





# **I N D E X**

## **EPW – MARCH 2019**

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### 1. WHO IS THE ENCROACHER OF TRIBAL LANDS?

#### *Why in news?*

- The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (henceforth, Forest Rights Act) were aimed at undoing the historical injustices that tribes have suffered for centuries.
- However, their forest rights are now in jeopardy following the SC's order directing states to evict tribes and other traditional forest dwellers whose claims for recognition of their rights have been rejected.
- The petitioners blame the tribes for deforestation and encroachment on forestlands, including protected areas, and thereby posing a threat to wildlife.

#### *Who is the actual encroacher?*

- The colonial state had usurped the tribes' rights of control and management.
- They continued to enjoy their traditional rights, though with some restrictions.
- However, post independence, under the new forest policy, the concession enjoyed as a de facto right was taken away.

- Further, in view of the policy of maintaining one-third of the country's land area under forest, the enthusiasm to achieve this objective led to the claiming of the tribes' lands, with even treeless land being brought under the control of the forest department as forestland.
- Thousands of kilometres of tribal land was encroached upon by the forest department.
- Later acts such as the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 and the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 too encroached on their land.
- It is clear, therefore, that it is the state that is the encroacher.

#### *Is the onus of the depletion of forestlands to lie squarely on the forest dwellers?*

- **Since independence**, tribal areas have been exploited for mining of minerals and setting up of industries and other infrastructure development projects, such as power, dams, roads, and defence establishments, which have not only led to massive deforestation, but also the eviction of tribes and other forest dwellers from their habitats.
- **Since liberalisation**, there has been an unprecedented entry of companies, including multinationals, for



exploitation of resources in tribal areas.

- It is ironical that the tribes are held accountable, but not those who denude the forests for private gain and irreparably harm the environment and animal population in the process.
- It is worth noting that, despite allegations of deforestation against tribes, the forest cover, including dense forest, is the best in tribal areas even today.
- In fact, this should lead to the questioning of the practices of forest and wildlife conservation that are being followed at present.

#### ***How does the current structure treat the forest rights claims?***

- The forest department and its officials, along with urbane and elitist conservationists, have always been hostile to the Forest Rights Act.
- There have been numerous complaints regarding the manner in which it is being implemented.
- The process for recognition of the claims goes through three levels.
- The gram sabha recommends the claim, which then goes to the subdivisional-level authority, and from there it is sent for verification to the district-level authority consisting exclusively of officials, including those of the forest department.

- It is here that the rejection of the claim takes place.
- The rejections are often **arbitrary**, against the recommendations of the gramsabha and driven by lobbies that want to hand over the forests to private parties and businesses.
- The Ministry of Tribal Affairs itself has observed that claims have been rejected on frivolous grounds.
- Lakhs of appeals are pending against the rejections and they have not yet been considered.
- Section 4(5) of the Forest Rights Act specifies that no one can be evicted without proper procedure, but the authorities are themselves responsible for its violation and arbitrary rejection.
- In several cases, the claims have been rejected based on flawed methodologies that are in violation of the act's rules.
- Often, the rejections are based on only satellite maps, even though they are supposed to be supported by ground surveys as per the rule.

#### ***What should be done?***

- The provisions provided in the Constitution treat tribes in a special way.
- It is important that lawyers and judges familiarise themselves with these provisions and laws as well as understand the spirit in which the



framers of the Constitution viewed the tribal populations.

- Indeed, it should form an integral part of curriculum at law universities in the country.

## **2. DIPLOMACY IS THE WAY FORWARD**

### **Why in news?**

- The series of events in India – Pakistan relations – the Pulwama Attack, and the consequent operation Balkot and Pakistan taking custody of Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman (who was released later), indicate that robust diplomatic moves are needed to break the logjam in India–Pakistan relations.

