

Struggle for the Peasants' Rights in Sri Lanka

**Lessons of the Farmers' Hunger Strike in Polonnaruwa,
Sri Lanka – August 2000**

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Summary:

Six farmer leaders, two women farmers and three Buddhist monks in Hingurakgoda, in Polonnaruwa District, Sri Lanka, “fasted” for six days from August 13 to 18, 2000, with thousands of farmers and supporters rallying round them in public demonstrations, in support of a set of 19 farmer demands for immediate solutions.

This action was one among many other farmer actions in areas such as Ampara, Maiyangana, Dehiattakandiya and certain parts of Hambantota District such as Sooriyawewa, Dambulla (by vegetable, paddy and onion farmers), Nuwara Eliya and Welimada (by potato and vegetable farmers) in the recent months.

With the General Elections pending on October 10, they were given a hearing by the Prime Minister on August 18, together with several Ministers, MPs and other Government officials on the sixth day of the fast, after one of the very elderly farmer leaders G.G. Haramanis (73 years), who had refused to take even water, from the 5th day, was taken to hospital, when his condition became very serious. The doctors said that his life could not have been saved if there was a further delay of 15 minutes,

A promise was made that the Government would intervene to purchase paddy at a price of Rs. 13 per kg and to make all other necessary arrangements to implement the main, immediate demand for a reasonable price of paddy through out the country. It was also said that the Government considers the 19 demands of the farmers for protection of domestic agriculture and small farmers were also reasonable and would be given a fair consideration.

The Prime Minister started the meeting admitting that there was an extremely serious crisis facing the farmers that needs immediate solution.

The process of buying paddy at this price has already started, at least in Polonnaruwa and Ampara, the biggest paddy producing areas in the country.

This decision taken within a single meeting, if fully implemented, would benefit over a million small farmer families in the country, increasing the present price in the fully privatized market of less than Rs. 8/ kg to Rs. 13 / kg.

Thus, a family cultivating 2 acres of paddy, getting an average harvest of 70 Bushels per acre would get an increased income of Rs.15,400 (70 Bushels x 2 acres x 22 kgs x Rs.5). The number of such farmer families is about a million, island wide.

This victory gained by the farmers, having fought for this demand for many years, showed that;

1. It is absolutely necessary and quite easy for the Government to intervene and assist the farmers to overcome the extremely serious crisis faced by small farmers and other small scale domestic producers. The 19 Demands made by the Farmers indicate practical ways of doing this.
2. There are far more effective and feasible ways of solving the situation of poverty, indebtedness, hunger and malnutrition, rural indebtedness and loss of livelihoods

compared to the so called “Poverty Alleviation programs” designed by the World Bank and IMF.

3. The recommendations made by the WB for Government withdrawal from marketing and other supportive interventions towards small farmer agriculture, have been proved wrong and should therefore be rejected.
4. Those opportunities should be made available for farmers and other poor sectors of society to voice them and be heard, without going through these extremely painful processes of protest action even at the risk of many lives.
5. The policy and practice that is adopted, at present, by the Government and the World Bank, of only listening to the big private sector business organizations (considering the private sector as the only engine of development and growth) should be seriously reconsidered, while giving enough space, opportunity and strength to the small scale rural producers and other workers to make their contribution to the over all development process and policy formulation.
6. A proper assessment should be made of the social and economic benefits that the whole country would gain, if such participation of the people, particularly the large masses of working people who are already making a tremendous contribution to national level socio-economic development is enhanced

Note: Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR). MONLAR led a petition campaign “People’s Memorandum in 1994 with 19 proposals for improving the situation of small farmers and domestic agriculture. This was submitted to the President in January 1995. MONLAR has been working with farmers and many other sectors for more than 10 years, campaigning and educating people on the adverse effects of policy changes imposed by the WB and IMF and on very viable alternatives that could be adopted. The Demands of the Hunger strike by Farmer organizations in the August 2000, were largely based on the same issues

Background:

About 1.8 million small farmer families in Sri Lanka, cultivating paddy and other domestic food crops have been facing severe difficulties for over two decades. This has been due to the changes in agricultural policies introduced since 1977.

Sri Lanka since Independence in 1948 followed a policy of sustaining and protecting small farmer agriculture for domestic food production. Domestic food producing agriculture in Sri Lanka has been done almost entirely by small farmers and this is still the main livelihood of most of the rural population.

