

➤ The Indian President on the Rural Landscape

➤ View from Diu: Saving the Hoka

FARMERS' FORUM

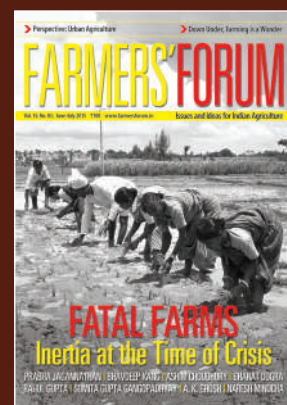
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Issues and Ideas for Indian Agriculture

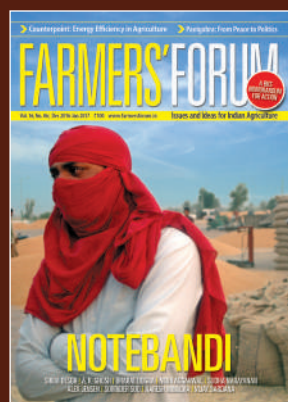
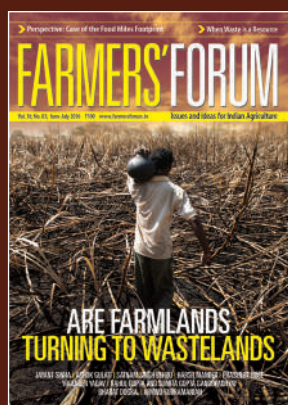


FARMING FUTURE DARK DAYS; BLACK NIGHTS

UTSA PATNAIK | SIRAJ HUSSAIN | AJAY VIR JAKHAR | ARINDAM BANERJEE
LOPAMUDRA MAITRA BAJPAI | DHRUBA DAS GUPTA



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THE COMMERCE MINISTRY IS SET TO SIGN THE RCEP, OPENING UP INDIA TO ASIAN AGRICULTURE IMPORTS

eat into the Indian farmer's earnings. With China imposing import duties on U.S. agriculture produce, India is expected to catapult under American pressure to allow import of agriculture commodities like livestock feed, chicken and milk products. On the eastern front, the commerce ministry is all prepared to sign the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) whereby New Delhi will commit to being a lifelong gateway to Asian agriculture imports. India is also being sucked into a similar treaty with the European Union.

The second facet would be the inexorable march of climate change. India has somehow survived the trauma of academicians predicting tomorrow based on yesterday, economists torturing unsubstantiated data to create an alternate reality or even financial newspaper editorials becoming torchbearers for flawed market-oriented farm policies. What it will not survive is the failure of the system to value climate change externalities and GDP-led policy modelling instead of imposing a carbon tax, which is literally a killer. Indeed, one is looking at a nation that can be compared to an under-construction building with a sinking foundation.

The third facet is the mismatch in the response levels, with the farmer quick to read and even respond to the market signals while the bureaucracy, trained to manage food shortages, dithering over how to respond to food surpluses, which in turn has led to the unprecedented number of farmer agitations and suicides. Vital though it is to abolish the Essential Commodities Act for purposes of improving farmer margins and simultaneously reducing the consumer household bill, it is critical to usher in competition amongst middlemen. The solutions, which are being pedalled instead, amount to plain hubris.

The fourth facet has been the failure to transfer agriculture or marketing to the concurrent list or building a GST type consensus with the states or abolishing the Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMC). A rational approach would have been for the central government to offer financial incentives to the states to reduce tax on fruits and vegetables trading to 0.1 per cent while compensating states for



Photo: Dinodia

revenue loss for five years, as in the case of the Goods and Service Tax (GST). The food parks are not even a beautiful mirage but a discernible sham.

There are problems wherever one casts one's eyes though there are myriads of ways to ease the farmer's agony. Apart from reduction in GST on processed foods from 18 per cent to five per cent, the government should explore new ways to incentivize private investment in the agriculture value chain. An easy enough idea would have been to mandate, for example, institutional bulk food buyers, like the Railways, Defence services and government institutions, to use processed tomatoes puree, potato paste and dehydrated onions while cooking. This would help stabilize farmgate prices, standardize produce, ensure hygiene, while reducing corruption and wastage. These institutions should not be allowed to start their own manufacturing units.

Even a non-partisan organization like the Bharat Krishak Samaj (BKS) is left hoping that the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh, the frontal farmer organization of the RSS, will be able to pressurize the government to see sense and organize some sort of import ring fencing. However, even the BKS, farmer managed and farmer driven, without the tyranny of 'experts', committed to improving farmer livelihoods, cannot escape liability for failing to stop farmer antagonistic policies.

Given the critical importance of the farmer in the Indian economy and the Prime Minister's brute parliamentary majority, it becomes imperative for the farmer to demand delivery; not just disruption. There is reason to believe that the Prime Minister has acknowledged the chasm between his vision, the designs and the delivery, dropping nearly two-thirds of his ministers. If nothing changes from within, the establishment will soon realize to its own peril, as the Congress party has experienced, that rhetoric can only take one so far and that the future keeps arriving in unexpected ways. In a new India one has to advocate remedies and fix problems within the political and ideological space available to the BJP.