### **What should India do?**

- The Indian government should realise that the claim to solve the question of terrorism through demonetisation has not and will not help.
- This has been evident in the continuity in terror activities at the border.
- Again, the Indian government should self-reflectively acknowledge that it has failed to address the more fundamental questions of the Indian economy, social harmony, and national integrity.
- The voices of reason questioning the incompetence of intelligence units in piecing together signals about the Pulwama attack and the presence of a

large quantity of RDX in a high-security zone of Kashmir were drowned in jingoism over the attack.

- The militaristic language that is bound to escalate the feeling of war is likely to deflect public attention from these fundamental issues.

### **What lies ahead?**

- The political objectives that the government intends to achieve in Kashmir and with Pakistan lack a long-term strategic vision.
- Its critics feel that the incumbent government seems to thrive on tensions, whether within or along the borders.
- Indulgence in war, however, without fully exhausting the diplomatic option, is fundamentally flawed.
- Political ambitions in the domestic agenda must not colour foreign policy.
- The deleterious consequences and international fallout of a possible nuclear war in South Asia must not be disregarded.
- Studies on democracy and wars suggest that electoral pressures restrain democratic leaders' decisions to go to war by providing an incentive to ignore belligerent public opinion.
- Warmongering is, therefore, not a wise state policy and war cannot be an end in itself.
- Down the years, too much reliance on military means to solve the Kashmir



issue has only worsened the situation by alienating the Kashmiri masses.

- Our strategic consciousness must explore hitherto unexplored geoeconomic connectivity options to break the logjam in India–Pakistan relations.
- Constant conditions of tension and conflict only lead to discontent and are not conducive to peaceful existence.
- Thus, it cannot be overemphasised that diplomacy must be the means of negotiating peace and safeguarding interests.

### 3. LIMITS OF TRIUMPHALISM

#### *What is the issue?*

- The post-Pulwama public reaction is a case of the public themselves taking over the role of military think tanks and suggesting war, aggression, courage, and fearlessness.
- These members of civil society have transformed their minds into militaristic minds, and demilitarising them requires ensuring lasting peace at the border.

#### *What are the consequences?*

- It has led to generation of fear among the Kashmiris, in the Indian instance, or fomenting hatred for the Kashmiris who are seen to be territorially associated with the terrorists, or even suggesting their social boycott.

- In fact, those who are in favour of the suggestion of social boycott require it for the resultant ghettoisation of social groups so that violence could be practised against the latter.
- Such suggestions actually tend to erase the distance between the civil and the military.
- **Militarisation:** Militarisation is a process through which civil society produces either the conditions for violence, or its actual articulation.
- The objective of civil society is to perpetuate non-violence and the democratic norms of tolerance and being reasonable to each other.
- The members of civil society are expected to keep in mind that defence forces have their own reasoning for dealing with external threat in terms of strategy, planning, and diplomacy.
- Civilians are not expected to take on this role of the defence forces.
- However, members of civil society seem to have crossed their limits in that they are suggesting to the defence forces reasons as to why war is the only option.
- They have not stopped at this and have gone on to find reasons for turning their “nationalist” anger towards their fellow members of society.
- This is further fuelled by certain media outlets that have propagated



hatred and violence through constant warmongering.

- Tragedy becomes a necessary condition for the brandishing of triumphalism.

#### *What lies ahead?*

- In a peace-loving democratic country, there are limits to triumphalism.
- And, the government in such a country is expected to see to it that the citizens do not imbibe or cultivate this sense of triumphalism.
- The challenge before the present Indian government is to shun its designs, which are crafted to enable it to draw its sustenance by injecting a kind of combative consciousness or sense of revenge among citizens.
- Combative nationalism leads to a vicious reproduction of **“national humiliation,”** which, for its resolution, leads to an acute urge for revenge and retaliation.
- Recovering or securing respect for a nation in a combative mode would logically require the reproduction of tension on the border.
- The urge to take revenge, thus, remains alive all the time and on both sides of the border.
- The governing class in both India and Pakistan needs to take the responsibility to temper the combative mind, wherever it is present and whenever it raises its head.

