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Agrarian Crisis and Agricultural Policy Interventions in India

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ABSTRACT

The agriculture sector in India is one of the significant sectors supplying food to more than 1.3 billion population and serves as the prime employer for huge masses directly in Rural India. As a result, the agriculture sector is considered the backbone of the Indian economy. This sector is not only confined to its own, but it drives other sectors to grow and develop that have a significant role in the growth of the Indian economy. The copious literature revealed that this sector has been going through a grave agrarian crisis. The crisis scenario in the contemporary agrarian sector is undoubtedly a time of pain, distress, and disorder for farmers, rural employment, rural communities, and the State. Consequently, the agriculture sector has become a stressful and risky occupation worldwide. The agrarian crisis is currently unfolding in India and many other developing countries. Hence, the present study tried to understand the roots of the agricultural crisis through significant agriculture policy intervention and fifth-year plans, including two significant reforms, namely the green revolution and economic reforms of 1991 undertaken by governments. This study is developed based on a critical review methodology taking secondary resources. The study has found that less attention is given to agriculture than other sectors, cutting off fertiliser subsidies, promoting commercial crops through the green revolution, and less budget allocation through fifth-year plans.

Keywords

Five-Year Plans, Green Revolution, Agriculture Policies, Agrarian Crisis

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Introduction

The Indian agriculture sector is one of the principal economic sectors in which a more significant number of the population actively find their livelihood and provide food security to the population. In terms of people's livelihood activities, India has remained a rural and agricultural country even at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Reddy & Mishra, 2010). Two-thirds of the Indian population derives substance from agriculture. The agricultural sector in India has been facing a severe crisis for two decades. The country has witnessed rapid changes in agriculture, becoming more demand-driven with a shift from staple crops to cash crops accompanied by a shift towards global integration of agricultural markets (Deshpande & Arora, 2010). The agrarian crisis has become more visible in recent years, resulting from adverse outcomes of loss of land rights against indebtedness and declining nutrition for the poorest majority of populations, rising farmer suicides cases in the county (Patnaik, 2003; Raghavendra & Kumar, 2020; Behere et al., 2021). The agrarian crisis is structural and institutional, as could be seen in the growing marginalisation and failure of support systems, including that of Government and non-government agencies, which is reflected especially as a part of the reforms agenda considering the shift in institutional emphasis from State to markets (Reddy & Mishra, 2010b). The primary indicators of this agrarian crisis are farmer suicides, farmer protests, degradation of farming sectors, and migration from agriculture by many farmers. The agrarian crisis is not a newly emerged scenario. It needs to be placed in the global context and particularly in the political context of India since the introduction of Liberalisation, Privatisation, and Globalization. The present paper analyses the root causes of the agrarian crisis and how policy interventions failed to curb the issue.

Methods and Materials

This paper attempts to understand the prime root causes of the agrarian crisis in India by critically analysing the essential flagship policies that adversely affected the Indian agriculture sector. The descriptive research design has been adopted for this study, and secondary data sources like policy documents, research papers, books on agriculture policy development, department reports, and fifth-year planning documents have been considered based on the objective of the study and critically analysed and examined.

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Agrarian Crisis in India

After independence in 1947, Indian agriculture underwent two significant phases; Green Revolution, in 1965 and Economic reform, in 1991. The first remarkable and successful phase was the Green Revolution, which made the nation economically solid and self-sufficient in food grains from 1968 to 1978; this revolution attracted much criticism from researchers. However, the rapid transformation produced significant economic inequity among farmers and contributed to enormous interregional agricultural differences (Chakravarti, 1973). The green revolution initiated in India from 1964 to 1965 aimed at achieving self-sufficiency in food grains, which proved successful. The north-western regions like Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh benefited from the fruits of this movement. The success of the Green Revolution was attributed to the use of high-yield varieties of seeds, chemical fertilisers, irrigation and different modern technique and methods of farming. However, the Green Revolution period did not sustain for a long time. Gradually, the Indian agriculture sector started getting into problems in the 1980s because of the degradation of natural and environmental resources like soil and water. Moreover, apart from the environmental issues, the most intriguing matters started emerging, like increased cost of cultivation, declining profitability, and dwindling farm productivity. Thus, it marked the end of traditional methods of cultivation.

