

LAND ACQUISITION BILL: MISSING THE BIG, BLEAK PICTURE

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

The unseasonal rains over the last few weeks have resulted in enormous loss of crop output across many States of North India. This has shifted attention from the issue of land acquisition to other important problems faced by farmers in India. While it is important to debate the various clauses of the Land Acquisition Bill — what might benefit the farmers and what goes against their interests — it is also important for the government to pay attention to the bigger problems that Indian farmers face. The findings from a survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in late 2013 among 5,480 farmers across 18 States in the country present a rather dismal picture of agriculture today.

Though farmers are anxious about the Land Acquisition Bill, this does not seem to be their biggest worry, as only a very small proportion of farmers in the survey (less than five per cent) — especially those who want money to get their sons educated or daughters married — buy and sell land. While the question of farmers' consent in land acquisition by the government is an important issue, there is little focus today on the very state of agriculture. It is therefore imperative to seek the opinions of farmers on this. Most conversations with farmers reveal how income returns are very low, irrigation facilities are inadequate and supporting infrastructure is largely absent or of poor quality.

What adds to the problem is the unpredictable weather and the dependence on monsoons even to this day. Besides, crops also get destroyed either by drought or by floods. It is no wonder that the survey indicates that more than one-fifth (22 per cent) of the farmers have begun to dislike farming.

The reasons for the farmers' increasing apathy towards their profession are not too difficult to understand. Close to half the respondents in the survey (47 per cent) believed that their overall condition was bad. More than six out of 10 farmers (62 per cent) were willing to leave farming if they found jobs in the city. More than one-third (37 per cent) said they would not like their children to be farmers. But it is important to note that their disillusionment is driven largely by economic considerations, and not a dislike for their occupation.

The need to reduce disguised unemployment in the sector by promoting alternative jobs or businesses does not negate the need for government action to revive agriculture. The sector has and will continue for many years to have the highest share in the country's employment. A prosperous agricultural sector is absolutely essential for maintaining food security, and the government needs to actively address some of the emerging problems.

There is no lack of schemes for the farmer — the National Food Security Mission, the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana and the Gramin Bhandaran Yojana, to name just a few. The need is to improve the delivery of these rather than to initiate new ones. Even Prime Minister Narendra Modi recognised this when he said in a recent speech that farmers hardly benefit from government schemes. The survey indicates that most farmers don't benefit from them. The proportion of farmers who have benefited was less than one-tenth for each of these schemes.

The scarcity of financial resources for farming is another major issue. Unsurprisingly, the study indicated that one-third of the farmers had taken a loan in the last five years for meeting personal or farming needs. For non-farming purposes, most of them had to depend on either

friends or moneylenders. Although more than half the farmers surveyed had heard about the Kisan Credit Card and the United Progressive Alliance government's much-publicised loan waiver project, its actual impact was quite limited. Only 15 per cent had a Kisan Credit Card, while one-tenth had actually benefited from the loan waiver. The proportion for the latter was higher among the big farmers (21 per cent) and much lower among marginal farmers (6 per cent.) We know that access to cheap credit from formal sources for both farming and personal purposes is key to rural development.

The lack of expert advice is another nagging issue. Even as new kinds of seeds, fertilizers or farming techniques become common, large numbers of farmers continue to rely on their own knowledge and experience or what they learn from word of mouth. Only 15 per cent said that they take information or help from agriculture department officers or other experts.

Thus, for instance, large numbers of the farmers surveyed had never heard of crop insurance, with 67 per cent having never insured their crop. Thus, in the event of a flood or drought, they have no means to recover even a portion of their losses. In the survey, 70 per cent of the farmers said that crops were destroyed in their area at least once in the last three years. The main reasons were drought, floods or unseasonal rains.

It is clear that adequate irrigation facilities remain one of the foremost concerns. Less than one-third (28 per cent) of those surveyed said that public projects such as canals and wells had been undertaken by the government in their area in the last 10 to 15 years. One hopes that the newly launched Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana will kick-start the process of improving irrigation facilities.

It is not surprising that farmers blame both the State and the Central governments for the massive systemic failure to address their concerns. The high level of dissatisfaction among farmers cannot be considered as an excuse for promoting other sectors at the cost of agriculture.

Reviving the rural economy should be a major challenge for the Modi government. Mr. Modi spoke of some critical concerns of farmers in his speech, but the real test is whether his government will walk the talk. If the BJP hopes to retain the support it received in rural India in 2014, the government must ensure that it is able to take the concerns of Bharat on board even as he harps on the India growth story.

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