



Farmer suicide as problematisation: A review on Punjab, India

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Abstract

Farmer suicide in Indian context has been focus of discourse in media, academics, politics and civil society. The paper attempts to analyse this through Foucault's conceptualisation on Problematisation. The issue being problematised in this paper deals with farmer's suicide in the state of Punjab to know how and why it became a problem and an object of thought. This has been attempted through a theme based review of academic reports/articles/papers published on the issue. The British colonial rule created Punjab as an agricultural province by privileging the peasantry and cultivators and by developing an extensive network of canal colonies. Post-independence the state was an obvious choice for implementing green revolution. One of the most profound impact attributed as a consequence of green revolution and economic liberalisation is farmer's suicide. Singular causality in terms of economic reductionism of impact of globalization/neoliberalism or hedonism of cultural practices would obfuscate the representation of this phenomenon. The narrative of agriculture in Punjab both during the colonial period and post-independence as an experimental lab for green revolution is a curious mix of peasant ideology as well as the bourgeois capitalism.

Keywords: problematisation, farmer's suicide, green revolution, governmentality

Introduction

Farmer suicide in Indian context has been focus of discourse in media, academics, politics and civil society. The discourses in these multidimensional fields are not mutually exclusive of one another but are rather co- dependent. What underlies the discourse on this issue begs the clarity on how and why this become a matter of discourse. The paper attempts to analyses and understand this through Foucault's conceptualisation on Problematisation. Foucault's idea on problematisation focuses on two components: the method of analysis and the historical process of producing it. In the first component, 'the object of analysis is not to look for the correct response to an issue but to examine how it is questioned, analysed, classified and regulated at specific times and under specific circumstances...' (Bacchi, 2012, p.1). In the second component, '...problematisation captures... how and why certain things become a problem... and how they are shaped as particular objects of thought' (Bacchi, 2012, p.1). This allows for deconstructing any object as a natural given and developing an analysis of how they come to exist as they do. The present, thus becomes a starting point for problematising an issue and then follows the process of building the history behind it. The issue being problematised in this paper deals with farmer's suicide in the state of Punjab. The moot question here being addressed to understand farmer's suicide as problematisation is to know how and why farmer's suicide became a problem and an object of thought. This has been attempted through review of academic reports/articles/papers published on the issue.

Agriculture and the case of colonial Punjab

The roots of agrarian crisis in Punjab are attributed to the

unintended consequences of green revolution, the neoliberal policies and globalisation. To understand positioning of Punjab in this triangular overlapping requires historicisation of this entire process, that is to understand the issue of farmer suicide as a problematisation '...involves studying problematised objects and the (historical) process of their production' (Bacchi, 2012, p.4).

Since antiquity Punjab has always been a major contributor in various historical events leading to defining of present day role and position of India as a nation and current state of Punjab as an integral part of it (Singh, 1999a) ^[22]. Agriculture had always been an important part of life for people of Punjab since Indus valley civilisation, changing its form and spread under different rules over it from the Mughals to reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the Britishers. It was the annexation of Punjab and its consolidation into the British colonial empire that laid the foundation of defining the state as an agricultural state. The colonial project of converting the Punjab into an agricultural state was a strategy to create space for political, economic and administrative consolidation of the state as its subject of control. This was achieved by what Ali (1988) ^[1] terms as agricultural colonisation of Punjab which commenced in 1885. Under this massive project of the British, Punjab was converted in canal colonies through development of extensive canal networks for irrigation purpose. In total nine canal colonies were developed by the British leading to large scale migration and resettlement of people for the purpose of engaging them in agriculture. As Singh (2008, p.3) ^[25] observes that Punjab which '... was once dry desert land between the Khyber pass and the Ganga basin ...while attempting to control this region and block the external threat from the Khyber, the British developed an irrigation system

based on the five rivers. Thus Punjab was transformed into an agricultural land of canal colonies in the nineteenth century, giving it a distinctive economic identity.'

Ali (1988)^[1] and Singh (2008)^[25] identify three major reasons for the agricultural development of Punjab as a colonial project. The first was to increase the generation of land revenue by increasing the agricultural output, second to increase participation of people in the military service of the Empire in India by the way of making it a medium of acquiring land and thirdly it helped in creating a "loyal political base" (Singh, 2008)^[25] for the British. The strategy converted '...what had been a great expanse of yellow sand ...within a couple of years a flourishing country of cornfields and villages' (Singh, 1999b, p. 118). The production of crops increased to more than what was internal requirement of the Punjab and as a result this facilitated laying down of roads and rail networks of connecting Punjab to rest of Indian British colony for export of crops like wheat, cotton and oilseeds (Singh 1999b).