- The history of war has shown us that militarisation tends to overwhelm humanistic values.

#### **4. PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM IS FAILING THE WOMEN FARMERS**

##### *What is the issue?*

- Maharashtra, with its drought-prone areas, is one of the states with the largest number of male farmer suicides with around 20% of the total farmer suicides in the country.
- In the aftermath of these suicides, women farmers struggle on multiple fronts.
- A poor public health system further fails them and aggravates their plight.

##### *What are the issues faced by women farmers?*

- Suicide by a male farmer changes the social relations within the family.
- As widows, women are left fending for the children and the elderly of the family, and have to deal with the harassment of debt collectors.
- Additionally, they are also trying to cope with drought, crop failures and the burden of expenses of education of their children, marriages of their daughters and also face the catastrophic expenses of medical care of the family.
- **Landlessness:** The struggle becomes more difficult, as in most cases women have no land in their name,



and generally have an unsupportive family that denies them access to the relief measures offered by the government, and in addition, they become easy prey to violence and sexual harassment.

- **Collapsing Health System:** Expenditure on healthcare is evolving as a crucial major burden factor, due to the almost collapsed healthcare system which forces patients to go to private hospitals.

#### **What are the schemes in place?**

- In order to address the healthcare services issues in the 14 suicide-prone districts, two schemes—the “Prerna” project and **MPJAY** were started.
- **Prerna:** aimed at assessment of farmers and their family members for mental illnesses, providing counselling services, and referral services to the district and sub-district hospitals for further treatment by mental health specialists.
- For this purpose, a helpline by the name of **Manobal** in addition to expansion of psychotherapy cells and free counseling and medication.
- **Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Jan Arogya Yojana (MJPJAY) scheme:** Under this, total annual coverage of ₹1.5 lakh can be availed either by one individual or collectively by all members of the family, with the exception of renal

transplant surgery where the upper ceiling would be ₹2,50,000 per operation per year per family.

- Benefits of this scheme can be availed from government/semi-government, private and charitable hospitals that have more than 30 beds, along with select hospitals that have been chosen as “**Arogya Mitra.**”

#### **What are the challenges?**

- In a survey, it was found that among 505 farmer families, only 74 (15%) families were aware of the Prerna project and only 28 families knew about the Manobal helpline.
- Only 17% of the patients availed of mental health treatment in the public sector.
- Forty-three percent availed mental health treatment in the private sector, while 40% preferred not to take any treatment at all.
- Obstacles pointed out were long distance from home, lack of help from the front-line workers, ASHAs or ANMs in the village, unavailability of the psychiatrist & medicines.
- Similarly among the 505 suicide-affected families surveyed, only 99 (19%) were aware of the MPJAY.
- Although this scheme guarantees free surgeries, all the farmer families had to undertake other expenses, including doctor’s fees, medicines, ambulance services, surgical



equipment/tools, etc, and 47 families out of the 69 had to take loans to meet these expenses.

### *What should be done?*

- **Reduction of out-of-pocket expenses:** To change this situation, the out-of-pocket expenses being incurred by farmers on health services need to be reduced.
- Given the context of drought in the 14 districts of Maharashtra, the farmer widows and their family members should have access to good quality health services free of cost.
- **Filling of vacancies:** To achieve this, all vacant posts in these districts should be immediately filled, and the constant shortage of medicines in the public health sector needs to be urgently addressed.
- In these suicide-prone and drought-hit districts, any tests and investigations required by the women should be available completely free of cost.
- These suicide-afflicted families should be incorporated in the Ayushman Bharat Yojana, without any terms and conditions.
- Effective implementation of schemes like Prerana and MPJAY can reduce the burden of expenditure on the women farmers.
- Actually, it is not so difficult for the government to accept these demands;

provided they have the willpower to do it and they exercise an appropriate implementation mechanism.

