

A historical analysis of Farmers Movements in Karnataka

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Abstract: India is an agrarian economy and agriculture sector employs nearly half of the workforce in the country and contributes to around 16 per cent of the GDP during financial year of 2019-20. India has witnessed many farmer movements and have been based on myriad issues and the demands of the movements have spatial and temporal dimensions. Infact, farmer movement in India has a long history, dating back to the colonial period, when farmers in different parts of India revolted against Zamindars, Landlords, British colonial masters or powers including feudal lords. These movements were the results of severe exploitation, oppression, loss of rights over land, imposition of new taxes and new agrarian relations of the farmers with the Colonial state or the feudal lords. Most of the struggles that the farmers resorted to were either carried as part of nationalist struggle or independent of it. All these struggles brought the farmers to the nationalist movement. One such leader who organised the farmers, under political party was Chaudhury Charan Singh, the former Prime Minister of India. He organised few rallies raising such issues as parity in prices between industrial and agricultural commodities; allowing import of agricultural input from abroad, reducing the protection given to industry, due representation of farmers in different boards and committees, subsidies to electricity, water, fertilizer, seeds, reducing the income disparity between the urban and rural people, establishing Kisan Banks as well as agricultural polytechnics etc.

During 1980s, India saw the beginning of 'New Farmers' Movement' in different parts of India. The reasons were: terms of trade going against the agriculture, declining purchasing power, un-remunerative prices, many peasants drifting away from agriculture profession, increase in input prices, declining per capita income from agriculture etc. It all began in Maharashtra when 'Shetkari Sanghathana' under Sharad Joshi, a former employee of UN, turned farmer, began agitating in village called Chakan in Pune for remunerative prices for agricultural commodities, particularly for onion. This one point agenda of remunerative prices began to be enacted by farmers in other states of India. In Karnataka, it was started by farmers of Navalgund (Navilgund) demanding abolition of 'betterment levy' in Command Area. This helped in the formation of an organisation called Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha. Prof. Nanjundaswamy, a Professor of Law, became its ideologue and undisputed leader. The list of demands would cover each and every issue of farmers. Many a time the demands of the farmers' movement would include issues such as getting remunerative prices, writing off agricultural loans, protesting against the government policy of procurement, levy policy, liberalization of agricultural policy etc.

Key Words: Agitation, Exploitation, Fair price, Farmers, Rajya Raitha Sangha, Welfare.

1. Introduction:

Farmers' movements in India, against landlordism and oppression within the rural sector, are relatively an old phenomenon. These movements were greatly instrumental in breaking the old feudal order and ushering in agricultural development on modern lines. Yet, the agrarian structure that came into being was hardly egalitarian. It is at this juncture that farmers' associations and open movements on price and related issues have dominated the Indian scene. Unlike the latter, the farmers' movements are not against oppression within the rural sector, but against what they believe to be the factors behind continuing rural underdevelopment and a relative deterioration in the income of farmers.

Price has naturally received the utmost attention from farmers' lobbies. While the fact of rural areas being less developed can be readily conceded, there nevertheless arise doubts about the efficacy of a strategy, which relies mainly on turning the terms of trade in favour of agriculture to alleviate rural poverty. A lively debate has ensued on this question particularly among economists, and there are many who do not believe in the efficiency of the price instrument. These agitations have been fairly well sustained and have enjoyed a fairly wide base among farmers and also a support much beyond their regional base, though they cannot be said to have covered all areas even in the state where they have been

recurring often. No state government and no political party today can dare to either ignore farmers community or openly oppose their cause. These agitations cannot be brushed aside as sporadic or as minor lobbies in the corridors of power.

The Farmers' movement emerged at a time when agriculture was undergoing tremendous crisis. It emerged when terms of trade were going against agriculture, income from agriculture was dwindling, input prices were going beyond the reach of farmers etc. It started in Maharashtra under Shetkari Sanghatana, under Sharad Joshi, a former employee of UN, turned farmer, began agitating in village called Chakan in Pune for remunerative prices for agricultural commodities, particularly for onion. This one point agenda of remunerative prices began to be enacted by farmers in other states of India, when it demanded remunerative prices to onion. It was later on followed by Karnataka under the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha. Farmer movements in Karnataka continues to be most alive and kicking to this date and shows no sign of abatement. It has also shown more skill and subtlety in securing a wider base. The movements and the issues are, however, analysed in terms of both regional and national perspectives. Farmer movements has been a vehicle of social and economic transformation of rural India.