The second is that the economic reforms in 1991 adversely affected the growth of the Indian agriculture sector. It resulted in an agriculture crisis in India along with the agrarian crisis. Agriculture crisis occurred in association with the production, use of inputs, and low productivity of crops. However, the agrarian crisis results from the shift of growing marginalisation and the support system on the part of the reform agenda of the institutional emphasis from State to market mechanism (Reddy & Mishra, 2010a). Increased dependence on inputs from the market resulted from the transition from subsistence farming to more commercial farming that prioritised profit. Agriculture became more commercialised, which has exacerbated the situation for farmers by causing them to consume more inputs that must be purchased, experience lower profits, and lack safety nets. The slowdown and stalling of agricultural expansion have negatively impacted the income and employment of most rural people who depend on agriculture. Additionally, the unpredictable monsoon, spurious inputs like seed, fertiliser, and plant protection chemicals, variations in productivity, and poor markets have added to the farmers' distress and frustration

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(Mohanakumar & Sharma, 2006). Along with these, the declining trend of public investment in agriculture, reduction of subsidies for significant inputs like fertilisers, and international agreements with organisations and countries resulted in an agrarian crisis in India with increased farmer suicide.

Since the Government announced the Structural Adjustment Policy, the nature of the Indian State has significantly changed. The agriculture sector has suffered the most due to the Indian State's gradual withdrawal from several economic sectors through various sources. On the other hand, this has led to a large-scale increase in farmer suicides across the developed states in India (Chakravorty, 2019). Economic theory has historically viewed the growth of the agricultural sector as a prerequisite for transforming the capitalist Economy (Kaur & Bhangoo, 2018). Even though seeds are a farmer's primary input, farmers all around the nation had access to seeds from state government organisations before liberalisation. The institutions that produced their seeds were in charge of their cost and quality and had a legal obligation to make sure that seeds were given to all of the State's areas, regardless of how far they were. Since the seed industry was tightly controlled, quality was also guaranteed for privately-bought seeds. Following deregulation, multinational agribusinesses, including Monsanto, Cargill, and Syn Genta, gained access to India's seed industry (Ahoy, 2016). On the same basis, the noticeable slowdown throughout the Liberalisation Era gains relevance.

The growth rate of agricultural output drastically decreased from the mid-1990s. Between 1995–1996 and 2004–2005, the growth rate of the agricultural GDP decreased from 3.62 per cent in 1984–1985 to less than 2 per cent. Additionally, patterns across states show that the majority of rain-fed regions and states had the most decline. In the previous 50 years, the agricultural output growth rate has not slowed for as long as it has from 1994–1995. As a result, the increase in agricultural output has been declining for more than ten years. After reaching a low of -0.2% in 2014–15, a rising trend took the rate to 6.3% in 2016–17 before falling back to 2.9% in 2018–19 (Jha, 2020). Despite having an agrarian economy, India's GDP became less dependent on agriculture. The service sector, followed by industry, makes up most of this share loss. This indicates that agriculture's importance is diminishing yearly, and the suicide rate reflects this (PS & Alex, 2020; Wasewar & Sinha, 2020). The agrarian crisis in India was primarily caused by this

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structural revolution in agriculture, which raised the physical and emotional stress on the farmers to the point that they had no choice but to commit suicide (Shakeel et al., 2017).

Agriculture policy interventions in India

The Indian Government introduced new economic reforms in 1991. The monetary policy shift was known as Liberalisation, Privatisation, and Globalization (LPG). During the 1990s, globalisation entered the world markets as a new economic phenomenon. Soon after, the World Trade Organization (WTO) was established in 1994 as part of the new economic regime. However, India also became one of the founding members of the world trade organisation.

Nevertheless, the new monetary policy and WTO brought new challenges and opportunities for different economic sectors. The agricultural sector was never exempted from bearing the cause of the new reforms, and the crisis, which followed was quite worse. In this global scenario, the debates about the impact of globalisation on the Indian economy in the general and agricultural sector, in particular, were widely initiated.

