

Agriculture Reform: India 2020

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Abstract

The globalization and liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 was caused by the cumulative effect of the ongoing revenue deficit crisis and Gulf War. Since the country was forced to mortgage its gold for a loan, the opening of Indian economy to private and foreign players was the only possible remedy. While other sectors enjoyed the benefits of an open economy, the agriculture sector was cast aside. The structural challenges on the economic front and financial problems that independent India inherited from the British era continued unabated. The recommendations of several policy makers, commissions, economists and think tanks failed to make any impression on the political leadership. As a result, the economic condition of Indian farming community and agricultural sector in general remained unchanged. The glaring gap between the skyrocketing market price of food and farm products, and the declining income of farmers is a clearest instance of marked inefficiency of state-regulated farm produce market. In fact, even after three decades of pro-market reforms in India, the state failed to protect the farmers and left the middlemen as the sole beneficiary of the reforms. The recent, what is being referred as, "Farm Bill 2020" is an attempt by the government to address the longstanding farmer grievances against the monopoly of middlemen class. However, the farmers are vehemently opposed to the new Bill. On the contrary, they are demanding for the continuation of the old mandi system and state-procurement of the produce on minimum support price (MSP).

Keywords: Agriculture sector, farmers, minimum support price Mandi system, APMC, yield, production, food-grains, farmers' market cold storage, economic development, 'Atma Nirbhar Bharat', food-chain industry.

Introduction

The fact that 58 percent on India's population¹ engages in agriculture as the primary source of livelihood, India could be considered primarily as an agrarian economy. The journey of an Indian farmer's struggle is in itself an epitome of discrimination and negligence. While nationalist leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru and Ram Manohar Lohia romanticized the rural Indian village and agrarian economy, little was done to improve the lives of Indian farmers. Even after 78 years of Independence, the Indian farmer still suffers under the oppressive trinity of sarkar, sahuakar and zamindar. The continued existence of British-era laws and regulations regarding agriculture sector testifies to the apathy casted on the agriculture sector. Thus, when the new era of economic reforms began in 1991, the farmer community welcomed liberalization with hope and enthusiasm. Though the reforms mostly focused on the manufacturing and technology-based sector of economy - a global phenomenon in the 1990s - it carved out a new road for the Indian economy. However, the agriculture sector remained mostly neglected.

For Indian economy, the 1991 reforms brought about phenomenal gains in almost every sector of the economy, and India emerged as the textbook example of International Monetary Fund (IMF)-led reform initiative. Between 1991 and 2016, India was one of the fastest-growing economies in the world with the real per capita income soaring unprecedentedly. However, the Indian growth story also holds a bitter side to it. On the one hand, the period also saw a massive increase in income-inequalities between urban and rural areas, and on the other hand, the share of agriculture in GDP declined from 29 per cent in 1991 to 14 per cent in 2015². In real economic sense, both these trends point to the worsening condition of Indian agriculture. It was so badly affected that these decades also witnessed the outward migration of peasants to cities. Many policy experts, scholars and social scientists have expressed concern over the agricultural crisis that had set in. As pointed out by M.S.

Swaminathan, "If agriculture goes wrong, nothing else will have a chance to go right in the country"³

The recent "Farm Bill 2020" is an attempt by the government to address the longstanding farmer grievances against the monopoly of middlemen class. However, the farmers are vehemently opposed to the new Bill. On the contrary, they are demanding for the continuation of the old mandi system and state-procurement of the produce on minimum support price (MSP). The aim of this article is to do an exploratory evidence-based research analysis of the impact of the new farm laws passed by the Modi government during the Covid-19 pandemic on farmers. It tries to understand the reason behind farmers' opposition to the law while the government continues to project it as not merely a bill for the welfare and development of farmers but also a game changer in the agriculture sector.

Disaster as An Opportunity for Development (Aapda Mein Avsar)?

