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A Study on Farmers' Organisations with special reference to Kisan Sabha

R.K. Khatkar, D.S. Nandal and C.R. Kaushik*

Agriculture is still the mainstay of Indian economy, notwithstanding the consistent decline in the share of agriculture in national domestic product (NDP) over time. The share of the agricultural sector in NDP at current prices declined from 47.8 per cent in 1970-71 to 36.4 per cent in 1980-81 but the decline in the share of workforce from 69.8 per cent to 66.7 per cent during this period was only marginal. Consequently, the relative income per agricultural worker at current prices which shows the relative purchasing power per worker vis-a-vis non-agricultural worker declined from 0.397 to 0.286 during the same period. This disparate trend of relative deterioration in the income of farmers is the main cause of peasants' movements in the country.

These movements were greatly instrumental in breaking the old feudal order and ushering in agricultural development on modern lines. Even after the abolition of Zamindari, jagirdari, etc., the agrarian structure that came into being is hardly egalitarian. As per the Census of 1981, about 23 per cent of the total operational holdings was possessed by only 2.4 per cent of the top landlords having 10 hectares or more. The majority of the small and marginal farmers are unaware and disorganised to protect their interests. However, efforts have been made by the government, political parties and farmers themselves to organise farmers into farmers' organisations which can help in protecting the interests of the farming community. Various farmers' organisations including co-operatives, Bharat Krishak Samaj, Kisan Sabha, Gujarat Khedut Sangh, Panjab Khetibari Zamindara Union, etc. In this paper an attempt has been made to examine the objectives, organisational structure, membership, mode of operation of All India Kisan Sabha and instruments of pressing farmers' demands by Kisan Sabha. Some emphasis has been put on the contentions, demands and ideology of Kisan Sabha in rural and intersectoral perspective.

Methodology

It is difficult if not impossible to document and attend to all problems and issues raised by Kisan Sabha from time to time in different parts of the country. More emphasis is focused on Hisar Unit of Kisan Sabha in Haryana State not only because of the authors' greater familiarity with it but also owing to more active participation of Hisar farmers as compared to those in other districts of the State. Primary data were collected from 75 farmer respondents selected randomly from five villages of Hisar district as well as from the office-bearers and active workers of the Sabha through personal interview with them. Secondary data were also collected from the records and published documents of the Sabha. The reference year of the study is 1989-90.

Historical Perspective of the Sabha

Keeping in view the pressing problems faced by the Indian peasants since long, it was felt that the farmers should organise themselves on a common platform for their common

* Department of Agricultural Economics, Haryana Agricultural University, Hisar.

interest. As a result, the All India Kisan Congress (later renamed as the All India Kisan Sabha) was formed at the 49th Conference (Sammelan) of various farmers' organisations under the presidentship of Swami Sahja Nand Saraswati held on April 11, 1936 at Lucknow. The foundation meeting adopted the following main resolutions:

- (i) The object of the All India Kisan Congress is to secure complete freedom from economic exploitation of the peasantry and the achievement of full economic and political power for the peasants and workers and all other exploited classes.
- (ii) All the systems of landlordism should be abolished and all the rights over lands be vested in the cultivators.
- (iii) Present system of land revenue and resettlement be abolished and replaced by a graduated land tax upon net incomes of Rs. 500 and above.

Aims and Objects

The aims and objects of the Sabha are:

- (i) Abolition of landlordism without compensation and distribution of land to agricultural labourers and poor peasants free of cost.
- (ii) Ending of exploitation of Indian monopolists and foreign capital.
- (iii) Liquidation of usurious debts.
- (iv) Improvement of the living standard, working conditions and cultural level of the rural masses and development of agriculture and industry.
- (v) Democratisation of the State structure to vest real power in the people.
- (vi) Struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism and against war and for peace.

Management and Organisational Structure of the Sabha

The Sabha consists of the following units: (i) Primary Kisan Sabha; (ii) District Kisan Sabha; (iii) State or Regional Kisan Sabha; (iv) Affiliated Organisations; (v) the Central Kisan Committee and (vi) All India Kisan Council.

