

Who is the Indian Farmer?

Naren Bedide (Kuffir)

Abstract: *In this interview, the fundamental question of ‘who is a farmer’ is examined in the context of purported capitalist expansion in India. It attempts to define the average Indian farmer in terms of labor, ambiguous property rights and exploitation, and examines caste mode of production.*

Anu: *Who is a farmer?*

Naren Bedide (Kuffir): That is a necessary question. You see all kinds of descriptions of a farmer. It is very loosely used. You think of a farmer as someone who produces your food, basically. Then you think in terms of someone who exerts labor on your behalf—so he becomes a laborer, basically, who produces food for you. You could also call him a producer because there is an implicit social imposition on him to produce food.

Farmers are described in many other ways. The primary or popular understanding of the term in India, especially after independence, gets attached to the attribute of land. One who possesses land. Landholdings have also become important in describing a farmer. When we consider landholdings, there are several types. In terms of size itself, there are several stratifications in India. From a large farmer who has holdings of over 10 acres, to a medium farmer with 5-10 acres, a small farmer who has something like 2- 5 acres and to a marginal farmer who has less than 1 acre and to a sub-marginal farmer who has less than 1/2 acre. Even these sizes are determined differently by different agencies, internationally and nationally, with relation to India. We do not exactly know how many people hold landholdings in India. Because the number of landholdings does not suggest the number of landholders. One person (or family/household) can own more than one holding, they can be dispersed and not in one place. In the same village, the same farmer could have one piece of landholding in the east and another piece somewhere in the north.



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There are several problems in pinning down the definition of the farmer to someone who holds so much land on an average. Especially, one who holds the title to the landholding could be a minor or a relative, that is benami or the actual holder or landlord who enjoys the fruits of the land. There is a lot of confusion at every stage when it comes to the simple task of describing who is the farmer in India, in terms of land ownership.

Over half of Indians depend on agriculture as one of their sources of income, not all of them to an equal extent. Those who depend the most on it are termed as cultivators and laborers. Again, cultivators are classified as main and marginal cultivators, depending on how many days of work they contribute, among other things. This terminology pays more attention to the main input in agriculture: labor.

This definition recognizes all those who contribute their labor to produce food. But who are all those? India's population has grown by nearly 4 times since 1947, while the share of the population, wholly or partly, dependent on agriculture has grown by 3 times or so. In absolute numbers, it has actually reached the stage where more than double the whole population of India in 1947 is now wholly or partly dependent on agriculture—that's over 60 crores? If 30 crores, 80% of India, people depended on agriculture, wholly or partly, in 1947, why has that number grown to around 60-70 crores now?

India's overall agricultural production has also grown in pace with its growing population's needs—but what has been the growth in real per capita productivity? All through the Five-Year Plans and Green Revolutions and scores of other programs and schemes and acts, the number of farmers in India actually increased severalfold, not decreased due to additions of capital and advances in technology.

Broadly, there could be two possible explanations for this: one, the obvious reason is that the Indian economy has not grown and expanded in pace with the growth in population, especially the rural agriculture dependent population, to absorb them into new jobs in new fields. Two, the Indian state has not invested even a fraction of what is needed to equip this section of rural India with necessary education, access to public services and social infrastructure and security to prepare them for new livelihoods and careers. Both explanations seem very plausible, because this uniquely Indian tragedy is a result of prolonged economic stagnation and more importantly, social stagnation.

It seems as if there is an unwritten social diktat that prescribes that the children of the shudra and ati-shudra, as Phule had almost adumbrated two centuries ago, should remain the servants of the society.

That is the implicit socially imposed duty on the small cultivators and workers, I mentioned in the beginning. Among the cultivators, if we think of the farmer as someone who contributes labor in the production of food, it means only 85% of those loosely described as cultivators are engaged in farming. The rest 10-15% are medium to large landholders and who enjoy its fruits and cannot be defined solely on the basis of labor—the labor they contribute would be minimal. The rest are caste slaves.