These agitations cannot be brushed aside as sporadic or as minor lobbies in the corridors of power. They constitute a major political phenomenon and richly deserve to be called movements rather than mere agitations. In a sense, the distinction between an agitation and a movement is the same as between a battle and war. Agitations form operational parts of a movement, but a movement is more than the sum of its agitations. A movement can also originate from sporadic agitations, with no larger perspective and goals initially. The leaders of farmers' agitations have, however, often managed to rise above the immediate local issues that provoked agitations and gave them a larger perspective and goals needed for a movement. A movement has a class base and intends to alter the existing social order or the power structure at least at the regional levels where it takes place. It also has an ideology to justify it. A movement has also a dynamics of its own and its prospects depend upon what alliances it seeks and how it resolves its contradictions arising in its course.

Although started almost simultaneously, the differences among the farmers' organisations checkmated the movements into becoming a big force in Indian politics. Despite differences the new farmers' movement did bring about a paradigm shift in the discourse, analysis and perception about farmers in Karnataka. It made the policy makers to address the deep rooted crisis of agriculture as well as agrarian classes in the state. It has also helped the farmers to be a part of international movement against such issues as globalisation, imperialism and capitalism. However, they have not been effective in bringing radical transformation in the rural environment, because of the fact that the movements, from the very beginning, were unable to overcome the internal conflicts as well as contradictions.

The power structure of India has undergone significant changes in the last seventy years or so, the replacement of the British being only apart of the story. The process of widening of the power base of the country mainly through the entry of peasants into the power structure started with peasant movements, the gains of which were consolidated during the sixties and the seventies. Indian agriculture remained firmly under the heels of feudalism, the zamindari system having been promoted and supported by imperialism.

Farmers movement in Karnataka also includes the protest of beedi tobacco cultivators of Nipani in Karnataka during 1980's. The growers had only the internal market to sell to and were in the grip of rapacious merchants. The familiar trade practices of providing some advance before harvest and taking away the harvest at less than the market prices, price rigging, short weighing and fraudulent grading, were reported to be very common. Even the market prices could be manipulated with relatively greater ease. The prices fell quite low in 1980. It was found that 'growers received less than six rupees a kilo as against the production cost of more than Rs. 12. What is worse, the traders sold the stuff at double the production cost. The agitation at Nipani was started in March 1981, taking the form of blocking of traffic (Rasta Roko). Nipani is on the Bangalore-Pune Highway. For 24 days farmers blocked the highway, forcing the traffic to take a diversion. Then the Karnataka police acted suddenly to arrest and clear the road by resorting to firing. It is alleged that the tobacco merchants stage-managed a provocation by throwing stones with the help of hired goondas, forcing the police to act against farmers. Some 10 people were reported killed in firing and hundreds injured. Finally, government intervention and active participation in fixing minimum support price for Tobacco cultivators set off the agitation. Since October 1984, the open auction system was started for tobacco and is expected to result in better prices for growers.

Farmers' movements in Karnataka on the new issues came into prominence only with the Malaprabha agitation in 1980. By merging all Raitha Sangha (Farmers organisation), Karnataka Rajya Raita Sangha (KRRS) came into existence. The story of farmers' movements in Karnataka after August 1980 is the story of the KRRS and of its trinity: viz., the elderly

Rudrappa, and the younger Sundareshand Prof. Nanjundaswamy. The KRRS was set up at the State level. Their first show of strength was a massive rally in Shimoga followed by 'Rasta Roko' in the district. They stopped supply of food, fuel, milk, etc. to Shimoga and offices were picketed. The agitation in Shimoga had put the others into the shade and the trinity played the most prominent role in presenting farmers' demands to the Chief Minister.

Another major issue which the KRRS took up actively was the harassment of farmers by officials for loan recovery. Loans overdue are a logical corollary of payment arrears, though the problem is not confined to sugarcane growers alone. It had been the practice of officials to deliberately humiliate defaulters by such means as public announcement of defaulters' names in village lanes with the help of drummers and attachment of utensils of everyday use, so that the fear of such humiliation may force them to repay loans regularly. It was mainly to prevent such harassment that farmers put up boards at entry points of villages asking officials and 'corrupt politicians' not to enter villages without permission. The farmers not only stopped harassment by officials in areas, where the KRRS had a strong hold, but even launched a counter-seizure of property of those officers who they thought were corrupt, in addition to recovering properties attached for non-payment of loans.

The KRRS also took up other issues which boosted its image among environmentalist, h has opposed the drive of commercial interests to expand the area under eucalyptus for use by the paper and pulp industry and demanded the promotion of trees which are of relevance to farmers and other rural sections. It has been feared that growing eucalyptus in semi-arid areas would reduce soil fertility in the long run, and in the short run itself reduce the availability of fuel, fruit and fodder to local population. Even seasonal employment could be adversely affected. The KRRS wanted this trend to be halted in favour of a forest development complementing agriculture and meeting local needs.

