Premchand and Pay Commission

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Sometimes writers are better conscience keepers of the nations than others. Take the plight of farmers. Many writers wrote about them in their novels, short stories and plays: Munshi Premchand, Shivaram Karanth, Rabindranath Tagore. In every language one can find such writers. They wrote about farmers: about the poverty and the hardships, the cheating by middlemen, the miseries of the women, the exploitation by money lenders, the gullible peasant, the caste violence, etc. … Many films too have been done on the miserable plight of farmers: Do bigha zamin will ever be a classic. We continue to live in Premchand’s country. But we seem to have lost our conscience. How otherwise can one explain the silence about the 7th Pay Commission? The government servants, the beneficiaries of the 7th pay Commission have almost 24% increase in their pay and allowances; the minimum pay would be Rs.18000 per month instead of Rs.7000; more than double. The maximum pay would be Rs.2,50,000 per month instead of Rs.90,000; again more than double. At one shot their incomes are doubled. But some of them are still cribbing; they are seeing injustice in the calculations. Are yaar, Come on, Can’t you see the injustice in the larger society? Farmers and citizen groups (who sympathise with farmers) in this country are asking in what way are they less than the government servants or sportsmen or actors/actresses that they should live on miserable incomes? They are saying: we are not beggars, begging for food; in fact we are the ones who grow food for the people of this country; and some for people of other countries as well. People do eat food, isn’t it, three times a day? How can this society let us live like beggars? Doesn’t this society have a conscience? Farmers are demanding a guaranteed income at par with the government servants. Their slogan has been: “Announce Farmers Income Commission before 7th Pay Commission”. They want an Act, a legislation, which will guarantee a minimum level of income on par with the Government servants. In making such a demand the farmers are not being greedy or lazy. They don’t want unholy doles. They are saying, let there be an Act and a statutory Commission (like the Pay Commission), a Farmers Income Commission, which, after conducting due surveys and studies, after taking into account the subsidies, the insurance, the credit, etc. etc. available to the farmer, will objectively recommend a guaranteed income at par with the minimum pay of government servants; and let the government of the day implement and enforce them. They are not asking a minimum guaranteed income for all families. Not for families whose incomes exceed the minimum level of income of government servants. Therefore income tax paying farmers are already out. Farmer families who earn an income in the organised sector- teachers, doctors, etc. are already out. Only for those families whose incomes fall below the minimum declared income may be protected by the Act. Why are they making such a demand today? “The National Sample Survey Organisation, in its situation assessment survey of farmers (SAS), conducted once every 10 years, assesses the major sources of income of an average Indian farmer. The latest required information is available for agri-year 2012-13. The SAS 2002-03 results are also available, which we use for comparison purposes. The income of farming households is shown under four heads: Cultivation of crops, farming animals, rural non-farm activities (RNF) and wages/salaries (WS). The SAS 2012-13 counts 9 crore agricultural households in India, with each earning on an average Rs 77,112 per annum. This was more than three times of what it earned in 2002-03, that is Rs 25,380. In real terms (using the consumer price index of agri-labourer or the CPI-AL as the deflator with base 2004-05), however, the average agri-household’s income increased from Rs 26,901 pa in 2002-03 to Rs 38,096 pa in 2012-13. The 10 year compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of the respective incomes was 11.8 per cent in nominal terms and 3.5 per cent in real terms. This means that it took about six years for nominal incomes to double and it would take about 20 years for real incomes to double!” Source: Ashok Gulati, Shweta Saini, June 20 2016. That is, in real terms, even after ten years, the average monthly income of agricultural household has increased from around Rs. 2500 in 2003 to Rs. 3100 in 2013. What a shame! It is even less than the statutory minimum wage, which is Rs. 160 per day. That is a daily wage earner earns more than the farmer! The present day government has announced that it will double farmers income in the coming 5 years. Even if it happens it will still be around Rs. 6000! And for it to happen there should be a 11% growth in the farm sector! The present rate of growth in the farm sector ranges from zero to 4%. It is but natural that farmers are seething with anger and frustration. Large numbers of farmers are leaving agriculture. They are of course free to leave farming for better paying jobs. But are these jobs available? The employment growth in the organised sector has been pathetic. “Since 1990, in spite of massive investment in the private organised sector, its direct employment increased from 7.5 million then to 9.5 million now while the workforce has increased from 250 million to 450 million. It has almost led to a jobless growth.” Source: ArunKumar It is not that the people who leave agriculture are sitting idle; they end up as underpaid, undernourished part-time workers, joining the unorganised urban labor market and providing cheap labour for the corporate industry and commerce. Neither the government nor the employers take any responsibility for their survival or their welfare. They are left to their own devices in this devil-may-care economy. And the government has no qualms or even pretensions about it. After all, just the other day it was ready to remove the word “socialism” from the very Constitution of the country, quietly and clandestinely. Across the world, governments have adopted different systems of income security for farmers to ensure parity between agriculture sector and other sectors, and to ensure food production and self-sufficiency. Even countries poorer than ours take care of their farmers. But government after government in India are still doling out piecemeal measures, a loan waiver here, a half-hearted crop insurance there. Every year the both state and central governments keep saying they have increased the budget for agriculture, but the farmers’ incomes remain pathetic. What should they do? Whom should they complain to? If India doesn’t ensure income security now and forces its small farmers to quit agriculture, we will end up giving huge subsidies to big corporates later – as it is happening in the U.S. and European Union. Perhaps that is what the governments in India are wishing to do; let down its farmers, party with the Corporates. Contact the Author