The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) as a globalisation policy was concretely introduced in India in 1992. According to the observations of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Trade Organization (WTO), the Indian economy was substantially overhauled by these policies. As per the export-import policy, many products' import and customs duties drastically dropped, resulting in large-scale imports without restriction (Kumar, 2012). At the same time, the rising exports of food grains from India in the 1990s intensely met with a decline in supply growth and price decline. Nevertheless, this predictably backfired with the poor being priced out, sales dropping, stocks building up over buffer norms and a higher share of the subsidy simply going towards the cost of stock holding (Patnaik, 2002). Indian farmers were already in crisis because of their food cost prices and along with that the Government's failure to support the system after the Structural Adjustment Programme made things even worse. The Government started reducing investment in the agriculture sector and input subsidies such as fertiliser subsidies. The crisis harmed the farmers and daily wage labourers in the agriculture sector.

The share of agriculture and allied sector to the Gross Value Added (GVA) at introductory price shows a declining trend over the years. In 1950-51, the contribution of agriculture and the allied sector at the constant price was 60.31 per cent to the real GVA at the introductory price in the

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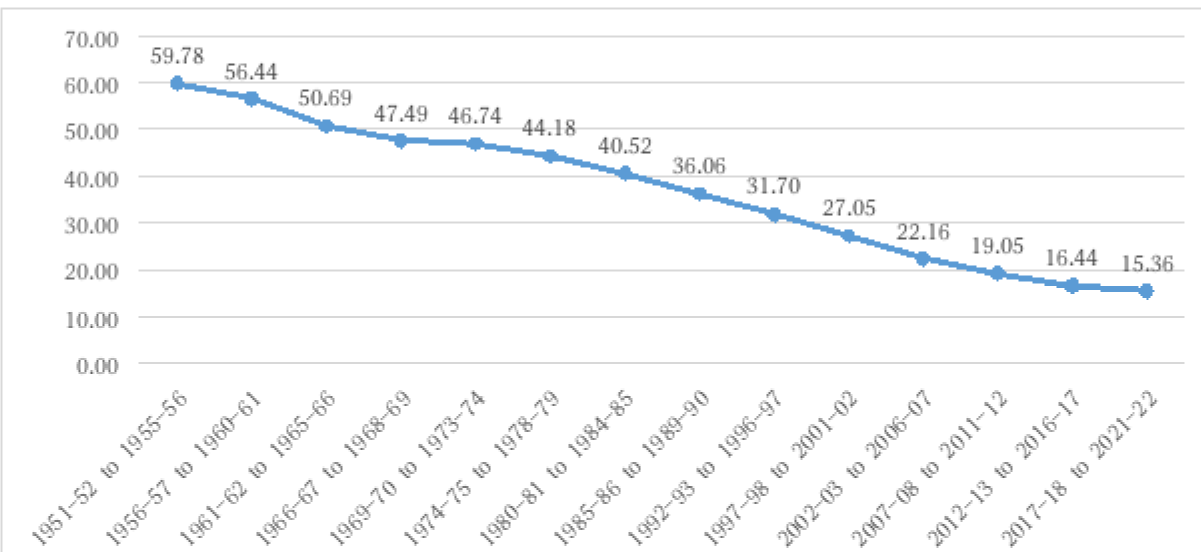
2011-12 series. As per the advanced estimates in 2021-22, the share of the agriculture and allied sector declined to 15.51 per cent. The share of agriculture and allied sector to the GVA at the introductory price in the plan period shows in figure 1. The plan period consisted of five years for all the twelve plans except the annual plans during 1966-67 to 1968-69, the rolling plan (1978-80), and the annual plans (1990-92). The first plan period was 1951-52 to 1955-56 and the last and the twelfth plan period was 2012-13 to 2016-17. The share of agriculture and allied sector to the real GVA at an introductory price during the first plan was 59.78 per cent and during the twelfth plan, it was 16.44 per cent. Later the union government replaced the Planning Commission of India (an autonomous body under the chairmanship of the prime minister established in 1951) with NITI (National Institute for Transforming India) Aayog in 2015. During the five years of the NITI Aayog regime, from 2017-18 to 2021-22, the share of the agriculture and allied sectors was 15.36 per cent. The data is depicted in **Figure.1.**

