

Orissa going the Maharashtra way

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BHUBANESWAR: Orissa seems to be heading the Maharashtra way. No matter how hard the Government might deny, an agrarian crisis is fast building up here. And, the very fault-lines that manufactured the gargantuan crisis in Maharashtra taking farmers' lives in hundreds, are clearly discernible here.

To give a boost to farm income, the Government's new agro policy has laid emphasis on cash crops and horticulture. But the policy carries an inherent risk as these crops require high yield variety (HYV) seeds, pesticides and fertilisers and more use of these requires nearly three times more water.

Exactly this type of policy prescription in Maharashtra has brought doom for the farmers by sucking them into the vortex of debt trap. In Orissa, the total indebted farmer population now stands at a whopping 48 percent, only a slice below the national average of 48.6 percent.

But rural farmer households in the State are at a high of 65 percent against only 60 percent nationally.

Direct cultivators in State are only 44 percent against 57 percent nationally while agro labourers are up 52 percent from 28 percent during 1991 census against the national average of 24 percent.

Similarly, 46.5 lakh rural farmer households own below one hectare land. This is an alarming sign as in Maharashtra and other States maximum number of suicides has been by small and marginal farmers owning below 1 hectare land.

Another ominous sign is like Maharashtra, in Orissa too, landless farmers take land on lease. A Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) study reveals that these leasees secure loans for crops and get sucked into eddies of debt-trap. TISS finds fault with the Government's drive to promote cotton or horticulture or oilseeds in hilly, drought-prone areas without provisioning a sustainable water-harnessing project or irrigation facilities.

The fallout would be devastating. However, the most ominous signal is of a total loan requirement of nearly Rs 6,000 crore, commercial banks and cooperative banks together provide only Rs 2,335 crore. Resultantly, more than 26 percent farmers rely on private money lenders, the prime cause behind the farm crisis in Maharashtra and elsewhere in the country.

The Government goes on beating drum that it provides subsidies to the extent of 50- 75 percent in HYV seeds, fertilisers etc. but TISS says small and marginal farmers could not avail of the MSP, what to speak of subsidies. Given all these ominous faultlines that are triggering a farm crisis of sorts in the State, and of late suicides in Orissa too have started grabbing headlines, an immediate reorientation in agro-policies and priorities is all the most essential.