On 17 September 2020, the Parliament passed the controversial farm bills. It was opposed by the Opposition, farmers and other stakeholders. During the passing of the bills in the Upper House, there were a series of ruckus and uproarious scenes as the Opposition claimed that the bills were a "death warrants for farmers"⁴ The Opposition claimed that the government lacked a majority in the Upper House and passing the bills without voting is a serious breach of trust on the part of the government. One member even went to call it the "saddest day in the history of Indian parliament". On the other hand, many experts questioned the timing of the bills amidst the pandemic. The eagerness on the part of the government to pass the bills, considering the severity of the public health crisis, has made many to question the motive behind it.

The Covid-19 pandemic struck the nation in February 2020 and by the end of March, a nationwide lockdown was imposed. Initially, a complete lockdown was announced for 21 days, which got later extended multiple times. This was not restricted to India, as the entire world appeared to be in a similar situation with schools, colleges, airports, restaurants and other public places shutting down. Gradually, the governments across the world started providing the necessary items to help in the prevention of virus such as sanitizers and masks. By June, social distancing was made mandatory as the lockdown was lifted. Prime Minister Modi declared Covid-19 a national crisis. However, even the Covid-19 situation did not deter the government to call a limited parliamentary session to pass the much contentious farm bills.

The events that transpired after the passing of the bills is quite well-known and widely reported in national media. Eight members⁵ of the Rajya Sabha were suspended over the farm bills row; as a mark of protest against the passing of the bills, they staged a protest in front of the Gandhi statue in the Parliament Complex. Farmers across North India, especially in Punjab and Haryana, also protested against the new bills.

What is The New Law?

The new Agriculture laws passed by the government is constituted of three major ordinances:

1. The Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance, 2020
2. The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Ordinance, 2020
3. The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020

The Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance, 2020

Under this law, farmers have the right to set a price for their produce themselves, thereby limiting the role of middlemen, who were earlier considered essential to the system. The farmers are now the sole owners of their produce and are authorized to sell their produce anywhere at a price of their choice. Until now, the farmers used to take their produce to the mandis and received an MSP fixed by the government for lentils and grains. These mandis worked under the supervision of the government through 'Inspector Raj'⁶ The combination of mandi inspector and middlemen controlled the system to such an extent that despite their tireless efforts in the farms, farmers received a meagre price for their produce. The irony did not stop here as the same price of food grains increased 4-6 folds by the time it reached the consumer through a series of retail markets. Clearly, the farmer did not assign the price for his 'product' himself; it was set by the buyer. The consumer paid a lot more than the actual cost whereas the producers i.e. the farmer, did not benefit at all. The real players and beneficiaries were the middlemen who siphoned off profits while paying far below the farmers' actual production costs. Through the mandi system, the government received enormous taxes from farmers often worth more than 1000 crores and in turn, used the same amount for subsidizing electricity and waiving off small farmer loans as populist measures.

Owing to farmers' lack of storage capacity, the monopolistic tendencies of middle-men exacerbated in the case of farm-grown produce such as fruits and vegetables, where MSP provisions are not applicable. The farmers were thus forced to sell them at the spot price set by the middlemen as they were unable bear the costs of transporting the produce to the market. In India, often, tomatoes and onions were found strewn on road as farmers found it more convenient to discard them rather than incur expenses to transport them to the market. In this scenario, the new Farm Laws provide an opportunity for the farmers to sell at his own discretion at the "farmers market" that are clustered around the villages. Enhancing the efficacy of the storage vis-à-vis warehouses and silos, built under PPP, is a cardinal objective of the law.

The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price assurance and Farm Services Ordinance, 2020

Under this law, a farmer can pre-decide the price and related agreements even before the cultivation of the crop. An agreement shall be set between the farmer and the prospective buyers

(massive food chain companies like Walmart, TESCO, Reliance Fresh etc.) with reference to the seed, type, quality, value, insurance and loan for the produce. This will give the farmer an opportunity to sell his produce to, for instance, food chains such as McDonalds or Burger King directly, by setting up an agreement stating the type and quality of potato along with its price. The buyer will be liable to abide by the agreement and would be required to buy the produce reducing the farmer's risk. The contract, on the other hand, will also minimize his losses occurring due to natural disasters such as excess rainfall, drought and floods. In addition to this, the contract would also safeguard the farmer against the fluctuating prices of crop due to excess production.

