

Voices from the Fields: Examining Sir Mark Tully's Narratives on Indian Farmers

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Abstract: This research paper, inspired by Mark Tully's observations and findings, sheds light on the distressing plight of farmers in India. It examines the factors contributing to their indebtedness and the resultant distress, including natural phenomena like droughts and floods, as well as institutional factors such as inputs, credit, and markets. The study encompasses the experiences of small, marginal, and large-scale farmers. To overcome this crisis, the paper proposes various measures that the government can adopt, drawing on Tully's recommendations. These include the formation of farmers' groups, the adoption of non-pesticidal management to reduce input costs, rectification of market anomalies, and the provision of counseling and confidence-building initiatives in areas facing acute distress. The research emphasizes the urgency of addressing these challenges and offers a comprehensive perspective on mitigating the plight of farmers in India.

Keywords: farmers; farmers' indebtedness; farm credit; farmers' groups; India; Mark Tully.

INTRODUCTION:

Agriculture has long been the backbone of India's economy, providing livelihoods for a substantial portion of the population. However, the distressing circumstances faced by farmers in the country, as depicted by renowned journalist Mark Tully, bring forth a harsh reality. Through his extensive coverage and firsthand experiences, Tully offers valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges that Indian farmers encounter. These challenges encompass issues such as high levels of indebtedness, crop failures, limited access to crucial resources, and the growing disparity between rural and urban prosperity.

Mark Tully's work sheds light on the underlying factors that contribute to the plight of farmers, revealing the intricate web of problems they face. One critical aspect is the issue of indebtedness, where farmers find themselves trapped in a cycle of borrowing to meet their agricultural expenses, often at high interest rates. This financial burden further exacerbates their distress, leading to desperate measures and even tragic outcomes such as farmer suicides.

The agriculture sector in India holds paramount importance as it sustains a significant portion of the population and plays a crucial role in generating income, employment, and subsistence. With approximately 70 percent of the country's population residing in rural areas and deriving their livelihood from agriculture, the overall development of the Indian economy heavily relies on this sector. Consequently, studying the challenges faced by marginal farmers becomes imperative for an agrarian economy like India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature is the mirror of our society. This dicta seems to be very true in the context of Mark Tully. Tully has shown the obstacles, hurdles and struggle in the way of this deprived section (downtrodden folk, farmers, women) of Indian society. Mark Tully's literature shows his emotions towards these marginalized people of Indian society. Tully has managed to create a unique space for himself through his books best labelled as 'travelogue' and 'reportage' at the same time. His accounts of rural India give a different yet realistic version of political, social and cultural incidents of the country since Independence. No other writer has done the same. There are books of history, reportage and travelogues but Mark Tully's books are all in one, nevertheless, not replacing anyone.

About the Author

Sir William Mark Tully was born on 24th of October in 1935 at Kolkata, British India. His father was a British businessman who was a partner in one of the leading managing agencies of the British Raj. He spent the first decade of his childhood in India without being allowed to socialise with Indian people. He was sent to a 'British boarding school' at the age of four in Darjeeling. After that he was sent to England for further schooling. There he was educated at Twyford School (Hampshire), Marlborough College and at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he studied Theology. Tully wanted to be a priest in the Church of England.

After getting education from India and England, he joined the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1964 and moved to India as the BBC's India correspondent the following year. He covered all the major events in South Asia for thirty years, until he resigned from the BBC in 1994. Since 1994 he has been a freelance journalist and broadcaster based in New Delhi. He has published several books on South Asia.

Tully's first book on India Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle (1985). His next book Raj to Rajiv: 40 Years of Indian Independence was written with Zareer Masani, and was based on a BBC radio series of the same name. In the US, this book was published under the title India: Forty Years of Independence. No Full Stops in India (1988), a collection of journalistic essays, was published in the US as The Defeat of a Congress-man. Tully's only work of fiction, The Heart of India and Upcountry Tales:

Once Upon A Time in the Heart of India (2017) were published in 1995. Tully later wrote India's Unending Journey (2008) and India: The Road Ahead (2011), published in India under the title Non-Stop India.

Objective: The primary objective of this research paper is to analyze Mark Tully's stories and bring forth a comprehensive understanding of the plight of Indian farmers. By exploring the narratives in-depth, we aim to highlight the socio-economic, political, and environmental factors that contribute to the distressing conditions faced by farmers. Additionally, this research seeks to emphasize the need for policy reforms, innovative agricultural practices, and support mechanisms to address the farmer's plight effectively.

Methodology:

This research paper adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing content analysis as the primary method of investigation. Tully's stories, featuring real-life accounts, anecdotes, and observations, serve as the primary data source. The narratives are examined to identify recurring themes, challenges, and underlying causes related to the farmer's plight in India. The paper also draws upon secondary sources, including academic studies, reports, and government documents, to supplement the analysis.