The Congress party, meanwhile, is in a state of shock and will be engaging in soul-searching for reasons why it was drubbed twice in succession but may well fail to acknowledge that it has only itself to blame. Farmers too must hold the party squarely responsible for their suffering because the Congress' failure to put up a meaningful opposition has been a large part of the problem. ●



Ajay Vir Jakhar
Editor

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EVEN A NON-PARTISAN ORGANIZATION LIKE THE BHARAT KRISHAK SAMAJ IS LEFT HOPING THAT THE BHARATIYA KISAN SANGH, THE FRONTAL FARMER ORGANIZATION OF THE RSS, WILL BE ABLE TO PRESSURIZE THE GOVERNMENT TO SEE SENSE AND ORGANIZE SOME SORT OF IMPORT RING FENCING

WITHOUT
COMMENT

06

Photo: Dinodia

The Indian President On the Rural Landscape

A Farmers' Forum Report

“Only on the foundation of a strong rural economy, it is possible to build a strong national economy. Our farmers are the pillars of rural economy. All possible efforts are being made by the Central Government to provide adequate assistance to the States for agricultural development.”

— President of India,
Ram Nath Kovind

The farmer and the rural landscape found extensive mention in the President of India, Ram Nath Kovind's address at the first joint sitting of Parliament after the elections to the 17th Lok Sabha. Significantly, this year commemorates the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi and 70 years of the adoption of the Indian Constitution.

On Strengthening Rural India

Large-scale investments have been made to strengthen rural India. In order to enhance agriculture productivity, an investment of ₹25 lakh crores will be made in the coming years.

On 'Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi'

"A decision has been taken to increase the income support to farmers who are our Annadaata, by extending the coverage under 'Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi', to every farmer in the country. Through this, an amount of more than ₹12,000 crores has been disbursed to the farmers in just three months. An estimated expenditure of ₹90,000 crores is likely to be incurred annually on this scheme since every farmer has now been brought in its ambit.

On Pension Scheme

To enable the farmer brothers and sisters, who work day and night in their fields, to lead a respectable life after attaining the age of 60 years, a 'Pension Scheme' for them has also been approved.

On Doubling Farmer Income

To double the income of farmers by 2022, several steps have been taken in the last five years. Be it the decision to increase the MSP or approval for 100 per cent FDI in food processing; be it completion of the irrigation projects pending for decades or extension of 'Crop Insurance Scheme'; be it the 'Soil Health Card' or 100 per cent neem-coating of urea;

my government has taken many decisions, appreciating such numerous small and big needs of the farmers. The government has made the agriculture policy both production-centric as well as income-centric.

On Livestock

Livestock is invaluable for farmers. They have to spend a lot of money for treatment of cattle-related diseases. To reduce this expenditure, my government has also decided to start a special scheme with an allocation of ₹13,000 crores.

On Fish Production

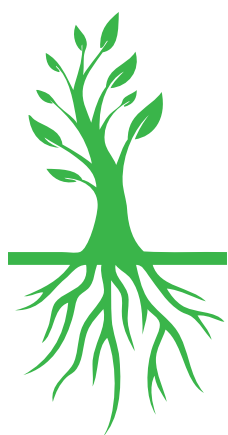
India is second in the world in fish production and has the potential to attain the first place. There is immense potential for increasing the income of farmers through marine fish industry and inland fisheries. That is why the government is committed to 'Neeli Kranti', which means 'Blue Revolution'. A separate department has been constituted for integrated development of fisheries. Similarly, a special fund has been created to develop infrastructure related to the fishing industry.

On Storage

With the provision of storage for farm produce, the economic security of the farmers is strengthened. Now the storage facility will be provided to the farmers near their village through the 'Grameen Bhandaran Yojana'.



Photo: Pixabay



On Co-operatives

The benefit of co-operatives in the agriculture sector is being availed by the farmers in the dairy business. In other areas of agriculture also the target is to create 10,000 new 'Farmer Producer Organizations' to benefit the farmers.

On Rural Women

Rural women are the biggest beneficiaries of freedom from smoke through 'Ujjwala Yojana', vaccination through 'Mission Indradhanush' and free electricity connections under 'Saubhagya' Yojana. Women are also being given priority in the registration of houses built under 'Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana' in the rural areas. Under this scheme, nearly two crore new houses will be built in the villages during the next three years.

On Women Workers in the Unorganized Sector

Facilities for the women workers in the unorganized sector are also being augmented. Self-employment opportunities are being made available to rural women through 'Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Rashtriya

Aajivika Mission. Under the 'Rashtriya Aajivika Mission', loans amounting to more than ₹200,000 crores have been disbursed so far to three crore women in rural areas.

On Rural Wellness

The objective is to set up about 1.5 lakh 'Health and Wellness Centres' in all rural areas by 2022. So far, about 18,000 such centres have been operationalized.

On Drought Hit Areas

My government is fully conscious of the crisis in the drought-hit areas and stands by every affected citizen. With the support of state governments and sarpanches at the village level, it is being ensured that farmers are assisted and the scarcity of drinking water is tackled.

