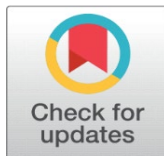
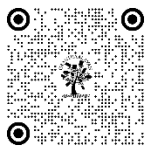


DEPEASANTISATION OF FARMERS IN PUNJAB

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ABSTRACT

Punjab agriculture has become seriously unremunerative because of steeply rising input costs, the dwindling size of the operational holdings, a perceptible incidence of increasing landlessness, and surrendering holding due to default on debt payment. This Study is based on primary data collected from three districts of Punjab, i.e. Amritsar, Sangrur and Jalandhar. Data shows that the farmers (74.9 per cent) in Punjab want to leave farming if provided other better opportunities and also 9.6 per cent of farmers already left farming because of the several problems they faced in the agricultural sector. The wards of small and marginal farmers detest working on tiny holdings and instead aspire to settle abroad. Even otherwise they find small holdings too un-remunerative to generate adequate income commensurate with their rising expectations. So, they are inclined to sell land and do sundry jobs and get disillusioned

Keywords: Depeasantisation, Agrarian Crisis, Low Returns, Indebtedness, Input Costs

1. INTRODUCTION

Punjab holds a place of pride among the other states of India for its outstanding achievements in agricultural development. The agriculture sector of Punjab continues making rapid strides over the years, beginning with the consolidation of land holdings which was followed by the reclamation of new agricultural lands, synchronous extension of irrigation through canals, and propagation of new agricultural technology. The agrarian structure of Punjab is dominated by two to four hectares of land holdings, and the predominance of owner cultivators has also contributed to the success of this process. The State has become a food grain surplus state in India with its 1.53 per cent geographical area and about 4.5 per cent cultivated area of the country. This has made the country self-reliant on food and overcomes India's severe food crisis during the 1950s and 1960s. The State contributed 43 per cent of wheat and about 25 per cent of rice to the central pool in 2013-14 (Government of Punjab, 2015). Agricultural and allied activities of the State have contributed 28.7 per cent to GSDP, and 24.6 per cent of the workforce is dependent on agriculture (Government of Punjab, 2020).

Over the millennia, the agricultural sector of Punjab has undergone substantial structural changes. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed significant growth in important crops, improved farmers' incomes, and increased employment in the

agricultural sector. The food-deficit economy turned into self-sufficient during this period, which was once referred to as the golden period of the agricultural economy of Punjab State. Whereas the growth rate of the agricultural sector of Punjab was 6.63 per cent per annum in the first decade of the Green Revolution. This decelerated to 4.74 per cent per annum from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s which further declined to 3.87 per cent during the mid-1980s (Sidhu, 2002). Nevertheless, the growth rate was only 1.90 per cent per annum between 1997-98 and 2001-02, and it was only 1.81 per cent in 2019-20 (Government of Punjab, 2020)

There is a high degree of dependence of the majority of the population of Punjab on agriculture. The workforce (cultivators and agricultural labour) dependent on agriculture in 1971 was about 62.67 per cent, which declined at a slow rate of 6.6 per cent between the period from 1971 to 1991. However, this share declined sharply to 17.12 per cent between 1991 and 2001. The share of cultivators in the total agricultural workforce also plummeted in this period. The share of agricultural income had declined sharply compared with the high dependence of the workforce on the Punjab agriculture sector. Agricultural incomes had been squeezed without lifting the workforce engaged in agriculture. Thus, the terms of trade between agriculture and the non-agricultural sector remained unfavourable to the agriculture sector of Punjab throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Gill, 2005a).

The intensive use of different inputs has made Punjab agriculture ineffective to cost. The cost of cultivation of two crops, wheat and paddy, is the highest in the country, and also, it is high for small farms due to machinery and other costs (Kaur et al., 2001). The crucial sources of soil and water, are also under stress in the state due to the excessive use of chemical fertilisers and over-exploitation of the groundwater resources through submersible pumps. The pumps have become a necessity due to declining water tables but they also cost very high for farmers, which are not affordable for small and marginal farmers (Sidhu, 2002). The Government policies such as the Minimum Support Price (MSP) and procurement policies have had adverse effects on the agrarian sector of Punjab. The restrictions on the free movement of agricultural products lead to lower prices of products as the farmers were forced to sell at low prices. The production of food crops becomes a loss-making venture (Pujara, 2016).

