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In MP, small farmers face big troubles

Rasheeda Bhagat



Mr H. B. Sen, Director, Krishak Sahyog Sansthan

HAS technology, access to credit, superior quality of fertilisers, etc, improved the lot of the small/marginal farmer with a landholding of two-three acres?

"Absolutely not," says Mr H. B. Sen, Director, Krishak Sahyog Sansthan (KSS), an NGO associated with the Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) programme funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development, that aims to reduce poverty in some areas in India by aiding sustainable livelihood projects.

The KSS works in 10 villages in Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh, about 50 km from Bhopal. He says that for all the tall talk about farm



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output having gone up, "the small farmer's lot has not improved; his investment on land — for water, seeds, fertilisers — has gone up but not the yield. The farmers are so distressed that, today, landless labourers are happier than the farmers. They do not have to borrow money to sink a borewell or buy seeds."

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Mr Sen says the region where the KSS works in "every village you'll find at least 20 farmers who've taken bank loans to put in pumps, wells or bore wells." The average borrowing is around Rs 28,000. "The government decides on the Minimum Support Price, but has anyone examined area-specific conditions," he asks.

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He says that diverse conditions govern the depth at which a farmer will find water... in some areas, you can go down 20 ft, whereas in others "you strike rock at one foot. So many farmers in this region hit hard rock and could not get water." For genuine reasons these farmers could not return their loan and have been branded 'defaulters'.

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"So harsh is the banking system on these poor people, that when we form women's self-help groups (SHGs), the bank to which they are linked insists that no family member of the entire SHG should have defaulted on a bank loan in three generations!



Considering that many of our SHG members are Dalit women, who are doubly marginalised — both for being women and Dalit — this is a very harsh and unfair condition," says Mr Sen.

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Says his colleague Mr Lalit Sinha, "Once upon a time a farmer used to give to others in the community. But thanks to our policies today the small farmer has to spread out his hands to receive alms from others. We have reduced our farmers to beggars. Farmers are finding it more and more difficult to get finance from banks; if these policies continue, in the days to come the farmer will become *sabse bada ghulam* (the biggest slave)."

He says that while the big farmers have linkage to modern technology, have tractors and access to bank credit, the marginal farmer is severely hit. Because of the high diesel price, he cannot even hire a tractor to plough his land or to draw water.

Also, the grazing area for his cattle is shrinking, with encroachments by the more influential for all kinds of purposes, including housing.

So is the small farmer starving?

"No, he has just enough for his stomach... he eats what he grows. But

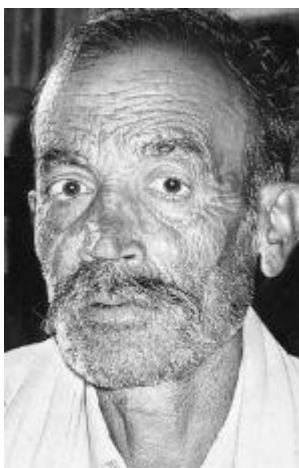
how is he to clothe his family? And educate his children," asks Mr Sen. Private schools are preferred by those who can set aside Rs 100 a month, because in government schools "the teachers are burdened with all kinds of work, including the responsibility for the preparation of the noon meal. So where is the time for teaching? Manu had wanted to keep both *shastra* and *shaashtra* (implements and knowledge) from what he considered the lower castes, but today's rulers have ensured that the rural people — and I am not talking of caste here — are denied both. If they do not have access to education or farming implements, they cannot progress economically," Mr Sen fumes.

In Raisen district, the main crops are wheat, chick pea (channa) and soya bean, but most of the small and marginal farmers are in debt. This year, the monsoon has been good, "but that is of hardly any use to them, as they have no money to buy the seeds or fertiliser."

Mr Sen explains that the farmer was better off earlier with his traditional seeds; "but his seed bank has been destroyed. They started purchasing seeds that yielded more, but only for a couple of years. After that, the yield drops to less than what they get from the traditional seeds, which had the advantage of giving a good produce with less water."

And, there are many farmers who own land only on paper. "Government land has been allotted to the landless, but they cannot occupy it because they don't know where it is located or who has the right over it. On paper they have become *bhooswamy* (landowners) but they do not know where it is or how to get control over it. Before distributing the *pattas*, government officials should give the beneficiaries the details, but more often than not the whole exercise is done only to meet targets," says Mr Sinha.