On Co-operative Federalism

Strengthening the system and spirit of co-operative federalism, my government is taking the states along to achieve the national goals. Last week, important developmental issues were discussed with the chief ministers and a decision was taken to constitute a Committee of Chief



Photo: Dinodia

Ministers to look into structural reforms in the field of agriculture.

On Aspirational Districts

Comprehensive work is underway for the development of 112 'Aspirational Districts' in the country and 1,15,000 most backward villages of the country are in these districts. With the development of education and healthcare facilities and infrastructure in these villages, there will be a positive impact on the lives of crores of poor families.

On Jan-Dhan-Yojana

After the success of the world's largest financial inclusion campaign, in the form of 'Jan-Dhan Yojana', my government is also working to bring the banking services to the doorsteps of the people. In order to ensure that banking services are readily available in every village of the country and in the inaccessible areas of the North East, work is being done at a fast pace. About 1.5 lakh post offices in the country are being prepared to provide banking services through 'India Post Payment Bank'. Our goal is

to utilize the postman as a mobile bank to bring banking services to every doorstep.

On Global Warming

One of the biggest challenges of the 21st century is the growing water crisis. Over time, the traditional and effective practices of water conservation in our country are disappearing. Houses have come up over ponds and lakes and the vanishing water sources have accentuated the water crisis for the poor. In view of the growing impact of Climate Change and Global Warming, the water crisis is likely to get further aggravated. The need of the hour is to follow the way the country has shown in terms of seriousness about 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan'. The same seriousness should be shown in 'Water Conservation and Management'.

On Ministry of Jalshakti

We must conserve water for our children and future generations. The creation of the new 'Ministry of Jalshakti' is a decisive step in this direction, which will have far-reaching benefits. Through this new ministry, the systems related to water conservation and management will be made more effective.●

To the Editor

Farmer led Farmers' Commission

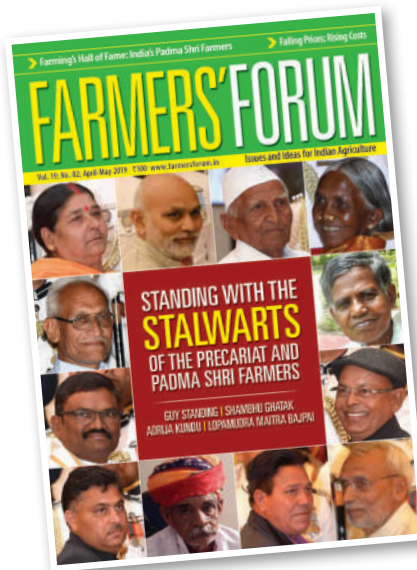
Farmers seem to have paid little attention to their own interests as have apparently been charmed by rhetoric in the recent elections. Yet India cannot do without the required transformative change, which you talk about in your editorial 'Ploughing hope out of despair', (Farmers' Forum, April-May 2019). Such change can come only when the farmers take charge of their destiny, beginning with a statutory "farmers commission", headed by a farmer with "a mandate to review existing interventions and recommend new initiatives to improve rural livelihoods", as you recommend. It is just as important to have a "nationally consistent database" without which there is no question of improved transparency, traceability, governance, policies and implementation.

Piyush Mehta
New Delhi

From Dream to Nightmare

Apropos of your editorial, "Ploughing hope out of despair" (Farmers' Forum, April-May 2019), farmers keep believing in a dream even though the humble farmer, who has managed to survive on hope through the years, knows that these are hopeless times, never mind the manifestos. When will farmers vote to choose what is good for themselves?

Lalit Kumar
Palwal, Haryana



Standing Tall

The lecture by Dr Guy Standing, 'Universal Basic Income and the Precariat in the emerging global order' (Farmers' Forum, April May 2019) was as educative as it was inspiring. Bharat Krishak Samaj is to be congratulated for organizing the talk and hopefully it will organize many more such to enlighten its membership about global thinking on what is possible.

Loknath Patil
Nashik, Maharashtra

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to all editions for
a comprehensive
understanding of Indian
farmer concerns**

Padma Shri Farmers

It was amazing to read the accounts of India's outstanding farmers, 'Farming's hall of fame: India's Padma Shri Farmers' by Adrija Kindu, (Farmers' Forum, April-May, 2019) and very uplifting to learn how farmers have left indelible impressions in their fields of activity through hard work, dedication and entrepreneurship. These awards are a tribute to the entire farming community and one is sure that it will be a morale booster for India's hard working farmers.

Suchida Parda
Cuttack, Odisha

Support in Perpetuity

Amidst all this talk of supporting the farmer, I hope policy-makers realize that farmers will need to be supported in perpetuity because India does not give them the freedom to flourish by allowing them fair prices that cover costs of production and leave something for them. For the new government in charge, it is imperative that policy-makers "tread cautiously in designing support systems", as you mention in your editorial, 'Ploughing hope out of despair', (Farmers' Forum, April-May 2019). Indeed, given the turmoil in the countryside, India has neither "the luxury of time nor do its numerous and nuanced problems lend themselves to silver bullet solutions". Now is the time to deliver the many benefits that the government has promised.

