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Agrarian Crisis and Peasants' Movement in Punjab: Issues and Challenges

Dr. Dawinder Kaur
Assistant Professor
PG Department of Political Science & Public Administration
Khalsa College Amritsar, Punjab, India
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9070-4447
Email: dr.dawinderkaur@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the multi-faceted agrarian crisis in contemporary Punjab and the subsequent responses from diverse peasant organizations. While the region historically reaped the benefits of the Green Revolution, the modern era paints a starkly different picture. The peasantry in Punjab has increasingly faced severe ecological, economic, and systemic distress—manifested through rising indebtedness, depleting groundwater tables, stagnant crop yields, and fluctuating market prices. Critically, these compounding vulnerabilities are deeply rooted in the structural policies and legislative programmes implemented by successive political regimes, which have often failed to safeguard the long-term viability of small and marginal farmers. Consequently, resistance and collective mobilization have remained an intrinsic characteristic of the region's agrarian identity. In the contemporary landscape, this dynamic has reached a critical juncture. On one side, the farming community experiences unprecedented socio-economic turmoil; on the other, peasant organizations themselves grapple with internal and external challenges, including political fragmentation, shifting class alliances, and state pressures. Utilizing a qualitative framework based on secondary sources—including academic literature, government records, and media archives—this paper dissects the specific grievances impacting various sections of the

farming community, from landless agricultural labourers to smallholders. Furthermore, it analyses the evolving patterns of mobilization, tracing how traditional agrarian unions have adapted their strategies, formed broader coalitions, and utilized digital solidarity to challenge modern policy frameworks. Ultimately, the study highlights how Punjab's contemporary peasant movements represent a critical reimagining of rural resistance in the face of a shrinking agrarian economy.

Key words: *Agrarian Crisis, Punjab Peasantry, Peasant Organizations, Agricultural Policy, Mobilisation.*

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1. Introduction

The peasants periodically raised up their voice against the lords and governments that imposed taxes and rent and other forms of uneven economic exchange. However, the potential for peasant rebellions and political organizing, in general, is often weakened by internal competition and distrust which is the result of struggle for scarce resources within peasant communities· (Kearney 2008, p.195)

The country has of late been witnessing a loud spectacle of the farmer agitations compelling the attention of Indian polity to the ailments of agrarian sector. Farming has essentially become a debt- ridden activity and the farmers barely managing to survive enduring the floundering state support as equally the erratic monsoon. Love to grow and celebrate the fundamental, to agriculture has now turned to the vocabulary of despair. Farming has become a narrative of growing pauperization of marginal and poor peasants, selling their land, slipping below poverty line and ending up as bonded labour. And in many cases, the punishing onslaughts of woes choke him up altogether.

Kathleen Gough describes in her definition that peasants are people engaged in agriculture or related production with primitive means and who surrender part of their produce to the landlords or to the agents of state. (Gough, 1974) This definition implicates the underdog position of peasantry who have relation of subservience to the state or intermediary landlord which makes it clear that position of peasants was always vulnerable to exploitation. (Singh 1991.p. 3) Peasants have always borne the brunt of extreme form of subordination and oppression in society first by being members of the lower strata of the social and economic

hierarchy and secondly having underdog position in the political arrangement of society. (Singharoy, 1957)

Punjab being an agricultural state has a strong tradition of peasants' movements in response to the harsh and discriminative policies of *Zamidars*, lords and governments. Punjab has seen several rounds of mass mobilization of farmers in the post- independence- period. Each round has its own distinct characteristics and issues of struggle. Mass mobilization of farmers have always been in response to specific issues and have left a distinct mark on the rural society. (Gill, 2004)

2. Methodology

The present study is based on qualitative and descriptive research methodology. The secondary sources are used to study the patterns of agrarian crisis in Punjab. In order to examine the concerned issue comprehensively, a wide range of academic and non-academic materials have been consulted, including books, research journals, magazines, newspapers, and other relevant documents. Books and scholarly journals have been used for the literature while newspapers and magazines have provided contemporary information, public debates, and recent developments related to the subject matter.The content analysis and interpretative methods to understand the major themes, arguments, and perspectives associated with the agrarian economy and patterns of farmers mobilisation.

