

# Citizen kisan

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ONCE the flag bearer of the new nation state and an icon of a newly independent India, the *kisan* or agriculturist is now placed on the backburner of the nation's economic, social, and political imaginaries. New economic agendas routinely bypass the agriculturist who is primarily seen as redundant to the new ambitions of a fast globalizing nation. Political strategies mobilize agriculturists primarily for votes and then remain unaccountable. Combining these is the absence of reckoning with the agriculturist as an economic agent, a citizen, and social being. Such non-presence results not from a deliberate absence on the part of the agriculturists but from a systemic oversight of agriculture as a livelihood and economy, and of agriculturists as citizens of the nation.

At various levels and fora, the agriculturist is an absentee member, whose representation has been reduced to a token invocation of numbers and significance but whose real interests and future are rarely factored in. Perhaps, what accounts for this invisibility is the paradox of India's political economy where intense processes of an economics of accumulation and a politics of appeasement have been simultaneously deployed. Caught between these two extremes, agriculture and agriculturists have been short-changed and this largely accounts for the fact that the condition of the average, marginal agriculturist has continued to deteriorate. That this is a major contradiction – in a predominantly agricultural nation, the agriculturist is not represented in the domains of economic

planning and at its multiple levels of policy, programmes, science and technology – is an issue that remains both understudied and un-understood.

That the average agriculturist has been effectively removed from the political obligations of the state is evident from the very appointment of Sharad Pawar as the agricultural minister. Representing not agriculturists but acting as a dominant caste politician turned entrepreneur, Sharad Pawar's tenure has been an endorsement of the depredations of agriculture, agriculturists and of rural India in general. That despite this egregious political act, agricultural groups have not been able to effectively dissent his appointment or challenge the plethora of policies that are antithetical to the interests of the average agriculturist is only one more instance of the lack of power of agricultural groups and the liquidation of rural and agricultural movements. This failure of representation is now visible at other levels and the rights of agriculturists to represent themselves have been eroded. Witness, for example, the extent to which the recent Cauvery water dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu was hijacked by regional chauvinist (language and ethnicity) groups that do not otherwise champion any of the demands of agriculturists.

**T**he deceleration of the agricultural economy since 1997, and the attendant distress of agriculturists which was manifested most sharply in the suicides in various parts of the nation, have disseminated an image of agriculturists as weak and dependent. While the real economic factors of lack of institutional support, rapacious credit terms, and a volatile and unreliable market that have made profits a distant dream are rarely factored in, the suicides have been rendered into becoming another reason for considering India's agricul-

ture as unviable. Missing in this dominant and hegemonic framework are any details of the average agriculturist – cultivating a meagre 1.32 hectares; unable to access credit or accurate market information; whose knowledge system is in disarray and whose livelihood is now untenable to meet even the basics of contemporary living.

**E**ven the voluminous policy documents, government and bank-based committees, and fact-finding missions have been unable to provide a comprehensive portrait of this marginal agriculturist and have instead resorted to suggesting solutions that are primarily technocratic and facile in their nature. Over the years, national agricultural policy documents have also begun to reflect guidelines from international aid and development agencies. Such cases include assessments and recommendations which consider it inevitable for the economy to shift surplus rural populations into the urban areas and for small-scale and subsistence farming to collapse.

The rural and the agricultural are seen and represented as lacking any worth and it is, therefore, considered necessary to transit them towards an urban, industrial or service economy. This is evident in the promotion of education, urbanization, and employment policies that privilege the urban over the rural and agriculture sectors. Such attitudes account for repeated statements by leading policy makers, think tank members and administrators that agriculture cannot cater to the overpopulated rural regions, that the poor human to land ratio accounts for the failure of agriculture to sustain people, and that an overhaul in the very working of the land is non-negotiable. While each of these have legitimized the increasing externalization, financialization, and corporatization of agriculture – basing it more and more on

external inputs and integrating it into the market – the larger structural issues and the problems of poor soil fertility, of inequitable access to land, resources and capital, for example, remain unaddressed and unresolved.

**B**ased on such recommendations made at the international levels, national level agricultural and rural policies, especially since 1991, seem to be on three parallel tracks. One track consists of a body of policies, missions, committee reports, position papers, etc., written by eminent scientists, scholars, or science administrators as heads of committees and organizations. Many of these, such as the National Agricultural Policy, provide comprehensive reviews and recommendations to scaffold agricultural growth and the rural economy in general but several governments place these on the back-burner and these policies remain distant from the reality of being implemented.

