

Early one morning in the second week of February this year, A. Kumaraswamy, 30, set out from his home in Devanoor village in Telangana's Warangal district and walked towards his cotton field. He was staring at a third straight year of crop failure due to rainfall shortages, but he still took out his plastic canister of expensive pesticide – he uses at least ₹2,000 worth of the chemicals each week – and began spraying. Once done, he took a costly drink.

Two weeks later, Kumaraswamy sits slumped on the steps of his unplastered brick home, his fingers shaky, his eyes averted. "I was in the fields, feeling quite depressed. So I decided to drink the rest of the pesticide I had used for that morning's spraying." Seeing him fall down, a farmer in the neighbouring field had run across, thrown him on the back of his motorcycle and rushed him to the government hospital in Warangal town 35 km away. It's now a week since he was discharged, and he has spent his first day in the fields again. "I still feel dizzy," he says.

Five days before Kumaraswamy's suicide attempt, the Union Interim Budget had announced the launch of a new scheme meant to provide income support for small farmers like him: the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi, or PM-KISAN scheme. It promises ₹6,000 per year to all families who own less than two hectares – that is, five acres – of farmland. The first instalment of ₹2,000 is to be paid by this March, before the Lok Sabha polls.

In many ways, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government at the Centre is following in the footsteps of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) government in this State. Last May, just four months before dissolving the State Assembly and calling for fresh polls, the Telangana government launched the Rythu Bandhu or farmers' investment support scheme, offering farmers ₹8,000 per acre in a bid to "enhance agricultural productivity and... break the vicious cycle of rural indebtedness". Only land-owning farmers are eligible beneficiaries and there is no cap on the number of acres owned. The scheme has a budget of ₹12,000 crore for 2018-19 for a total of 57 lakh targeted beneficiaries, although farmers groups say that at least nine lakh beneficiaries are yet to receive any money.

When Assembly elections were held in December, after the first instalment of Rythu Bandhu had been paid, the TRS swept the polls, winning 88 out of 119 seats, including the entire Warangal area. Rythu Bandhu was seen as one of the major reasons for the victory.

'It solves no problems'

Kumaraswamy had been a beneficiary of the Rythu Bandhu scheme, receiving ₹8,000 for the one acre he owns. However, he received no benefit for the five acres he leased.

He had started leasing land six years ago, lured by the solid profits then enjoyed by cotton farmers. He hoped that a higher investment would rake in higher returns, help him pay off some pending loans, and finance his children's education. It paid off for a couple of years, before three consecutive years of drought and poor rainfall threw him into a nightmare of higher investment, higher losses, and higher debt. He says: "I need to pay for labour, tractor rental, 10 bags of fertilizer per acre, plus lease of ₹10,000 per acre per year. Every week, I spend ₹2,000-₹3,000 on pesticides because every week there is a new pest, even though Bt cotton was supposed to cut down on pesticides. I have no money to dig borewells." He used the money from Rythu Bandhu to buy fertilizer, but it was merely a drop in an ocean of bills. He now has pending loans of more than ₹6 lakh, mostly taken from family and friends at an interest rate of 2% per month.

Indebtedness is a taboo topic in this area; farmers are unwilling to talk about the quantum of their unpaid debts in front of their neighbours, though it is almost certain the neighbour is also in debt. A survey in 2016-17 by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) showed that 79% of agricultural households in Telangana are in debt, the highest rate in the country. The national rate of indebted farming households is 52.5%.

Warangal in particular has become known for farmer suicides linked to unpaid debt. There have been 15 cases in Devanoor itself, including one last December. Following the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh and the creation of Telangana State in 2014, the district was split into five new districts, in 2016. Warangal (Urban), where Devanoor is located, has less than 15% of its cultivable area covered by irrigation. Nearly 92% of its farmers fall into the 'marginal' or 'small' categories, cultivating less than one or two hectares of land, respectively. There is no official data on tenancy, but local farmers' groups estimate that 40% of farmers in the area are tenants, paying a yearly rental to cultivate lands that belong to others. Often, they also own a small amount of land themselves.

This rabi, or winter season, Kumaraswamy has leased out one acre with a borewell on it. He is planting tobacco under contract to a local company which has sold him the seed and will procure his crop. He hopes this guaranteed earning, along with work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) will



The key: "PM-KISAN may have good intentions, but it will be lost in translation without accurate land records." Mudika Kumar, 28, on his dried out cotton fields in Sripathipalli village, Chilpur mandal, Jangaon district. He is a tenant farmer who is forced to depend on his livestock for sustenance. ■ NAGARA GOPAL

A drop in an ocean of debt

The first transfer of money under the PM-KISAN scheme is scheduled for Sunday. **Priscilla Jebaraj** reports from villages in Warangal, Telangana on how farmers have benefited from Rythu Bandhu, the income support scheme seen as the inspiration behind PM-KISAN



divide him over. However, next season, he intends to go back to cotton.