3. Discussion and Results:

3.1 Issues and Challenges

In the contemporary times the plight of the farmers is quite miserable. The situation reached to the flash point which needs immediate attention of all stake holders i.e. central and state governments, agricultural scientists, farmers etc. The farming sector in Punjab is in crisis and showing signs of no returns as it is suffering from falling productivity and shrinking returns. In the past few years around 28 percent of them have entered the labour market. (Kaur, 2016)

The government is not exactly unaware of the monumental neglect of the farming community, but it has been applying cosmetic measures to address the looming agrarian crisis than explicit measures that would excite the community. And the added pain is that the community fails to collect, gather, grow and speak up in unified voice.

There is no denying the fact that the agrarian crisis is national in dimension but it has regional and at times local character. Socio-economic, geographical, environment and at times political factors may be determinant equally or variably for the patchy performance of the sector. The experts are of the view that the intensive agriculture under the green revolution in

Punjab had the fall out of environmental degradation and eventual deterioration of production in the absence of sustainable solutions.

The high yielding varieties of seed, fertilizers, insecticides and new machinery were used to get sufficient output from the fields. The farmers and the government were successful in securing the positive results in the first decade of the launching of the green revolution but steadily its adverse effects started to show up. The high production of food resulted in the food sufficiency but the farmers' income started declining due to the crippling disparity between input and output cost of the crop. (Punjabi Tribune, June 2017)

The recent socio-economic and caste census data reveals that sixty five percent of rural households are landless in the state. The facts suggest that farmers in state are either selling their prime agricultural land which indicates de-peasantisation in the state rural economy. Consequently, the peasants have been compelled to go to labour market for their earnings in most of the cases to non-agricultural sector. Due to the rising debt trap and decreasing land holdings because of the subdivision and selling of the land the number of peasant suicides has increased to the worrying level. (The Tribune, July 2016)

In the beginning, the process of farming related suicides was confined to the cotton belt of Punjab consisting of Mansa, Sangrur, Bathinda, Ferozepur and Faridkot districts. The higher input prices for production of cotton and its damage by the harmful insects and the supply of duplicate insecticides deteriorated the economic condition of the farmers of the cotton belt and the farmers of this particular region are considered mainly the victims of heavy loans. But of late these assumptions have been negated as the farmers from the non-cotton belt districts like the Fathehgarh Sahib, Ludhiana and Gurdaspur are committing suicides. The stagnation and decline in the agrarian income remained unattended for lending to the last two decades which has led to the high indebtedness leading to agriculture related suicides. (The Tribune, June, 2017)

The serious environmental degradation issues like the depletion of ground water, deficiency in micronutrients and deteriorating quality of air in the space of last five decades have frustrated the agrarian society as it has led to the enhancing of input cost of the farmers on the production of crop and thus challenging the survival of their occupation. The depletion and deteriorating quality of the ground water beyond its sustainability is worrying matter for the farmers in particular and

public in general. The stubble burning in the harvesting season of paddy and wheat has increased the pollution in the air. It is yet another problem for the farmers as the government has put ban on the burning of stubble but without providing an adequate and economical method to the farmers. It requires an extra cost to manage the residue without burning. The governments seem to have failed to support the farmers as it has not provided any concrete solution of their problems.

The problems of the farmers in Punjab are so glaring and the objective indicators show the worsening of the conditions. The solutions are not possible without the sincere efforts of the experts, government and the disadvantaged peasants.

Extraneous to the overwhelming national agrarian predicament there is Punjab-specific border fencing problem which has drastically impacted the number of farmers who have lost free access to their holdings beyond the fencing and along the international border with Pakistan, due to security strategy. The fencing covers the Indo-Pak borders from Pathankot to Fazilka and the total productive land falling beyond the fencing is estimated to be twenty thousand acres. These luckless farmers have to face the rigors of the stiff attitude of the Border Security Forces (BSF) in their farming activities with regard to the timings of the visit to the fields, the number of persons and the nature and size of the agriculture implements they carry to and fro. It is not ordinariness for these farmers but the punishing schedule that makes them marginalized and cries for attention.