Swarup Bhatnagar
Mumbai, Maharashtra

WITHOUT COMMENT

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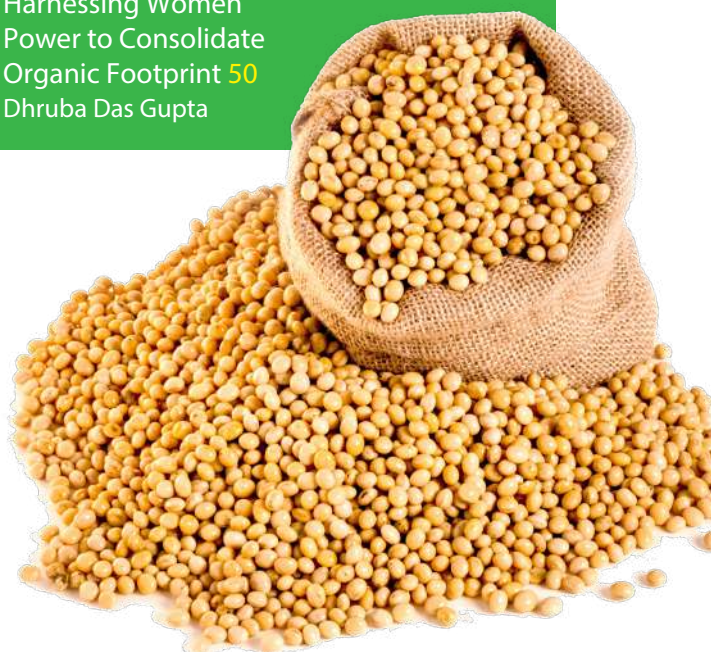
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Dhruba Das Gupta



INDIAN AGRICULTURE Looking For Exit Routes From the Epidemic of Despair

A Farmers' Forum Report



Public policy solutions to the problems of the disadvantaged should be publicly debated. There are many cruelties that modern India is guilty of. One of them is that the single largest food-deprived segment of the economy comprises the food producers, whose situation is only getting worse. This is best described as an 'epidemic of despair', evident in the spectacle of farmers' suicides, which does not seem to go away", said Mr Harsh Mander, setting the ball rolling on the 5th Policy & Inclusion Debate on Peasants, Policy and the Polls: Deepening agrarian crisis and the way ahead, at the IIC Annexe on April 23, 2019. The discussion, organized by the Centre for Equity Studies in collaboration with The Wire and India International Centre, was moderated by Mr Mander.

Conceding that there was enormous poverty, deprivation, hunger in the countryside earlier, he emphasized, however, that there was resilience enough to keep persevering. Today, "there is something about the tragedy of farmers' despair, resulting in suicides in the last 20-25 years coinciding more or less with the neo-liberal economic model". Travels across the countryside show young people fleeing the farms and farmer parents not wanting their children to have much to do with farming. "If these children can escape even to the lowest rung of urban economy, the farmers want them to leave", he said.

The many visible aspects of this crisis include:

- The very low levels of agricultural growth that has almost reached zero
- The ecological crisis evident in the farmlands and water aquifers that have got poisoned
- Food production increasing three-fold but chemical fertilizer application increasing 25 times.

Young people are fleeing the farms and farmer parents do not want their children to have much to do with farming. If these children can escape even to the lowest rung of urban economy, the farmers want them to leave



- Dependence on certain kind of water-intensive technology catering to the needs of well-to-do farmers in the most agriculturally prosperous regions
- The large mass of Indian farmers and tenants experiencing small growth but even that not evenly distributed across classes and regions
- Very low public investments.

Though the agriculture sector gives employment to 55 per cent of the population with contributions to GDP at 16 per cent and declining, the share of public investment in the sector, even in the UPA



Photo: Dinodia

years, was the lowest at five per cent, coming down further under the current dispensation, even as talk of doubling the farming income increases. The public investments generally support large farmers in agriculturally-prosperous areas while public investments, catering to small farmers and tenants in the large mass of India, are almost nil. At the bottom of all of this is the withdrawal of the state from a whole range of support services such as agricultural credit and agricultural extension and even deeper at the foundations the failure of land and tenancy reforms. The Situation Assessment Survey showed levels of extreme poverty in the countryside with 57 per

cent of rural households having no land. Economist Prabhat Patnaik wrote that the conditions today are worse than those at the time of Independence.

There are many facets to this crisis but the farm sector distress is recalled only when there is a report on suicides, only to be forgotten. The last couple of years have seen some epic displays of resistance by farmers who have marched into our cities with great dignity and have forced the public commissions of people in city and policy makers to take notice, even if briefly, Mr Mander said.

The BJP makes promises to help resolve this crisis in agriculture but the question is how. The



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conversation tends to be quite often superficial. Loan waivers are not the solution even if they seem to be an immediate imperative. “We might believe that they are needed to deal with the crisis at the moment but we need to find solutions to prevent such a crisis in the future”, said Mr Mander.