Among these supportive policies were resettlement of landless peasants under irrigated agricultural settlements in the dry zone, revival of ancient irrigation reservoirs and systems in the dry zone areas, provision of agricultural extension services, Government intervention in supportive marketing of paddy and other agricultural products, production and distribution of good quality certified seeds, fertilizer subsidies liberal agricultural credit systems, drought and flood relief, import restrictions on locally produced agricultural commodities etc. These policies were adopted not only to support farmers but also as a means of sustaining rural

livelihoods, while keeping the prices of essential foods low and affordable to the large numbers of the poor consumers.

Policies adopted since 1977 both in agriculture and industry, described as export oriented growth strategy, liberalized market and the policy of attracting foreign investment, under the guidance of the WB/ IMF resulted in large investments in infrastructure development and also necessitated in almost a complete reversal in policies that supported domestic agriculture by small farmers.

The result of these policy changes was a near complete breakdown in domestic agriculture, and the danger of loss of livelihoods of farmers. This became a very serious social and political issue too, since they form about half the population

The farmers became heavily indebted as cost of production became very high (increasing more than ten times within about a decade) and the cost of living too increased in a similar manner, while the services provided by the state in all areas were cut down and handed over to the private sector. As the private traders became the only agency for buying domestic agricultural products and also importation. The prices obtained by the domestic producers dropped to very low levels, particularly during the harvesting times, although the consumers continued to pay very high and increasing prices.

Rural poverty increase in Sri Lanka became very sharp. Malnutrition and anemia among children and mothers increased reaching very damaging levels. Hunger, poverty and indebtedness finally led to a sharp increase in the rates of suicide, particularly among rural population who suffered only disadvantages and losses and had no other avenues to meet the adverse conditions created by the new policies and the way they were implemented. Youth displaced from their rural livelihoods did not find sufficient opportunities outside, resulting in severe outbreaks of social and political unrest and violence. Sri Lanka finally became a country of widespread and frequent political violence. In the youth uprising in 1988 – 90 there were 60,000 disappearances in the southern provinces and over 50,000 deaths so far in the North – East ethnic war.

These situations, in addition to the ethnic discrimination over many years was a major contributor to the escalation of the ethnic conflict and the war that is still going on

In 1994 about 28 farmers in Polonnaruwa district committed suicide within a period of 4 months, unable to meet the debts and legal action taken to recover debts and other social commitments. Large campaigns that erupted demanding solutions to this crisis contributed a lot towards a change of Government.

The government elected at the end of 1994 promised policy changes and solution to the farmer's crisis, which they said was due to the "Killer Agricultural Policy of the UNP Government and WB.

The new People's Alliance Government accepted 95% of the proposals made by the "People's Memorandum" submitted in January 1995, with 150,000 signatures. This Campaign was carried out by MONLAR in collaboration with many other organizations and political parties. It was strongly supported, then, by PA which was elected into power at the end of 1994.

However, the same policies and WB recommendations were continued and the farmer suicides continued and the food crisis worsened under the PA government too, during the last 6 years.

Paddy Marketing Crisis:

One of the major problems faced by the small farmers was the very low prices obtained under the import liberalisation and private sector controlled monopoly market for paddy and all other domestic food crops such as potato, chilli, big onions, red onions etc. which were the main domestic food crops grown in Sri Lanka. The small scale growers of vegetables and other cereals suffered the same problem.

In February and March 2000, when the harvesting of paddy in the Maha (larger) Season was done, with relatively good yields, the price of paddy dropped very low. The Monopoly rice importers had stock piled cheaper rice from other countries. Free and large importation of wheat contributed to this too. The Paddy Marketing Board (PMB) which earlier provided some competition to the private sector, buying about 10% of the paddy in the market at a guaranteed price of Rs. 7.40 / kg had been closed down.

The price of paddy dropped below Rs. 8 / kg, when the cost of production was about Rs. 11 / kg or more. This serious crisis was faced by over a million of small farmer families producing paddy (an average farmer cultivates about 1 to 1.5 acres). A similar crisis was faced by potato farmers, chilli farmers, and onion farmers due to cheap imports without restriction, in the recent years. The acreage under potato cultivation in Nuwara Eliya and Welimada dropped from 15,000 hectares to below 500 hectares.

As a result of this desperate situation farmers in various areas began to agitate and demand the Government to find immediate remedies and also longer term policy solutions. Paddy farmers in Ampara, Maiyangana, Hambantota and Polonnaruwa launched public actions for solutions. Onion farmers in Dambulla, and chilli farmers in Anuradhapura, in areas such as Eppawela and Thambuttegama launched protest action demanding import restrictions and better prices.

