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AGRARIAN CRISIS AND FOOD SECURITY

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AGRARIAN CRISIS AND FOOD SECURITY

Farmers protests and farmer suicides across the country in recent years have once again brought to the spotlight the agrarian crisis facing the country and its implications on food security to meet the nutritional needs of a fast growing population in India. The genesis of the agricultural crisis in India was the slowdown in agricultural growth in all sectors, including horticulture and livestock, for about a decade from mid-1990s to mid-2000s. This was characterised by a stagnation of the growth rates of yield of foodgrains, decline in public investment in rural infrastructure, decline in formal institutional credit towards agriculture, rise in input costs, stagnation in per-capita food consumption and decline in the demand for foodgrains and agricultural commodities. In addition, due to globalisation and liberalisation of the economy, the farmers became vulnerable to the fluctuations in the international prices of food and agricultural products. Further, the uncertainty of climatic conditions, especially the monsoon, also made farmers vulnerable to crop loss due to climate change. With 96 per cent of farmer households owning less than 4 hectares of land, their monthly consumption expenditure exceeded their monthly income from all sources resulting in growing indebtedness and rising number of farmer suicides. The declining profitability of agriculture is making farmers lose faith in farming activities. Therefore, 40 per cent of farmers want to quit farming if given an option. This is reflected in economic and employment data from National Accounts Survey and National Sample Survey, which show that the share of agriculture in India's GDP has declined from 35 per cent in 1983 to 14 per cent in 2012. During the same period, the share of agriculture in employment declined from 68 per cent in 1983 to 48 per cent in 2012. The farmers are trying to tide over this crisis by engaging in intensive farming, use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and changing cropping pattern from foodgrains to cash crops, like cotton and sugarcane. However, farmers have to contend with soil and land degradation, depletion of groundwater and micronutrient deficiency. These trends have serious repercussions on agricultural production and food security. Food security is achieved when 'all people at all times have physical and economic access to food that is sufficient to meet dietary needs for a healthy and productive life'. This implies producing or importing sufficient food and making it accessible to all individuals throughout the year on a sustainable basis. Food security

connotes freedom from hunger and malnutrition. Therefore, it implies physical and economic access of all people to nutritious food according to the requirements of each individual. According to a recent United Nations report, India is home to 190.7 million malnourished people (14.5% of total population) with 38.4 per cent of children under five being stunted and 51.4 per cent of the women in reproductive age anaemic. Successive governments have tried to introduce various measures to address issues of agrarian distress and food security. These measures are often related to (1) improved technology to the farmers, (2) modern farm inputs and technical knowhow, (3) institutional credit, and (4) remunerative marketing and pricing environment. These measures are supplemented by measures to improve infrastructure including increasing irrigation networks and short term strategies involving selective market intervention, public procurement of foodgrains at minimum support price (MSP) and targeted distribution of subsidised food to vulnerable communities. Besides, attention is also paid to non-food factors such as employment, access to education, healthcare, water and sanitation, which affect food security and nutrition. Further, in order to control food inflation and keep food prices low and affordable, the government imports foodgrains. These imports help in keeping consumer prices of foodgrains low, but it also affects profitability of agriculture as a majority of farmers work with limited resources in drylands or rainfed regions. Another area of concern is the large scale private agricultural land purchases and conversion of fertile agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes as well as land acquisition of agricultural land for building infrastructure, expansion of urban centres and other developmental projects. On 23 November, 2011, the Supreme Court criticised the government for massive acquisition of land from farmers in the name of ‘public purpose’ for the benefit of private parties. In fact the fifth report of the National Commission on Farmers (NCF) in 2006 had warned that mindless acquisition of agricultural land in the name of planned development or industrial growth would adversely affect the future availability of food.

In order to address the complex challenges of food security and the agrarian situation in India, Social Action has dedicated this issue on the theme of “Agrarian Crisis and Food Security”. The article by Mohammed Izudheen and T. A. Siamlal on “Role of Public Distribution System in India’s Food Security” analyses the functioning of the public distribution system (PDS) in India and its role in ensuring equitable distribution of foodgrains to vulnerable sections of society in a targeted manner. While the article appreciates the improvement in the net availability of foodgrains in rural and

urban areas, it expresses concern about the wrongful exclusion and inclusion in targeted PDS. The article on “Political Economy of Agrarian Distress in India” by Ramya Ranjan Patel points to the symptoms of agrarian crisis manifested in farmer suicides and poor standard of living of the farming community. While pointing out to the declining share of public investment and gross capital formation (GCF) of the agricultural sector, he analyses the economic and political context of the sad state of affairs of people depending on agriculture. One of the progressive legislations for promoting food security in India has been the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013. The article “National Food Security Act, 2013: Problems and Prospects” by Amit Kumar, Damodar Suar and Bimal Kishore Sahoo dwells on the attempt of this legislation to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goal of eradicating hunger and malnutrition in India. The article points out the challenges of implementing the world’s largest food security network and the opportunities it provides to eradicate hunger in India. Pradyumna Bag presents various dimensions of food security in his article, “Culinary Diversity and Food Security: Exploring Diverse Dimensions of Food Security”. He has been trying to unravel the paradox of high levels of under nourishment and surplus foodgrain production. His article highlights the importance taking into account diverse food preferences and access to a healthy and nutritious diet in food policies in the country.

In addition to these thematic articles, there are four non-thematic articles, namely “Determining Factors of Changes in Punjabi Family System - A Study of Rural Punjab” by Neha Wasal and Sukhdev Singh; “Empowerment of Dalits through Post 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in Bihar” by Sohail Akhtar; “Karunya Benevolent Fund Scheme: A Boon for Inclusive Healthcare in Kerala” by Divya Karikkan and K. Gangadharan; and “Role of Violence in Student Politics at Allahabad University” by Vineet Singh. I hope the articles in this issue of Social Action will stimulate a debate on the serious agrarian crisis that has plagued the country for over two decades so that the country may adopt sustainable agricultural policies rather than temporary measures such as loan waivers. I also hope that policy makers may endeavour to strengthen the implementation of food security measures so that India may achieve the sustainable development goal of eradicating hunger by 2030.

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