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RAPPORTEURS' REPORTS

Rapporteur's Report on Farmers' Organisations

Rapporteur: M.V. Nadkarni*

Though agriculture is said to be an unorganised sector in contrast to big industry, it is not any longer atomistic in the sense of each farmer acting in isolation. It is still much less organised than industry, but farmers do not lack spokesmen to air their demands or representatives to make their weight felt in a fairly organised way. In a politically very active democracy with adult franchise, with the bulk of workforce dependent on agriculture and the bulk of population residing in rural areas, a scenario of utterly unorganised farmers, if at all, can only be a thing of the past. It would have been unnatural and even unwelcome in a democracy if organised industry and organised urban labour were to be the only organised forces in the economy, with the vast hinterland without any political power to protect its own economic interests. Rural labour is, however, still in an unorganised position except in a few pockets, but the same cannot be said now about farmers.

However, organisation of farmers into a cohesive force is not a sudden and once-over process, nor is it taking the same form as organised industry. Presently it is confined to particular areas in more commercialised or developed agricultural regions, and yet to spread to drought-prone and backward areas. Nevertheless, it is an on-going process and constitutes one of the most interesting things occurring in India's polity and economy. No social scientist, least of all agricultural economists, can be indifferent to the implications of this process. It has materially changed the character of India's power structure over the last five decades which has implications for resource allocation and nature of price determination in agriculture. That prices in agriculture are not determined purely by the invisible and free forces of demand and supply, but influenced by political forces of class relations is now a familiar proposition, thanks to Mitra (Mitra, 1977). Farmers' lobbies too have seized on this, turning the tables as it were, blaming the urban domination for adverse terms of trade for agriculture. We cannot yet be too sure, however, if the rise of farmers' power has led to redefining the goals and strategies of economic development, a matter which needs to be probed into. Several further issues also arise. What stimulated the emergence of these organisations? What are the aims and functions of these organisations? What promise do they hold for India's - or at least Rural India's - poor and under-privileged? Whom do they represent? What are the forms of these organisations and how effective are they? What are their achievements? What are their drawbacks?

Just as big industry is organised on two fronts - one for lobbying through institutions like the Chambers of Commerce and Industry and the other for production or business through corporate enterprises-, farmers too are getting organised on two fronts though not as formally as in industry. On the one hand, they need to voice and realise their economic demands as farmers vis-a-vis other sectors by increasing their political strength. Such organisations are plainly for lobbying and agitation and are basically political in nature. Secondly, they also feel the need for constructive organisations through which they can directly promote and conduct the business of farming and allied activities more than what is possible by acting in isolation as individual private producers. Such organisations have

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taken the co-operative rather than the corporate forms and are predominantly economic rather than political in nature. Both types of organisations may be important for agricultural development and farmers' welfare as they could complement each other, though the former are more vocal. Nevertheless, one cannot help asking which of them are more meaningful in concrete terms at the grass-root level. The papers presented are helpful in answering this question to some extent, as they assess the experience of both.

Among the 17 papers submitted at the Conference on this topic, five papers deal with organisations of the first type and the remaining 12 with those of the second type. We shall take up the former first. Even among the first type of organisations, it may be useful to distinguish between peasant organisations of the past which fought against rack-renting and landlordism and the present organisations of farmers which emerged towards the end of the seventies. The former were concerned mainly with contradictions within the agrarian structure and sought justice for the oppressed tenants. The latter on the contrary are concerned with contradictions between agriculture and the rest of the economy, imagined or real. The five papers presented at the Conference are on the present-day organisations of the latter type. Fortunately, though ignored by paper-writers here, scholars in India have not ignored anti-feudal organisations and struggles of peasants (*e.g.*, Desai, 1979; Alexander, 1981; Dhanagare, 1983). Earlier peasant struggles played an important role in making the agrarian structure more democratic, if not egalitarian, in stimulating and implementing land reforms, and also in helping the emergence of farmers as a political force which is behind the present organisations of farmers.

