



## Rythu Bandhu Scheme: From Manifesto to Re-election

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### Abstract

In the post-independence era, farmers have been a major vote bank of political parties. In the recent years, there have been some major schemes and proposals promised in manifestos by the parties during elections ranging from loan waivers to the new universal basic income. One such example is the Rythu Bandhu scheme put forward by the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) in Telangana. The scheme has become a popular one among farmers of the state as intended. Claims were made that KCR's re-election as Chief Minister with a big majority, against odds, was due to the 2018 manifesto that talked of the scheme's expansion. It has become a role model for other states and parties that include similar proposals in their manifestos for increasing chances of victory. The aim of the paper is to analyse the TRS Rythu Bandhu scheme, what promises were made, how they have been implemented and how the scheme has panned out. It would chart the journey from the 2014 manifesto, when Telangana was formed, to how the manifesto promises relating to the scheme helped in TRS's victory in 2018. There are various limitations of the schemes as pointed out by critics. Claims for minimum income support and the present BJP government's idea for RS 6000 support in the interim budget will be taken into account.

**Keywords:** Rythu bandhu, Telangana, Vote Bank, Elections, TRS

### Introduction

After 73 years of independence, the Indian economy remains majorly agrarian as a big chunk of the population still engaged in agriculture or related industries. The agriculture sector of India is fraught with problems that hamper its productivity and reduce a farmer's income, whether it is the fragmentation of land that passing down generations becomes small and ceases to be profitable or the unpredictability of monsoon in the subcontinent. The moody monsoons create a yield risk (the risk that emerges due to the unsatisfactory yield during harvest) and the fluctuation in market prices have a supply and demand problem that creates a price risk (the risk that emerges from the unsatisfactory pricing of the produce) as market forces come into play then. At the time of sowing, these risks can't be predicted and thus have an adverse impact on the peasants. In rare circumstances, when all other conditions are favorable, there is not enough credit available to the farmers to support the season's cultivation. The ground reality is that if a farmer has not earned enough in the last season he has virtually no funds to sow his field for the next. Such a situation is created that a peasant inevitably must borrow money and falls into a debt trap which is a major cause of farmer's suicide. Many such cases have been noted in the recent past.

It is taking this dimension into account that the democratically elected governments try to roll out schemes such as farm loan waiver in the hope that some respite to farmers would come as much as expecting political gains from this important section of society as it's a big vote bank for all parties. It is often commented that farmers can make or break the poll results, such is the importance of this section in Indian politics. As a part of their pre-election campaigning, 8 states promised to waive off farmers loans worth Rs.1.9 trillion since April 2017.

One loophole that can be seen in the implementation of loan waivers is the time lapse in the reception of benefits as certain protocols need to be followed, which essentially

renders the waiver useless due to interest accumulation. Moreover, it is also alleged that the well connected are the sole beneficiaries of such waivers and not the poor, landless peasants who need it the most.

But the way this measure is being politicized and played out, economists fear that it can lead to economic instability in the long run due to its unsustainability. Raghuram Rajan, the former RBI governor, says that farm loan waiver "inhibit investment down the line and it obviously creates enormous problems for the fiscal (health) of the state once those waivers are done".

A strategy paper suggesting certain reforms was presented by a group of eminent economists including former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan that considered moving to a fixed cash subsidy based on per acre cultivation to address distress in the farm sector rather than falling back to a farm loan that is truly just a short-term solution, replacing costly, ineffective and distortionary price support schemes. A direct benefit transfer scheme is thus a workable alternative than farm loan waivers.

### Telangana and its agriculture predicament

Telangana was born in 2014 as India's youngest state when it split from Andhra Pradesh after a long and difficult agitation. It faced declining public and private investment in agriculture, fluctuating agricultural growth, lack of irrigation sources and lack of post-harvest technologies to aid the farmers. This was due to "inappropriate policies to provide support to marginal and small farmers who have strong aspirations for upward mobility." according to the socio economic outlook 2014 of the Telangana government. The document also highlights the vision that was held by the government from the start was to enhance productivity as 43.20% land of the state came under net sown area and make Telangana the seed bowl of India. After its formation, the state made major headways in economic development. Its GSDP grew at 9.2% in 2015-16.