Agriculture became mainstay of Punjab and a means to an end of achieving prosperity for the province. Yet at the same time it resulted in counter intuitive economic challenges that people faced. The prices of land increased, number of landless farmers also increased and 'the 1870's ushered in an era of peasant indebtedness which had never been known in the country before' (Singh, 1999b, p. 152). The role of moneylenders became important as peasants and farmers either mortgaged their land or sold it to them. The reason attributed to this hardship was the need to meet the revenue burden of the state and to support newer agricultural technologies which resulted in increased expenditure (Singh, 2008)^[25]. Singh (1999b, p.154) attributed other contributing factors to this indebtedness which included expenses at weddings, dowries, litigations and increasing population, 'the pressure on land became heavy and holdings became uneconomical'.

The British colonial government also passed the Land Alienation Act 1900 which prohibited the sale of land from agriculturalists to the non-agriculturalists. This infers that Punjab and its people had become specialised primarily in agriculture which was a governance mechanism of the colonial state, branching out into different direction to dilute this was challenge next to impossible. This political and economic process of creating an agricultural expertise in Punjab changed and consolidated the social structure of society where the 'superior castes were also economically and politically dominant' (Ali, 1988, p. 11)^[1] and controlled the means of productions.

To conclude, the British colonial rule created Punjab as an agricultural province by privileging the peasantry and cultivators and by developing an extensive network of canal colonies. This resulted in the region emerging '...as the pace-setter for Indian agricultural development well before independence' (Talbot, 2008, p. 211)^[27]. Yet at the same time it created its own sets of issues and problems including the indebtedness of the peasantry, consolidation of class as well as caste structures.

Agriculture and The case of federal Punjab

Post-independence, India had been dependent on other

developed countries to meet the food requirements of its population. During the 1960's, India's reliance on US aid for food grains was high. The concurrent geo-political scenario of cold war at the time as well as souring India-Pakistan relations had considerable impact on India's dependence on US under the program of Public Law 480. As a measure for opening up of markets in developing countries and to ensure its presence in countries to wean them or keep them away from the Communist ideology, the US started program of green revolution in many countries including India. It became a source and means to achieve food sovereignty for the country, though in lieu of many other economic adjustments (Srivastava, 1972; Ghuman, 1983; Singh, 2008)^[26, 9, 25].

Given the historical significance of colonial Punjab in the domain of agricultural success, the state was an obvious choice for implementing green revolution. This technology involved use of high yield variety seeds, use of pesticides, fertilisers, insecticides and high use of water for irrigation. Wheat and paddy became the major crops produced in the state. As Talbot (2008, p. 216)^[27] observes, 'By the early 1980's, the Punjab was firmly established as India's breadbasket. Despite possessing less than a thirtieth of the total population, it was producing around two-thirds of the entire procurement of wheat and over a half of that of rice. The fact that rice was rarely grown in the British era apparently suggests that this agricultural performance owes far more to the green revolution of the 1960's than to the colonial legacy. But without the high investment in agriculture and infrastructure of the British period, it is unlikely that the Punjab's peasantry would have adopted the Green Revolution technology'.

The impact of green revolution was palpable not only in terms of sufficiency in food grains but also in terms of profit margins for farmers across all categories in Punjab. As Bhalla and Chadha (1982)^[3] observed that where in the 1950's differences in the cropping pattern existed with respect to farm size these became non-operative during the mid seventies due to adoption of green revolution technology. Even for the differences in resource base including that in irrigation, '...it appears that small and marginal farmers of the Punjab have adjusted their cropping patterns in full response to the opportunities available to them.... Neither is small land area a special disadvantage, nor a large land area an extra advantage in choice of cropping combination' (1982, p. 828a). Yet they also observed that, '... in spite of putting in very hard labour both in farm and non-farm activities... even in the heartland of green revolution about one-third of the marginal farmers and about one-fourth of the small farmers are living below poverty line' (1982, p. 877b). By the 1980's the success of green revolution in Punjab had reached a stagnation level. The studies conducted by experts in the field of agricultural scenario in Punjab eventually started presenting the unintended consequences of this technology and prophesied a doom if not handled in terms of appropriate policy changes for agriculture.

