

Govt spend fails to lift rural economy

As most indicators from rural India point towards a crisis, the latest GVA for agri shows a rather contrasting picture

SANJEEB MUKHERJEE
New Delhi, 19 October

Lakhichand Sinam of Sonee village in Mandasaur district, Madhya Pradesh, has for the first time seen his standing soybean crop being so badly destroyed by monsoon. Not only his own crop, grown in over 4 acres, but almost the entire soybean crop in all the neighbouring fields has been damaged due to the incessant rain that broke several records this year, Sinam tells this reporter on phone from Mandasaur.

Soybean Processors Association of India (SOPA), in its last crop assessment report released on October 11, pegged the total soybean crop in Madhya Pradesh at more than 4 million tonnes, which is a drop of almost 31 per cent from the previous year. The total production in the country has been estimated at 8.99 million tonnes, 17 per cent less than last year.

In any other time, such a sharp reduction in production would have pushed up prices in the spot market. But, this year is not like any other. While a decline in international soy-oil and soymeal prices is a reason for weakness in soybean prices, poor economic sentiment in rural India stands out as a key trigger. In fact, revealing a severe slowdown, a Nielsen report a few days ago had pointed at a seven-year low in rural FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) growth in the September quarter. FMCG growth numbers are typically a measure of the overall economic sentiment.

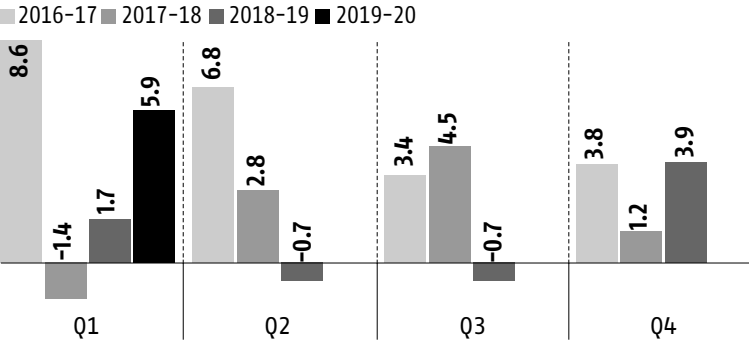
So, it was no surprise that data sourced from agmarket.nic.in showed soybean rates in Indore markets consistently dropping since the first week of October. On October 17, it was quoting at around Rs 3,500 per quintal, against the 2019-20 Minimum Support Price (MSP) of Rs 3,710 per quintal. Even future pricing doesn't look too bright.

Barring momentary spikes here and there, overall sentiment in rural economy remains very weak, according to Mahendra Dev, director of Mumbai-based Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR). "How long this will contin-



MIXED SIGNALS

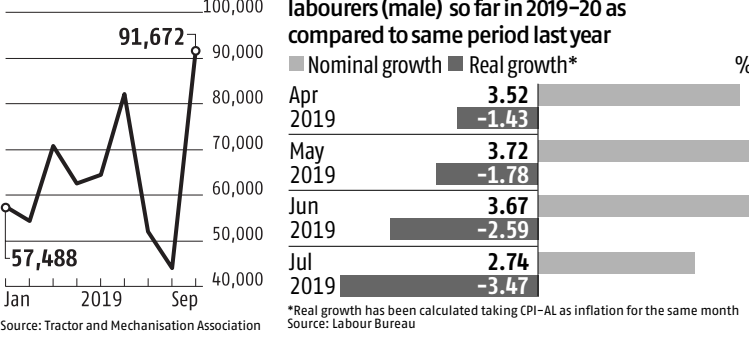
Difference between current and constant prices for gross value added (GVA) in agriculture and allied activities



NOTE: The difference between current and constant prices which largely is inflation sometimes also gives a broad picture of farm incomes. Demonetisation happened in third quarter of 2016-17. Source: Government of India

TRACTOR SALES

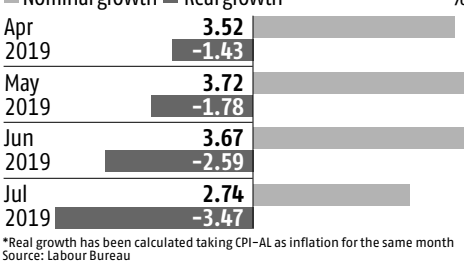
(Including exports)



Source: Tractor and Mechanisation Association

DOWNWARD TREND

Rural wage growth for general agriculture labourers (male) so far in 2019-20 as compared to same period last year



*Real growth has been calculated taking CPI-AL as inflation for the same month Source: Labour Bureau

ue is difficult to say because global food prices are still stagnant and demand is absent," said Dev.