The Telangana region is mostly with an elevated/hilly topography which makes the soil arid. This has implications for the peasants. Presently, 55.6% of Telangana's population is engaged in agriculture. Many farmers cultivate in Telangana's semi-arid regions and drought becomes a persistent challenge. Farmers have faced a lot of income losses due to droughts. This has driven many farmers to take their own lives, falling in the debt trap and incapacity to continue cultivation due to unavailable credit. According to a NABARD survey of 2017, Telangana had the highest percentage of indebtedness in India, a fact that holds true from the 2013 All India Debt and Investment Survey.

### Premises of the rythu bandhu scheme

The Telangana government headed by K. Chandrashekar Rao (KCR) of Telangana Rashtriya Samiti (TRS) launched Rythu Bandhu (loosely translated to farmer's friend/support) in May 2018 as a direct money transfer scheme for the provision of a universal basic income to the farmer population of the state. It was implemented from the year 2018-19 Kharif season.

Under the 2018 scheme, all owners of agricultural land will be given an amount of Rs.4000 per acre per season as investment support. This then would act like a basic income that would ideally be used for buying the farming inputs like seeds; manure, tools etc and they would be able to continue the production process under the scheme. So, a farmer would get at-least Rs.8000 per acre assured in a year for two seasons: Rabi and Kharif, as beneficiaries will get the amount even if they do not sow their fields for the season.

For the scheme's implementation, a budget of Rs.12,000 crores had been provided for the financial year 2018-19 by the government of Telangana. The amount transferred to the farmers' account under the scheme was raised to Rs.5,000 per acre according to the TRS election manifesto for the 2018 legislative assembly polls. So that the yearly assured support to the farmers is increased to Rs.10000 per year irrespective of the crop sown or even if one is sown.

Farmers will be supported five to six years under the scheme so that they come out of the debt trap. Then, the government aspires to improve infrastructure and make irrigation available to all tillers. Direct transfers as the one this scheme provides are not exclusive, less prone to leakage and easy to administer. The scheme only considers the residents of Telangana as

beneficiaries. The 1<sup>st</sup> phase of cheque distribution started in May 2018 itself. This was followed by the second phase in November 2018.

All these cheques are to be handed over to the farmer themselves. The same applies to the Pattadar passbooks so that there is no middle man involved in these transactions thus no scope for corrupt practices is left. The state is also getting a lot of donations for the successful implementation from private entities also. An online portal and app have also been set up for the purpose of making donations.

Former chief economic adviser, Arvind Subramaniam has called Telangana's Rythu Bandhu scheme "an embryonic UBI, or rather embryonic QUBI (a quasi-universal basic income). We need to find direct-benefit transfers that could actually cushion farmers' income on that and that's why maybe I'm a little over-positive about Telangana's Rythu Bandhu scheme."

The Telangana model has even received accolades not only from national but also international organisations like The

United Nations. UN Food and Agriculture Organisation praised this scheme and several states are preparing to adopt this model albeit after making certain changes. Both the Rythu Bheema and Rythu Bandhu are recognized by UNO as stories of success and the government of Telangana was asked to present both the schemes at the international symposium on agricultural innovation for family farmers.

In terms of the scheme being a policy move, the Telangana experiment has earned praise and helped the Chief Minister of Telangana K. Chandrashekar Rao in the recent 2018 elections, where his party—Telangana Rashtra Samiti—was the largest party in the house.

The scheme offers a crop neutral investment support of Rs.4,000 per acre to farmers with land titles. The two important takeaways here are:

- **Crop neutral:** the state government would provide basic monetary support irrespective of the crop harvested. In this way, it differentiates itself from MSPs which work on the basis of the crop harvested and create a disparity by having higher MSPs for some crops as compared to others depending on market forces.
- **Land titles:** only those who are landed would be benefiting and be able to get the money transferred in their bank accounts as this is the criterion that has been put up for the identification of the beneficiaries. This essentially leaves out tenant farmers or those who are landless agricultural labourers and cultivate rented land.

