

Understanding “Created Poverty” And Farmer Suicides In India

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Farmer suicides in India

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Since 1995 more than three lakh Indian farmers have committed suicide -- the largest wave of recorded suicides in human history. Vidarbha district of Maharashtra alone has seen 3145 farmer suicides in the last three years. Though the causes of the poverty that drives farmers to suicide are multi-dimensional Professor K.Nagaraj's definitive study of Farmer Suicides identifies Neo-Liberal policies introduced in the 1990's as the precipitating factor of the agrarian crisis rocking rural India.

The introduction of Genetically Modified crops in the country is one such neo-liberal policy that is today acknowledged to have contributed significantly to trapping many farmers in a debt trap particularly in the cotton growing areas of Vidarbha district. BT cotton was introduced in India with the stated objective of making cotton pest resistant thereby reducing pesticide use, input costs and being environment friendly at the same time. 15 years of experience with BT cotton manifest the inefficiency of the seed with the pest developing resistance against the crop. The situation is further worsened with the development of secondary pests which turn out to be major cotton pests in some time. Thus BT cotton seeds which are prized substantially higher than traditional varieties turned out to be non pest resistant and a major pesticide guzzler thereby increasing the input costs of farmers by leaps and bounds without giving any return.

Further the crops from BT cotton are genetically engineered to produce seeds that cannot be saved for the next season forcing farmers to buy new seeds for every new round. The Parliamentary Standing Committee Report on the Cultivation of Genetically Modified Food Crops categorically stated that the factors noted above which caused indebtedness led to 7922 farmer suicides in the region between 2006 and 2011.

In the wake of concrete proof linking the introduction of BT cotton and farmer suicides it is pertinent to ask if such an outcome could have been prevented. The answer to that question is an overwhelming yes and sheds light on apathetic implementation of existing skeletal regulatory framework which contributed to the 'creation' of poverty that drove farmers to take the extreme step. The Supreme Court appointed Technical Expert Committee (TEC) set up following a public interest litigation challenging environmental release of genetically modified crops admonished the regulatory system for containing major gaps that needs to be redressed before conducting new field trials and recommended an indefinite moratorium on field trials for food crops and stringent conditions with respect to other crops.

The committee noted the need to create expertise and capacity within the regulatory system for a proper understanding of risk assessment to meet the needs of bio safety evaluation. To this effect the TEC has recommended the setting up of a secretariat of experts who will look for best practices in bio safety regulation from around the world to fix gaps in the existing regulatory mechanism as opposed to the present system where the one body (Genetic Engineering Approval Committee) makes unilateral decisions without the slightest amount of accountability and transparency leading to unfortunate consequences as documented above.

Shockingly, in spite of the wealth of evidence against the efficacy of GM crops introduced without proper testing the GEAC reconstituted after the NDA Government was voted into power in 2014 approved field trials for 5 crops. It is important to note that such approval has been given despite none of the recommendations of the Supreme Court appointed TEC being fulfilled. Thus GM field testing and approval will continue to happen under the existing skeletal regulatory framework exposing more farmers to 'created' poverty. This is a prime example how bureaucratic action taken without due regard to regulatory frameworks can violently disrupt the lives of the poorest Indians.

To assume that issue of imperfect regulatory frameworks will be remedied by the Government on its own is unfounded optimism given the Government's pro GMO tilt evident from recent policy decisions. Therefore a solution to this problem will not come from within the governing system but will have to come from outside it. It is at this point that the democratic form of Government and the consequent freedoms such a form of Government guarantees to all its citizens becomes relevant in winning the battle against institutionalized poverty.

Amartya Sen in his seminal work 'Development as Freedom' argues forcefully that democracy plays a pivotal role in ensuring that indicators of abject poverty such as famines do not occur in such societies due to the presence of a free media and a political class that has to be necessarily responsive to citizens needs. Of course, democracy by itself is not enough to ensure basic necessities for citizens. The point that is being made is that democracy provides citizens with a set of freedoms which has to be positively grabbed in order to force action on part of the political elite. Opposition parties, independent media and active civil society are important players that need to utilize the

freedom democracy provides in order to fight institutional poverty. In the specific case of farmer suicides opposition parties and the media have largely remained mute spectators barring a few exceptions.

Therefore in the context of more GM field trials being allowed it would not be an overstatement to say that the fate of farmers depends largely on the ability of civil society and farmers to bring their struggle to the forefront in a way that make it impossible for the political class and media to ignore their legitimate demands.

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