D N Pathak, Executive Director of SOPA, holds the international scenario responsible for the domestic slide.

"When the demand for end product, be it soyoil or soymeal is down internationally, why would domestic bean prices improve," he said.

Wage issue

Almost in sync with the rural consumption slowdown, agriculture wages too are going downhill. Labour bureau data shows that growth in real wages for rural male general agriculture workers decelerated to (minus) 3.4 per cent in July. The consumer price inflation for agriculture workers during the same month was 6.21 per cent against 2.04 per cent a year ago.

"This clearly shows that while wages of rural workers are declining, the prices of items he buys are rising, thereby hitting him hard," a senior official said.

Although demonetisation and improper implementation of goods and services tax (GST) along with falling prices are being blamed for much of the distress in rural India for some time, experts believe those may not be the only reason.

"A big part of rural demand and consumption in the last few years was supported by debt as in every state farmers were taking more loans than (what was) needed for agriculture. And this could not have gone on for long," NITI Aayog member and eminent agriculture economist Ramesh Chand told Business Standard. "At some stage, this debt-laden growth had to end, and the impact of which is showing up," he pointed out.

The contrarian signal

While most indicators from rural India point towards a deepening crisis, the latest Gross Value Added (GVA) for agriculture and allied activities for the April to June quarter of 2019 presents a rather contrasting picture.

The difference between real and nominal GVA in agriculture and

allied activities for Q1 2019-20 — which sometimes gives a broad idea of farmers' income — was at a 11-quarter high of 5.9 per cent. This was the highest level since the third quarter of 2016-17, coinciding with demonetisation.

Meanwhile, the government's own spend in rural areas in the current financial year has seen an increase. In two of these signature projects—MGNREGA and PM-KISAN—funds directly pass on to end beneficiaries.

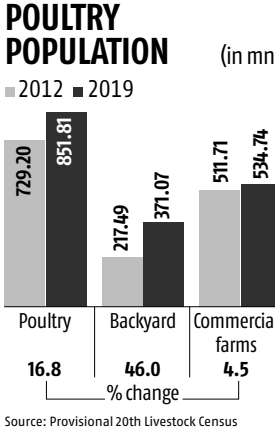
In the case of MGNREGA, official data shows that between April and September, Central release for wages and materials was around Rs 48,397 crore, almost Rs 4,630 crore more during the same period last year. But, not all of it may have reached the end beneficiary because of usual delays after the Central release of funds.

Under PM-KISAN, a sum of around Rs 15,600 crore has already been pumped into rural hands this financial year through the Rs 2,000 installments.

As P K Joshi, former South-Asia Director of International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), puts it, in the case of PM-KISAN disbursement, timing matters a lot in making any tangible impact on rural sales. A quick pilot study done by IFPRI in few select districts of Uttar Pradesh showed that when the ₹2,000 installment of PM-KISAN was given ahead of sowing season, farmers used it for buying fertilizer and seeds, which got reflected in their increased sales, Joshi said. "It is only when the installment was given between sowing seasons, farmers spent it on FMCG goods."

And, this time, rains have not helped. "It (the surplus rains) could have some positive impact on rabi crops, but overall the rains haven't done much to alleviate distress in rural areas," Shashank Bhide of Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS) said.

Backyard poultry jumps in latest livestock census



Source: Provisional 20th Livestock Census

SANJEEB MUKHERJEE
New Delhi, 19 October

In what could signal a significant development in India's rural landscape, the latest provisional data of the 20th livestock census shows a sharp increase in backyard poultry between 2012 and 2019 as compared to the rise in the bird population from commercial poultry farms. The data released on Wednesday shows the number of India's poultry has risen from 729.2 million to 851.8 million, an increase of almost 17 per cent.

It is the backyard poultry numbers which stand out. The census was launched in October last year. The data shows the number of backyard poultry has risen by 46 per cent between 2012 and 2019. The poultry includes fowl, ducks, emu, turkeys, and quail. The poultry of commercial farms, which are typically located near urban areas, have risen by 4.5 per cent during the same period.

Though the contribution of backyard poultry is still less than 40 per cent of the total and a majority of the birds come from commercial farms, experts said sharp growth in its population

reflected an interesting development. Small and marginal farmers generally own backyard poultry, and the produce is largely self-consumed. "In several states, governments have been incentivising backyard poultry by distributing free birds, and the numbers probably reflect that," said Rickey Thaper, treasurer of the Poultry Federation of India (PFI).

He called the development extremely "positive" because it provided an incentive for small and farmers to rear birds. "Demand for millets and other nutria-cereals will increase as more farmers shift to high-value animal protein," Thaper said.

India is the world's third-largest egg producer. It annually produces around 75 billion eggs, the bulk of which come from commercial farms. Egg production is growing at 5-6 per cent, while broiler meat production is rising at 7-8 per cent.