## **5. INTRIGUES OF INDIGENEITY AND PATRIARCHY IN KHASI SOCIETY**

### *What is the issue?*

- Proponents of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Khasi Social Custom of Lineage) Second Amendment Bill, 2018 see it as a mechanism to protect the indigenous culture of the Khasi tribal community.
- However, critics from within and outside the community are describing it as a regressive legislation which will distort the matrilineal values of the Khasi society.

### *What is the change brought out by the bill?*

- The amendment inserted a new section 3(d) which states that **any Khasi woman who married a non-Khasi as well as her offspring(s) born out of such marriage(s) shall be deemed as non-Khasi** who shall lose the Khasi status and all the privileges and benefits as a member of the Khasi tribe who cannot claim preferential privileges under any law.

### *What is the ground reality of Matrilineal societies?*

- In Khasi matrilineal society, the youngest married daughter inherits



ancestral family property and her husband moves to settle with her family and look after her parents.

- Though Meghalaya is projected as a matrilineal society with great gender equality, matriliney, often controlled by patriarchal deep-rooted patriarchal values prevents the socio-political empowerment of women.

### **What are arguments of the supporters of the bill?**

- In trying to build wider legitimacy for the bill, supporters argue that it is intended to protect indigeneity, safeguard culture, and uphold tradition.
- According to them, it will save Khasis from becoming a minority community.
- The bill is legitimised by asserting that it will protect indigenous people in the wake of illegal migration by non-tribals into the state.
- Further, the bill supposedly takes into account the controversy surrounding the NRC in Assam.
- Supporters of the bill claim that the derecognition of around 40 lakh people from the citizens register will lead to their immigration from Assam to neighbouring Meghalaya, and that they will enter into marital relationships with Khasi women.
- Invoking indigeneity, the protagonists further argue that the bill is

protecting Khasi self-identity from the threat of interracial marriages.

- Supporters of the bill often ascribe the increasing cases of family breakdown in the Khasi community to Khasi women marrying non-Khasi men.
- Proponents believe that the bill will prevent unscrupulous claims of Khasi status, which are made purely to obtain constitutional benefits, concessions, or privileges conferred on Khasis.
- Moreover, it is purported that such marriages lead to changes in culture with the Khasi women and their children adopting their husbands' personal laws and practices.

### **What are the criticisms?**

- Critics argue that the interests of the community create obstacles for the realisation of individual liberty.
- Preventing a Khasi woman from marrying a non-Khasi is gender-biased and often propagates a culture of hate.
- It is also in violation of the fundamental rights of tribal women and the rights of tribal children.
- The decisions of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) are often seen as similar to those of **khap panchayats**.
- Critics have also added a **religious angle** to the bill, arguing that it prevents Christian tribals from



marrying non-tribals of the same religion.

- The provisions of the bill also apply to Khasi women who marry men from other tribes.
- It was argued that the move was an attempt to control women's bodies and choice.
- While the bill intends to protect the indigeneity of Khasis who believe in Christianity, it does not address the anxiety and concerns of the Seng Khasis, an indigenous community among the Khasis, who are in a state of virtual extinction.
- Since the provisions of the bill are only applicable to the Christian Khasis of Meghalaya claiming Scheduled Tribe status, the Seng Khasis are left out of the bill.
- **Dilution of Matrilineal Values:** Critics argue that the bill is an explicit manifestation of the patriarchal values inherent in Khasi society and that matriliney is crumbling due to its provisions.

#### **What lies ahead?**

- The construction of the tribal versus non-tribal binary is often a deliberate attempt to hide the clashes within Khasi society between the elite and the poor masses.
- Although the customary laws and practices of the tribal communities are protected by the Constitution,

they must work within the spirit and ideals of the modern Constitution.

- Traditional institutions should also work within that framework.
- When traditional institutions invoke customary laws to protect the community's indigeneity, the causality is gender equality and women's rights.
- Feminists contend that in order to ensure gender equality and abolish control on women's sexuality and choices, laws and institutions should be made gender neutral.