Says P. Srinivas, a former ward member who now leads a village farmers' committee: "What other option does he have? There is no irrigation. If there are wells, we can opt for paddy or maize. When we were young, they planted jowar and dal on these lands. But the rains are less now, groundwater is low, the soil is no longer fertile, and monkeys and wild boar come and eat any food crops as they are not able to get enough food in the forests anymore... Rythu Bandhu helps a little, but it does not solve any of these problems."

Under the tamarind tree

Three kilometres from Devanoor is the Dharmasagar reservoir, which was originally meant for irrigation when it was constructed 30 years ago. But today it's used mostly for the drinking water needs of Warangal town.

Sripathipally, a village of about 500 households, lies in neighbouring Jangaon, another new district carved out of the erstwhile 'undivided' Warangal district. This village is lucky to have borewells and open wells watering some of its fields, making for a stark divide. On the outskirts of Sripathipally, the dirt road winds past the last few houses and peters out at a clearing shaded by a spreading tamarind tree. On one side of this clearing are lush paddy fields, the rabi crop flooded after transplantation; on the other, a few white fluffs dot the bleak landscape of dried out cotton fields.

Under the tamarind tree, a discussion among the farmers about the benefits of Rythu Bandhu is fast turning into an argument.

Aakoju Lakshmi, 62, is a landowner, widowed since December 2018. She leases out her plot of two acres and 12 'guntas' (a local land measure, with 40 guntas making up one acre) to a cotton farmer. But due to crop failures over the last three seasons, her tenant has not paid his lease amount. "Without the Rythu Bandhu money of ₹9,200 per season, I wouldn't have been able to pay for the food or medical expenses for my husband before he died," she says. Now deprived of her husband's minimal earnings and pension, she is even more dependent on the government's modest bounty.

On the other side of the owner-tenant

divide, Mudika Kumar, 28, is resentful that the scheme does not consider the woes of tenant farmers. He owns one acre, but leases four more, of which three acres have been planted with cotton. Drought dried his open well and the crop failed, leaving him with a minimal harvest of just seven quintals. Along with the lease amount, his total investment into the crop last season had been ₹70,000. His returns were just ₹40,000, leaving him with a financial loss of ₹30,000, apart from the months of wasted, back-breaking labour.

"I've worked hard in all my fields, but I got Rythu Bandhu only for the one acre I own. Instead, the owner gets the money, even though he made no investment, he put in no work, he took no risk. He won't even reduce the lease rate," he says, watching his herd of 50 goats nibble on the dry cotton stalks in his fields. The government subsidy which let him buy the herd has been more helpful than Rythu Bandhu, he adds. Like most farmers in the village, he considers PM-KISAN to be of minimal benefit in comparison to Rythu Bandhu. He says, "It is also meant only for landowners, not tenants, though it will at least exclude the large landowners."

K. Rajitha, 35, is also a tenant farmer and owns one acre and leases six, but thanks to borewells, has managed to plant them all with paddy. For a three-acre field, she pays a lease of ₹30,000 per year. Having spent about ₹50,000 on input costs, she sold her crop for a return of ₹1 lakh. She is content with the profit of ₹20,000 on this field, and is only concerned about the future of the field's borewell.

She says, "See, this rice was planted two months ago, but it's not growing properly because the water level in the field is not enough." She is worried that the borewell which waters the field is drying up this season.

Rajitha's grandparents were assigned one acre of land 40 years ago during a government redistribution drive for landless workers. Says Rajitha, who is

already a grandmother herself, "The Rythu Bandhu scheme is for landowners, so I don't want to ask for any benefits for my leased land, but I will fight for my rights for the one acre of land that I do own. I have the passbook, but have not got any money." She wants the money to help pay off a loan taken to buy buffaloes. She adds, "The VRO [Village Revenue Officer] keeps my issue pending, and he is a government employee. How can I fight him?" Several farmers in the village claim that their VROs are demanding bribes to correct their pattas and passbooks or to include them in the list of beneficiaries. They plan to form a delegation and appeal to the Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO).

No time to update records

VROs are the lowest link in the chain of officials who were engaged in the State government's massive drive to update land records a year before the Rythu Bandhu scheme was launched. Further up the chain is District Collector Prashant J. Patil, who sits in a sprawling 133-year old bungalow which originally housed the prime minister of a province under the Nizam of Hyderabad.

He says, "The first land survey in this area was done in 1935 in the Nizam's time. A few minor additional surveys were done in the 1940s and the 1960s to cover areas that were left out of the Nizam's survey, but that was it. Now 80 years have passed, and at least four generations have come and gone. Industrialisation and urbanisation have created a lot of land use changes. Many people still have handwritten pattas in their ancestors' names. So it was impor-

Income support schemes like Rythu Bandhu and PM-KISAN will not be sustainable without a focus on basic resources such as soil fertility and water availability.'