On the second track are a body of policies, or legislations and programmes formulated behind closed doors, without due process or public inputs, and which seek to integrate land and agriculture into the larger global, neo-liberal economy. Scholars and representatives of public and private think tanks are also members of such initiatives and draw their perspectives from the overarching neo-liberal economics which justifies increasing financialization and liberalization of all economic activity. While the body of policies of the first track remains largely at the level of rhetoric and rarely sees any realization into actual programmes, the second track of policies and programmes are finalized by a chosen few and then granted legitimacy through implementation.

US-led programmes such as the Indo-US Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture have been inked without

any public debate and the fact that one of its key objectives is to identify research areas that have the potential for rapid commercialization with a view to develop new and commercially viable technologies for agricultural advancement in both countries indicates its biases and orientation. Linked to this has also been the constitution of the Knowledge Initiative Board (KIB) with members from leading transnational agri-business corporations and with only select representatives from the Government of India and from a few agricultural universities. The absence of representatives from agricultural groups, elected representatives, and from civil society organizations indicates the blatant violation of democratic processes in matters of agricultural development. In bypassing democratic processes, and in the absence of stringent and effective regulatory mechanisms, these second track agricultural policies are against the interest of small and marginal agriculturists and the sustainability of agriculture.

**A**dding to these closed door international negotiations that override the interests of the average marginal agriculturist, are policy documents that represent the third track and are produced by corporate consultants who second and seek to realize the neoliberal goals of commercializing agriculture and relocating the mass of rural persons as pools of cheap urban labour. For example, several states now have 'Vision 2020' and/or 'Vision 2050' documents which are actually authored by management consultancies and have become directives of state economic policies even though they have not been subject to widespread discussions or debate. Such documents prescribe the shifting of large masses of agriculturists towards more efficient livelihoods, suggest the

commercialization of agriculture to make it both competitive and efficient in the global market, envisage a stronger economy based on increasing the volume of people in the service economy, and endorse ideas that technology and appropriate management of resources would solve all the structural problems of poverty.

Similarly, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), India's apex body for agriculture, endorses globalization as good for Indian agriculture. In its 'Vision 2030' document, it notes the increasing fragmentation of landholding and considers the further fragmentation and loss of contribution to GDP as one of the key problems. Failing to provide more details about those very marginal agriculturists who cultivate such small parcels of land, the ICAR 'Vision 2030' document goes on to call for global and corporate interventions which can facilitate the production and marketing of agricultural commodities in India.

**I**f and when the interests of agriculturists are factored in or are paraded as evidence of agriculture-sensitive policies, they often tend to be populist stances, supporting dominant farmers or large agricultural players who also wield political clout. Here the political appeasement of agriculturists plays a large role. The moratorium on loans, first formulated to address extant distress due to loans and then extended primarily as the UPA's signature vote garnering strategy, was one key programme that provided succour to large farmers and did nothing to alleviate the distress of the most marginalized. The recent declaration by the Uttar Pradesh government of a loan waiver to celebrate Mulayam Singh Yadav's birthday is only one other example as to how vote garnering and problem deferment have actually deluded any real solution to the structural problems

of the marginal agriculturist. In addition, the continued subsidies on key agricultural inputs, which are promoted as catering to agricultural interests, are in reality supporting corporate production and interests. What the implications will be of direct cash transfers, an effort by the UPA government's bid to win the 2014 elections, are issues that only time will unfold. And as in the case of formulating several policies, no substantial research or public review with agriculturists was conducted to access their inputs into such a scheme.

**R**eacting to the crises in agriculture (deceleration in growth rates, decline in contribution to national GDP, to ongoing suicides) and as part of the politics of appeasement, there is a recent trend to see agriculturists as needing to be rescued even while both their agency and representation continues to be missing. The ambitious National Agricultural Policy and the National Commission of Farmers have both claimed to assert the importance of agriculture and agriculturists in the nation. Yet, in their detailed suggestions they privilege the now problematic productivity norm and overlook the more structural and region specific problems of land and resource poor agriculturists.

