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DEATH OF A STUDENT

It points finger at an education system that turns a blind eye to inequality

DISHA NAWANI

EVER SINCE THE young student, Aishwarya Reddy from Lady Shri Ram College, died by suicide, the media, political activists and civil society in general, besides expressing shock, grief and concern, have been busy identifying the culprits responsible for her untimely death. Aishwarya's story apparently has a "simple" narrative — an ambitious, bright girl from a poor family took her life due to her inability to buy gadgets required by her to continue her online education.

Four factors are being held primarily responsible for creating the circumstances that pushed her to choose death over life. They are havoc caused by the "digital divide" in accessing online education, the Department of Science & Technology's (DST) tardiness in giving her the well-deserved scholarship on time, and lack of knowledge on part of the college administration about its students' socio-economic backgrounds because of which all students, except the freshers, were asked to leave the hostel premises. The fourth factor pointed out by some is the girl's inability to proactively reach out to those in positions of authority for help. Who is blaming whom and why is not important, but one must understand that a hasty identification of "factors responsible" will lead to even more hastily "arrived at" solutions, which may, at best, be "quick-fix" and unable to address the deeper malaise plaguing our education system.

At the outset, we need to acknowledge that ours is an unequal society and our socio-economic and cultural locations determine the school that we go to and the nature/quality of education that we get. There is no awkwardness, guilt or repentance on part of either the policymakers for the stratified education system devised by them or us as consumers, for gleefully lapping it up.

It is important to recognise the huge pressures on students, even in regular circumstances — the pressure to do well academically, to dress or talk in a certain way, to appreciate a particular kind of music or film. COVID-19 unleashed multiple tensions for all students but turned the world upside down for those already struggling to survive.

While most students find it difficult to come out of their vicious cycles of disadvantage, a few resilient ones manage to enter those elite institutions, to which there is limited access. However, the challenges faced by these students outweigh the initial thrill of being admitted to such institutions. Once admitted, the college treats them alike. Everything that the students go through — syllabus, curricular resources, pedagogic processes, assessment practices — is uniform/same for everyone, irrespective of the divergent spaces they come from. Children with different caste, class, religion and ethnicity, with unequal economic, social and cultural capital, are all treated alike. Herein lie the seeds of inequality, because what seems to be equal and neutral is in effect unequal and biased. This does not mean that a heterogeneous mix of students accessing a good institution is a bad idea. However, that is not enough and it is the responsibility of the institutions to make such spaces more democratic and egalitarian, and adopt more proactive measures to reach out to their students, especially those belonging to marginalised backgrounds.

It is important to recognise that the pressures faced by such students, even in regular circumstances are huge — the pressure to do well academically, pressure to conform and look/dress/talk in a certain way, appreciate a particular kind of music/film, the list is long and encompasses every part of their being.

COVID-19, however, unleashed multiple tensions for all students but turned the world upside down for those already struggling to survive. Aishwarya would have also had her share of troubles but the change in environment from college to home must have made matters worse — the biggest of which was no access to those very gadgets which would allow her to continue her education, something she was so passionate about. She would have also experienced the painful everyday struggle of her parents, the inability, desperation and frustration of her father to buy her a laptop and the guilt of pushing him to mortgage their house and forcing her younger sister to drop out of school.

Do all these factors make her death her personal problem, requiring counselling due to poverty, anxiety, depression and inability to cope, etc? Or is it the responsibility of the college which admitted her but made no attempt to reach out to her or the DST which did not release her scholarship on time? Or is it the responsibility of every single person who believes that more islands of excellence should be created; celebrates exclusive spaces for the meritorious few; turns a blind eye to struggles of others, considering them their destiny; and who sees state support as acts of charity doled out to the less fortunate ones?

The writer is professor and dean, School of Education, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

After fertiliser, govt may now review outlay on food subsidy

DILASHA SETH & SANJEEB MUKHERJEE
New Delhi, 30 November

After hiking fertiliser subsidy, the Centre may have to take a relook at the food subsidy outlay, with 91 per cent of the allocation already achieved in the first seven months of the current fiscal year. This might have prompted it to not extend the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY)) (free foodgrains scheme).

Extending the free foodgrains scheme, would have added on to government's spending pressure amid bleak revenue outlook and higher capital expenditure going forward.

While the free food grain distribution scheme under the PMGKAY ended on Monday, economists say a large part of it was not accounted for in the fiscal package even as the government increased its borrowing programme. There were also talk of extending the scheme, but no decision has been taken so far, given the financial implications.

Of the ₹1.15 trillion budgeted as food subsidy for the fiscal year, ₹1.05 trillion was spent by October, according to data by the controller general of accounts. October saw a 27 per cent jump in food subsidy spend on a month-on-month basis compared to a 16 per cent monthly increase seen in September.

Last year, about 70 per cent of the total food subsidy allocation was exhausted by October.

REPORT CARD

(in ₹ crore)

Figures in ₹ cr	Budget estimates 2020-21	Aduals up to Oct 2020	% of aduals to BE
Food subsidy	115,569.68	105,203.19	91.0
Nutrient-based fertiliser subsidy*	23,504.0	12,795.43	54.0
Urea subsidy*	47,805.0	48,010.53	100.4
Petroleum subsidy	40,915.21	19,390.67	47.0
Total major subsidies	**227,793.89**	**185,399.82**	**81.0**

*Govt has announced an additonal outlay of ₹65,000 crore for fertiliser subsidy
Source: Controller General of Accounts

"The Centre will have to provide for over ₹5.70 trillion from its own finances in 2020-21 if it wants to clear all its subsidy and payment dues accruing to Food Corporation of India (FCI) and others," said a senior government official. In June, the government had extended the free grain distribution scheme to November taking up the total spend to ₹1.5 trillion. In a normal year, the actual food subsidy on the National Food Security Act (NFSA) is around ₹1.8 trillion (which includes subsidy to FCI and decentralised procurement states).

However, this year, the subsidy will rise by another ₹1.5 trillion because of expenditure incurred on distributing free grain. Thus, the government's total food subsidy bill in 2020-21 is estimated to be over ₹3 trillion (NFSA+ Garib Kalyan).

In addition, it may have to make a provision for another ₹20,000 crore (at least) towards pending payment dues for the decentralised procurement by states.

"Of the ₹1.5 trillion of the free food grain distribution scheme, only ₹30,000 crore was included in the fiscal package. So, it is unclear where the balance will come from. It is to be seen whether it will come as National Small Savings Fund (NSSF) loan to FCI or the government will increase its borrowing programme. That is the confusion," said Aditi Nayar, principal economist, ICRA Ratings.

"Our fiscal deficit estimate at 7.7 per cent of GDP can no way fully accommodate the food subsidy. There is an under-budgeting of ₹1.2 trillion for which the source of funding remains unclear," added Nayar.

Madan Sabanvis, chief economist, CARE Ratings, said that since the free food grain distribution scheme will not be extended beyond November, the spending pressure will ease. However, the government will need to make additional provisioning for food subsidy for the current fiscal year or will have to roll it over to the next fiscal.

NSSF loans have been the government's default option to fund expenditure in the past few years, as it tries to ensure that the fiscal deficit is kept in check. Even before Covid-19 struck, FCI, the government's main designated agency to procure and supply millions of tonnes of cheap grains to the poor, had an outstanding loan of around ₹2.54 trillion from the NSSF as on March 31, 2020.

While the government is facing pressure to meet the capex target for the fiscal year, 81 per cent of the subsidy budget allocation has already been met in the first seven months of the fiscal. Earlier this month, the government hiked fertiliser subsidy outlay by another ₹65,000 crore, up from ₹71,309 crore allocated in the budget, taking the total to ₹1.36 trillion.

The Centre had budgeted to borrow ₹7.80 trillion in FY21 but was forced to raise it by as much as 54 per cent in May amid decline in revenue.

Wendy's ties up with Rebel Foods to open 250 Cloud kitchens

PEERZADA ABRAR
Bengaluru, 1 December

American fast-food restaurant chain Wendy's Company has formed a strategic partnership with food tech company Rebel Foods to expand its presence in India over the next decade.

As part of the plan, Rebel Foods will partner Sierra Nevada Restaurants to develop and operate about 250 Wendy's Cloud kitchens across India, and Sierra Nevada will develop 150 traditional Wendy's restaurants.

"This is a game-changing partnership. Rebel Foods, Wendy's, and Sierra Nevada all believe in quality, speed, and the convenience that comes from multiple channels," said Kallol Banerjee, co-founder of Rebel Foods.

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely impacted the restaurant business. Many restaurant chains are adopting new technologies to earn their clients' trust regarding food safety and hygiene.

For generations, Banerjee said, brands building a national presence relied solely on a brick-and-mortar strategy and made significant investments over decades. He said by partnering the Rebel Foods network of existing kitchens in India, Wendy's will get immediate access to rapid scale across the country, at far lower levels of capital. "We have always wanted to partner with a world-class burger brand, and this tie-up with a globally beloved name is a fantastic addition to our portfolio," said Banerjee.

Rebel Foods is the world's largest operator of online restaurants with over 300 Cloud kitchens across India, the UAE, South East Asia, and the UK. A Cloud kitchen is one that does not offer dine-in facility and accepts food orders only through an online ordering system. The Mumbai-based company is known for brands like Faasos, Behrouz Biryani, Mandarin Oak, and Oven Story. It has raised total funding of $342.3 million from investors, including Sequoia.

