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## **Rapporteur's Report on Agricultural Reforms and Farmers' Protests**

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In a year marked by sustained and uninterrupted farmers' protests, led by farmers' unions from the northern Indian states of Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, who have been demanding the repeal of the national government's three controversial Farm Laws, this theme received 20 papers, of which 13 were accepted for discussion.

The new central laws seek to alter the manner and degree of state regulation over the exchange, storage, movement, and taxation of agricultural produce in India. Presented as landmark pro-farmer legislations, the union government argued that the new Acts rid primary agricultural markets of excessive regulatory interference by the state and grant the nation's small and marginal farmers a long denied 'freedom': the freedom to sell their produce wherever, whenever and to whomsoever they choose. Easing of regulatory restrictions would then attract the private sector into unleashing major investments that would, in theory, transform India's inefficient agricultural markets and boost farmers' incomes. But, for its many critics and opponents, the Farm Laws signalled a more ominous association between 'free' market agricultural reforms and farmers' lives and livelihoods. In their view, the laws' actual purpose was to hasten the withdrawal and dismantling of public regulation and state support (especially Minimum Support Prices) for farmers, paving the way instead for corporate control over Indian agriculture.

The controversy and crisis over the Farm Laws has brought the question of the reform and regulation of agricultural markets to the forefront of national debate and discussion. It has also brought farmers' movements to the centre once again as a powerful, social and political force. Unfortunately, the framing of both the reforms and the resistance to them, and the ensuing polarisation only seems to have obscured our understanding of the diversity, complexity and dynamism of agricultural markets and marketing processes as they actually exist and have evolved across Indian regions and commodity systems.

In this respect, the set of papers accepted for summary and discussion make a contribution towards refocusing our attention on particular agrarian contexts and to the specific production, marketing and procurement conditions and relations present in diverse sites and commodity systems. Although most of these papers do not attend

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to particular agricultural reforms or to farmers' mobilisations, they do serve as a reminder of the varied regional and commodity-specific relations of production and marketing, which public policy discussions on reform do not adequately take into account.

Each of these papers focus on one major agricultural crop/commodity complex: food grains (rice and wheat), oilseeds (rapeseed and mustard), and cotton, and analyse changing dynamics over time, across states, and within states. Praveen Kumar *et al.* provide a temporal analysis of the growth performance of rice (considering the instability of area, production, and yield) over half a decade between 1970-71 and 2019-20. Kunal Munjal analyses the changing cost of wheat cultivation during the decade between 1997-98 and 2017-18. Prasanna Kolar *et al.* analyse the differential and changing cost of cultivation and profitability of rapeseed and mustard across four states, viz., Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. We also see important regional variations as four papers focus on specific states. There are two papers on Punjab: Manpreet Singh *et al.* study the determinants of farm technical efficiency in Punjab based on NSSO data, while Parveen Rani presents an empirical study of the production and marketing of cotton in Bathinda district. In a starkly contrasting case study when it comes to production and marketing conditions, Dipriya R. Lyngkholi *et al.* focus attention on the Northeast region, its agroecological diversity as well as the infrastructural and development ecosystem challenges that need to be addressed if reform efforts are to be effective in the region. Of this set, one paper by Chandan Khandagiri and Elumalai Kannan take up a specific reform initiative, the case of the eNAM (electronic National Electronic Market) in Odisha and try to analyse the arrivals and prices based on available information. While such cases studies are important and their paper does reveal the problems of poor market integration, it also cautions us on the limitations of such initial studies so soon after implementation, and points to the need to study the arrivals and prices across seasons. It also points to the importance of a better understanding of the institutional preconditions required and groundwork that need to be put in place before launching and rolling out ambitious agricultural reforms in diverse production and marketing contexts.

