

Farmers' Suicides and Statehood Demand in Bundelkhand

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Farmers' suicides in Bundelkhand are a result of several years of neglect of the agricultural sector and industrial backwardness. Neither the Uttar Pradesh nor the Madhya Pradesh government has made efforts to address the basic issues of ecological degradation, agricultural modernisation and rural indebtedness. The demand for a separate state only serves to satisfy political ends and is no solution for the multiple problems of Bundelkhand's farmers.

Bundelkhand is competing with Vidarbha, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala in the number of farmers' suicides. All the seven districts in Uttar Pradesh (UP) – Jhansi, Banda, Jalaun, Chitrakoot, Mahoba, Hamirpur and Lalitpur, and six in Madhya Pradesh (MP) – Datia, Tikamgarh, Chhatarpur, Panna, Sagar and Damoh, that comprise Bundelkhand are severely affected by this malady. The official figures for farmers' suicides in UP Bundelkhand are 568 (2009), 583 (2010) and 519 (January-May 2011). In MP, the corresponding figures are 5,838 (2006-10) and 348 (January-May 2011) with a large number from Bundelkhand.

It is no wonder that the ravine-rich and dacoit-peopled Bundelkhand, sandwiched between the northern plains and the rocky soil of the Vindhya ranges, unfit for agriculture and industry both, is facing this crisis. The total area is 30 lakh hectares (ha), of which 24 lakh ha is agricultural land, but cultivation is hampered by the lack of irrigation facilities. Some of the big dams like Matatila, Rajghat, Sukhwan-Dhukwan, and Dhasan have inundated large parts of the fertile land. Most farmers are totally dependent on rains. Unfortunately, Bundelkhand has just 60,000 ha of forest cover, which is fast depleting due to the reckless cutting of trees, and hence the region suffers from scanty rainfall and regular droughts. Nevertheless, agricultural produce in Bundelkhand increased by 16% during 2010-11.

Flawed Policies and Suicides

Regular droughts, crop failure, scanty rains, poor irrigation facilities, burden of agricultural and private loans, damage to dignity, and worry about their families' future appear to be immediate causes of the farmers' suicides in Bundelkhand. The rural agricultural credit system, entrapping farmers into public and private debts, has a large role to play in this. When banks

and financial institutions initiate loan recovery processes, farmers face threats of losing their possessions and social esteem. When they are not able to cope up, they commit suicides. In Bundelkhand, 70%-100% farmers are in a debt-trap owing to rising prices of agricultural inputs and lack of support prices for their produce.

Many suicides could have been avoided had banks and lending institutions followed the directives of the Reserve Bank of India which exempt mortgaging farmers' land for Kisan Credit Cards up to Rs 1 lakh, and permit loan recovery in instalments in 10 years. The total outstanding rural bank debt in UP Bundelkhand today is Rs 4,370 crore, up by 21% since 2010 (Rs 3,613 crore). In Banda, Hamirpur, Lalitpur and Jhansi alone, farmers owe banks about Rs 2,750 crore. Interest on agricultural loans is 3% in MP, but 7% in UP. This imbalance needs to be corrected urgently. The UP government provides exemption on loan interest only to those farmers who have more than five ha of cultivable land. In the 2008-09 Union Budget, the government announced the "Agricultural Debt Waiver and Debt Relief Scheme" to exempt the agricultural loans of marginal and small farmers holding land up to five acres. This was revised in May 2008 to cover 237 dry land districts where farmers with more than five acres were offered a one-time settlement rebate of 25%, subject to their paying the balance loan amount without interest in three instalments up to 30 June 2009. Though all districts of UP Bundelkhand figured in that list, farmers did not adequately benefit owing to administrative neglect.

Two recent developments have brought the plight of the Bundelkhand farmers to the fore. On 15 June 2011, Justice Sunil Ambwani and Justice Sabhajit Yadav of Allahabad High Court took suo motu action on farmers' suicides in Bundelkhand, issuing notices to the UP government, Ministry for Rural Development and Ministry of Finance to report the causes of each and every suicide, as also steps taken by them to provide relief to the farmers. The UP government was also directed to report on rural indebtedness with regard to agricultural loans given by banks, cooperative banks, khadi boards and other financial institutions, and prevent

them from taking coercive steps to recover loans. The second development was on 18 June, when the chief minister of UP, Mayawati, wrote to the prime minister to waive off loans disbursed till 31 March 2011 for about 15 lakh farmers in Bundelkhand. She also directed her officials to not use force to realise loans up to Rs 2 lakh.

The UP and MP governments have taken no initiative in formulating a proactive, integrated and coordinated strategy for the holistic development of Bundelkhand. Even the central schemes (antayodaya, mid-day meals, pension, etc) have not been properly implemented and show little impact. There are no jobs under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), and corruption is so rampant that the Supreme Court had to order an enquiry.

