



BINA AGARWAL

Budget silences

It has left out key concerns of agriculture, environment and women

THE budget aims at economic growth and social protection. This is welcome. So are provisions for financial inclusion, housing, water, sanitation and rural electrification. But there are also substantial cuts in crucial social sectors and key omissions that are likely to undermine its stated economic objectives. Consider agriculture, environment and women.

First, double-digit growth or poverty reduction is unlikely without strong, sustained agricultural growth. In 2014-15, agriculture grew at 1.1 per cent. The budget plans to revive it by expanding irrigation, watershed development, introducing soil health cards, agro-industry and a national agricultural market. Irrigation and watershed development are clearly important. But something seriously ails irrigation: only 35 per cent of arable land is irrigated after almost 65 years of emphasis. In fact, canal-irrigated area has been shrinking. The expansion is mainly through private tubewells. But excessive groundwater withdrawal by tubewells has lowered the water table unsustainably, even in Punjab: here, the water table has been falling by 42 cm per year since 1998. We need taxes and other penalties for farmers overdrawing on groundwater, which is a public good. The budget is silent on this. The emphasis is on micro-irrigation, but it is unclear what this covers. Rainwater harvesting played a major role in Gujarat's agriculture. But the Economic Survey stresses drip irrigation. This is capital intensive and

beyond the reach of most farmers. We need a multi-pronged approach to enhance water in catchments, and irrigation expansion that is effective, affordable and sustainable.

Equally, we need research and development. Crop yields in most states have been stagnant, even declining. With climate change, India faces a serious fall in the yields of wheat and rice unless it generates varieties that are heat resistant, water efficient and able to withstand temperature volatility. R&D cannot be done by each state and ecology cuts across borders. We need the Centre to invest substantially in research on seed adaptation as well as agro-ecological practices which replenish soils. Soil health cards

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can diagnose, not cure. The budget makes no provision for R&D or for reaching findings to needy farmers. In fact, funds to the department of agricultural research and education have been cut in recent years.

More, 35-40 per cent of farmers are women. These proportions will keep rising, since migrants to non-farm jobs are largely male. But women own little land, and face serious constraints in accessing inputs, credit, extension and markets. Incentives, subsidies and information on new practices fail to reach most. Agricultural extension through Kisan TV, as proposed in the Economic Survey, is unlikely to reach women farmers who rarely have access to community TV. The

12th Plan working group on disadvantaged farmers, which I chaired, had many recommendations, including group approaches and block-level resource centres, with nodal officers to give information and training to poor farmers, especially women.

Second, the budget is silent on many environmental challenges. A shift to electric cars alone cannot reduce air pollution. Shouldn't households with several cars face disincentives? SMEs may create jobs, but will they be green jobs? What about urban waste management and public transport? Water contaminated by fluoride and arsenic has exposed millions to disease. Over 67 per cent of Indian house-

holds with access to drinking water, drink it untreated. The budget promises drinking water to all but what about deteriorating quality?

The budget allocates funds for renewable energy, but will it prioritise cooking energy? Over 65 per cent of rural households still depend largely on firewood and cattle dung. This has serious health effects. There is a desperate need for clean fuel. Solar energy cannot yet provide the answer, but biogas could. However, unlike China's highly successful biogas and improved stove programmes, India's have largely failed, due to poor delivery and maintenance. We need substantial funds for better design, adaptation and delivery of clean

cooking fuel to rural kitchens.

Third, for women, the budget provides little beyond "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" and the Nirbhaya fund. This alone cannot empower girls or women. Assets in the mother's hands are found to do much more for the health and education of girls. Women need direct access to land and housing. My research provides substantial evidence that if women own land or a homestead, it strengthens family livelihoods and greatly reduces the risk of domestic violence. Will the six crore homes promised in the budget be in women's names? Given social restrictions, without special provisions, can young women have the same access as young men to training, credit and jobs under various budget heads? Our demographic dividend has a gender difference. The budget has no direct funds for women's economic empowerment. There is a sharp cut in funds for the ministry of women and child development. Measures to enhance women's access to assets and regular employment would do more for them and their daughters than simply adding to the Nirbhaya fund, which lies largely unused.

Many experts gave high marks to the budget. In the din, they silenced the voices of the farmers, the environmentalists and women.

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