

COMMENT

Of Food and Insecurity

IF PEASANTS DON'T SURVIVE, India won't survive. All the tall talk of maintaining high growth, combating food inflation and improving livelihoods will vanish in the thin air. The deliberate policy of neglecting agriculture, particularly small-peasant economy has aggravated India's food insecurity and for good reasons, India has acquired the dubious distinction of capital of hunger.

Two aspects of food security have disappeared in the current approach being taken by the Indian government in the proposed Food Security Act: first, the right to produce food, and second, national food security. Both are aspects of food sovereignty: one at the level of food producers and the other at the level of the country as a whole.

Any country risks genuine food security if it ignores food production, and in India the risk is higher because two thirds of Indian's billion plus population is involved in agriculture and food production. In truth small farmers have traditionally provided a nation of 1.2 billion with food security, yet today they themselves are in distress. In fact, the most tragic face of the agrarian crisis the country faces is the suicide of more than 200,000 farmers over the past decade.

India's rural communities are hungry. They have no purchasing power. Globally, too, half the hungry people today are food producers. This is directly related to the capital- and chemical-intensive, high-external-input systems of food production introduced as the Green Revolution. Farmers must get into debt to buy costly inputs, and indebted farmers must sell what they produce to pay back the debt. Hence the paradox and irony of food producers comprising the highest number of hungry people in India and the rest of the world. Farmers' suicides are linked to the same process of indebtedness, due to the high cost of inputs.

The solution to the hunger of producer communities is to shift to low-cost sustainable agriculture based on principles of agro-ecology. And, contrary to the false perception that small farmers and sustainable systems do not produce enough, data from India and other parts of the world demonstrate that small farmers have higher output than large farms and that biodiverse organic farms have higher food output than chemical monocultures.

The food sovereignty of rural producers addresses the hunger of rural communities as well as the hunger of those they feed. For the same reasons, corporate farming and contract farming are false solutions to the hunger and malnutrition crisis now facing the country, as is the corporate takeover of food processing and the attempted hijack of the existing food security programmes such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme.

Then policy-makers in Delhi are not listening. Their charted path of neo-liberalism will lead to more contract farming, destruction of whatever remains of traditional agriculture, destitution of peasants and more farmers' suicides.

Also, the political left in India has failed to address the peasant question in its entirety in the changed context. Maybe, they are not interested in facing the continuing peasant catastrophe. They too are passive partners in Government's crusade against the peasant community. □□□