

## **Socio-economic Status of Tribal Farmers**

### **A case study of the Bhaxa tribe in Bijnor District, U.P.**

**Mohammad Awais**  
*Ex M.Sc. (Ag.) student*  
*RSM (P.G.) College*  
*Dhampur, Bijnor, U.P.*

**Dr Ramesh Singh**  
*Reader*  
*P.G. Deptt. Of Agr.Eco*  
*RSM (P.G.) College*  
*Dhampur, Bijnor, U.P.*

The tribal population in India is second only to that in African countries. As many as 250 tribal groups live in isolated regions of the country while 427 groups have been recognised as Scheduled Tribes.

Historically, tribals have been poor and backward with low levels of subsistence and poor nutrition, due no doubt to their lack of resources, low level of education and lack of adequate employment or income opportunities. Yet those tribals in the area of this study were freedom lovers, full of vigour and zeal.

The life style, community habits and habitats of tribals have made it difficult for them to keep pace with modern society; they are not well placed economically, politically, educationally or industrially but they are trying hard to catch up with the rest of India.

The Green Revolution in India brought economic disparity; some sections of the farming population enjoyed a rise in their standard of living but others lagged behind. Nevertheless, there was significant economic prosperity in the agricultural sector with programmes for high yielding varieties, poultry farming, livestock rearing, water management, improved fruit and vegetable production, farm mechanization, plant protection and information technology all playing a key part.

In the district of Bijnor, the disparity is clearly seen with highly progressive and prosperous farmers as well as poor tribal farmers who seem to be totally unresponsive to any of the above programmes. Tribal farmers still grow indigenous crops with low yields, low marketed surplus and low farm incomes; they consequently find it hard to save. These farmers also operate on a low capital base in spite of tribal credit facilities that are available to them now that commercial banks have been nationalized.

Another major reason is the attitude and values of tribal people to the whole business of farming and the use of modern agricultural inputs such as HYV seeds, fertilizers, irrigation, machinery and credit from outside the farm. In order to take appropriate

policy measures to mitigate the poverty and backwardness of tribal farmers, it is essential to identify and quantify the socio-economic factors behind their situation.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

1. To appraise the socio-economic condition of tribal farmers in Bijnor
2. To study the existing cropping and resource use patterns to locate the specific socio-economic weaknesses in their production organisation
3. To compare the above factors with non-tribal farms in adjacent areas and study the gap in production patterns and economic levels
4. To find the social constraints that inhibit the adoption of new technology.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

The total tribal population in Bijnor is 1,863. There are 11 blocks in the district but tribals only live in three of them, viz. Kotwali, Najibabad and Afsalgarh. Most tribals are farmers.

#### **Sampling Framework**

The study was conducted in the Kotwali block which is the one where the majority of tribals live (1,329). Two villages – Bhoomidan Colony and Bagnala – both inhabited by Bhoxa tribals, were chosen. Each family of tribal farmers had 3 acres of land, allotted to them by the government.

Twenty tribal farmers were randomly selected, 10 from Bhoomidan Colony and 10 from Bagnala. For comparison and identification of specific factors, 20 non-tribal farmers who had 3 acres of land were selected randomly from the neighbouring village of Jahanabad Khobra.

Information was collected by personal interviews using structured questionnaires.

#### **TRIBAL FARMERS**

Life in most of the villages is one of continual struggle for existence against wild animals such as elephants, tigers, wolves, *neelgai* and jackals, against the dense forest vegetation, the enervating climate, malaria, dirty drinking water,

poor transportation, poor communication and a lack of basic amenities.

The Bhoxas are found in six villages of the block of Kotwali; they originally migrated from the regions of Kumaun and Nainital in Uttaranchal. Their main occupation is agriculture. Because of their extreme poverty and miserable state, the government gave them 3 acres of land per family in 1962, hence the place where they live is called the Bhoomidan Colony (*bhoomidan* = land gift).

They also keep cows, buffaloes and poultry. Bhoxa women help in farm operations and cut wood from the forest. They also keep kitchen gardens, collect *tendu patta*, make ropes and do carpentry. It is the Bhoxa women who make purchases from the market and decide on the finances involved in the marriages of their children. Thus the women have the dominating role.