## **6. GOVERNMENTALISING THE RESEARCH MIND**

### **What is the issue?**

- Recently a resolution was passed to make research in the universities fall in line with "national priorities."
- Such a resolution, is anti-intellectual in as much as it seeks to undermine the very democratic dimension of how research shapes up.

### **Why is it a problem?**

- The conditions put forward by this resolution are clearly an attempt to make research scholars abide by a particular notion of nation, which in a misconstruing way gets equated to the government, sans all the cleavages, inequalities, injustices, and discontents it embodies.
- Any differing view or dissent in any form, then, by default gets tagged as



destructive to the nation, which the government confuses itself to be.

- The history and social reality of sections that remain out of the purview of such national priority are being erased from the National Council of Educational Research and Training textbooks.
- If even research gets limited in this way, then it will become hard to contest the majoritarian view and to remember that there are indeed many discourses of nationalism, and conflicting and differing ideas of nation.
- The condition to discourage research in “irrelevant areas” may fend off the university departments to encourage research that is not considered “safe,” such as analysing the “benefits” of demonetisation, or socio-environmental costs of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan.
- Moreover, in research, what matters more is not relevance, but the significance that an issue holds for the researcher, the academic community, as well as for the larger society.

### **How will it affect the research atmosphere?**

- Ideally, research emanates from the questions that drive the researcher’s mind and life.

- Thus, a researcher needs an atmosphere where any and many questions could be asked.
- The resolution, by directing researchers to “select” from a pre-prepared shelf of topics, defeats the purpose of research itself: to strive to know beyond what is given, or made to appear “worth knowing,” and to ask fresh questions recognising the silences in the existing scholarship.
- If spoon-fed and dictated to, either by the market or government interests or even by the prevalent academic fads, research loses its spirit.
- With routine, safe, and conformist topics, there will be the little or no need to carry on research at all.
- Further, the value of a research university is not only in its ability to respond to immediate concerns, but also in engaging with ideas that go beyond the limitedness of the present.

### **What lies ahead?**

- **Policing research:** Steps to **police research** are surely detrimental to the freedom to read, write, imagine, dream, think, and express, which researchers ought to have in a university, as should people in a democracy.
- If the ruling regime will start defining what and how scholars should think and study, and encapsulate research in its limited understanding of



nationalism, universities might end up producing only what the government and, by extension, corporate interests demand.

- To nurture conformist research or to follow monologues and monocultures pushed by an authoritarian regime is not the mandate of a university.
- Rather, it is to provide a space for research that engages with plurality of ideas and world views, involves imaginations of better societies, different politics, and diverse ideas of nationalism and nationhood.
- Thus an enlightened government ought to enlarge the frontiers of research and not promote official thinking.

## **7. MONITORING DIGITAL ELECTION CAMPAIGNS**

### ***What is the issue?***

- The campaigning for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections has been perhaps the most “digital” so far with parties across the spectrum now using, and often abusing, the digital tools available to them such as social media, mobile apps, online discussion forums, and mass messaging.
- However, the ECI’s approach to campaigning on social media has failed to ensure a level playing field.

### ***What is the role of social media in politics?***

- Over the last decade, social media has developed from being a networking tool to becoming an important mode for citizen engagement that can empower, educate, and emancipate, changing the way in which democracies operate.
- However, as was evident from the Cambridge Analytica revelations, the personal data of millions of people was harvested using these very same tools for political gains.
- Closer home, along with threats of data harvesting, fake news is rampant and content websites are masquerading as “news outlets.”
- These instances reveal that while social media platforms can be empowering, they are still unequal forums with differential access determined by money and power.

### ***What are the challenges?***

- Much of social media spending takes place through influencer marketing, where prominent individuals who are aligned with political parties run long and expensive campaigns.
- A majority of such campaigns are run on cash payments and it is difficult to establish a money trail.
- It is also almost impossible to track individuals posting advertisements on behalf of political parties.



- Platforms such as WhatsApp, which offer encrypted messaging, are also used to promote political advertisements, further complicating the process of monitoring.

