

UNDERSTANDING THE PERSPECTIVE OF FARMERS LEADERS ON POLICIES OF LIBERALISATION IN AGRICULTURE SECTOR OF PUNJAB

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ABSTRACT

It has been passed more than three decades in introduction of policies of Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation, still this topic has great relevance in academic filed. From the last three-decades agriculture sector of Punjab too is passing through serve crisis. Role of these policies in agriculture sector is part of academic debate. Various farmers unions in Punjab are continuously working at the grassroot level and suggesting the alternatives to the government time to time. Therefore, their views on these policies have great academic value. The present paper seeks to decode the stand of various agricultural unions on the issue of liberalisation in agrarian sector of Punjab.

Keywords: Globalisation, Liberalization, Public Private Partnership, Left-Right Debate, Corporate Farming

Introduction

Liberalization of agriculture sector means the market oriented agricultural trading system, opening up Indian agriculture to the large market for world and reduction in agriculture support such as farm subsidies. Supporters of these policies promoted that policies will bring new opportunities to developing countries like India. Greater and equal access to foreign markets, technology transfer, fair price of production and improved productivity are some of the advantages of these policies which gives benefit to Indian farmers. Despite of all assured benefits, agricultural sector of India have seen negative results at least to the poor peasantry and gives hefty benefits to corporates. While growth rate of agriculture sector has been increased from 1991 but economic condition of farmers getting worst day by day.

Current policies of free market and Perspectives of Farmers' Leaders: Left vs Right Debate

Punjab has witnessed fragmented farmer movement due to existence of more than 30 farmers'

union. Unions which gets supports from rich landlords are always supporters of free market policies directly or sometime hidden way. Contrary to this, left leaning peasant organisations, which represents the interest of small, landless and poor peasantry, has always taken vocal stand against these policies.

Representative of the left parties have brought to the fore the relationship between the adoption of the free market policies in the crisis of agrarian sector. These policies have completely neglected the agrarian sector and peasantry. The widening gap between returns and costs of production has increased the farmers' dependency on non-institutional sources for credit as the prices of pesticides, insecticides and seeds skyrocketed. These are the reasons responsible for the increasing the indebtedness among the peasantry of the Punjab. This has compounded the problem to such an extent that peasantry of Punjab, both male and female, are resorting to suicide. (Noorpuri: 2007, Chopra: 2008, Jamsher: 2008 and Virdi: 2009)

However, policies of liberalization have also forced the agricultural labour to follow the path of suicide. Labour class, who were already in the state

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of distress, were further made vulnerable by policies of liberalization, privatization and globalization. Crisis in agriculture has closed the window of employment in agriculture and is increasing the trend of under-employment or unemployment among them. (Bhaktapura: 2010) Post liberalization period also saw high inflation in food grain products. Monster of inflation has put the agriculture labours in the state of poverty, under-consumption and starvation. Due to severe malnutrition crisis, more than 20000 agriculture labourers had committed suicide in last 8 years. (Jamsher: 2008)

Even Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) mode in water supply, education, health and sanitation beat the peasantry severely. High service charges for these services have made these services inaccessible to the poor people of the rural Punjab. Now the villages in Punjab are crowded with unemployed, illiterate and diseased population. If the government continues with its neo-liberal policies, then more suicides will occur in future. (Virdi: 2009)

On the contrary, views of the farmers' leaders, especially of Balbir Singh Rajewal and Ajmair Singh Lakhawal, on the current policies of liberalization, privatization and globalization are rather moderate as compared with those of the left wing intellectuals. On the one hand he is criticizing the government's reform policies for neglecting the agrarian sector and making it non-viable for farmers, on the other side; he also favours the entry of big private companies in to the various mandis of Punjab.

From the period of economic liberalisation, the central government is favouring industry and trade, thus neglecting the agriculture sector completely. Freezing the minimum assured support price and declining subsidies to the farmers are the bone of contention between farmers and Indian government. Due to decline of governmental subsidies and rising costs of farm products farmers are in huge indebtedness. Present structure of subsidies is also meant for the fertiliser, pesticides and weedicides industries. In the name of farmers, fertiliser units

are making money and farmers becoming dependent on these companies. (Rajewal:2007, Rajewal:2008 and Rajewal: 2010)

However, Rajewal also views the privatization as a source of relief to the farmers and blames the government for giving less room to the private firms and traders in mandis. The only reason for pauperization of farmers is the monopoly of the government to determine the prices of the food grains, which obviously remain very low. Every time government creates zones and puts stock sealing restriction on the private trader so that farmers cannot sell their crops to them at high rate, consequently they always remain handicapped in getting desired prices from the private players. (Rajewal: 2008)

Additionally, the current parlance the term 'land reform' is being used for advocating removal of land ceiling and tenancy regulation. This would allow the corporate sector to enter into direct farm operations. The big farmer would be able to negotiate profitable deals with corporate sector and MNCs, but small farmers are further marginalized with process. (Metha: 2008). BKU (Lakhawal) President, Ajmair Singh Lakhawal has favoured to liberalise the land ceiling limit from 17.5 acers to 25 acers for one family unit. (Randhawa: 2013)

Conclusion

Policies of Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation has made the position of our trade unions and agricultural groups ambiguous due to mix and contradictory response by the farmers union. Leaders of Farmers Union which represents the interest of rich peasantry have adopted the pragmatic stand towards these policies despite of their ideological stand. On the other hand, leaders of left leaning farmers and agriculture labour unions have been vehemently criticised these policies as these policies are anti-farmers, anti-labour and anti-people.

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