It is also very well to talk about Swaminathan committee recommendations for MSP at 50 per cent of cost price, which also includes the cost of labour and land but this has to be thought through. “We need to think that even if we are able to implement a nationwide and crop-wide support price, purchased by the state, what is the state going to do with all of that? We have the public distribution system for rice and wheat but we still have million tons of them rotting in warehouses. The question is what are we going to do with the rest of the produce. If they are going to dump it back into the market, the crisis is going to deepen”, Mr Mander said.

- There are other questions around farmers getting the decent price versus the imperative to ensure that the consumers do not pay higher prices.
- There are questions about whether the farmers need to bear the burden of subsidizing the urban consumers.
- Again, a large segment of urban consumers is very poor and the question is how does one achieve a balance.
- There are questions about the farming insurance programmes that have to contend with a huge set of problems.

The new solution being talked about is around income support for every acre cultivated with different variants of this implemented in different states such as Telangana and Odisha.

The new solution is around income support for every acre cultivated with different variants of this implemented in different states. This reflects an acknowledgment, in principle, that farming is a public service, which is not economically viable without state support



Photo: Pixabay

The bottomline here is the acknowledgment, in principle, that farming is a public service, which is not economically viable without state support. Therefore, state support has to take a particular form, which has to be decided. There are huge problems around this, given the sad state of land records, with a significant number of cultivators as tenant farmers whose ownership is not even recorded. How can they be supported?

Thus one starts this discussion to seek solutions on the premise that there is an enormous crisis, which has only deepened with passing years. If the government has the resolve to solve the problem it needs to begin from that premise, Mr Mander said. The speakers at the seminar were economist, Utsa Patnaik, currently Emeritus Professor, Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, JNU, where she taught from 1973 until her retirement in 2010; Siraj Hussain, former union Secretary of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare and currently Visiting Senior Fellow at ICRIER; Ajay Vir Jakhar, Chairman of Bharat Krishak Samaj and Editor, Farmers' Forum and Arindam Banerjee, Associate Professor at the Ambedkar University Delhi. They spoke of steps that they would recommend to help Indian farmers emerge from the 'epidemic of despair' in which they find themselves in. •

AGRARIAN CRISIS

Historical Perspective and Current Realities

Utsa Patnaik



The farm crisis is not new; it is more than 20 years old. I have been talking about it to many audiences, mainly to kisan sabhas, to agricultural labour unions, to NGOs since 1977. This is the first time that I am talking to an audience of this composition. The fact that the farm crisis has been neglected for so long and has taken the urban elite to wake up to it only after thousands of farmer have been forced to march and after more than 300,000 farmers have committed suicide, says something about our own callousness and our lack of connect with material reality around us. That is the first point to be made.

The major reason is that even the well-intentioned have had a wrong theory or model of what constitutes development and industrialization. Indians have been told that somehow this country can replicate the classical development path followed across the world and later generalized to the USA. Some of my own ex-students ask why I worry about displacement farm distress when they were to be expected of the process of growth and capitalistic production because I have taught them about the enclosure movement, displacement of small peasant freed from the land and creation of landless labour.

It needs to be categorically said that whether it is about India or China or smaller developing countries, one must get this idea, that the classical development trajectory can be replicated, out of one's mind. The reason for this is that it is myth to think that when small peasants were displaced from the land through enclosures in the classical development trajectory followed in Britain – generalized later to the west European countries – they were eventually reabsorbed within their own economy. There was tremendous social discontent, upheaval even at that time. The technological change was incredibly labour displacing; people were being displaced from the new factories as soon as they were employed.

One spinner used to be employed for spinning one thread but a spinning jenny could spin 80 threads with one or two persons only, displacing 78 spinners in late 18th century England. Later, the spinning jenny could spin 800 spindles at a time



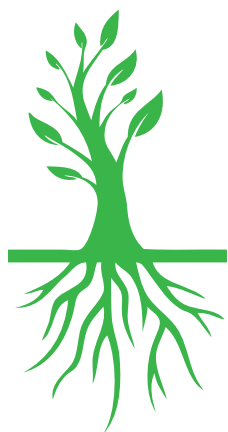
UTSA PATNAIK
Indian Marxist
Economist,
currently Emeritus
Professor, Centre
for Economic
Studies and
Planning, JNU



Photo: Dinodia

with only two or three people required to look after it, displacing hundreds. Labour got displaced as soon as factories came up and there was no absorption of the displaced labour force within the European countries. The only way they got rid of the enormous socio-economic problems that displacement caused was by exporting the unemployed to the new world, to the lands that they had seized from indigenous inhabitants by either massacring these indigenous inhabitants or driving them to reservations while taking over the enormous land areas of North America, Central America, South Africa and Australia. Half the incremental population in Britain migrated permanently every year for a whole century after 1815. Thus, more people out-migrated permanently than the initial population of Britain.

India's displaced peasants have had nowhere to go. If the same rate of out-migration as in Britain





Perish the thought that India can be developed and industrialized in the same way that the advanced countries were. India must find a solution within its own economy

were to be applied to India, since Independence, 400 million people should have gone out of this country permanently. That has not happened. The total Indian diaspora in the entire world is 17 million and there is no place that India's displaced farmers can go today. Hence, one must reject the thought that India can be developed and industrialized in the same way as the advanced countries. Instead India must find a solution within its own economy; find ways of employing our people and giving them livelihoods and incomes.