The decade of the 1990s showed a slow growth rate in the agricultural sector. Agrarian Crisis was aggravated during the early 2000s, which made farmers look for other avenues. The agriculture profession was becoming non-profitable for the farmers as 37 per cent of them expressed their desire to leave farming (NSSO, 2005). The primary victims of this Crisis were small and marginal farmers, who found it difficult to sustain themselves in the agrarian sector and were getting pushed out of agriculture (Gill, 1994).

Pillai (2007) analysed that the most important aspect of the agrarian Crisis is that Indian agriculture has become highly unremunerative and is increasingly becoming unviable for the bulk of the peasantry. And, the unviable nature of the farming sector forced farmers to leave farming. The study concluded that the different development measures i.e. land reforms, green revolution, and economic reforms have aggravated the crisis in the agricultural sector. Singh et al (2009) and Singh and Bhogal (2014) made an attempt to analyse the depeasantisation of small and marginal farmers in Punjab due to the agrarian Crisis. This process started in the state in the early 1990s, as the small land holdings were decreasing and the large holdings were increasing. Both studies were based on primary data. And the findings indicated that a considerable proportion of marginal and small farmers had been pushed out of farming because of its non-viability. The different reasons were low profits, land leased out due to high rent, joining other professions, selling their lands due to high debt burden, drug addiction etc.

Sharma et al. (2018) also revealed that the next generations of Punjab do not want to be a part of the farming sector. The study presented that the 'push factors', i.e., indebtedness, high input prices, low profits, and land fragmentations pushed the farmers from their lands and force them to leave farming. The 'pull factors', i.e., mechanization of agriculture, increasing employment and income, high education level, urbanization and development of tertiary sector pulled them from the farming sector. Mahapatra (2019) concluded on the basis of various surveys and reports that most of the Indian rural households' earnings are from the non-farm sector. The Indian youth is not interested in farming, the majority of the students of the agricultural universities switched to other professions because of the low returns from the farming sector.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that although Punjab State has achieved a higher rate of productivity and consequently improvement in the level of living of the rural society, the benefits have not percolated to the marginal and small farmers. Marginal and small farmers are leaving farming due to the unprofitability of the agricultural sector. The present study aims at understanding the plight of the farming community facing the hardships of the agrarian Crisis with a specific focus on small and marginal farmers. Although Punjab is the most researched state, the present agricultural

situation in Punjab is so monster that a lot more research is required to be conducted. The present study has, therefore, been conducted to address the several problems faced by the farmers by employing an interview schedule.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

In light of the above, the main objective of the present paper is to investigate the problems or factors that led to the depeasantisation of farmers in Punjab.

METHODOLOGY

The multi-stage stratified random sampling has been adopted for the present Study. Punjab is divided into three regions, viz Majha, Malwa and Doaba. In the first stage, one district from each region was selected. Amritsar is selected as it is the premier city of the Majha region, also agriculture is the main occupation of the city. It is a well-known fact that districts like Mansa, Bathinda and Sangrur in the Malwa region are known to be the 'epicentre' of farmers' suicides in Punjab (The Hindu, 2017), of which Sangrur is the most affected (Amrit, 2005). This study has selected Sangrur from the Malwa region. The Doaba region is known as the potato seed bowl of the country, and Jalandhar is the largest and the most densely populated district, with 53% of its population engaged in agriculture.

