



Politics Of Stubble Burning

Solving the problem requires us to rethink paddy farming and irrational subsidies

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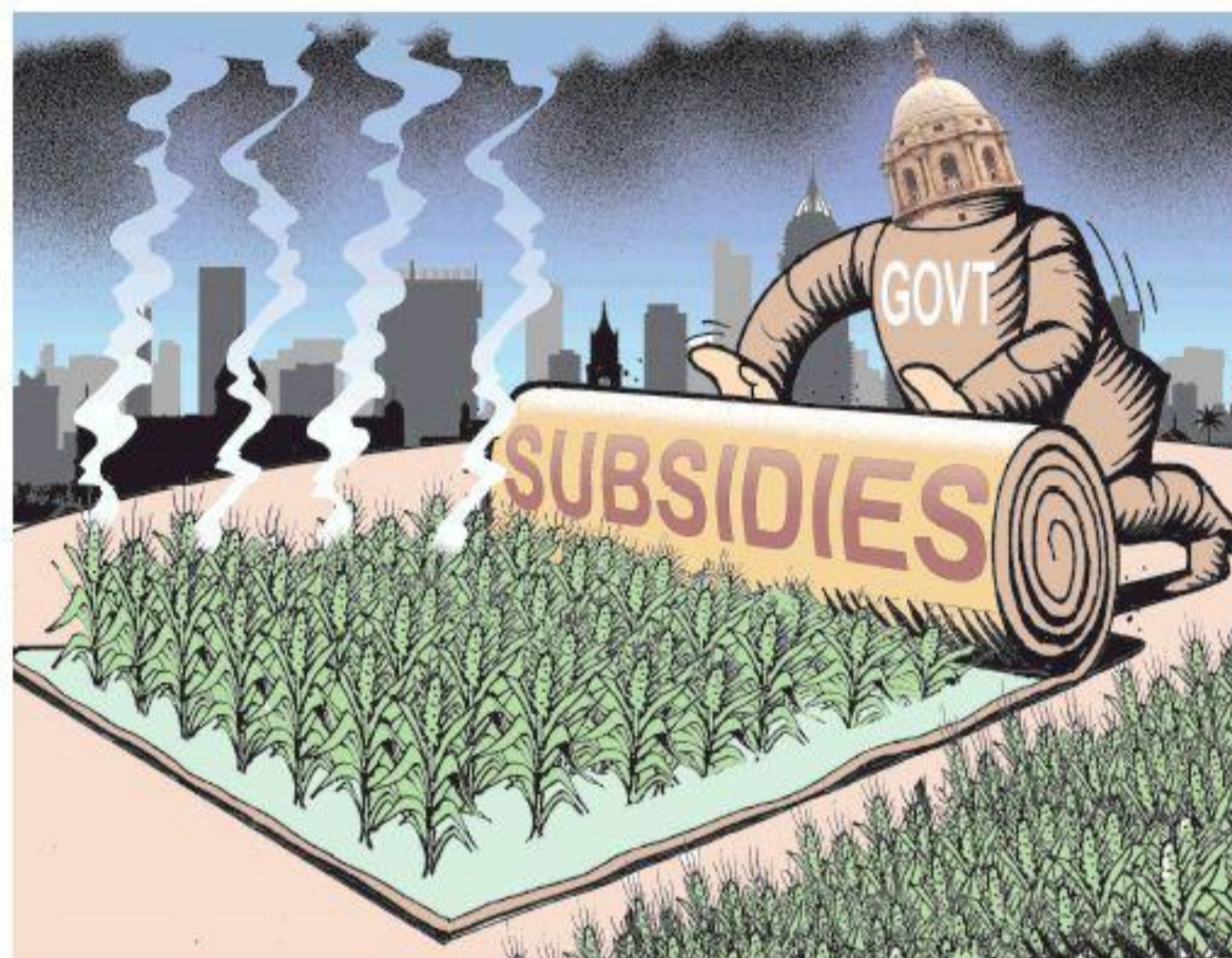
The burning of paddy fields after the harvest, or stubble burning, is a major seasonal contributor to air pollution in north India just prior to winter. In the northern belt metros, already polluted with many activities, this additional pollution load from stubble burning tipped the scales heavily towards hazardous air quality index exceeding 400 and even reaching 1,000 in some places for some days, when the acceptable norm is 120 as per the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).

