to accept as a 'something is better than nothing' kind of situation. On the basis of another commission called 'Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices' which calculates the average of all these inputs that go into every acre for different crops, these MSPs are calculated. The costs would vary across states and regions as you can see that a Bihari farmer makes Rs 3500 a month, Punjabi farmer makes Rs 18000 a month. This is as good as the difference between Italy and India. There is so much of a difference—so how can the Bihari farmer's interest and the Punjabi farmer's interest be the same? But the imperial wisdom says that they are the same and they are all 'Indian' farmers. So, MSP itself is a fraud. It is a government attempt, supposedly to soften the blow of the market but it actually worsens things in the market itself.

The market itself hasn't been relevant, it has become a slaughterhouse. It is basically a predatory buyers' market—a few thousand buyers preying on the helplessness of millions of farmers. In the last 30 years it has started sucking farmer's blood right from the input stage. So, there is no way the market will solve this problem. We can understand that at some stage when the WTO (World



Trade Organization) agreements and GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) etc were in the news some 20-30 years ago, lots of people in India had feared that Americans would flood our markets with their cheap produce because the Americans support their farmers through novel schemes of livelihood support, like they pay pensions every year, encourage massively crops that they don't even consume.

But we don't have the willingness to pay the farmers any kind of living support. It is almost like prisoners being made to work and they are rewarded if they produce a little more. But you are anyway in a prison. If agriculture contributes 16% of national income, it means it can only support 16% of our people and not 50% of our people. This understanding will not come from Sainath or anyone else. If we ignore it, we are only postponing near death for the farmer. The Bahujan farmer will always be near death.

With Modi kind of economics, manufacturing and every other kind of activity has been steadily going down in the last 10 years and even before that. In 2004, they needed to support the farmer, they came to power on emotional blackmail publicizing farmers' suicides and Sonia Gandhi traveling across India decrying the ruling regime's congratulatory 'Shining India' campaign. But they didn't bring in any law or legislation to support farmers. They brought in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and even that is not implemented properly. So, we are at a kind of a standstill wherein the last support of the farmer, the state government—the last political agency who feels a certain kind of accountability or who can be held accountable for the poor situation of the farmer in the country, his local or state government—their powers are also being undermined through this legislation which overrides the states' right to formulate policy on agriculture.

If Punjabi farmers are complaining now and if the government does agree to sell their produce in Bihar or U.P., what will happen to the Bihar or U.P. farmer? The Madhya Pradesh chief minister himself said that we will beat up whoever comes from outside to sell their produce here. They will beat up any other farmer, whether it is a Punjabi farmer or a Rajasthani farmer or Maharashtrian farmer, who comes over to sell their produce in Madhya Pradesh. The inter-state trade which is the most vital aspect of this legislation and which no one on the left is looking at is actually taking away the sovereignty of the local government. The Telangana government procures much more rice every season than the Haryana government. It is close enough to the Punjab farmer's share. We have become the second highest producers of rice in the country. This year during lockdown the state government promised people to come to their farms in every village and buy every grain of produce, they have actually done 70-80% of that. The state government offers protection but when you make state governments irrelevant that seems to me the most important issue. Because, agriculture by itself, in the constitution, is a state subject. Through various measures over the last 70 years they have undermined and undercut states' powers and they have brought us to a situation

wherein even the last protection or defense of the farmer is being removed. The state government actually becomes irrelevant.

Let us not talk about cultures of each region or our foods because what will determine this in the end is the consumer. And the consumer determines what restaurants are opened in this country, we know that they majority are all vegetarian restaurants. Even though here in Hyderabad 98.9% people are non-vegetarian new vegetarian restaurants are opening every day. Even the dhabas say 100% shudh vegetarian food. Then there are all these Idli Sambar places. All this is because the biggest consumer is of course the Brahmin-Savarna and he will determine what will be produced (Kuffir, 2016). There is a paper by Utsa Patnaik (as cited in Kuffir, 2007) in which she points out the wisdom of the original formulators of Indian agriculture policy wherein they said that let us support more productive regions of Punjab, Haryana and the north and let there be a slump in the south—this was deemed ‘balanced’ national policy. During the time of independence the south produced 21.7% of India’s total foodgrains, almost. Now it produces only 17%. That was a part of a deliberate plan. People don’t understand that this kind of national level policy eugenics can actually happen for I cannot find any other term for it. This was approved of as a reasonable nationalist policy.

We have come to a stage where any kind of regional assertion, which in fact means the politics of the marginalized, whether of religious or caste minorities, all this can be waved away, because even the state government does not have any locus standi on it. It is not like corporates are going to rush into the ‘food business’. They have always been involved in buying. What is your MDH masala, what is your Aashirwaad Atta? They have always been there. It is not like they are the proponents of this new farm bill as the NGOs seem to think, saying: that we can export, we can do wonders and there will be retail chains across the country. The main focus and influencer of this policy is again the consumer, the Brahmin-savarna consumer, as I pointed out earlier. In America too they don’t produce food of everyone’s choice, it is the top 10-15% of the people who determine what food will be produced, what grain will be produced.

Here, the only political agency which could stop and which can be held accountable by the farmer is the state chief minister or the local MLA. His role itself is being undermined. Forget the question of the corporates taking away at least 35% of the agricultural workforce and putting them in manufacturing. We know how the corporates work. Even though so much legislation has been passed in their favour but they have not expanded their workforce much. And there were never any big barriers for them to enter the food distribution processes. Since my youth I remember governments across India offering lots of support for agri-processing units, they still have many schemes for them, they have SEZs for them. But they don’t want to get into areas wherein there is a problem. Right now these new bills are not only going to take away our food freedoms but many other freedoms, which are all severely restricted, as it is. And we can’t say that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has planned it because it was the Congress government that had planned

it for a long time but they postponed it and brought in the Food Security Bill which was also supposed to take away the middlemen. The proponents of the farm bill say that there are six layers of middlemen. Middlemen are there in every kind of activity. They add value. Somebody is a transporter and he takes the food from the farm to the mandi or to the city, he is acting on the materiality of the grain, he is also providing certain material labour. There will be all kinds of other middlemen. The middleman isn't the key issue.

The key issue is: will the state and savarna 'civil' society treat the farmer as human ever? Or will it pin him down as responsible and as culpable for both, production and under-production, fixing it as his caste responsibility (Bedide, 2019)? Second, not providing him any kind of salary or waivers which justifies your demands of him, which I call caste demands, as his duty to serve the higher castes, the Brahmin, upper caste consumers or masters. Because, he has no education and he has no way to organize himself he goes into his caste occupation. He can't organize himself and ask for his rights. You are taking advantage of that. This is caste serfdom, this is caste slavery and we can't discuss corporates or Modi government alone because you have to discuss freedom first and this is a political question. Jai Bhim!

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