

Federalism and the Farmer

- Gandhi

The farmer movement in independent India has primarily targeted the policies of the central government. This by itself makes it clear that it is the policies of the central govt that determine the well-being or otherwise of the farmers of India. Although agriculture and allied activities have been earmarked as a state subject in the Constitution, it is the interventions of the central govt such as Green Revolution, Minimum Support Prices, Procurement and Stock Holding of food grains, Enactment of laws for food security, Essential Commodities Act, Control over the export and import of food/agricultural products that have profoundly affected agriculture and farmers.

Although the farmers movement has been in existence in India for more than 50 years now, it has hardly questioned the usurpation of the powers of the state govts by the central govt.

Possible reasons for this -

- 1) Economistic nature of the farmer movement
- 2) Faith on a free unified domestic market to deliver justice to the farmer
- 3) History of struggles against inter zonal restrictions on the movement of agricultural products / foodgrains within the country
- 4) Importance of export / Import restrictions of the Central govt in the determination of domestic prices of agri-commodities.

A change in perception has occurred after the recent successful movement against the three farm laws -

- 1) The encroachment of the central govt on the powers of the state govts in the enactment of the three farm laws
- 2) The identification of the central govt as the representative of monopoly corporates
- 3) The realisation that Agricultural Marketing (APMC) laws and infrastructure vary highly from state to state
- 4) Crops and their costs of production vary from state to state.

- 5) A disillusionment with WTO and its false promise of a free market in agricultural commodities
- 6) The decreasing competitiveness of Indian agricultural products in the international market
- 7) The total refusal of the central govt to accede to the basic demand of the farmer movement for legally guaranteed MSPs, and accommodation of the long-term interests of the farming community in policy making

The way forward-

- The farmer movement must realise that the capitalist market system can never accommodate the interests of the farming community
- It must realise that the corporate takeover of the central govt is not a transient phenomenon; it is the inevitable outcome of the current global capitalist development. Hence accommodation of the interests of the farming community is near impossible under an all-powerful central govt
- The history of the past farmer movements including the most recent one of 2020-21 shows that howsoever mighty the mobilisation of the farming community be, it has proved unequal to the task of forcing the central govt to adopt policies friendly to the farming community
- In this situation, forcing the central govt to adopt farmer friendly policies is almost impossible
- Therefore, In the medium term, the farmer movement must strive to divest the central govt of its powers to interfere in the agricultural sector, as the Constitution has earmarked agriculture as a State Subject. The powers so far appropriated by the central govt must revert back to the states.
- The farmer movement has, even under the present politico-economic conditions, sufficient strength to force the hands of the state govts to frame policies in the interests of the farming community
- The powers to enforce food security, procurement of foodgrains and their public stock holding, determination of and legal guarantee of MSP must be transferred to state govts
- All matters related to the trade and stocking of agricultural commodities must rest with state govts
- Export and import of food / agri-commodities must be left to the jurisdiction of the state govts
- Technology related matters pertaining to agriculture including GM food must be left for the states to legislate as per local requirements.

- In short, at least in the case of agricultural production and distribution, state governments must enjoy full powers, with no scope for interference by the central govt.
- Regional parties have been demanding a federal structure, with greater autonomies for state govts in policy making and implementation. The farmer movement must fully endorse the demands of regional parties for more federal powers and autonomy for states. In the case of agricultural policy and food security, the farmer movement must demand full autonomy to state governments
- The farmer movement must realise that even with full federal powers and autonomy, regional political parties and state governments may not provide solutions to the problem of unequal exchange in the capitalist market which is the crux of the problems facing the farming community. Therefore, the farmer movement must also formulate a long-term strategy for emancipating the farmers from the clutches of the capitalist market.
- The long-term goal of Swaraj can only be achieved through the strengthening of the lowest rungs of local self-government like the gram sabhas, gram panchayats, town panchayats and municipalities. It is here that the farmer movement has a great role to play.
- Keeping the lowest rungs of self-government outside party politics must be the top priority task the farmer movement must take upon itself. The villages and towns of our country are the victims of the divisive policies of the centralising forces of the parliamentary political system where political parties rule the roost.
- The re-establishment of Lokvidya samaj as the most important determinant of local self-government can be achieved if instead of the current systems of voting and decision making in the panchayati-raj institutions are replaced by the traditional panchayats as practised by the people. The SKM leading the farmer movement has demonstrated that the panchayat system of decision-making can go a long way in ensuring the primacy of the samaj over politics.
- The farmer movement must address head on the issue of transforming the prevalent top-down parliamentary party based politics to a swarajist non-party bottom up panchayati politics of the lokavidya samaj.