

Populism and Policy Formulation: An Analytical Study of Agricultural Policymaking in Contemporary India

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Introduction

Agriculture is one of the most prominent sectors of the Indian Economy. Agriculture in India is not only of economic importance but also of social importance because it has a large section of people who depend upon it for their basic living. It supports a significant section of the Indian Population and employs 42% of the workforce. It has been practiced since times immemorial for self-sustenance of societies. Agricultural practices are as old as societal existence. Even the Harappan Civilisation has traces of agricultural practices. India's official farmer population is between 100 million and 150 million. As per the Agricultural Ministry's latest Input Survey for 2016-17, the total operational holding in India is at 146.19 million. The All-India Rural Financial Inclusion Survey 2016-2017, conducted by National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) accounts for 100.7 million agricultural households.

The agriculture sector in India has been mired in crisis for a long time. The issues are manifold and so are its implications. The change in cropping pattern, market instability, rising cost of living has led to pauperization and immiseration of the small and marginal farmers (owning land less than 0.1 hectare). An unresolved agrarian quest is a central characteristic of economic inequality in India. Eventually the disparity of the farmers has become a pivotal theme of policy making. The nature of the policies seems to be drifting more towards alleviating the distress than reforming the agrarian sector holistically. It has become one of the prime-movers of electoral mobilization and poll competition. The policy formulation is witnessing a fond imprint of populism in India. The farmers being a strong lobby of voters has garnered a power of influencing the electoral mandate. Populism has the ingenuity of resurfacing the suppressed voices of the people in a democratic nation. However, it also has a tendency to convert into mass clientelism because of the fierce electoral competition. The idea of welfare policy and populist policy has seemingly become submerged.

The Landscape of Agricultural Policy in India

Government policies in India are broadly divided into two sub-categories: Central Sector Schemes and Centrally Sponsored Schemes. The former can be understood as the domain of the Central Government, i.e., schemes that are completely and directly funded and executed by the Central Government. These schemes focus on the entries in the Union list, i.e., the domains that are under the responsibility of the Central Government. It also has a category of schemes that is implemented at the federal level, in the State and Union Territories by the various Central Ministries but is financed by the Central Government resources. Examples of Central Sector Schemes in India's Agricultural Sector are: Crop Insurance Scheme and Interest Subsidy for short-term credit to farmers. Centrally Sponsored Schemes, as the name suggests are sponsored partially by the Central Government. The sharing of the expense can be in the ratio of 50:50, 70:30, 75:25 or 90:10. However, the larger ratio is always borne by the Centre. The implementation machinery of this schemes is the domain of State Government but are financially assisted by the Centre. Agriculture is a state list subject, thus most policies are executed and implemented by the federal set up. The policies are mostly brought out by the Central Government and the various

schemes in accordance with the policies are framed and executed by State Governments. Agriculture as a sector comprises of four components: crops, livestock, forest and fishery. It is a vast sector that is deeply interlinked.

The broad policy measures that India has taken in the Agricultural sector are Green Revolution. This was followed by a rainbow revolution, which was a multistakeholder approach to diversify the focus of agriculture as a sector. It focused on fisheries, oilseeds, food grains, fertilizers, potato, meat milk and eggs. It laid emphasis on an inclusive growth mechanism. The single focus of green revolution on wheat and rice was diversified to include other crops and sectors into the development paradigm. A corollary of this initiative was to boost export development by diversifying the food basket. It even led to an increase in export from 2005-2015. This was followed by National Commission on farmer, commonly known as M S Swaminathan Committee report. This report laid down various guidelines for fast and inclusive growth of farmers. The issue of implementation was also highlighted, wherein the issues were to be implemented under the Concurrent list, so that the Centre and State both have a sense of responsibility in the execution of various schemes. It highlighted assured access and control of farmers over basic inputs. It laid emphasis on a more scientific and technological approach towards farming to suit the agro biodiversity for sustainable agriculture. It stood up for sustainable ways like bio fertilizers, biopesticides and rainwater harvesting. It further elucidated upon a cross-sectional growth that would involve horticulture and livestock. It advocated outreach of institutional credit by reducing crop loan interest rate, debt recovery facilitation and separate Kisan Credit Card for Women farmers. It also highlighted the increasing number of farmer suicides and called for an urgent to address the farmer's concern.