In the second stage, two blocks were chosen randomly from each district, three villages (selected randomly) from each block were the third stage unit, and agriculturists as the fourth and ultimate stage of the sampling unit. From each village, 25 respondents were selected by the snowball sampling procedure. Thus, the total sample size is 450. The respondents were asked various questions, in a structured interview schedule. Simple tabulation and percentage methods are used for the results and discussions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The transformation of the workforce from farming to the non-farming sector can be of two types; firstly, the 'growth-led' transformation is due to 'pull-factors'. The main factors are the mechanisation of agriculture, increasing employment opportunities, high level of education, increased incomes, Urbanisation, and development of secondary and tertiary sectors. Secondly, 'distress induced' is created by 'push-factors' such as low productivity, increasing costs, decreasing returns, unemployment, crop failures and indebtedness and others. Thus, it is based on the Crisis or the hardships in agriculture (Singh et al., 2009).

The main consequence of the agrarian Crisis is leaving farming, especially the small and marginal farmers as they find it difficult to sustain farming, thus pushed out of farming. The Study also found (table 1) that 74.9 per cent of farmers expressed their desire to leave farming. The respondents were asked about the reasons for leaving farming, and they reported many factors, which are discussed in detail in the next section of this paper.

Table 1 likewise indicates that 9.6 per cent of farmers had already left farming. Among the different causes, the highest number (4.9 per cent) was low returns and left with no savings, followed by those (2.9 per cent) who settled or wanted to settle their sons abroad as their children did not want to adopt the farming profession. Other 2.4 per cent had transformed to the non-farming sector as they found agriculture highly unprofitable. The farmers (2 per cent) of higher ages had left farming due to health issues. The rest, 1.7 per cent, 0.7 per cent, and 0.7 per cent had left farming because of the hard-working professionals, small holdings and other reasons, respectively. Singh et al. (2009) also found similar reasons for leaving farming. Therefore, multiple reasons found by the study are low incomes from farming, high land rent, fragmentation of land, going abroad, debt repayments, starting a new occupation and others.

Table 1 also shows 15.6 per cent of farmers who did not want to leave this sector. The majority of these farmers were cultivating for self-consumption, and some farmers opined that the Government would never provide them with any jobs, because of their general category.

Table 1. Distribution of Sampled Farmers Who Left or Want to Leave Farming

Sr. No.	Questions as per schedule supplied to farmers	Categories	No. of farmers	Percentage
1.		Yes	337	74.9
		No	70	15.6

	If you get an employment opportunity in a city, will you leave farming?	Already left	43	9.6
2.	If yes, why?	Low MSPs/Low returns/no savings	182	40.4
		Smallholdings	27	6.0
		High input cost	22	4.9
		Indebtedness	103	22.9
		No help from the government	18	4.0
		Marketing problems	49	10.9
		Want to go for another opportunity	4	0.9
		Hard-working	81	18.0
		Health issues	8	1.8
		Want to settle son or himself in abroad	11	2.4
3.	If you already left, why?	Hard-working	8	1.7
		Low returns/no savings	22	4.9
		Smallholdings	3	0.7
		Gone for another opportunity	11	2.4
		Health issues	9	2.0
		Want to Settle son or himself in abroad/ Settled son abroad	13	2.9
		Others	3	0.7

Source: Primary Survey, 2022-23

Factors Responsible for Depeasantisation of Farmers

In order to study different factors responsible for depeasantisation, the respondents were asked various questions related to their land holdings, input costs, loans they have taken, awareness about schemes, Minimum Support Prices (MSPs) and some others. On the basis of the information collected, the researcher has explained various factors reported by the sampled farmers. The gathered data has been analysed and discussed as under:

Low MSPs/Low Returns/No Savings

Table 1 elucidates that 40.4 per cent of farmers reported that the basic reason behind leaving farming is low returns which leave them with no surplus to save. Those low returns are the result of the low prices of their crops. Gill (2005b) highlighted that low MSPs and late entries of procurement agencies in the market caused the market crisis in Punjab because the slackness of procurement agencies procuring their produce forced farmers to sell crops at prices much lower than the MSPs.

