

Problems of Small and Marginal Farmers in Karnataka – A Sociological Study

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Abstract

Agriculture is continuing to be one of the most important sectors in Karnataka. It provides food security and also sustains the rural society. It offers employment opportunities to lakhs of small and marginal farmers. Challenges of small and marginal farmers cannot be understood only in economic terms but also in cultural terms. Preserves cultural traditions of agriculture. The majority of farmers in the state fall under the category of small and marginal farmers, who have less than two hectares of land. According to government data, more than 80 percent of cultivators in Karnataka are small and marginal farmers. Agriculture Census 2015–16 (as in Karnataka Economic Survey), Karnataka had a total of 86.81 lakh operational farm holdings, covering 118.05 lakh hectares. Small and marginal holdings (under 2 hectares) account for approximately 80% of all holdings, yet manage only 44% of cultivated land. This study examines the challenges of small and marginal farmers. The main challenges of small and marginal farmers are, low productivity, ineffectiveness of agricultural extension services, inadequate irrigation, labour shortages, lack of quality seeds, problem of use large-scale farming machines, lack of resources, poor information on pesticide management and crop diseases, and lack of awareness about government schemes, insufficient support from local government bodies, market fluctuations, heavy dependence on monsoons, climate vulnerability, rain-fed, transportation difficulties, inadequate storage and market linkages, facilities, limited access and informal sources of credit, indebtedness, farmer suicides, problem of middlemen, impact of globalization, a structural imbalance in rural society. The economic insecurity, environmental vulnerability, and social inequality together create marginalization, lack of recognition for women's work, rural-urban migration, migration of youth to urban areas, insufficient infrastructure, social exclusion are the main challenges of small and marginal farmers of Karnataka. The findings highlight the urgency for targeted interventions and policy reforms that address the unique needs of small farmers, strengthen institutional support, and enhance resilience for sustainable agricultural development in Karnataka.

Keywords: sociological perspectives, institutional support, climate effects, fragmented land holdings, lack of mechanization, small and marginal farmers.

1. Introduction

Agriculture is one of the most important employment sector in India. It provides employment opportunities, livelihood, food, and shelter. It also helps to sustain the rural society in India. Small and marginal farmers typically manage fragmented plots, produce for household consumption and local markets, and lack access to large-scale resources such as irrigation, mechanization, credit, and market

infrastructure. Problems cannot be understood only in economic basis but also in culture. The majority of farmers in Karnataka are category of small and marginal. National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) Reports (2016 and 2019) Data show that more than 70 percent of Karnataka's farmers are small and marginal, with low incomes and high dependence on credit. According to government data, more than 80 percent of cultivators in Karnataka are small and marginal farmers. Agriculture Census during 2015-16, the total farm land holding in Karnataka was 86.81 lakhs. It covers 118.05 lakh hectares. Yet it manages only 44 percent of cultivated land. This study examines the challenges of small and marginal farmers. The main challenges of small and marginal farmers are, low productivity, rural-urban migration, migration of youth to urban areas ineffectiveness of agricultural extension services, heavy dependence on monsoons, inadequate irrigation facilities, labour shortages, problem of use large-scale farming machines, lack of resources, lack of awareness on use of pesticides management and crop diseases, a structural imbalance in rural society. Lack of awareness on government schemes, lack of support from local government bodies, transportation problems, unavailability of storage and market linkages, facilities, for credit depending on local individuals, indebtedness, farmer suicides, problem of middlemen, impact of globalization, economic insecurity and social inequality creates marginalization, lack of recognition for women's work, insufficient infrastructure, social exclusion are the main challenges of small and marginal farmers of Karnataka. The average size of landholdings in Karnataka has been consistently shrinking over the years, leading to increased land fragmentation and making farming less economically viable. The findings of the research paper highlighted the urgency for targeted interventions and policy reforms that address the unique needs of small farmers, strengthen institutional support, and enhance resilience for sustainable agricultural development in Karnataka.

Meaning of Small and Marginal Farmers

A small and marginal farmer is primarily defined on the basis of the size of their landholding. Small and marginal means farmers who have very small farm land, depending heavily on agriculture for their livelihood. And own or rented, land. And cultivate less than 1 to 2 hectares of land (less than 2.5 to 5 acres). Farmers with 1 and 2 hectares are categorized as small farmers. Those with less than 1 hectare are called marginal farmers. But from a sociological perspective, the Caste system, Gender issues, Community structures, migration, declining social support, and weakening rural networks. Cultural aspects are linked with the challenges of small and marginal farmers.

