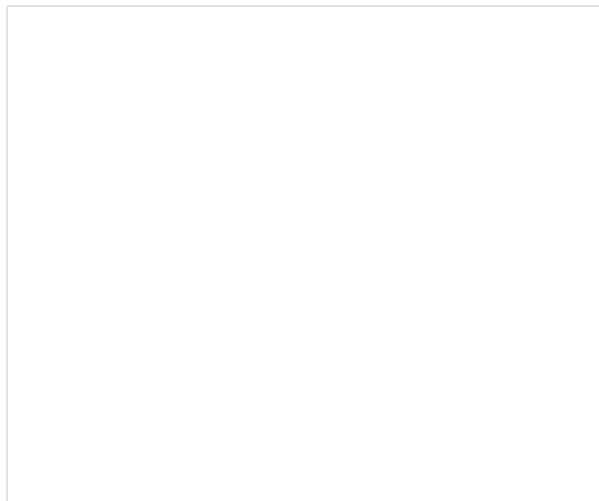

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Stubble burning: Shoddy policy

In Perspective



[Kaveri Haritas](#), NOV 13 2019, 23:14PM IST | UPDATED: NOV 14 2019, 01:05AM IST



Every year, we are told that Delhi faces a pollution problem and yet, the problem is a regional one affecting the North Indian states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. The hue and cry over pollution from stubble burning lasts for about a month, after which the issue no longer makes headlines, even as the smoke from crop stubble burning spreads over the eastern and south eastern coast of India. Stubble burning thus touches several states and results from insular and shoddily formulated agricultural and environmental policies.

An advertisement for Vistara Direct. The background is a gradient of purple and pink. At the top, the text reads "Vistara Direct" in bold, followed by "Exclusive benefits with bookings on airvistara.com". Below this is the MobiKwik logo and the text "Get 10% SuperCash". A hand is shown holding a smartphone displaying the Vistara app interface. At the bottom, there is a dark purple button with the text "Book Now" and "T&C Apply" in small text below it.

willing to listen to experts and stakeholders. Thus, what has been happening for the last 10 years since 2009 when this problem began is the same story as any other policy of the government. Policies are devised as knee-jerk responses to issues, with only a surface level assessment of the problem, addressing symptoms rather than dealing with the root causes of the problem. Policies in India are more political vehicles, aimed at molding public opinion rather than providing solutions. It is no surprise they are ineffective.

The government's policies funding 'happy seeder' machines and investing in residue management cannot be effective as they address the symptoms of the problem. Stubble burning has consumed significant amount of financial resources, with Rs 2,000 crore set aside for 'happy seeders' and another Rs 1,151.80 crore towards promoting in-situ management of crop residue in Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. A more thorough examination of the problem could have resulted in more effective use of these funds.

The problem of crop burning is new and has emerged since the last 10 years. So, a good question would be to ask, what happened in 10 years that pushed farmers to begin burning stubble. The answer to this lies in depleting groundwater. A 2019 article published by scholars revealed how water conservation has resulted in air pollution.

In 2009, laws were passed to prevent groundwater depletion – the Preservation of Subsoil Water Act in Punjab and Haryana, which prohibit early cropping of rice in May, postponing it to June, post-monsoon, to preserve groundwater. In the states of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, farmers have to wait till the monsoons as adequate groundwater is not available for cropping paddy. The delay in cropping results in delay in harvest, leaving farmers very little time to sow the next crop. To make matters worse, the government provides farmers free electricity and water, incentivizing paddy production and covering water requirements over and above the rainfall. Again, these policies are political vehicles used to mobilise electoral support and thus are unlikely to be withdrawn.

Even if the government is skeptical about scientific advice, a mere consultation with farmers could have resulted in policies that tackle both water depletion and air pollution. Money allocated towards 'happy seeders' and on-site residue management could have been better spent on direct cash transfers to farmers shifting from paddy to less water-dependent crops. Farmers need persuasion, not punishment. Financial incentives can make the shift viable.

Agricultural experts, including researchers from Columbia University, have been suggesting change in cropping as a way to tackle malnutrition and nutritional deficiencies that can be overcome by consuming nutritionally rich cereals such as maize, sorghum, finger millet and pearl millet that also

local price.

Rather than looking at the issue of paddy cultivation in an insular manner, a multi-pronged approach is required that takes into account the issue of groundwater depletion, export price, malnutrition and nutritional deficiencies, etc. Coming out with insular policies will result in the creation of new problems, just as water conservation has resulted in air pollution. The government has to be willing to engage with experts from different domains -- water, soil, air, etc., and with stakeholders, including farmers and agricultural ministries from the different states. Instead of conducting high profile meetings with bureaucrats, as the central government did on November 3, a more comprehensive engagement is needed.

This should also be sustained throughout the year, with an advance plan in place before May next year when the next cropping season starts, rather than having a last-minute meeting at the peak of the pollution problem, when it is too late to do anything about it.

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stubble burning

New Delhi

Air Pollution

Comments (+)
