

CROP OF IRONIES

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

It is ironic that it took a [devastating pandemic](#) to force the government's hand for long-overdue agrarian reforms. Amendments have been made to the Essential Commodities Act, 1955. The Finance Minister has urged States to dismantle the Agricultural Produce Market Committees. Several long-term changes have been made to the agricultural sector, such as fair pricing and e-trading, along with liquidity measures. The Centre has also encouraged the State governments to adopt three model laws on contract farming, agricultural land leasing, and marketing.

These developments came as the Indian agriculture sector was impacted by lockdowns across States following the COVID-19 outbreak. Migrant farm workers fled the fields en masse, unable to sustain their livelihoods. Crippling bottlenecks in the supply chain resulted in prices skyrocketing in consumer markets, even as farmers, stuck with inventory, started dumping them at throwaway prices. Many remained hungry even as the Food Corporation of India's godowns overflowed with grain stock at three times the buffer stock norms.

It is an irony that many migrants to the cities who come from farming backgrounds sought the city for a better life but it is the same cities and their employers that have forced them to return to their homes. What India has been witnessing over the past few months is a historic reverse migration. It is an irony that the very people who ensure food security in this nation are being made to go hungry now. It is equally an irony that the lockdown was imposed to contain COVID-19 but migration of the poor and vulnerable might be taking the virus to the hinterland of India.

While the concept of One Nation, One Ration Card has potential, people are concerned about immediate relief for the hungry. This is being provided with the release of fixed quantities of free foodgrains and pulses to the migrants, even to those without ration cards, for the months of June and July. Implementation needs to be seen through. India has always struggled to fill the gap between policy prescriptions and implementation.

Just as rabi crops were set to be harvested, unseasonal rain and hail arrived at the beginning of the year. Parts of the country reeled under a pernicious locust invasion. Looming loans could push farmers into a tailspin of poverty. The Reserve Bank of India announced an extension of the moratorium on loan EMIs by three months, but given that many farmers rely on a system of informal borrowing, this negates the intended effect. The government has also hiked the MSP of 14 kharif crops, but some argue that this may not offer the intended extent of relief due to a lack of manpower, working capital, machinery (stuck in other States) and storage.

Coronavirus package | [What are the measures announced by the government to deal with the farm crisis?](#)

Steps that economists suggest are to switch from cash to food crops; listen to the Prime Minister's 'go local' message and invest in redirecting supply chains locally; increase government allocations to poor farmers through the PM KISAN scheme by including everyone, even those who do not own land; ensure timely availability of seeds and fertilizers for the next season by roping in gram sabhas to verify claimants; and involve Farmer Producer Organisations in the process to ensure the safeguarding of farmers' rights.

The world observed World Hunger Day on May 28, 2020. India was ranked 102 out of 117 qualifying countries on the Global Hunger Index. Although agriculture accounts for around 17% of India's GDP, nearly 50% of the country's population depends on farm-based income. The

Prime Minister's vision for doubling farmers' income in two years seems a distant dream in the wake of the pandemic. Climate scientists warn about climate change. The resilience of Indian farmers has meant that the nation was fed even through multiple lockdowns. Now, it is our turn to give them a brighter day.

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