Figure 1

Share of Agriculture and Allied Sector to the GVA at basic prices (Constant Prices at 2011–12 series)



Source: MoSPI, 2022

Thus, the significance of agriculture and allied sectors in the Indian economy has declined since the first plan of the then Planning Commission to the NITI Aayog period. Later, the service sector emerged as the primary contributor to the Indian economy. This indicates that income generation is not occurring in the agriculture sector compared with the service sector. However, it is essential

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to note that growth in the agriculture sector is the only route to reducing poverty and sorting out the problems in this field. It is indeed very unpredictable and difficult to believe that Indian farmers reside in the grip of a severe agrarian crisis. The Government prioritised and promoted the service and corporate sectors over the agricultural industries. Therefore the agrarian crisis is still existing. The Indian agriculture sector has many schemes and programmes provided and run by both Central Government and States Governments. However, problems with agriculture and farmers are still enduring mainly due to the failure to implement these policies. This is very unfortunate to see that the union government's expenditure on agriculture and allied sectors has shown a declining trend over the years. The data demonstrates the expenditure of the union government on agriculture and allied sector, revealing the importance given by the Government. The agriculture sector provides the largest employment opportunity to the ordinary people of India. More than 40 per cent of the workforce still depends on the agriculture sector. The union government spends around 11 per cent of the total expenditure on the agriculture and allied sector. The data is furnished in **Table.1.**

Table 1

Expenditure on agriculture and allied sector and its percentage of the total expenditure of the Union government of India

Year	Expenditure on Agriculture and Allied Sectors (in crores)	Percentage of total expenditure
2008-09	139134	15.7
2009-10	117253	11.4
2010-11	154269	12.9
2011-12	153344	11.8
2012-13	164998	11.7
2013-14	169821	10.9
2014-15	180703	10.9
2015-16	222523	12.4
2016-17	189390	9.6
2017-18	218959	10.2
2018-19	191388	8.3
2019-20	238916	8.9
2020-21	710816	20.3
2021-22 (RE)	493827	13.1
2022-23 (BE)	384682	9.8

Source: various years of Union Budget Documents

RE = Revised Estimates

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BE = Budget Estimates

The expenditure pattern of the union government over the years shows that the allocation to the agriculture and allied sector is declining. In 2008-09, the spending was 139134 crores, only 15.7 per cent of the total expenditure. In the coming years, it started to decline. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the union government spent a higher amount on this sector to avoid a food crisis and create employment opportunities. Severe lockdown days, and the virus's continued spread resulted in the economy's shutdown. In order to revive the economy, the Government spends much more on the primary sector of the economy, which is the agriculture and allied sector. In 2020-21, 20.3 per cent of the total expenditure was spent on the agriculture and allied sector, and in 2021-22, as per the revised estimates, the share was reduced from the former year to 13.1 per cent.

Moreover, in 2022–23, the budget estimates (9.8 per cent) show the central Government's priority on agriculture and the allied sector. The year 2020–21 witnessed the severity of the coronavirus attack, and in the later years, the spread was reduced. Likewise, the economy is also trying to revive itself after the spread of the coronavirus. In this situation, the government is trying to move away from the agriculture sector without proper spending.

Along with reducing the spending on agriculture and allied sector, the spending on fertiliser subsidies in India has also decreased drastically. The Government is providing fertiliser subsidies to the agriculture sector in two categories. Urea subsidies and nutrient-based subsidies are the two significant categories of fertiliser subsidies. Since 2008-09, the percentage of fertiliser subsidy to the total expenditure of the Union government is showing a declining trend by examining the trend line itself. From 2008-09 to 2019-20, it showed a continuous declining trend, and in the Covid-19 era, the government was forced to spend more on subsidies to revive the economy. In those years, especially in 2020-21, the government spent 127922 crores which is 3.64 per cent of the total expenditure. The revised estimates and budget estimates for the years 2021-22 and 2022-23 show a declining trend from the actual spending in 2020-21. The data is depicted in **Figure.2.**