Similarly, when the sampled farmers were questioned about the MSPs decided by the Indian Government, then, 87.6 per cent of farmers reported that their cost was not covered by the prices they got for their produce, and 87.3 per cent were not satisfied with MSPs (as shown in table 2). Thus, the sampled farmers complained that these low prices caused low returns from their produce.

Table 2. Responses of sampled farmers regarding MSPs

Sr. No.	Questions as per schedule supplied to farmers	Responses	Percentage
1.	Are you satisfied with the MSPs decided by the government?	Yes	2.9
		No	87.3
2.	Do you think that price covers the cost of your produce?	Yes	2.2
		No	87.6

Source: Primary Survey, 2022-23

Small Holdings

The following reason for leaving the agricultural sector in table 1 is small holdings, it was reported by 6 per cent of farmers. It is a well-known fact that Punjab is an agriculturally developed but land-scarce economy as the number of

operational holdings has been declining. It has declined from 11.17 lakh in 1990-91 to 10.53 lakh in 2010-11 in Punjab (Government of India, 2014). Table 3 represents the total owned area (only operational holdings) of the sampled agriculturists that the maximum number of 87.1 per cent of agriculturists owned below 10 acres, which clears that the maximum number of farmers were marginal, small or semi medium and the minimum number was only 0.4 per cent, who had above 30 acres, i.e. large farmers. In contrast, 8 per cent and 3.8 per cent of households owned between a range of 11-20 and 21-30 respectively. The respondent farmers stated that these small holdings are unviable and uneconomical and cannot earn sufficient farm incomes for the households.

Table 3. Distribution of Sampled Agriculturists according to Own Land Holdings

Own land	No. of agriculturists	Per cent
Up to 10	392	87.1
11-20	36	8.0
21-30	17	3.8
Above 30	2	0.4
No land	3	0.7
Total	450	100

Source: Primary Survey, 2022-23

High Input Cost

The increasing cost of cultivation is the biggest problem for farmers. The cost of cultivation is increasing due to the high use of pesticides, fertilisers, expensive HYV seeds, hired labour, over mechanisation, high lease in cost etc., and Indian agriculture becomes highly unprofitable and unviable. Table 1 represents that 4.9 per cent of farmers wanted to leave farming because of the high input costs. They reported that to take home better profits from cultivation, they prefer to lease the land to make their holdings viable for the application of modern technologies, but the lease cost is very high. Also, sampled farmers conveyed that they never get seeds at subsidised rates, thus they have to purchase certified seeds at higher rates.

The present study also observed that the maximum number of farmers were cultivating wheat and paddy, and the labour they used was mostly hired labour. Labour hired by these farmers also demands high wages. The government of India (2015) discussed that due to increasing costs and lower prices, farmers are not able to pay competitive wages to the agricultural workers and the workers prefer to shift to the industrial sector, which provides them with year-round employment. The shifting of farmers to the industrial sector led to the shortage of agro workers and the demand for higher wages for agricultural work. Agricultural wages are increasing every year at a high growth rate which increases the cost of production and lowers the returns from agriculture.

Indebtedness

Punjab's agrarian Crisis had pushed farmers more profound and deeper into a debt trap. The increasing costs and low returns had left farmers with no other option but to borrow and borrowing is not a serious problem but not being able to repay these loans becomes a severe problem. Indian farmers also took loans for unproductive purposes and from non-institutional sources, which aggravated their problems as the farmers were entrapped by the moneylenders and traders to whom they were indebted to sell products to them. Farmers are left with meagre incomes, and also, the exorbitant rate of interest increases the misery of farmers and negatively affects their profits (Gill, 2005a).

The data in table 1 clear that a large number of farmers (22.9 per cent) are interested in leaving the agricultural sector attributable to indebtedness. The present study found that 62.9 per cent of farmers are indebted (table 4). The sampled farmers affirmed many reasons (table 4) for taking loans of which farming purpose was the highest (45.1 per cent), which was followed by agricultural implements purchasing (7.1 per cent) and loans, for personal consumption (5.8 per cent). Other reasons are also shown in table 4, i.e. loans taken for medical treatment, marriages, higher education, or to settle son abroad.

