



## **Farms Act 2020: A Boon or Bane for the agriculture sector**

### **Webinar 38, COVID-19 Pandemic Voices from Margins series**

**Date: October 21, 2020**

#### **Meeting Notes**

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### **PANELISTS' PROFILES**

**Panelist 1:** Bhairab Saini is an organic farmer from Panchal village in Sonamukhi block of Bankura district of West Bengal, and is a 'rice revivalist'. He started farming in 1994 along with his father. After ten years of chemical farming, he learnt about the harmful effects of chemicals and decided to reverse completely to organic farming. Since 2009-10, in addition to organic farming, he also started seed conservation, starting with paddy, and is conserving wheat, mustard, millet, jowar, bajra, pulses, vegetables, maize since 2013.

**Panelist 2:** Ravdeep, who hails from village Pharwahi, in Punjab, started farming full time in 2004, when he was 25 years old. His mother was a schoolteacher and his father was a government employee. Ravdeep recalls that he used to help his grandfather in the field since he was very young. After finishing Class XII, he took care of the vegetables they cultivated. For the first six years, he actively used chemical pesticides like the other farmers in his family and village. The family then had around 12 acres of land on which he grew three crops a year – paddy, wheat and vegetables, which required the highest amount of chemical pesticides. After a personal setback in 2009, he gradually moved to chemical-free farming by 2012. Not once in the last eight years has he regretted his decision to natural farming. For him, the satisfaction comes from the belief that the work he is doing will stem the pressures of climate change, even if not reverse it.

**Panelist 3: Balindra Saikia.** Convenor , Krisak Mahasabha, State Convenor Assam, AIKSCC.

**Panelist 4:** Jeevan Dasu Ade owns around 4 acres of land and has been primarily cultivating Cotton and Soyabean on his land. As a medium holder, he does face issues because of the online systems being introduced in procurement. He feels that most of the government schemes are going to similar set of large farmers while small and medium farmers are at loss.

**Panelist 5:** T Thungdemo Ovung is a Bio-Entrepreneur, a scientist by profession and an organic farmer by occupation in Nagaland. A passionate food producer implementing sound principles of organic ethos, leaving less carbon & chemical foot print on daily activities. There by conserving the environment from

harmful chemicals that contaminates the soil, water and air to produce a brand of healthy, fresh and tasty organic food for a sustainable agriculture system in Nagaland.

**Panelist 6:** Bhanuja hails from Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh. She has a rich experience of working with women farmers and started the organization Rural and Environmental Development Society (REDS). Through the organization, she has been working for the livelihood and rights of women farmers and has also been connecting them with various schemes that focus mainly on their development. She is also the in-charge of MAKAAAM and Convenor of the Rythu Swarajya Vedika of Andhra Pradesh.

**Panelist 7:** Kavitha is a social activist known for her work related to sustainable farm livelihoods and farmers' rights. She has 25 years of experience working in the development sector and is Founder Convenor of Alliance for Sustainable & Holistic Agriculture (ASHA), a pan-Indian alliance of more than 400 organisations that have come together to secure India's 'Food, Farmers & Freedom'. Kavitha has also served on several Government of India's Committees/Task Forces in an advisory role. She is also the Founder member of an initiative that focuses on the rights of women farmers called MAKAAAM (Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch).

**Panelist 8:** Jayesh Joshi is a development analyst & practitioner, with more than 20 years of working experience in the Development Sector especially with the tribal community on various issues including Agriculture & Livelihoods, Natural Resource Management, Health, Women & Child Development. He has been associated with VAAGDHARA from the last 18 Years as Secretary (CEO). He is a very keen follower of sociopolitical development in the region.

## **WELCOME NOTE**

Tom Thomas, works with Praxis, an organisation that primarily focuses on participatory research. He said, now physical outreach programmes are mostly being done digitally. Over the last 37 webinars we have been able to reach different communities ranging from migrant workers, sex workers, children, denotified tribes, adolescent girls, to children with special needs and trying to bring mostly unheard voices of margins particularly during lockdown. We listened to the status of these communities and tried to engage with those issues both organisationally and personally. This 38<sup>th</sup> edition about the farms act 2020: a boom or bane on the agricultural sector is brought together PRAXIS and PIC, will share voices of farmers from across the country, as well as groups and organisations that have been supporting the cause of farmers.

Just to place this conversation in context, I think it is important to look at the farm bills 2020. Seeing them just from a very narrow lens of the current state affairs from Modi sarkar policies or just as these three bills will be very myopic. The way current debates are going on, minimum support price, APMCs as the boon for the farm sector and so on. But I think the country has literally been burning the farmers for a very long time in the name of modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation. We can see problems in the farm bills of India post independence . These farm bills are just one nail in the coffins of the agricultural sector and it shows what the country has been doing to the agricultural sector since independence. We must understand the bill from the larger context of BD Sharma's concept of rural appropriation that has been happening in the country since independence.

