

Agriculture and Small Farm Dynamics

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The origin of small farmer-based strip fanning can be traced back to the agricultural pursuit of the community in the early period of its transition from food gathering to food production and more particularly after the dissolution of the commune system in the history of human civilisation. The long transition period covered thousands of years. With the dissolution of the commune system as a result of the exchange of products and emergence of individual property in certain respects and items, small-scale agriculture associated with handicraft slowly and gradually grew and developed with primitive instruments of production over the years. This form of property was swept with the emergence and prevalence of slavery of diverse forms in different regions of the world. But the institutions viz., small-scale agriculture and handicraft were grafted in, and it formed the economic basis of the classical, slave and feudal societies of human bondage.

Individual property in land and other means of production in the world was of spatial character and unevenly transformed into private property with absolute ownership. Its pace was somewhat fast in the western Europe and in USA for obvious internal and external factors in the post-Christian era through the nineteenth century. But in the vast areas of the world, the old social formation characterised with small scale agriculture and handicraft constituting the unity of the ancient traditional society virtually remained undisturbed and intact. Individual property users of land lived and worked as usufructurers but they were not private property owners, because land was continued to be strictly held under common ownership of the village corporation, remnant of the old commune organisation. This common ownership in land was mutilated, usurped and gradually transformed into private ownership in other regions of the globe by the colonial power to thrust in peasant proprietor and capitalistic (bourgeois) mode of production at the pain of their extinction.

INDIAN SITUATION

Individual property in land, small scale agriculture and handicraft in India had continued for time immemorial but private property therein did not exist and grow for a very long period of time. The British Colonial power here introduced private property in land through the zamindari and ryotwari systems during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Before that, zamindars functioned as employees or contractors to the land system, appointed by the central royal court in Delhi. This did not encroach upon the rights of the small farmers and land ownership of the village corporations at large. It was the British colonial power which largely favoured and granted absolute ownership in land to the Rajas, zamindars and ryots which uprooted the old system and teared up the old unity between the small-scale agriculture and handicraft with a very high rate of land tax imposed on the peasants only to exact and establish a colonial market for the British industry and capital in the country.

The plight of the small farmer in this situation increased with the mounting threat of eviction, high rate of tax, diverse forms of bondage and dependence on the landowners who turned to be more parasitic on the shoulders of the peasants. The small farmers were pauperised more and their problems have continued to grow and manifest with the passage of time, despite some apparent measures for the abolition of the zamindari system in the 1950s and 1960s, and growth and expansion of small proprietorship in agricultural sector and introduction of new technology with the use of irrigation, HYV seeds, chemical fertilisers and pesticides in the more recent time.

The problems of the small farmers are, logically speaking, thus continuation and extension of the misery transmitted from the past and has been, exacerbated over the years. The so-called land reforms of the Government and its policies are further aggravating the situation, throwing the small and poor farmers in a state where they cannot live nor die. The market forces have thrust formidable challenge to the existence and sustenance of millions of small farmers and their families, in India, living in dire distress. They have very meagre and small means of production, practise scattered individual form of cultivation, suffer from diseconomy in farms, lack of capital, lower production and hazards of market, both as purchasers of inputs and sellers of any surplus production over their family consumption. They are a vast multitude of small and marginal farmers in India but they are scattered and very weak to exert influence as an institution or a strong lobbying force in the country's very coercive political atmosphere.

Everything with its own motion, develops and subscribes to the law inherent in the existing socio-economic order prevailing in the country. Small scale farming and existence of numerous small farmers has been a very growing social phenomenon in India, in spite of "land reforms" attempted to remove the obstacles of feudalism to growth and progress of capitalist agriculture with large-scale production by employing more wage labourers and production exclusively for exchange and consequently expanding the home market. The small farms and petty producers though in great plight are still surviving and growing all over the country. The growth spread and pace of capitalist development in India has not succeeded to overwhelm and eliminate small and marginal farming and fully subjugate and reduce the petty agricultural producers completely into wage workers in the agriculture and industrial sectors of the country's economy. The small-scale agriculture and handicraft –the economic basis of feudal society is not only continuing but growing in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Associated and aided by other social factors, it survives by resisting the emerging capitalist production and its market forces. Transformation is greatly thwarted by the internal factors as well as external forces. The regime of international finance capital can never permit free development of the means of production in the countries like India, Pakistan, Egypt and Brazil. Hence a typical semi- feudal agriculture system prevails in the present-day Indian situation, where the number of small farms, area and their problems develop and manifest with the passage of time.

The internal structure and solidity of small-scale farming by the individual peasant families has historically conditioned its subsistence but not its strength and development to a higher form of production. More-over there has been a

perceptible tendency of the middle and large farms in India, to recede and decline to the lower-middle, middle and small farms for obvious reasons of the limitations and impediments to their transition to capitalist production.

Even in the states like the Punjab and Haryana where the concentration of land holding and other means of production was registered in the 1970s and 1980s, small-scale farming re-emerged in the 1990s and that has persisted through 2000.