The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020

The third law is nothing but a mere amendment to the pre-existing famous- Essential Commodities Act. Essential Commodities Act is an anti-hoarding law enacted during the Second World War. As per the law, individuals and firms were prohibited from holding the farm produce more than a specified amount. This law was passed despite the fact that Bengal was suffering from a famine as Churchill was predisposed towards feeding his soldiers; the law till continues till date. The law gives the government the right to restrict the storage of essential commodities to a stipulated amount. Any violation of the Act constituted a criminal offence. The current government saw this Act as an impediment in attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in agriculture sector and setting up of massive cold storage, warehouses and processing units. Uncertainty about this law being brought in action by reducing the limit of storage haunts the warehouse owners compelling them to dispense the produce to rot (Is it really necessary here?).

The agro-export industry is yet another casualty of this law. Since the pressure on warehouse storage capacity is directly proportional to the amount of food products exported, any restriction on exports such as tariff wars adversely impacts the domestic supply of food grains. For instance, the recent ban on onion exports to neighboring countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan etc. is a case in point. This tarnishes the reputation of India as a global exporter by not meeting the target set in the agreement between the two nations. Furthermore, this law also encourages the setting up of big private warehouses to store upto maximum capacity and only limiting the capacity under extraordinary circumstances.

The Farmers' Concern

1. Farmers are apprehensive of the abolishment of MSP as their biggest reason for their protest which till now guarantees them a minimum price for sale of their produce at mandis. They fear that the incoming of private sector in agriculture will destroy small farmers leaving on their own and only big players will be able to sustain themselves in market. Moreover, wealthy industrialists will start setting prices according to

themselves ransacking farmers and hence, leading to monopolistic behavior of the sector.

2. If the government withdraws itself from this process completely, the farmer will be left exposed to variabilities of the market where currently he at least has MSP to guard himself in situations of complete distress.
3. In the Indian cultural context, mandis are not merely a site of market transaction, but they also work as a site of social networking. In this system, farmers and middlemen work in collaboration with each other throughout the year. It acts an important social security net where the farmer could borrow loan from middlemen and repay it at the time of the sale of his produce. Scrapping of this system will adversely impact farmer's survival during emergencies as well.
4. Once the Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Law is brought into effect, it will render nearly 3 lakh laborers jobless by abolishing the Agriculture Produce Market Committees (APMCs).
5. The undermining of mandi system will lead to economic vulnerability and instability of farmers. The present condition of agrarian in Bihar is a case in point. Professor Ramakumar noted, "The experience of Bihar, Kerala or Maharashtra do not inspire confidence in this respect. Where are the private investments in these states? Including in Maharashtra, most big corporate retail firms purchase their food items directly from APMC markets, and not directly from farmers. This shows the importance of APMC markets, and the need to strengthen them"⁷
6. The farm bills, through the provisions of contract between farmers and industrialists, aim to radically restructure agrarian economy in India. It essentially promotes contract farming; however, failure to meet the requirements of agreement will render farmer helpless where they will be fighting against agro-industrialists.
7. The bills also make provisions for farmers' markets clustered around villages. Farmers in India with small landholding, absence of warehouse facilities/storage and low capital will find it difficult to sustain a farmers' market. Thus, the concept of farmers' market appears unrealistic and questionable.
8. The big industrialists will come lurking trying to enter the agriculture market just for the sake of own profit jeopardizing the sole aim of this law – to support farmers. 98% of farmers own less than 10 hectares and 86% of them own less than 4 hectares of land. The protection of such small farmers against big agro-conglomerates, solely interested in maximizing their own profit, is yet another concern for farmers.
9. Farmers are also questioning how will the other available welfare schemes like subsidies, PM Kisan Samman Nidhi policy will work in the new scenario.