Interestingly, though some of the organisations of peasants which took up anti-feudal struggles under left political parties also took up the issue of remunerative prices, new farmers' organisations emerged outside the traditional framework of political parties and the parliamentary process. There is a growing impression that the latter, led by Narayanswami Naidu in Tamil Nadu, Sharad Joshi in Maharashtra, Rudrappa and Nanjundaswamy in Karnataka and Mahendra Singh Tikait in Uttar Pradesh (UP), have been able to exercise greater weight both with farmers, particularly the more commercialised of them, and the government than other farmers' organisations led by political parties. Formal membership of organisations is not necessarily a dependable criterion and non-party organisations have not stressed formal membership. Inner working of these organisations is also not clear except in left party led Kisan Sabhas which hold regular conferences and elections. In other cases, the personality and the thrust of leaders assume greater significance.

Of the five papers on farmers' organisations of political nature, four are case studies - by R.R. Doshi on Sharad Joshi's Shetkari Sanghatana (SS) in Maharashtra, by S. Lakshmanan on Gobichettipalyam Unit of Tamil Nadu Farmers' Organisation started by Narayanaswami Naidu, by R.K. Khatkar, D.S. Nandal and C.R. Kaushik on All India Kisan Sabha with special reference to its Haryana Unit, and by R.C. Verma and N.L. Agarwal on Bharatiya Kisan Sangh in Rajasthan. The paper by R. Mukherji is a general overview of such organisations in India.

Trying to identify factors behind the emergence of agitations by farmers and their organisations for this purpose, Mukherjee, and Khatkar *et al.* point to the slower rise in agricultural incomes, continued dependence of the bulk of workforce on practically the same extent of area and increase in capital-output ratios, all resulting in a decline in relative per capita incomes in agriculture and declining rates of return (see also Nadkarni, 1987, Chapter 2). In other words, the question is not one of relative prices alone, though it has received the major attention of farm lobbies as the primary cause of farmers' problems.

The ideology of SS, led by Joshi, is relevant in this regard. It makes farmers' struggle

identical with the struggle for higher prices, though it is not quite clear what prices are fair and how such prices have to be achieved. One way is to adopt a very comprehensive concept of cost of production including certain items of surplus, such as imputed rent on own land and imputed interest on own capital, apart from imputed cost of family labour and managerial costs, an allowance for risk factor, and - as Doshi's paper points out - also marketing costs incurred by farmers in taking the produce to the market. This approach is plagued by tremendous variations across regions and even across farms within a village. Whose costs are representative? Are average costs of a crop fair? Average for the country, State or district? Another approach is parity price, which also raises the problems of appropriateness of the base year and the range within which deviations from parity could be allowed. It is because of difficulties of mechanically depending on a single approach that the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices has been relying on a fair judgement instead of a rigid formula, taking into account trends in costs as well as terms of trade. But this has been criticised as subjective and unscientific by farm lobbies. The farmers' organisations have not come out with a clear alternative formula. In spite of its focus on the price problem, Doshi finds that Joshi's SS has not revealed the basis on which it calculates costs and demands prices. The approach advocated by the recent High Power Committee headed by Bhanu Pratap Singh seems to be to go by market prices moderated by 'support' and 'intervention' prices to maintain parity within a desired range (of 15 per cent) through purchases and sales (Government of India, 1990, p. 7).

Farmers' organisations have raised other issues as well, though Sharad Joshi has been regarded as having the one-point programme of only improving farm prices. At one end, there is Kisan Sabha with a broad political perspective, conscious of inequity and exploitation within the rural sector, which advocates ending of landlordism, distribution of surplus lands to landless labour and poor peasants, liquidation of usurious debts, and a further democratisation of the state structure so as to vest real power in the people (*cf.* paper by Khatkar *et al.*). At the other end, there are others with a focus on narrow issues such as writing off of institutional loans given to farmers (without demanding such a measure in the case of private usurious loans) and reducing electricity tariffs on pumpsets. In between, demands for stopping harassment of farmers by seizure of property (when loans are not repaid) and for improving rural infrastructure and public distribution also have been made. The popularity of a farmers' organisation depends on the skill with which it identifies specific issues for making demands and launches effective agitation to realise the demands. However, a suspicion of sympathy for landless labour and poor peasants on issues of exploitation within the rural sector tends to make an organisation less popular with richer farmers.