Sierra Nevada Restaurants launched Wendy's in India in 2015 and operates four traditional restaurants and five Cloud kitchens in the National Capital Region. Wendy's and its franchisees operate more than 6,800 restaurants worldwide.

Abigail Pringle, president, international and chief development officer of Wendy's Company, said the partnership reflects the company's commitment to growing its international business in strategic high-growth potential markets.

Macro backdrop calls for status quo on rates

GAURAV KAPUR

The macroeconomic backdrop for the December Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting is one of recovery gaining traction from a recession, on one hand, and CPI inflation holding well above the upper-end of the target band of 6 per cent for five consecutive months, on the other.

Official estimates of the second quarter gross domestic product (GDP) showed that in a multi-speed recovery, manufacturing sector helped both by improving domestic trade and external demand is normalising, even as farm sector continues to show positive growth, while services sector is lagging. PMI data for the current quarter shows that manufacturing sector activity picked up sequentially, while private services, came out of contraction. Farm sector prospects also look better this year on a normal monsoon.

RUN-UP TO MPC MEETING

However, a confluence of factors – supply disruptions, erratic monsoons induced food price spikes, higher taxes on fuel and intoxicants, along with high precious metal prices – have led to headline inflation rising faster than anticipated. This setting, thus, calls for status quo on rates to be extended and a reassessment of the growth and inflation outlook, given the high degree of uncertainty associated with any GDP growth estimate at this stage.

The MPC in all likelihood would keep the repo rate unchanged at 4 per cent, extending the pause from its August and October meetings and reiterating the accommodative stance. There is a risk of food inflation becoming more generalised and dragging already weak consumption lower. The MPC members flagged that in the October meeting and will be carefully monitoring this spillover. Moreover, a better-than-expected growth outturn would provide time for the MPC to see through transient food price pressures and assess the underlying inflationary conditions beyond November, as food prices seasonally witness easing from December.

The scope for repo rate easing is limited to 25-50 basis points (bps) and any further easing may now only happen in the next fiscal year. Headline CPI inflation could ease gradually towards the 4 per cent target over the next four quarters, on the back of easing food inflation and protracted recovery in consumption, after the pent-up demand is met. Real GDP growth should pick up, too, with a positive headline print likely in the current quarter. But, in all likelihood the March 2019 level of GDP may only be achieved in March 2022. That in turn would keep the output gap negative and keep demand side pressures on inflation in check. Thus, lower food inflation and below potential GDP would open up space for further monetary policy easing in April or June 2021.

In terms of the forward guidance, the MPC has already made it clear that it would maintain an accommodative stance for this year and for most of next fiscal year, in order to aid normalisation of economic activity from this year and to ensure a meaningful recovery in the next. That implies that policy rates will remain lower for longer, even though any further easing may be limited in magnitude. The focus of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in the meantime will remain on improving transmission of past policy signals through banking, sovereign bonds and credit market channels. The aim of RBI is to ensure that lower policy rates are reflected in lower cost of borrowings for the Centre, states and the corporate sector. Through its open market bond purchases, for both central and state governments, RBI will continue to reduce the cost of borrowings for the general government. The central bank may also provide some guidance on the withdrawal of liquidity, with durable surplus now touching ₹8 trillion.

(The author is the chief economist of IndusInd Bank. Views are personal)

Answering farmers' knock

Centre must carefully consider options, do the groundwork, close the communication gap

ASHOK GULATI

FARMERS HAVE PROTESTED against the recently enacted farm laws by converging on Delhi's highways connected to neighbouring states. The agitation is primarily led by Punjab farmers, although some other groups have also joined. I believe every citizen has the right to protest peacefully. But blocking highways reveals their intention is to create chaos and disruption, which may go out of hand.

Here, let me also say that I feel there is a gross communication failure on the part of the central government to explain to farmers what these laws are, and how they are intended to benefit them. This communication gap was fully exploited by some political parties and social activists, who themselves are facing an existentialist threat and believe that the Narendra Modi government can do no good for this country. A massive misinformation campaign was launched, saying that these laws are a sell-out to corporate houses, will abolish the MSP system, dismantle APMC mandis, and even capture farmers' lands. Nothing can be further from the truth.

Neither do the laws say anything about it, nor is the MSP/APMC system going to disappear with these laws. Yes, what would certainly come under pressure is the high commission of *arhtias*, mandi fees and cess that states collect, which account for as much as 8.5 per cent over the MSP in Punjab, amounting to roughly Rs 4,500 to 5,000 crore each year. A substantial chunk of this is never audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India.

What are the policy options now that the farmers have dug in their heels? Punjab farmer leaders, including two major political parties, demand repeal of these laws. I don't think that would be in the larger interest of the country's peasantry, as repealing would mean bringing back controls, licence raj and the resultant rent-seeking. Remember milk, poultry, fishery, etc. don't go through the mandi system and their growth rates are 3 to 5 times higher than that of wheat and rice. Overall, almost 90 per cent of the agri-produce is sold to the private sector.

Since many states and activists are saying that agricultural marketing is a state subject and, through these laws, the Centre is trampling over their jurisdiction, then why even have a central MSP? Since MSP and procurement exist basically to support farmers for supplying grains to the FCI to feed into the PDS, let the whole money on so-called food subsidy be allocated to states on the basis of their share in all-India poverty/proportion of vulnerable population, all-India wheat and rice production, all-India procurement of wheat and rice, etc.

Another demand is making the MSP statutory and legally binding even on the private sector, implying that anyone buying below MSP could face prison. Let me say that it is not the first time that such a demand has been raised. It came up several times even during the time of the UPA government in 2004-13, and it was rejected every time. I consider this impractical as there are 23 commodities for which MSPs are announced, but in actual practice only wheat and rice enjoy MSPs in any meaningful manner, and that too only in 6-7 states. Punjab is the biggest gainer as its 95-98 per cent of market arrivals of wheat and paddy are procured at MSP by state agencies on behalf of the Food Corporation of India (FCI). The FCI is overloaded with grain stocks that are more than 2.5 times the buffer stock norms, indicating massive economic inefficiency in the grain management system, costing the tax-payers thousands of crores without serving any purpose, and that, too, at a time when the country desperately needs funds to tackle COVID-19 at home and China on its borders. I consider this policy option impractical because if the government cannot cope up with excess production of just wheat and rice in any meaningful way, think of how it will handle 23 commodities under MSP.

In case of excess production, the private sector will not come forward to buy at MSP, and the government will not have the wherewithal to buy all and stock them without any viable outlet. It will massively distort markets, make Indian agriculture non-competitive and stocking of these will be financially unsustainable. And then, why only 23 commodities, why not 40? This type of state socialism is a sure path to financial disaster.

The third policy option is to use the Price Stabilisation Scheme to give a lift to market prices by pro-actively buying a part of the surplus whenever market prices crash, say more than 20 per cent below MSP. It can be done directly by NAFED-type agencies that are already active in the case of pulses and oilseeds, or use Commodity Derivatives Exchanges where farmers can buy "put options" at MSP before they even sow their crops, and if the market prices at the time of harvest turn out to be below MSP, government can compensate them partly for lower market prices. I consider it a feasible option, and it can kick in immediately.

The fourth option is to totally decentralise the MSP, procurement, stocking, and public distribution system (PDS). Since many states and activists are saying that agricultural marketing is a state subject and, through these laws, the Centre is trampling over their jurisdiction, then why even have a central MSP? Since MSP and procurement exist basically to support farmers for supplying grains to the FCI to feed into the PDS, let the whole money on so-called food subsidy be allocated to states on the basis of their share in all-India poverty/proportion of vulnerable population, all-India wheat and rice production, all-India procurement of wheat and rice, etc.

A well thought-out formula is needed to allocate, say, Rs 1,00,000 crore of food subsidy. And then let the states decide what should be the state MSP and let them handle procurement and stocking costs. The deficit states can invite tenders for supplying them required quantities or, even better, they may introduce cash transfers in the PDS system. I would go a step further and include another Rs 1,00,000 crore of fertiliser subsidy and free up fertiliser prices from any controls. Still further, even include another Rs 1,00,000, say, of MNREGA. Let the Finance Commission work out a formula for distribution of this Rs 3,00,000 crore amongst states based on some tangible performance indicators. And the Centre should get off from MSP, PDS, fertiliser subsidy, and MNREGA.

This would be true decentralisation, and can be accomplished provided enough groundwork is done well in advance. But will this be acceptable to farmer leaders/opposing states/activists? Only time will tell.

Gulati is Infosys Chair professor for agriculture

CSE exposes 'honeygate', says top brands fail adulteration test

Dabur, Emami, Patanjali dismiss claims, say their products safe

VIVEAT SUSAN PINTO
Mumbai, 2 December

Some of the country's top honey brands, including Dabur, Patanjali, and Emami, have failed an adulteration test carried out by a foreign laboratory, the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) said on Wednesday, bringing into focus the issue of contamination of honey, which is widely used as an immunity booster in India.

Among big brands, only Marico's Saffola Honey cleared all the tests, pointing to the level of adulteration among popular honey labels, the CSE said. Smaller brands, on the other hand, failed laboratory tests for both Indian and foreign standards, the organisation based in New Delhi said.