The Bhoxas are keen observers of festivals and like to visit fairs. Both men and women smoke and drink on a large scale. In their leisure time, they get together in small groups and discuss village affairs and casual scandals. They sing their own traditional folk songs but also enjoy film music.

Bhoxa houses are made of mud walls with a two-sided sloppy thatch. This type of structure is used to prevent the accumulation of water in the rainy season and to increase the longevity of the structure. The houses usually have two *kuccha* rooms, each with two doors that open against each other. Houses are used for living, dining, storing and cooking and are very attractive and clean, unlike the Bhoxas themselves who are dirty. There is a separate building with a thatched roof for the animals.

The Bhoxas suffer from many illnesses but no proper treatment is available. Their panacea for all ailments and cuts is herbs but they also have remarkable powers of resistance. They are very superstitious and so do not like to start a new job or embark on a new undertaking at certain times. They are hesitant to break old conventions even though it may be to their economic advantage and betterment.

Most Bhoxas are non-vegetarians. Apart from one Christian family, they are all Hindus but prefer to worship in the open rather than go to the temple. They are completely unaware of the government's programmes and schemes.

### **Profile of the study area**

Most parts of this district fall under the *tarai* zone, an area that is backward both politically and industrially. The area selected for study is surrounded by forest. Maize, paddy, mustard, lentils, wheat, sesame and sugar cane are the main crops. The soil comes from the Shivalik Belt of the Himalayas and is generally sandy, clay-loam or light loam. It is naturally fertile and centuries of accumulated deposits of grasses and foliage have contributed to the enrichment of the humus content of the soil.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Education**

The majority of tribal farmers are illiterate (77.21%) and 45.34% of non-tribals. In both groups, there is only one farmer who is a graduate and very few of those who are literate have gone as far as high school. This is because there are no educational facilities in the village. Another factor is the shortage of labour, which means that many families use child labour on their farms.

#### **Mobility**

Mobility is greater among non-tribal farmers than among their tribal counterparts. This is possibly due to the fact that the non-tribals are immigrants to the area and their relatives live in far-flung villages. They visit them at least once a year. Tribals, however, have all their relatives within 50 to 100 kms.

#### **Sources of information**

The extension staff are a significant resource of agricultural knowledge for non-tribal farmers. Tribals, however, use fellow cultivators (75%) and relatives (50%) as their main source of knowledge. Mass media methods such as the radio contribute very little to the dissemination of new ideas in the study area.

#### **Non-agricultural occupations and family size**

A very small proportion of farms (20% tribal and 15% non-tribal) have members who are engaged in non-agricultural occupations. Most of the tribals have joint families so there are usually members who can be spared to follow other occupations; however, non-tribals mostly have nuclear families. The average size of a non-tribal family is 5 people (per farm) and of a tribal family, 4.9.

#### **Attitudinal analysis**

There were thirteen questions in the interview schedule with three possible answers – yes, no and don't know, indicating whether they agreed, disagreed or were undecided. The score for the

innovativeness of tribal farmers was 2.2686 and for non-tribals 2.5284, indicating a fair degree of innovativeness.

## **Resources and Application of New Farm Technology**

### **Land holdings**

Because of the poor and miserable conditions of the Bhoja tribe, the government allotted 3 acres of land to each Bhoja family. For comparison and identification of specific factors governing tribal farming, twenty non-tribal farmers owning 3 acres of land were selected from the neighbouring village.

### **Farm animals**

There are more draught and milch animals per farm on non-tribal farms; they also keep goats and poultry, which few tribals do.

### **Labour force**

Women are more commonly used as labour on tribal farms and only tribals use child labour. Only non-tribal farmers spend money on hiring labour.

## **Application of new farm technology**

### **Irrigation**

The tribal farms are almost entirely non-irrigated while almost all non-tribal farms have their own irrigation facility (75%) or one provided by the government (25%). Tribals depend totally on rainfall in both agricultural seasons.