The Kisan Credit Card (KCC) was announced in the budget speech of 1998-1999 to fulfil the financial requirement of the farmers. The model scheme was prepared by National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) on the recommendation of V Gupta Committee. The Scheme was to be implemented by Regional Rural Banks, Cooperative banks and public sector banks throughout the country. The rationale behind this scheme was to meet the short-term (cultivation or domestic expenses) and medium-term (Maintenance and cattle requirements) credit goals. The objective behind this policy is to provide adequate and timely support to the farmers at a minimal rate of interest, to manage the post-harvest expenses, to provide for working capital for allied activities like irrigation facilities, storage facilities and input requirements and lastly the consumption requirement of the farmers. Another prominent policy that came up in 2007 as a part of Eleventh Five Year Plan was Rastriya Krishi Vikas Yojana. It focused on maximizing returns to the five-year farmers, increasing public investment in agriculture, doubling agricultural growth, decentralization of crop suitability as per climatic conditions of State. One of the recent policy initiatives was National Agricultural Export Policy in 2018. It was a more holistic vision to increase the farmer's income, accelerate rural growth, increase the agricultural GDP, prosperity of the primary sector. The more contemporary focus has been on doubling farmer's income. The focus on increasing the farmer's income is to ameliorate the deteriorating living standard that a farmer has to go through.

Agricultural policy was completely under the surveillance of state and thus the bureaucrats and state officials had an upper hand in policy choices. The policies were an outcome of intra governmental battles and factional differences in the Congress party as an organization. It was in 1970s that the orientation of agricultural policy making undertook a change. The personality and charisma of Chowdhary Charan Singh as a leader changed the narrative of

assertion in the agricultural policy domain. A central figure of Janata Party, he rose to power with the defeat of Indira Gandhi in 1977 parliamentary election. He held important portfolios like home and finance ministry and was also the Prime Minister for a very short span. As a leader, who represented the peasants of the most populous state: Uttar Pradesh, he not only mobilized the farmers but also became a voice of the farmers. His consolidated leadership made the policy choices more representative of the rural masses. The policies began to respond to the interest of the farmers.

The policy landscape underwent a transformation with the Structural Adjustment Program of IMF and World bank. The restructuring of the economy, implementation of liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation reforms and the onset of a neo-liberal state made way for foundational changes. With the idea of minimal Government interference, agricultural subsidies and import tariffs came to be regulated by WTO and the Uruguay Round under GATT. Consequently, this led to pervasive market access, dismantling of public distribution system, decrease in price support for India. Due to the subsidy regulation by Agreement on Agriculture, India became a dumping ground for the exported goods. This led to an adverse impact on the price of Indian crops because of competition from open market. The clause of 'green box' subsidies made way for the developed nations to get away with the WTO subsidy clause but it did complicate the Indian subsidy regime, which further came forward as a domestic policy challenge. The fundamental changes brought about by Neoliberal policies have aggravated the distress in by compression of demand. The fiscal contraction measures like income deflationary policies, decay of price stabilization measures and promotion of export crops have added to the misery.

Populism and Policy

Let us briefly understand the basic premises of populism, and why has it been chosen as a vantage point for this paper. To begin with, populism is a much contested and invariably diverse construct which does not have a standard definition. It is not a recognizable ideology but an idea related to the emotions of the people. An emotion that can be moulded and sharpened as per the socio-political situations. It is a thin centered ideology, that offers explanation to the socio-political event. It can be merged across ideological divides and can offer an understanding by synchronizing with ideologies like liberalism or socialism. It visualizes the society into homogenous and antagonistic groups and views politics as an expression of general will. The general will of the people focuses on the engagement of people with the power to articulate their demands, and voice their opinions. They are at a pedestal of a strong identity as a popular subject and define the outreach of popular sovereignty.

Its relationship with representation is what shapes the understanding of a liberal democracy. Populist features tend to originate from the perception of crisis. A perception that can get triggered by transitions in the political system. It emerges as an 'episodic phenomenon', and unfolds itself by building narratives, myths and symbols that can resonate with the sentiments of the people. In the Indian Context, not only has populism risen as an episodic phenomenon, it has also made its place in the representative democracy by means of constant validation via the electoral polls. Populism views politics as an on-going conflict and thereby it focuses on wars and not battles. The allegory of war here indicates its communication tools and metaphors that they adapt to while engaging with politics.

Populism in India can trace its compossibility with economic liberalization. A situation that has arisen because of the reforms, wherein the political apparatus tries to accommodate the externalities arising from economic changes. Crises are amalgamation of political and economic

changes, which can be manifested as response to the crisis of modernity. Populism has the tendency to emerge as a form of political representation. It often arises as a lash back to inability of existing social and political institutions to organize their subjects into a complacent social order. In the case of Agriculture, the farmers have consolidated as a lobby strong to be reckoned with. Populism, as exemplified in postcolonial societies like India has led to competitive pluralism, which is often manifested as mass clientelism. The leader characteristics has come to play a pivotal role in consolidating demands and building a trust. There is a circumvention of the institutional and legal procedures, i.e., the high spectrum to engage with the people directly. This direct and unmediated connect falls under the low axis of spectrum, where an individual is directly connected to a leader. This low spectrum engagement exhibits the populist tendency of the democracy.

