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Indian farmers need human rights

We may have reasons to be pleased with the growth rate and economic development of the country, but there is an urgent need to recognise the growing sense of frustration and disillusionment among the farmers.

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Extrême poverty and its human rights consequences are numerous. But the ability of the system of governance to respond to such consequences has unfortunately been limited. While the normative framework for upholding human rights is reasonably well-established in India, enforcement remains a key challenge. This is most pronounced in the traumatic saga of farmers committing suicide in different parts of India. It is clearly one instance where institutions of governance have not been able to respond effectively to the extreme impoverishment prevailing among the farmers. One cannot help but wonder how our country is not able to deal with this depressing issue, when the story of India shining is highlighted, both domestically and globally. Obviously, the benefit of economic growth has not sufficiently percolated, resulting in the gap between the rich and poor widening. There is something fundamentally unethical in the system of governance that does not value in right measure the lives of the poor and vulnerable. It is indeed a fact that the poor and the marginalised have always found it difficult for their voices to be heard. But they have a right to hope that the system of democratic governance that we have institutionalised in our country would slowly but definitely respond to the crisis of extreme poverty among farmers.

Today, the statistics relating to farmers' suicides is indeed alarming. Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra have witnessed 89,362 suicides between 1997 and 2005. A recent study by Professor K. Nagaraj of the Madras Institute of Development Studies notes that on average, one Indian farmer committed suicide every 32 minutes during all these years. Since 2002, that has become one suicide every 30 minutes. It demonstrates the seriousness of the issue. While we may have reasons to be pleased with the impressive growth rate and economic development that the country is witnessing,

there is an urgent need to recognise the growing sense of frustration and disillusionment among the farmers and other poor and vulnerable sections of the populace. We cannot sustain the present level of increasing disparities of income and wealth or for that matter demonstrate our inability to stop the farmers committing suicide. The question that deserves deeper examination by all concerned is with regard to why farmers are committing suicide and how to prevent them.

The continuing suicides have brought out the urgency of dealing with the issues relating to governance, vote bank politics, farmers' rights, and parliamentary intervention:

Ineffectiveness of the governance machinery: There is an urgent need for the different institutions of administration to galvanise support to respond to the crisis of governance. The problems of suicide and extreme poverty among farmers need to be urgently addressed by the joint efforts of the State and Central governments. The bureaucracy has to find ways to formulate and implement the right kind of policies that will change the situation. There is no room for delay, as we cannot afford to be lethargic on this issue. In its report, aptly titled *Serving Farmers and Saving Farming*, the National Commission on Farmers has noted thus: "Some areas in the States of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala have been affected by a serious agrarian crisis, leading occasionally to farmers' suicides. The time has, therefore, come when we should focus more on the economic well-being of the women and men feeding the nation than just on production." The recognition of the human development perspective by all institutions of governance becomes critical for responding effectively to deal with the problem of farmers committing suicide.

Vote bank politics and the vulnerability of farmers: In democratic politics, different constituencies create legitimate pressures to initiate and support policies that are of deep concern to them. Politicians and political parties in India,

like elsewhere, also take up issues with an eye on vote banks. Although they constitute a significant vote bank, the issues of deep concern for the poor, marginalised, vulnerable and disempowered farmers tend to be ignored. On the issue of suicides, it is the extreme poverty, vulnerability and lack of political voice that have made them ignorable, if not completely voiceless. This has created a situation where even though numerous reports relating to farmers committing suicide have been brought to the headlines, not much seems to have been done to change the situation. Of course, there have been visits by dignitaries to the villages, where these suicides have occurred and comprehensive relief packages have been announced but unfortunately, this has not changed the situation. It is important for other actors to take up the cause of farmers so that the political brass and powerful bureaucracy can better recognise the situation.

Extreme poverty

Human rights of farmers: There is little doubt that the human rights of farmers are violated due to their extreme poverty situation, leading to them committing suicide. The report of the U.N. independent expert on the question of human rights and extreme poverty, Dr. Arjun Sengupta, has underlined the importance of this inevitable link: "Any society would recognise that poverty is something repugnant and unacceptable because it represents denial of human dignity. However, in order to make the eradication of poverty a human rights entitlement, there has to be a categorisation of the social forces that would be prepared to make the necessary sacrifices by redistributing resources or by mobilising special services and targeted programmes." It has to be recognised that farmers' suicides are indeed a violation of their human rights. The rights institutions need to consider how to approach this issue. It becomes the duty and responsibility of institutions such as the National Human Rights Commission and the State Human Rights Commis-

sions to respond to this problem. They will have to engage with the State and Central governments to impress upon them the need for taking cognisance of farmers' suicides, given the huge consequences such incidents have on the family members and the community as a whole. There is a case for creating a Special Rapporteur on Farmer's Rights. Civil society has an important role to play in this regard. Farmers' suicides are a continuing disaster, and it does not need natural disasters such as earthquakes or tsunami for disaster management efforts to be activated in India. Farmers' suicides are an ongoing disaster that needs necessary response, including support to the victims from governmental and non-governmental actors.

Need for parliamentary intervention: The issue is serious enough to call for a special session of Parliament to discuss it threadbare. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited a number of districts where the suicides were particularly high. The government announced a special rehabilitation package to mitigate the distress of farmers. Unfortunately, these measures have not been able to make a significant difference to the ground reality. The discussion in Parliament that is being proposed is not only to actually culminate in specific policy outcomes leading to urgent reforms, but more important to sensitise and make aware the Members of Parliament about the deplorable situation. This is precisely what parliamentary democracies are expected to do when dealing with crises.

It was none other than the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, who poignantly remarked in 1947: "Everything else can wait, but not agriculture." With Parliament currently in session, it is an opportune time to hold a special session to discuss the issue as it is one of the most disturbing contemporary human rights challenges of India's governance.

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