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Grasping the Nettle or Nettling the Graspers: Modi's Ryot Act



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The Indian ryot, or peasant cultivator, has always been a political football. When we think of a farmer most of us think, this man is getting subsidised water, electricity, seeds, fertiliser. The government buys his harvest. The government is keen to gift him a bank account under the Jan Dhan Yojana, even if he has no money to save. When the rain gods punish him, the government offers compensation, even if it is a fraction of his costs. When it is election time, he is wooed with promises, even food and drink. Chances are that he does not pay any income-tax. So what does he have to complain about?

When a Rajasthan farmer hanged himself at an Aam Aadmi Party anti-land acquisition rally in the heart of New Delhi, a stone's throw from Parliament House, it was a sight to see politicians from every party jumping up to milk the suicide for every crocodile tear on television and Twitter. "Political morality" was an oxymoron. AAP leader Somnath Bharti called it a conspiracy. A Bharatiya Janata Party spokesman called it a planned murder. How much lower could we stoop?

The poor young farmer who died hadn't read the Confederation of Indian Industry's statement hours earlier that praised the government's land bill as being pro-farmer and pro-growth. CII said developmental infrastructure and industrial projects were held up; the government's land acquisition ordinance "could not have come at a more opportune time".

Oh, the timing. Back in the old days of carburettors, our cars would stutter and stop now and again if their timing was off. That was before fuel injection and emission controls. India's engine seemed to be firing on all cylinders after a majority government was elected last year, but Narendra Modi's timing seems to be off on the land/farmer issue. What is going on?

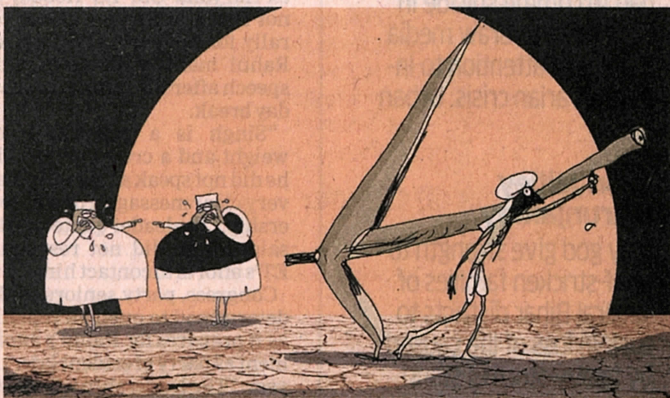
Why did Modi have to try to amend the 2013 amendments to the land acquisition bill that the BJP had supported? Why is Modi making this a make-or-break fight just when farmers seem to have their backs to the wall? Why does he not put the land bill on the back-burner until things have cooled off, we have lived through what the Meteorological Department predicts will be another deficient monsoon, and we know which way the global economy, and our markets and food inflation go later this year? Instead, Modi has painted himself into a corner, keeping the land bill alive through a second ordinance. He

may still be able to get the legislation passed in a joint session of parliament, but he is burning a big hole in his political capital.

Here are some very grim farm facts. Hit by unseasonal rain and hail for the third year in a row, with their winter rabi crops either destroyed or sub-standard, many of India's farmers are in dire straits. They are unable to repay bank loans; the compensation the government has announced falls far short of their expenses; and they are driven into the arms of bloodsucking moneylenders. Minimum support prices, at which the government buys farmers' crops, have gone up marginally, but as the finance ministry's Economic Survey pointed out in February, high MSPs encourage the growing of rice and wheat at

for our benighted farmers. Did you know that there are 2,477 principal agricultural produce markets and 4,843 sub-market yards? Yet, small and fragmented land holdings and sloppy land records make it "distorted and opaque" as the CII says for any project that wants to acquire land. How will Modi reconcile these contradictions with an eye to the millions of economic migrants who are streaming into our cities?

Somebody needs to brief Rahul Gandhi thoroughly on these facts. On Monday, about when the 'Nehru-Gandhi scion' stood up to speak in the Lok Sabha on the government's land bill and the plight of India's farmers, I was reading a fascinating account of how the Kalapalo, a small



LONG WAY TO GO
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the expense of other crops, and the Food Corporation of India then has to store the grains at high cost. More than 40 per cent of cropped land is unirrigated and rain-fed.

Nearly two-thirds of India's farms are smaller than one hectare in size, and therefore economically unsustainable. Eighty per cent of farmers do not have crop insurance. About 60 per cent of India's population depends on agriculture, but agriculture contributed only 18 per cent of GDP in 2013/14. IndiaSpend, a data-analysis website, estimates that nine million people quit farming between 2001 and 2011. Census data show that between 2001 and 2011, the number of cultivators fell from 127.6 million to 118.6 million, while the number of landless labourers rose from 107.5 million to 144.3 million. Cropped land fell from 87 per cent of total sown area in 1987/88 to 72 per cent in 2011/12.

As you can see, there is a lot to be done to improve crop yields and soil health, create a common agriculture market, and ensure equitable prices and crop insurance

Amazon Indian tribe in the deepest jungle near Brazil's Xingu river, send the young man in line to become their next chief into four years of seclusion. In comparison, the young Gandhi spent only 56 days in secret contemplation. Is he ready?

To put it another way, did Rahul show great timing in coming out of the shadows as the row over the land bill reached boiling point? His speech was passable: he is not anytime soon going to be a Winston Churchill or an Atal Behari Vajpayee. He needed prompting by one of his fellow MPs. His English was stilted, his Hindi halting. Other young Congress MPs like Sachin Pilot and Jyotiraditya Scindia speak better, more forcefully, and with a greater command of their facts and figures.

As Sitaram Yechury, the newly-anointed General Secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) put it pithily: "The ability to communicate with people, the methods of that communication have to change. And if they do not change, then you are back in a Jurassic Park situation."

So if Rahul's Monday speech, and the one he delivered the day before at Congress's own Kisan Rally, both high on rhetoric and wobbly on accuracy, are seen as epochal events that have put the NDA government on the back-foot, then fie on our politics, and a pox on our timing.

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Economic Times 23 April 2015