Decoding a Populist Policy

One of the key determinants of the policy is the social structure in which the policy thrives. A public policy cannot be devoid of its socio-political context. The political factor becomes one of the key ingredients in conceptualization of a policy from the inception stage of the policy making i.e.; the problematization of a particular issue and its agenda setting. It is not the sole ingredient that decides the policy outcomes but indeed an ingredient of fundamental importance. As a cornerstone determining factor of the policy, the political factor does not only shape the policy but also harbors an environment where the policy can be influenced and altered accordingly. Policy is usually seen as post-election variable. The policy deliberations take place after the formation of Government.

Present Scenario of Agricultural Policymaking in Contemporary India

India's agricultural sector remains central to its economy and political landscape, employing nearly half of the population and contributing significantly to GDP. In recent years, policymaking in this sector has been heavily influenced by populist considerations, particularly in response to farmer protests, rural distress, and electoral pressures. Initiatives such as loan waivers, minimum support price (MSP) guarantees, direct cash transfers, and input subsidies have become common tools to address immediate agrarian concerns. While these measures offer short-term relief, they often prioritize political expediency over long-term structural reforms like improving irrigation infrastructure, crop diversification, storage facilities, and market access.

The 2020–21 farmer protests against the central farm laws highlighted the tensions between policy formulation and populist pressures, demonstrating how mass mobilization can shape legislative outcomes. States have also increasingly adopted region-specific policies, reflecting local demands and political considerations, sometimes diverging from central policy objectives. Additionally, issues like climate change, soil degradation, and fluctuating commodity prices add layers of complexity, necessitating evidence-based, sustainable policies. Overall, contemporary agricultural policymaking in India operates at the intersection of populism, governance imperatives, and developmental goals, with political incentives often shaping both the timing and nature of reforms.

Conclusion

Policy Discourse in the agriculture sector is diverse, however the more advocated and adopted policies are the policies that help farmer survive the crisis, these are the policies that help a farmer retain the profession, policies that help the political leaders maintain their incumbency or come to power. The policies are informed by short term goals and lack a scientific rigour. The policy space is engulfed with the idea of populism resonating with the concern for the 'public'. The

policies are politically with no substantial research on the agricultural policies. The last in the series was MS Swaminathan committee report. There have been promises of doubling farmer's income by 2022 without significant research. The ministries rely on their own data, which is collected through surveys by their own volunteers which in turn tampers the political neutrality. There is no documented policy being implemented on a formal research agenda. Thus, the contemporary policy making lacks the scientific temper. Most policies are adopted by incremental method and are renamed with rudimentary changes.

The crisis in the agrarian sector calls for a paradigm shift that engages a multidimensional view to solve the complexities of the sector. The rise in prices of basic commodities has affected the farmers as a consumer also. Around 50 years ago, the price of 1kg of wheat was equivalent to the cost of a litre of diesel. As per the prices of goods and commodities, this ratio today is 4:1. A farmer is not only a producer but also a consumer. He has to invest in his crop by buying the inputs like the seeds, fertilisers, machinery and also sustain a family. He is the only one who buys in retail but sells in wholesale. Thus, a farmer seeks stable prices for his produce, and price parity is of utmost concern for the farmer. He demands a remunerative price that is above the margin of cost of production. The policies in the crop sector should lay emphasis on two fronts. They have to focus on who are the actual farmers they are targeting.

The policies have to be a right mix of investment in agricultural growth and export orientation of the sector. The problem of agricultural surplus if accommodated for generating revenue can be used for the infrastructure sustenance of agriculture. The reforms have to be right mix of technology and traditional practices. A system that employs eco-friendly, crop diversification, water sustenance and crops as per the agroecology should be employed. It will not only end the monopoly of certain food grains but will save crops from being destroyed. Agriculture has become an expensive and input exhaustive practice because the crops are grown as per the demands of the market and not as per the climate resilience and agroecology. The reform has to percolate through research and extension initiatives in the agriculture sector. Technology has to be used in the right mix for alleviating the farmer's distress. The problems of agriculture are interlinked but the solutions being offered are compartmentalised and sectoral in their approach. The approaches have to be conglomerated to come up with a holistic solution. his own eco-friendly and community orientation practices. The policies have to be fine-tuned to the local needs of a particular state. All states differ in their agroecology, cropping patterns, market and the orientation of crisis. Agrarian Crisis require a far-sighted, consistent and a long-term solution that will solve the problem fundamentally. Traditional practices of water harvesting, seed storage, cropping pattern should be innovated with technology and used. It will also give opportunity to the farmers to grow because of the variety that will come out of the crops. The policies need to more adequately informed, researched, surveyed in their approach. A policy should be inclusive of the people's demand but it also should be responsible for bringing reform.

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