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AGRICULTURAL CRISIS AND FARMERS SUICIDES

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture sector plays an essential role in the process of economic development. Agriculture sector in India accounts for 15.9 percent of GDP and provides employment to around 49 percent of the population. The agriculture sector is a leading sector that needs a relook and reinvention. It is the time that India marches towards a 'millennium agricultural transformation' advancing from traditional agricultural system (labour intensive) to contemporary agribusiness system (capital & technology intensive). Seventy percent of the farmers in India are small and marginal. They are forced to borrow money not only for agriculture purposes but also for day to day requirements. The amount so borrowed has not been utilized for the purchase of new technological equipments or for asset building which could have generated incremental income. Due to this, these farmers can't repay the loans in time and farmers' indebtedness grows. Political parties used agriculture loan waiver as a political strategy. There was no evidence of investment and productivity of loan waiver beneficiaries because institutional credit facilities were not available to them. Hence, farmers have to depend on non-institutional credit. Thus, due to such credit, farmers become debt trapped and driven to poverty. There is no way to come out from debt because poverty had deeply affected the families of small and marginal farmers which results in farmers' suicides. They saw no future for their children, except to be born into debt and die in greater debt. Attempt has been made in the study to analyze the causes of agricultural crisis and farmers suicides.

KEYWORDS: *Agriculture Credit, Suicides, Repayment of Loan, Marginal Farmers, Institutional Agricultural Credit*

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture sector in India accounts for 15.9 percent of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and provides employment to around 49 percent of the population. A recent global economic outlook estimated India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth at 6.6 percent of the year 2019–20. Slowdown over the previous years has been attributed to steadily cooling activity in the manufacturing sector and to a lesser extent, agriculture indicating that the Indian economy may be slipping into a recession. Nonetheless, even today, most of Indian population are directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture. The agriculture sector is a leading area that needs a relook and reinvention. It is the time that India marches towards a 'millennium agricultural transformation' advancing from traditional agricultural system (labour intensive) to contemporary agribusiness system (capital & technology intensive).

As per 2011 Census of the Government of India, seventy percent (70%) of the farmers in India are small and marginal. Livestock farming is the secondary source of income for these farmers apart from agriculture. Even then, the farmers are unable to meet their daily necessities. They are forced to borrow money not only for agriculture purposes but also for day to day requirements. The amount so borrowed has not been utilized for the purchase of new technological equipments or for asset building which could have generated incremental income. Due to this, these farmers can’t repay the loans in time and farmers' indebtedness grows. As per the National Crime Records Bureau Report (2015), 38.5 percent farmers committed suicide due to bankruptcy or indebtedness, 19.5 percent due to agricultural problems, 11.7 percent due to family problems, 10.5 percent due to illness, 2 percent due to marriage problems and 1.15 percent due to property disputes. The report further stated that in the year 2015, 42.5 percent small farmers and 27.4 percent marginal farmers committed suicide. As per the report, a total of 12602 people committed suicide in the agricultural sector in India out which 8007 were farmers and 4595 were agricultural labourers. The data shows that indebtedness (38.5%) is the major cause of farmers' suicides.

Manjunath and Ramappa (2017) conducted all India survey on farmers' suicides. They found that on the one side traders are cheating the small and marginal farmers and on the other hand financers are charging excessive rate of interest on loans due to which farmers are hard to repay their loans. Majority of the survey respondents (58%) belonged to the BPL (Below Poverty Line) category. Chandrasekhar and Ghosh (2004) specifically investigated the agricultural crisis in Andhra Pradesh. They found in their study that there is a lakh of yield, reduction in bank credit, inadequate marketing facilities, seed supply problems, increased fertilisers cost and lack of alternative non-agricultural income opportunities. Due to the increased cost of production, small and marginal farmers are committing suicides in the State of Andhra Pradesh.

Political parties used agriculture loan waiver as a political strategy. During elections, politicians proclaim 'farmers first' policy for political mileage (Banik, 2018). The past experience of loan waivers by the Government under the Agricultural Debt Waiver and Debt Relief Scheme of 2008 shows that there was redemption in the household debt. But, there was no evidence of investment and productivity of loan waiver beneficiaries because institutional credit facilities were not available to them. Hence, farmers have to depend on non-institutional credit (RBI, 2018). Thus, due to such credit farmers become debt trapped and driven to poverty.