Second, it is best to listen to the farmers about what they want rather than to bureaucratically hand out a formula to them. Farmers have been articulating

what they want in the course of the demands that they have raised during the last two years over several marches and demonstrations. Their major demand is stability of income and prices. Agriculture is the only branch of production facing weather-related output instability. In all other branches, producers putting in all the inputs and labour and incurring expenditure in the optimum proportion, know what the output is going to be but the Indian farmer does not. If there is price uncertainty on top of output uncertainty the situation is an absolutely impossible one for the farmer.

This is why after Independence, for 40 years (1950-90) of Nehruvian or state-directed policy,

one of the most important steps taken, right from the beginning, was assuring price stability to the farmer. The minimum support price for grain was successfully implemented with the setting up of the Food Corporation of India in 1965 but it could be implemented only because the economy had been cordoned off from the destabilizing impact of global demand. For nearly 200 years before Independence, under British rule, India had been completely trade liberalized with an open economy, particularly the agricultural sector. There was no protection for farmers at all and especially during the Great Depression, their situation had become absolutely dire. There was an enormous drop in purchasing power due to the drain of wealth. During the Depression years, the crashing world prices were transmitted to crashing prices within India. The farmers had to mortgage land or whatever little assets they had and there was a huge rise in landlessness because the creditors took over their land and assets.

There was absolutely incredible demand compression. With loss of income, one's ability to feed one's self goes down and systematic data analysis shows that from about 200 kilograms annual foodgrain per capita in 1900, consumption had dropped to 137 kilograms by 1946. This was 63 kilograms less per capita/annum being consumed with the calorie/energy intake decline easily calculated (a kilogram of grain gives 3,450 calories). Since the elite did not have any problem with nutrition however, those that did suffer saw a more serious decline than the overall average.

Price stability was considered to be of such enormous importance that post Independence, Indian planners put in place a system to cordon off the economy from global demand to a very large extent. Under the recent liberalized regime global demand has changed India's cropping pattern at the expense of the food-based production and consumption within the country. Earlier the farmer had been cordoned off by a policy disallowing cheap, subsidized foodgrain from abroad to flood the country that would undermine the Indian farmers' incomes. There was also a system of procuring at a price to cover the cost of production and give farmers something more for them to survive.

It must be repeatedly emphasized that this system of MSP cannot work unless the economy is cordoned off from the global demand. The neo-liberal economists, the World Bank and others,





Photo: Saraswati Narayan

It must be emphasized that the system of MSP cannot work unless the economy is cordoned off from global demand. The neo-liberal economists, the World Bank and others have abused that safeguard

have abused that safeguard. India's early planners also insisted, for example, that even if global cotton prices rose, India would not allow its raw cotton to go out unless the domestic needs of the handloom and powerloom weavers were met. The price of yarn has always depended crucially on the price of raw cotton. Exporting raw cotton because of a global shortage would mean a rise in prices of raw cotton and yarn within the country, which would ruin handloom weavers and powerloom enterprises. This is precisely what happened in the early 1990s after trade was liberalized.

Farmer suicides have been preceded by suicides of handloom weavers in Karnataka and the closure of hundreds of powerlooms throughout the country because, after 40 years, the government allowed unrestricted export of raw cotton. In fact, farmers were encouraged to export and, earnings being good then, they expanded the area under raw cotton. Even farmers in arid peninsular India, who had never produced cotton before, having produced millet, jowar, bajra and ragi, took to higher cost cotton. The government exhorted them to export to take advantage of the global price rise and they took loans to sow large areas of cotton. No one informed them that global prices are volatile; they could treble over a five-year period and come down to a third of the original level in the next three years.

On the one hand, these farmers took huge loans and, on the other, given the so-called financial sector reforms, they were excluded from the priority sector effectively. Thus farmers no longer had access to cheap loans from the banking systems, which forced them to turn to private money lenders, who lent money at usurious interest rate of ₹3 to ₹5 per ₹100, per month (between 36 per cent and 60 per cent per annum). Since the neo-liberal wisdom





Photo: Dinodia

India should give up free trade that hurts farmer incomes and set up a system of protection before it can implement minimum support price

expenditures in particular. Such investments are outside the individual farmer's ability. The Situation Assessment Survey of the National Sample Survey 2013 shows that 90 per cent of the farmers could not meet their consumption out of their income and, even by borrowing, invest no more than ₹368 per month on average, which achieves very little. Only the top 10 per cent invested more than ₹1,000 per month. Clearly, in this state of poverty the farmer cannot even replace even a bullock should it die.

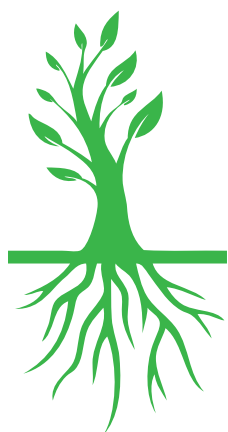
Irrigation is another area where individuals cannot substitute for public investment and the issue of declining public investment is very serious. Public expenditure on research, into new crop varieties for example, has been cut down drastically. Government's extension services to farmers to give them technological advice has been withdrawn completely for the best part of two decades. No agrarian crisis can be reversed without reversing these neo-liberal policies. Cash transfers to farmers is a red herring for us, which advanced countries have recommended for India because they can do it very easily. The USA has only two million farming families, including livestock farmers, which makes it administratively feasible for the US government to transfer cash to them out of its larger budget. The same applies to most European governments and industrially advanced countries.