So, there are those who make a profit from agriculture—these are mostly medium and large landholders, families, corporates, plantations, trusts etc. The majority of cultivators fall in the second category— the ones who are ascribed by birth, or are condemned, to make a livelihood from agriculture and should be recognized as caste slaves. And the third category is composed of those who derive a major part of their livelihood, or supplement their income, from agriculture—the agricultural workers.

It's the second and third category of people, who are basically defined by labor, who are the primary producers of food. The top 10-15% farmers possess sizeable holdings and make certain income from land and also have a certain social standing. The rest must be called caste slaves. If your occupation and subservience does not change for several generations, there is no other way to describe you except as a caste slave.

Why do I call them caste slaves? The first category of farmers invests capital or money to buy/produce commodities for more money in the market whereas the second category farmer, traditionally, invested his labor to produce grains that he used to pay off rent/tax, and retain a portion for his own household needs. Now he must produce for the market. He has to borrow money against future harvests (his future labor, actually) to invest in inputs and produce commodities which he sells in the market to pay off more money to his creditors and to buy commodities for his own household. So, his chief function is to provide labor, his ownership or non-ownership of land is immaterial. The third category of agricultural workers too invests only labor and gets only sustenance wages for it.

The average cultivator might hold some land, half acre, 1 or 2 acres but still what he gets in the end is not even compensation for the labor he has spent on that land. If you think of all these in broad numbers, let us say, there are 10 -11 crore landholdings in India of these around 85% of holdings are of individual holdings which are less than 2 acres each. They range from 1/2 acre to 2 acres to 2 and half acres. This is the majority of Indian farmers, even if we crudely identify each landholding as belonging to an individual. All these together make up 85% of farmers. These are the people I am describing as caste slaves.

They make a fraction of the GDP per capita—sometimes 1/3rd or 1/4th, or sometimes 1/2, if one is lucky. Agriculture contribution to India's GDP was around 55-60% when it became independent and is now around 15%. Remember, the number of people dependent on agriculture has actually grown by more than 2.5 times, roughly, since independence. So, what would be the average cultivator's share in GDP be in this situation? In real terms, his financial situation is several times worse than in 1947, as you can see. And this situation is bound to worsen, progressively.

Why are they slaving away without getting even basic returns in terms of minimum wages? Daily, monthly or yearly wages—they don't get that kind of income. They are doing this for generations, they can only be described as caste slaves. It does not matter whether they work on their own land, sometimes they take up in lease much more than what they hold. A small farmer has 2 acres, he leases another 10 acres, and he becomes much more of a slave. He thinks he can get rid of all his indebtedness, but only ends up in deeper crisis. This is someone who over a long period of time

essentially makes no income from farm slavery. He barely ekes out sustenance from it. Even in real monetary terms what he gets as a result of his drudgery is not equivalent to his labor.

Anu: *Who is the farmer's master?*

Naren Bedide (Kuffir): This is a very good question. We are all his masters, in a way. As pointed out a short while ago, the average farmer's share in the national pie is decreasing while that of everyone else is increasing, collectively.

It's almost like the Indian state, the caste structures are his masters. To be politically accurate, all the upper castes are his masters, collectively. They may not be visibly his masters, he may be the master of his 1 or 1/2 acres, but essentially, he is a slave because, he is working without due compensation. But what he produces, in value terms, it does sustain all of India's food needs.

Traditionally, the caste system works by imposing curbs on certain key freedoms: the right to education, the right to choose your occupation/profession/work, the right to defend yourself (Babasaheb pointed out the restrictions on the shudra/ati-shudras' right to bear arms to defend themselves) or resist. In case of the average Indian farmer, all these freedoms are severely curtailed. Hence, they're caste slaves. Ironically, this is done more in the name of democracy and rights now.

