

Narendra Modi reiterates commitment to double farmers' income by 2022

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India's farm sector has witnessed "unprecedented progress" in the past few years due to record production of crops and farmer welfare schemes launched by the government, Prime Minister Narendra Modi told farmers from across the country in an interaction on Wednesday.

"Compared to the last four years of the previous government, the budget for agriculture has nearly doubled to ₹ 2.12 trillion and this shows our intent for farmers' welfare," Modi told farmers. He added that the government is working toward its goal of doubling farmer incomes by 2022 despite an "environment of hopelessness" spread by critics.

"The measures we took are aimed at minimizing costs of cultivation, protecting farmers against crop loss and ensuring they get the right price for their produce," Modi said, adding: "In the budget this year, we took a big decision by announcing that crop support prices will be fixed at 50% over production costs."

Modi's outreach to Indian farmers, who have been blighted by drought and a collapse in crop prices in the first four years of the National Democratic Alliance government, comes ahead of crucial state polls this year and the general elections in 2019.

During the video conference interaction, 24 farmers from nine states narrated their success stories to the Prime Minister and spoke on how they benefited from government schemes on crop insurance, soil health card, micro irrigation, electronic national agriculture market, farm mechanization and establishment of farmer producer companies.

The select set of progressive farmers also informed the Prime Minister how their incomes have grown manifold in the past few years, aided by new technologies and advice from local Krishi Vigyan Kendras, the central government's technology extension centres in districts.

While women farmers from tribal areas of Chhattisgarh explained how they earned more through value addition of perishable produce and use of subsidized drip irrigation systems, those from Madhya Pradesh narrated how rearing local *kadakhnath* variety of chickens changed their lives. Farmer producer companies set up in Maharashtra explained how they were reaching out to consumers directly with packaged pulses, while drought-hit farmers from Karnataka said that compensation from the Prime Minister's flagship crop insurance scheme helped them tide over losses.

The event was broadcast directly to over 600 Krishi Vigyan Kendras and common service centres across 200,000 villages.

The situation portrayed during the 90-minute discussion, however, is in sharp contrast to ground reality, expert said. Following consecutive years of drought in 2014-15 and 2015-16, and successive years of record harvests in 2016-17 and 2017-18, farmers from several states hit the streets demanding higher crop prices and loan waivers.

"There will always be success stories by enterprising farmers, but this was more of a smoke screen and a managed show...we are nowhere close to the goal of doubling farmer income, which requires a farm growth rate of 13% per year in real terms," said Ashok Gulati, agriculture chair professor at the Delhi based Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations.