How to Define a Farmer?

What is the issue?

Categorising farmers based on dependence on farm income and land ownership has strirred debates.

What is the categorisation about?

- The Agriculture Census for 2015-16 placed the total operational holdings in India at 146.45 million.
- National Statistical Office's Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households (SAAH) report for 2018-19 pegs the country's agricultural households at 93.09 million.
- This wide variation has largely to do with methodology.
- The Agriculture Census looks at any land used even partly for agricultural production and operated/managed by one person alone or with others. The land does not have to be owned by that person (cultivator), who needn't also belong to an agricultural household.
- The SAAH report considers only the operational holdings of agricultural households.
- While the Census treats each of them as separate holdings, the SAAH takes all these lands as a single production unit.
- Those households whose net receipts from farming are at least 50 per cent of their total income from all sources are categorized as **full-time/regular farmers.**
- The mention of minimum land (more than 1 hectare or 2.5 acres) required for farming to be viable excludes about 70 per cent of agricultural households in the country which they do not possess.
- There is a suggestion that the agricultural policy should target only serious/regular farming households as they genuinely depend on farming.

What are the flaws of the above mentioned categorisation of farmers?

- The categorization of farmer based on a single ratio of farm income dependence and a threshold of 50 per cent ignores the differential historical trajectory of development and livelihood diversification in diverse regions of India.

    - For example, while remittances often constitute a major portion of household income in states like Kerala, it does not make small-scale spice cultivators or rubber growers any less serious.
- Farmers are not a homogenous category and a more realistic category of rich/middle/poor farmers or capitalist/petty-producer/agricultural labour is needed to identify those engaged in agriculture.
- The contribution to national production of 70 % of farmers possessing less than 1 hectare of land is under question.
- Forcing marginal farmers out of agriculture would be disastrous from the perspective of household-level food and nutrition security.
- Withdrawing state support to smallholders will have a disproportionate impact on the socially marginalised groups and would further push them into asset poverty.
- If 70% of agricultural households are identified as non-serious farmers, there lies a question of who should be moved out of agriculture and what happens to their land resources.
    - Huge land reserves will be immediately opened for corporate grabbing laying the foundation for agribusiness monopolies.
- Agriculture functions as a social safety net in providing a source of sustenance to millions and thereby providing conditions of relatively stable growth in productive sectors of the economy.
    - The crisis faced by migrant workers during the lockdown and the phenomenon of reverse migration is a testimony to the fact that agriculture continues to provide a buffer to millions who face intermittent unemployment.

What will be the solution to the problem of Indian farmers?

- The SAAH data also shows a fall in real average crop incomes between 2013 and 2019 which is driven by rising input prices and dwindling output prices.
- Smallholders rely more on informal sources of moneylending, which adds to indebtedness.
- Forced destruction of the livelihoods of millions of smallholders by withdrawal of the little they receive by the way of state support will be a recipe for disaster.
- The solution to the problem of Indian farmers needs a serious rethink of the economic policies and surely cannot lie in simply excluding them by redefinition.

References

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