

**COVER
STORY**

FARMER STRIKE

Arousing India's Collective Conscience

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“...the entire farming community in the country is in deep distress. An agrarian crisis is looming large. Unless timely steps are taken, there is going to be a major agriculture crisis in the country. We will be repenting in leisure after not doing anything in time”.

— *Vice President, M. Venkaiah Naidu, as Opposition MP in December 2011*

Farming and farmers' protests are as intertwined as oxygen and hydrogen atoms in the water molecule. This is because the road to agriculture is paved with potholes and ditches of policy failures; inadvertent and some deliberate. Friction, jerks and, at time, big jolts in form of mass agitations seem inevitable.

India's latest tryst with a farmers' strike was far more significant: it was about taking the voice of the farmer to the people, not to political leaders or policy makers; it was about exposing the core of a critical crisis that will hit the aam aadmi, even if it leaves the politician unscathed, save at the hustings perhaps.

Farmers in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana put together a united front for a 10-day "gaon bandh" starting Friday, June 1, sending a message to urban India about what it would be like not to have their supplies of essential items like milk and vegetables. Their demands were many, from loan waiver to right price for their crops and the implementation of the Swaminathan Commission recommendations. In Madhya Pradesh, the farmers declared a complete shutdown of supplies to cities.

Farmers wage periodic fights for their rights across the world. The struggle ranges over the right to get inputs including water; to the right to save crops and livestock, farmland and life. No wonder certain states such as Michigan in the United States have enacted the Right to Farm Act to protect farming and farms.

Modern and medieval histories are replete with instances of farmers' resentment that at times have exploded into uprisings. In current times, one witnesses more of agrarian grudges venting themselves in frequent street protests. (*See box Farmers' Struggle: A Look Back into History, Page 18*).

There can be no absolute escape from agrarian distress in an overpopulated and resource – starved country as India with myriads of conflicting interest of different stakeholders. The solution lies in timely and efficient resolution of problems that are as unavoidable as the weeds.

The 10-day June gaon bandh has to be viewed in this perspective. The bandh saw anguished farmers dumping milk, vegetables and other farm produce on the roads or feeding them to animals in several



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states. The reactions to this outburst obviously were varied with some citizens endorsing the farmers' style of protests and others finding fault with the wastage of food.

The wastage seems a good idea as, often times, the price that farmers get when the wholesale market is flooded with vegetables and fruits, for which there is no minimum support price (MSP), virtually amounts to nothing. This is precisely the message that the farm community wanted to convey through modest, if not symbolic, dumping of commodities.

The farmers want to awaken the national conscience, which is the key to shaking governments at the centre and the states. Dumping of commodities is an integral feature of farm protests across the world.



Farmers have waited for generations for a fair price for perishable commodities and dumping could be the release of generational frustration with bad governance

Farmers are paid modest prices in mandis even when the production for a crop is normal. They get a pittance when there is glut. Farmers have been waiting for generations to get a reasonable price for the perishable commodities. Dumping should thus be viewed as the release of generational frustration with bad governance of agriculture.

It is pertinent to recall an anecdote about burning of the sugarcane crop by Uttar Pradesh farmers due to their inability to sell the cane to sugar mills

in the fifties. When a member of Parliament raised this issue in August 1956, the then agriculture minister, P.S. Deshmukh, tersely denied crop burning. That laid the precedence for the business-as-usual attitude when it came to farmers' woes; denial became the accepted norm.

When another MP followed up with a question on whether the government was aware of the corruption resulting from the practice of giving slips to the cultivators for the purchase of sugarcane for crushing





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by the mills; that “great corruption prevails and that the men in charge have to be tipped before they are made to grant these slips”, the minister responded with: “I don’t think the degree of corruption is more excessive as compared with corruption everywhere else in this particular instance”.

That seems to have become a permanent passport for the entry of bribes in farming transactions. It gave rise to a *chalta hai* attitude that troubles growers. Farmers must bribe officials for getting their subsidy entitlement for farm machinery, for loans and for marketing their produce in mandis. They are reconciled to market malpractices such as under-weighting of produce and intentional delay in payment for sold commodities.