This leads to the question of class background of farmers' organisations and interests they protect, though they try to give the impression of speaking for the rural sector as a whole. In so far as the prosperity of farmers and improvement in general living conditions and infrastructure in rural areas have beneficiary spill-over effects on the landless and other poorer sections, these organisations hold some indirect and distant promise for the rural poor. But there is little evidence of a direct concern for them. Mukherji observes in his paper that farmers' organisations have served very little the interests of millions of lower-middle and poor peasants, agricultural workers and artisans, and that even Kisan Sabhas which had a good tradition of organising poor peasants appear now 'too weak and hesitant to face the offensive and domination of farmers' organisations'.

Coming to the achievements of these organisations, they are of both types - specific achievements of immediate economic and/or local importance and broader achievements on the political front with promises of wider and long-term economic gains for farmers.

Even Kisan Sabha, an organisation with broad objectives, had to have specific locally significant achievements to retain its base, such as getting canal lining charges and loans upto Rs. 10,000 waived, securing old age pensions, improvement in power supply, and land for tenants (see paper by Khatkar *et al.*). Joshi's SS could get price gains to the growers of onion, sugarcane, milk and cotton (*cf.* Doshi's paper). Naidu's organisation in Tamil Nadu, as seen from the experience of Gobichettipalyam Unit, apart from resisting increase in land taxes, could get started a milk society of farmers, an instance of attending to constructive activities too in addition to agitational (*cf.* paper by Lakshmanan). Bharatiya Kisan Sangh in Rajasthan succeeded in getting electricity rates converted to a flat system based on horse power of the pumping set; resisted a raise in the flat rates; helped farmers in getting new electric connections and pumpsets at reasonable prices; induced the government to improve the functioning of mandis and credit societies; even got cancelled illegal land allotments made by officials in Rajasthan canal command areas; and mobilised flood relief in 1981 - an impressive list! (*cf.* paper by Verma and Agarwal).

Other achievements are no less significant. All the contributors have noted the success with which these organisations mobilised farmers and made them conscious of the problems affecting them, particularly on the price front. This led them to whittle down urban domination in the pricing process. A significant achievement, even if symbolic, in this regard is changing the character of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices from a purely expert body to a body dominated by farmers' representatives. The political gains in terms of significantly increased representation of farmers in legislature and other political bodies (*cf.* Mukherji's paper) is a continuation of a process which started even before Independence when the Freedom Struggle spread to rural areas, but the farmers' movement since the late seventies could have strengthened this process all the more. The rise of farmers as an influential class in India's polity has not, however, exactly elated the traditionally oppressed sections in rural areas. Dalits are particularly afraid of neutralisation of law-and-order machinery in the event of a clash affecting them, apart from a decline in their bargaining power vis-a-vis farmers on wage issues (*cf.* Nadkarni, 1987, pp. 148-155).

Let alone the lack of interest of farmers' organisations in issues affecting landless labour and poor peasants, they are not clear even on issues taken up by them. They are bitterly critical of the private trade, the government and the co-operatives all at the same time and have indicated no alternative of their own. It is the lack of clarity about a feasible alternative which must have led to the debacle at Nippani, which is only an example of what can happen as a result of a confused perspective. Doshi observes that the intervention of Joshi's SS in the case of tobacco growers at Nippani only worsened farm-trader relations, and 'farmers' exploitation has continued unabated and more than before'. The SS did not try to evolve an alternative to a market dominated by private traders. Both in Maharashtra and Karnataka, 'non-party' organisations of farmers are sceptical of co-operatives and dub it as part of official machinery, incapable of solving farmers' problems. If neither co-operatives, nor government, nor private trade assures cost-based price to farmers, what will do it? In practice, Doshi observes, SS relies largely on government purchases and co-operative marketing, providing a good case of inner contradiction. He exhorts SS to use at least a part of its energies and organisational strength for strengthening the marketing and processing institutions.

