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## B O O K R E V I E W

### **Gender and Social Vulnerability in Rural Punjab**

Shakti Kak\*

Ranjana Padhi, *Those Who Did Not Die: Impact of the Agrarian Crisis on Women in Punjab*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2012, 228 pages, Rs 650.

The book under review is a study of one of the aspects of the agrarian crisis in India, in the aftermath of suicides in rural Punjab. In recent decades, the number of farmers who have committed suicide has been estimated at more than 150,000, most of them in Maharashtra, Punjab, and Andhra Pradesh. The incidence of suicides has been attributed to the high degree of farmers' indebtedness owing to loans taken to cultivate commercial crops. Farmers meet the increased costs of seeds, irrigation, and pesticides by means of loans taken from various institutional and non-institutional agencies. Price fluctuations and crop failures have often landed these farmers in debt and the inability to pay up leads to a loss of honour. Suicide then appears to such people to be the only option. Since the mid-1990s, the impact of the new policy paradigm of the state – withdrawal from positive intervention, deflationary policies and market-driven prices for essential inputs – has led to a deepening of the agrarian crisis. The brunt of such policies is borne by small and marginal farmers.

In earlier years, Punjab was considered the best example of the successes of “green revolution” technology. The State experienced increased agricultural output and rising rural incomes. Employment potential also increased in the first decade of the green revolution. With waning commitment to land reforms over decades, technological solutions to a stagnant agriculture were much acclaimed by the ruling classes. However, the inherent weaknesses of such a strategy emerged in the first decade itself, resulting in economic and social distress in Punjab and across the country. The gains of agricultural modernisation in Punjab and in other States have been extremely uneven in their distribution, with small and marginal farmers being the losers. As the limits to technological intervention-based agriculture were reached, stagnating productivity levels, environmental damage, and lack of work because of mechanisation led to social tensions. Class and caste tensions are increasingly being

\* Professor, Centre for Jawaharlal Nehru Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, shaktikak@gmail.com

reported in the media as the privileges of a small number of big farmers and the ritually “upper” castes are being challenged by the oppressed castes and the landless.

The book under review gives a multi-layered and nuanced view of the lives of women who have had to deal with a different and specific aspect of the agrarian crisis in Punjab. These women are mostly small and marginal farmers, and some are from landless families. The limits of their coping strategies are determined by their caste and class position. For some, the option of work is limited to farming, while for others, wage labour is the only way of earning a living. With the suicide or death of their husbands (or sons), they have to deal with the issue of paying back loans as well as providing for the family. With young children, daughters to be married off, and fields to be tended to, they try to do their best within the bounds of the oppressive patriarchal system in which they live. In several cases, even where these women are *patta* (title-deed) holders, they are not allowed to take any independent decisions regarding the land. The author’s field area was in the districts of Sangrur and Bhatinda, where she interviewed women from families in which farmers committed suicide over the last decade. By means of the material gathered through these interviews, she questions the model of development that has created such massive income differentiation, environmental pollution, indebtedness, and joblessness.

The initiation of neoliberal economic policies since 1991 aggravated the crisis in rural areas, as the government reduced or stopped investment in agriculture. At the same time, market-driven agriculture has exposed farmers to commercial crops, dealers in private inputs, crop failures, and rising indebtedness. The author points out that agriculture in Punjab since the mid-1990s has been in the throes of stagnation, and the small and marginal farmers do not find it remunerative to engage in farming. The Punjab State Farmers’ Commission, in a recent study, observed that a large number of small and marginal farmers often lease out their land holdings, and eke out a living as agricultural and non-agricultural wage labourers. With limited job opportunities outside the agricultural sector, these families are faced with a crisis of livelihoods. In a social milieu where extravagance in marriages and other social ceremonies has become the norm, there is a constant danger of losing their land and other assets in order to be able to raise enough cash for such events. While the need for credit (not always for productive purposes) is ever-increasing in the region, agricultural incomes are stagnating and there are very few opportunities for getting non-agricultural jobs. It is this kind of social pressure that has led to a high degree of indebtedness amongst landless families as well.

According to a study done in 2007 by the Punjab State Farmers’ Commission, nearly 88 per cent of farm households in Punjab are indebted. On a per-hectare basis, the level of indebtedness is the highest among marginal farmers. More than 50 per cent of suicides occur among small and marginal farmers. A pilot study for the Government of India conducted in Bhatinda and Sangrur districts by the Punjab Agricultural

University in 2009 showed that 1,757 farmers and 1,133 agricultural labourers who committed suicide had loans amounting to over Rs 100,000 each. The study also highlighted the role of *arhatiyas* (commission agents) in providing loans to small and marginal farmers. There is also evidence of women farmers committing suicide in Punjab. This, however, does not get reported adequately as they do not have joint ownership of the land.

The author of the book under review points out that in the official statistics, the causes of farmers' suicides are classified into very broad categories, such as "indebtedness," which gloss over the multiple other reasons for which farmers and others in the rural population take their lives. She elaborates, in her study, the reasons for suicide and its aftermath on the basis of fieldwork done in the Malwa region of Punjab. She has interviewed 136 families to understand the levels of distress, pain, and economic hardship that the surviving members in such families, particularly women, undergo. The study brings out the complex linkages of caste, class and patriarchy in the countryside. The work participation rate of rural women in Punjab has been declining over the years due to the dominance of upper-caste and class perceptions. However, in families where women have had to undertake the sole responsibility of raising the children after the suicide of the earning male members, the women have been working in the fields irrespective of their social status. But there are limits to this outside employment, as these women will not work in any other area except farming. The burden of getting daughters married in a lavish style along with a huge dowry adds further to the indebtedness and misery of these families. As a result, daughters are always seen as a burden. Young widows, despite working hard with the rest of the family, do not have any say in matters of farming or in any family matters.

The author highlights the environmental cost of green revolution technologies. Increased mechanisation has led to higher pollution levels, and the damage to the environment as a result of the use of a large amount of pesticides and chemical fertilizers has also been analysed in the book. Increased incidence of cancer and other major diseases has put another kind of burden on the budgets of these families. Medical treatment is a major source of indebtedness in these villages. Lack of proper nutrition, the added responsibilities of managing home and farm, and earning enough to sustain the family have added to psychological stress among these women. Lack of affordable health care forces them to depend on private health care facilities. The mental condition of these survivors is fragile indeed, as brought out by the case studies done by the author. The women have barely any social support and definitely no support from the state.

The author's study points to the increased economic and social costs of development to landless families in rural Punjab. Absence of employment and mounting debts lead them to commit suicide. Landless families borrow to spend on social ceremonies, daughters' weddings and private health care, making them heavily indebted. As

wage work in agriculture has become negligible and very few non-agricultural jobs are available, there is increased dependence on moneylenders. The women in these families are far more precariously placed, both economically and socially. The author highlights the issue of the unpaid domestic work performed by these women, work that is not considered by others to be productive work. They are not entitled to any independent state support nor does their status as producers ever get recognised. The invisibility of their work further marginalises these women.

The book brings out very succinctly a host of issues related to capitalist development, the environment, the role of women in social reproduction, and the hold of regressive feudal and patriarchal ideology – especially in rural Punjab. These are issues that need to be further researched and debated to evolve a development strategy that will help build an equitable and just society.