Former Governor of RBI, Sh. Raghuram Rajan said that 'First we need to worry about why people are so distressed and angry. There is a lot of agriculture distress. I personally believe that farm loan waivers are not the answers. But, there are other answers' (Press Trust of India, 2019). Unnikrishnan (2019) observed that loan waiver was not a permanent solution for farmers' problems. Revealing the causes of farmers' suicides, Thatai (2015) stated that there was no way to come out from debt because poverty had deeply affected the families of small and marginal farmers. These farmers had no money to educate their children. 'They saw no future for their children, except to be born into debt and die in greater debt'. It is a depressing scenario for Punjab farmers. They went into mental stress when they were unable to take care of their family and themselves. They felt guilty and committed suicide. Physical, mental illness and economic difficulties are the reasons for farmers' suicides (Vijayakumar, 2010).

In the year 2014, the Government of India had promised a minimum support price and 50 percent profit to farmers. But, no concrete plan has been made in this regard. On 12th September 2018, a scheme as 'Pradhan Mantri Annadata Aay Sanrakshan Abhiyan' was launched. But, during Kharif season of the year 2018, only 25 percent of the yield was purchased and the remaining produce was handed over to the State Government. The State Government delayed the payment to the farmers by two to three months. Due to this reason, farmers approached middlemen and sold their produce at a low price (Srinivas, 2019). Moreover, the Government of India has recently set an ambiguous target to double the income of farmers by 2022 which corresponds to targeted annual agricultural growth of more than 14 percent per year.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lack of availability of adequate credit is a big problem for farmers. Majority of farmers who are poor are illiterate and hence reluctant to accept new ideas or technology. The existing credit system has been found unsound and defective which needs restructuring and revitalization so that the benefit of credit may be trickled down to the target group.

Krishnaswami (1972) made an attempt to study the reorganization of the short and medium-term credit structures. It was observed that the record of credit system in India is not altogether satisfactory due to various structural and operational weaknesses and deficiencies. He suggested an action programme for the reorganization at all the three levels i.e. Primary, Central and State by suggesting constitutional reforms, cooperative education and professional management.

The Report of Expert Group (Reserve Bank of India, 1978) examined the various aspects related to agricultural credit schemes of commercial banks. There were reports of undue caution and cumbersome procedures in the sanctioning of loans. It was observed that the farmers take little interest in availing themselves of bank loans as they have to run from pillar to post to collect numerous documents. The expert group, by observing the pattern of distribution of loans among different size groups of cultivators, noticed that banks are interested in quick turnover of loans and not in high productivity.

Singh and Singh (1990) in their study revealed that the cooperatives play a vital role in agricultural financing in the selected areas. Other institutional credit agencies such commercial banks provide marginal loan for the agriculture. It was observed that long process of sanctioning the loans, mortgage problems, high rate of interest, scatter locations of banks, unfamiliarity with the loaning process are some constraints faced for not taking loans through commercial banks by the farmers, especially the poor ones.

Ghose and Patel (1991) examined the flow of institutional credit to farm sector and actual status of marginal and small farmers in allocation of institutional credit. It was concluded that there is no specific discrimination against marginal and small farmers. Further, it was found that the commercial banks are given the exclusive role for planning of the service area approach and the relative shares of the Co-operative Banks and Commercial Banks in the total agricultural credit generate some management problems for the implementation of the Service Area Approach.

Shylendra and Singh (1995) in their study examined the impact of the Agricultural and Rural Debt Relief Scheme, 1990, popularly known as the 'Loan Waiver Scheme' on the recent progress and performance of the credit Co-operatives in Karnataka. The total amount of loans written off by the Commercial Banks, Regional Rural Banks and Co-operatives aggregated to about Rs.78, 250 million and benefited about 32 million borrowers. It was found that the scheme has adversely affected the functioning and performance of Primary Agricultural Societies and the Primary Land Development Banks. They suggested a ban on general loan waivers and called for measures like implementation of effective insurance schemes and for following an incentive based loan recovery system.

The report of Reserve Bank of India (1998) revealed that flow of agricultural credit by commercial banks decreased due to various reasons. Among the major reasons include insufficient authority of the branch manager to finalize the loan applications, complex procedure, lack of freedom to commercial bank to fix the rate of interest on loans of all amounts as it is being done in the Co-operatives and Regional Rural Banks, duly connected with registering mortgage. Besides, the Service Area Approach programmes restrict the borrowers' freedom to approach any bank in the locality.