Evidence-based Research Analysis

India has had a history of putting heavy taxes (lagaan) on the farmers even pre-Independence

during the British rule. The unfortunate legacy of neglecting the farmer friendly reforms continues even today.

This 'discrimination' against agricultural reforms is so strong that today, agriculture is the only sector where the producer can't decide the price for his product himself. Manufacturers of Shoe, clothing, car etc and even a local samosa vendor decides the prices for his products himself except the farmer whose product's price is set by the buyer. The government can buy/acquire the land of farmer in 'public interest' at the price decided by themselves. There are several examples where the land bought at bare minimum prices from farmers, is sold further to build malls, shopping complexes, cineplexes etc. by industrialists and businessmen at extremely high rates. For instance, if the government acquires 1 acre (approx. 5000 yard) at Rs. 75 lacs from the farmer, they will in turn after developing the land, sell it to the buyer at approx. Rs. 1 lac per yard.

Several parties came into ruling post-independence however, nothing concrete has been done to end the British era formed laws in order to improve his livelihood. The contribution and hard-work of Indian farmers as how he managed to make India self-sufficient and self-dependent (atma-nirbhar) in case of food-grains is often long forgotten. Norman Borlaug, M.S. Swaminathan - father of green revolution, and Verghese Kurien - leader of White Revolution in India are prominent figures who have tried to work for improvement in the sector of agriculture. Numerous commissions and committees have been set up in the past decades to improve the plight of farmers but the farmer supporting recommendations were thrown off the table. It is ironical that the largest agricultural based democracy has major political parties with election symbols from agriculture sector such as cows and calf (gaya bachadha-Congress), hammer and sickle (hathoda and hasiya-Communist party), Ears of corn and sickle (CPI), sugarcane farmer (TNK), farmer carrying plough (haldhar - Lokdal/Janta party). Such parties clearly calling themselves flagbearers of farmers, despite after winning elections, have failed miserably to improve farmers condition. Leaders who themselves were farmers and fought drought, floods, famine and other challenges of agriculture, post becoming ministers, Chief Minister and Prime Ministers were also unable to uplift the life of farmers.

Farmers often demand for the implementation of 'Swaminathan Aayog' recommendations which included MSP. The Home Minister of India, Mr. Amit Shah, asserts that the recommendation of 'Swaminathan Aayog' which were thrown away by the Congress government in 2006 are now being implemented by Modi government.⁸

These are ludicrous situations in a democratic India where a party opposes a bill being in opposition but applauds itself by bringing the same bill while in ruling. Prior to 2014, BJP used to defy GST and MGNREGA but after coming into ruling, they are commending themselves for bringing such 'historical' changes.

The Congress Manifesto in 2019 states

Point no.9 "Congress will promote Farmer Producer Companies/Organizations to enable farmers to access inputs, technology and markets.", point no. 11, "Congress will repeal the Agricultural Produce Market Committees Act and make trade in agricultural produce—including exports and inter-state trade—free from all restrictions."

Point no. 12, "We will establish farmers' markets with adequate infrastructure and support in large villages and small towns to enable the farmer to bring his/her produce and freely market the same"⁹. Discreetly, Congress party would have implemented this bill if they were in power but today they are aggressively criticizing it while sitting in opposition. Agriculture minister, Mr. Narendra Tomar said, "If Rahul Gandhi agrees with the Congress manifesto of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, then he should join efforts in educating farmers"¹⁰.

In fact the first law of this Farm Bill recognizes that farmers should be the lone decision makers of price and the place where they want to sell their crop. Although farmers suppose that MSP is the biggest achievement and tool of the mandi system. Reality is that only 6% farmers are benefitted by the MSP according to Shanta Kumar committee"¹¹. In today's ironical scenario MSP (minimum support price) is nothing more than 'Maximum Support Price' for farmers due to the mandi system as no one is ever ready to purchase the produce from farmer at more than MSP, leaving him powerless and dependent on the only available support system. According to the government point of view, MSP has been continuously increasing from 2014 to reach the target of doubling farmers income.