### Verification VIA Land Holding Rectification Records

Telangana had undertaken an intensive exercise to rectify land records to know about the ownership details clearly across 10,500 revenue villages to ensure there are no glitches in execution.

Before the scheme was announced and before implementation, the government deputed officials who verified agricultural land records, by digitizing and identifying plots, to ensure names of the people legally owning farm lands correctly are reflected in government records. A senior official from the revenue department which is verifying land records, said 90% land records in the 10,733 revenue villages in the state have been verified and updated.

Once all landholdings are digitally recorded under the scheme, they can be accessed by the state government anytime for future use. This increases transparency in governance and would benefit both the people and the government. This land record database which had been updated and purified formed the foundation for executing Rythu Bandhu.

The Telangana government implemented the formative plan by taking an earnest approach. The herculean task of recording and verifying the data on land ownership was taken up the state officials. This data needed to be digitalized for easy operation in the future (for actions relating to the sale and purchase of land or even succession). To this end, a Pattadar passbook was issued to every eligible peasant, which is a passport size passbook acting as a data record.

### What are Pattadar Passbooks?

The beneficiaries of the scheme were given these 'Pattadar' passbooks. The passbooks are embedded with 17 unique security features, such as a unique code and Aadhar number

of the owner meant as one single proof of ownership according to the state government sources.

The Pattadar passbooks can only be issued by the state authorities after registration. These are not chargeable and are free. At the time of the inauguration of the scheme, 71 lakh farmers were allotted these bound passbooks. The state authorities assure that Pattadar passbooks cannot be tampered with. The farmers can visit their nearest Mandal office in order to register themselves to be able to get the free passbook. A web portal to facilitate the process was also set up by the state government. If a landowner wishes to sell or buy some land, the transaction would be reflected in the Pattadar passbook within a day and for this purpose, the government has established a separate wing.

### **What is Rythu Bheema-life insurance ?**

Along with the Rythu Bandhu scheme, the government had also started a 'Rythu Bheema' scheme, launched on 15<sup>th</sup> August, in the face of farmers suicide in the state. Under the scheme, a sum of Rs.5 lakh insurance would be provided within 10 days of the demise, for families of farmers, in case of death due to accidental or/and natural causes. It is a novel life insurance scheme to come to the rescue of the farmer's family in the event of death, notwithstanding circumstances. These funds would provide temporary support to the family in distress.

The premium payment for the scheme will be paid by the state government and so applies to only those residents of Telangana who are fully engaged in agriculture. It has been worked out in association with the Life Insurance Corporation of India. The scheme caters to the small and marginal farm families.

The twin schemes of Rythu Bandhu and Rythu Bheema have been inaugurated with the vision of supporting the farmer's family and thus be able to achieve the status of seed bowl of India for the state. Rythu Bheema can be seen as an extension of the Rythu Bandhu scheme.

### **Challenges faced by the Rythu Bandhu Scheme**

The scheme has surely given dividends to the population of Telangana. It has helped many with the funds to continue cultivation and purchase the inputs after a bad harvest in the last season but it is not without its loopholes. Criticism has been coming mainly on two grounds.

Firstly, the scheme doesn't provide an upper limit of acreage for availing the benefits. This means that even if a one has 400 acres of land then one is eligible to the Rs.4000/acre support which would essentially amount to Rs.36,00,000 in income support. Several critics have pointed out that a lack of upper limit is distortionary as the big landowners already earn more than the regular cultivator and thus don't require the support money. The money could, in turn, be used to supplement and increase the benefit given to the poor cultivators who otherwise have a hand to mouth existence.

The problem with the Telangana model then becomes that those with more land get more. Therefore, it does not give importance to and completely ignores equity issues. It is estimated that in Telangana, about 40% of the money is going to people who are neither agriculturists nor cultivate their land. Thus, a limitation is the scheme's regressive bias toward large landowners. It is suggested that the upper limit is not provided to cash in political gains from the landed elite.

