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Preventing suicides among farmers in India due to economic issues

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Introduction

India’s agricultural growth stagnated until 1990 after the Green Revolution. Not only in the agrarian field, but economic growth of the country was often disparaged as “Hindu rate of growth,” recording annual growth rate of 1~2%. However, the country’s economy changed dramatically after financial crisis in 1991, as International Monetary Fund (IMF) demanded open market. Both the intervention and governmental attempts to liberalize her market were pretty successful, resulting general increase in GDP, commercial production, agricultural production and industrial production. These factors contributed to India’s current status in global economy as one of the world’s biggest emerging markets.

However, living conditions of the farmers have not changed despite the country’s economic growth. Economic misery caused by several reasons, made the farmers forsake their hope for better life. According to India’s National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and the India Tribune, more than a quarter-million farmers committed suicide due to various reasons between 1995 and 2009. In spite of governmental and civil movements to solve the issue, the suicide rate of Indian farmers has not decreased much. In 2012, NCRB reported that 135,445 people in India committed suicide and 11.2% of them, 13,754, were farmers. It has been argued that even though the ostensible reason for this catastrophic social issue is ruined economic status of individual farmers, cultural, environmental and other external factors underneath it are complicatedly related.
1. **Green Revolution**

   It is a series of agricultural reforms by adopting modern technology in farming. India started to conduct the program in order to attain food self-sufficiency through:

   - Use of High Yielding Varieties (HYV) of seeds
   - Modern irrigation system
   - Use of insecticides and pesticides
   - Land reforms and enclosure
   - Use of machineries (sprinklers, tractors, etc.)
   - Investment on rural, agrarian infrastructure

2. **Monsanto**

   Monsanto is an American multinational agrochemical and agricultural biotechnology corporation that has been criticized for being responsible to increased suicide rates of Indian farmers.

3. **Caste**

   Caste, or caste system is a social hierarchy in India which has been continued for thousands of years. There are four different ranks in the system, which are immediately decided by the status of one’s parents after one’s birth: Brahmins(priests), Kshatriyas(governors), Vaishyas(farmers, cattle raisers, traders) and Shudras(servers of the above three). This social system is closely related to tradition and culture of India and is also interpreted by some scholars to be related indirectly to the suicides of the farmers.

4. **Dowry**
In India, dowry is the payment in cash or properties given to a bridegroom’s family along with the bride. This has been identified by the scholars as one of the major factors that brought about India's gender imbalance and dowry death.

5. Poverty Cycle

When a farmer commits suicide, the responsibility to pay off the liabilities he got before is passed down to his family, resulting in another series of suicides and devastation of a family. Furthermore, poor economic condition of a family blocks children’s access to education, leaving them also in poverty.

**Main Reasons**

1. Privatization and liberalization of market

   Influx of foreign capital and enclosure movement led by rich landowners after the Green Revolution increased the total agricultural production of India. However, as the national policy focused mainly on ramping up production, welfare and economic conditions of poor farmers deteriorated and the gap between the rich and the poor widened. Consequently, farmers started to rely on debt to overcome difficulties.

2. Drought

   Because of the country’s geographical location, about 80% of India’s farmland relies on flooding during the monsoon period, which makes it vulnerable to inadequate rainfall. Low agricultural production makes the farmers unable to pay off the debt and loan which, makes them to borrow money from private moneylenders with extremely high interest rate.

3. High dependency on products of Trans-National Corporations (TNCs)

   During the Green Revolution, genetically modified (GM) cotton, commonly known as Bt cotton, was introduced to Indian farmers. Having seen the low production rate of indigenous cotton, farmers welcomed the introduction at first. However, Seeds purchased from companies like Monsanto are also engineered with “terminator technology,” which means plants produce sterile seeds after only one season. Farmers, already in debt because of the high price of “superior” GM seeds, are thereby forced to buy more seeds for the next harvest.

4. Dowry

   In India, bride’s family has to give the amount of money that bridegroom’s family. Since marriage is considered one of the most important events of one’s life, farmers with daughters tend to pay more than they could afford.

**Past Resolutions**

A. National

   1. **2006 Relief Package**
The government of India identified 31 districts in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala, the state with relatively high suicide rates, and provided the farmers there with special rehabilitation package that includes the followings;

a. Debt relief
b. Improved supply of institutional credit
c. Improved irrigation facilities
d. Experts and social services personnel as advisors
e. Introduction of the ways for additional income through horticulture, livestock, dairying and fishery

2. **Agricultural debt waiver and debt relief scheme, 2008**

This was another governmental attempt to benefit 36 million farmers at a cost equivalent to US$ 10 billion so that they could be free from debt.

3. **2013 Diversity Income Sources Package**

In 2013, the Government of India launched a “Special Livestock Sector and Fisheries Package” for the regions of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala in order to diversify income sources of farmers.

B. Regional

1. **Maharashtra Bill to regulate farmer loan terms, 2008**

The State of Maharashtra has been one of the states that have the highest suicide rates of local farmers. This Money Lending Regulation Act set maximum legitimate interest rates on any loans to farmers, seeing that outrageously high interest rates of private loans made the farmers commit suicides. The rate was set slightly above the money lending rate by Reserved Bank of India.

2. **Maharashtra relief package, 2010**

The State Government made it illegal for all non-licensed moneylenders from seeking loan repayment from any individuals. The government of Maharashtra also announced the formation of Village Farmer Self Help Groups. This will provide additional income opportunities through poultry, dairy and sericulture to farmers and finance a marriage fund under its Samudaik Lagna with its budget equivalent to US$ 160,000 per year per district.

3. **Kerala Farmers’ Debt Relief Commission (Amendment) Bill, 2012**

The State of Kerala declared Kerala Farmers’ Debt Relief Commission Act in 2006, which stated that only the liabilities due from the farmers on or before the date of commencement of the Act is “debt.” However, since the suicide rate did not decrease, the State Government extended the date up to 2011.
Sources

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