

Union Budget 2020: What is in Store for Agriculture?

A sort of panic usually grips the people before the budget is presented in the house. However, this time, expectation rather than trepidation was the hallmark of the pre-budget days. The agricultural sector was ready with its long wish list expecting big announcements in the Union Budget 2020-21. There were talks about increased fund allocation to schemes aimed at improving farmers' incomes, besides those meant to address the issues of irrigation networks. Well the optimists surely have something to rejoice. The government's 16-point action plan is definitely a steroid shot to revive the agricultural sector and to double the income of the farmers by 2022. It also bespoke of the government endeavour to utilize the last year of the decade for making rapid progress so that we may enter the next decade on a better note.

It is evident from the budget and the policy statements that science and technology is going to be the major tool for transforming the agricultural landscape as reiterated by the Finance Minister that we need more technology and innovations in the agricultural sector for its modernization and development. Agriculture rural development will remain at the centre of planning. It is interesting to note that the government is diversifying the portfolio and exploring ways other than agriculture like on farm solar power generation to augment the income of farmers. The move to encourage states to implement model agri-laws like land leasing, agricultural marketing and contract farming for seamless marketing of agricultural produce is indeed exhilarating.

The budget makes handsome allocations for various developmental, research and poverty alleviation programs. Of the total allocation of ₹ 2.83 lakh crore, ₹ 1.60 lakh crore has been earmarked for agriculture, irrigation and allied activities and the remaining (₹ 1.23 lakh crore) for rural development and panchayati raj. Big portion of farm budget went to PM-Kisan, a scheme for providing cash support to farmers. An outlay of ₹ 15,695 crore has been allocated to PMFBY to protect farmers against crop failure. The Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers Welfare has got an outlay of ₹ 1,34,399.77 crore. The government committed ₹ 8,362 for agriculture research and education. Acknowledging the potential of allied farm activities in raising the farmers' paycheque, the government increased the allocation for DADF and DoF to ₹ 4,114.13 crore.

Several key announcements are a part of this budget biography. Enhancing solar power usage in farm sector (standalone solar pumps and solar irrigation facilities) under PM-KUSUM scheme is definitely not a misplaced move as it will mitigate GHG emissions from agriculture sector and reduce carbon footprints. Perils of the incentive regime sparked a course correction with government now counting on the balanced use of fertilizers. Lack of efficient market connectivity has always been a limiting factor for the farmers. Economic emancipation of the farmers also strolls through the corridor of better market opportunities. Kisan Rail (for transportation of perishable agricultural products through refrigerated coaches under PPP mode) and Krishi Udaan (by Ministry of Civil Aviation on national and international routes) are footsteps in this direction. Financing of NWRs with eNAM; VGF (viability gap funding) for additional storage capacity with geo-tagging of the warehousing and cold storage facilities; comprehensive measures for water-stressed districts; integrated farming systems for rain-fed areas; fodder farming with NREGS funds; involvement of SHGs for seedbanks and One Product-One District idea are well thought out proposals. The government also vouched to continue its support to natural and organic farming.

Though, there have been bountiful announcements in the past years as well to rejuvenate the agricultural sector, they have not metamorphose into improvements addressing the distress in the farm sector so palpably. The Union Budget 2020-21 with its 16-point agenda covering the vast expanse of agricultural sector outlines a detailed plan for agricultural and rural development enlightening on what can be done along with the resource arsenal needed but implementation remains the key. If we are able to replicate what is on paper in the field, this surely will open a new chapter in our farmers' life. Science has always been at the root of technological revolutions, which have brought landmark changes in the agricultural sector as testified by our journey to a food surplus nation. Hence, greater thrust on agricultural research is the absolute need of the hour. This is where the ICAR has to play its role turning the challenges into opportunities and steering the agricultural sector to new heights. Considering budget allocations, ICAR can invest more in research areas like precision agriculture, genetic engineering of crops to withstand climate stress, artificial intelligence and high yielding varieties. Once again ICAR has to prove worthy of the trust reposed in it. This largely will depend on the brain box of our scientists who will steer the ship of the revolution safe ahead.

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