Secondly, the scheme leaves out the tenant farmers from availing the benefits of the direct income transfer and has been criticized by farmer groups for this exclusion. Government officials from the agriculture and revenue departments have defended this step by saying that there was no data present to verify tenant peasants and distribute the benefits to them. But a TISS survey showed that of almost 700 Telangana families, 75 % of farmer suicides in the past four years were by tenant cultivators. So, the exclusion of tenant farmers that take land on lease for cultivation, comprising over a third of Telangana's farming population from the scheme becomes a big loophole and lacuna. So far, 5.8 million farmers have been benefitted from Rythu Bandhu which has covered nearly all farming households except tenant cultivators. This has become a source of contention.

Kiran Vissa, a member of Rythu Swaraj Vedika, an organization working on farmers' rights said, "The scheme is providing investment support to farmers, but it is excluding tenant farmers who cultivate 30% of land in Telangana,". This sort of dissatisfaction echoes through all the tenant farmers community, who have been deprived of the benefits.

The lack of verifiable data cited as the reason for this exclusion has been countered by some who suggest that The Land Licensed Cultivators Act in 2011 that was brought about by the then joint state of Andhra Pradesh and adopted by Telangana after it was created can be used for the benefit of tenant farmers to avail benefits as these.

### **Telangana model: Setting an Example Kalai Scheme by Government of Odisha**

The Telangana model has been seen as a game-changing policy idea and thus has been taken up by states like Odisha who have made some improvements upon the initial clauses and expanded the scope of the scheme.

The Odisha government under Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, on December 21 2018, launched KALIA scheme. The Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation (KALIA) scheme is an income support scheme, which aims to cover and benefit 90% of the state's farmers. The scheme is seen as an improvement on the Telangana model, as it includes landless rural households under its aegis to be eligible for benefits.

It provides different benefits to different categories of agriculturists. According to the provisions of the scheme, farmers will be receiving Rs.10,000 every year. Landless rural households will get Rs.12,500 for investments in areas like fisheries and animal husbandry. The scheme is expected to cost the state government around Rs.5,000 crore and would benefit over 4.5 million families.

### **Pm Kisan Yojana By Government of India**

The central government of the national democratic alliance headed by PM Narendra Modi too has launched a scheme on the lines of the Telangana model. During the 2019 budget announcement, the then finance minister Piyush Goel announced Rs.6000 per year as income support for farmers.

Under this recently announced Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan) scheme, small and marginal farmers with less than five acres are eligible to receive Rs.6,000 every year in three instalments of Rs.2,000 each

every year, with the scheme having an eligibility cut-off date of 1 February.

Under the present government, there have been quite a few episodes of farmers dissatisfaction, the recent one being where farmers marched to Delhi. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in its final budget, presented in February 2019, announced an income support scheme for small farmers.

It is deliberated, looking at the timing of the announcement, that PM-Kisan is a bid to win back the support of dissatisfied farmers and cultivators ahead of the 2019 general election.. The government estimates the PM-Kisan scheme will help 120 million farmer families live with respect, besides helping pay for cultivation costs and reducing debts. The PM-Kisan scheme is expected to cost Rs.20,000 crore in 2018-19, and Rs.75,000 crore in 2019-20 and will cover 86% of all farm households in India. The PM-Kisan scheme will provide Rs.7.5 trillion over the next 10 years and will benefit 90 out of 100 farmers in a village.

While the funding is being provided by the centre, it is for the states to draw up the list of scheme beneficiaries by means of providing the central government with the land records data to be able to identify those who would be eligible for the scheme. The government proposed to reach all PM-Kisan beneficiaries by 31 March before the model code of conduct comes into play. The scheme is expected to form a major component of the Bhartiya Janta Party's (BJP) electoral campaign.

Andhra Pradesh also announced the Annadata Sukhibhava input subsidy scheme under which farmers, who are eligible for the PM-Kisan scheme, will receive additional Rs.9,000 per annum. Farmers who own more than 5 acres and are not eligible for the PM-Kisan programme, will also get Rs.10,000 per year, while tenant farmers will receive Rs.15,000 per year (in instalments), said Vijay Kumar, Andhra Pradesh Food Commission Member.