### *How the ECI's response so far?*

- **No timely updation:** While the ECI has recognised the use of social media in election campaigning as early as October 2013—before the 2014 Lok Sabha elections—in its “Instructions of the Commission with respect to use of Social Media in Election Campaigning,” it had only aimed these instructions at “candidates, political parties, media and election observers.”
- But there seems to have been **no updation** of these instructions despite several state assembly elections having been held since then.
- There have been no further guidelines on how social media platforms need to be used by candidates, parties, and others, nor has a cap been put on the inordinate sums of money being used by parties to advertise on these platforms.
- The recently released **voluntary code of ethics** is a case of too little, too late, and is only a guide on how social media companies and the ECI are to interact in monitoring paid advertisements during electoral campaigning.

- Being platforms that carry advertisements, these social media companies should essentially be bound by the model code of conduct with respect to paid advertisements from candidates, political parties, and their supporters.

- **Lethargic:** The 2013 instructions from the ECI had already directed that advertisements on social media require pre-certification and transparency on payments made for the same.
- That steps to comply with these instructions are being taken only now, and that too on a voluntary basis, shows the ECI's lethargic and outdated approach towards digital platforms and their role in electoral processes.
- As a result, the ECI has failed to ensure a level playing field in the electoral process, online and offline.

### *How does the future look?*

- The digital sphere is not separate from physical, social and political spheres, and to view it as operating in isolation is rather unwise.
- We are in a grey zone now because we have ignored the need to interrogate how digital platforms and technologies affect democratic systems, and in turn the integrity of electoral processes.



- Setting up a “voluntary” code of ethics one month before the world’s largest elections are to begin is nothing more than a futile public relations exercise by the social media platforms.
- Ideally, the ECI should have been creating an adequate and nuanced knowledge base on social media in the last few years, which would have enabled it to navigate the fast-evolving digital landscape.
- If it wants to catch up with what social media and elections might look like in 2024, the time for the ECI to take action is now.

## 8. ELECTION CAMPAIGNS AND THE PUBLIC AS SPECTATORS

### *What is the issue?*

- In a representative democracy, elections are an occasion for collective deliberation over the questions that have a bearing on reorienting society along democratic lines and the government’s responsiveness to such questions.
- However, the election campaigns in recent times have fallen short of being vehicles for such a deliberation as they have been conducted and projected as if they were a spectacle or spectator sport.

### *What are the consequences?*

- The deviation from the deliberative thrust in the exercise of elections has

lent its support to two tendencies, namely, **presidentialisation** and **municipalisation**, that necessarily seek to undermine the substance of democracy.

- **Presidentialisation** entails a singular focus on the prime ministerial candidate or the “face” of the party or coalition, which reduces the electoral debate and competition to a personality contest.
- **Municipalisation** entails a narrow focus on the performance or attributes of the candidates at the constituency level.

### *What are the concerns in Presidentialisation?*

- In the case of presidentialisation, people are expected to vest their authority in a strong central leader and the parameters of choice are the skills, competence, and limitations of the individual leader.
- At the immediate level, this means that there is no space for voters to question or counter the policies or the programmatic vision of the ruling party, or interrogate the alternative proposed by the opposition.
- At a larger level, turning elections into a personality contest would ensure a policy continuum favourable to the hegemonic forces in society and economy, and thereby the capacity of



the voters to alter power relations is negated for all practical purposes.

### **What are the concerns in Municipalisation?**

- Municipalisation contributes to negation by circumscribing the domain of the voter activity and intervention to the level of constituency.
- Municipalised political consciousness not only excludes the discussion of macro-level policy issues—from specific programs and legislations to the character of the government but also makes it difficult to grasp the universal and structural aspects of seemingly local or constituency-specific questions.
- People are confined to the domain of the *gully* (the local), even as levers of power in *Dilli* (the centre) become increasingly inaccessible.
- While it is true that in a parliamentary democracy sources of power in *Dilli* are rooted in the *gully*, people must be activated by the consciousness that extends to *Dilli*, since actions of *Dilli* have a bearing on the lives in the *gully*.