The resulting air pollution is now responsible for the ill health of millions and deaths of lakhs of people, and dominates headlines of newspapers in the entire northern belt. Reducing air pollution would require tackling the problem of stubble burning, which in turn requires us to rethink paddy farming.

Historically, a series of policies such as free electricity, subsidised fertilisers and ever-increasing minimum support prices (MSP) led to growth of paddy. So the percentage of paddy growing area increased fivefold, from 6.5% in 1970-71 to 35% in 2009-10 at the expense of maize, oil seeds and pulses.

Paddy was firmly entrenched in Punjab and Haryana causing water logging, leaching of pesticides and chemicals, stagnating yield levels and more. Methane emissions due to paddy also promote climate change. Two crops became normal and a third crop began as well. Of course, the consequences involved were limited to those states till then.

In 2009, the Preservation of Subsoil Water Act required the farmers to delay planting of paddy by one month. This reduced the time available to plant the winter crop after paddy is harvested. As the manual labour got expensive and even ineffective as it required more time to clear it, paddy stubble burning started. Instead of again questioning and abandoning it in favour of other crops, further Band-Aid solutions for paddy are being offered such as buying straws, putting up biomass power plants, different types of harvesters, happy



seeders, super SMS and leaching with chemicals. Enormous capital is locked into these machines for a few weeks of work.

It seems that the entire government machinery, both central and state, is busy to ensure Punjab farmers can grow paddy. Yes, they do provide a large percentage of rice for PDS – but many other states could do the same. In 2018, despite subsidies, Punjab has only 11% share in all-India rice production and has already slipped to the second position after Bengal, closely followed by Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. Haryana is in the ninth position.

Free electricity, subsidised fertilisers and ever-increasing MSP supporting already rice eating states would be more equitable and effective, and will reduce the need for storage and transportation of grains.

It's time to address the stubble burning problem not with more government sops to paddy, but by encouraging farmers in Punjab and Haryana to shift to different crops such as orchards and horticulture which are also high value crops of short and long duration. If the incentives and sops are withdrawn, paddy will not be an economically viable

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crop anyway in Punjab and Haryana.

Crop Diversification Programme is already in place since 2013-14 in favour of alternative crops like pulses, oilseeds, maize, cotton, kinu, guava, mango, pears, horticulture and agroforestry plantation. Crop diversification is generally done in order to minimise failure risk, to address declining soil fertility and depleting water table, to respond to external shocks as well as consumer demands changing in favour of non-staple food due to increase in income, and higher competition in

staples production in other states.

Paddy and these other crops need to be compared in terms of water requirements, fertiliser/ pesticide consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, growing period, labour, MSP, cost of cultivation, cost of production including investment, market price, income per unit area, food consumption patterns etc. Government policies and incentives should create a level playing field – let the best crop that enhances the farmer's income win. If any incentives are needed to encourage farmers to make the shift as soon as possible such as subsidy, promotion, MSP or compensation, they could be in favour of other crops for a fixed period, and not permanent commitments to avoid making similar errors made in the case of paddy.

Let's also question the Subsoil Water Act that gives such a limited window for harvesting. Why is this law sacrosanct? Economist Ajay Shah says that it does not make economic sense. Groundwater use can be controlled through other actions. But apart from economics, we need to question the ethics of this law. If its result is air pollution, then we also have laws against air pollution which are far more important because of the health hazards air pollution creates. We have a law-against-a-law situation.

So let's begin with fundamentals and ask the right questions: Why is paddy sacrosanct? Why should the Subsoil Water Act not be reviewed given the many stakeholders involved? Why can't Punjab and Haryana go for higher valued crops and what incentives will they need? Why should we spend government money on a crop that leads to so many deaths?

How can we help farmers grow alternate crops that make sense in a framework of level playing field? Could we absorb paddy jobs, by extending post-harvest activities of other crops needed to modernise agriculture and tap new opportunities to make high valued products? These are questions we should grapple with. We have only a few months to act before the next season comes around in May 2021.

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