2. Limitations observed in the movement:

The farmers movement, from the very beginning, were identified with rich or market-oriented farmers, the other categories received scant focus in their politics. This is the reason why they have been losing their social bases. Further, their operational areas are confined to those localities wherein the classes of rich or market-oriented farmers have come to stay. This has further reduced their areas of operation.

Farmers' movement did not believe in single ideology, because of the fundamental differences among different farmer associations about addressing the issues of farmers. The Karnataka farmers' movement claimed itself as Gandhian but few of its arguments come closer to the argument of dependency theory. It argues that the present day retarded development of the third world is largely due to the colonisation of the third world by the former colonial countries. This colonisation is once again being pursued, even after the independence, by way of cheap goods, dumping secretive technology, patent regimes, imposing restrictions on the agricultural production, developing weak capitalism, urban biased policies etc. Infact, the division within the farmer's movement was not a new one; there were many issues that divided the farmer's movement, when it was at its peak at the all India level. One such issue was retaining the "non – political" character of the movement. This non-political stance had a different meaning: disassociating from the electoral politics, keeping distance from parties upholding agitational politics etc. However this process of remaining non-political underwent transformation, for the reason that the farmers' movement increasingly began to believe that remaining non-political would not benefit the farmers nor the movement. The agrarian structure shows some basic weaknesses. The proportion of households which generate marketable surplus is very small in the total. The medium households which form the bulk of the surplus households and also of area, are not secure in terms of marketable surplus and probably even viability. Whereas the richer households may be able to diversify their economic activities, investing in trade and even to some extent in industry and having good urban contacts, the medium households are mostly tied to agriculture having a tremendous stake in it.

Indian agriculture has caught up with several contradictions. The long-term decline in the relative income per worker in agriculture, which is a reflection of these contradictions, was further compounded by adverse relative prices. In such circumstances it should be a surprise if farmers do not protest, not necessarily because they are the most vulnerable or the most to suffer in agriculture, but because they feel, that, unless they protest, they too would join the ranks of the most vulnerable.

The caste solidarity is an important fact of village life. The small and marginal farmers of these peasant communities rally behind a cause which would benefit the community as a whole, even if the benefits may not be equitably distributed. It should be noted, however, that caste appeal was not the only factor in securing a popular base for the farmers' movements.

3. Suggestions to meet the limitations:

- Since the 1990s it has become necessary to stage protests at the global level and to engage in transnational networks and build alliances to create the world that the movement had envisioned.
- To achieve sovereignty from the complex inter-linkages of a global food economy dominated by agribusiness giants, to prevent climate crises and to provide solutions to rampant farmer suicides in India, KRRS utilised multi-pronged strategies of protests, negotiations with policymaking bodies and the creation of agri-food networks.
- The focus on information sharing, engaging with networks of similar groups, exchanging knowledge and building solidarity across local and global spaces, has been a discernible shift within the movement.
- Conceptualised initially by its leader Nanjundaswamy as seed sovereignty in their campaign Beeja Satyagraha, the concept of food sovereignty has broadened in later years via the movement's links with La Via Campesina.
- The influence of Gandhian principles on the notion of sovereignty with regard to the freedom to cultivate crops and save seeds has continued through several generations of the movement.
- Involvement of more and more youth in the movement to create a more just, ecologically sustainable and self-reliant society is needed. Herein lies the success of the movement, that its vision has been carried on to the next generation.

4. Conclusion:

The farmers' movements in India have excelled in populist philosophising. Some farmers' leaders, like Nanjundaswamy particularly, have emphasised that the price issue is only one of the many issues affecting farmers and the ultimate goal of their movement is to end capitalism of the Western type and run the economy on Gandhian principles. There is an immediate need to curb the mad rush to elitism that provides little employment and security to the masses. Mass leader like Prof. Nanjundaswamy has already given a call to his followers to avoid synthetic fabrics and wear only cottons. But there have been no corresponding moves to take up the issues concerning rural artisans and rural industries or to improve other aspects of rural life such as education and health. The fact is that farmers' movements are yet to graduate themselves into rural movements for improving the quality of life of the bulk of the rural population, let alone movements of all the deprived sections including the urban poor. Irrespective of personal convictions, it is doubtful how far Nanjundaswamy would be able to dissuade the elite farmers from emulating the life styles of the urban rich and carry them to Gandhian goals. The means adopted by the farmers' movements may well be Gandhian, but it is doubtful if the goals are.

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