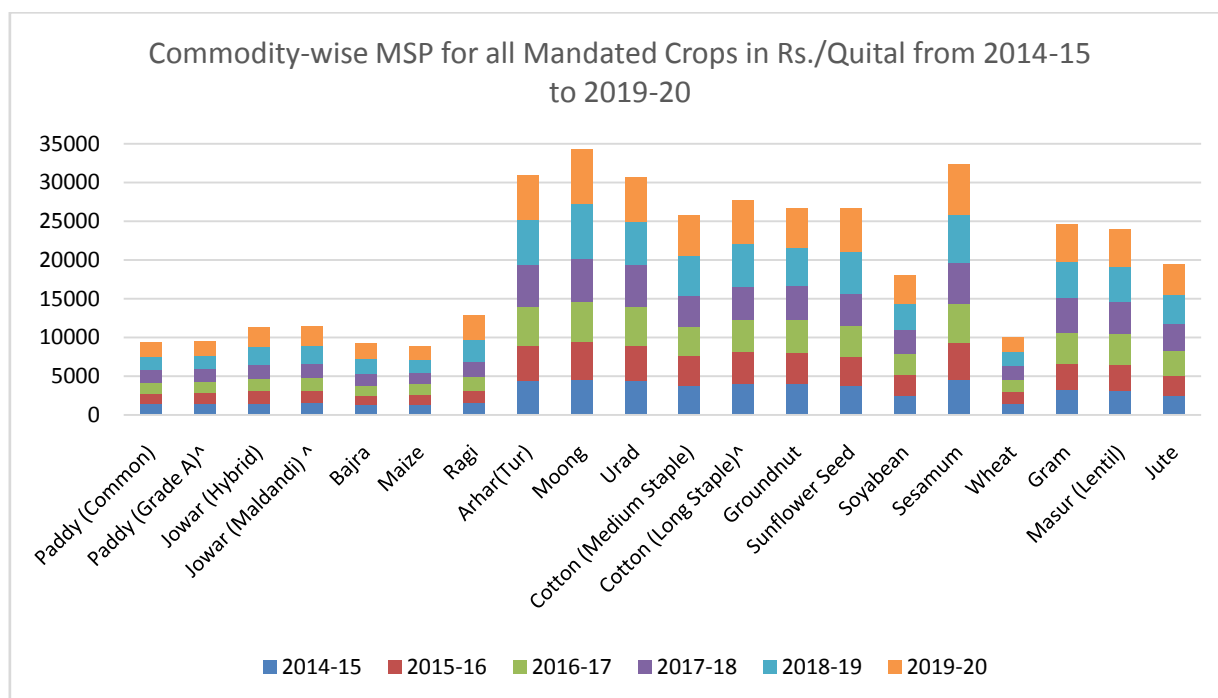


Figure 1- Source – Data.gov.in

Mr. Amit Shah claims in his recent article that in the previous six years, Wheat saw an increase of 41% in MSP, paddy – 43%, Masoor – 73%, Urad – 40%, Moong – 60%, Arhar – 40%, Sesam -52%, gram – 65%, groundnut – 33%.

Similarly, significant increase in purchase was also noticed.

In comparison with 2014, an increase of 73% in wheat and 114% in paddy has been witnessed.