Historical Background of the Study: Agriculture in Karnataka has a long history, shaped by traditional practices, colonial influences, and post-independence reforms. Understanding the background of small farmers requires tracing the social, cultural, and economic transformations that rural Karnataka has undergone. Traditional Agrarian Structure: Historically, agriculture in Karnataka was carried out on a community-based model, with village tanks, canals, and rainwater harvesting systems supporting cultivation. Land ownership patterns were heavily influenced by the caste system, where dominant castes controlled fertile lands while marginalized groups worked as tenants or labourers. In the Colonial Period, the British introduced commercial crops like cotton and coffee, the revenue system, and changed traditional farming. Many small cultivators lost land due to their inability to pay high land revenue, becoming tenants or bonded labourers. After 1947, the Indian government introduced land reform policies. In Karnataka, the Land Reforms Act of 1974 aimed to abolish intermediaries and distribute land to cultivators. While this improved land access for some, holdings remained fragmented, and many small farmers still struggled with low productivity.

2. Review of Literature

Dandekar & Rath (1971). In their study on poverty in India, they highlighted how small farmers remain trapped in cycles of low productivity and indebtedness, showing the link between land size and poverty. Beteille, A. (1974) – Emphasized the role of caste and class in shaping land ownership patterns in rural India. Deshpande, R. S. (2002). He identified drought, dependence on monsoon, and fragmentation of land as key issues for small cultivators in the state. Vasavi, A. R. (1999) explained how modernization and globalization disrupted local farming practices and increased farmer vulnerability. Nagaraj, K. (2008). His study on farmer suicides in India showed that small and marginal farmers are the most vulnerable due to debt burdens and crop failures. Swaminathan, M. S. (2010) – Stressed the importance of sustainable agriculture and the need to focus on small farmers for food security and rural development.

3. Methodology used

It is mainly descriptive and secondary data-based research, and used secondary data for the preparation of the report, data collected from sources such as books, survey reports, research publications, and web-based resources.

Objectives of the study:

- To examine the socio-economic conditions of small and marginal farmers in Karnataka.
- To examine the challenges of small and marginal farmers.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of government policies and schemes.
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Statistics on Small and Marginal Farmers in Karnataka

Agriculture Census 2015–16 Karnataka had a total of 86.81 lakh operational farm holdings, covering 118.05 lakh hectares. Small and marginal holdings account for about 70 percent of all holdings. The average farm size in the Karnataka state stands at 1.36 hectares (3.36 acres). Drought Over 80% of the state's operational landholdings are classified as small and marginal (less than 2 hectares). This means the majority of farmers are working on very small plots of land. In semi-arid zones of Karnataka, there is a high increase in the number of marginal farmers, showing the extent of land subdivision and shrinking land sizes.

Main Challenges of Small and Marginal Farmers in Karnataka

Small and marginal farmers are the backbone of Karnataka's agrarian society. But they remain the most vulnerable group in the agricultural sector. The study reveals that their problems are not only economic, but also social. This includes caste hierarchies, gender inequalities, regional disparities, weakening of traditional community networks, low productivity, debt, and market instability, land fragmentation, financial instability, lack of knowledge on the use of technology, weak market access, vulnerability to climate change, etc. According to government reports, about 80 percent of the Indian agricultural households had small holdings. The main challenges of small and marginal farmers are,

Socio and Economic Challenges: The Majority of the farmers in India are small and marginal farmers. And they have less than 2 hectares of land. In sociological point of view the main challenges are low social status, caste and class inequalities, low standard of living, poverty, indebtedness, lack of good housing facilities, poor education and health, illiteracy and ignorance, failure in the farming- often leads to social stigma, many small farmers belong to marginalized castes or tribes, facing exclusion from

resources, credit, and agricultural support. The farmer suicides, migration, and means of livelihood. etc. are challenges.

From an economic point of view, land is divided into scattered plots, making cultivation inefficient and costly, indebtedness, high input costs, using indigenous farming methods, seeds, fertilizers, pesticides etc, crop prices often remain unstable, lack of Irrigation facilities, middlemen dominate procurement, little bargaining power and low returns, low-income levels these pushing them into economic vulnerability.