### **What lies ahead?**

- In addition to the problems of presidentialisation and municipalisation, there is a dwindling relevance of election manifestos to the overall electoral process.

- Neither is there evident interest among citizens in the making and content of the manifestos of political parties, nor do the political parties accord centrality to the manifesto in their campaigns.
- The indifference of citizens towards manifestos is partly explained by their justified scepticism about their authenticity and sincerity, but nevertheless it remains an important statement of the programmatic vision of the political parties.
- The absence of a systematic discussion of the manifestos in the media and active interaction between parties and voters over its contents marginalises this dimension of a programmatic vision from the electoral contest.
- This element of programmatic vision brings the contestation over ideas—of the current state and future trajectory of the government and society—to the fore and it becomes more relevant with recent government moves that are decisively antithetical to the vision of the Constitution.
- If this makes the 2019 general election arguably the most important election since independence, then it is incumbent upon citizens to ensure that public discourse around the election reflects this seriousness.



## 9. GOVERNMENT'S AGRI-PRICING POLITICS

### Why in news?

- The CSO's latest agricultural growth estimates, based on the 2011–12 GDP series, have revealed that the nominal GVA of agriculture in the Oct–Dec 2018 quarter dropped to a 14-year low of 2.04%.
- With the farm production in this quarter being nearly 3% higher than that in Oct–Dec 2017, this abysmal performance of agriculture in current value terms is indicative of tumbling farm prices, which, in turn, put a question mark on the government's agricultural pricing policy.

### What is the dilemma in agri-pricing?

- While various reports have already documented that the crops covered by the MSP had sold at prices that were 20%–30% lower than the declared prices, empirical estimates show that even with augmented government procurement of pulses and oilseeds, MSP can benefit only about a fifth of the farmers in the country.
- The proponents of this government would, however, argue that pricing agriculture and food is a perpetual dilemma of governments in developing countries.
- High prices that can stimulate production are also deterrents for consumers, especially the poor.

- On the other hand, dwindling prices are distressing for the farmers and, in extreme situations, have even led to farmer suicides.
- So, it is indeed a delicate balance of affordable prices and stable incomes that governments must maintain, which is no cakewalk.
- Though the government has launched various farmer support schemes, the political will underlying this enthusiasm is contested by evidences.

### What are the recent examples?

- While none of the states—even had implemented PM Annadata Aay SanraksHan Abhiyan (AASHA) that sought to provide income support to farmers, the disproportionately meagre budgetary provisions indicate the government's intention of using it only as an electoral plank.
- While distress sales remain historically true for the Indian farm sector, instances of farmers destroying their produce due to market gluts are also common.
- Concurrently, when retail prices hit the roof during shortages, farm prices can barely match up to the rise indicating lack of concerted policies for agricultural market reforms.
- India's conventional *mandi* system, governed by the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) Act, is characterised by exploitative



middlemen who are retained as the central marketing agents by the Model Agriculture Produce and Livestock Marketing Act, 2017.

#### ***What do the statistics reveal?***

- A joint report of the OECD and the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) in 2018, have pointed out that domestic marketing regulations with their in-built bias of controlling consumer prices, have implicitly taxed the Indian farmers for almost two decades now, contrary to the rhetoric of protecting their interests.
- It also reveals that between 2000–01 and 2016–17, every year Indian farmers received prices that were on an average **14% lower than the global prices.**

#### ***What is the future outlook?***

- The pro-consumer bias in the government's agricultural policies is explained by the fact that this "consuming class" is not too far away from the "middle class" population whose pro-ruling party swing had brought the current government to power in 2014.
- Keeping consumer prices under control is thus politically expedient.
- The opinion-shaping character of the urban electorate can then be exploited to champion the government's "pro-common man" rhetoric, and further alienate the distraught rural voices from mainstream politics.