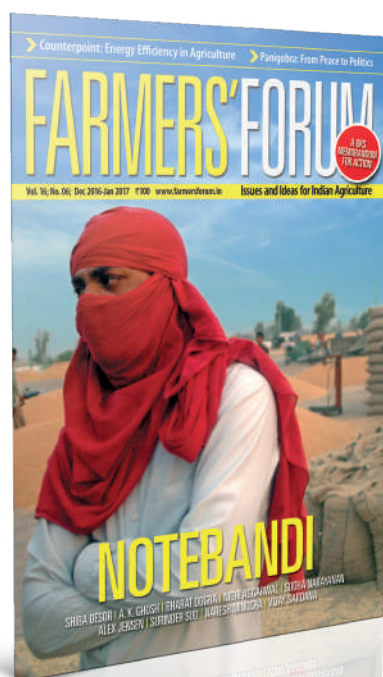
Their budgets, as a proportion of their GDP, are huge compared to India's. The budgets of European countries are between 25 per cent and 40 per cent of their GDP. The budgets of federal government and various states of the USA, account for 37 per cent of their GDP. India's is hardly 18 per cent and there are 156 million landowners in the country, including the landless with only homestead. Exclude the landless and 140 million landowners still remain. Is it the plan to organize cash transfers to 140 million landowners? Or is this something deliberately being suggested by the advanced countries because they know that India cannot do it. ●

was to produce more cotton for export, they went in for these loans. Expectedly, global prices started crashing from the end of 1995 and farmers realized that they could no longer pay interest, leave alone repay the loans. They hoped that prices would improve the following year but the price fall continued until they were in a debt trap.

The point is that the farmer must be assured of price stability and that is not possible without restrictions on trade. Ideally, there should be quantitative restrictions that are no longer permitted because India signed the agreement on agriculture at the WTO. However, India can still raise tariff because the world capitalist leader, the USA, has given up on neo-liberalism and free trade and has threatened sanctions should India import oil from Iran. India should give up free trade that hurts farmer incomes and set up a system of protection before it can implement minimum support price. Why has minimum support price not been properly implemented in the last few years when Indian administrators had implemented it successfully for 40 years? It cannot be implemented now because it is not consistent with free trade.

The third point is cutbacks to plan spending that reduce incomes and raise unemployment. The government has been hegemonized by and succumbed to the wrong advice, based on fallacious theories given by the leading international organizations and has actually cut back very sharply on rural development





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Complex Agrarian Issues Defy Single Solution

Siraj Hussain





That India's agrarian crisis is complex is known. Had it not been so, both the UPA and NDA governments would have resolved the issues by now. However, two major macro issues demand critical and urgent attention: water and incomes. For the rest, at different points of time, farmers of different crops face completely different issues in different states. Therefore, it would be unrealistic to think that even a body like GST council could address the issues worrying all farmers at one go. The solution to agricultural woes of farmers lies in the states and strategies must vary from state to state.

The one common issue confronting Indian agriculture is water. Other issues may find solution sooner or later but India will not be able to easily address the challenge of water scarcity in several regions and the problem will become even more complex due to climate change. Out of around 200 million hectares of land, 105 million hectares remain unirrigated, posing enormous problem every year for farmers in rain-fed areas. Their problems are not fully appreciated amidst the din created by various interest groups.

Therefore, the challenges faced by rain-fed farmers do not receive the attention they deserve. Even now, the issue making media headlines in north India is the non-payment of dues to sugar farmers but there is little talk of what is happening to drought-hit farmers in Marathwada or northern Karnataka. Irrigation is needed for these unserved million hectares over the next two or three decades; it is not feasible to do so earlier than that. The NDA II government has started well to focus on water under the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana.

The programme for major and medium irrigation (MMI) projects, Acceleration Irrigation Benefits Project (AIBP), is not new; it was run under earlier governments also. The change lies in bringing it under sharper focus under the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Samaj Yojna and identifying 99 projects after careful evaluation of the status of their implementation. These projects were to be completed by December 2019



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Photo: Dinodia

99 projects were selected for completion to achieve 7.6 million hectares of irrigation because they were about 70 per cent complete in 2015. Even this achievable target was not met

to bring under irrigation an additional 7.6 million hectares, out of the total unirrigated area. This was hardly an ambitious target; these 99 projects were selected for completion because they were about 70 per cent complete in 2015. This seemed like an achievable target.

States also have to make a contribution under the AIBP for the completion of MMI projects. Since they lack resources, there was innovative thinking and a fund was created under the Nabard from which the states could borrow to make their contribution. The states could borrow at six per cent rate of interest. Unfortunately, the pace of implementation did not pick up in all the projects. There could be several reasons for this.