Missions such as the National Rural Livelihoods Mission also claim to sustain the varied livelihoods of rural regions and yet no comprehensive training, support and inter-linked institutional structural changes have been promulgated to make this a reality. That there are larger systemic agents and agencies that thwart even well-designed programmes is evident in the cases where even the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme has not been allowed to function. All these cases highlight the continued marginalization, silencing, and absence of agriculturists.

Of these, few agendas or programmes have been more explicit about this than that of land. Even as all land, including agricultural land, is being garnered into the national and international real estate grid, there is little attention paid to the land and resource needs of agriculturists. While fragmented land would make simple land reforms difficult, there has been no attention paid to designing or considering ways in which land hunger can be addressed. Expressions of land hunger and intense contestation between contending groups are often represented as 'ethnic tensions', thereby bypassing any gaze or effort at understanding the real issues. The recent violence in Assam represented as ethnic tensions and riots in the Bodo regions is only one example of this. Far from reviewing how land disputes and land deprivation feed into the circuitous production of violence, current policy rhetoric seeks to legitimize the idea that instead of rights to land, a corporate model of shares in land may be appropriate.

**P**romises pertaining to land reform and allocation have met with more violations and obfuscation rather than commitment. Among these, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's assurance of constituting a committee to oversee land reforms and then renegeing on it is exemplary of state and political disregard for agriculturists and agricultural issues. That the Ekta Parishad, spearheading a movement for land rights, had to undertake an arduous walk to press for these rights is only too telling about the extent to which agricultural land issues are mired in political indifference. Preventing the agriculturists and activists from making their presence felt in the capital and interrupting their walk was one other strategy to erase their presence and voice of dissent. Whether the signed promises by the minister, to address these issues

of land rights, will result in any tangible policy or programme is an issue that will be keenly watched.

Matching the political disdain and disregard for agriculturists is the insouciance of the establishment's science and technology fraternity. Far from developing and deploying appropriate and cost-effective technologies, the science fraternity is largely supporting corporate agendas of promoting high-technology and capital intensive products. Such policies and programmes have further entrenched agriculture into the world of external finance, thereby accounting for the growing indebtedness of agriculturists and the continued erosion of sustainable agriculture practices. That it is the inability of agriculturists to form pressure groups that permits the science establishment to neglect their interests was evident in the Inter-Academy Report produced in the wake of the debates over the introduction of BT technologies into vegetables.

Endorsing corporate interests and blatantly plagiarizing from in-house corporate dossiers, such a report represents the distance and indifference of the science establishment to agricultural and agriculturists' interests. Cliques of scientists, supported by a few well-placed international social scientists, allegedly on the payroll of agri-business groups, have made pronouncements on the efficacy and utility of GM crops, all the while ignoring the long-term interests of the agricultural community.

**I**n the domain of education also, agriculturists' needs or inputs have never been factored in. Primary, secondary and predominantly higher education programmes promote an anti-agricultural agenda in which agriculture is rendered into a redundant occupation and the agriculturist, an outdated worker. Agricultural universities, which largely

function as closed enclaves, are largely based on received ideas of lab-based science and are not engaged institutions where agriculturists' inputs, requirements and knowledge are integrated. In the recognition of the need to promote vocational education also, there is an excessive emphasis on promoting and supporting programmes for urban and industry-based vocations rather than for agricultural vocations and skills.

The absence of effective and nation-wide agricultural or farmers movements is linked to the fact that previous farm leaders have emerged or blended themselves into becoming political entrepreneurs. With no substantial body or agency to represent them, in either state assemblies or in the Parliament, agriculturists and their problems remain on the back burner or are denied. That their concerns and ideas are rarely factored in is also evident in the recent move to initiate Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in retail, and in the promotion of commodity trading in agricultural goods.

**M**ore significantly, in each of these cases of the denial, oversight, and erasure of agriculturists' rights and well-being is the erosion of agrarian citizenship of rural peoples. Such citizenship, beyond civic and political citizenship, should recognize the land, agriculture and resource based rights of agriculturists. More particularly, there is an absence of the recognition of agricultural livelihoods, lives and futures. As with the missing agriculturists, there is an absence of a social contract between the state and agriculturists. In displacing the agriculturist as an icon in the national imaginary, we will soon have to reckon with the possibility that the nation's vast and complex rural and agricultural terrains may become merely territories for the expansion of a marketism that respects no rights or citizenship.