Agony of Farmers

According to Mark Tully an Indian farmer gets trapped in a vicious circle government employees and village Mahajans. And he never succeeds to come out of this vicious circle. The same thing he has shown in this chapter through the character of 'Tirathpal'. A Mahajan (money lender) befools Tirathpal by getting his signature on documents. Actually the farmer, Tirathpal wanted to take some loan from the Mahajan by mortgaging a piece of land. But later the Mahajan alleged that the document Tirathpal had signed was actually a deed of sale not a mortgage. And he was very happy with that deal and had no intention of giving the land back. Tirathpal pleaded with the Mahajan but he didn't listen to him.

After the hot discussion with Mahajan Tirathpal and his brother returned to their home. According to Tirathpal going to the panchayat might be a better option. From what he has heard about courts they are very expensive and often not just and fair. Tirathpal says that Magistrates are influenced by big people and the Mahajan is a big man. He has money to buy the magistrate. Here Mark Tully wants to talk about the thinking of an Indian farmer towards Magistrates and Indian courts. An Indian farmer thinks that going to courts is very expensive and still there is no surety of justice from there. That's why farmers prefer going to the village panchayat/council for the justice. But his brother somehow convinces Tirathpal to go to court. When an advocate suggests him to go to police and register a case and bring it before the magistrate. Tirathpal's face fell and he says, 'But the police will never do my work. I'm far too small a man. What's more, the Mahajan will bribe them.' (page no 109)

Here again Mark Tully wants to indicate that a farmer has no belief in police and he has negative image of police department. According to him police men are corrupt, they don't work without bribe. I too agree with Mark Tully here, police men some time torture innocent farmers and scare them to take bribe. They charge fake cases against such innocent people. Whatever Mark Tully has observed as a BBC correspondent about India and its people, farmers, government officials etc, the same he has woven in his short stories through such characters like Tirathpal. There is no exaggeration in his short stories. So it's not only the thinking of Tirathpal about the police but most of the Indian farmers think the same. There may be one reason behind of this that is un education. Unless the Indian farmers will get educated, police and other government officials will keep befooling them. They will have to be aware about their rights that are given to them in the Constitution.

Mark Tully in his book 'India in Slow Motion' takes an example of a farmer (Ningappa) from Southern state of Karnataka. Through this character Tully wants to say that some time a farmer is unable to pay the family debt through out of his life and he dies in debt. After that his sons inherit the family debt from their father. When a family gets seperated, the qqqq ii n lenders. Now he was desperate because he couldn't even sell his maize. There was no demand in the market and he didn't believe the government would cost to bother to buy from a farmer as small as he was. (Page no 180, book Slow Motion in India)."

It is the problem of all the farmers in India. When the farmer Nagappa goes to the shop owned by another farmer Mahabaleshwar Mallappa Desai, he talks about his plight as a farmer. Then the shop owner says, 'we are all in debt, farmers are everywhere, 'the elder comforted him. 'I have bigger debts than you do.' 'But my debts just keep growing,' Ningappa sobbed, 'and what hope do I have now of ever providing my family with somewhere to live? I feel disgraced I have no wear to show my face, living as I do. I come from a respectable family and my wife and children are reduced to living in a hut.'

Mahabaleshwar tried to calm him by saying that it's a matter of patience. These things come round in circles. I am older than you are, I have seen it all before two or three bad years and then a good one or two. He tried his best to console Ningappa. Apart from his consolation this elder farmer (Mahabaleshwar) says that the farmers never get out of debt. And the money lenders also don't want the farmers to get out of their debt. Village Mahajans or money lenders are like blood suckers. They keep sucking their blood generation to generation. As a result the farmers have to commit suicide. That's what the farmer Ningappa does, he kills himself by hanging from a tree.

The issues of the farmers that Mark Tully has raised in this chapter (Farmer's Reward) are the same which were the reasons of protest done by the farmers of Panjab , Haryana and Rajasthan in 2020. In order to collect more facts Mark Tully goes to some other farmers who were working at their fields. Besides Hemant there was one more companion with Tully who was a young agricultural economist (Dr Rajendra Poddar). When they meet a farmer and his son at the fields, they had detailed questioning in which Dr Poddar used the skill of an economist and the knowledge of a farmer, he drew up a balance sheet of the maize crop which showed that the expenditure, including interest at 5% a month on the crop loan, was 6150 rupees per acre, and income from the sale of the grain was 3960 rupees. So the net loss per acre was 2190 rupees. As the farmer had sown eight acres of maize, his total loss was 17520 rupees. His income would have been higher if he had gone to the government procurement centre, instead of

selling to a private trader at a hundred rupees a sack less than the official price, but the farmer explained, 'Nobody cares if you go to the government. At least with the private trader I get my money at once and its much easier. I don't have to take my grain anywhere either. He comes and collects it.' Government should analyse that why a farmer has to sell his grain to a private trader instead of Government procurement centre. Although he knows that going to a private trader will get him less price in the comparison of going to government procurement centre. The government must ponder about the compulsion of a farmer behind selling his grain to some private trader.

The farmer gives some reasons of selling his grain to a private trader. First reason is , he doesn't need to bother about carrying his grain to the private trader. The private trader himself comes and collects the grain from him. On the contrary if he wants to sell his grain to the Government procurement centre, he will have to pay extra charges for transport. And the Second reason behind of going to the private trader is, he doesn't have to wait for the payment, private traders give him payment at once. But in the case of p procurement centre, he doesn't get the payment at once . And it's not an easy process comparison to the private trader.

