

## Why are farmers restless?

Last week, more than 40,000 farmers began walking from Nashik to Mumbai demanding a loan waiver, and implementation of the Swaminathan Commission's recommendations and the Forest Rights Act. This is not the first time that farmers have hit the streets to voice their demands. Last year alone, farmers from more than 15 states took to the streets to protest against the worsening situation of their lot in the country. Large-scale farmers' protests were seen in Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. In June 2017, seven farmers were killed in police firing in Mandsaur in Madhya Pradesh. Clearly the anger among farmers is increasing. These are now confirmed by official data as well. According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, there were 628 farmers' protests in 2014, which increased to 2,683 in 2015 and 4,837 in 2016, an increase by eight times in just three years of this government.

Why are farmers protesting and why has this unrest increased so rapidly? A large part of the blame has to be with the government which has not only neglected growing distress among the farming community but has contributed to making the situation worse in the last four years. Rising cost of cultivation had already triggered a crisis by 2014. While the sudden collapse of commodity prices in 2014 and the drought in 2014 and 2015 worsened the situation, the Modi government reduced investment in agriculture by 2.3% per annum during 2014-17 as against a growth in investment at 10% in real terms during 2004-13. It also reduced expenditure on several schemes, in some cases by almost 50%. Agricultural credit, which had increased at 21% during 2004-14, slowed down to 12% per annum during this government's tenure. Declining job opportunities and sluggish growth of rural non-farm employment along with declining rural real wages further contributed to worsening of rural incomes. The end result has been stagnant agricultural incomes and rising debt.

Unfortunately, the response of the government to this crisis was as myopic as its long-term vision of agriculture. The only strategy that it had was to resort to loan waivers. While the strategy paid political dividends in Uttar Pradesh, it has now set off a demand which cannot be denied in other states where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is in power. By last estimate, loan waivers worth more than Rs130,000 crore have been announced in different states. But this has failed to satisfy farmers. Simply because it is not a substitute for the lack of investment in agriculture. But it has taken away the precious fiscal resources which could have been used to invest in agriculture. The government has only itself to blame for the mess that it has created.

Farmers' unrest has already extracted its pound of flesh by punishing incumbent state governments, mostly led by the BJP, in assembly and Parliament elections. The protests are only going to increase. Rising farmer anger was behind the decline in seats won by the BJP in the Gujarat assembly elections. It also contributed to the defeat suffered by BJP in a string of byelections to legislative assemblies and Parliament in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

But it is not just the failure of the government to respond to the crisis in agriculture that has angered the farmers, it is also their growing distrust of the government. The latest example of this is the budget announcement to raise minimum support price (MSP) to 50% of costs. Not only did the government betray its own promise by changing the concept of cost implicit in the Swaminathan Commission report, but the announcement also came with reduced budgetary support for price support operations. Clearly, the farmers did not buy this promise of the government.

The BJP is now faced with a tough choice. Having started the loan waiver scheme in Uttar Pradesh, it cannot deny the same in other states. At the same time, declining investment and expenditure on essential agricultural schemes also means that the situation is unlikely to improve

soon. On top of it, the promise of doubling farmers' incomes by 2022 is only adding salt to their wounds.

*Himanshu is an associate professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University and visiting fellow at Centre de Sciences Humaines, New Delhi.*

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

crackIAS.com