

Civil society urges Centre not to accept 'iniquitous' RCEP trade pact

OUR BUREAU

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As officials from the 16-member countries of the ambitious Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) gather in Hyderabad to prepare for the negotiating round next week, researchers and academics have come together to express concern over its likely impact on areas like agriculture, services, access to medicines, investment and e-commerce.

"Since the RCEP mandate talks about narrowing the development gap, one initially thought that due to the strong presence of Asia one may see a different dynamic in this pact. But as the negotiations progressed, the safety nets to protect the poor and vulnerable developed holes and now we have a typical iniquitous free trade agreement focussing on market access for the big guys with already enormous global presence," pointed out Biswajit Dhar, Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, at a press conference on 'RCEP Round in Hyderabad and its implications for India', organised by the Third World Network.

Concerns are being raised on the pressure on India to agree to zero duties on more than 90 per cent of its traded items which would force it to

eliminate duties on a large number of sensitive agricultural and industrial items.

Most of the 16 members — which include the 10-member ASEAN, China, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia — are ready to go along with the ambitious market access commitments, which puts New Delhi in a vulnerable position.

Small peasants

Small family farms and those who depend on peasant agriculture could find their space further limited by RCEP, said Ranja Sengupta of the Third World Network.

"India has already witnessed the adverse impact of the ASEAN FTA on its plantation sector even with relatively modest duty reduction. That impact will increase multi-fold as India faces demands to eliminate duties on 92 per cent of its goods. Add to that the fact that farmers will now face imports from the world's third highest subsidiser Japan, and stiff competition from meat and dairy products from Australia and New Zealand."

e-comm provisions

Moreover, provisions on e-commerce and investments pushed by most RCEP members go against India's domestic regulations and re-

quirements, the researchers warn.

"India should not fear being isolated at the RCEP. If it comes under pressure and agrees to provisions on e-commerce and investments that it has been resisting, it will not be able to say no to them at the World Trade Organisation too," pointed out Jane Kelsey, Professor, Faculty of Law, The University of Auckland, New Zealand.

The RCEP, once created, would be one of the largest free trade bloc (including goods, services and invest-

ment) in the world with 45 per cent of the world population and over \$21 trillion of gross domestic product.

The Hyderabad negotiating round will be followed by

a meeting of trade ministers in the Philippines next month where members, including India, may have to take a final position on all sectors being negotiated.