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Tracking impacts of Poverty and Climate Change on the farmer's body



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November 19, 2021

My great-grandfather was from Punjab, a state in India that is well-known for its fertile soil and agricultural prosperity. He was a farmer by profession, and he farmed until the age of 80. Although it may seem like a simple job, he engaged in a lot of physical labour and endured many physical injuries, with the most significant one being breaking his arm in his 70s. Farming also did not offer much profitability or income, so my family was financially unstable, and my great-grandfather was never able to seek immediate medical attention for his injuries. After his retirement, he dealt with the repercussions of his physical labour, including his unhealed arm, but he was fortunate that he would be the last to endure these hardships that came with being a farmer. After generations of my family farming in Punjab, my great-grandfather decided that farming was no longer a viable career option to support a family, so he invested his earnings to fund his children's education rather than his farming practice. While my great-grandfather worked the fields, my grandfather and his siblings gained sufficient education to work in the big cities of India and find better financial opportunities. My grandfather was able to find a government job to support his family, and my dad eventually immigrated to Canada. As a first-generation immigrant, I find myself in Canada holding the privileges my family previously never had in Punjab, but I have always questioned the sudden disappearance of my family's roots in farming.

My family's unfortunate history of the loss of our traditional profession as farmers due to financial instability is not an issue of the past, nor is it a story that depicts individual tragedy. This story of farmer hardship and struggle in India continues today. Should you find yourself at India's capital city, Delhi, you would be overwhelmed by the thousands of farmers who have travelled hundreds of kilometres from their homes and jobs to protest for almost a year. This protest is in response to the government's introduction of new agriculture bills that aim to

deregulate the market and reduce government involvement in the wholesale of agricultural goods (Imran, 2021). At the same time, this will work to increase power to corporations, and without government mediation, there is a great likelihood that they will eventually drive down prices of agricultural goods and create an even greater reduction in the income that farmers make (Imran, 2021). Being one of the largest protest movements in history, where hundreds of protestors have died, it is not prevalent in the global media and has gained little attention and support.

However, analyzing this seemingly political issue from an environmental lens indicates that this imbalance between the demand for farmer justice and the agricultural bills is rooted in climate change, and thus deserves international attention. The three bills that work to privatize the agriculture industry and reduce farmers' profits have been created because agriculture is becoming less diverse and more expensive for the government to subsidize (Imran, 2021). The reduction in crop diversity is a result of the unstable and changing rainfall and temperature patterns (Imran, 2021). The total amount of precipitation in India has seen a dramatic decrease, which is of concern because more than half of India's farmland relies on rainfall systems (Imran, 2021). The increasing temperature patterns of almost 1°C have led to changing seasons of productivity, which also changes the supply of agricultural goods, and thus sale costs (Imran, 2021).

Because of these dramatic environmental changes, this has reduced crop productivity, and farmers are struggling to make ends meet. To cope with these losses, farmers have intensified the use of agricultural inputs such as pesticides and herbicides, which include those that have been deemed unsafe for use due to the potential negative health outcomes (Chaudhary, 2019). At the same time, agricultural productivity loss has resulted in financial strain on governments, and despite implementing programs to aid farmers such as free electricity and subsidized fertilizer, it is still not possible to sustain agricultural practices given the changing weather patterns (Imran, 2021). Finally, with environmental changes, many farmers are growing the same crops because they are less risky to grow given the unpredictable weather, and this has led to overproduction of certain crops, which has increased competition and decreased their sale value (Imran, 2021).

There is a lengthy list of the effects of climate change on the agriculture industry, but these few examples depict that there is a linkage between climate change and poverty, such that it drives the lower class and poor communities to become even poorer, thus increasing poverty. In India, the reduction in crop productivity and unsustainability of the agriculture industry has led to a reduction in how profitable farmers' crops are, and the introduction of the three bills that privatize the industry drive down their profits even further. The understanding that those in poverty are the most vulnerable and experience the most intense effects of climate change also justifies the pronounced health effects and social phenomenon of suffering in these farming and agricultural communities.

In Punjab, a major agricultural state in India, there is an opioid drug epidemic in response to the debt farmers face (Chaudhary, 2019). This state also has the highest rates of cancer in India, and this is attributable to the prevalence of carcinogens, such as those in the pesticides used to treat crops (Chaudhary, 2019). Finally, there is the prevalence of a social suffering of suicide, in which India's farming community faces one of the highest suicide rates in the country, averaging 28 suicides a day (Shivji, 2021). While farmers in India work to provide food for the entire country, this comes at a price of compromising their own mental and physical health. Climate change has caused economic ruin, and the unsustainability of the industry has led to debt. The lack of India's financial and social support for farmers has intensified the effects of climate change on the lower class over time through the collective suffering of cancer, drug use, suicide, and other health problems.

Ultimately, I use the case of India and its farmers to understand the connection between climate change and poverty. When I first heard about the protest in India, I thought it was a simple issue of protesting in response to the new bills and policy changes. However, I eventually learned that environmental impact plays an integral role in both the development of these new bills and the social suffering that farmers face.

The farmers' protest is thus a symbol of the struggle of the lower class. Environmental changes impact entire industries, and in this process, climate change also intensifies the gap between the upper and lower class. The lower class is driven to experience more financial instability, which can manifest health issues and social suffering, both physically and mentally. My biggest finding in this analysis of the farmers' protest is that politicians mainly attempt to fix the issues in a system at the surface level; however, without policies addressing root causes like climate change and their contribution to failing systems, this will continue to harm the most vulnerable— those in poverty.

Now, when I think back to my great-grandfather, I understand why as he got older, the struggle to make ends meet intensified. The changing environment throughout his work life, in combination with increased competition and lowering the sale price of goods, led to a reduction in his profits. When he did retire, it was because my grandfather and his siblings were able to finally relieve their family of financial strain by working jobs that required education and paid well. Even when my family did become financially stable, my great-grandfather's injuries persisted throughout the rest of his life, including his untreated arm injury. This unhealed arm has always been a symbol to me of the difficulties my family faced because of financial instability, but now I also understand it as a manifestation of environmental change.

Not every family is able to escape the hardships of farming like mine did, and the effects that changing weather and precipitation patterns have on farmers will only intensify in the future if climate change persists. The farmers' protest is not only important because it supports farmer injustice, but it is also a call to action to direct policy change on reducing climate change and its effect on the lower class.

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