Coming back to protests, what do critics expect from peace-loving farmers, whose cry for justice on multiple issues has been addressed in a perfunctory fashion by successive regimes? Do they want farmers to block roads and rail tracks

and thus face bullets? Why do they not spare one week to spend with farmers in villages to understand their problems?

Why do they not look at chilling statistics on average income of farm households, with the daily market prices ruling substantially below minimum support prices and MSPs absence from the domain of milk, vegetables and other perishable commodities?

Insensitive and ignorant critics walk away having made inane comments but responsible political leaders berating farmers’ strike demonstrate the quality of people put in charge of farmers.

- The union minister for agriculture and farmers’ welfare, Radha Mohan Singh, for instance, reportedly stated that only five lakh out of 14 crore farmers have joined the strike. Ergo, the protesters were merely seeking media attention through their bizarre acts.
- The Gujarat chief minister Vijay Rupani reportedly stated that the farmer’ agitation in his

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— M. Venkaiah Naidu, December 2011





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state was a “political stunt” of the opposition.

Even if one accepts ruling party’s general charge that the opposition is misleading farmers, does it empower the ruling party to wash its hands off its own manifesto promises? Should it put in deep freezer the concern for farmers that it showed generously when in the opposition?

Should there not be a political consensus on workable, credible and effective solutions to agrarian problems to safeguard national food and economic security?

The need of the hour is to act on sage advice given by Vice President, M. Venkaiah Naidu, during December 2011. Initiating a discussion,

as an Opposition MP, on agrarian crisis in Rajya Sabha, he had noted: “agriculture has become totally unviable and unremunerative”. Farmers have confirmed his observation with agitations during the subsequent years.

M. Venkaiah Naidu’s position bears repetition: “Parliament should hold a special session for seven days to discuss this very important issue because it is not a one-day problem. It is a problem that is long term in nature. It requires the attention of the government and the Parliament, and also of the various stakeholders in this. But, unfortunately, we have not been able to do justice to this issue. Even ministry-wise, the minister of agriculture



alone will not be able to solve the problem of agriculture. The ministry of finance, the ministry of commerce and the ministry of food and public distribution, all of them, are also equally important in this. But, unfortunately, whenever there is a discussion on the agriculture issue, we could get only the minister of agriculture and, finally, justice is not done to this issue”.

The Vice President had made another important point: “...the entire farming community in the country is in deep distress. An agrarian crisis is looming large. Unless timely steps are taken, there is going to be a major agriculture crisis in the country. We will be repenting in leisure after not doing anything in time”.

M. Venkaiah Naidu is now in an enviable position and can emerge as the doctor who can heal the agrarian distress. In his capacity as chairman of the Rajya Sabha,

Recommendations Galore

“We have had recommendations by the dozen, by the score, by the Ford Foundation, the Foodgrains Enquiry Committee, the Nalagarh Committee, the Indo-American Committee and many others, and all of them have recommended the very same things — expansion of irrigation, seed farms for the production of better seeds, use of fertilizer, chemical and organic, better implements, better water management, plant protection and the use of pesticides, soil conservation, an efficient extension service and above all, an economic price to the farmer. If we have not been able to make any headway, it is not because these recommendations are wanting in themselves but because they have not been implemented”.

— T. S. Avinashilingam Chettiar,
Tamil Nadu MP; March 6, 1964

he can urge the Lok Sabha speaker and Prime Minister to agree to have a special session of Parliament on the agrarian crisis to find a national solution to a national problem.

What the government should ensure is that the debate not be reduced to a blame game but a solutions-finding endeavour. A study of the past parliamentary debates on agrarian woes would show the governments of the day defending initiatives and resulting achievements on the farm front. The opposition, however, would reel off instances of the peasant’s plight and warn of worsening crises in what would evolve into a slanging match, leaving a bitter taste in every mouth; certainly the farmer’s.

There have also been instances of the agrarian crisis having been studied and its report disposed of in a bureaucratic manner. A case in point is a paper “the Causes and Nature of Current Agrarian Tensions” prepared by Ministry of Home Affairs in 1970. The paper made certain recommendations around





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implementation of land reforms and land laws. It was circulated to states and union territories.

In reply to a question on this subject raised during May 1970, the government stated: “Land being a subject in the state list, the central government’s function is to advise and urge the states to take action and that has been done”.