From table 4, the contingency dependence of the farmers can also be observed, which shows that about two third (67.6 per cent) of the sampled farmers depend on loans in need of the hours. Furthermore, 11.8 per cent admitted that they have their savings for the time of emergency and 4.2 per cent rely on their incomes from subsidiary occupations, whereas 6 per cent and 10.4 per cent depend on foreign remittances and their relatives, respectively. Rani (2015) also discussed the importance of agricultural loans. These are not only small and marginal farmers who took loans as being resource poor but also the large farmers borrow to enhance their incomes.

Table 4. Distribution of Sampled Farmers according to Different Financial Problems

Sr. No.	Items	Categories	Percentage
1.	Are you indebted?	Yes	62.9
		No	37.1
2.	Why have you taken a loan?	For farming purpose	45.1
		Land purchasing	0.2
		Agricultural implements purchasing	7.1
		Personal consumption	5.8
		Marriage ceremony	1.6
		Higher education for a child	0.4
		To settle son abroad	2.3
		Medical treatment of a family member	0.4
3.	Contingency dependence	Loans	67.6
		Own savings	11.8
		Subsidiary income	4.2
		Foreign remittances	6.0
		Relatives	10.4

Source: Primary Survey, 2022-23.

No Help from the Government

Agriculture in any region needs government involvement to grow at a faster rate and a balanced regional growth. The primary responsibility for increasing agriculture production, and productivity rests with the State Governments because agriculture is a state subject. In order to supplement the state government's efforts, several centrally sponsored schemes were implemented to increase agricultural production, and productivity (Prasad, 2012). Keeping in view the numerous constraints faced by the Indian farmers, various policy measures were introduced by the state and centre governments from time to time that could restructure and rebuild the economy.

The next factor responsible for depeasantisation reported by 4 per cent of farmers was no help from the Government (table 1). Although the Indian Government has introduced loads of Schemes to augment agricultural growth, these Schemes have not benefitted the majority of the farmers. Moreover, farmers of many rural areas are unaware of any of these Schemes because these schemes have never been introduced or implemented in their areas. The perusal of table 5 illustrates that 98.7 per cent of farmers had never heard about Government Schemes and data no one benefitted from any of the government schemes and contract farming arrangements by the State Government.

Nain and Mishra (2017) also analysed in their study that most of the farmers under survey were unaware of the components coverage of risks and exclusions, premium rates, associated subsidies, loss assessment procedures and implementing agencies of the Agricultural Insurance Scheme. The study suggested awareness and capacity-building campaigns for farmers to recover from bad agricultural years. It can be done through bank personnel, the agricultural department and village administrative officers.

Table 5. Responses of sampled farmers according to awareness about government schemes

Sr. No.	Questions as per schedule supplied to farmers	Responses	Percentage
1.	Have you heard about different agricultural schemes?	Yes	1.3
		No	98.7
2.	If yes, then benefitted or not?	Yes	0.0
		No	100.
3.	Have you entered into a contract with MNCs?	Yes	0.0
		No	100.0

Source: Primary Survey, 2022-23

Marketing Problems

It is true that if steps have been taken to secure a high level of productivity, then another step should be taken to ensure the gains from this productivity should reach the pockets of all the farmers of the economy. The objectives of the APMC Act are to remove market distortions in creating a common market, to facilitate the creation of a national agriculture market and lastly, to promote efficiency and growth, but the APMC Laws are the major hurdle to the modernisation of

the food economy. Patnaik (2011) discussed some faults in this Act, i.e. Marketing Committees do not allow the traders to buy from the farmers outside the specific yard, the area served per market yard is relatively high, the APMCs elections in several states are not regularly held, congestion in the market yards which results in delays in disposal of farmers produce. The commission agents charge a fee higher than the market fee, which is 0.5 per cent to 2 per cent, but agents charge from 2 per cent to 8 per cent.