This leads us to the second set of papers dealing precisely with such institutions of farmers, though not started by the farmers' organisations discussed above. How far have they solved farmers' problems? We have twelve case studies here. Four of them relate to crop growers' co-operatives, relating to paddy in Kerala by S. Hari Kumar, soyabean in UP

by S.P. Gupta and V.P.S. Arora, of oilseed in Tamil Nadu (TANCOF) by A. Pushpavalli, and of fruit in Maharashtra by A.G. Pujari. They are not instances of strictly co-operative farming as such. Except in the case of group farming of paddy, even cultivation is done individually. The role of co-operatives arises mainly in providing marketing support to growers. We have similarly four studies of producers' co-operatives in the allied activities sector, three of which relate to dairy, reflecting perhaps the dominant position of dairy in this sector. They are respectively of the much celebrated case of Amul by K. Sain; of milk co-operatives of the same pattern in Meerut district, UP by Ram Iqbal Singh, V. Prasad and A. Solanki; of dairy co-operatives in Nainital district (UP) by Bhagwan Dass, D.S. Shukla and Kuber Ram; and of fishery co-operatives in West Bengal by P.K. Chatterjee and S. Bandyopadhyay.

In the service sector, we have two studies of credit co-operatives, both in UP, respectively by Balishter, and by J.P. Misra, H.N. Singh and N.L. Yadav. The paper by R.V. Sarada and I. Narender is on a lift irrigation co-operative in Andhra Pradesh, and the paper by P.W. Amin *et al.* is on an Agriculture Science Association - Theodore Schultz Krishi Vidyan Mandal, in a relatively under-developed part of Maharashtra, dedicated to improving the skills and knowledge of farmers, providing them infrastructural support and developing cropping systems that have the promise of giving stable and higher incomes.

Hari Kumar's study shows how group farming by paddy growers in Kerala has attempted to overcome some of the constraints of small farms typical of rice production in Kerala. The experiment is said to have been inspired by the success of a similar approach in a few other Asian countries (Wong, 1979). It has been extended to almost all districts in Kerala, bringing under it nearly 10 per cent of total paddy area during the first year itself. Members handle key farm operations together by pooling their resources, without giving up ownership of land. This has been especially beneficial in the purchase of inputs, adoption of proper technology, post-harvest processing and marketing, resulting in an increase in net incomes by over 100 per cent in one case and incredibly 25 times in the other case studied, comparing before-and-after situations. I wish the author of the paper had elaborated and analysed how exactly this feat was achieved, explaining how far the success could be attributed to group farming.

From the two case studies here, getting the oilseed growers organised into co-operatives for marketing has been a rewarding experiment. Gupta and Arora show that soyabean growers received a better price from the co-operative society than from itinerant traders, the main competitors. The marketing co-operative also had the lowest marketing cost among all market functionaries. The reasons for this need to be probed, though the authors mention mainly one reason, namely, avoidance of storage on the part of the co-operative society. A perusal of the data given by the authors shows that, apart from storage costs, NAFED had to bear sales tax and costs of gunny bags, which the society did not incur. Interestingly, the society paid lower prices to marginal farmers than to other farmers, while the itinerant traders paid higher prices to the former. This needs explaining. The TANCOF study by Pushpavalli also showed that the net price received by farmers through the co-operative was highest as compared to the price received in other market channels and marketing costs also were lowest in the former. Since oilseeds prices are generally unstable, we also need to know if co-operative marketing has a stabilising effect.

The problem of marketing is particularly significant in the case of fruit growers. To avoid the exploitation by middlemen, they formed a co-operative in Solapur district. The paper by Pujari narrates how this encouraged further extension of area under fruit - pomegranate, ber and grapes and helped farmers in raising commercial crops in a semi-arid low yield area.

The fruit growers could substantially reduce their transport and marketing costs and could get even technical guidance in cultivating fruits. The society is now planning to set up fruit processing units. No details are available about the impact on different types of farmers as per the size of their holdings, the study being based only on secondary data about the society.

