

Don't Neglect Rural Landless and Farm Workers of Punjab. They Need Justice.

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The rural discourse in Punjab has not given the due attention to a very significant share of the population—the rural landless sections including farm workers who have the least resource base and hence constitute the most vulnerable and poorest segment of the population. In keeping with the principle of giving the most attention to the most vulnerable and poorest sections of society, they should have got the most attention, but in reality their needs and aspirations have been neglected by successive governments to a large extent.

Several marginal farmers also toil as farm workers. In addition, several small and marginal farmers have been forced by indebtedness and economic distress to leave their land and turn into farm workers. This can be a traumatic experience for them as family honour can be very closely linked to land ownership. Studies have revealed that 14.4 per cent of Punjab's farmers have left farming since 1991. Among those who left farming 82 per cent were small and marginal farmers. 28 per cent of the farmers who left farming started earning their livelihood as labourers in the farm sector as well as the non-farm sector (EPW, Paper by Singh and Bhogal 2014 on Punjab's Small Peasantry).

Excessive mechanization and increasing presence of a large number of migrant workers has reduced the farm employment opportunities of local farm workers while at the same time creative and satisfactory alternative employment opportunities have not emerged for them, despite the potential for this.

Unnecessarily high mechanization not related to the real needs of Punjab's villages has led to high levels of unemployment among farm workers, apart from creating other problems, including ecological problems. As a report of the Punjab State Council for Science and Technology admits,

“the state has double the number of tractors it requires. The average use of tractors per annum in the state is barely 450 hours, which is much below the minimum 1,000 hours of productive use in agriculture. This is leading to over capitalisation in farm mechanisation and its under-utilisation due to decrease in farm size. This leads to higher cost of production and lower net income to farmers, making it economically unviable. As per 2004 estimates of Department of Agriculture, Government of India, 14% of total population of tractors in India ploughs the fields in Punjab”.

Another study (2007, Ghuman and Singh, Punjabi University Patiala) points out that the overall economic condition of farm workers has been worsening, (the wage data must be seen in the context of the time of the study)

“The low wage rate, along with the lesser number of employment days, has worsened the economic plight of agricultural labourers. It is important to note that no casual labourer in agriculture is earning more than Rs. 1500 per month, on an average. Even in the case of family earnings, nearly 67 per cent families end up with a monthly income of less than Rs. 1500. Even in non-agricultural activities, 91 per cent casual labourers are earning less than Rs. 1500 per month. There is, thus, an urgent need to address this phenomenon by way of empowering workforce with skill and other measures...As a result of low wages, low availability of work and low family earnings, more than 70 per cent of the casual labourers are under loan. They had taken loan from non-institutional sources at a very high interest rate. The fact of the matter is that a very high proportion of labourers take loan to meet household expenses, health, care and social commitments. These labourers are in a debt-trap.”

The working of the prevailing power structure both at the village level and at the wider policy level is such that the aspirations of farm workers either for better wages or for a share of the land are generally curbed with a heavy hand. As Sukhpal Singh has noted, the increase in real wages in Punjab has been lower than the all India level. There have been examples, as in Ferozepur, when big farmers used heavy handed methods to lower wages for paddy transplantation. In 2009 when farmers agitated for homestead land rights and better implementation of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, over 1300 agricultural workers and labour leaders were arrested. Farm workers have been denied even that land which should be leased to them according to the governments own policies. As a result of all these denials, “employment in agriculture is casual, intermittent and uncertain and labourers find it most difficult in making both ends meet at this consistently low level of living. The major reasons behind the “casualization” of farm labour in the state have been mechanisation of major farm operations, inflow of migrant labour, slowdown of agricultural growth, and non-viability of small and marginal holdings”. Out of the 2890 suicides reported in the study on Bhatinda and Sangrur 39 per cent were those of agricultural labourers. (paper by S. Singh, EPW, 2009).

With the changes in technology farm workers have been exposed to increasing health hazards and injuries. In particular the health hazards caused by high levels of exposure to toxic agro-chemicals have been very severe.

The landless sections also need at least some land base. If even small plots of land can be provided to them along with support for water conservation and irrigation then using low-cost natural farming methods, kitchen gardens, multi-layer vegetable gardens they too can have at least some food security. In the recent past when they could access some land the model of collectively growing fodder crops to promote dairying related livelihoods has also proved useful. As they have very little access to land, they should be given more opportunities in various village level schemes of cottage and small-scale industries including agro-based industries.

As work of water conservation and recharge, cleaning and clearing of water sources, improving soil health etc. needs to be taken up on a large scale, significant opportunities for the landless should be created under NREGA based schemes and other schemes. The greening of Punjab in the form of planting mixed indigenous species should be taken up in a big way and this can become another important source of short-term wage employment as well as long-term self-employment for landless workers. Certain patches of degraded community land and forest land can be given to groups of landless persons for greening with mixed indigenous species, trying to imitate a natural forest of the region. They can be

given proper wages for this work for some years. When the trees are grown up, they can be given the rights to obtain minor forest produce from them, while at the same time taking care to protect trees.

A large number of migrant workers particularly from Bihar and eastern UP have come to work in the villages (as well as cities) of Punjab. They have worked hard in adverse conditions far away from home to contribute to the completion of intensive agricultural operations with tight seasonality and time schedules. However their welfare needs have also been often neglected as they generally do not have essential facilities and access to government schemes in the way they would have in their home villages. They do not have unions and organizations to assert their needs and rights even though they may be placed in the most vulnerable position. Their welfare needs also need much more attention.

At some places efforts of farm workers to unionize have led to good results but on the whole, much more remains to be done for better and stronger organization of farm workers in Punjab so that their needs can be met and their rights can be protected in much better ways.

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