Sahu and Rajashekar (2000) analyzed the factors affecting the institutional credit and agricultural income. It was highlighted that gap between credit and investment takes place mainly due to mis-utilisation of credit and secondly, due to inadequate and untimely loans to farmers. Finally, due to concessional or subsidized interest rate also increased the gap between credit and investment as well as income and repayment. It was suggested that above problems can be overcome by: (1) Increasing the post-sanction supervision; (2) Encouraging group–lending programmes i.e. lending through non-government organizations; (3) Giving more importance to the quality of credit delivery system and (4) Giving timely credit.

Koester (2001) opined that functioning of rural financial markets played a key role in transforming agriculture from a centrally planned to a market economy. It was observed that in the absence of sound rural financial markets, the revitalization of agriculture will be delayed and the structural adjustment and transition of the agricultural sector to a market economy will take longer than for most other sectors of the economy. The experience of Central and Eastern European Countries as well as Southern and Eastern European Countries showed that rural financial markets are still underdeveloped. It was suggested that the design of adequate policies in order to address the above problems should be based on a diagnosis of market and policy failure.

Shete (2002) in his study highlighted the performance of the Public Sector Banks (PSBs) in India under the priority sector credit during the post-reform period 1991-2001. It was observed that process of financial sector reforms has bypassed the agricultural sector in general and weaker section in particular. The flow of credit to the priority sector has declined substantially and a large number of PSBs are not able to reach the prescribed target of lending to agriculture and weaker sections. Dynamic and conflicting changes appear to be operating in curtailing the current supply of priority sector credit, while at the same time, financial requirements of agriculture and other activities are increasing in rural areas. It was suggested that particular attention needs to be given on the removal of distortions in the priority sector lending by commercial banks for agriculture and rural sectors.

Mohanty and Haque (2003) in their study revealed that despite substantial increase in the flow of institutional credit to agriculture in India in recent years, inter-regional and inter-class disparities seem to have widened. It was observed that the eastern and central regions of the country, which are starved of capital for agricultural modernization, also suffer from inadequate supply of institutional credit. The poorer section of the rural population continue to borrow largely from private agencies like moneylenders, traders and relatives, as cooperatives and commercial banks mainly cater to the needs of the better off. In other words, the relatively backward region and poorer section of the population in India have not benefited much from existing credit institutions.

Sahu, Madheswaran and Rajasekhar (2004) argued that the literature on the rural credit market in India (and elsewhere) has generally assumed that peasant farm households are rationed in their access to subsidized formal credit. Because of a lack of infrastructure and poor access to institutional credit, such farmers are exploited by means of an interlocked market connecting informal credit to the sale of paddy. It was suggested that access to formal credit is limited in rural areas, although a high demand exists there for it, that a high degree of credit rationing by the formal lender occurs, and that poor implementation by the state of minimum support price policy all contribute to the need for informal loans and its attendant inter linkage.

OBJECTIVES

The Specific Objectives of the Present Study are:

- To know the educational status of the farmers.
- To find out the other sources of income along with agriculture.
- To examine the problems being faced by farmers in getting credit from institutional agencies
- To analyse the means used to meet the additional requirements of finance by the farmers.
- To know the reasons for delay in repayment of agricultural credit.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is limited to Haryana State. To cover the wide range of farmers spread all over the State, 'Multi-stage Stratified Random Sampling Technique' was adopted. To begin with, the State was stratified into four homogeneous agro-climate zones, designated as Zone I (Faridabad, Gurgaon, Rewari, Mahendergarh, Palwal and Mewat), Zone II (Jind, Panipat, Sonepat, Rohtak and Jhajjar), Zone III (Ambala, Panchkula, Yamuna Nagar, Kaithal, Kurukshetra and Karnal) and Zone IV (Fatehabad, Sirsa, Hissar and Bhiwani). Each zone comprises four (4) to six (6) districts. The study is confined to 640 borrowing farmers. To select the ultimate units, i.e. the borrower farmers, 'purposive sampling technique' was used. Every sincere effort was made to ensure objectivity in the selection of borrowing farmers. Survey method was used for the purpose of collection of data from the lendee-farmers. The primary data was collected through questionnaires filled by the lendee-farmers of Haryana State which included both open ended and close ended questions. Secondary data was collected from textbooks, periodicals, newspapers, research journals, magazines, hypertext, etc. RBI Annual Reports, Publications of NABARD, Reports of State Level Bankers' Committee, RBI Reports on Trend and Progress on Banking in India, Economic Survey Reports, and Five Year Plans, etc were also studied and analyzed in the light of objectives specified for research. To analyze the tabulated data, various techniques consistent to the objectives of the study were used.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Educational Status

Educational status play a considerable role since it increases the ability level of farmers under the assumption that they respond to better cultivation practices with greater elasticity and awareness level may also be high in case of educated farmers.