Any student of agriculture would agree that there is no dearth of solutions, many of which are articulated in policy announcements and reports of various commissions/expert committees. The problem lies in inaction or inadequate effort to convert intent into robust action for benefit of farmers.

Indian agriculture would have been healthier, wholesome and inclusive if the government had wholeheartedly implemented its maiden policy

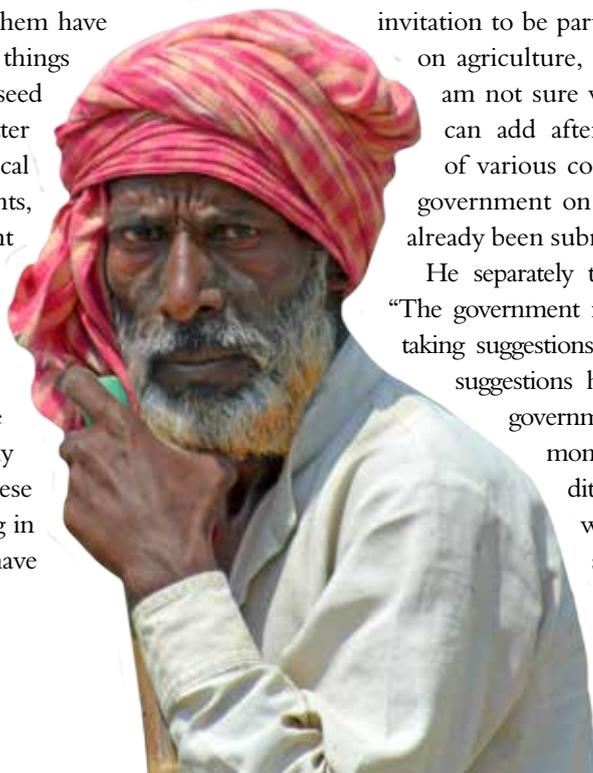
unveiled during January 1946. Titled ‘Statement of Agriculture and Food Policy in India’, the Policy had 10 objectives. One of the objectives envisaged remunerative prices for the producer and fair wages to the agricultural labour.

It is here pertinent to cite a Rajya Sabha discussion on a member’s resolution that the government should appoint a commission on agriculture, on the pattern of the Royal Commission on Agriculture of 1926-28, to study agricultural problems. Speaking on the resolution on March 6, 1964, an MP from Tamil Nadu, T. S. Avinashilingam Chettiar observed: “we have had commissions galore. He (resolution mover N. Sri Rama Reddy) mentioned the names of those commissions. What we want is what he himself said — sow the seed for action.”



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He added: “We have had recommendations by the dozen, by the score, by the Ford Foundation, the Foodgrains Enquiry Committee, the Nalagarh Committee, the Indo-American Committee and many others, and all of them have recommended the very same things — expansion of irrigation, seed farms for the production of better seeds, use of fertilizer, chemical and organic, better implements, better water management, plant protection and the use of pesticides, soil conservation, an efficient extension service and, above all, an economic price to the farmer. If we have not been able to make any headway, it is not because these recommendations are wanting in themselves but because they have not been implemented”.



As many as 53 years later, T. S. Avinashilingam Chettiar’s wisdom found echo in an pithy observation made by agricultural economist, Ashok Gulati. Declining the Niti Aayog’s invitation to be part of a panel of experts on agriculture, he reportedly said: “I am not sure what value this group can add after four major reports of various committees by the new government on agri-food space have already been submitted”.

He separately told Economic Times: “The government needs to act, not keep taking suggestions. Multiple volumes of suggestions have been sent to the government in the past few months. The farmers’ conditions have not improved, which shows there is something lacking on the ground.”

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Farmers' Struggle: A Look Back into History

A History of Agriculture in India, Vol-II has great relevance vis-à-vis the current crisis in the Indian farm sector, showing, as it does, that very few rulers learn from history. Published in 1983, the book reviewed literature on the agrarian system during the medieval times. In the book, the late M.S. Randhawa cites another one titled *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707* by Irfan Habib in 1963.