## PANEL DISCUSSION

**Ravdeep** talks about Farms Act 2020 in relation with the green revolution

Punjab's agriculture sector has been through three stages. The old system of agriculture was self-sustaining and the market depended upon the market - the farmers did not depend on markets. The basic motive of the private entities is the profit motive and they hardly care about the welfare of the people. The green revolution created a lot of damage to the natural resources and the traditional systems of agriculture.

Now there is a season of basmati selling. There is a system where all the buyers gather at one place and they decide together what rate they are going to quote. If there is an abundance of quantity they will lower the price. But after the green revolution, the rate was imposed, everything started coming from the Market. So it started getting dependent on the market. The green revolution ruined Punjab - our diversity, health as well as our economy.

In past years, private entities joined the poultry sector and poultry farmers were contacted. Initially they were given a lot of privileges and this went on for three years wherein the farmers had all the control. Today more than 90% of poultry farming is controlled by private companies. With the contract and rules, now the farmers are bound. Neither can they leave nor make any profits. These are the two examples which clearly show what implications privatisation in new farm bills will create on the farmers.

**Balindra Saikia** talks about price hike in Assam and the following farmer's suicides. There are a lot of protests going around across the country regarding the new farm bill. Jute production is high in lower Assam. Assam is placed in third position in jute production in India. This time, the farmers are facing huge losses.

Three years back, incidents of farmers' suicide happened in Naogaon because of hike in price of tomatoes. There are also more than 1200 tea gardens in Assam, all are owned by MNCs. 17% of the total production is from these companies. Green leaf costs Rs. 9. If the MNCs fix the price, then farmers' suicide will increase. The new farm bill doesn't reflect MSP adequately. We need to look at how the farm bill will affect rubber plantations as well.

**Jeevan Dasu** talks on farmers' reflection towards the acts. Ade owns around 4 acres of land and has been primarily cultivating cotton and soyabean on his land. As a medium-sized farm holder, he faces issues because of the online systems being introduced in procurement. He feels that most of the government schemes are going to a similar set of large farmers while small and medium farmers are at loss. Farmers are in trouble. The online agricultural marketing system is also not beneficial to small and medium farmers while most of them are unaware about these.

Across the agricultural sector then the farmers are going to be the victims of privatisation. Wherever farmers find it profitable, they will move there. Only when we find out where the higher rates are given will we have a better idea. But if the government pulls away and does not

provide support, then the farmer is left without anything. If the government doesn't support, don't know what will happen.

### **Bhairab Saini**

Namaskar! I am from Bankura. The farm bill that talks about freedom of farmers- will mainly affect the farmers negatively. Currently, the price of rice is Rs. 900-1000 per quintal. In July-August, we get a price of Rs 1800-1900 per quintal. This price is in the Mandi (retail). But the open market price is lesser , around Rs. 900-1000 per quintal. If the MSP is not there, MNCs will completely take over the market.

In contract farming of Pepsi potatoes across my district and neighboring district - when the market demand is high with good price, all potatoes get sold. But if the price is less, buyers do not come, potatoes get ruined in the storage. Once in 2-3 years , farmers have to agree to a lesser price to sell off the potatoes. Still the buyers complain that potatoes contain water!

The MSP and middle men statements in the farm bill are completely false. We don't even know the companies. We contact the middle men and these middle men know the companies. In chicken farming, the electricity and water is all paid by the farmer. Chicken gets sold when there is a high price in the market. If the mortality rate is high among chickens, companies do not buy the chicken. The farmers somehow try to sell off chicken secretly in the markets. If there are no middle men, we have no clue what happens next

**T Thungdemo Ovung** talks on procurement systems in Nagaland and how he sees this Farms Act and what could be the implications.

In my view farming is a way of life it's not just a purpose to sustain life. For business we don't have large scale farmers here and most of the farmers sell their products in the local markets and export to the neighbouring states. But my concern is that when the bill comes into force, the large multinational companies will come to our states and our farms will be hampered. That may lead to some changes in the marketing system. This will destroy the existing peace here. If the farmers don't have control of the price of their product then the retailers will bully these marginal farmers and they will be forced to sell their products to them. This bill will introduce large scale companies in the agricultural sector and we don't want these large scale companies there because we mistrust them from the previous experiences we had.

Contract farming is completely against the traditional farming system and there will be a master- slave divide among them. This will not be based on the need of the society but based on the profit motive of the large scale companies. This is not easy for most of the farmers in Nagaland to understand these contractual agreements. This will affect the prevailing traditional agricultural system we follow now. The new change that the government wants to bring will affect our culture too.