According to the CSE, honey, which is a natural product acquired from bees, is mixed with sugar syrup acquired from rice, corn, beetroot, and sugarcane and passed off as pure — a clear health hazard.

THE HONEY TRAP

- Big honey labels using adulterants, says CSE
- Adulterants include sugar syrup derived from rice, corn, beetroot, and sugarcane
- China was source of adulterants till last year
- Ban on Chinese imports this year pushing companies to source locally

The investigation began after tip-offs received from Indian beekeepers pointed to widespread contamination of honey by domestic manufacturers, who were allegedly sourcing sugar syrup from China. After the ban on Chinese imports recently, Indian manufacturers now locally source sugar syrup from plants located in states such as Uttarakhand.

Sunita Narain, director general, CSE, said it was the sheer economics of the operation that was pushing companies to adulterate. Sugar syrup is available for half the price of raw honey. An indicator of this is the falling price of raw honey, which has crashed to ₹60-70 per kg now from ₹150 per kg six years ago. Beekeepers unable to match this price have been getting out of the business over the last few years.

"There is no norm that permits the mixing of honey with sugar syrup. But companies have been doing so and making huge profits in the process," Narain said. "We need the beekeepers because without them, there will be a decline in bees. And without bees, we will lose productivity of food, as they are crucial pollinators," she said.

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Task force to create roadmap for technical education in mother tongue

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 2

UNION EDUCATION Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal on Wednesday announced the setting up of a task force for creating a roadmap to impart technical education in the mother tongue. The task force, which will be chaired by Higher Education Secretary Amit Khare, has been asked to submit a report in a month.

Ramesh Pokhriyal

The move stems from the new National Education Policy (NEP), which encourages the use of mother tongue and regional languages as the medium of teaching in schools as well as professional programmes in higher education.

"The minister said that no language will be imposed on any student but enabling provisions should be made so that bright students are not deprived of technical education due to lack of knowledge of English language," a press release by the Education Ministry said.

In a first, lab-grown chicken to go on sale in Singapore

LESLIE PATTON
2 December

Eat Just, a maker of meat and egg substitutes, has been approved to sell its laboratory-created chicken in Singapore, which becomes the first government to allow the sale of cultured meat.

The product, created from animal cells without the slaughter of any chickens, will debut in Singapore under the GOOD Meat brand as a chicken bite with breading and seasoning in a single restaurant. Eat Just is initially working with local manufacturer the Food Innovation and Resource Centre to make the cultured chicken. Additionally, the company is buying more equipment to expand sales to other restaurants — and eventually

grocery stores.

"We want Singapore to be the focus of our manufacturing globally," Chief Executive Officer Josh Tetrick said in an interview. "They're just really forward thinking in building an enabling environment for this kind of work."

He added that the chicken's flavor and taste are the same as the real thing.

Singapore is moving quickly to allow the sale of alternative proteins like cultured meat, a move that fits into its broader food-security agenda. The densely populated nation, which relies mostly on other countries for food, has deepened its focus on getting enough to eat for its 5.7 million people as the Covid-19 crisis exposes fragility in supply chains worldwide.

Authorities allow alternative proteins to be sold after they are found to be safe for consumption. This year, plant-based meat maker Impossible Foods entered the retail market in Singapore and Hong Kong with its product sold in grocery stores.

The city-state is trying to produce 30 per cent of its own food by 2030, up from less than 10 per cent today, and has recently accelerated funding for local farms. "Singapore has really spent a lot more time and energy getting this right than Western Europe and the US," Tetrick said.

The new chicken product will be priced similar to premium chicken for the first six months, Tetrick said, adding that the cost will come down over time as the company builds global scale. "Eventually we want to get to the place where it is significantly more cost effective than conventional production."

That could take a while, since chicken is one of the most inexpensive proteins.

Humane, sustainable

At the same time, fast-food chains and grocery stores have been rapidly adding meat alternatives to their menus. While cultured meat is real meat, and not a plant-based substitute, it can be marketed as more humane and environmentally sustainable.

In Singapore, cultured burgers may be next. Eat Just is planning to submit its application for lab-created beef there during the first half of next year. **BLOOMBERG**

Honey sold by major brands is laced with sugar syrup, says CSE

Dabur, Patanjali reject charges; FSSAI says it will study findings, take action

SOURAV ROY BARMAN
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 2

HONEY SOLD by major brands in India are laced with a modified sugar syrup, imported from China as well as manufactured in India, which go undetected during quality checks under prevailing Indian standards, a Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) investigation has found.

The major brands named by CSE include Dabur and Patanjali. Both have rejected the charges.

The CSE also released a paper trail showing revisions in the Indian quality standards for honey brought about by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) between 2017 and 2020. When contacted, the FSSAI said it will study the findings published by the CSE and take necessary action.

Addressing a press conference Wednesday, CSE director general Sunita Narain said samples of 10 out of 13 brands, which were examined, failed to clear the Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR) test, which can provide clues into the composition of a product at the molecular level.

Of the 10 brands, three failed to clear even Indian quality standards, while five failed the TMR (test to detect rice syrup) apart from NMR. The tests were carried out in a German lab, Narain said.

EXPLAINED

FSSAI's red flags on syrup use

THE CSE findings assume significance as the FSSAI, a statutory body mandated to ensure food safety, has red flagged the use of syrups in honey thrice in the recent past. It directed the states in December 2019 and June 2020 to enhance surveillance, sampling and inspections of honey manufacturing units. On May 26, 2020, it directed traders importing certain kinds of syrups to share details of manufacturers to whom the products were being supplied, observing that they were being used in production of honey.

Incidentally, on August 1, NMR tests were made mandatory for honey being exported from India. Also, TMR tests were removed from the list of quality parameters in October 2019.

The German lab found that "Dabur honey passed tests for C3 and C4 sugar, but failed the NMR tests on all three samples. In one sample it also failed on TMR and Patanjali honey passed tests for C3 and C4 sugar, but failed TMR and NMR tests on both samples".

In its response, Dabur India Ltd said, "The recent reports seem motivated and aimed at maligning our brand. We assure our consumers that Dabur Honey is 100% pure. We also assure our consumers that Dabur does not import any honey/syrup from China and our honey is sourced entirely from Indian beekeepers."

"Dabur is complying with the 22 parameters... mandated by FSSAI. In addition, Dabur Honey is also tested for the presence of antibiotics, as mandated by FSSAI. Further, Dabur is the only company in India to have an NMR testing equipment in our own laboratory," it added.

Patanjali Ayurved Ltd MD Acharya Balakrishnan also stressed on the "100 per cent purity" of the company's product. "It seems to be a plot to defame Indian natural honey industry and manufacturers in a bid to promote processed honey. It further seems to be an international marketing design to promote German technology and machines which cost crores of rupees," he said.

When contacted for response to the claims on quality checks in the country, FSSAI CEO Arun Singhal told The Indian Express, "Our scientific panel felt that TMR was no longer necessary as specific marker tests (SMR) had been mandated for rice syrup. The Ministry of Agriculture concurs with this view. SMR can detect the presence of rice syrup. Some groups have been advocating the use of NMR machines. NMR happens to be very costly and the volume of testing at present would not make it cost effective for food testing labs. Moreover, our experts feel that the tests, which are mandated, are adequate to detect adulteration and an adequate database is not available yet to utilise NMR technique. In case of exports, NMR machines are used as some countries mandate that only honey certified through NMR is sold within their jurisdictions."

"We will study the findings published by CSE and take all action necessary to ensure that only pure and unadulterated honey is sold in our country," he said.

However, Narain said the CSE was not advocating the need to make NMR mandatory as "the Chinese can make syrups that bypass NMR tests next".

The CSE said it was demanding that import of syrups and honey from China be stopped and that the Indian government should get samples tested using advanced technologies and make this information public so that consumers are aware.

Learning in many tongues

NEP must tap children's astonishing linguistic ability as a classroom resource

RAMA KANT AGNIHOTRI

IN VARIOUS PROGRAMMES preparing teachers for schools, language is one of the most neglected areas. It was with some difficulty it found a place in programmes such as Delhi University's four-year Bachelor of Elementary Education programme and TISS's Master of Arts in Education (Elementary) programme. Even there, it seems in dire straits now.

One can indeed argue that teachers should have a solid understanding of philosophy and aims of education, history, sociology, psychology, political economy and issues of marginalisation, gender and disability, among others, but it should not be difficult to see that all these are themselves eventually mediated through language. And that they demand high levels of reading comprehension in both the teacher and the taught. Yet, teachers generally arrive in schools without any understanding of the nature, structure and acquisition of language. It is not their fault. That's the way they themselves have been educated, without putting a question mark on the stereotypes they carry about language as a part of their mental baggage created during their socialisation, schooling and education.

It should not be difficult to find teachers who believe, among other questionable things, that children learn languages from their environment largely through imitation and practice; that dialects are significantly inferior to languages; that Hindi is our national language; that Sanskrit is the mother of all languages, at least of all Indian languages, and that it is the most scientific, expressive and beautiful language; that the script used for Hindi is far more scientific than the one used for English or German; that second or foreign languages are best learnt through a combination of teaching grammatical rules and vocabulary.

The fault does not entirely lie with the programmes in education — linguists must accept a part of the blame. For linguists, irrespective of whether they belong to the structural tradition extending from Panini to Ferdinand Saussure to Leonard Bloomfield or to the more recent tradition of generative grammar introduced by Noam Chomsky, the study of language is essentially a formal matter, closer to mathematics and physics than to society and education. It does not matter whether you believe that each language is different (traditional structuralism) or all languages are a manifestation of the same universal grammar located in the human language faculty (modern structuralism). In the former case, your focus is the set of rules that govern the specific language under consideration; in the latter, your focus is the mental representation of the principles that govern all languages. There are also not enough linguists around to take up this challenge. The departments of linguistics across the country are either shrinking or have already been closed down. How can we ensure high levels of critical enquiry without high levels of proficiency in academic literacy and how is that possible unless future teachers have some idea of the nature, structure and acquisition of language?

Four-year-old children arrive in schools almost as "linguistic adults" — "almost" because acquisition of vocabulary and specialised registers is a life-long exercise. Since teachers are not equipped to appreciate "what" is it that the child has cracked, they fail to appreciate the potential of the child as a learner, who can abstract highly complex rules from limited and highly impoverished data. Since the nature of "what" is acquired is not understood, naïve explanations such as "through imitation and practice" are sought as justified answers to the question of "how is language acquired".

Of the four years, a child sleeps at least for two — she has several other things to negotiate in addition to acquiring language. And notice she acquires not just one but all the languages that constitute her environment. This is possible because all children are genetically endowed with immense linguistic and cognitive potential.

Imagine a Punjabi child growing up in a family that has to move to Delhi because a parent has been transferred. Punjabi is the only tonal language in India, except for those spoken in the Northeast. The new languages this child may learn are the non-tonal Hindi and English. Punjabi and Hindi, like all other Indian languages (except Khasi), are verb final but English is verb-medial (Mohan *eats* an apple). Not only that, English has prepositions (*on* the table) but Hindi and Punjabi have post-positions (*mez par*). Hindi and Punjabi mark gender in the verb, English doesn't care about this. Except in the case of third person, present tense, singular, English does not worry much about number or person either ("She walks" but "I/ we/ you/ they walk") — only slight changes in the auxiliary sometimes. At the level of words, English makes only one plural, Hindi and Punjabi will have six forms for every noun. Consider whether *larke* in Hindi is singular or plural. This is just a glimpse of the verbal repertoire of our Punjabi child. Other children are no different. A child internalises these highly rule-governed systems along with socially appropriate usage automatically without any explicit instruction.

It is unfortunate that though the draft NEP 2020 talks a lot about "multilingualism", it does not recognise that children arrive in school not with "a language" but with a complex verbal repertoire that may be simultaneously located in what are construed as several different languages. A focus on language in teacher education will go a long way in helping future teachers use this complex verbal repertoire as a resource — rather than appear to them as an impediment. Unless we adopt this perspective, there is no easy way to concretise the slogan of "mother tongue education" given the fact that the Census itself counts at least 20,000 of them.

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A safety net for farmers

Why should Indian agriculture be liberalised when in most countries governments subsidise it?

CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT AND HEMAL THAKKER

ON SEPTEMBER 27, President Ram Nath Kovind gave his assent to three contentious farm bills passed by Parliament — The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020 (FAPAFS), the Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020 (FPTC) and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020 (EC). These bills were passed by the Rajya Sabha with a voice vote in spite of the Opposition asking for a recorded division of the votes.

Essentially changing the rules around sale, storage and pricing of farm produce, the bills will permit private buyers to hoard essential commodities for future sales, which only government-authorised agents could do earlier, along with changing the rules for contract farming. The bills have been touted as a watershed moment for Indian agriculture by the Prime Minister, as the government claims that the reforms would remove the shackles from the agriculture sector and free farmers from the stranglehold of middlemen by creating one market. However, farmers' unions and groups have concerns about two major issues: First, since the Minimum Support Price (MSP) is not mentioned in the bills, they fear that they will lose the assured option of selling to the APMC mandis and that this will lead to corporate exploitation. Second, they apprehend a process of corporatisation of agriculture in the absence of regulation, as agribusiness firms might well be able to dictate both the market conditions (including prices) and the terms of contract farming as small farmers do not have the same bargaining power.

Indian farmers, in particular, worry that the farm bills may clear the way for giant Indian companies. When Akali Dal leader Harsimrat Kaur Badal resigned from the Narendra Modi government, she said, citing a farmer from Punjab, "Jio came in, they gave free phones. When everyone bought those phones and got dependent on these phones, the competition was wiped out and Jio jacked up their rates. This is exactly what the corporates are going to do [with agriculture]". Some farmers' groups in Punjab forced the closure of Reliance stores in protest as Mukesh Ambani expressed his interest in agriculture. In 2017, he had declared "Agriculture, education and healthcare — all three are on our roadmap..."

The Adani group has also made some investments in the agri-business infrastructure space. "At Adani, we want to be known as the big agri-infrastructure player and Adani Wilmar to be a big food company in the country," said Atul Chaturvedi, CEO, agribusiness at the Adani Group, in an interview. Adani Agri Logistics has invested in the grain storage-handling-transportation network, while the Adani Wilmar joint venture is also looking to expand in food commodities.

The farmers' suspicion is understandable. Not only because big players have a lot of clout, but also because past experiences have not been rewarding. For instance, the management of the crop insurance scheme against natural disasters, introduced in 2017, was handed over to one of Anil Ambani's companies, among others. As P Sainath has reported, the farmers did not profit from it.

Why should agriculture be liberalised in the first place when in most countries governments subsidise this sector? In the US, the agriculture sector is expected to receive $46 billion in federal subsidies this year. This accounts for about 40 per cent of the total farm income and, if not for those subsidies, the US farm income was poised to decline in 2020, according to a report by *The New York Times*. Similarly, the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy spending has averaged €54 billion annually since 2006.

Without some support from the state, the smallest of Indian peasants would be even more vulnerable. According to provisional numbers from the 10th Agriculture Census 2015–2016, in India, "smallholder and marginal farmers" (those with less than two hectares of land) account for 86.2 per cent of all cultivators — that is, almost 126 million people. For them, it is inconceivable to carry their produce to other states or far-off places to sell. They will not easily resist the deals "proposed" by agribusiness firms. Should they disappear in the name of the modernisation of agriculture, which means concentration of land and mechanisation?

That could be a good idea if the industrial sector could offer them jobs. But the share of the secondary sector in total employment has been stagnant at around 26 per cent (as against 41 per cent for agriculture) and its share in the GDP is declining. The tertiary sector has not been able to create enough jobs either and most migrant labourers in cities live in precarious circumstances, as the reverse migration due to the COVID-19 lockdown clearly demonstrated. Should more peasants leave their land to end up in cities without proper jobs? Already, the gap between urban and rural India in terms of per capita resources is widening.

It would be far more prudent to increase public investment in agriculture in terms of infrastructure and in the form of income support schemes like the Rythu Bandhu in Telangana or the Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation in Odisha. This, coupled with ensuring that no transaction can be done below the MSP, would help alleviate some rural distress.

But money is not the only problem (or solution). For making farming sustainable, the government should draw inspiration from Andhra Pradesh's community managed farming model which promotes agro-ecological principles with the use of locally produced, ecologically sustainable inputs, focusing on soil health, instead of depending on chemical fertilisers. This model is more resilient as well as more biodiverse in nature and provides a safety net to farmers.

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HONEY ADULTERATION ISSUE

FSSAI questions body for not conducting SMR test

Food safety regulator seeks details of CSE tests on honey

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, 3 December

Food safety regulator FSSAI on Thursday sought details of the CSE tests that claimed to have busted adulterants in the top 10 honey brands, even as it raised questions over why its prescribed tests were not conducted.

In a statement, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) said the CSE found the adulterants by using "the non-prescription" Trace Marker for Rice syrup (TMR) test instead of "a more sensitive" Specific Marker for Rice syrup test (SMR).

Stating that it has taken note of the CSE investigation on adulteration in honey, FSSAI said it had already made SMR test mandatory as it is "a more focused test to detect adulteration of rice syrup in honey." "It is not clear as to why some tests like SMR have not been conducted on the samples...," the statement said. "FSSAI has requested for details of the samples and the tests conducted from CSE."

Once the details are available, they will be analysed by

FSSAI to draw conclusions about the protocols followed and suggest any improvements that are required in the test methodology for the future, it added.

On Wednesday, environment watchdog CSE claimed that honey sold by several major brands in India has been found to be adulterated with sugar syrup. Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) food researchers selected 13 top as well as smaller brands of processed and raw honey being sold in India to check their purity. It was found that 77 per cent of the samples were adulterated with sugar syrup. Out of the 22 samples checked, only five passed all the tests.

"Honey samples from leading brands such as Dabur, Patanjali, Baidyanath, Zandu, Hitkari and Apis Himalaya, all failed the NMR (Nuclear Magnetic Resonance) test," the study said. Emami (Zandu), Dabur, Patnajali Ayurveda and Apis Himalaya have refuted the claims made by the CSE.

"One of the points raised in this investigation is about the non-prescription of Trace Marker for Rice syrup (TMR) for detecting adulteration of rice syrup in honey. In view of the fact, a more sensitive Specific Marker for Rice syrup test (SMR) has already been made mandatory and is a more focused test to detect adulteration of rice syrup in honey, hence, it was felt by scientific experts that TMR is not necessary," FSSAI said.

This view was concurred by the Ministry of Agriculture, and hence TMR has not been made mandatory as a test method. Regarding the utility and desirability of NMR for honey testing, FSSAI clarified that it allows rapid but database driven detection and quantification of various chemical compounds, especially for authenticating the origin of a sample of honey.

Let positions not harden

Protesting farmers believe that new laws place undue faith in big players and corporates. Centre must pay heed to their concerns, dispel fears

SUCHA SINGH GILL

C R Sasikumar

THE PRESENT FARMERS' movement began to take shape in Punjab when the three ordinances were promulgated in the first week of June. These ordinances were converted into bills for the enactment of three Acts in Parliament and passed hurriedly, ignoring serious objections within both Houses and the opposition outside.

The farmers started a widespread mobilisation within Punjab — holding flag marches in villages, demonstrations in cities and *dharnas* in front of the houses of MPs and MLAs. They formed a front of 31 farmers' unions in the state and held rallies in Chandigarh. They decided to remain completely peaceful in their movement. They also constituted a committee to hold talks with the government at various levels. They got these Acts translated into Punjabi and held extensive discussions between themselves and experts in the state and outside to sharpen their understanding of the gamut of issues related to the economics of farming and the implications of the new legislation. They also held meetings with the Punjab chief minister to do something to block the implementation of these Acts to save the future of farming and farmers.

During the Parliament session in October, one of the oldest allies of BJP, the Shiromani Akali Dal, came out in support of the farmers and its representative in the Union cabinet resigned. This forced the Punjab government to pass a resolution in the state assembly not to implement the laws. This resolution was supported by all political parties except the BJP and submitted to the Governor for approval. The approval of this resolution is still awaited.

The farmers started protesting in front of the houses of BJP leaders, toll plazas on highways, Reliance petrol pumps and shopping malls and occupied railway lines to block the movement of trains. The Government of India suspended the movement of goods trains to discontinue the movement of grains from Punjab, and coal, fertiliser and other goods into Punjab. This was done so that the farmer unions would be blamed for the blockade of all commodities.

The nature of the peaceful protest not only got the support of political parties but a wide range of people, including traders, commission agents, trade unions, teachers, writers, poets, singers, artists and lawyers. At this stage, the Punjab farmers began to contact farmers from other states to oppose the three laws. Initially, farmers from Haryana began to join them, followed by those from Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and others.

The Centre invited the Punjab farmers to Delhi for talks but they were met only by the agricultural secretary, not a Union minister, leading the farmers to walk out. This episode led to the government losing some of its credibility. But the farmers did not lose hope and faith in negotiations.

The farmers then thought of putting pressure on the government by moving their protest from the states to Delhi from November 25-26. As they began to move towards Delhi from Punjab and Haryana, the Haryana government began to put serious restrictions on their entry on the highways passing through its territory. When farmers tried to cross the barriers, the police used tear gas and water cannons to stop them. They were also lathi-charged at some places. But the farmers remained peaceful despite the provocations from the Haryana police. Rather, they provided lunch to the cops who lathicharged them.

The farmers contend that the Acts will be extremely harmful to agriculture. These laws, they argue, have been enacted to involve big players in the trade of agricultural commodities by amending the Essential Commodities Act 1955 and withdrawing the Food Corporation of India (FCI) from public procurement of foodgrain like wheat and paddy. This was also recommended by the Shanta Kumar committee. By removing the ceiling on stock holdings for wholesale traders, processors of agricultural produce and exporters, the government is preparing to withdraw from the procurement of foodgrain and hand it over to the corporate players.

The government is thrusting contract farming on farmers in association with corporates who represent crony capitalism and whose track record in contract farming is not up to the mark. This is also borne out by an earlier, very bitter experience of farmers in Punjab, and recently with the sugar mills, which did not pay them for 3-5 years.

The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement Act takes out the dispute resolution mechanism from the purview of courts and hands it over to the SDM (sub-divisional magistrate) and the DC (district collector) — who are perceived as being under pressure from their political masters. The Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act allows any trader with a PAN card to trade in agricultural commodities anywhere in the country. They will be exempted from any tax, cess or fee charged under the Agriculture Produce Market Committee (APMC) Act, which are used for rural development and market infrastructure. This is a fabulous favour to traders. This also allows many traders to operate in agricultural commodities trading and lure farmers and cheat them.

The government's arguments are fallacious and based on theoretical propositions. The abolition of APMC markets and middlemen/commission agents in Bihar did not lead to better prices for farmers who get prices much below MSP from traders who later sell in other states at higher prices and earn higher profits. Most farmers (86 per cent) in India are small and marginal who can sell in local markets only. The unquestioned trust which the government has in corporates is equally matched by the trust deficit of farmers who have had bitter experiences with them.

The government argues that these laws facilitate the farmers to sell anywhere in the country to get maximum prices. It is further argued that contract farming can provide predetermined prices to farmers contracted in advance. This will ensure them prices more than the MSP. This will abolish intermediaries between buyers and sellers, enabling farmers to get higher prices.

The government's arguments are fallacious and based on theoretical propositions. The abolition of APMC markets and middlemen/commission agents in Bihar did not lead to better prices for farmers, who get prices far below MSP from traders who later sell in other states at higher prices and earn higher profits. Most farmers (86 per cent) in India are small and marginal who can sell in only local markets. The unquestioned trust which the government has in corporates is equally matched by the trust deficit of farmers who have had bitter experiences with them.

At present, there are wide differences between the government and the agitating farmers on the anticipated outcome of these laws. The positions are hardening every passing day, and the protest movement is only growing stronger. India's farmers have lost much since 1991 because of the freeing of input prices and the collapse of health and education services in rural areas. This has been complicated by the degradation of soil and the environment, adding to diminishing productivity and increasing costs. The latest move to raise diesel prices has also hurt. The bill to amend the Electricity Act 2003 has created apprehensions in the mind of the farmers regarding the withdrawal of the power subsidy.

For the survival of farmers, the leadership demands the repeal of the three laws, and an assurance that MSP and procurement by FCI will continue. The government has the option to accommodate the farmers and dispel their fears over MSP and market clearance. This can help avoid a prolonged standoff.

The writer is senior professor at Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development (CRRID)

No move to offer courses in mother tongue: IIT director

New Delhi: IIT-Delhi Director V Ramgopal Rao has said offering "entire B Tech programmes" in Indian languages would mean "the beginning of the end" for the IITs, but added that Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal has clarified that no such plan was afoot.

This came after reports that the Centre has set up a task force to prepare a roadmap on imparting technical education in Indian languages and the Education Minister tweeted on the same.

Rao, in a Facebook post on the same day, issued a clarification. Pokhriyal "... There is going to be a task force involving IITs and the task force will look into the NEP implementation aspects related to IITs", he wrote. "Offering entire B.Tech programmes in local languages would mean, language will become a criterion in our faculty selections. This will be the beginning of end for IITs. Our faculty selections need to be on a global scale," he added. ENS

Lab-grown meat: cleared in Singapore, emerging alternative worldwide

POOJA PILLAI
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 4

THE SINGAPORE Food Agency (SFA) approved this week the sale of a lab-grown meat product. This is the first time cultured meat has been cleared for sale anywhere in the world. The product approved by the SFA is cultured chicken, produced by US-based East Just. The company has announced the product will be manufactured with local partners under its new brand GOOD Meat.

Why is this a big deal?

In its June 2020 Food Outlook Report, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) stated that world meat output was set to contract row to 333 million tonnes, 1.7% less than in 2019. The disruption has been caused mainly by Covid-19, but it has added to already widespread fears about zoonotic diseases, especially African swine fever and highly pathogenic avian influenza.

This provides an opportunity to the alternative meat industry. According to a Nielsen report from May this year, the sale of plant-based meats, which have been available in retail outlets and restaurants since 2018, grew by 264% in the US over a nine-week period that ended May 2. The market for alternative proteins was growing even before the pandemic: in a 2019 report, Barclays predicted that alternative meat could capture 10% of the $1.4-trillion global meat market over the next decade. But while plant-based meats were finding more and more favour, commercial availability of lab-grown meat (or cultured meat) was still many years in the future.

This is why the approval by Singapore to cultured chicken is seen as significant.

How is lab-grown or cultured meat different from plant-based meat?

The latter is made from plant sources such as soy or pea protein, while cultured meat is grown directly from cells in a laboratory. Both have the same objective: to offer alternatives to traditional meat products that could feed a lot more people, reduce the threat of zoonotic diseases, and mitigate the environmental impact of meat consumption.

Lab-grown chicken. *Memphis Meats*

In terms of cellular structure, cultured or cultivated meat is the same as conventional meat — except that cultured meat does not come directly from animals.

According to the Good Food Institute (GFI)'s 2019 State of the Industry Report on cultivated meats, compared to conventional beef, cultivated beef could reduce land use by more than 95%, climate change emissions by 74-87% and nutrient pollution by 94%.

The report adds that since cultivated meat is created in clean facilities, the risk of contamination by pathogens such as salmonella and *E coli*, which may be present in traditional slaughterhouses and meat-packing factories, is significantly reduced. It does not require antibiotics either, unlike animals raised for meat, thereby reducing the threat posed to public health by growing antibiotic resistance.

Who else is making cultured meat?

According to the GFI report, by the end of 2019, 55 companies were focused on cultivated meat products, including Future Meat Technologies (chicken, lamb, beef) in Israel, Biftek (beef) in Turkey, Cubiq Foods (chicken fat) in Spain, Netherlands-based Meatable (pork, beef), French company Gourmet (foie gras) and US-based Memphis Meats (beef, chicken, duck). Also among these is Delhi- based Clear Meat, which is developing cultured chicken.

How soon will cultured meat be widely available to consumers?

There are still significant hurdles to be overcome before cultured meat is widely available. Apart from ensuring that the products are affordable — currently still a challenge — and dealing with consumer mistrust, producers of alternative meats will face resistance from traditional meat producers.

The world's largest meat companies, such as Nestlé, Tyson Foods and Perdue Farms, have already jumped on the fast-moving plant-based meat bandwagon. But production of cultured meat is difficult to scale up at present.

Conventional meat still dominates the market, and industry lobbies have been fighting to hold on to their market, not least by challenging the very idea of alternative meats. The application of meat-related terms, such as burger and sausage, to plant-based products has been challenged in the EU (where the bid failed) and the US (where it has had some success) on the ground that these mislead consumers.

The charge against lab-grown meat, led by agriculture and husbandry bodies, is that it simply isn't meat if it didn't come from an animal. The US Cattlemen's Association, for example, successfully lobbied Missouri to pass a Bill ruling that plant-based and lab-grown meats cannot be called meats. The Cattle Council of Australia has been putting similar pressure on the country's government since 2018.

Farm talks deadlocked, another round on Dec 9

Agriculture minister Tomar offers four concessions, asks protesters to send elderly, kids home

Zia Haq
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NEW DELHI: The fifth round of talks between protesting farmers and the Centre showed no signs of progress, dealing a blow to the government's offer to bring a set of amendments to the three new farm laws that agriculturists say will hurt their interests. Farm unions stuck to their demand for a full withdrawal of the legislation, but agreed to another meeting on December 9.

With the stalemate persisting, farmers' representatives said they would intensify their agitation, as thousands laid siege to the Capital's entry points for the tenth straight day. They have called for a nationwide blockade on December 8.

The government team, led by agriculture minister Narendra Tomar, railways, food and consumer affairs minister Piyush Goyal and minister of state for commerce Som Prakash, offered to make four major amendments to the set of farm laws during the talks, although they presented no written material, an official said, requesting anonymity.

While the government has leaned on its new reform agenda for better crop prices and higher investments in the farm sector, farmers say changes approved by Parliament in September would allow big corporations to exploit them.

The government on Saturday proposed new rules for free

continued on →7

UN: PEOPLE HAVE A RIGHT TO PROTEST

NEW DELHI: Authorities should allow people to exercise their right to demonstrate peacefully, UN secretary-general António Guterres's spokesperson has said regarding the farmers' protest in India. "...People have a right to demonstrate peacefully, and authorities need to let them do so," the spokesperson said on Saturday. →P3

HOMELESS GET LANGAR FOOD

NEW DELHI: Rubiyal, 10, and his sister Masuma, 8, have not gone to school since Wednesday. They say they don't want to miss out on the meals from the langar at Singhu border. These langars are not just feeding the protesting farmers, but also many underprivileged people and the homeless, who otherwise struggle for even one meal a day. →P2

Dabur, Marico spar over claims on honey, approach ad regulator

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, 6 December

Two leading homegrown rival FMCG brands Dabur and Marico are in an open spat with each other over claims regarding their honey brands and have taken the matter to advertising regulator ASCI.

Dabur on Sunday said it is filing a complaint against rival Marico before the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) for claiming its Saffola Honey sample being passed through the NMR test.

The Noida-based company claimed Marico's Saffola honey has failed the NMR (Nuclear Magnetic Resonance) test and is misleading the consumers.

"Dabur is filing a complaint in ASCI against Marico as their Saffola Honey sample from the market has failed the NMR test. Test reports clearly indicate the presence of sugar syrup in Saffola honey. Their claim on NMR test is misleading the consumers," Dabur claimed in a statement.

However, Dabur's claim was refuted by Marico contending that "Saffola Honey is also compliant with each of the quality parameters mandated by FSSAI".

Earlier, Marico had filed a complaint before the ASCI on October 1, over Dabur's claims of NMR of its honey and was upheld by the regulator. "Marico filed an intra-industry complaint before ASCI, against 'NMR TESTED PURE HONEY' claim by Dabur for its product Dabur Honey. The claim 'NMR tested' was considered false and misleading by implication and omission and UPHELD under Chapter 1.4 of the ASCI Code," a Marico spokesperson stated.

According to Expert Market Research, the India honey market reached a value of about ₹1,729 crore in 2019

It has also filed another complaint before ASCI on December 3, 2020, wherein it challenged the claim made by Dabur its honey has passed the German NMR test. "The complaint has been admitted by ASCI and taken on record for further hearing," said Marico.

Without naming the brand, ASCI said it has received four complaints against honey brands over the past few months.

"Three of these complaints were upheld as they contravened the ASCI code. The advertisers were unable to provide adequate substantiation for the claims they were making, and hence these advertisements were considered misleading," said Secretary-General Manisha Kapoor in an emailed reply to PTI. As per the ASCI process, the advertisers are required to modify their claims or withdraw the advertisements.

While, Dabur in its statement said that the recent clarification by the Food Safety & Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has clearly reinforced that their 22 mandatory tests, including specific test like SMR, are the most stringent tests globally to detect all the potential adulterants and sugar in honey.

"Dabur has cleared all the above FSSAI-mandated tests, including SMR, besides voluntarily conducting NMR test periodically to ensure that our consumers get 100 per cent Pure honey with no added sugar/syrups or any other adulterants," it said.

Last week, the CSE had issued a report claiming leading honey makers products were adulterated with sugar syrup.

In farm debate, a green reality check

Neither government nor protesting farmers recognise the challenge of depleting natural resources and climate crisis

RICHA KUMAR, NIKHIT KUMAR AGRAWAL, P S VIJAYSHANKAR AND A R VASAVI

PROPONENTS OF THE three new farm laws have claimed that they will engender competition in agricultural markets and will give farmers a choice to sell wherever they like. The opponents of these laws, including many farmer groups, have forcefully argued that these policies will strangle the mandi system, spell the end of the Minimum Support Price (MSP), and lead to oligopolistic buying by large agribusinesses.

These debates, however, have remained restricted to the realm of agricultural marketing and the economics of livelihoods. They miss the fundamental reality of today's times — that the current agrarian impasse reflects the fatigue of dominant approaches to agriculture, which assumes growth is limitless and resources are inexhaustible. Added to this is India's agrarian structure, closely aligned with the caste structure, thereby marking the whole system with tremendous inequality in access to natural resources, capital and markets. A combination of all these is reflected in the multiple ecological, economic and social crises that beset rural India. To tackle all these challenges, we require alternative policies that address these foundational deficits and go beyond the dominant paradigm of high-external-input, high-cost agriculture.

The recognition that agriculture is embedded in nature and that the agrarian economy is constrained by the limits imposed by nature and by social rules is fundamental to making policies that can benefit farmers. Instead of a resource-based approach, the need is to develop a relationship-based approach towards the environment. The challenges towards adopting such an approach have ecological, sociocultural, political, techno-scientific and economic dimensions. Reducing this complex maze to either economic or techno-scientific or a combination of both is highly problematic. This reductionism is the primary reason we are now suffering the consequences of runaway climate change, to which the contribution of modern agriculture is significant.

Moreover, the destruction of our rich agricultural biodiversity, the growing toxicity of our air, water and soils, the over-extraction of groundwater and growth in pesticide resistance have led to farming becoming a high-risk venture, in addition to threatening human health. The link between factory farming of animals and the growth of zoonotic diseases is now well-known, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak.

Drawing upon a paradigm of the conquest of nature, modern agricultural practices emphasise maximising crop yields, farm incomes and global competitiveness. The single-minded pursuit of such goals has remade our land and farms into monocultures. Success means ensuring a single crop accesses all the nutrients and everything else is killed as pests or weeds. This means competing with and controlling nature, which, in contrast, survives (and thrives) on the principles of biodiversity. This has led to increasing doses of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, causing widespread soil degradation. The extent of degraded land in India is 12 crore hectares or about 38 per cent of our total geographical area.

While modern science and technology have made monoculture farms possible, it is the economics of modern supply chains that has accelerated their growth. For example, crop varieties of wheat (and later rice), highly responsive to chemical fertilisers and water, along with the advent of mechanisation and agrochemicals, made wheat and paddy monoculture farms possible in the 1960s. But the Green Revolution did not take off until the Indian government provided input subsidies and set up the MSP-based procurement regime for these two crops. Similarly, it is the economics of soybean meal as cattle-feed that has driven the growth of soybean monoculture farms around the world while the demand for sweeteners and biofuels made from corn and sugarcane have promoted their fast growth.

Unfortunately, the scientific paradigm of single-crop productivity has promoted an agricultural system with ecologically unsustainable cropping patterns. It has contributed significantly to climate emissions, and threatened farmer livelihoods and the natural resource base they depend upon. Moreover, it has also distorted our food consumption patterns, replacing nutritious millets with polished rice and wheat and negatively affected our nutritional security.

In attempting to offer a new deal to farmers, do the new farm laws recognise or address any of these fundamental concerns? Do the farmer organisations pressing for continued MSPs and subsidies recognise the in-built reproduction of these problems in this model?

Sadly, both sides have continued to ignore the broader ecological and social contexts in which agriculture is embedded. By promoting greater corporatisation of agriculture (through contract farming, higher stocking limits and private marketplaces), the laws will, in all probability, accelerate the growth of long supply chains of monoculture commodities. An expanded MSP regime might support the livelihoods of farmers growing the crops being procured and who have the wherewithal to access the mandi/procurement centres, but it will necessarily be limited by the government's ability to purchase. Moreover, guaranteed procurement in the past has incentivised monoculture farming, with huge ecological and social costs.

This is not to ignore the critical importance of a system of public procurement to promote less favoured crops like millets and pulses. In either case, the pressing problems of natural resource exhaustion, adverse climate impacts, unstable markets and undemocratic governments will eventually force farmers off the monoculture treadmill as farming becomes riskier and more expensive with a continuously degrading natural resource base.

If we truly want to ensure the livelihoods of our farmers and provide safe, healthy, nutritious food for our consumers, it is imperative to make policies that go beyond the productivity trope and populist posturing. This can begin with the salient recognition that any sound economic and techno-scientific model must have agroecology and equity at the core and, must indeed, be guided by them.

The authors are affiliated to the Network of Rural and Agrarian Studies, which has just published the State of Rural and Agrarian India Report 2020

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar

Make inclusive changes in the agrarian sector

The fifth round of negotiations between the government and representatives of the agitating farmers has failed. It is now clear that the agitation is likely to continue for some time to come. This is the first time in its six-year tenure that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has faced such a siege of the Capital and such a challenge from farmers. No single government or political personality is to blame for this impasse; this problem has been in the making since Independence.

The next round of negotiations is on December 9. The conflict will end sooner or later, but will the problems that beset agriculture be solved? Will there be an end to agrarian poverty and farmer suicides?

During the famine of 1967, my father was posted in Mirzapur. I had started going to school and could discern a visible change taking place in the city. Tribals and villagers from nearby used to come to the cities and big towns those days in search of work or food. But, they often went back empty-handed. Those who had the ability to lend a helping hand to them were themselves facing a crisis. Foodgrains like wheat had become a rarity. The red wheat that was imported from the United States (US) was being distributed through ration shops. People were not able to access wheat in sufficient quantities, as a result of which the black market was flourishing.

During visits to my ancestral village in later years, I found that more than 90% of farmers were facing various problems. With the growth in population and an increase in members in households, land holdings were getting smaller. The farmers were sticking to traditional crops. They had no one to advise them on how to change cropping patterns which could benefit them financially. If the weather was conducive, life after the harvest was bearable. If not, they faced various adversities, the obvious one being the inability to provide for their families.

Then the Green Revolution happened. India started growing more food than it needed. But the distribution system did not improve enough to deal with this surplus. So we had a situation where, on the one hand, the warehouses of the Food Corporation of India were bursting at the seams and, on the other, about 14% of the population did get enough food to survive. The farmer today does not get the right price for his crop and the consumer has to pay more than is required. It is time when we also looked at agricultural best practices from around the world.

The impasse will end sooner or later, but will the problems that beset agriculture be solved? BLOOMBERG

There is no doubt that the agricultural scenario has to change. The question is how. We already have seen the sort of fear-mongering we are witnessing today in the early 1990s. At that time, then Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao and his finance minister Manmohan Singh brought about economic liberalisation. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, George Fernandes and all other Opposition leaders and parties declared this a conspiracy to sell India down the drain. There was unrest on the streets and in Parliament. The whole argument was that foreign companies would now come an enslave us as the East India Company had once done during the British *raj*.

But, what liberalisation did was to pull at least 300 million Indians out of poverty. Coordination between the government, corporates and society improved. This helped set India on the path to becoming an aspiring economic superpower.

Many things changed for the better with liberalisation. In the mid-1990s, it used to take hours on end to make a phone call from one city to another. Whenever we went abroad for reporting assignments, we spent an inordinate amount to time to send telex or fax messages to office. I wonder, what would have happened had we faced a pandemic like Covid-19 at that time. Today, if millions of Indians are able to save their jobs by working from home, they have the communications revolution to thank for this. This and many such important measures are the results of those 1991 reforms.

To get back to agriculture, let us look at the market in milk. Milk is also an agricultural product. It has no Minimum Support Price. The dairy sector has no special government protection when it comes to the purchase and sale of milk. Barring a few semi-government institutions like Mother Dairy, most of the bulk buyers come from the private sector. The white revolution that Amul started in Gujarat through cooperatives has spread to many parts of the country. Most people who are primary sellers of milk are from villages and own one to six animals per family. No corporate entity has affected their business.

This is not to argue in favour of mindless privatisation. Most sugar mills in India are in private hands. But working hand-in-glove with corrupt government officials, the business is exploitative of farmers. In such a situation, it is necessary that farmers' rights be not only strengthened but that administrators should also be forced to implement the rules strictly. At the same time, farmers must be mobilised to grow alternative crops and also crops for agro-industries. We need to effect positive, inclusive changes in the agrarian sector in our quest to rebuild the economy in a post-Covid-19 world.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan
The views expressed are personal

‘Nobody understands farmers’ problems. Everybody is giving us advice, nobody is ready to listen to us’

The CPI(M) leader and general secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha insists farmers won’t accept “cosmetic changes” to new laws, criticises “calculated attempt” to paint protest as Punjab movement and urges govt to harmonise ties between traders, farmers. The session was moderated by Deputy Associate Editor Manoj C G

IDEA eXCHANGE

WHY HANNAN MOLLAH

The eight-time Lok Sabha MP and CPI(M) politburo member is among the prominent leaders of the ongoing farmers’ protest. As general secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha, the 74-year-old veteran from Bengal is part of the team holding negotiations with the government, demanding that the new farm laws be scrapped

Illustration: Suvajit Dey

MANOJ CG: Farmers’ organisations want all the three new farm laws to be repealed. Is there a middle ground?

In the last six months, farmers from across the country have been raising their issues. When the ordinances were passed, farmers were not asked… The movement was continuously gaining momentum in the last six months. Ultimately, when farmers realised that the government is not listening to them, what else could they do in a democratic system? We decided to organise a peaceful movement… They (farmers) decided to come to the Capital and inform the government about their problems. The government is insisting that these (farm) Acts are a panacea. But the farmers never wanted these Acts, no farmer organisation demanded it.

MANOJ CG: If the government does not repeal the laws, are you willing to accept some amendments?

We want the laws to be scrapped. If there were some mistakes, there could be amendments, but all the laws are anti-farmer. That is why farmers have said that cosmetic changes here and there will not serve any purpose.

LIZ MATHEW: Will your protest draw more farmers from other parts of the country?

There is a calculated attempt by the government to paint it as a Punjab movement and, unfortunately, the media is helping them. On August 9, there was a ‘Jail Bharo’ (agitation) against these laws. Nearly one crore farmers in 600 districts across 25 states were on the streets to protest. Did only farmers from Haryana and Punjab protest then? Punjab is definitely at the forefront of the movement, but the Punjab movement is part of the Indian movement.

There is a wrong perception that farmers are very strong and that they have bargaining power… The government is making laws with wrong perceptions… Farmers need regulatory protection, but it isn’t there in the new Acts. About 86 per cent farmers are small farmers and have less than two acres (of land). How will these helpless people survive the attack from the Adanis and Ambanis?

Farmers are producers. Please help us remain producers. Don’t force us to become traders… After the pandemic, all production sectors collapsed except farming. Farmers survived without any government help or package. The government should help us survive, and not destroy us.

HARISH DAMODARAN: Why are farmer unions demanding that MSP be made a legal right? If private traders have to compulsorily pay the MSP, they will not trade. How will it benefit farmers?

Why should everything be at the cost of the farmers? You can survive without everything, but if you do not have food, you will die. Can you compare food with any other product? Now, farming has become a loss-making venture but despite that farmers cannot leave it because it is their way of life. Why are you forcing us to become traders? Let us remain producers.

Four lakh farmers have committed suicide. Why didn’t a single corporate-aided intellectual or journalist mention it?... We need certain guarantees and protection. The government has a duty to protect the weaker sections. Now, India is no more a welfare State. It is becoming a neo-liberal State. Welfarism is gradually being finished. But we are demanding welfare measures. Without welfare measures, we cannot survive.

> We are not expecting much from talks. They are killing time. Lakhs of people are sitting in the cold ... the govt is wasting time to exhaust farmers

How many industrialists or traders commit suicide? And if they commit suicide, what is the reason? It may be because of bad management of the economy. But farmers fail because of natural calamities, which is not in their hands. They do not receive compensation. As a nation, we have a duty to protect our *anna daata* (food providers).

ANANT GOENKA: It’s tough to be in the farming profession today. What would your advice be to a 22-year-old from a farming family, who plans to sell off his land and work for a corporate?

The sons and daughters of farmers do not want to engage in farming because their fathers and grandfathers suffered. It is becoming a loss-making venture. In such a situation, what is the duty of the government? Will profit only be for Adani and Ambani, and not for the crores of farmers? If the government manages to improve the situation, then a section of the younger people will remain in farming. Government is not helping (the farmers). They are only interested in contract (farming). There is contract farming all over the country, but at least there is certain control over it. Now, (because of these new laws) contract farming will be totally free. The stronger partner will dominate. And once they buy crops, give loans and inputs, don’t you think rich people will gradually have influence over the land?

ANANT GOENKA: What was the best period for the Indian farmer since Independence?

No government had implemented perfect farmer-friendly policies. Farmers work for 18 hours a day. Their entire family works, day and night, in rain and cold, but they are not receiving any benefit. The government should take responsibility to some extent. But they are not ready to listen to the problems.

MANRAJ GREWAL SHARMA: Farming is becoming a loss-making business. How can the situation be improved?

We are giving Rs 6-7 lakh crore to those who are looting the country by (creating) non-performing assets, and cheating the banks and government. Why can’t a part of the exchequer be given to farmers for survival?… Unfortunately, as they (the farmers) come from the poorer sections, no one is concerned. At one point, the middle-class was vocal in its support of the poor. But now, since the neo-liberal policies were introduced, we are seeking a better life for a few, and destroying the lives of common people.

MANRAJ GREWAL SHARMA: In Punjab, the major complaint of the farmer was with the *arhtiyas* or the commission agents, who received 2.5 per cent as commission on anything that the farmers sold. The new laws propose to change that. In that case, don’t you think that the laws will help farmers?

We keep the poor perpetually illiterate and try to exploit them. We are not concerned about raising their consciousness. They should know their rights. But when they go to exert their rights, they are under attack. The government is talking of consensus, which is a very, very favourable word. But what is consensus? This consensus is a democratic consensus or fascist consensus? Democratic consensus means listening to all, taking everybody’s concerns and opinions and combining it to reach a conclusion. And if ‘what I say, you agree’ is (considered) consensus, that is fascist consensus.

NUSHAIBA IQBAL: Is there a way in which we can implement a set of reforms that would give farmers more bargaining power in the market without, as you mentioned, furthering the neo-liberal agenda?

You come to the farmers, consult them, listen to their problems and find out how those problems can be addressed with some participation from the government and with some protective measures. Reform does not mean that all burden will pass on to the farmer, and all benefit will go to the traders.

HARIKISHAN SHARMA: What are your expectations from talks with the government?

We are not expecting much because the government’s attitude isn’t very favourable. In the meetings too I told the minister that the Prime Minister has already said that these are very good laws, very beneficial, then what can you do? You have no power. They are only killing time. Lakhs of people are sitting in the cold, three people died... Instead of a more humane attitude to resolve the problem immediately, the government is talking and wasting time to exhaust the farmers so that they are defeated.

SANDEEP SINGH: You mentioned how earlier small traders were looting farmers and now a few corporates will do that. So where does the farmer stand, because even if the previous situation is restored, the farmer will bear losses?

A sincere government can take steps to protect the farmers, to harmonise the relationship between small traders and farmers... There are lakhs of farmers and you have to understand the existing situation of the country. You cannot wish it away. In such a situation you cannot follow ways of Singapore. India is not Singapore. You have to consider your policies based on Indian realities... We need reforms to ensure a harmonious relationship (between farmers and traders). Government must think about it. If you keep farmers in your mind and form policies, that will be a certain type of policy. But if you think about only farming production, trade and export, then the policy will be in a different direction. All the policies formulated by successive governments have been keeping in mind production, benefit, export, import etc. Our demand is to keep the farmer at the centre of the policy and to stop this economic exploitation for benefit to a small section of people.

> Left parties couldn’t utilise opportunities earlier. There were weaknesses. We have to be more practical. The thought is now dominating Left, progressive circles

ATRI MITRA: The Left had a strong organisation among farmers in West Bengal. But there isn’t a consolidated movement against the new farm laws in the state. Why is that the case? Is it because they believe the laws will be beneficial to them?

The farmers (in West Bengal) are not in good condition. During this government’s tenure, 219 farmers committed suicide... We are building the movement and mobilising farmers. There are ups and downs in a movement... The farmers of West Bengal have the same problems as those in the rest of the country — problems of land, cost of production, input cost.

There were some problems initially... People forget they are farmers, and suddenly become Hindu and Muslim. We told them you can be Hindu or Muslim, but you are a farmer... If you become Hindu or Muslim, you become instruments in the hands of communal forces. So, at certain stage, they (farmers of Bengal) were misled and became victims of communalism, which is also dominating other parts of the country. But now they are realising things and coming back to the struggle. The farmers (of Bengal) are also realising that if we have to fight, we have to fight unitedly. There is no other way.

> Farmers are producers. Don’t force us to become traders. During Covid, farmers survived without any govt help or package... Govt should not destroy us.

MANOJ C G: Many of the farmer unions are affiliated to the Left. You critics say that you are using these protests to gain political ground.

Farmer movements cannot always be equated with electoral battles. Election has different issues... Now, money power has become a major issue (in polls). We saw it in Bihar elections, where farmers voted against the government (BJP-JD-U government).

HARISH DAMODARAN: Why is it that the Left’s trade union politics has failed whereas its farmer politics seems to be succeeding?

There is no comparison. Earlier, farmers were suffering, but after neo-liberal policies, their problems took the shape of a crisis. Now, there is an agricultural crisis. We are trying to take up their cause and the farmers are coming forward. But you know how the trade union movements have been destroyed all over the world. How the neo-liberal policies have destroyed the workers’ rights... Such policies are trying to destroy the trade union movements, and that is implemented in our country too.

For 70 years, workers fought and got many pro-worker Acts implemented. But now 44 labour Acts have been repealed in the interest of the corporates... The State power is directly involved in attacking the poorer sections, workers and peasants. These are the two producing classes, others are consuming classes... The former is suffering, but the sympathy for these sections (the poor) is reducing… As a last resort we go to the judiciary, and in the last 5-10 years, since the neo-liberal policies, you see that the judgments in favour of the exploited people, poor people, workers is being reduced. The mental make-up is being changed in favour of neo-liberal policies. Corporates are dominating the minds of well-off people. But the workers are still fighting. Over 26 crore workers participated from all over India in the last strike. When there are attacks, reaction will also develop. They are facing a very difficult situation. State power, national power, media, intellectuals, all are putting pressure against these toiling people. They are fighting against all odds to survive.

MONOJIT MAJUMDAR: But it is the political space vacated in West Bengal by the Left and by socialist parties in UP and Bihar that created the space for the neo-liberal policies that you are talking about…

Earlier, when opportunities were available for the Left and socialist parties, they could not utilise it properly. The weaknesses were there. They realised that they should consolidate what they achieved and take it further. The mistakes and weaknesses were seen. Now, we understand that we need a relook, we need to rectify our weaknesses, and we have to be more practical and objective in our understanding. That thinking is now dominating Left and progressive circles.

NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN: Is the international attention that the farmers’ movement has got actually hurting the protest? It has become a security question, people are talking about Khalistanis...

This is a ready-made prescription of the government — security... The government declared war against the farmers when they started coming. They encircled Haryana, they said we are sealing the borders. Have you seen, after Independence, any state sealing its borders to other states? Even during the Khalistani problem, the Punjab border was not sealed. The government sealed the border and attacked farmers in this cold weather with water cannons... Nobody is understanding our problem. Everybody is giving us advice, but nobody is ready to listen to us. But there is no other way (apart from protests).

PARTHASARATHI BISWAS: In Maharashtra, the Shetkari Sanghatana has not supported the present movement. They have welcomed the de-regulation of APMCs and many of the farmer producers’ companies are making considerably good money after the market cess was abolished for trade outside the market. In Maharashtra, there isn’t a groundswell of support for the ongoing movement, unlike the protests two years ago. Why is the movement limited to the northern parts of the country?

Unlike earlier, the farmers are now suffering directly. Their interests are in danger. Why do you think despite the cold, at the start of the sowing season, they have left everything to protest? The government is using the pandemic to destroy us. In Maharashtra too, there is support. These new laws will destroy the farmers all over the country. It is a death knell for farmers. Today, one section will get attacked, tomorrow others will face it. Gradually, it will spread to the whole country. These Acts are not for Punjab, Haryana or Maharashtra. These are for India. I mentioned how the government and the media tried to show that it is a Punjab movement, but that is not the case. The movement is there across the country, only the degree, scale is different.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: Can you tell us about some of the leaders who have been most receptive to issues of farmers in the past years?

(Late CPM leader) Benoy Kishna Konar was there. There was Sundarayya (who led the peasant revolt) in Telangana. In Maharashtra, Godavari Parulekar took up issues of farmers and tribal communities… No government in the country in the past has formulated absolute pro-farmer policies. There have been small cosmetic changes, some benefits here and there... But farmers have never been at the centre of agricultural policies. That is our complaint.

MONOJIT MAJUMDAR: Over the years, which agriculture minister have you found most easy to reach out to and communicate with?

(NCP chief) Sharad Pawar was a little sympathetic to the cause of farmers. When we went with our issues, he listened... They have made some small changes, but our demand is for overall policy.

For any suggestion, Please feel free to write us at nkc@niftem.ac.in