An Agenda sans Development

Suicides in Bundelkhand are not caste-specific, but entrap all castes. In a society ridden with caste hierarchies, farmers belonging to the higher castes are more conscious of their social esteem, and thus vulnerable to suicides. For instance, in Banda district alone, out of six farmers who committed suicide in May 2011, four belonged to what are considered upper castes. With the dalit population in Bundelkhand higher¹ than the state averages (UP 21.1%, MP 15.2%), the chances of small and marginal dalit landholders committing suicides, and dalit labourers fleeing Bundelkhand are substantial.

Farmers' suicides in both halves of Bundelkhand are related to larger issues of poverty, backwardness, and lack of industrialisation and development. This is despite the fact that both UP and MP claim to pay special attention to the development of Bundelkhand. In 1990-91, the UP government divided the state into four economic zones – western, central, eastern and Bundelkhand – and instituted a regional development fund “Bundelkhand Vikas Nidhi”² along with Poorvanchal Vikas Nidhi. In 1970, the Bundelkhand Divisional Development Corporation (BDDC) was set up, but was wound up in 1992. The Mayawati government revived the BDDC in April 2008 and also formed the Bundelkhand Special Area Development Authority (July 2008) to counter the demand by Rahul Gandhi to

form a Bundelkhand Development Authority (BDA). The MP government also set up a BDA in May 2007 for the development of its part of Bundelkhand and allocated Rs 10 crore for the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2007-12).

Agriculture in Bundelkhand is not modernised, there are problems of ecological degradation, and acute shortage of drinking and irrigation water. All its districts figure in the 200 most backward districts of the Planning Commission. The scheduled castes and scheduled tribes face greater hardship because of limited access to water resources. The governments have paid hardly any attention to modern methods of water harvesting or the reckless deforestation. In districts like Mahoba, export-oriented betel farming has suffered enormously. Betel farming has shrunk from 3,000 acres to just five acres today, owing to the neglect by governments.

The region also lacks industrial development. Except for Bharat Heavy Electrical Limited at Jhansi (UP) and Birla Cement factory at Damoh (MP), there are hardly any big industries. In May 2011, the Bharat Oman Refinery, with a capacity of six million tonnes per year, was opened in Sagar (MP). Recently, gold, diamond and platinum of high quality have been discovered in UP Bundelkhand. This has led to the skyrocketing of land prices in Jhansi and the adjoining areas. The National Highway Development Project makes Bundelkhand the centre of Golden Cross, where east-west and north-south corridors cross each other. This might accelerate development in Bundelkhand. Mayawati has long been demanding Rs 80,000 crore for Bundelkhand from the centre. But the prime minister announced a package of Rs 7,266 crore, of which UP and MP received Rs 3,506 crore and Rs 3,706 crore respectively. According to the central government, even 10% of this money could not be utilised by these governments.

Separate State Not a Solution

Demands are often raised for a separate Bundelkhand state to end its plight and make it more prosperous. But, who are the people demanding it? Do they have popular support? The first is Raja Bundela, president of the Bundelkhand Mukti Morcha (BMM), who is trying for a bigger “National Federation for New States” that supports Telangana, Vidarbha, Gorkhaland, Poorvanchal,

Bundelkhand and Harit Pradesh. The second is Sanjay Pandey, national convener of Bundelkhand Ekikrit Party. Both of them belong to the film and the television world and live in Delhi. Others include Balmukund Goswami and Babulal Tewari of the BMM, and Badshah Singh, who has abandoned the cause after becoming the labour minister in the Mayawati government. Organisations like Bundeli Sena, Bundelkhand Navjawan Sena, Bundelkhand Foundation, Bundelkhand Utthan Samiti, Bundelkhand Kisan Mahasabha, Bundelkhand Kisan Panchayat and others also occasionally come into picture. But most initiatives are from the upper caste educated people, even though they claim support of dalits and backward classes.

A small Bundelkhand state may face formidable boundary and river-water sharing problems with UP and MP besides being politically unmanageable, economically fragile and socially divided between the people of UP and MP. The political parties are exploiting this issue because assembly elections are due in these states.

Whether a smaller Bundelkhand state would perform better is controversial; farmers may continue to commit suicides even after its formation if their genuine problems are not addressed. But unless development is prioritised, the pro-Bundelkhand activists will continue to agitate. They derive inspiration from the earlier demands for a separate state in 1949, 1955 and 1968, and the first SRC which was favourably disposed to a Bundelkhand state on the basis of its distinct language and culture. One wonders if there is a conspiracy to end the predominance of UP in national politics today by steadily slicing off a part of UP.

Farmers' suicides and agricultural neglect in Bundelkhand and elsewhere are linked directly to the issue of good governance, which hinges on pro-people policies, and not so much on the formation of new smaller states.

NOTES

- 1 The percentage of scheduled caste (SC) population in UP Bundelkhand: Jhansi (28), Lalitpur (24.9), Jalaun (27), Hamirpur (22.8), Mahoba (20.8), Chitrakoot (26.3); and in MP Bundelkhand: Datia (25), Chhatarpur (23.3), Tikamgarh (24.3), Panna (20), Damoh (19.5), Sagar (20.5).
- 2 The allocation for Bundelkhand Vikas Nidhi has decreased from Rs 10,000 crore (2007-08) to Rs 1,200 crore (2011-12); see <http://planning.up.nic.in/documents.htm>