**2018 State Polls-KCR'S Landslide Victory**

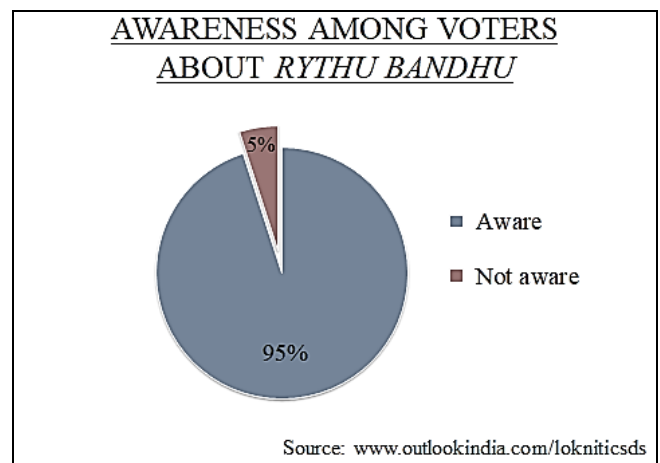
Rythu Bandhu was one of the several steps started by Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) government to revive, restore and revitalise the agriculture sector as the TRS government has invested heavily in other aspects of agriculture as well and between 2015-19, Telangana's average spending on agriculture was 7.8% of the budget (compared with the all-India average of 6.2%). This figure clearly shows that Telangana spent more on its agriculture sector than other states.

The 2018 Telangana polls were the first that were conducted in the youngest state of India as the 2014 polls when Telangana was formed were held in the then joint state of Andhra Pradesh. The electoral competition was tough mainly between the ruling TRS headed by KCR and its main opponent being the Congress in an alliance with the ruling party of Andhra Pradesh, the TDP. The Telangana assembly polls were to be held simultaneously with the Lok Sabha elections of 2019, but the Legislative Assembly was dissolved on September 6 as per a recommendation by the state cabinet. This was seen as a big move by KCR and some saw it as a ploy carried out in haste and overconfidence but at the end of the day, the results clearly showed that it was a well-planned strategic move.

In the 2018 polls, maiden polls for the assembly were held on December 7 with a voter turnout of 73.20 percent and Telangana RashtraSamithirecorded its biggest ever electoral

success in 2018. It bagged 88 out of 119 assembly seats, 19 seats more than its tally in the 2014 assembly elections. Thus, it had a clear majority. The TRS also recorded a steep surge in its vote share from 34.3 percent four years ago to 46.9 percent in 2018. The popular welfare schemes for farmers consolidated his support base all over the state, especially in rural areas. Trends show schemes Rythu Bandhu the farmers' insurance cover of Rs.8,000 per acre and like Shaadi Mubarak played a major role in voter swing. Political analysts suggest the welfare measure played a major part in Rao's Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) winning 88 of the 119 assembly seats in the 2018 state elections. Usually, a state government that enabled economic growth under its reign and implemented popular schemes for its main vote banks should ensure electoral success. Political analysts believe that KCR's two welfare programmes — Rythu Bandhu and housing scheme — helped him come back to power for the second consecutive term. Former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan along with a group of economists praised Telangana's Rythu Bandhu scheme in a report and said that other governments should also move to a fixed cash subsidy as demonstrated successfully by the scheme to reduce farmers' distress.

The pre-poll data by Lokniti-CSDS shows that there was a very high level of awareness about the welfare schemes of the TRS government among the electorate. KCR's schemes touched all households belonging to all sections of society.



Source: <https://www.outlookIndia.com/magazine/story/Telangana-election-is-not-only-TRS-victory-but-also-failure-of-opposition/300998>

**Conclusion**

The backing KCR received from traditional TDP supporters, the OBC community and the Dalits played a major role in his 2018 election victory. The single most significant contributor to his victory thus becomes that the party got votes even in areas where large numbers of Andhra origin people live due to the past track record of his government that wasted no time to put out and implement populist schemes.

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