3.2 Political Mobilisation in Response to Agrarian Crisis:

In a democratic set up, the farmers could decide to keep quiet and stitch their own mouths at their own peril. The only hope in the face of despair and nightmare of the times is to speak up in one unified voice. It could lend their cause, the strength and urgency and let the issues be addressed holistically to meet the future needs of the country for food and fiber.

No doubt the farmers in Punjab have been mobilizing on a number of contemporary issues. But the efforts have proved futile in the face of the factionalism that plagues the mobilization itself with discordant notes dissipating their energies in petty ideological, political and geographical issues rather than prime organizational concerns. A unified state level platform to represent the farming community like one mother organization to feel the pulse of suffering farmers and then offer the remedial measures to ameliorate their condition is the need of the hour. But that has been and is wishful thinking. The reality is far from encouraging.

The number of peasants' organizations which are vocal and claim to be genuine is more than twenty. Once the principal organization *Bhartiya Kissan Union* has been divided and subdivided umpteen times, due to political, personal and geographical reasons. Quite far from raising a united voice, every farmer's gathering is a more an occasion of contestations than of consensus bringing in local, regional and even ideological issues to the fore. The existing peasants' organizations such as *Kissan Sabha* of the CPI and CPI(M) and the newer one the *Kirti Kissan* Union of CPI(ML) had either become marginalized or fallen into line with BKU. It is the significant fact that no attempt has been made by the left and other non-left organizations to oppose the BKU on the issues related to the farmers. (Gill 1995, p.195)

Of late, the ending 2017 to be precise, some glimmer of the emergence of a unified voice from a national platform All India Kissan Sangharash Committee has been witnessed. A total of one hundred and ninety- four peasant organizations all over India joined the same platform to strengthen the farmers' movement at the national level on the common issues like the complete waiver of the debt and the remunerative prices for their crops according to the report of Swaminathanan Commission. The All-India Sangharash Committee (AIKSC), sort of an umbrella organization was formed in response to spontaneous struggles of farmers in different states like Maharashtra and Madhya Predesh for debt relief and remunerative prices and for securing their demands. (The Tribune, March 2017). Farmers of Punjab were very vocal partners in the meet.

However, the kissan unions in Punjab are an assortment of nomenclatures. There are eight factions of *Bhartiya Kissan Union* (BKU) i.e. *BKU Mann,* BKU *Rajewal,* BKU*Lakhowal,* BKU *Ekta (Ughran)* BKU *Ekta (Dhakoda),* BKU *Krantikari* BKU *Sidhpur* and BKU *Kadian.* There are three *Kissan Sabhas* controlled by CPI, CPI (M) and Pasla group of CPI (M) and three leftist independent organizations namely *Kirti Kissan Union, Kissan Sangharash Committee* and *Kissan Vikas Morcha.* The *Kissan Sangharash* Committee is divided in two groups, one led by Satnam Singh Pannu and other by Kawaipreet Singh Pannu. Some of the peasants' organizations have constituted its separate units to function in specific areas on issues like the *Jamhoori Kissan Sabha* formed its units namely *Border Area Sangharsh Committee* and *Mand Bet Abadkar Committe* to function in border areas and *mand* (river-bed) areas in Punjab respectively. These areas have a number of

additional issues including the general issues of the farmers of Punjab due to the specific geographical location. There are some independent peasants' organizations which are constituted by the farmers in certain areas like the *Pagri Sambal O Jatta, Kissan Sangharash Committee (Azad)Border Area Kissan Welfare Society, Krantikari kissan Union Punjab* and *Doaba Sangharash Committee*. *The Pagri Sambal O Jatta* and *Doaba Sangharash committee* belong to the Doaba region but mobilize the peasants on all the general issues of peasantry including the local issues. The eight factions of *Bhartiya Kissan Union* have been working in the Malwa region in collabouration with certain other independent peasants' and laborer's organizations like *Kissan Sangharash Committee (Azad) Doaba Sangharash Committee* and *Pagri Sambal O jatta.* There are certain agricultural laborer's organizations such as *Punjab Khet Majdoor Union, Krantikari Pendu Majdoor Union, Dihati Majdoor Sabha, Pendu Majdoor Union (Mishal)* and *Majdoor Mukti Morcha* etc. The independent left peasant organizations i.e. the *Kissan Sangharash Committee* (Kawalpreet Singh Pannu), *Kirti Kissan Union, Jamhori Kissan Sabha* and *Punjab Kissan Sabha* are active in the different areas of Majha region. The *Kissan Sangharash committee* led by Satnam Singh Pannu has its influence in some areas of Maiwa and Doaba like the Ferozepur, Faridkot, Moga, Fazilka, Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur and Nawashahar including the whole Majha region. (Kaur 2016, p.103)

