

Ides of March

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March carved a special niche for itself in India's crop calendar. Last month, the district of Sikar in Rajasthan witnessed a terrible hailstorm that caused damage to harvest-ready wheat, life and livestock. Several districts of North Bengal and parts of northern Bihar have tasted the fury too. The magnitude of crop loss and the resultant economic downturns in agrarian lives are being speculated on.

Hailstorms have become routine, especially during *rabi* season. In March 2015, severe hailstorms affected over 106 lakh hectares of cropland in 14 states. Considering the fact that over 90 million rural households are already adversely affected by high-interest-rate debts over crop failure, recurrence of such events shoves thousands into intergenerational cycles of poverty, malnutrition and humiliation.

What we are witnessing currently are not just seasonal weather aberrations, but major climatic shifts in which extreme weather events - hailstorm, drought, cyclone and so on - have become commonplace. This deserves methodical policy interventions to enhance adaptability and maintain economic expansion.

When it comes to intervention, the question is simple: will it be post- or pre-disaster intervention? In other words, crop insurance or long-term weather forecasts? Crop-loan waivers or climate-proofing? Emergency relief or adaptive capacity building?

What we need is a bit of both. But first, we need pre-season warnings to give farmers adequate margins of preparation. Unfortunately, the Met office is not yet prepared for such long-ranging predictions. Numerical models used by the India Meteorological Department are capable of predicting weather with 60-70 per cent accuracy for up to five days at the most. Accuracy drops beyond that. The mathematical weather algorithms actually work on reiterative cycles that introduce cycle-to-cycle errors. Other factors include lower area coverage by weather stations and the lack of regular upkeep of instruments. The latest IPCC reports suggest that climatic disasters are to become routine in the future. Where do we then stand with the current forecasting system?

But Met warning is only one half of the story. The other, more prominent, half is crop insurance. To many, the flagship insurance scheme, Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, is a leap ahead of the National Agricultural Insurance Scheme and even the modified NAIS. But it has been met with apprehension by farmers' groups. The premium rates are high; the area coverage is poor; governmental claims of achieving universal coverage is rooted more in electoral dynamics than empirical evidence. In addition, there is hardly any provision for tenant farmers, who face the maximum brunt of crop damage but lack adequate compensation.

Two major operational pitfalls of the system include the spatial unit and the method of damage assessment. Farm-level assessment, instead of the current practice of block/ *tehsil*/village/*panchayat* level assessments, is necessary to obtain exact, rather than 'averaged out', estimates. There is an additional demand of taking rolling average of yields instead of setting a 'benchmark' year for yield assessment.

An inherent flaw in insurance schemes is the state-Centre premium subsidy sharing arrangement. If the PMFBY wishes to expedite payments, the Central government must agree to pay off the full amount to avoid delays at the state level. Moreover, insurance companies barely link up with farmers and totally depend upon bank clearance notifications on loans which is a cumbersome process in itself. Insurance schemes are thus more 'loan insurance than crop insurance', as was stated by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

In essence, post-disaster responses are no less unreliable than pre-disaster aids. Agricultural GDP has sunk to its lowest since 2010. But political will and R&D support may still turn challenges into opportunities.