Thus, 87.6 per cent (table 6) of respondents in the present study stated that they had been exploited in marketing activities. The present study also found that 88.9 per cent of farmers have been selling their crops through intermediaries. Only 0.2 per cent are selling direct in the grain market and 0.7 per cent of small farmers sell to their relatives. Moreover, the farmers who sell their crops through middlemen (about 87.6 per cent, as shown in table 6) stated that they had been exploited in the marketing process in the name of grading and weighing their produce. Also, 89.8 per cent of farmers complained about the exploitation through the marketing fees in the market. Therefore 10.9 per cent (table 1) of respondents expressed their desire to leave this sector owing to this exploitation in the market.

Table 6. Responses of sampled farmers according to different marketing problems

Questions as per schedule supplied to farmers	Responses	Percentage
How do you sell your crops?	Direct in the grain market	0.2
	Through middlemen	88.9
	To relatives	0.7
Do you give any fees for the marketing process?	Yes	89.8
	No	0.0
Do you think that you have been exploited in the marketing process?	Yes	87.6
	No	2.2

Source: Primary Survey, 2022-23

Want to Go for another Opportunity

Agriculture in Punjab is no longer a way of life rather, it has become a commercial activity, and farmers took decisions based on profits and rate of returns. Many big farmers are interested in urban properties, and businesses particularly in transport, hotels, cinemas etc. (Gill, 2005b). The study also came to know about the 0.9 per cent of farmers (table 1) who wanted to leave agriculture because they believed that they could earn better from other opportunities as many of them were engaged in other subsidiary occupations to overcome the low returns from agriculture as shown in table 7. The information shows that 6.4 per cent of agriculturists were doing farming, however, it was not their primary occupation. It was a subsidiary occupation for them. The majority depended on livestock for their subsidiary incomes which constituted 44.2 per cent. On the other hand, 4.9 per cent were self-employed, 0.2 per cent depended upon pensions and remittances, and only 0.2 per cent was doing non-agricultural labour and the same for regularly employed. Furthermore, 37.6 per cent had no subsidiary occupation; these families depended on farming only.

Table 7. Subsidiary occupation of sampled agriculturists

Subsidiary occupation	No. of agriculturists	Per cent
Farming	29	6.4
Livestock	199	44.2
Non-agriculture labour	1	0.2
Self-employment	22	4.9
Regular employment	1	0.2
Pensions and remittances	29	6.4
No subsidiary occupation	169	37.6
Total	450	100

Source: Primary Survey, 2022-23

Other Factors

As farming is an extremely hard-working profession, 18 per cent of sampled farmers expressed that they simply want to leave farming in light of the fact that they have to work hard. Likewise, there was 1.8 per cent of farmers wanted to leave because of health issues and 2.4 per cent of farmers believed that their sons or themselves should settle abroad. Bera

(2018) also stated that the Youth are not interested in continuing farming due to the unprofitability and low incomes in agriculture.

4. CONCLUSIONS

It very well may be closed from the discussion that farmers in Punjab are dealing with endless issues in the agriculture sector, which have emerged as the agrarian Crisis in Punjab. In addition, this Crisis made Punjab agriculture highly unprofitable and unviable for the farmers. Smallholdings, high input costs, indebtedness, low MSPs, and marketing problems prompted the depeasantisation of the farmers from agriculture. The present study discovered that 74.9 per cent of farmers wanted to leave farming due to the agrarian Crisis, and 9.6 per cent of farmers already left farming. In the light of the present study results and discussions, the only panacea is a need for periodic revision of the procurement prices for farm produce to help farmers and meet the increasing costs for farm inputs and ensure at least remunerative income. The need is to afford proper counselling to farmers to guide them about the locally available inputs and markets to assimilate their outputs. Many such earlier initiatives have been met with failure simply due to a lack of marketing opportunities. Many studies corroborate this assertion. The Government ought to increase investment and expenditure in the agriculture sector because low government expenditure is one reason for stagnation in agriculture growth. The reliance on non-institutional credit of farmers should be brought down by providing accessible credit facilities since the input cost of agriculture has gone up.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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