His son added, 'It's probably more profitable too, what with all the interest we would have to pay while we waited for our money from the government. Therefore the farmers don't prefer to go to government procurement centre in order to sell his grains. Dr. Poddar said that the interest would have been less if the farmers had borrowed money from the bank. The farmer said that they couldn't borrow the money from banks because they already had a debt of 23000 rupees with the State Bank of India, which meant no other bank would have lent to them.

Dr. Poddar said, ' How can you go on like this? You are losing money.' The farmer replied , ' I have hopes. The last two years have been very bad, maybe the prices will improve next year.' An Indian farmer always lives in hope, he doesn't know about the price either it will improve next year or not. He can only hope for the best price. As far as his debt is concerned, he will use the money from the crop to pay the money lender and he will make the bank wait. According to the farmer everyone owes money to the banks here and there is no disgrace in that. It means almost all farmers are in debt in the villages. The debt is the cause of their anguish. (190

They asked the farmer that why they were farming if it was going to make a loss.

The farmer said that owning land was a matter of prestige and it would be a disgrace if he didn't farm it. An Indian farmer feels proud of farming the land of his ancestors, no matter it is profitable or not. He takes pride in owning the land. The same thing was with the farmer Tirathpal. Although he was not getting much profit from it but still he felt proud of ploughing the land of his ancestors on his own. He considered it his duty and responsibility, given by his father.

After meeting the farmers at their fields Mark Tully and his companion Gilly and Hemant wanted to check the procurement centres and Karnataka State Warehousing Corporation. Here Tully depicts the problems which are faced by the farmers at these warehouses. Tully observes that on the verandah of the warehouse office farmers jostled each other to get their documents recorded by just one bald headed bad-tempered clerk. They also had to register their vehicles with the police for some reason the sub inspector on duty was unable to explain.

The farmers were anxious to express their frustration, gathered arounds Mark Tully and his team. Some of the farmers had been waiting for 24 hours to complete the complicated process which involved queuing first to get their loaded vehicles weighed, then standing in another queue to get them unloaded and finally joining a third queue to have thei empty vehicles weighed. It was very tiresome and time taking process for the farmers. All the farmers complained of long waits first at the local procurements centres before they were allowed to bring their maize to these warehouses. A young farmer who was also a transporter said that the government should have started procurement here months ago. He further said that they had only just started buying and the rate they were going most of the grain would start losing quality. If it was not properly stored it would lose it's quality after six months

One of the eminent observers of the Indian agricultural landscape, Mark Tully, has portrayed the anguish and struggles of farmers through his stories. This research paper takes inspiration from Tully's narratives to shed light on the distressing realities faced by Indian farmers. By critically examining their experiences, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the underlying issues and provide recommendations for overcoming the crisis.

The stories depicted by Tully vividly capture the plight of farmers, highlighting their entrapment in a vicious circle created by government employees and village moneylenders. Instances of exploitation and deceit faced by farmers, such as in the character of 'Tirathpal,' reflect the harsh realities of their lives. The farmers' lack of trust in the judiciary and the police further exacerbates their struggles, making it evident that institutional support is essential for their well-being.

By analyzing the factors leading to farmers' distress, including rising indebtedness and mounting cultivation costs, this study seeks to provide insights into the dire consequences faced by agricultural communities. The high incidence of farmers' suicides, predominantly triggered by unbearable debt burdens, serves as a stark reminder of the gravity of the situation.

In light of these challenges, the research paper puts forth recommendations to address the crisis and pave the way for a more sustainable and prosperous agricultural sector. Suggestions include the formation of farmers' groups to foster collective strength, the adoption of non-pesticidal management techniques to reduce input costs, rectification of market anomalies, and the provision of counseling and confidence-building measures in distress "hot spots."

This study underscores the urgency of addressing farmers' woes in India and emphasizes the need for comprehensive measures to alleviate their distress. By delving into the nuances of their struggles, this research paper seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and provide valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders invested in the welfare of Indian farmers.

In conclusion, understanding the challenges faced by farmers in India is crucial for formulating effective strategies and policies to alleviate their distress. By examining the narratives of farmers portrayed by Mark Tully and analyzing the underlying factors contributing to their plight, this research paper aims to shed light on their experiences and provide recommendations for a more sustainable and prosperous agricultural sector in India.

This research paper serves as a wake-up call to recognize and address the pressing issues surrounding the farmer's plight in India. By examining Mark Tully's stories, we gain valuable insights into the challenges faced by farmers and the urgent need for comprehensive policy reforms, financial support, and sustainable agricultural practices. It is essential for stakeholders, including policymakers, agricultural experts, and civil society, to engage in a collaborative effort to mitigate the distress faced by farmers and ensure a dignified and sustainable livelihood for this vital sector of society. Through this research, we hope to ignite a dialogue and inspire concrete actions that contribute to a brighter future for Indian farmers.

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