Anu: *There is a contract between the master and the slave as we understand from the American system. The master does have responsibilities to the slave, he does make sure he is alive, fed, and paid, he is paid very poorly but he is paid.*

Naren Bedide (Kuffir): This is happening here too. But the contract is not visible. Here too, the farmer is paid to sustain himself at a bare minimum level. The visible agent of these masters or the representative of the masters is the Indian government which steps in by way of sometimes providing relief in times of distress or drought, during natural disasters, unforeseen rains, cyclones. Apart from that, it also subsidizes seeds, fertilizers as inputs and supports minimum support prices so that farm produce has a certain market value. It also enables the availability of cheap formal credit. These are support interventions. But in reality, they support the seed producing companies, the fertilizer and pesticide etc manufacturers, and the banks and not the average farmer. And the support prices keep the prices in check for the consumers.

Why does the state need to do that? The state does not say to the soap manufacturer, this is the minimum support price, you don't have to sell below this price. Or any other kind of products for that matter. For instance, the computer manufacturer sells at a price he chooses; he does not have to be supported by the state to get the price he wants.

The state offers that kind of assurance only to the manual laborer or the skilled or semiskilled wage earner by decreeing that that they should have a minimum wage. What does that indicate? The modern state in its welfare avatar seeks to protect, at least formally, those who provide labor. To those who live by selling their labor. But why does it have to do it in the case of the farmer, who

is popularly recognized as one who owns land, and therefore of means of production, and is hence a capitalist of sorts?

The popular perception is that the farmer is a kind of master on his own. So why does a master need to be supported? This is where we need to examine more closely the average Indian farmer's right to property, another freedom traditionally disallowed to shudras/ati-shudras. Do they really have a right to property now?

We need to remember the distinction I made earlier between the top layer of farmers, the top 10-15%, and the rest of the cultivators and workers. In my view, profit defines the former while labor defines the latter. To elaborate, let us look at the range of social functions the two classes perform: the first class of farmers are also money lenders, contractors, babus, businessmen etc., while the second class apart from being tillers are also construction workers, manual workers of all kinds, depending on the region and its political economy. The former is overwhelmingly upper caste while the latter is majorly lower caste.

By Babasaheb's definition, the former is the governing class while the latter are the servile class. His century old formulation still works perfectly. Both classes still perform the caste functions they were traditionally assigned. Marx says, the dominant mode of production that arises from every social formation sets to work the existing productive forces in and under definite relations of production.

Social relations derived from relations of production are still governed by caste informed hierarchy and separation in rural India, especially. Why have the advances in technology and productive forces not changed social relations?

Productivity per average acre on the Indian farm is around half or less than even the averages in other Asian countries. This means that the infusion of technology and capital has been very slow and meager in agriculture in India. The bullock cart still remains the symbol of many parts of the countryside. As for the labor power, another key component of productive forces, its productivity has remained almost stagnant in real terms, as pointed out earlier.

The farmer has been fulfilling his socially imposed duty of producing food faithfully—there have been no food shortages in the last 50 years, at least. And to achieve that objective, he has not just reproduced himself but also cloned himself, through generations, so that there are enough workers to serve the increasing demand.

In capitalism, Althusser says:

How is this reproduction of the (diversified) skills of labour power provided for in a capitalist regime? Here, unlike social formations characterized by slavery or serfdom this reproduction of the skills of labour power tends (this is a tendential law) decreasingly to be provided for 'on the spot' (apprenticeship within production itself), but is achieved more and more outside production: by the capitalist education system, and by other instances and institutions.

You will notice several deviations from this normative scenario in India. First, there is no reproduction of ‘diversified’ skills in rural India. In fact, many diverse skills regarded as essential to the village economy earlier are being extinguished. Only one uniform skill is being reproduced, that of tilling. Second, this uniform skill is being reproduced increasingly, not decreasingly, as we look at the increasing number of those engaged in agriculture since independence. Third, the reproduction of the uniform skill of this labor power is being provided for ‘on the spot’ (apprenticeship within production itself)—in the family, clan, caste and in the farms—and not outside, by ‘the capitalist education system.’

This is definitely not capitalist mode of production. This is birth-based stratification being reproduced, one generation after another. This is heredity determining occupation, and hierarchy deciding the allocation of surpluses and status. This is caste mode of production.