

Majboor farmers need to be made majboot

BHAVDIP KANG, a senior journalist and columnist, feels there have been too many false steps on the farm sector

The NDA's pro-corporate and anti-farmer image stems largely from its single-minded obsession with the Land Acquisition (Amendment) Act, 2015. To be fair, it has made palpable efforts to address the agrarian crisis it inherited from the UPA but failed entirely to come to grips with the sheer complexity of India's agricultural sector. As a result, in the past year, the crisis has deepened, as the rash of debt-driven suicides by farmers testifies. Natural causes and global factors were largely responsible for the setback in agri-

culture in the past one year. Farmers suffered from drought, unseasonal rains and hailstorms – everything that could possibly go wrong with the weather, went wrong. The NDA, in the meantime, adopted a market-oriented approach to agriculture, thereby exacerbating short-term distress.

The main issues confronting the NDA were: heavy subsidies distorting the food economy, leakage of subsidies, lack of adequate insurance cover for the farm sector, rural credit being misdirected to non-farmer beneficiaries, deteri-

Pushing farmers into the sink-or-swim arena of open markets needs an enabling, rather than a disabling approach

oration in soil health due to overuse of agro-chemicals, water stress owing to over-drawing of ground water; lack of income support for farmers in the face of spiralling input costs, volatility

of global markets for agricultural commodities, lack of post-harvest infrastructure and fragmentation of land holdings into non-viable plots. Added to this was adverse weather. The first problem addressed by the NDA was that of the distorted food economy: the huge subsidy burden and underdeveloped markets for agricultural commodities. In this regard, it took four decisions: a "no-bonus" policy for food crops (June, 2014); setting up the Shanta Kumar Committee on restructuring Food Corporation of India (August, 2014); marginal increase in

minimum support price for foodgrains (October, 2014) and reducing food stocks (Jan, 2015).

By only nominally increasing MSP – which is revised every year in order to offset inflation – the government avoided adding substantially to the food subsidy bill (in April last year, the then prime ministerial nominee Narendra Modi had promised farmers 50 percent profit over their input costs – either that electoral pledge was an empty one, or his arithmetic is at fault).

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