Table 1 depicts the educational status of respondent farmers. It shows that a large share of farmers (76.9 %) is below matriculate and 8.3 percent respondents are found to be illiterate. Only a few of the respondents are highly educated i.e. graduate and postgraduate.

Table 1: Zone-wise Educational Status of Farmers

Zone	Educational Level						
	Illiterate	**Primary**	**Middle**	**Matric**	**Graduate**	**Postgraduate**	**Total**
Zone I	19(11.9)	65 (40.6)	53 (33.1)	17 (10.6)	6 (3.8)	0 (0.0)	160 (100.0)
Zone II	22(13.8)	55 (34.4)	65 (40.6)	18 (11.3)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	160 (100.0)
Zone III	3(1.9)	18 (11.3)	69 (43.1)	69 (43.1)	1 (0.6)	0 (0.0)	160 (100.0)
Zone IV	9(5.6)	38 (23.8)	76 (47.5)	21 (13.1)	12 (7.5)	4 (2.5)	160 (100.0)
Total	53 (8.3)	176 (27.5)	263 (41.1)	125 (19.5)	19 (3.0)	4 (0.6)	640 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages to total

Landholding-wise Educational Level

The table shown below depicts the educational level of the respondents according to the size of landholding. As the size of landholding is decreasing day-by-day, farmers are unable to get the economies of large scale production. Income from agriculture is not sufficient to meet the requirements of farmers. Hence, education is necessary to undertake other activities along with agriculture to create another source of income.

Table 2: Landholding-wise Educational Status of Farmers

Type of Farmers	Educational Level						
	Illiterate	Primary	Middle	Matric	Graduate	Postgraduate	Total
Marginal (Up to 2.5 Acres)	4 (5.5)	18 (24.7)	25 (34.2)	25 (34.2)	1 (1.4)	0 (0.0)	73 (100.0)
Small (2.6 to 5 Acres)	16 (8.9)	57 (31.7)	69 (38.3)	35 (19.4)	3 (1.7)	0 (0.0)	180 (100.0)
Medium (5.1 to 10 Acres)	25 (15.5)	41 (25.5)	70 (43.5)	24 (14.9)	1 (0.6)	0 (0.0)	161 (100.0)
Big (Above 10 Acres)	8 (3.5)	60 (26.6)	99 (43.8)	41 (18.1)	14 (6.2)	4 (1.8)	226 (100.0)
Total	53 (8.3)	176 (27.5)	263 (41.1)	125 (19.5)	19 (3.0)	4 (0.6)	640 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages to total

Other Source of Income along with Agriculture

Information was collected from the respondent farmers to know whether they have any other source of income along with agriculture. It was found that 18.4 percent are having other source of income along with agriculture. Most of the farmers are doing 'Trading activity' followed by 'Govt/Private job'. A very few farmers are involved as commission agent, money lending and labour activities. Efforts were made to know the reason to undertake other activity along with agriculture.

Table 3 shows that 'Risk in Agriculture' was found to be the most significant reason to undertake other activity along with agriculture followed by 'Inadequate Agriculture Income'. The next reason was found as 'Seasonal Work of Agriculture'. But, 'Extra Income' was ranked the last. It was also found that every farmer possess account in a bank as it is mandatory for any farmer to open account before availing any loan.

Table 3: Reasons for Undertaking Other Activity Along with Agriculture

S. No	Reason	Mode	Rank
1	Risk in Agriculture	1	1
2	Inadequate Agricultural Income	2	2
3	Seasonal Work of Agriculture	3	3
4	For Extra Income	4	4

Problems Being Faced by Farmers in Getting Loans from Formal Credit Agencies

Farmers face numerous problems when they approach the formal credit agencies for getting loans. Though a few number 7.3 percent has reported for refusal of loan by these agencies. Table 4 depicts various problems faced by farmers and ranked in order of importance reflected by their mean values. For determining the relative importance of various problems being faced by farmers, two-tailed t-test of mean values was conducted. Weights such as 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 were allotted to the responses as Always, Mostly, Seldom, Rare and Never respectively.

