



Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences Seminar Series Lecture

The Political Economy of Agrarian Distress of Post-Reform India

by
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Date: Monday, 9 January 2016
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The recent form of agrarian distress in India is qualitatively different from what India experienced during the colonial times and the period after independence, which were also associated with hunger and acute poverty in rural India. One of the prominent ways in which it is different is in the emergence of the hitherto unknown phenomenon of farmers' suicides that is observed only in the post-reform period. This issue has been seen more as a political embarrassment by the different Governments rather than as the tip of the iceberg of a deep agrarian distress of a different nature which by any yardstick of serious policy-making requires both long-term and short term measures. The magnitude and stubbornly persistent trend revealed by official data on farmers' suicides recorded by the National Crime Record Bureau from 1997, though severely underrepresented, is disturbing. A pertinent question that has been asked by a few scholars of the subject is why should we experience such a retrogressive turn in rural India in recent years that is marked by a higher rural per capita income, better irrigation coverage, and a higher rate of growth of the economy compared to the periods before? Surprisingly, at much lower levels of income, which is particularly true for the period before the green revolution, the farmers appeared to have a greater range of alternatives than what they have today. On the other hand, the spatialities of the farmers' suicides lead us to ask another relevant question. The states most impacted by suicides, namely, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala and Chhattisgarh have one or more of the following characteristics: a.) they are counted among the developed states of our country; b.) they have had appreciable economic growth rates in recent years; c.) they have historically seen strong peasant movements; and d.) the political leadership of the state has come from farming communities after independence. The paper explores the apparently baffling phenomenon of farmers' suicides under two causative heads; the possibility of the farmers

being impacted by adverse and extreme weather conditions on the one hand, and the characteristics of neoliberal growth model having the seemingly 'free' market as the core institution, on the other. The first proposition is brought into the paper to respond to the numerous loan waivers handed out by the politicians during the abnormal years of rainfall, that indirectly hold droughts as the main cause for the distress. The latter issue is explored in the backdrop of reducing public investments in agriculture, which fits into the larger development paradigm of urban centric growth. The paper concludes that the agrarian distress in the post-reform period can be viewed through the lens of deep societal and sectoral inequalities, which are necessary fallouts of the neoliberal times and has as much to do with the increasing role of the private sector as with the withdrawal of the state in agriculture.

About the Speaker:

Dr. Sucharita Sen is currently the Executive Director of SaciWATERS, on leave as a Professor in the Centre for the Study of Regional Development, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University. She is an economic geographer, keenly interested in the issues of rural livelihoods, in the larger backdrop of changing access to natural resources in rural India. More recently, her work has specifically focused on gender and work in peri-urban India. She was a Nehru-Fulbright Fellow in 2009-10 and was associated with Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA during this period. She has published in areas of land resources, its acquisition and effect of dispossession on rural livelihoods, rural employment, on decentralized participatory models of rural development and problematising the impact of watershed development programmes as a means for sustaining rural livelihoods. She has just completed a project 'Gender Atlas' funded by the Department of Science and Technology (DST), and is currently actively engaged in a Inter University Consortium on Cryosphere and Climate Change (IUCCCC) project of 'Himalayan Cryosphere: Science and Society', also funded by the DST. She is particularly interested in making her work relevant in the policy domain, and has contributed to the framing of National Watershed Guidelines and investment decisions at the national level with respect to information and communication technology. She is keenly interested in interacting with young geographers and does so with regular contributions to the geography curriculum in school (Central Board of Higher Secondary Education) through her association with the National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi and writing a regular column in a journal that address young geographers at the undergraduate level.