Characteristics presently observed in Punjab's agriculture are not of an isolated phenomenon in the country. In fact, during the thirty-year period between 1960-61 and 1990-91, the number of operational holdings in India had increased 115 percent, semi-medium and medium holdings grew 36 percent, marginal and small farms 167 percent, while the number of large farms decreased by 28 percent. The total area under operational holdings rose 25 percent and of semi-medium and medium 26 percent, marginal and small 115 percent, while the area under large holdings decreased by 28 percent. The average area of operational holdings in the country declined by 42 percent in the same period. The fall in the average area of the marginal and small, semi-medium and medium, and medium and large holdings in operation was 20 per cent, 8 percent and 1 percent respectively. Clearly, the concentration of landholding and consequently, the pace and trend for large-scale production with machine and employment of a higher number of wage labourers exclusively for sale of the entire produce in the market is very sketchy, slow and largely countered and narrowed down in the context of high rate of population growth, dominant socio-economic condition of the old and survivals of the past or the feudal society.

Irrational agriculture has made so much perverse and deleterious effects that 60.6 percent of the land in Indian agriculture has been degraded, loss of nutrient top soil extended to an area of 150.4 million hectares of land, a huge quantity of rich nutrient top soil is washed to the seas every year. It amounts to a colossus loss to the country threatening its economic sustainability and future of the society. While the population of India trebled since 1951, the stock of natural resources has declined to critical levels in several parts of the country. The cost of this decline and degradation of natural resources even informally measured economic activities has been, substantial. Tata Energy Research Institute's estimate is that "over 10 percent of India's GDP is lost annually on account of environmental costs", and the gap between the rich and poor continues to increase with retaining the old institutions of social hierarchy.

PROBLEMS OF THE SYSTEM

All this speaks of the worst features of the semi-feudal agricultural system prevailing with certain variations all over India in which small farmer with his meagre holding and petty individual form of production survives and grows, facing many hazards and problems. The small-scale farming still functions as the pivot of production in the agricultural sector of the country. The central tendency of the holding pattern of farms has been certainly towards small farm and small-scale production in agriculture, and despite continually worsening condition, their importance in agricultural production and subsistence to the vast multitude of peasant families will continue to remain and grow in the socio-economic milieu of the Indian sub-continent. Distribution of some patches of ceiling-

surplus land to the poor and landless would not solve the problem. For today he receives, he loses it tomorrow. Many of the small farmers are forced to mortgage and sell their land and household property for meeting high cost of agricultural inputs as well as due to the scourge of poverty and destitution. The lower middle and middle peasants also suffer from the increasing costs of production and investment mounting family expenditure and observation of the old law of inheritance and social institutions and customs of the past. As a consequence, their farms get sub-divided, fragmented, and sold in the market, thereby perpetuating small-farm holding and small-scale agriculture and its attendant handicraft -the economic basis of feudal society. Constant supply of new labour and existence of surplus labour aggravate the situation and complicate the matter with the declining value of labour.

Thus the semi-feudal system with its characteristic features survive and prevail in the countryside depicting the anarchy in the form of property ownership and cultivation of farms in the agriculture sector at large. Much is said about increase in output, productivity, cost of production, return of capital and farm profit. But much less or very little is said on the changes in the structure of holdings, perennial diseconomy, relations of production, degradation of the land as principal instrument of agricultural production, waste and high rate of loss in natural resources threatening sustainable agriculture. Consequently, all this fabulous loss in the existing regime of ownership and pattern of land holding and cultivation takes place in agriculture - thanks to the existence and operation of holy private property.

The existence of scattered strip farming, individual property and its acute perverse operation and motive, historically, has engendered a monstrous negative impact on the resource base and greatly hampered rational development of agriculture in India and other countries of the world. The National Commission on Agriculture viewed in 1976 that the new strategy in agricultural development had bypassed very large section of rural population, particularly the small farmers, tenants, share-croppers, and agricultural labourers. It lamented that the recent technological developments in crop production in the country took place without simultaneous and appropriate institutional changes in the rural areas. The result has been an extremely uneven distribution of the gains from improved technology among different classes of rural population and a rapid widening of the existing disparities in incomes and levels of living.

The numerous small and scattered units with the peasants' individual form of ownership in the means of production engaged in agriculture with family labour and a little employment of wage labour for hundreds of years, accounting for the major share of the agricultural production and generally using their produce for their self-consumption with only the surplus over self-consumption entering for exchange in the market and representing small-scale agriculture and handicraft, form the economic basis of feudalism and continuation of the semi-feudal system through the present time. This economic basis constantly aided and abetted with the operation of the traders and money-lenders and fostered by the religious institutions and culture, and population growth has not only sustained but also proliferated over the years. C R Hazra, agriculture commissioner, Government of India, observes "Because of continuous land fragmentation, the size of land

holding is continuously on decline, consequently there is also decline in family income especially in case of small and marginal farmers."

REMEDY AND SOLUTION

The remedy to the irrational agriculture and its most wretched victims, small and marginal peasants created by the vile nature of private property actually lies in the systematic administration of policy towards organisation and development of *the real basis* for rational agriculture. The existence of private property in land with increasingly large number of holdings in scattered parcels, division, sub-division and fragmentation of land is anachronistic to this social objective. Land, being the principal instrument of agriculture production and its allied activities, and means for livelihood of the vast majority of the population must be brought under social management and control for its proper conservation, improvement and development for provision of employment to the masses of the people and commonweal of the whole nation. State control and nationalisation of land would be ideally suitable to protect the vast multitude of small farmers and agricultural labourers living in a precarious condition, from the vagaries of market force.

The rationale of the strategy to the ultimate remedy of small farmers in nationalisation is objectively irrefutable and unassailable as there is no other course that can particularly deliver the goods and help small farmers and agricultural workers in the present time of history. □□□

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