### **Improved seeds**

High yielding varieties are available in maize, paddy, bajra and wheat but only HYV of paddy and wheat were used in the study area. The proportion of all farmers using HYV paddy is only 50% on non-tribal farms as compared to HYV wheat (65%) while only 15% tribal farmers use HYV wheat and 10% use HYV paddy. On non-tribal farms,  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{2}{3}$  of all farmers use HYV seeds for paddy and wheat respectively. The area of paddy under HYV is nearly six times more on non-tribal farms than on tribal ones. Similarly, the area of wheat under HYV is only 7.08% on tribal farms but 31.08% on non-tribal ones. Farmers have problems adopting HYV seeds because of their high cost and lack of availability at sowing time.

### **Chemical fertilizer**

While  $\frac{2}{3}$  of farmers on non-tribal farms use fertilizers, only  $\frac{1}{4}$  of tribal farmers do. The average expenditure on non-tribal farms is Rs 1053 compared to Rs 943 on tribal farms. The difference could be attributed to the tribal farmers'

lack of technical awareness and financial difficulties.

### **Plant protection**

Neither tribal nor non-tribal farmers use any significant plant protection measures as neither group has any 'know how' on the protection of plants against pest and disease.

### **Farm implements**

There was only one farmer, a non-tribal, who owned heavy machinery such as a tractor and thresher. However, almost all farmers, both tribal and non-tribal, possessed iron ploughs and local implements.

### **Priorities for future investment**

Since irrigation is a pre-condition for the successful adoption of modern technology, irrigation is the highest priority on tribal farms, followed by fertilizer, HYV seeds, farm animals and machinery. On non-tribal farms, the priority is investment in HYV seeds, followed by fertiliser, animals, building, machinery and irrigation. Buildings do not have any place of priority for tribal farmers, probably because they prefer to live in open spaces.

## **CROP PRODUCTION**

### **Cropping pattern**

In the *kharif* season, for both types of farmers, paddy is the main crop followed by maize and sesame. In the *rabi* season, the main crop is wheat followed by sugar cane. Tribals sow more sesame than non-tribals while the latter sow more sugar cane.

### **Crop production**

On both types of farms, per acre yield of crops is very low because of the inadequate availability of inputs. Non-tribal farms perform slightly better.

### **Summing up**

- § The percentage of school-going children among tribals is comparatively higher (85%) than among non-tribals. However, one must point out that more heads of tribal families are illiterate than heads of non-tribal families yet they are far more aware of their children's education because of the reservation policy in jobs.
- § There is greater mobility among non-tribal farmers
- § On tribal farms, fellow cultivators are the major source of information with demonstrations and radio playing a very small role

- § The total cultivated area on tribal farms is without any form of irrigation
- § A very small proportion of family members is engaged in non-agricultural occupations in both types of farmers
- § The per acre yield of crops on tribal farms is very low
- § An attitudinal analysis indicates that both farm communities are quite keen on new developments in agriculture
- § Both kinds of farmers are facing difficulty adopting new agricultural technology; for tribal farmers the difficulties are proportionately worse

### Suggestions

- § Educational facilities should be provided for the tribal people. More educational institutions should be established and parents, primary school teachers, village development officers and the head of the local panchayat should be vested with the responsibility of enrolling all children under 14 years of age in school
- § Positive steps should be taken to check the exploitation of tribals and stern action should be taken against those who exploit them
- § Dispensaries and child care centres should be set up in tribal villages to improve their low standard of health
- § Good, reliable transport and communication facilities should be provided in tribal villages
- § Tribal villages should be connected to a regular supply of electricity
- § Irrigation facilities should be provided by government tube wells
- § Hybrid seeds of crops should be made available to farmers in sufficient quantities well before the sowing season
- § Rainwater should be stored in reservoirs and tanks and used judiciously in a micro irrigation system. Multiple cropping and intercropping should be actively encouraged to improve farmers' net income
- § There must be adequate facilities for clean drinking water
- § The government must make major moves to create permanent assets with tribal farmers and provide infrastructural support for meeting input, credit and marketing needs
- § Extension agencies must visit the villages and interact with farmers on a regular

basis to educate them about improved crop production technology

- § The future course of action for alleviating the misery of tribal farmers and boosting production from dry lands should direct the development of afforestation through agro-forestry systems in dry land
- § It is high time that a national tribal development policy is developed in conjunction with prevailing socio-economic imperatives. Such programmes would go a long way to improve the lot of tribal farmers.

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