Since Punjab has sort of feudal agrarian society, it is the middle and small farmers who mostly organize and run numerous peasants' organizations. The fragmentations of various organizations impact not only the mobilization but also the intensity of the assertion of the purpose vis-à-vis the gravity of the issues raised from time to time. The damage of the cotton crop due to the attack of insect white fly in the Malwa region in 2015, the implementation of the farm loan waiver by the government as promised loud and clear by the Congress party if returned to power, in 2016, are glaring examples of the indifference in general.

Farmers' distress is too big on issues which are impossible for any party to ignore, especially the farmers' suicides. But even such monumental issues get side tracked due to their fragmentation and the conflicting attitude of the farmer's organizations. The introduction of Money Laundering Act, which addresses most of the chronic troubles of the farmers, could have worked as panacea for them. According to this act farmers should -have

been provided interest free loans for agricultural purposes, all other loans to the farmers and poor laborer's should have been provided at the interest of four percent per , strengthening of cooperative banking system to provide financial assistance to the farmers, the implementation of land ceiling act, in letter and spirit, direct payment for procuring their produce at the minimum support price, ex-gratia grant of rupees twenty lakh to the family of each farmer who committed suicide besides giving employment to one of their family member, release of rupees four hundred crore pending against the purchase of sugarcane by sugar mills, cancel the order of disowner ship of land adjoining the rivers owned by the peasants of respective areas, withdrawal of the bill of protection of public and private property act 2014, implementation of Swaminathan Commission report, the fixation of minimum sport prices for all the crops, compensation for the damage of crops by natural calamities, the five thousand per month pension for above the sixty years of farmers and agriculture laborer's, sixteen hour electricity supply for agriculture sector during paddy season, the five thousand compensation for not burning paddy stubble and no harassment of the farmers on this issue, permanent employment to the unemployed, prohibition of the auction of agricultural land for the recovery of loan, a ban on getting the signature from the farmers and laborer's on the blank checks and stamp papers at the time of releasing loan by the governmental and non-governmental agencies, the availability of agricultural inputs like seeds fertilizers, insecticides, pesticides and at the subsidized prices, and prohibition of drugs etc. include certain important issues upheld by the peasant' organization. (Ajit (Punjabi Daily), August 2017)

The issue of contract farming is very recent issue and the farmers' organizations like the *Bhartiya Kissan Union (Ekta*) and *Kissan Sangharash Committee* (Satnam Singh Pannu) have been mobilizing farmers on this issue. It is important to mention here that the present government has proposed to introduce the contract farming under the center Contract Farming Act. The farmers' organizations viewed that this act favored the capitalists who intended to grab the cultivable land of small and marginal farmers. The government tendency of ending the practice of announcing the minimum support price for crops will be fulfilled in this manner. It aimed at helping the corporate houses and is an unequal arrangement where farmers' products would be available to these companies at cheaper rates. The corporate houses are the

modern day *zagirdars* who would ultimately grab the agricultural land. (The Tribune, January 2018)

There is a slight difference in terms of issues which are upheld by the different peasants' organizations like almost all the factions of *Bhartiya Kissan Union* collectively or individually focus mainly on the issues of complete waiver of the farm loan and the implementation of the Swaminathan Commission Report including the other general issues but certain independent peasants' organizations like the *Kissan Sangharash Committee* (Satnam Singh Pannu) mainly focus on the complete waiving of the debt of all the category of the farmers and farm labourers. These peasants' organizations generally concentrate on the local issues like the support of the farmers who are cheated by the banks, commission agents and property dealers, the lack of infrastructure, issues related to the erratic electricity supply during paddy season, any illegal occupation of the agricultural land of the farmers and the local environment related issues, corruption at the different places like revenue department, banks, opposition of the establishment of biomedical waste plant and any other such plant in the villages, lack of water draining infrastructure during the rainy season etc. The farmers organizations have also been joining hands with other public organizations to pressurize the government on certain issues which are not directly concerned with agriculture but indirectly affect them as members of society such the implementation of PCOCA (Punjab Control of Organized Crime Act). In addition to it the laborer's organizations have certain issues which are exclusively concerned with them like the allotment of plots to the landless poor in the Punjab on free of cost, two hundred days work to the laborer's under the MNERAGA scheme, weekly payment to these labourers , complete waiver of the loan of the landless farmers and labourers' who are cultivating land on the lease basis, minimum three thousand old age and widow pension and its monthly release for the laborer's families.(Hindustan Times, January 2018)