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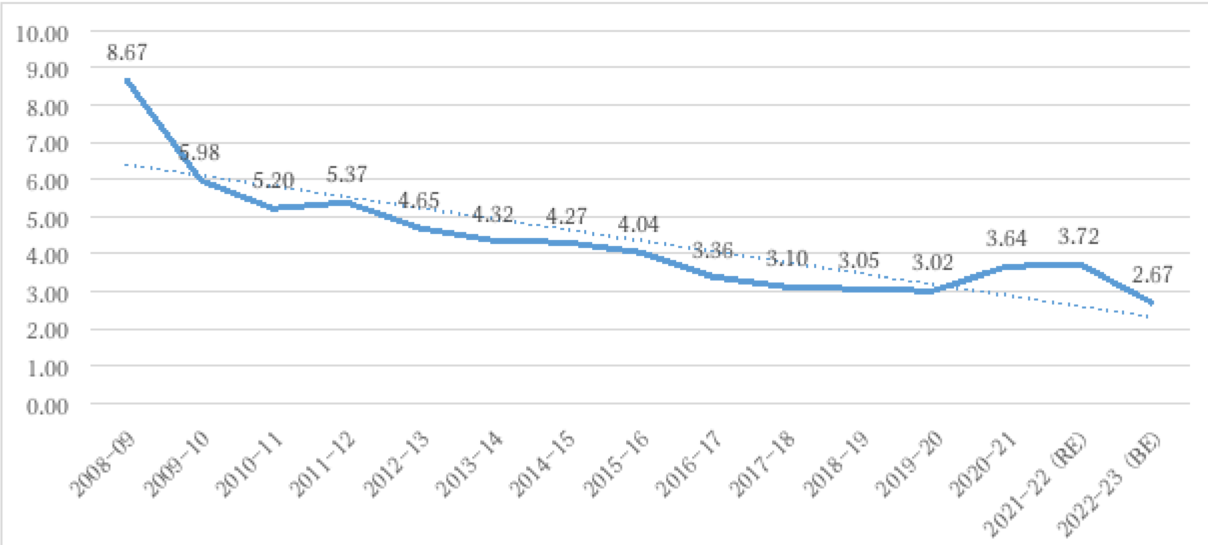
Figure 2

Fertiliser subsidy to total expenditure in percentage



Source: various years of Union Budget Documents

RE = Revised Estimates
BE = Budget Estimates

The reduction in fertiliser subsidies adversely affects the agriculture sector, especially for small and marginal farmers. The prices of fertiliser, which is the primary input for the production of crops, increase drastically. The small and marginal farmers cannot afford the higher prices for fertilisers such as urea, potassium, and others. The subsidy system's direct benefit transfer (DBT) may not help the farmers from the crisis. As a result, the cost of production also increases, and the farmers get back again into the trap of indebtedness, and finally, they commit suicide. The reduction of spending on fertiliser subsidies and the DBT system adversely affects the agriculture sector and contributes to the agrarian crisis in India. In later years, farmers fear that the government may stop providing subsidies for fertilisers like what the government strategically did in the LPG subsidy.

Farmers are forced to raise their voices to address their issues, which are otherwise unheard of by the governments and denied by the policies despite the various policies and programmes for the agriculture sector. It is a significant juncture for the agriculture sector; there is a need to pause and think about the issues raised by the farmer's agitations nationwide. One of the most prominent farmer's movements happened in Delhi on 29 and 30 November 2018 by the All-India Kisan

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Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), which organised 150-200 farmer organisations for the protest. Two significant demands raised by the agitators were loan waiver policies and the implementation of the Swaminathan Commission report. The first report of the Swaminathan Commission was submitted in December 2004, and the last report was introduced in October 2006. The primary recommendations of the Swaminathan Commission report were focused on land reform, irrigation reform, productivity growth, credit & insurance, food security and prevention of farmer suicides.