Action by the Working Committee for Protection of Farmers' Rights in Polonnaruwa District:

In March 2000 nearly a hundred farmer organisations in and around Polonnaruwa District came together to form the "Working Committee for Protection of Farmers Rights". They formulated a set of demands and proposals in March 2000, which were submitted to the Minister of Mahaweli Development, who was also a Member of Parliament for Polonnaruwa District.

These were presented for urgent attention and response. Having received no response, not even a discussion with the Government, these proposals were submitted to the head of the State, the President of Sri Lanka in July. In the absence of any reply the farmer organisations gathered on August 2 and said that they have been "patient enough" and decided to engage themselves in a

"Fast" (hunger strike) until they were given a hearing by the President or a Senior Minister nominated by her, with similar status within the Government. They decided to continue the "fast" until their major demands were granted, among which the most urgent were the

objective of the fast was to make a non violent act of self sacrifice to bless the leaders of the country with sufficient wisdom to look at the tragedy of the farmers and to take meaningful solutions.

The immediate demands were:

1. Their major and immediate demand was that the President should give them a hearing.
2. An assurance that paddy variety that is grown most (White raw – Sudu nadu) would be purchased by the government at a price of Rs. 15 / kg. The price had begun to drop even below Rs. 8 / kg in the private market with the beginning of the new harvest in August.
3. They also wanted an immediate assurance that the importation of domestic agricultural produce such as Potato, onions, chilli which can be sufficiently produced in the country should be immediately stopped, unless and until there is a serious shortage. The decision to allow imports must be taken by a special commission appointed for the purpose with the Ministers for agriculture, Trade, three farmer representatives and a retired judge.
4. The one man, Kapilaratne Commission Report made in 1994 about the reasons for the farmers' suicides be made public

Listed below are the 19 Demands and Proposals based on which the farmers launched the Hunger Strike and wide people's demonstrations,

1. A National Policy for Protection of domestic agriculture and farmers should be declared.
2. A permanent, independent commission should be set up by the government to study the crisis of domestic agriculture and farmers and to recommend solutions, in consultation with farmers.
3. A minimum price of Rs.15 /kg. Should be guaranteed for white raw (Sudu nadu) paddy.
4. Government policies should be formulated to permit the farmers, the right to set the selling prices of their agricultural products.
5. Agricultural implements should be allowed to be imported tax free.
6. Just and appropriate compensation should be given, without political bias, to farmers who suffer damage as a result of losses in agricultural activities.
7. Land belonging to farming classes should be allowed to remain in their own hands and permanent titles should be given to such farmers, without the possibility of transferring such land to persons outside their blood relations, instead of the false land grants now given in the form of "Swarna boomi " and "Jaya boomi " deeds or long term lease holdings.
8. Women's rights should not be considered secondary in granting land or in inheriting land ownership.

9. Legal provisions should be made, not to allow the breaking up of paddy lands to parcels less than one acre.
10. Provision of irrigation for agriculture should not favour big agribusiness and immediate steps should be taken to provide irrigation at suitable times to minimise pest and other losses.
11. The Kanna (pre season) meetings to decide on the farming and irrigation calendar should continue to remain a right of farmers. This right of farmer participation, which was traditional, should be re-established, instead of the present trend of taking centralised decisions at the top without farmer consultation.
12. Importation of domestically produced crops such as rice, potato, big onion, red onion, chilli etc. should be suspended immediately. Such imports should only be allowed at times of shortage in the country as decided by a Commission set up for the purpose, comprising of the Ministers of Agriculture and Trade, three representatives of farmer organisations and a retired judge.
13. A national policy of protecting the small tanks for percolation and preventing sedimentation of larger water reservoirs should be established.
14. Maintenance of larger reservoirs and major channels should be the responsibility of the Government.
15. Importation and distribution of poisonous agro-chemicals that are destructive to humans, earth, animal life, plants and environment should be stopped and environmentally friendly, ecological, sustainable agriculture should be adopted as the government policy (importation of herbal products that are environmentally friendly should be permitted).
16. Immediate steps should be taken to prevent the sale of national assets that are necessary for future generations, to rich foreign companies (proposed sale of the Eppawala Phosphate deposits, setting up of the Vice of America Radio Transmitting Station, building of the thermal power station in Norachchulai, selling water reservoirs and canals are some examples).
17. Prevent the sale of Government farms used for agricultural research and seed production.
18. Proposals to close down the paddy marketing Board should be rejected.
19. Legal arrangements should be made to provide grazing land for cattle and to protect cattle as a necessary resource for the farmers.