

FARM LAWS WORSEN A DEVELOPMENT MODEL THAT COVETS LAND, IGNORES CULTIVATOR

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Agriculture Issues and related constraints

As farmers from Punjab and Haryana force the central government into unconditional talks, demanding nothing less than a repeal of the three new farm laws, the [BJP](#)-led NDA government insists the reforms are “farmer-friendly”. The farm laws seek to introduce the neoliberal notion of “choice” into the production and sale of agricultural produce through deregulation, and give a push to private traders and agricultural corporations. Small and marginal farmers — a section that constitutes 85 per cent of agrarian landholdings — are likely to be worst hit, with the lowest bargaining power and highest level of precarity.

Added to this, state policies on land, intertwined in important ways with the current development model, are a significant force shaping agrarian conditions in India. The scale of land acquisition has increased exponentially since the Nineties, with the estimate for all displaced people up from approximately 25-30 million by 1990 to 60 million by 2004 (Walter Fernandes). The current development model is hungry for land but has little use for the people that live on it, with little progress being made on employment generation in comparison to the numbers of livelihoods destroyed by displacement. A closer look at the way in which these policies influence the livelihood of small and marginal farmers is imperative in a relevant analysis of agriculture in India.

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A policy framework shaped by the needs of capital — which needs land but not the people — creates a system that renders subsistence cultivators unnecessary or superfluous to development initiatives of the state. A halt to large-scale land acquisition is, therefore, fundamental to the survival of the large majority of cultivators in India.

Where many small and marginal farmers engage in subsistence cultivation, sale of agricultural produce is limited to the need for cash or an assured surplus. Cultivating primarily for household consumption, their practices are not geared towards maximising production driven by the dynamics of the market. Instead, it relies heavily on non-market inputs, whether it is seeds, manure, or other forms of nourishing the land. Protecting themselves to a limited extent from market volatility and being dependent on cash, they remain relatively protected from the vicious cycles of debt that are the norm for commercial farmers.

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Comparing data of states that have a high proportion of commercial farming with those that have a higher degree of subsistence cultivation substantiates this. In 2018-19, the consumption of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium fertiliser in Maharashtra, UP, Assam and Jharkhand was 125.95 kg/hectare (ha), 170.09 kg/ha, 73.69 kg/ha and 59.79 kg/ha respectively (Agricultural Statistics at a Glance, 2019). Keeping this trend in mind, the state-wise scale of indebtedness of agricultural households as recorded in the All-India Report on Agriculture Census 2010-11 shows Maharashtra at 57.3 per cent, UP at 43.8 per cent, Assam at 17.5 per cent and Jharkhand at 28.9 per cent. These figures are representative of the increased cash dependence of agriculture in commercially significant states as Maharashtra and UP, and a significantly lower

level of debt in states like Jharkhand and Assam.

However, this is not to be confused with a picture of stable or secure livelihoods. It is to point to the means through which subsistence cultivators protect themselves from the vagaries of the market by drawing on non-monetised resources and informal arrangements of land use. The policy trajectory on land and development, particularly since the 1990s, has lain waste to these resources, institutions and arrangements of social relations.

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Of the total estimated land acquired between 1947 and 2004, more than half is constituted by forest land and common property holdings. Land marked off as village common land or grazing land is often declared as government land and appropriated without the consent of local residents. The constant expansion of forest lands is itself the latest strategy to bypass mandated procedures for land acquisition under the new Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition and Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013.

The latest Environmental Impact Assessment Draft Notification 2020 seeks to facilitate ease of doing business by clearing “obstacles” for businesses such that permissions are simpler to get and grievances harder to file. Even as the new Land Acquisition Law 2013 has introduced significant changes from the colonial 1894 Law, it serves to firmly keep in place the principle of eminent domain by which the state retains excessive powers over land and, thereby, facilitates the process of land acquisition in the long run.

Together, these policy changes aid the process of land acquisition and further intensify land dispossession. Several informal land arrangements are being stripped away constantly, leaving subsistence peasants more dependent on cash for meeting everyday requirements of life and propelling them deeper into an unequal market that constantly reproduces their position at the margins.

Continuation of the development model in its present form sounds as much of a death knell for a thriving agrarian sector as do the new farm laws. Without land, there will be neither field nor farmer. In the context of jobless growth and capital's growing need for land but not people, such a paradigm continuously throws the people who occupy land needed for “development” out of the system, with no employment opportunities to offer them, no requirement of their labour, and no place to settle them on. For a healthy agrarian sector, the state must strengthen and protect the position of the cultivator. As long as land acquisition continues at its current pace, there is little chance of that happening.

This article first appeared in the print edition on December 9, 2020 under the title ‘Land, but not for the tiller’. The writer is assistant professor, department of humanities and social sciences, IIT Guwahati

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