'Unwillingness to Compromise with Officials' (mean = 3.99, t = 46.766) and 'Inability to comply with formalities' (mean = 3.96, t = 46.187) was found to be the most common problem faced by the farmers. 'Lack of Awareness about various Schemes of Credit' (mean = 3.79, t = 30.236), 'Non-cooperative Attitude of Employees' (mean = 3.75, t = 27.508) and 'Inability to provide Security' (mean = 3.79, t = 25.548) were found to be the next significant problems being faced by farmers followed by 'Cumbersome Procedure' (mean = 3.14, t = 3.290). Mean values of all these problems are found to be the higher side of hypothetical value and significant at 1 percent level. On the other side, mean values of last two variables are found to the lower side of hypothetical value but, significant at 1 percent level.

Table 4: Problems Being Faced by Farmers in Getting Loans from Formal Credit Agencies

Sr. No	Problems	Test Value = 3		
		Mean	Mean Difference	t-value
1	Unwillingness to Compromise with Officials	3.99	0.989*	46.766
2	Inability to comply with formalities	3.96	0.964*	46.187
3	Lack of Awareness about various Schemes of Credit	3.79	0.789*	30.236
4	Non-cooperative Attitude of Employees	3.75	0.750*	27.508
5	Inability to provide Security	3.79	0.794*	25.548
6	Cumbersome Procedure	3.14	0.139*	3.290
7	Personal Differences with Management	2.49	-0.706*	-12.168
8	Previous Loan Outstanding	2.29	-0.514*	-16.753

Significant at 1 % level

Arrangement of Additional Amount Required by Farmers

Information from respondents was sought whether the same amount of loan is sanctioned by Banks as they demand. It was found that 43.8 percent respondents were not able to get the loan as per their demand. Although, 89 percent respondents were found successful to avail above 75 percent of their demands. But, it is very difficult to avail the loan as per their demand. Therefore, they have to make arrangement of their additional requirement from other sources. Other sources used to meet their additional requirement were shown in the following Table 5.

The Table 5 shows the relative importance of these sources and two-tailed t-test was conducted. The Table ranks the various sources generally used to meet their additional requirement in order of importance reflected by their mean values. 'Borrowing from Friends & Relatives' with mean of 3.99 (t = 20.012) was found to be the most important source of finance to meet their additional requirement followed by 'Borrowing from Private Money-lenders' (mean = 4.01, t = 16.909). 'Reduction in Use of Inputs' with mean 3.86 (t = 15.735) was found to be the next important source. Mean values of these sources was found to be the higher side of the hypothetical value and significant at 1 percent level of significance. On the other side, 'Liquidating Assets' (mean = 1.91, t = -25.340) was found to be less important source. The mean value of this source was found to be the lower side of hypothetical value and significant at 1 percent level.

Table 5: Managing the Remaining Amount to Meet Requirements by Farmers

S. No.	Problems	Test Value = 3		
		Mean	Mean Difference	t-value
1	Borrowing from Friends & Relatives	3.99	0.986*	20.012
2	Borrowing from Private Money-lenders	4.01	1.014*	16.909
3	Reduction in Use of Inputs	3.86	0.863*	15.735
4	Postponing Investment	3.02	0.025	0.399
5	Liquidating Assets	1.91	-1.090*	-25.340

Significant at 1 % level

CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing educational status of respondent farmers, it was found that a large share of farmers (76.9%) is below matriculate and 8.3 percent respondents are found to be illiterate. Only a few of the respondents are highly educated i.e. graduate and postgraduate. There is an assumption that awareness level may be high in case of educated farmers. Income from agriculture is not sufficient to meet the requirements of farmers. As the size of landholding is decreasing day-by-day, farmers are unable to get the economies of large scale production. It wasa found that 43.8 percent respondents were not able to get the loan as per their demand. Though, 89 percent respondents have found successful to get above 75 percent of their demand. Therefore, they have to make arrangement of their additional requirement from other sources. Information was collected from the respondent farmers to know whether they have any other source of income along with agriculture. It was found that 18.4 percent were having other source of income along with agriculture. Farmers face numerous problems when they approach to the formal credit agencies for getting loans. Though, a few number (7.3) percent has reported for refusal of loan by these agencies. Various problems are being faced by farmers and ranked in order of importance reflected by their mean values. 'Unwillingness to Compromise with Officials' and 'Inability to comply with formalities' are found to be the most common problem faced by the farmers.

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