Agricultural challenges: The fragmentation of land leads to low productivity due to the limited use of modern methods in agriculture. Irrigation land still depends on rainfall. If the monsoon leads to crop failure.

Inadequate

Access to Formal Credit: Small farmers have difficulties meeting collateral requirements, pushing them toward informal lenders with high interest rates, intensifying financial burdens. Migration and

Labour Shortage: Increasing rural to urban migration reduces available labour, often impacting timely agricultural activities and productivity **Rural-Urban Migration:** The farmers and younger generation, seeing the continuous struggles and financial risks associated with farming, are increasingly migrating to urban and other areas in search of more stable and lucrative employment. This leads to a labour shortage in rural areas.

Limited use of Technology: Due to their limited resources and small landholdings, small farmers struggle to adopt modern farming techniques and machinery. This results in lower productivity and higher labour costs.

Social and Psychological Stress: The constant economic uncertainty, indebtedness, and fear of crop failure leads to immense mental and emotional stress, stigma, and feelings of inferiority for small and marginal farmers and family members. This is a significant contributing factor to the high rates of farmer suicides in the region. Ongoing uncertainty about crop success, income insecurity, and social pressures have led to mental health crises among farming communities.

Environmental Challenges: In drought-prone districts of Karnataka like Kalaburagi, Raichur, and Vijayapura, agriculture heavily depends on monsoon rains. Rain affects them. Frequent droughts, rising temperatures, unseasonal rains, and crop-damaging floods affect small and marginal farmers. Unpredictable weather patterns lead to crop failures and significant financial losses. Environmental Degradation: Overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides without adequate knowledge harms soil health and long-term sustainability.

Policy and Institutional Challenges: limited reach of schemes. Government programs such as loan waivers, crop insurance, and Minimum Support Price often fail to reach the poorest. Ineffective crop insurance, weak cooperative systems, and the agricultural extension services, which are meant to provide technical knowledge and support, are often ineffective or inaccessible. Lack of irrigation, power, storage, and transportation infrastructure hampers agricultural efficiency and profitability. With Various subsidies and support schemes, many small farmers remain unaware or unable to avail themselves of them

These are interconnected challenges that restrict the sustainability and livelihoods of small and marginal farmers in Karnataka, requiring comprehensive social, economic, and policy interventions. Addressing these extended challenges requires a combination of technological innovation, inclusive policy reforms, social support systems, and community empowerment interventions tailored specifically to small and

marginal farmers. From a sociological perspective, it becomes clear that the challenges of small farmers cannot be solved by economic reforms alone. What is needed is a holistic approach that addresses structural inequalities, empowers marginalized groups (especially women farmers), strengthens cooperatives, and promotes sustainable agricultural practices.

4. Recommendations

The study concludes by advocating for a holistic and multidimensional approach to agrarian reform. It argues that simply providing financial relief is not enough. The proposed solutions must address the root causes of the problem, including: Strengthening institutional support by making government schemes more accessible and transparent.

Investing in climate-resilient agriculture through improved irrigation infrastructure and promotion of sustainable farming practices. Developing robust rural markets to empower farmers and eliminate their dependence on exploitative middlemen. Providing social and psychological support to address the mental health crisis among the farming community.

5. Conclusion

The challenges of small farmers in Karnataka are multi-dimensional. They cannot be explained by economics alone; rather, they are deeply connected to social structures, cultural practices, and environmental pressures. A sociological approach shows that solving these problems requires addressing inequalities of caste and gender, strengthening community support, and ensuring inclusive and sustainable agricultural policies. Thus, the survival and dignity of small farmers are not only crucial for Karnataka's agricultural growth but also for ensuring social justice, food security, and the preservation of rural cultural identity. The way forward lies in policies and practices that combine economic support with social transformation, creating an inclusive and sustainable future for farming communities. Small farmers in Karnataka face a complex array of challenges that impact their economic viability, social status, and overall well-being. The dominance of small and marginal holdings, coupled with the predominance of rain-fed agriculture, exposes these farmers to risks from erratic weather, low productivity, and fluctuating market prices. High input costs and inadequate access to formal credit push many small farmers into debt cycles, threatening their livelihoods. Despite various government schemes and policy interventions aimed at supporting rural farmers, gaps in implementation and outreach continue to limit the effectiveness of these measures. Ensuring comprehensive policy reforms, technological adoption, and social empowerment will be vital to secure a sustainable and prosperous future for Karnataka's small and marginal farmer community.

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