"The rise in backyard poultry is fascinating, but more information is required. These could at best be estimates," said Suresh Chitturi, vice-chairman and managing director, Srinivasa Farms, and chairman, International Egg Commission.

HEALTH

FIT & PROPER

Your weekly health guide

Important signs of distress in teenagers



SAMIR PARIKH
Director and Head of Department, Mental Health and Behavioral Sciences, Fortis Healthcare

Adolescence is a period of rapid changes. The transition from childhood to the next phase of development brings with it inherent anxieties and confusions — the formation of identities, dealing with relationships and developing our own concepts. It is not surprising, therefore, why teenagers are often susceptible to developing high stress levels.

This does not mean that all adolescents who experience stressors may develop depressive feelings, or resort to self-harm or exhibit suicidal tendencies. Multiple factors interact together to create such a susceptibility. Some of the common factors include performance related pressure, high tension tasks, responsibilities at work, and environmental and psychosocial stressors.

What is important to understand is that a suicidal mind, regardless of age, gender or any other demographic variable, tends to be filled with many despairing and negative emotions that begin to overwhelm the individual. In such circumstances, a sense of hopelessness and helplessness can cause a person to resort to suicide as they tend to feel that the circumstances are beyond their control.

Here are some of the most common warning signs, which signal the need of intervention.

Social withdrawal

A teenager becoming increasingly withdrawn, avoiding social interaction and preferring to stay alone or becoming increasingly quiet is a major red flag — a sign of depressive features, or even suicidal ideation.

Sudden changes in mood

Crying spells, irritability or anger outbursts — increased emotional reactivity is another important sign. Disproportionate emotional outbursts to trivial situations, which could be in the form of grouchy behaviour, or anger outbursts, things that make an individual's behaviour seem unpredictable in nature must not be ignored.

Dysregulation of appetite or sleep patterns

It is also important to be vigilant for sudden, unexplained changes in a person's sleep or appetite, including excessive or a lack of sleep.

Increase in risk-taking behaviour

Often an increase in a teenager's risk-taking abilities, such as substance abuse, could be a manifestation of mood disturbance, which could be a potential trigger for low impulse control or suicidal intent.

Feelings of helplessness

Teenagers who are extremely distressed are likely to experience feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, with a lack of control and a sense of despair clouding their minds. Some of the signs indicating such feelings include their talking about the futility of working for the future, their disinterest in planning the next step or setting any goals and showing an interest in talking about death or suicide. Any such changes in behaviour that are contrary to a person's usual disposition must not be ignored.

You're only as old as you feel

EMILY LABER-WARREN
19 October

Not long ago, Stephanie Heller, a New Jersey realtor, was leaving her gym after a workout when she noticed a woman in the parking lot struggling to bend down. "I don't know if she dropped something and had to pick it up, or if her shoe was untied," Heller said, but she eagerly bounded over to help. The woman blamed old age for her incapacity, explaining that she was 70. But Heller was 71. "This woman felt every bit her age," she recalled. "I don't let age stop me. I think it's a mindset, really."

Each of us has a chronological age, the number we commemorate on birthdays. But some 50-, 60- and 70-year-olds look and feel youthful, while others do not. Scientists can measure these differences by looking at age-related biomarkers — things like skin elasticity, blood pressure, lung capacity and grip strength. People with a healthy lifestyle and living conditions and a fortunate genetic inheritance tend to score "younger" on these assessments and are said to have a lower "biological age."

But there's a much easier way to determine the shape



people are in. It's called "subjective age." When scientists ask: "How old do you feel, most of the time?" the answer tends to reflect the state of people's physical and mental health. "This simple question seems to be particularly powerful," says Antonio Terracciano, a professor of geriatrics at Florida State University College of Medicine in Tallahassee.

Scientists are finding that people who feel younger than their chronological age are typically healthier and more psychologically resilient than those who feel older. They perform better on memory tasks

and are at lower risk of cognitive decline. In a study published in 2018, a team of South Korean researchers scanned the brains of 68 healthy older adults and found that those who felt younger than their age had thicker brain matter and had endured less age-related deterioration. By contrast, people who feel older than their chronological age are more at risk for hospitalisation, dementia and death.

"We have found many, many predictive associations," says Yannick Stephan, an assistant professor of health and aging psychology at the University of

Montpellier in France who has been at the forefront of subjective age research.

If you're over 40, chances are you feel younger than your driver's license suggests. Some 80 per cent of people do, according to Stephan. A small fraction of people — fewer than 10 per cent — feel older. The discrepancy between felt and actual age increases with the years, Terracciano said. At age 50, people may feel about five years, or 10 per cent, younger, but by the time they're 70 they may feel 15 per cent or even 20 per cent younger.