The farmers' discontent is generally as intense as the intensity of different issues on the one hand and the strategy of different peasant organizations on the other. The peasants' organizations in Punjab share the mobilization process at the national level on the common issues like the waiver of debt and remunerative prices of the agricultural crops etc. and the local issues of the farmers which may be slightly different are also upheld. All the popular methods of mobilization such as the blockade of roads and railway tracks, *gherao* of the mini secretariats at the district, tehsil and block levels, presenting

memorandums to the Prime Minister, Chief Ministers, Members of Parliament, Members of Legislative Assembly and Deputy Commissioners, rallies and *dharnas* at the district and tehsil headquarters, mass arrest (*jail bharo*) etc. (Hindustan Times, June 2017)

At the local level the peasants' organizations adopt the methods of pressurizing the concerned local officials like block development officers and occasionally hold rallies before the police stations. They hold protest and block roads or railway tracks for limited hours or for one day but sometimes the rallies or *dharnas* (sit in) are prolonged for two or more days. The two days *dharna* by the *Kissan Sangharash Committee* (Satnam Singh Pannu) at the office of Deputy Commissioner Amritsar on 29 September, 2017 on the issues of debt waiver, employment for one member of the household (suicide related) and prohibition of drugs etc. was this kind of protest. There are also few examples of protest by peasants' organizations for a very long period on certain issues like the one *Kissan Sangharash Committee* launched a continuous protest against Narindera Paper Mill situated in the village Chabba, a village near Amritsar. The effluents of this mill flowed in the Chabba drain which affected about fifty villages. The *Kissan Sangharash Committee* demanded of closing Narindera Paper Mill. Ultimately the Pollution Prevention Board locked the mill after the *dharna* of six months. (Pannu, January 2018)

The farmers' organizations in Punjab realized the significance of the participation of women in the effective mobilization and some of them have been making efforts to constitute women's wing. It may be the impact of recognition of women farmers at the national level by the farmers' organizations and their participation in the process of mobilization in the farmers' Parliament held in New Delhi on 20th November 2017. (Yadav, 2017) The women of Punjab have been participating in rallies and *dharnas* (sit-in) in large numbers especially in the Malwa region. In the districts of Sangrur and Mansa the women from the suicide victim families have been regularly participating in the rallies and protests on the issues of adequate compensation and complete debt waiver of the families whose male or female member committed suicide due to indebtedness. (The Tribune, January,2018)

4. Conclusions

To sum up the farmer in Punjab are facing acute agrarian crisis due to certain reasons. Issues are limitless and the farmers are crying for immediate attention but the governments, centre or states could not provide adequate relief to them. Consequently, the process of mobilisation

of the farmers might be hope to solve their problems, which could also not be successful to the fullest extent. However, the peasant mobilization has passed through different phases and influenced policy programme of the government on one hand and got influenced to change its strategy according to the governmental activities on the other. Moreover, it is a continuous process though its intensity depends upon the nature of crisis or issues of peasantry in Punjab.The political mobilization of the peasantry in Punjab is the part of its continuity and taking place in response to the contemporary issues. But the peasantry never divided or fragmented ever before. The issues are numberless and the peasants' organizations are many but the methods and strategies are the same. The bases of division are less sectarian or ideological but more political and personal. The divide is also not very hard and sharp but many a time the different farmers' organization struggle collectively on different issues. But in spite of that these organizations could not strengthen the process of mobilization from the single platform. The crisis of the peasantry seems unmanageable in these days and peasants' organizations may play positive role by uniting and helping the crisis ridden peasantry.

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