

## Mines multiply as farmland shrinks

[Rajaram Satapathy](#), TNN Feb 22, 2013, 03.45AM IST

BHUBANESWAR: The separate agriculture budget presented for the first time in the assembly has more to it than meets the eye. The government has since begun a publicity blitz, also not done before, highlighting the budgetary provisions, a step seen as a calculated strategy in an election year to woo farmers, a major vote bank crucial for the ruling BJD.

This comes after chief minister [Naveen Patnaik](#) recently said his government would reduce the price of cheap rice from Rs 2 to Re 1 a kilo. The cheap rice will be given to 36,90,119 BPL families and 5,35,402 APL families in eight districts of the Koraput-Balangir-Kalahandi region and the boarders of SC and ST hostels and differently-abled persons. The scheme will cost the government Rs 1,312.05 crore, Rs 171.48 crore more than last year. If talks in the BJD circles are any indication, leaders are not very hopeful that rice at Re 1 per kg would fetch the party as much electoral dividend as it gave when it was first introduced before the 2009 Assembly elections. "It is futile to seek logic in a populist scheme, more so when the election is not far off," remarked a senior BJD leader.

The government has all along faced flak for ignoring the agriculture sector and running after industries and mines, which have not paid much dividend. If the latest economic survey is any indication, more than 60% of the state's population depends on agriculture for their sustenance. The net sown area has drastically declined from 56,91,000 hectares to 52,92,000 hectares in the last five years. So is the case with area under food grains falling from 53,19,000 hectares to 47,44,000 hectares and paddy growing area from 40,05,000 hectares to 42,26,000 hectares, all in a span of one year. Paddy production incidentally constitutes 70% of the total cultivated area in the state. The ground reality notwithstanding, the government however claims, as per the report, that the agriculture sector has registered a 16.11 per cent real annual growth. It nevertheless admits food, livelihood and nutrition security are a matter of concern requiring improvement in agricultural production and productivity.

The economic survey report shows how micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) could really provide succour to the vast majority, an area not really treated with priority at the government level. It said 5,505 MSMEs with a paltry investment of Rs 500.73 crore operated in 2011-12 providing employment to nearly 31,000 people.

Odisha under the present BJD regime has always heard of major industries in the pipeline. The only big factory that saw the light was Vedanta refinery in Lanjigarh, which, faced with raw material shortage, downed its shutter in December. The scam-tainted mining sector is a saga of sorrows. The report showed Odisha compared to many major states extracted highest quantity of the mineral resources worth Rs 30,204 crore. Officially, nearly 661 lakh tonnes of iron ore were extracted in 2011-12, of which 134.93 lakh tonnes were exported, the report said. It is no secret that the government's claim of honesty and probity in public life came under question after the mining scam surfaced followed by the Central government ordering a judicial inquiry.

