

In Conversation With

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Q1. In the wake of recent farmer's debt waivers announced by various State Governments, do you think that periodic debt waivers will be successful in driving away from the woes of the Indian Farmer?

Ans. Loan waivers cannot address farmers' woes. They only reach the 20-25% farmers who have access to institutional credit and not the marginal farmers who depend on moneylenders or get no credit at all. Having a bank debt is not, in itself, a sign of distress. Farming, like other businesses, needs loans, and access to formal credit signifies creditworthiness. It is the poorer farmers who depend mainly on private lenders, and whose loans don't get waived, who are in distress.

To address farmers' woes, we need a multi-pronged strategy of income support, government investment, and institutional innovations, and not a 'one size fits all' approach. The better-off farmers are deeply dissatisfied due to unfulfilled aspirations and especially a lack of formal sector jobs for themselves and their children. Poorer farmers are distressed due to poor economic returns from agriculture.

To overcome immediate distress, direct cash transfers are preferable to loan waivers, but such transfers should be made only to smallholders (those owning 2 ha or less) and pure-tenants. And the funds should go to women in the family. There is substantial evidence that it is income in a mother's hands which greatly improves child nutrition and education, and not income only in the father's hands. Just before the last state elections, Telangana gave Rs. 9900/ha/season to all landowning farmers, while pure-tenants and most women farmers got nothing.

To reduce long-term distress, however, agricultural investment is imperative, especially in irrigation, water conservation, new crop varieties, and storage for surplus produce. We also need to encourage small farmers to pool resources and cooperate in farming. Some 85% of farmers cultivate 2 ha or less, in scattered plots. This is non-viable. Pooling land and resources will help smallholders create medium-sized production units. Finally, it is essential to create jobs for farmers' children in small towns, through ancillary industries, food processing, SMEs, and so on. This would provide supplementary income for farmers in distress.

Q2. Women farmers have largely been excluded from the narrative of agricultural reform in India. Along with reorganizing land rights, are there any alternative solutions that can be adopted?

Ans. Yes, women farmers are seldom mentioned in the policy, despite the fact that an increasing proportion of women are principal cultivators, and many more are de-facto responsible for farms with male outmigration. Some 35% of all agricultural workers are female and 13.9% of operational holdings are directly farmed by women (2015-16 agricultural census). The economic distress that women farmers are facing is never

mentioned. In 2010, they constituted some 15% of farmer suicides in 5 major states (Down to Earth. 2015). Overall, gender is, in fact, a critical factor, as we look toward the future, since women are significant food producers and home food managers.

Despite being major contributors to agriculture, few women have land titles and those that do usually own very small plots. A lack of titles remains a big constraint, since it is linked not only to the security of tenure but also to access government support schemes for farmers. Women farmers also face gender biases in access to technology, training, inputs, irrigation, machinery and markets. So we need measures both to increase women's land ownership and to raise the land's productivity. For this, women farmers not only need support for essential inputs but also institutional innovations such as group farming.

In the early 2000s, Kerala began a programme of group farming in which women lease in land collectively, pool their labor and capital, and share the produce equitably. In order to understand what economic difference this makes, I did a detailed survey in 2012-13 to compare women's group farms with individual family farms (95% of which were male managed), in Thrissur and Alappuzha districts. I found that the annual average value of output was 1.8 times greater and annual average profits were 5 times higher on women's group farms. They did especially well in commercial crops such as bananas and vegetables, despite depending on leased land. Groups helped increase farm size, brought scale economies, saved on hired labour, improved credit access, and enhanced women's bargaining power in input and output markets.

Institutional reform, which has long been ignored in India's farm policy, needs to be an integral part of schemes to help poor farmers (both men and women). Groups can also reduce the likelihood of farmer suicides by reducing their isolation.

Q3. Do you think that we have enough time to avoid the warming that will bring severe and damaging effects of climate change?

Ans. We are already facing the severe effects of climate change, in terms of a rise in droughts, floods, unseasonal and erratic rainfall, melting glaciers, and so on. Most of all, India, and South Asia more generally, will be among the worst affected in terms of a decline in crop yields with temperature rise. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington DC, for instance, estimated that by 2050, climate change (relative to the no climate change), could lower production of rice, wheat and maize in South Asia by around 14%, 49% and 9% respectively. Even without climate change, we need extraordinary efforts to meet the food security demands of the 9.7 billion people projected for 2050. With climate change, this is even more imperative.

We can still do a good deal in terms of both adaptation and mitigation. For more secure agricultural production, for instance, we need to invest in efficient irrigation and water conservation; develop and adopt more heat and drought resistant crop varieties; diversify the crops grown, so that if some crops fail others will survive; integrate trees with crop production; and, most of all, grow crops that use less water. Today, only 44% of India's irrigable area is irrigated. This must increase, but not via groundwater mining, which is unsustainable. We need rainwater harvesting and conservation. In Punjab – India's breadbasket – the water table is falling by 2.3 ft/yr or more, with no

penalties for overdrawing. In contrast, Gujarat's success in agriculture (9.6% growth rate between 1999-2009) lay particularly in rainwater harvesting. This needs replication, wherever possible, and can be done through community cooperation. Also, methods such as drip irrigation help use water more efficiently.

Technology alone, however, cannot solve the problem. The technical advances must also reach the farmers, especially women farmers, whose numbers are growing. Most of all, our politicians need to look beyond elections and invest in our country's long-term future.

Q4. You are among the pioneers of equal land rights for women, even leading a social movement to amend the Hindu inheritance law to make it gender equal. What other things are you passionate about?

Ans. I am passionate about social equality for all and not just for women, as well as environmental conservation, especially forest protection. I also feel strongly about social tolerance and intellectual freedom. And I love poetry and literature, classical music, and good cinema.