

Why Do Farmers Commit Suicide?

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A farmer from Rajasthan committed suicide in a dramatic fashion on 22nd April 2015 at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi within sight of a rally organised by the Aam Aadmi Party and addressed by the Delhi Chief Minister, Arvind Kejriwal. The farmer climbed a tree and after trying to be heard, with his voice being drowned by the noise of the AAP leaders giving speeches, he wrapped a piece of cloth around his neck, tied it to the branch of the tree which he had climbed and either jumped or slipped and before he could be rescued he died of strangulation. The suicide note he threw down can be interpreted as a suicide, but it does not categorically use these words. The incident has been widely reported by the print and electronic media and one need not comment further on it. The larger question is why farmers commit suicide in India, with a report stating that in the first four months of 2015 a total of 45 farmers have ended their lives.

India, with 60% of its land being arable and only 10 percent being unculturable waste, is ideally suited for the cultivation of crops, including horticultural crops. With about 30 percent of the land being a part of forests, including degraded forests, India is also well suited to arboriculture. But there are certain ground realities which must be borne in mind. Perennial irrigation systems cover only about 30 percent of our agricultural area and, therefore, the major part of the cultivated land is either monsoon dependent or must have resort to localised irrigation systems based on wells, tube wells and miner irrigation works. The problem with ground water is that if there is a monsoon failure ground water, especially in peninsular India, is also affected and the water table drops. It is, therefore, a system with low reliability. Regarding the monsoon, it has always been notorious for its vagaries and variations. The average rainfall, except for a few pockets, ranges from adequate to excellent, but then averages, like all statistics, can be misleading. If it does not rain when the crops need moisture, but rains heavily when the crops need a dry spell, even if the rainfall is adequate on average, the crop is ruined. That has happened in the agricultural season 2014-2015, when untimely rains largely damaged the rabi crops, especially in northern and central India.

Then we have a climatic devil called El Nino which creates oceanic and atmospheric conditions which disturb the monsoon pattern. El Nino was active in 2014 and meteorological scientists tell us that it will be active in 2015-2016 also. That reduces the chance of a normal monsoon and greatly increases the chance of an erratic monsoon. This is unwelcome news for the farmers because unless they are able to successfully plan a cropping pattern which mitigates the effect of weather, they may have another crop disaster in the coming kharif and rabi seasons. The agricultural research establishment and the agriculture universities will have to think very seriously about the weather patterns and see what crop pattern can be adopted to neutralise adverse climatic impact.

Agriculture, like any other business, needs both capital infusion for improvement and working capital. Regardless of the farm size and the value of the collateral, if a farmer wants to dig a tube well and install a pump there is a threshold level of investment which has to be made. Even today banks link total credit with the credit worthiness of the farmer and his farm. Many farmers receive less than the threshold level of funds and, therefore, the work remains incomplete. The farmer gets no returns, but the debt remains constant. The farmer cannot repay it and the more faint hearted seek a quick exit through suicide. Unless credit requirements are met in totality, unless the rates of interests are low, unless the period of repayment is long and unless there is an adequate crop insurance or loss compensation scheme

which actually works, suicides by farmers may continue. Attacking a particular government on political grounds will not help and, therefore, there has to be national consensus on (1) Research on and development of cropping patterns which can counter climatic changes, (2) Threshold level of funding of farm activities, (3) A marketing system which ensures a fair return to the farmers, (4) Government intervention in terms of crop insurance or compensation against crop loss.