DIVYA VELUGURI, Researcher, Centre for Sustainable Agriculture, Hyderabad



A. Kumaraswamy, 30, outside his home at Devanuru village, Dharmasagar mandal in Warangal (Urban) district. ■ NAGARA GOPAL

tant to overhaul the entire land records. No other State government has done such a comprehensive pan-state survey since Independence."

In the wake of Rythu Bandhu, several other States, including Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Jharkhand, have announced similar schemes, and of course, there is the Centre's PM-KISAN scheme. Patil, however, warns that without a similar exercise to update land records, such schemes will fail.

He says, "PM-KISAN may have good intentions, but it will be lost in translation without accurate land records. It is even more complicated because they want to give out money per family, not per acre. How will you identify the total land-holding of a family? Land records are held by an individual."

He is appalled that the Centre gave the States just a few weeks to update their databases before starting money transfers under PM-KISAN. The scheme was announced in the Budget on February 1, will make the first transfers on February 24, and has a March 31 deadline to complete disbursement of the first instalment.

He says, "It will be impossible for the States to clean up their records in that period of time. Many farmers will lose out." He adds that several States have approached Telangana to learn from their experience. A few weeks ago, he briefed a Jharkhand delegation that wanted to replicate the State's efforts.

Handing out the Rythu Bandhu cheques was "only the tip of the iceberg", explains Patil. The bigger process was the Land Records Updation Programme which preceded it. Launched on September 15, 2017, it was initially planned as a 100-day "purification" exercise, but increasing hurdles dragged it out to almost one year.

Teams led by local officials spent a week or more in each village. He says, "This was meant to be a survey out in the field, not an exercise conducted sitting in the office. Before the exercise, the records were maybe 40% complete. Even now, I would say only about 80% of the records in my district have been cleaned up. In some areas, it will be even lower."

Apart from cases which are being disputed in court, major snags include the "sada bainama" records, or white paper transactions certified by the elders of a village which have no actual legal sanctity, and "assigned lands" which were allotted to the poor, landless, Dalits and Adivasis without actual ownership papers. The government has agreed to a one-time regularisation of such lands for small and marginal farmers, but the process is slow and still incomplete.

Land not meant for paddy

Back in Devanoor village, Banda Kumar, a grizzled 60-year-old, holds out a torn and yellowed paper, now carefully laminated. It has a one-rupee stamp from the Nizam's era. In handwritten Urdu, it states that his grandfather was assigned

one acre of land. This plot was inherited by Kumar's brother, who then sold it to Kumar in 1996, recording it as a sada bainama transaction on another handwritten document, this time in Telugu. He says, "The government says their records don't include my land even when I show them my documents. But I am making losses cultivating cotton on this land that their records do not show. Why should I be denied Rythu Bandhu benefits?"

Srinivas, the leader of the farmers' committee, says that out of approximately 700 small farming households in Devanoor, only half have received Rythu Bandhu benefits in the first year. Out of the total 2,000 acres of cultivable land in the village, about 800 acres are redistributed forest land, allocated to small farmers during the Naxalite movement, and many of them are yet to receive new passbooks. State-wide grassroots activists estimate that about 30% of eligible farmers did not receive Rythu Bandhu benefits in the rabi season.

The PM-KISAN is expected to face further hurdles, even in a State that has updated its records. Says Ch. Kavitha, who was elected Devanuru village sarpanch a month ago, "There is only a small list approved for PM-KISAN in our village so far. The revenue officer says that other names may be included later, but they are in a hurry to give out the money now, so only a few verified names will benefit." Like many farmers across the district, the group of village leaders gathered in her courtyard don't think the PM-KISAN will have much of an impact on the Lok Sabha polls or reap votes for the BJP in the way Rythu Bandhu is reported to have benefited the TRS.

Says ward member G. Kavitha, "Voting is more complex than that, it's not only on the basis of such schemes. If you give us water, we don't need your Rythu Bandhu. We don't need your PM-KISAN. We will grow a profitable crop on our own, and give you back your money."

Groundwater, however, is a fast-disappearing resource. Its rate of disappearance is hastened by free 24-hour electricity supply to farmers, which powers more than 22 lakh pump sets and borewells across the State. Public investment is also flowing into reservoirs and massive irrigation projects, but some experts are pushing for a more holistic policy approach.

Says Divya Veluguri, a researcher with the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture in Hyderabad, "Income support schemes like Rythu Bandhu and PM-KISAN will not be sustainable without a focus on basic resources such as soil fertility and water availability... Rather than celebrating record paddy production in the winter season in a 'dry land' State, what the government needs to do is to incentivise the cultivation of pulses, oilseeds and coarse cereals. These are the kinds of crops the land here is suited for."