Amul is an eminent example of how farmers' organisation for the constructive purpose of economic upliftment could bring about a miraculous change in their lives. Its success cannot, however, be indicated merely in terms of growth rates in milk collection and profits, nor by a regression analysis to explain their annual variation, as Sain has tried to do. More probing into the nature of impact on their members has been done by two studies of dairy co-operatives in UP presented here. They work on a three-tier system, with a Milk Producer Co-operative Society at the village level, a Dairy Co-operative Union at the district level, and a Co-operative Dairy Marketing Federation at the State level. The village level society not only collects milk, transports and distributes it, but also takes care of the health of animals, providing fodder and balanced feed, and also technical guidance and services in breeding. Their progress is indicated by the fact that in Meerut district alone, which is the focus of study by Singh *et al.*, the number of societies increased from 50 in 1972-73 to 526 in 1987-88 and milk procurement from 7 lakh litres to 413 lakh litres during the same period. Both this study and the study of Dairy Co-operative in Nainital district by Dass *et al.*, which are based on a sample of households, reveal the heartening fact that benefits are not restricted to middle and large farmers, and both landless labour and marginal farmers too have gained. The latter derived a significant part of their total income from dairying, though in absolute terms it was less than the income earned by larger farmers from milk. The Nainital study shows further that though landless member households sold a higher proportion of their milk production than the non-member landless, in absolute terms they consumed a significantly higher amount of milk than the latter, apart from having also significantly higher total income. The comparison of member households with non-member households showed consistently higher incomes for all classes among the former, the difference being almost entirely on account of higher milk yields and higher number of milch animals per household.

The story of fishery co-operatives in West Bengal is not one of success. The authors, Chatterjee and Bandyopadhyay, observe that such societies could have played a vital role in increasing both fish production and the incomes of fishermen and also in making fish available to consumers at sensible prices, through curbing profiteering by middlemen. In practice, however, the growth of the societies has been erratic, and their profits and turnover have been extremely low, in spite of a significant rate of growth in fish production (about 6 per cent per annum) and a much higher price rise. Unfortunately, no explanation is offered about the failure of fishery co-operatives in playing a prominent role. Could it be that fishermen themselves do not prefer to sell through co-operatives when demand conditions are bright and middlemen offer both high prices and perks (like consumer credit)? In such a situation, are the benefits of co-operatives confined mainly to consumers, with the fishermen having no vital interest in them?

Both the studies of co-operative credit societies, one by Balishter in Agra district, and the other by Misra *et al.* in Varanasi district, conclude that they have been quite beneficial to their members. The level of input use in agriculture and also the net income of borrowers have been significantly higher than those of non-borrowers. Balishter's study further shows that the concerned society advanced more loans to small farmers with upto 2 hectares than to farmers with large holdings, both short and medium-term. Is it unique? How did it happen? In fact, even medium-term loans were given almost wholly to small farmers except in two years when large farmers too received a small share. No long-term loans were given, which

normally go mainly to larger farmers as borne out by the other study. The Varanasi case does not show such a bias in favour of small farmers, but there also the credit co-operatives were instrumental in raising the income and employment of borrowers.

The case of the lift irrigation co-operative society in Gaddipalli village of Nalgonda district in Andhra Pradesh is rather unique. Its study by Sarada and Narendra narrates how, inspired by a teacher in the A.P. Agricultural University who hailed from the village, over a thousand farmers came together pooling their holdings, and agreed to take back 90 per cent of developed land. This was to take advantage of the lift irrigation facility created by an irrigation canal of Nagarjunasagar. The remaining 10 per cent of land was needed for construction of irrigation channels, roads and other community facilities, including community hall, school, hospital and repair workshop. The pooling of land facilitated execution of irrigation work and land development simultaneously. Apart from providing related customary services like pumping water, the society has been providing technical guidance, farm inputs and other services like spraying insecticides at concessional rates. It has even established an Institute of Rural Development mainly to train farmers in modern technology. The society has been instrumental in an all-round development of the area and its people, taking care of health, education, warehousing, development of communication and transport and even cultural amenities. Capital assets and incomes of farmers, including marginal farmers, have increased significantly. Both productivity and cropping intensity improved considerably. There have been a few snags, however. Only about 67 per cent of the designed command area could be developed, the remaining being only partially developed. There was thus a shortfall in irrigated area. There were complaints of inadequate supervision of irrigation, inadequate finance, cases of wilful default in repayment of loans and the tendency to grow more of paddy instead of adhering to agreed crop pattern. There is a strain on co-operative institutions, when members tend to ignore their own role and responsibilities and depend too much on the management by leaders or on the government. We may recall, however, that farmers' associations for managing common property irrigation resources are not new in Andhra Pradesh, and instances of successful collective action are not lacking (see Wade, 1988).