The rural affairs journalist P. Sainath uncovered the current status of Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY), and it was a giant scam after the Rafale deal. On behalf of the statement, Sainath said that 18 primarily private insurance companies had collected over Sixty-six thousand crores in premiums from the farmers and contributions from the State and Central Government so far. However, crop loss compensation payment by the agencies is significantly less. For instance, Sainath has given a vital example of the Pharbani district in Maharashtra, where Rs.173 crores were paid to Reliance Insurance Company which was selected for the district under the PMFBY scheme, and it collected premiums from only the farmers of the bean crop. The entire crop was reported lost, but the company paid only Rs.30 crores as compensation and made a profit of Rs.143 crores only from one crop in one season, which that too only in one district. If this situation continues for five years, it will be a giant scam in India (TOI, 2018).

Even though, despite the agrarian crisis and farmers' agitation over the nation, three agricultural bills (The Farm Bill, 2020) were passed by National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government in September 2020. The Bills were Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill 2020, Farmer (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Service Bill 2020 and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill 2020. These bills came when the country was suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic. During that pandemic, people were struggling for their basic needs such; as health, employment, daily wages, and education. However, the Government passed the farm bills instead of providing essential relief to the people. However, the farm bills came into public discussion and mainstream media only after a protest started by farmers at the Singhu Border near the national capital New Delhi. The Samyukt Kisan Morcha organised this farmers' movement, and the body spearheading the farmer protest has put the figure to over 670 farmers' deaths during the protest (Express, 2021). After a long protest over the

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country, finally, the Government placed the Farm Laws Repeal Bill 2021 in Parliament (TOI, 2021). This situation is worsening an already fragile agricultural sector in India. In many countries or regions, the crisis would be a decisive moment, a critical time, or a state of affairs, and its outcome will make a fundamental difference for either better or worse. Moreover, crisis circumstances in any form are considered a menace to the prospects of a state. Every crisis has its indicators, which explain the phenomena.

Discussion

It is beyond doubt that agriculture is the backbone of the Indian economy, providing food security and livelihood security. Nevertheless, the sector's condition gradually deteriorated over the period, with very little attention from both governments, leaving the farmers, especially small and marginal farmers, in a plethora of distress and debt. Consequently, the agrarian crisis became grimmer and grimmer, leading farmers to commit suicide through protest, agitation, etcetera.

The cause of the present agrarian crisis varies from State to State because of the diversity in terrain and climatic conditions. External trade liberalisation and neo-liberal policy-driven economic reforms have played havoc with the agriculture sector across the country. Let us look at the paradigm shift of crisis in the agriculture sector. It indicates that after the green revolution, the budget allocated for the agriculture sector was reduced, and the schemes were not implemented properly. New factors like drought and monsoon failure have been added in the name of climate change to conceal the shortcomings of policies. Another significant finding is that farmer suicide is a result of the agrarian crisis in India. From 1995 to 2020, 375941 farmers, including agricultural labourers, committed suicide. The highest number of farmers' suicide happened in the year 2004, and the highest suicides were concentrated in states like Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Punjab, and Kerala as per the ADSI (Accident Death and Suicide in India) of National Crime Records of Bureau (NCRB). Thereby, it is argued that the Government should pay adequate attention to revive the sector on which millions of farmers and people depend. The sector needs fresh attention from research institutions, including academia and practitioners worldwide. Moreover, we need a more inclusive and decentralised policy focusing on the welfare of farmers, not just mere focus, but rather a centralised and controlled policy.

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Conclusion

The root causes for the agrarian crisis have been identified as a green revolution and globalisation and neo-liberalisation process through which the Government introduced several policies. During this period, significant policy shifts occurred in major sectors like agriculture and industry. The import-export policy was one of the significant initiatives during this time. However, import-export policies like Structural Adjustment Programme later proved to be a failure and became unfavourable to the farmers. The critical review of the green revolution, the status of subsidy in fertiliser, budget allocation status over time and other significant policy changes has been brought into the light. To highlight some of the primary root causes, the budget allocation for the agricultural sector started to fall after the fourth five-year plan. It was the most considerable ignorance by the system which resulted in the crisis of the upcoming decades. Despite the significant consequences of the agrarian crisis, the Government did not take any central policy to curb the situation and reduce stress among farmers.

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