The development of agriculture in the 1960s as a part of Green Revolution made agriculture more commodified in its approach by promotion of modernisation and capitalist bent of framework (Singh, 2008; Padhi 2012)^[25, 28]. Cultivation of crops got limited to primarily two main crops grown, wheat

and rice, which witnessed increase in productivity owing to availability of better quality seeds, use of fertilisers and pesticides and increased mechanisation. The impact of Green Revolution on farmers and peasantry has been unequal. As Gill mentions, 'Capitalist development in Punjab agriculture has had a differential effect on the different sections of peasantry. Capitalist farmers have been the largest beneficiaries... The small and marginal farmers experienced some gain in their income levels in the initial period but they are unable to sustain it' (1988, p. 2167). The overall gains observable in agrarian development started decreasing by the 1990s, with shrinking profit margins, mono-crop culture, increased division of land, over mechanisation, etc. (Singh, 2008) ^[25].

The paradox of Punjab

One of the most profound impact attributed as a consequence of green revolution and economic liberalisation is farmer suicide. If the phenomenon of suicide is reflected in large numbers in a society, this complicates the propensity of defining it through psychological parameters and hence, problematises the question of why such acts occur across regions, cultures, social and economic classes. Farmer suicides in India are one such category that confounds and complicates the act of suicide since these happen to be occurring across the divisions of region, class, and caste. Farmer suicide in India present the highest proportion as well as one of the most complex categories of suicide reported in country (Mayer, 2016) ^[14].

Study by Basu, Das and Misra (2016) ^[6] on farmer suicides in India between 1995 and 2011 present that suicide mortality rate (SMR) for farmers is much less than that of the non-farmers at all India level. However, a state wise comparison reveals the concentrated issue of farmer suicide in particular states rather than it being a pan India issue. Kerala and Maharashtra had the highest number of suicides by the farmers whereas in states like Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Assam and Punjab '... the SMR ratio for all farmers has trended upwards... since the mid 2000s' (2016, p. 64).

In context of Punjab, the state government's own report in 2004 acknowledged that the incidents of farmer suicides started during the 1980s however they increased manifold during the 1990s. These incidents were mainly concentrated in the districts of Sangrur, Bathinda, Mansa, Ferozepur and Faridkot (cf. Jodhka, 2006). These incidents were 'more than 70 percent among small/marginal farmers or landless labourers' (Jodhka, 2006, p.1533). One of the first attempts by the state to address the increasing distress in the agriculture sector was the setting up Johl Committee in 1985. The committee in its report in as early as 1986 recommended diversification of cropping pattern in agriculture in the state (Jodhka, 2006; Sharma and Singh, 2014) ^[24].

On the nature and extent of farmer suicide in the state of Punjab Gill and Singh's (2006) ^[13] review of this issue reveals that in Punjab suicides by farmers became a public issue since the mid 1980s, because 2,116 suicides in Punjab had taken place since 1986. They observe that cultivators committed suicide more than agricultural labourers. Most of the suicide victims were illiterate, small and marginal farmers. The reasons of the suicide included economic distress due to

indebtedness incurred to meet the demands of mechanisation and technological advancements as agricultural inputs as well as crop failure. Other factors identified by them included alcoholism, marital and domestic discord and drug addiction. Loan from non-institutional sources was high because of ease of availability in contrast to availability of loans from formal source due bureaucratic structures that impeded the supply of formal credit which was not even 50 per cent of the demand for credit. As the authors remark, 'It is the failure of the institutional set up in supplying credit commensurate with demand that is mainly responsible for the crisis and its manifestation in the form of suicides' (2006, p. 2765). Contrarily marked increase in income due to benefits of green revolution caused a change in lifestyle of the farmers with increased materialistic consumption for activities such as marriage and death ceremonies. Age old practice like dowry became even more entrenched even if loan had to be taken for it. Along with this neoliberal economic practices of government leading to inefficiency of public sector banking units, incapability of existing storage facilities, market based dependency lead to fall in the prices of crops as a result the income of the farmers declined but not their consumption level. As a consequence, the burden of debt compounded and in the extreme case they sold their land which was embarrassing and this shame pushed them to commit suicide.

Similar observations were also made by Dandekar and Bhattacharya (2017) ^[5] who explored main causes of suicide in the two districts namely, Yavatmal in Maharashtra and Sangrur in Punjab that recorded highest number of farmer suicide in India. The study finds that in addition to indebtedness, other factors like faulty cropping pattern, rising input costs, aspirational consumption, and absence of non-farm income sources as the main causes of farmer suicides.