Most of the research on sub-

jective age is based on associations between how old people feel and their health status, so it cannot establish cause and effect. It's not clear, for example, whether feeling younger actually makes people healthier, or whether people who are already healthy tend to feel younger. But by simply asking people how old they feel, Stephan says, doctors might be able to identify who is most at risk for health problems.

For Francisca Mercado-Ruiz of South Plainfield, NJ, getting healthier transformed her internal sense of age. In the months leading up to her 49th birthday last December, she fulfilled her goal of losing 49 pounds. Before the weight loss, she had back and hip pain and felt like she was 65. Now she's off her blood pressure medication, full of energy, has few aches and says she feels 35.

Some intriguing studies suggest that a youthful frame of mind can have a powerful effect. When scientists trick older people into feeling younger, most tend to instantly become more capable. In a 2013 experiment by Stephan and colleagues, people's grip strength significantly improved after they were told that they were stronger than most people their age.

© 2019 The New York Times News Service

Researchers develop new method to find tumours

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
19 October

Researchers have developed a new technique to identify aggressive heterogeneous tumours that need to be treated more rapidly than normal cancer growths — an advance that may pave the way for novel treatment approaches against such cancers.

According to the study, published in the journal Nature Communications, cancer cells generally vary in the number of copies of each gene or chromosome present in their genome — a phenomenon known as copy number alterations or CNAs. The study noted that even within the same tumour, cells belonging to different anatomical parts of the lump may carry different CNAs.

Researchers have developed a new method called CUTseq, which can assess the amount and type of CNAs in many different parts of the same tumour, at a much lower cost than existing technologies.

Smoked ever? Exercise can reduce the risks, says research

LISA RAPAPORT
19 October

Researchers gave treadmill tests to 2,979 men — 1,602 who were former smokers and 1,377 who were current smokers - to assess their "cardiorespiratory" fitness, or how easily the circulatory and respiratory systems can supply oxygen to muscles during physical exertion. They assessed exercise capacity using a standard measurement known as metabolic equivalents (METs) which reflects how much oxygen is consumed during physical activity.

Researchers followed the men for an average of 11.6 years; during this period, 99 participants were diagnosed with lung

cancer and 79 of these people died from cancer.

Among former smokers, each 1-MET increase during treadmill tests was associated with a 13 per cent lower risk of developing lung cancer. Moderate to high levels of cardiorespiratory fitness were associated with a 51 per cent to 77 per cent lower risk of developing lung malignancies, the study found.

And among current smokers who were later diagnosed with lung cancer, each 1-met increase during treadmill tests was associated with an 18 per cent lower risk of dying from cancer. Moderate to high levels of cardiorespiratory fitness were linked to an 84 per cent to

85 per cent lower risk of dying from cancer.

"Both former and current smokers can significantly reduce their risk of developing and dying from lung cancer by achieving higher cardiorespiratory fitness," said lead study author Baruch Vainshelboim of the Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System and Stanford University in Palo Alto, California.

"Aerobic exercise at moderate to vigorous intensity such walking, jogging, running, biking, or elliptical for 20 to 30 minutes three to five times a week can improve cardiorespi-

ratory fitness," Vainshelboim said by email.

Lung cancer remains the most common cancer worldwide, with more than 2 million new cases and 1.8 million deaths a year, researchers note in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. Tobacco is the single most important risk factor for developing and dying from lung cancer, accounting for up to 90 per cent of diagnoses and more than 80 per cent of deaths, researchers note.

Eliminating low cardiorespiratory fitness as a risk factor could prevent about 11 per cent

of lung cancer diagnoses in former smokers and roughly 22 per cent of cancer deaths in current smokers who develop lung cancer, the study authors estimated.

While the study can't prove whether or how improving aerobic fitness might directly reduce the odds of developing or dying from lung cancer, the results still point to one modifiable risk factor that current and former smokers might be able to control to reduce their risk, researchers conclude.

It's possible that being more fit helps limit exposure to toxins from cigarettes in the lungs, said Trude Eid Robsahm, a researcher at the Cancer Registry of Norway, Institute of Population-based Cancer

Research, who wasn't involved in the study.

"In addition, physical activity improves activity in immune cells and produces a cancer-inhibiting environment in the tissue," Robsahm said by email.

Getting recommended levels of exercise will help, said Sudhir Kurl, a researcher at the Institute of Public Health and Clinical Nutrition, University of Eastern Finland in Kuopio.

"The consensus public health guideline to perform 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity physical activity will move most of individuals out of the low-fitness category," Karl, said by email. "It also may help smokers to quit smoking."

REUTERS