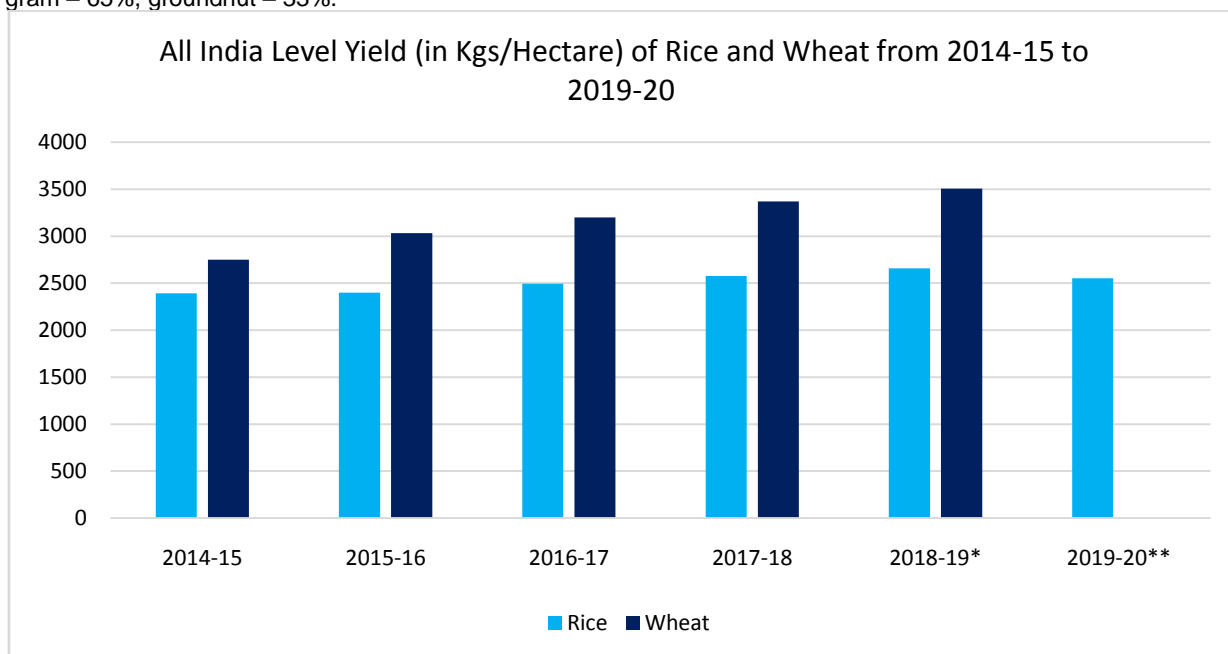


Figure 2 - Source – Data.gov.in

Similarly, in food production 7.29%, in gardening 12.4% and lentils (dahan) 20.65% was an increase.

In accordance with Swaminathan Commission recommendations, the agriculture minister, Mr. Narendra Singh Tomar announced in Lok Sabha, a highest increase in MSP for lentils

(Rs.300)/Quintal, gram and rapeseeds & mustard at (Rs. 225)/Quintal each and Safflower (Rs. 112 per quintal)¹².

Nearly 10.21 crore farmers have been benefitted by the 'PM Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojna' as around 94,000 crore rupees have been directly deposited in their accounts. Under the 'Pension Yojna', 19.9 lakh

farmers are being benefitted. An increase of 6.66 to 13.26 crores is estimated for the crop insurance scheme, 'PM Fasal Bima Yojna'. Overall, this has led to a growth of 35.6% in the agriculture sectoral budget. It is pivotal to note that despite global pandemic and lockdown, the farming sector witnessed 3.4% growth rate due to the tremendous efforts of the farmers. Agriculture sector has acted as a catalyst in improving financial condition even during the 2008

Global recession. According to research 2019-20 recorded a total food production of 29.5 crore ton (Figure 3) with 332 lakh ton in sugar produce and 8.5 crore ton milk production taking India to become top producers of sugar and milk in the world. Gardening, fruits and vegetables production is also at more than 32 crore ton, It is clearly evident that Indian farmers are excelling in producing everything except cooking oil and oilseeds production.

