

Income and Future Vision

-Girish Sahasrabudhe

12 Jan 2022

The farmers' movement achieved a major victory with the withdrawal of the three farm laws by the Government on 19 Nov 2021. It has since been suspended pending other demands, the main among them being legal guarantee for MSP (Minimum Support Price) for not just 17 agricultural commodities but for all farm produce including vegetables. The SKM is to meet on 15 Jan 2022 to decide on its future action. The SKM movement has touched the boundaries of the possible in these times in various ways. It has brought out into the open both the devious nature of policies and of ways these are fabricated. It has emphatically rejected these as well as convincingly opined on what it expected of a government. To continue effectively as a political challenge, the movement needs to come out with promise of a new, more just social order and picture of a new world. Only then is it unlikely to catch the imagination and trust of other sections of the lokavidyadhar samaj and bring them along as allies in transformative politics.

Farmers' Incomes: Putting MSP in Perspective

The issue of MSP bears a direct and obvious relation to farmer's income. The demand is for legalization of MSP as the floor price below which agricultural commodities cannot be traded. It is also known that MSPs as they exist are themselves not remunerative. That this demand is still made shows the markets for what they are: they deny the farmer even the basic minimum return necessary to sustain agriculture.

But the MSP demand is not just demand for legalization of MSP. It also seeks to redefine the concept. As a government policy measure, the idea of MSP at its root is not even meant to remunerate the farmer but to serve to make him more productive and efficient, to make him exert to make the MSP remunerative. Contrary to this, the movement wants to view the MSP quite differently. The view about how to fix MSPs is that in Swaminathan Commission Report. That view questions the assumptions made by CAPC in its calculations in many ways. It talks of honorable life to farmers and, parity with the organized sector, and regeneration of agriculture. How far this conception of MSP goes to as such question markets as they exist will be known only with future events regarding MSP demand.

Income and Lokavidya View

We have been with this for a while in the form of demand for government action to ensure incomes, which are on par with those in government employment in terms of levels and security, to all in the lokavidyadhar samaj (all those who live on the strength of lokavidya). This demand arises from our understanding of lokavidya and denial of instituted hierarchy in knowledge-worlds. It is a concrete demand of लोकविद्या प्रतिष्ठा अभियान.

Lokavidya point of view enriches demands of equal income with explicit positive content – as return for real contribution of lokavidyadhar samaj to the whole society based on its knowledge and labour. It exposes political programs related to free distribution of food and other things, doles, direct payments and subsidies as programs conceived and designed on the basis of a false and negative picture of poverty and destitution. These programs aim to divert

attention from social existence and potential of lokavidya-based work and create a myth of state benevolence. Lokavidya view of income is, thus, income as a just social return to all sections of the samaj allowing them to sustain and enlarge their existence. This makes the current income question primarily a question of denial of incomes to lokavidyadhar samaj.

Income and Employment

Policy-based bias against lokavidya in favour of modernity has given rise to all kinds of distortion of and discrimination against everything lokavidyadhar samaj claims as its own. It has legitimized completely unjust and unequal resource allocations and priorities of the state. This has created huge disparities in availability of health services, education, water, electricity and civil amenities, and administrative response. More pertinently, this has led to all-round destabilization of lokavidya-based work by starving it of physical and financial resources and publicly sullyng its knowledge base.

It is the destruction of lokavidya work, which is the chief source of unemployment. Of course, it may always be so in societal transitions. However, modernization, in the name of which it is legitimized ensures no direct entry into the new world for the unemployed. They must "educate" themselves at the cost of further erosion of resources available to those they leave behind. They must also face the brunt of progress of technology, which, in the name of eliminating hardship of human labour, in fact eliminates need for humans themselves. The question of unemployment is thus, the question of destruction of existing lokavidya work: it cannot conceivably be addressed without reversal of that destruction.

Income and Markets

The market denies incomes to lokavidyadhar samaj. It is the site for unequal exchange. State action sustains unequal exchange.

The policies of export and import of agricultural produce is designed to keep prices in the country depressed. The buffer stocks in government godowns are used for the same purpose. Money supply in the market is manipulated partly by salaries in the organized sector and partly by other fiscal policies designed to promote the modern sector. Each such action goes to increase the disparity between the modern and the "unorganized" (lokavidya-based) sections of the society. We know that agriculture is one of the most "human"-intensive of productive activities. A measure of that disparity can be easily imagined by looking at agriculture and, say, projecting likely prices of grain if agricultural labour is paid on par with even the lowest daily remuneration to government employees, and comparing those with farm-gate prices obtained by the farmer today.

The Swaminathan report talks of more than this parity by its price recommendation of C2 plus 50 percent. In that sense it calls for a bigger market-intervention than even legalization of the current MSPs. If the MSP committee negotiations ever take place, and if the movement participates, and can force its own terms for the discussions then it may mean a far-reaching redefinition of market intervention as it is understood and is accepted today.

The question that may be important is does that debate have the potential to go beyond confines of a national (and global) market whether free or regulated. This

is important because experience has shown that there can be nothing "just" (equal exchange) and "natural" (exchange as use values) about the national market. In addition, it is difficult to see how the idea of food sovereignty can take root in a national market.

Is there a conception of income that is not primarily derived from that of the market? It is difficult to see that there can be unless some considerable part of income – conceived as means to sustain life activity – is not realized from market transactions. For, otherwise income (and wealth) would always tend to reduce to possession of a "universal" means of exchange. One way to conceive of income not realized on the market is of course in terms of some kind of (primarily) local exchanges, whether directly between people, or communities or in a local market. We have been engaged with this too. But, it may be difficult to move forward in a way, which allows us to do so in dialog with farmers' movement, unless we have some concrete notion about working of existing local / weekly markets and to some extent what is still in public memory about them.