The membership of Theodore Schultz Krishi Vidyan Mandal (Agriculture Science Association) at Parbhani is open to all farmers and others interested in agriculture, and aims at dissemination of knowledge and skills including transfer of modern technology to farmers, developing cropping systems that give better and stable incomes, distribution of inputs and small equipment, and development of market for seed with assurance of fixed price for seed grown by grower members. According to Amin *et al.*, the authors of the study, the Association has been working well, though there are still some problems to overcome such as the lack of staying power of small seed growers. The evaluation does not discuss much about other functions of the Association other than supporting seed growing.

Rounding up the role of both types of organisations of farmers, we could say that agitational organisations have served farmers' interests by securing several concessions for them and also a greater allocation of resources for the development of agriculture in particular and rural areas in general. To actually realise the gains of transfer of resources to rural areas, it is necessary to make a productive use of them for which we need the development of institutions with constructive roles. But they not only have to be *for* farmers and rural people but also run *by* them and not by the government. That is where organisations of the latter type, giving needed services to farmers in sales and purchases, credit, extension and even health care and education, play an important role. With the possible exception of Naidu in Tamil Nadu to some extent, farmers' organisations of the first type have ignored the latter.

But ultimately, if farmers' interests have to be served in real earnest, there can be no escape from developing the constructive organisations. Factors behind success and failure of these organisations have to be probed into, so that it can be helpful in replicating successful cases. We can learn also from traditional organisations for collective action in the management of tank irrigation and other common property resources (Wade, 1988). Sadly, no paper was presented here on this.

Several issues arise which can be discussed at the Conference, some of which have been already raised above in the light of the papers presented. They are outlined below:

1. What has stimulated agitation-oriented organisations of farmers? What explains the time and place of their origin? What factors have limited their spread to other areas? What are they after and whom do they represent? Is it plainly an attempt to form a monopoly front by political means to extract higher prices from consumers? Has the pricing process in agriculture come under their control?

2. Has the ideology of agitational organisations in terms of rural vs. urban interests led to or at least has the potential to redefine the goals and strategies of economic development in a way that effectively and more quickly solve the problem of poverty, unemployment and under-development in general? What are the prospects of these organisations earnestly taking up issues like agricultural wages in the interest of rural labour so as to form a united front of farmers and rural labour?

3. How do we assess the success and limitations of farmers' organisations? What factors promote their success?

4. Considering that the price issue is the main plank of farmers' organisations and agitations, what price could be considered fair to them? What criteria of fairness could be feasible and acceptable to farmers? Will such prices be fair to consumers?

5. What revolutionary innovations or at least reforms are necessary in agricultural marketing? What are the alternatives? Can we depend on free trade in food? What is the role of government intervention and farmers' organisations in agricultural marketing and particularly in managing food economy? Are marketing costs unreasonably high in India? How can better organisation reduce them?

6. Why are leaders of agitation-oriented farmers' organisations uninterested and sceptical about co-operative marketing? Why do they generally shun constructive types of activities and avoid taking up rural development as such in direct ways? Even while being bitterly critical of the government, do they still want the government to be the main actor as far as constructive and development activities are concerned? Why?

7. What can induce farmers' organisations to take up the processing of farm produce to realise higher profits? Can they offer better goods to consumers at reasonable prices?

8. What factors promote the success of co-operatives and collective action in rural development? Will they be favourable to small growers? What factors promote failure? What institutional innovations could be suggested to make the operation of co-operatives more genuinely participative and effective?

9. Can organisation of small and marginal farmers or small producers in allied activities including fisheries help them to overcome the problem of non-viability? In what form? What support do they need? What can other farmers' organisations do for them? Can the experiment of group farming in Kerala be replicated?

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