

WHO IS A FARMER? GOVERNMENT HAS NO CLEAR DEFINITION

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Undefined entity: The implications of having no definition of a farmer hurt communities working the land. U. SUBRAMANYAM

Who is a farmer? What is the government's definition of a farmer, and how many farmers are there in India by that definition?

Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar failed to answer that question in Parliament last week. The government's ambiguity has serious implications for the design and beneficiaries of the schemes meant to help them, including its flagship PM-KISAN (Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi).

In a written response, the Minister only noted that the Centre provided income support to all farmer families who owned cultivable land through PM-KISAN.

MPs pointed out that the number of land holdings did not necessarily equate with the number of farming households.

In fact, there is a clear and comprehensive definition available in the National Policy for Farmers drafted by the National Commission of Farmers headed by M.S. Swaminathan and officially approved by the Centre in 2007.

It says, "For the purpose of this Policy, the term 'FARMER' will refer to a person actively engaged in the economic and/or livelihood activity of growing crops and producing other primary agricultural commodities and will include all agricultural operational holders, cultivators, agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, tenants, poultry and livestock rearers, fishers, beekeepers, gardeners, pastoralists, non-corporate planters and planting labourers, as well as persons engaged in various farming related occupations such as sericulture, vermiculture and agro-forestry. The term will also include tribal families/persons engaged in shifting cultivation and in the collection, use and sale of minor and non-timber forest produce."

Farmer leaders and researchers point out that the definition of a farmer is not merely a philosophical or semantic question, but rather has practical implications. "There is a deliberate dragging of the feet to avoid this pre-existing official definition which is there in black and white," said Swaraj India president Yogendra Yadav, who also heads the Jai Kisan Andolan, referring to the Agriculture Minister's evasive response.

He noted that most schemes meant for farmers' welfare, including the procurement of wheat and paddy at minimum support prices, are effectively available only for land owners.

According to Census 2011, there are 11.8 crore cultivators and 14.4 crore agricultural workers.

"There is a need to convert the M.S. Swaminathan Commission's definition into a legal and actionable tool for identification. Already, the revenue department is supposed to annually record who is actually cultivating each piece of land. In an era of GPS, GIS and Aadhaar, this should not be that difficult. It simply takes political will," said G.V. Ramanjaneyulu, executive director, Centre for Sustainable Agriculture.

“Linking the identity of a farmer to land ownership has devastating consequences for another category: women farmers. Some studies estimate that 60%-70% of farmers are actually women, but their names are rarely on ownership documents,” noted Devinder Sharma, an agriculture scientist.

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