Any *kisan* (farmer) of at least 16 years of age, who accepts the aims and objects of the Sabha and is willing to abide by its discipline, on payment of an annual membership fee of paise 25, can become a member of the Sabha. The overall membership in the country during 1989-90 was only 11.5 million, just about 2 per cent of the farming community. The membership of the Sabha was found highest in the States governed by the leftist parties, such as in West Bengal (about 8.5 million) and Kerala (about 1.3 million). Agriculturally advanced States like Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan have very low membership.

Decision-Making Process

The Conference of the All India Kisan Sabha is held normally once in three years. But in special circumstances, it can be convened at a shorter interval by the Central Kisan Committee. The business of the Conference is to discuss and take decision on (i) the General Secretary's report to the Conference on the activities and organisation of the Sabha during the period after the preceding Conference; (ii) resolutions; (iii) statement of accounts; (iv) amendments to the constitution, if any; (v) election of the All India Kisan Council and the Central Kisan Committee and its office-bearers.

All decisions of the Conference are made by a simple majority of votes. But questions relating to the national and international political situation are decided by at least a three-fourth's majority.

The State or Regional Kisan Sabha in general performs the activities and organisation of the Sabha in the State or Region under the direction and guidance of the Central Kisan Committee. It issues instructions from time to time to check up the work and otherwise guide the activities of its lower units. The Central Kisan Committee is vested with the highest and final authority in the matter of redressing grievances of a subordinate unit and settling disputes between two or more such units and also of receiving and settling all appeals made by a unit of the Sabha against any order or decision of a State or Regional Kisan Sabha in connection with a dispute.

Main Demands/Issues

The peasantry of India is struggling for getting resolved their problems mentioned below through All India Kisan Sabha and other organisations:

- (i) The Union Government should guarantee adequate supply of all essential commodities through public distribution system to the rural and urban consumers.
- (ii) Remunerative prices be ensured to the agricultural producers. Adequate purchases be made by State agencies as soon as the harvest begins to arrive in the market to protect the peasants from distress sales.
- (iii) The prices of agricultural inputs should be brought down by reducing the excise duties on them and by restricting high profits. Reduce electricity charges, irrigation rates and other taxes to give relief especially to the lower sections of the peasantry.
- (iv) Existing land reforms be speedily and effectively implemented after plugging the loopholes. All types of tenants including share-croppers be recorded within a year and evictions be banned.
- (v) Ensure cheap credit and supply of farm inputs to the peasantry at their door-steps with a view to give relief to the poorer sections.
- (vi) Persons affected by natural calamities like floods and droughts be adequately compensated and a scheme of comprehensive crop insurance be introduced all over the country to protect the peasantry from the miseries due to crop failures, pests and hailstorms, etc.

- (vii) Allocation for the National Rural Employment Programme and Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme be increased to help the agricultural workers in getting employment and guaranteed minimum wages.
- (viii) Adequate irrigation facilities should be provided through controlling floods by constructing dams/reservoirs.
- (ix) Comprehensive rural development.
- (x) Adequate supply of electricity.
- (xi) Maintenance of canal lining.
- (xii) Marketing, storage and loan facility against stored produce.
- (xiii) Social equity to all the farmers and agricultural labourers.
- (xiv) Waiving off loans of the poor peasants.

Modes of Operations and Agitation

Farmers take the following steps for getting their demands fulfilled: (i) petitions through applications to the administration; (ii) memorandum through deputation; (iii) Kisan meetings and Kisan mobilisation; (iv) Demonstration, *dharna* and *gherao* of the authorities concerned; (v) civil disobedience; (vi) press publicity through writing on the walls, pamphlets, etc.; (vii) jatha marches in different villages; and (viii) court arrests.

Achievements Claimed

For examining the performance, personal interviews with the office-bearers of the Haryana unit of Kisan Sabha and farmers were undertaken. The office-bearers reported the following achievements:

- (i) On August 15 1980, the Kisan Panchayat of Haryana farmers demanded at Jind waiving off canal lining charges and decided not to pay the same. As a result of the efforts made by the farmers, Kisan Panchayat and Kisan Sabha, Shri Bansi Lal, the then Chief Minister of Haryana in 1986 waived off canal lining charges amounting to Rs. 113 crores.
- (ii) Old age pension was started by Shri Devi Lal, the then Chief Minister of Haryana in 1987, which was demanded by Kisan Sabha and Kisan Panchayat since 1977 when it was introduced in West Bengal.
- (iii) Waiving off loan was demanded jointly by Kisan Sabha and Kisan Sammelan of Shri Devi Lal in 1982, which was implemented by him in 1987 and the National Front Government at national level in 1989 by waiving off loans of farmers and rural artisans up to Rs. 10,000.

- (iv) Regulation of market was done due to continuous struggle of the Sabha.
- (v) Adequate power supply is regularised up to some extent to the agricultural sector mainly due to the struggle of the farmers.
- (vi) About 700 acres of land of Raja Faridkot near Hansi got distributed to the tenants and to the tillers and about 400 acres at village Goli (Karnal) were also got distributed to the tenants.
- (vii) *Be-dakhli* was stopped at village Kalar Bhaini (Hisar).
- (viii) *Malkiana Hak* at bir land near Hisar was restored due to the efforts of the Sabha.

Problems Faced by the Sabha

The activities of the Sabha are hindered due to the lack of unity among farmers, resistance of the upper strata of the farming community in the implementation of land reforms, lack of participation of poor peasantry owing to political affliction and unawareness; paucity of funds and apathy of the government.

The awareness of the selected farmers regarding the Kisan Sabha and its role in solving farmers' problems are depicted in Table I. It is apparent from the table that the size of holding has no influence on creation of awareness regarding the existence of Kisan Sabha. While education and affiliation to political parties particularly to the communist parties has direct relationship with it. On the whole, one-fourth of the sample farmers know about the existence of Kisan Sabha and half of them believe that the Sabha has played a major role in getting the problems of farmers solved.

TABLE I. FARMERS' OBSERVATION ON ALL INDIA KISAN SABHA

Sr. No.	Item	Number	Number of farmers who know about the existence of All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS)	Number of farmers who think that AIKS played a major role in getting their problems solved
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1.	Literate farmers	15 (20.00)	12 (80.00)	4 (33.33)
2.	Illiterate farmers	60 (80.00)	8 (13.33)	6 (75.00)
3.	Large farmers (>10 acres)	24 (32.00)	6 (25.00)	2 (33.00)
4.	Small farmers (<10 acres)	51 (68.00)	14 (27.45)	8 (57.14)
5.	Politically affiliated to leftist party	8 (10.67)	8 (100.00)	8 (100.00)
6.	Politically affiliated to non-leftist parties	20 (26.67)	7 (35.00)	0 (0.00)
7.	Non-affiliated	47 (62.66)	5 (10.63)	2 (40.00)
Total		75 (100.00)	20 (26.67)	10 (50.00)

Figures in parentheses are percentages to the total number of farmers selected in column (3); in column (4) are percentages to the corresponding figures under column (3) and in column (5) are percentages to the corresponding figures under column (4).

Conclusions and Suggestions

The membership of Kisan Sabha is still negligible, which is hardly 2 per cent of the farmers and the majority of these members are affiliated to leftist parties rather than remaining non-political. Rural under-development, price and related issues have gained predominance over the old phenomenon of anti-feudal/oppression in the rural sector. The fact of rural areas being less developed is readily conceded by all. There are two opposite schools of thought regarding the efficacy of the strategy of turning the terms of trade in favour of agriculture to alleviate rural poverty. Only balanced emphasis on price incentives to promote production and reduce poverty can produce the desired results. Perhaps the main crisis in agriculture is that the proportion of viable holdings has not only been small but further declining over time. This is mainly because of too slow development of the non-agricultural sector to absorb the ever-increasing workforce from the rural sector. Farmers' organisations do have the potential for checking the exploitative role of traders, for disciplining local bureaucracy, for organising community support for more productive and equitable use of common property resources and of course for bringing more resources for rural development and ensuring their proper use. The role of farmers' organisations in curbing legitimate financial flows to the government in terms of loan recoveries, electricity charges, irrigation dues, etc., may adversely affect the allocation of resources for rural development itself. Farmers' organisations are yet to transform themselves into a rural movement to fight for the rural poor and for integrated rural development.

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