The state of Punjab represents a classic case of paradoxes. Until 1990s the state was one of the richest states in the country in terms of per capita income in the domain of agriculture (Gill and Singh, 2006; Singh, 2008) ^[11, 25]. The results of green revolution were contradictory in themselves in terms of increased output and income on the one hand and exploitation of natural resources of the state like over utilisation of ground water for cultivation of paddy, extensive use of chemicals and fertilisers, and simultaneously the creation of a situation of exclusion especially for the small and medium farmers as well as landless agricultural labourers on the other hand. The study by Bhalla and Chadha (1982) ^[3] attributing benefits being reaped by small and medium farmers from increased yields due to green revolution in 1970s changed to call of addressing the distress of cropping pattern, increased use of chemicals and water adverse impact on soil quality, during the 1980s and finally leading to ever increasing incidences of suicides amongst this category of farmers particularly.

Primarily there are two strands of argument that emerge in literature on farmer suicides. The first argument has been more in focus in comparison to the second argument. The first argument indicts the structural factors of economic and political forces, particularly green revolution and neoliberal market linked economic policies. According to this argument increasingly the state of agriculture has been marred by many ills and problems. There has been stagnation in yield of major

crops produced in the state, the cost of agricultural inputs in terms of seeds, fertilisers, machinery, labour, etc. has increased manifold, but the corresponding output in terms of profit has not been observed. Also due to over mechanisation of agriculture, the labour absorption capacity has also declined, causing distress among landless labourers involved in agricultural activities (Ghuman, 2008; Singh, Bhangoo and Sharma, 2016) ^[24]. Further increased division of landholdings has also decreased the available land at individual level with increase in tenancy, and this has also increasingly led to the phenomenon of reverse tenancy, where large farmers rent the land from small farmers for cultivation (Padhi, 2012).

The second argument focuses on individual responsibilities and social and cultural factors like caste, class, patriarchal society which pushes a person to the brink. The shame and stigma of not being able to fulfill social obligations particularly dowry for daughters, lack of alternatives to further one's survival, notions of pride and prestige, maintaining the façade of consumerist lifestyle and consumption, alcoholism and association between patriarchy and masculinity all get linked to the economic distress already being faced. Suicide becomes the culminating point for combined effect of economic and social structures pressuring the individual to his/her threshold limit.

Conclusion

As Munster (2012, 2015, 2016) ^[17] argues singular causality in terms of economic reductionism of impact of globalisation/neoliberalism alone or hedonism of cultural practices only would obfuscate the representation of this phenomenon. Therefore, '...the rejection of a simple causality... may give way to more serious engagement with the cultural effects of neoliberal capitalism on rural lifestyle' (Munster, 2014, p. 1605). The discussion on issue of farmers suicide calls for a continuity of discourse on it. The narrative of agriculture in Punjab both during the colonial period and post-independence as an experimental lab for green revolution is a curious mix of peasant ideology as well as the bourgeois capitalism. Observing the scenarios in agriculture as an event during both the time period uncovers the commonalities of approach to create and the result of increased food production followed by adverse consequences for the general population of the farmers.

Analysing this review from Foucault's concepts of government and governmentality entails that '...government concerns the shaping of human conduct... and presupposes the primary freedom of those who are governed entailed in the capacities of acting and thinking' (Dean, 1999, p. 15) ^[7] and in maximizing the utilisation of this freedom of acting and thinking. This form of government is not coercive and '...could be understood as an instance of neo-liberal rationalities, where governing involves the shaping of subjectivities aligned with governmental aims, using freedom as a resource' (Franzen, 2014, p. 253). This appears to be the case in both the scenarios discussed for development and proliferation of agriculture in the Punjab. Though the colonial phase could not be equated with the neoliberal mentalities and rationalities of the government nonetheless the form of governmentality did not involve dynamics of power and authorities in a coercive form. Rather in both the scenarios

individuals were offered technologies of the self to mould and contribute themselves towards the larger aim of governance that is, food production. This form of government works at two levels the individual and the population. At individual level it induces, as mentioned above, the need to transform self-according to the extant norms affording a level of choice and freedom and locating the ethical morality of change within the individual. Yet at the level of population, this freedom is controlled and maintained through right over life, death, movement and all forms of knowledge production becomes a source of power for the government including censuses, studies of all form and statistics.

Since government in this context presupposes thinking and acting individual whose conduct could be governed, the same thinking and acting individual may conduct himself in a way as not envisaged by those in power, farmer suicide in the present case. Thus it involves relations between power, authority and identity (Dean, 1999) ^[7]. The attempt of this review has been to identify and connect the historical continuity of the distress of farmer suicide in the present day Punjab. It relates on how this issue became a problem that needs to be addressed and what forms of governing practices has created this situation of present. This paper has been an attempt to collate two major narratives in the history and continuity of agricultural development in the state of Indian Punjab.

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