There can be little doubt that one of the most critical aspects of the formulation and implementation of agricultural reforms is the extent to which farmers understand and are engaged in the process. In a revealing study based on a large household survey carried out in 2020 across five eastern states (Bihar, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal), Anjani Kumar *et al.* investigate the awareness and perceptions of farmers in response to the new central Farm Laws. In sharp contrast to farmers in the northern Indian states of Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, only 50 per cent of farmers in eastern India were aware of the new laws. Moreover, even among the farmers who expressed an awareness of the laws, the authors find the level of knowledge on the substance of the laws was dismal; on average 86 per cent of farmers who were aware of the laws' existence had no detailed

information about their content, ranging from 64 per cent in Odisha to 99 per cent in Jharkhand. In further probing the determinants of better awareness and knowledge among the small proportion who did have access to such an understanding, size of landholding, level of education of the household head, awareness of government programmes, and visits to Kisan Melas appear to have made a difference. Given that the union government has repeatedly stressed that new central laws are designed for small and marginal farmers, and to include *all* Indian farmers in an integrated national agricultural market, this study of awareness among farmers in eastern India, the vast majority of whom are small and marginal cultivators, should be deeply troubling. The authors of this study not only emphasise the vital importance for wider and deeper consultation with and engagement of farmers and other stakeholders in the reforms' process, they also reiterate the need for centre-state coordination and state autonomy in the reform and regulation of agricultural markets. The question about the changing centre-state relationship in the context of agricultural market reforms is also raised, among other points, in a paper assessing the new laws by H.C. Harshitha and V. R. Kiresur.

Centre-state dynamics, regional concentration and inequality, and the cereal-centricity of state investments in production and marketing are also critical aspects of current reform debates on agricultural price policy and public procurement in India. Although, in principle, the new Farm Laws have no bearing on the MSP procurement system in place, the question of MSP has come to inextricably linked with the controversy over APMC mandi regulation and reform. Indeed, in his paper S.S. Sangwan argues that the genesis of the Farm Laws and their enactment at this point in time, should be understood in relation to the multiple problems that have arisen over time with the implementation of the price support and procurement policy, which has historically resulted in both regional concentration (especially benefiting Punjab and Haryana) and 'lop-sided' production favouring paddy and wheat over pulses and oilseeds, although there has been some correction in this imbalance in recent times. Perhaps the design of the laws, especially the creation of tax-free 'trade areas' outside state-regulated 'market areas' were, at least in part, conceived to get around the high and mounting fiscal costs associated with an expanding MSP procurement regime? Even if this were to be the case, the question still remains: where does this leave us and what should we do about this system going forward. Sangwan argues that the way ahead lies in taking an area planning approach and that this vital if one was to consider expanding MSP procurement support to all crops. In another paper that deals with MSP procurement processes in Telangana in detail, Gummadi Sridevi and Dontha Prashanth also argue that rather than deregulating already asymmetric commodity exchange and trade, which is stacked against farmers for multiple structural reasons, strengthening the decentralised procurement system currently working in the state would be a better course of action.

Finally, Anurag Chaudhary and Sukhpal Singh focus our attention on the socio-economic conditions on agricultural labourers, a group who occupy a vital place in

the agricultural systems and are both affected by and impact agricultural policy and its implementation. Based on a study of 300 households of agricultural labourers across different agro-ecological regions of Punjab, the paper reports on the caste status, literacy levels, household and economic assets. As the authors and other scholars of Punjab have pointed out, one of the striking features of the current farmers' protests against the Farm Laws has been the active participation of agricultural labourers in the movement and the ways in which they have articulated the threat to their incomes and livelihood security if these reforms are implemented. In their paper, presented in summary form Ajay Kumar Sharma *et al.* briefly trace the recent histories of the farmers' movement in India, their regional roots and related developments, and the build-up to the current crisis.

The paper on agricultural labourers serves to remind us that agricultural policies and reforms always have diverse and differentiated effects both across and within regions and these need to be carefully analysed. At the same time, the ongoing farmers' movement also represents an effort to articulate the shared interests both among agrarian classes (small and large farmers; farmers and labourers) as well as link agrarian and non-agrarian interests (farmers and traders/commission agents; producers and consumers).

The social, political and economic effects of these agrarian mobilisations and their contradictions and possibilities will need to be better understood as they unfold over time. In addition to reflecting on this question of shared and conflicting interests among diverse agrarian classes and regions, the discussion in this session may also address the following key questions:

1. How are the Farm Laws (even in suspension) and recent agricultural reforms reshaping centre-state relations and federal arrangements as they relate to agriculture policy and implementation? What kinds of policy and institutional arrangements are required to support and strengthen centre-state and inter-state coordination and consensus building?
2. What are the state and commodity-specific variations (in terms of market structure and organisation) that need to be kept in mind in designing agricultural market regulations and reforms?
3. How should one approach the question of reforming the MSP procurement system in a way that addresses the serious problems that the current system faces? What are the other critical areas for state support and public investment in agriculture?