**Bhanuja** talks about feministic issues of the farm Act 2020

Women farmers and marginal farmers would face a lot of issues with this bill. The major hurdles in Andhra Pradesh are women working single handedly or working with small plots and are struggling to sell their products. Additionally, single women face more issues. In Andhra Pradesh there was a high demand for Millets and the reason is the demand from the consumer side had increased. So we changed parents to grow this. But this demand driven change in crops frequently, has meant that women have not been able to cope with this change.

In contract farming arrangements, toxic chemicals are also supplied. Seeds or fertilizers brought from outside are advertised well but the products grown by women aren't recognised which is against their rights.

### **Kavitha**

Various panelists have addressed issues and shared situations related to crops. The mandi system was made keeping in mind the protection of farmers. The mandi system emerged as a result of the green revolution which created surplus production. A centralised framework was envisaged and the systems of procurement, MSP and distribution were thought through well in the earlier system. Only around 36% of produce and around 11.5% farmers seem to be interacting with the APMC system. There are far fewer mandis than required. There has been politicisation, non investment of all the revenues collected in the mandi system for infrastructure development, trader cartelisation and all these are well documented problems. Importantly for the most marginalised farmers, with very small volumes, or lack of mobility and knowledge as well as inter locked credits- inputs - output markets, various changes in the market regulation statues do not mean much. However even for them MSP provides a benchmark for bargaining.

Just as there is diversity in the agricultural production system and the agrarian structure in India there exists diversity in market forces. Decriminalisation of selling outside the mandis should have been brought in rather than de-regulation. The buzz around freedom with the introduction of farm act is questionable. This is not a bill but in the act it is called the trade area. Very less production was going to these mandis. Other channels have already entered into the market. In the year 2003, the market was opened. There is already a direct marketing system in states like Tamil Nadu and Telangana and various panelists have addressed the issues and shared situations related to crops. The mandi system was made keeping in mind the protection of farmers.

A centralised framework was envisaged and the systems of procurement. MSP and distribution were thought well through the earlier system. Mandis as a physical space provides a system of storage and selling. Also the female farmers also have a place wherein they can sell the produce. If the government is very confident that these reforms will lead to better prices and incomes, why does it not put in MSP as the minimum reference price in all these acts? What we want is to annul these 3 acts and enact 2 AIKSCC on freedom from indebtedness and guarantee remunerative MSP.

### **Jayesh**

It is very difficult to conclude but I can start with the first line - the three bills are not for farmers or farmer security. Rather, this is for everyone other than the farmer - the middlemen and companies. The mandi system has always been criticized and people have spoken of an alternate system. We should remember that Mandi is a democratic institution in the visualisation of the mandi vyavastha. The Mandi system has always been debated and discussions happened on the alternatives. The notions of the farm bill gives an illusion of independence for the farmers.

The Bill has many problems related to definitions. When big companies come - they do farming for business, not for food. This also leads to exploitation of farmers as well as the land and environment. There is no mention of the protection of the farmer. In all these years, amendments in Bills (corporate bills as well) have been done without any thought for those at the margins. There needs to be a revision of this Bill. There is very little representation of farmers. The government should think about Farmer Freedom and the security of this freedom.

### **QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

**Question to Kavitha:** the act does not talk about eradication of mandi and removal of APMC?

**Answer to the question:** The acts don't directly say that they will dismantle APMC. On the state level, APMC will continue the regulation of mandis but all things have been engineered in a way that the mandis or markets will collapse. For the traders or agencies which used to operate within the mandi, there are no restrictions on them and now there is no need to operate within the mandi. Because now they will be the most advantaged to move out of the mandi and trade outside. They already had relations with farmers without paying the fees and mandi taxes. So they can operate with farmers outside. This denotes that the traders and transactions are moving out of the mandi spaces. Already mandis have been in a bad shape, the acts are geared to the collapse of the mandi. The online marketing encouraged also denotes the same.

**Q: Why is there no farmer leader at national level?**

There are very strong farmer leaders. All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee, a platform of 230 farmer unions, Kisan Masdur with 180 farmers union etc. but there is no one farmer leader in the country. But there were regional leaders in south India. Now we can see that the farmer unions have become commodity based farming unions. And the caste and region have become determinants of farmer unions. There are diversities among them but they are unified. May be the electoral behaviour is not unified.

**Tom** concludes the session with an emphasis on the need to take forward discussions on the issue.

What we need to be understood, is not just the policies but the kind of broader ideological concepts which creates an inter relation between policies. In this context, we should analyse these farm acts from various aspects and various levels. It is not just an issue of MSP or tax but about the state interventions on it. The market is not playing in favour of the farmers and state

should play like an arbitrator in favour of the less advantaged. How agricultural sector will be governed by private entities without state intervention is a problematic one. The small middle men will be replaced by large capitalists like Ambani and Adani. The food security of the country will remain a question as farm lands will be leased out to companies.