Mr Raghuraj Thakur from Gorkhi village in Raisen district, who grows wheat and channa on his 2.7-acre plot, goes into a detailed account of how much money he has to invest on an acre of land. Roughly, he spends Rs 4,000 on buying the seeds, fertiliser, diesel, water and sowing. Add to this, Rs 250 for the *katai* (cutting) and Rs 600 for threshing of the grain, totalling Rs 4,850. The average yield is about 10 quintals of wheat per acre, fetching him a market price of Rs 5,000-6,000, depending on the quality.



Mr Raghuraj Thakur

"If this is my investment and this is my return, what is the use of taking so much trouble and using the labour of my entire family to grow on my land? I might as well use the money to buy the wheat for our *rotis*," he says, adding, "These days, because the high price of diesel makes water so expensive, it is better to grow babul (thorny shrubbery that is used for fencing) on the land. That can give a better return."

Mr Halka Rai, another farmer who has a three-acre plot, says that when they question the seller of the seeds on the low yield, they ask us: '*Kitna pani diya tha?* (How much water did you give?)' "I don't have the money to give enough water, and when I admit this, he turns around and says: 'How can you get good yield from my seeds if you don't irrigate the land with sufficient water? Or else, he finds fault for not using enough urea or other fertilisers."

Diesel at Rs 35 puts a cap on the water he can access.

Is he happy with the government's role? Mr Rai merely shakes his head, but Mr Sen adds: "The government's role is that of the rajas and maharajas of earlier days. Their job is confined to achieving targets, nothing more!"

With their land not giving them decent returns, Mr Raghuraj and 14 other men have also formed an SHG. Named the Deendayal group, it is the only men's SHG organised by the KSS, and also the most successful.

Every month, Mr Raghuraj, who is the president, and his group members, save Rs 36, and now the KSS has managed to give the group bank linkage for a revolving fund and a loan under the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojanna (SGSY), where 80 per cent

of the funds comes from the Centre and 20 per cent from the State government.

The total amount this SHG will get is Rs 5 lakh and it plans to undertake contracts for tents for marriages, meetings, etc. Mr Rai and some of the other members of the SHG are not too happy with this choice as "we feel that there was much better scope for buying a second-hand bus as these villages do not have a dependable bus service. But the bank (Kshetriya Gramin Bank, Hoshangabad) people shot down the bus proposal saying tent decoration is a better option."

His fear is that in a rural area, not too many people would require this service. "The bigger players in the business will undercut us. If we ask for Rs 2,000, they'll cut it down to Rs 1,500."

But while the plight of the small farmer is not good, that of a highly qualified man like Mr Sen, who has a doctorate in applied social sciences from the Dr Ambedkar National Institute of Social Sciences, Mhow, MP, is even more pathetic. Though not a Dalit, he says "*hamari bhi dashta Dalit logon jaisi hi hei* (our plight is similar to that of Dalits)."

An OBC, he says that "for all of us things are the same. *Jab tak malik ko pair dabwana hei to palang par bita dega. Aur kaam pura hua to phati chatai bhi naseeb nahi hoti.* (Till the employer wants to get his feet pressed, he'll make you sit on the bed. Once that is done, he won't even give you a torn mat.)

This whole district is like that. My entire family is well educated and qualified but when I go to the villages on work, if I drink tea in anybody's house, I have to wash my own cup," he says bitterly.

When you ask him why he goes to such homes, Mr Sen replies: "What option do I have? My work is related to farmers and their problems. And their problems are associated with the rich and the upper-caste people. If I don't go to their homes, the farmers will die of hunger."

He has a good word for the former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister, Mr Digvijay Singh, who was thrashed in the last election.

"He had made some effort to improve the lot of the poor and the socially oppressed classes. During his regime *kuch mansik manobal to bada* (some psychological comfort was there), but though this (BJP) regime, for reasons I cannot explain or fathom, *Dalit logno ko ek mansik ghutan si hoti hei* (Dalits feel psychologically oppressed).

There is always a question mark... a doubt, on whether the BJP will favour us or not."

Mr Sen warns that the overall development of the country will not happen "until all the classes participate. *Garib aur soshit vargon ke vikas ka sabse bada sootra hei ki agar uska mansic manobal bad gaya, to hi vikas ho payega.* (The *mantra* for the development of the poor and socially oppressed classes is their psychological confidence).

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