

A wilful negligence

How many more farmers must die before the prime minister condescends to take notice? How many rats must the protesting Tamil Nadu farmers at Jantar Mantar eat before the government acts? How many more fake farm loan waiver schemes will be announced before the cabinet realises that farmers cannot be fooled anymore? Despite 300,000 farmers taking their lives over the past two decades, this government is unmoved.

The central government constituted a series of high-powered committees on farmers' suicides. They made explicit recommendations. The Ramesh Chand Committee Report of March 2015 said the Minimum Support Price (MSP) should be calculated by computing farm labour at the skilled wage rate, calculating land rent at the actual rent without any ceiling, calculating interest on working capital by including a factor relating to borrowing from non-institutional sources, calculating interest on working capital for the whole and not half the crop season, by including in the cost of cultivation post-harvest costs and by including the rate of inflation. If this is done, the MSP would rise by over 50 per cent.

It also recommended that the government correct all instances where the MSP is lower than the cost of production. It drew attention to the recommendations of the National Farmers Commission headed by M.S. Swaminathan that had made a similar recommendation decades ago. Not only has the MSP not been scientifically revised, but farmers have been forced to sell below the MSP across India.

The Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) was launched with fanfare to provide crop insurance to nine crore agricultural households. The Centre for Science and Environment reported that only 20 per cent of the eligible farmers were covered and most farmers had no idea about the scheme. Rs 13,240 crore of government money found its way into the bank accounts of private insurance companies that more often than not refused to pay, making a variety of excuses.

This insurance scheme does not cover tenant farmers even though they constitute 50 per cent of farmers' suicides in Andhra Pradesh and other states. They should be registered and given documents such as the Loan Eligibility Cards as in AP and the Bhoomiheen Kisan Credit Card or the Certificate of Cultivator so that get crop insurance, crop loss relief and other benefits. The insurance schemes does not cover women farmers even though the National Farmers' Commission recommended decades ago that their names be included in the column of cultivators and concessions on registrations and stamp duty be granted to women to incentivise land transfers to them. M.S. Swaminathan had even drafted a Women Farmers Entitlements Bill, 2011 which was revised by the Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch. No one in government took notice.

Many expert committees have recommended urgent steps to reduce rural indebtedness to contain the intensification of the debt burden which has risen alarmingly. For this, the RBI guidelines that require 18 per cent of Adjusted Net Bank Credit (ANBC) to be set aside for agriculture, and 8 per cent of this exclusively for small and marginal holders, must be followed. Instead, the government allowed big industrial houses to corner capital meant for poor farmers by amending the RBI definition of "agriculture" and "allied activities" to allow for large agri-businesses.

The central government-appointed Task Force on Organic and Non-Chemical Farming recommended in 2016 that all states should substitute chemical fertilisers with bio inputs in at least 10 per cent of the net cultivated area (up from 1 per cent today) and provide high-quality organic seeds to farmers by 2025. Similar recommendations were made by the Parliamentary Committee on Estimates headed by Murli Manohar Joshi. However, GM food giants like Monsanto have a more powerful lobby of MPs than organic farmers.

Finally, trade policies have destroyed the lives of tens of thousands of farmers. At times of high production, import policies have been tweaked to allow for cheap imports, decimating the farm economy. All over the world, governments subsidise and take care of their farmers. Here we push them to suicide.

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