Definition of a Farmer - Question in Rajya Sabha

Why in news?

The Agriculture Minister evaded answering a question over the government's definition of a farmer and the number of farmers in India by that definition.

What happened in Parliament?

- The question was posed in the Rajya Sabha by BJP MP Ajay Pratap Singh.
- He also asked whether any survey had been conducted to find out the number of farmer families.
- In a written response, the Agriculture Minister evaded giving any definition of a farmer.
- He instead said that agriculture was a State subject.
- He provided data on the number of agricultural landholdings.
- He noted that the Centre provides income support to all farmer families who own cultivable land via the PM-KISAN scheme.
- In the following discussion, MPs pointed out that the number of land holdings do not necessarily equate with the number of farming households.

What is the definition in the National Policy?

- There is a clear and comprehensive definition available in the National Policy for Farmers.
- [The policy emphasises the need to substantially increase the net income of farmers.
- It also aims at developing support services for them, using that comprehensive definition.
- It was drafted by the National Commission of Farmers headed by M.S. Swaminathan.]
- The definition was officially approved by the Centre in 2007 following consultations with the States, for the purpose of the Policy.
- Accordingly, the term 'FARMER' will refer to a person actively engaged in the economic and/or livelihood activity of growing crops.
- It will also apply to those producing other primary agricultural commodities.
- It will include all agricultural operational holders, cultivators, agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, tenants, poultry and livestock rearers, fishers.

- Others include beekeepers, gardeners, pastoralists, non-corporate planters and planting labourers.
- Besides these, those engaged in various farming related occupations such as sericulture, vermiculture and agro-forestry are also covered.
- The term will also include tribal families/persons engaged in shifting cultivation and in the collection, use and sale of minor and non-timber forest produce.

What is in practice?

- There is a deliberate attempt at avoiding this pre-existing official definition.
- In practice, those who cultivate or work on the land but do not own it are excluded from the definition of farmers.
- Thus, dairy farmers, fisherfolk, fruit and flower growers would not fit into it.
- Also, landless agricultural workers who cultivate the land belonging to others would not come under it.

What are the implications of this?

- The government's ambiguity has serious implications for the design and beneficiaries of the schemes meant to help them.
- According to Census 2011, there are 11.8 crore cultivators and 14.4 crore agricultural workers.
- The excluded ones do not get access to agricultural credit and interest subvention for farm loans.
- Crop insurance and loan waivers go to loanees so they are left out of that as well.
- Most schemes meant for farmers' welfare, including the procurement of wheat and paddy at MSP, are effectively available only for land owners.
- Access to subsidised crop inputs is difficult without identification as farmers.
- In the event of crop failure too, compensation is only given to owners.
- Tax exemption is usually claimed by owners who give an unverified affidavit that they cultivate the land.
- Direct income support schemes such as PM-KISAN (Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi) are also limited to owners.
- Those who work on the land may not be identified as farmers for the purposes of counting farmer suicides.

- **Women** - Linking the identity of a farmer to land ownership has devastating consequences for another category - women farmers.
- Some studies estimate that 60%-70% of farmers are actually women, but their names are rarely on ownership documents.

What does this call for?

- The definition of a farmer is not merely a philosophical or semantic question, but rather has practical implications.
- There is a need to convert the M.S. Swaminathan Commission's definition into a legal and actionable tool for identification.
- Already, the revenue department is supposed to annually record who is actually cultivating each piece of land.
- In an era of GPS, GIS and Aadhaar, this should not be that difficult. It simply takes political will.
- Apart from adding inclusion criteria other than land-ownership, the Centre must add exclusion criteria so that absentee landlords are left out.

Source: The Hindu

