

# Exploring the agrarian crisis

DEVINDER SHARMA

THE iconic farmers' protest that lasted over a year at the doorsteps of New Delhi threw up a lot of questions. While the movement ended with the withdrawal of the three contentious laws by the Prime Minister, the massive protest evoked interest globally and succeeded in drawing the nation's attention to the beleaguered agriculture sector.

The focus of the protest remained largely on the declining farm incomes and growing agrarian distress over the years. However, it also provided an opportunity for academicians and researchers to explore the dynamics of agrarian lives in the region, and at the same time for policymakers to reorient the agricultural policies to bring these in tune with the rising aspirations in the farming sector.

*Economic and Political Weekly* has done well to bring out a compendium of important research articles published over the decades on the subject. The edited volume — 'Agrarian Change in India: Readings on the Economy, Polity and Society' — provides an insight into not only political economy, but also transcends a period that makes it easy for the reader to understand the complexities of the social and cultural dimensions, the power structures and the transformation towards market orientation. Moving from pre-colonial times to modern agriculture as defined by the post-Green Revolution period, the articles provide a rich resource to under-

stand the changing dynamics of the Indian agrarian scene.

This seminal work of a galaxy of distinguished economists, sociologists and others has been categorised under five broader themes: conceptual frame, holding size and land reforms, the Green Revolution and market edifice, relational structures and transitions, and emergent agrarians. A collection of 23 essays, published over the years in *EPW*, have been put together and the compendium cuts across various dimensions, class and caste structures, and timelines to look at the emerging agrarian crisis.

While it will not be fair to name any of the distinguished scholars in particular, because each of the articles is at the heart of the contemporary agrarian question, they certainly have raised a number of pertinent issues that need further exploration.

A lot has changed in agriculture, but the recent protest clearly shows that the agrarian crisis has only worsened. While the spate of farm suicides bears testimony, the declining public sector investments in agriculture and the lack of income parity have led to an even serious crisis. Although it has various social and ecological dimensions, the declining farm income is the most critical. At the same time, the 'prejudices and preferences' reflected in the dominant economic thought, which sacrifices agriculture for the sake of industry, too, need wider discussions. After all, the emergent dynamics of Indian agriculture would be largely based on the policy direction that is laid out. Sustainability and inclusive development

remain at the very foundation of the transformation that Indian agriculture is yearning for.

The strength of this publication is that it draws from studies from various regions, giving a better understanding of how agrarian transformation and political developments have been influenced by technology, commercialisation and the accompanying innovative marketing mechanisms. Agriculture markets, mandi reforms, procurement and the move to attain self-sufficiency in cereals have shifted the production emphasis from nutritionally-rich crops and also moved away from crop diversification. The neoliberal economic agenda has further pushed agriculture to a situation where the younger generation is no longer interested in taking up farming. This is worrisome.

At the international level, the book looks at the political economy of food, and provides greater insight into the politics of hunger and famine. This is more relevant given the severe food crisis the world is presently grappling with. At a time when the world is over-laden with food, at least 200 million people are on the verge of hunger in 53 countries.

The extremely rich and varied outlook in this volume will help the readers not only get a historical perspective, but also understand the intricate complexities that remain hidden behind the production figures.

Remember, every time you hear a statement about record food production, it is the sweat of millions of farmers and farm workers who toil hard for the food on your plate.



## AGRARIAN CHANGE IN INDIA: READINGS ON THE ECONOMY, POLITY AND SOCIETY

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