"He is the first historian to diagnose the correct nature of the agrarian revolts of the Jats, Satnamis, Marathas and Sikhs, which ultimately shattered the Mughal empire. By a massive array of evidence, he also highlighted the wretched condition of the peasants in Mughal India. This must have come as a shock to those who are dazzled by the grandeur of the mosques, mausoleums, forts and palaces of the Mughals", Randhawa wrote.

Like the mughals, several regimes after the Independence have incurred the farmer's wrath, often forcing the government to backtrack or make amends on issues that hurt the farmer. In fact, India's Independence in 1947 virtually coincided with farmers' strong resentment against the government's policy of robbing Peter (farmer) to pay Paul (consumers).

The Nehru government was honest and bold enough to admit this when it released a review of agriculture developments on completion of the first year of Independence. Released by the Press Information Bureau for publication on August 15, it noted that several years prior to 1947 were focused on food distribution and easing food shortages in the wake of the separation of Burma and 1943 Bengal famine.

According to the *Independence Anniversary Review*, this policy worked well with remarkable success and received unqualified praise from international observers and missions. Its continuance depended upon the willing co-operation of millions of cultivators scattered throughout the country though. They had to sell their grain to the government at "controlled" rates.

The Review says that the "dissatisfaction at the controlled prices paid to the agriculturists for their produce gradually grew and this gathered momentum with the coming into power of popular ministries in the provinces. Internal procurement decreased; a section of the popular opinion rebelled against regimentation in food and Mahatma Gandhi's powerful voice was raised in favour of self-reliance. This led to the appointment of the Purshottam Das Committee in September

1947, charged with the 'more important task' of recommending measures, which would secure a definite increase in food production within the country during the next five years".

Another major milestone in the farmers' struggle is April 1972, when the government was considering a reduction in the wheat procurement prices. Protests in Punjab and other states and rocked Parliament and rattled the centre.

The eighties possibly marked the highest number of major protests perhaps due to emergence of two great leaders of mass movement of farmers: Mahendra Singh Tikait and Sharad Joshi.

The decade also saw protesting farmers facing bullets. Two notable instances are:

- The police firing on farmers seeking higher price for onions in Nasik district of Maharashtra during March 1980 and
- On farmers protesting against reduction in cotton procurement prices in Maharashtra's Nanded district during November 1986.

Firing on protesting farmers has become more common in subsequent years – be they farmers protesting against fertilizer and other input shortages or seeking minimum support prices.

Another significant milestone in farmers' agitation came about was in 1997, when the government revoked the Deep Sea Fishing Policy of 1991, following prolonged protests from traditional fishermen.

It is indeed sad and unproductive for the nation to see its farmers initiate protests against the successive governments for their survival and to avoid major set backs to farming.

Even the Modi government stepped on the toes of farmers when it issued an ordinance in December 2014 to make certain controversial amendments to the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 in January 2015. The government later let the ordinance lapse following protests from farmers and other stakeholders.

The government must lay a clear-cut roadmap for central, state and local administration to make time-bound interventions to address farmers' problems varying from input shortages to marketing woes.

India needs an effective policy that channels the energy of farmers for strengthening food security, promoting balanced nutrition and for giving a big leg-up to industry and service sectors.

With 2019 elections around nine months away, the government can conceive of a big-bang package of actions, which no one has thought of as yet

Instead of going whole-hog to implement the policies and recommendations of expert panels, successive governments have resorted to new promises, new schemes and new slogans.

The Modi government itself has constituted several committees to solve problems in agriculture and rural economy. The most notable is the Committee on Doubling Farmers' Income. It has so far published 13 volumes of its report on Strategy for Doubling Farmers' Income by 2022. The 14th and last volume on Comprehensive Policy Recommendations is yet to be released.

With 2019 elections still nine months away, the government has an opportunity to conceive of a big-bang package of actions that no previous government has thought of for holistic development of agriculture. It goes without saying that farmer and farm workers have to be the nucleus/focus of the package. Also, while doing so, it should reflect over what an MP from Assam stated in Parliament during November 1988.

Participating in a debate on farmers' problems, Bijoya Chakravarty observed: "We have seen that all the programmes and points simply cannot help the farmers. Because in these points and programmes, the farmers are the greatest casualty in this country. Probably this is why we have seen the biggest kisan rally at the Boat Club and we are having farmers' agitations in various parts of the country". Nothing changes for the Indian farmer. ●

