

Problems of Low-Income Farmers

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It is a well-known fact that nearly three-fourths of India's population depend on agriculture for their living. Nearly 70 per cent of these cultivators have uneconomic holdings. Cultivation of land taken on lease, is therefore widespread and about 50 to 60 per cent of cultivators are tenants at will, sharing their produce with absentee landlords, who very seldom render any useful service in the cultivation of their lands.

Madras had a population of 49 millions in 1941 and this is increasing at the rate of nearly one million per year. Almost two-thirds of the cultivated area of 39 million acres in Madras is owned by cultivating farmers who pay less than Rs. 30/- each assessment on their holdings. The average size of holdings range from 0.63 acres to 6.5 acres, with a mean of about 3 acres. The richer class in agriculture, who pay over Rs. 100/- as land assessment, own about 14% of the cultivated area; their holdings range from 40 acres to 305 acres, with a mean of 60 acres. The majority of the cultivating classes are farmers of small holdings with a low income. This income is also deteriorating day by day. The holdings are getting smaller as the years go by, due to division of property. The partition of ancestral property in accordance with the existing laws of inheritance, is the main cause for the small size of holdings and the uneconomic returns obtained from the land. This type of farmers owning small areas, take up tenancy farming and also seek other supplementary avocations to eke out their incomes. Agricultural incomes in general, not only fail to show any increase in recent years but have actually been falling in many parts of the country, in spite of the increase in area under irrigation. Even the recent unprecedented rises in the prices of agricultural produce have not brought any substantial relief to the cultivators, as a vast majority of them produce only for their own consumption and have hardly any surplus for sale, to be able to benefit by the higher prices. On the other hand, most of them have lost a good deal during this period owing to the higher costs of their requirements. The bigger landlords have no doubt benefited to some extent, but the vast majority of tenants, labourers and uneconomic landholders and share-croppers have been left poorer by the war. Thus our agricultural strata comprise a small minority of large landholders at the top and a vast majority of uneconomic landholders, tenants and labourers at the bottom.

The problem of relieving the pressure of population on the land resolves itself into one of rapid industrialisation and secondly of reorganisation of the agricultural economy of the country. Surplus labour in agriculture should be drawn into the industries. Cultivation methods should be modified so as to increase the productive capacity of the farmers. Measures should also be taken to bring more area under cultivation, by reclaiming the 90 million acres of waste lands, with the aid of facilities offered by the International Monetary Fund.

At present all the facilities available for increasing crop-production are not fully availed of by the majority of cultivators. The achievements of agricultural research are not sufficiently appreciated and are not fully translated into general farming practices. The innate conservatism of the farmers, reluctance to adopt methods new to him, and his chronic poverty, these are some of the reasons that are attributed for the slow spread of agricultural improvements.

As an outcome of detailed enquiries made in villages, some of the main reasons for the slow spread of improvements and the possibilities of hastening the spread are dealt with in the following paragraphs.

Ignorance, lack of finance, and non-availability of the materials for improvements in time, these are the main handicaps of ryots. They are also conservative and often lack any incentive to improve their status, though in recent times this tendency is receding. Ignorance on the part of the farmers about the achievements in improvements indirectly reflects on the inadequacy of the organisation for propaganda. Convincing demonstrations of improved methods are the best means of translating the results of research. Educating the ryot on the benefits of improved methods and awakening him from the slumber of centuries of ignorance, should form the primary duty of the State.

Availability of improved seeds and plants of different crops and their utility should be brought home to the ryots more widely than is done now. Sufficient quantities of such improved seeds should be made available within easy reach of the ryot. Inadequate supplies and distant transport damps the enthusiasm of even enlightened ryots. The cost of such improved seeds should be kept low, by subsidies if necessary, so as to be within the easy reach of the low income group of farmers. Even ryots who are aware of the benefits of adopting the improvements suggested, get disappointed, if the supply is inadequate or not available in time. It often happens that the low income farmer is hit hard and fails to get the full benefit if attempts are made to ration the limited supply of improved seeds. A continued spell of meagre supply is likely to create not only an antipathy towards the organisation, but also destroy the incentive to improvements.

On account of their low income levels farmers are not able to avail themselves of all the improvements now put before them. Costs in many cases appear to be prohibitive to the small farmer. Credit facilities from

co-operative organisations have touched only a fraction of the needs of the country and have not become a good substitute for the village money-lender. Quick availability of finance, as it now obtains in the case of the village money-lender, without too many formalities to guarantee the credit-worthiness of the borrower, should be provided by the co-operative credit societies also.

The next and perhaps the most important handicap is the existence of uneconomic holdings. These holdings in addition to being small are often scattered over a large area. Improvements are difficult in small and scattered areas, particularly for share-croppers; while the tenancy system creates no incentive for improving the yields or income from the land. A radical change in the system of inheritance, which now perpetuates the fragmentation of holdings, should be brought about speedily. A system of inheritance like that of primogeniture or the preferred-heir-system as adopted in western countries may be tried. Existing holdings may be made compact, even by compulsion if necessary and economic units fixed for each region in the country, taking into consideration the fertility of the soil, nature of cultivation, climatic conditions, irrigation facilities, etc. Division of land beyond a certain economic limit can be prohibited by law. Crop-sharing system can be put an end to and replaced by cash rentals or a fair rate of interest for all the investments made, including improvements. Cultivators may also be discouraged by law from raising credit on the security of the land for unproductive purposes. These would prevent change of lands from agriculturists to non-agriculturists.

Other factors that stand in the way of agricultural improvements will easily get resolved if the most important ones mentioned above are overcome.

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