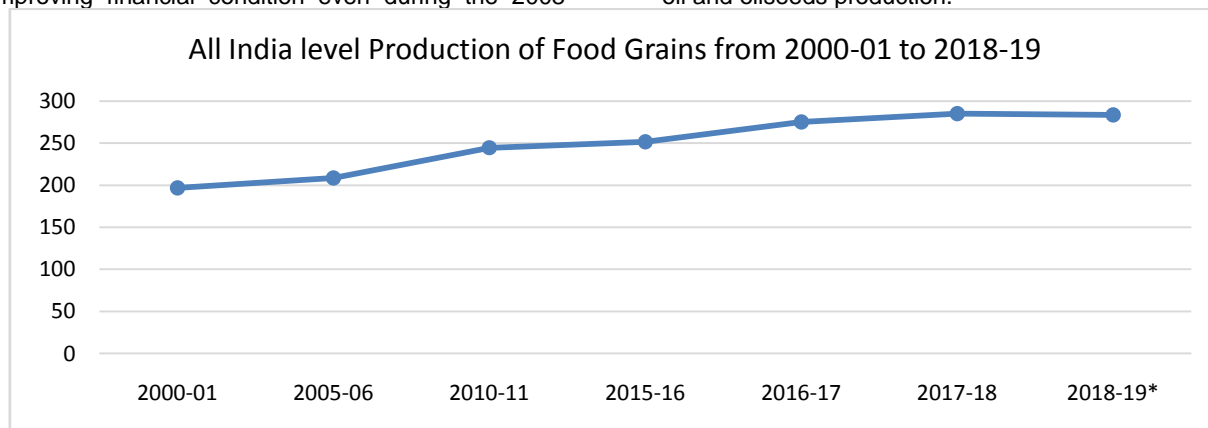


Figure 3 - Source – Data.gov.in

The question lies as why despite 1) concerted efforts of farmers who are making record breaking growth in production, 2) government's ongoing numerous structured policies aiming at increasing MSP, 3) increased purchase sales are all still unable to reflect parallel improvement in farmers' economic condition. There has been no guarantee of more yield- more profit for farmers. In contrast, the agrarian distress is reflected by burgeoning farmers' suicide rate as farmers accounted for 7.4% of total suicides¹³ in the country in 2019. Father of India's first Green revolution showed concern as well, "The cost, risk and return structure of farming is becoming unfavourable to farm families. As a result, the younger generations do not want to take farming as a profession. Even elders will like to quit if there is an opportunity to do so¹⁴.

Unavailability and poor infrastructure of food processing storage, warehouse and cold storage is the main reason for no substantial growth in income of farmers. Immediately after harvest, the farmer is enforced to sell the produce at very low and minimum price. However, the middleman buys at low and sells at huge gains to the end customer six months later. It is estimated that around 16% fruits and vegetables, 10% lentils and oilseeds etc. get destroyed due to unavailability of cold storages.

The government wants to spend Rs.1 lakh crore¹⁵ on establishment of food processing industry, cold storage and warehouses. About 20,050 crore worth of investment is expected in the industry of fishery and 15,000 crores has been announced by the government to be invested in the Milk and Dairy Industry. This is evident that government alone can't make such huge investments sans private sector contributions in the food production and distribution system. This year about 9.73 crore ton record foodgrain storage was available. Despite Corona, the

F.C.I and other agencies had 9.44 crore ton grains available in July which was five times the standard buffer quantity. Clearly, Indian farmers on the basis of their produce are capable of helping the nation fight the pandemic. However, the society and government on the other hand are not doing enough for them by providing appropriate food storage and prices.

According to policy experts, due to inefficient purchase and distribution policies, the government is unable to succeed. Post inclusion of storage, transportation, insurance and loan interest cost on the MSP, wheat is costing around Rs. 28838 / 100 kg and rice approx. Rs. 37267/ 100 kg to the government. On top of this cost, there is huge financial burden of subsidy and loan waiver as well. It is interesting to note that the government sells large grains at Rs. 1/kg, wheat at Rs. 2/kg and rice at Rs. 3/kg undergoing huge losses only to gain political advantage and sustain its popularity. In addition, the government prefers to put direct transfer in farmer's account instead of increasing their income, resulting in increasing the dead-weight loss.

The Way Forward

Globalization and opening of the Indian Economy in 1991 brought the advancement of technology in many sectors to improve services for the consumers. Agriculture sector on the other hand was ostracized as digitalization of this sector is yet to happen. The crucial point is that a farmer wants a guarantee that his social, financial and technological upliftment be assured after the full implementation of these intended policies. It is pivotal to understand that the reason behind such laws being implemented during corona time is that the people in India accept a reform when it is utmost necessary. This clearly is an example of political pragmatism. Reforms of 1991 were brought into action by a minority government led by P.V. Narasimha Rao when country's gold was put

mortgaged. In other words, accepting a new reform without any existing situation of social or economic turmoil is not the psychology of Indians. Therefore, it seems that these reforms are being introduced during global pandemic time deliberately by the politicians.

In the context of the farm bills, it must be noted that the farmers' concerns must be given utmost priority. The government must immediately intervene and recommend changes to assuage their apprehension and control the situation before it goes out of hand. Such a situation will lead to a potential political damage to the ruling party. Therefore, the following concerns of farmers should be amicably addressed:

1. Continuation of MSP as a protector for farmers be assured in the form of law.
2. For the sale of farmers produce, the mandis system should be continued in addition to open market. The round year social - livelihood relationship among the farmer – middlemen – seller be respected.
3. Farmers must be provided with his due role in the agro-industry. As far as the setting up of cold storage, food processing unit and technological upgradation is concerned, they should be provided with financial assistance.
4. The idea of opening of new Farmer Markets in the neighborhood is impressive but the only concern is that there should be special arrangements for protection of small farmers vis-à-vis the big farmers and industrialists.
5. 'Contract farming' agreement between a farmer and a food-chain businessman must be established taking into consideration the welfare of farmers. The government must also ensure the simplification of the contract-farming clause and that it is written in simple language.
6. While acquiring farmers' land for the setting up of cold storage, warehouses, food-processing units etc., the government must not take away the ownership from farmers. In contrast, the farmers' ownership across generations must be ensured. There should also be proper regulation regarding sale of land by farmers.
7. Role of female agriculturists and farmers be enhanced and instituted with specific laws. Increased contribution along with definite role of women in farm production, storage, processing and distribution will not only imply social upliftment but will also give a new direction for innovation and advancement in field of agriculture.

A farmer has never left the nation in a turmoil rather, stood firm supporting the Indian economy at times of distress. The Policy maker should keep this fact in their mind that a country totally dependent on crop export at the time of Independence for their survival, today has a massive population of more than 138 crores majorly fed by the domestic farmers. On the other hand, according to a report by NABARD-2018¹⁶, 52% of Indian farmers are under a debt of approximately Rs. 1 lakh. Several provisions of loan waivers have resulted as a failure in the improvement of condition of farmers.

If the new bills are implemented through the existing Social-Panchayat, it will lead to the provision of increase in the income of farmers. Limiting the role of middlemen, the payment gap between the farmer and final consumer will reduce benefitting both of them directly. Relationship between the farmer and mandi system will also keep progressing. According to a report, Karnataka farmers once transported their watermelon production directly via trains to the consumers and earned huge profit margin worth lakhs. A healthy relationship between the farmers and the private sector improving the storage and distribution mechanism will help reduce 10-16% of loss that occurs every year due to crop failure. This will eventually lead to improvement in GDP of India along with subsequent reduction in the amount of subsidy that government spends.

Stature of India as top agriculture produce exporter will rise and it will also definitely profit the industrialists and businessmen. Prof. Alagh asserts, "The role of international trade and incentives and policies determining profitability of agriculture will determine the growth of Indian agriculture and future outcomes"¹⁷. In conclusion, the farmer of India on the basis of their agriculture growth will be able to contribute more actively in the development of the nation. As a result, India will be able to stand as a respected developed nation or as the Prime Minister refers, "Atma Nirbhar Bharat".

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