One, the irrigation minister in most states, at least in north India, is the most powerful person after the chief minister and the irrigation department is seen to be a powerful money-spinner. Therefore, someone powerful at the centre should have forced the state governments to complete the irrigation projects. That did not quite happen. Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, all three ruled by the BJP, were to be the main beneficiaries of the scheme to bring the 7.6 million hectares under irrigation by the December 2019. For a variety of reasons, the projects did not receive the push that they deserved and one does not precisely know how much area actually came under irrigation. Again, the mere completion of the project does not mean that water will actually reach the farm as command area works are required to be completed for taking water to farmers' fields.

With the government failing to achieve the agenda of bringing 7.6 million hectares under irrigation by 2019, there must be serious thinking around how to provide irrigation to entire unirrigated area. How can the states be pushed into implementing irrigation projects and how much can realistically

India has earned around \$60 billion from cotton alone after the Vajpayee government allowed GM cotton (despite the dispute around GM). This year, the cotton farmers are not in distress. Maize farmer too realized a very good price and some other crops have given good returns to farmers this year. The situation will vary from year to year and policies need to be able to provide a graded response to specific crops facing distress in each state

The UPA I and II governments had created additional storage capacity of about 15 million tonnes for central pool stocks across India because of which the percentage of damaged grains was below 0.05

get done? In Maharashtra, one heard of the rampant corruption in irrigation projects before the 2014 elections but the pace of completion of projects has not picked up as expected.

The second point is around the wide variation in annual incomes of farmers from different crops. The issues facing the sugarcane farmers this year may not face them two years hence. This year the cotton farmer, for instance, realized a good price despite all the leftist criticism against global trade. India has earned around \$60 billion on account of cotton alone after the Vajpayee government allowed GM cotton (despite the dispute around GM). This year, the cotton farmers are not in distress; the maize farmer too realized a very good price and some other crops have given good returns to farmers this year. The situation will vary from year to year and policies need to be able to provide a graded response to specific crops facing distress in each state.

It is very difficult to formulate one price policy for the entire country; nor is it possible to procure all 23 crops at MSP, across India. In the last three decades, the government has successfully procured only wheat and rice. With rice production threatened in many north Indian states due to declining water table, over the next five to 10 years, agricultural exports of \$40 billion will be under threat. The centre has to sit down with every state, under the aegis of the GST like council or a similar body, to find the resources of a much higher order that will be required to restore sustainability to crops grown in that state. The centre and the states have to formulate policies supportive of this goal of long-term sustainability for agriculture.

One significant achievement of the UPA I and II government was the creation of



Photo: Sampat Pathak

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additional storage capacity of about 15 million tonnes for central pool stocks across India because of which the percentage of damaged grains came down below 0.05 per cent. This year, with projected record high procurement of both wheat and rice, there may be shortage of storage capacity in some states. Many states are giving bonuses on wheat and paddy and, hence, farmers are growing wheat instead of other crops like mustard, skewing the crop basket. It means that India's dependence on imported edible oil will continue while wheat is procured in even larger quantity year after year.

A third point is about crop insurance, which is not a failure, though the scheme needs many modifications so that farmers receive their claim expeditiously. It has to be supported by application of science and hopefully a technological breakthrough will make it possible to reduce the number of crop cutting experiments required to estimate the yield of a crop.



TIME FOR Stakeholder-driven Policies

Ajay Vir Jakhar





Photo: Dinodia

Some reality check is needed before discussing farmer problems and solutions. First, doubling farmers' incomes by 2022 is not possible under any circumstance. Second, minimum support prices for all crops is not possible. This is something that farmer organizations know but demand any way; it is probably good to demand things even if there is little hope that they will be delivered. Third, farmers need to be supported in perpetuity. The changing global order and policy regime over a century has been painful and, as a farmers' organization and a farmer, one can only argue a case for making it less painful. There should be no illusion that it will be painless.



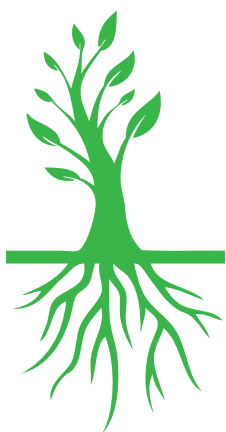
AJAY VIR JAKHAR
Chairman, Bharat
Krishak Samaj

There is constant chatter in the media with columnists and armchair experts asking for the farmer not to be shifted out of farming, which is allegedly the World Bank line. As a farmer, one can say without fear of being contradicted that 99.99 per cent of the farmers want to quit farming. The need is to find meaningful ways for them to do so instead of being compelled to exit. Only a non-farmer would advocate keeping farmers on the farm. What one can meaningfully advocate for is to make farmers' lives more prosperous by shifting at least 20 per cent to 25 per cent of the farming dependent population so that there is less fragmentation-led stress.

What would an appropriate business case be? First, transferring farm input subsidies – power and fertilizers – in cash to farmers in such a way so that they do not lose out. It must be understood that farm input subsidies are not livelihood sustenance subsidies. What the Prime Minister offers with PM Kisan or the Congress party with NYAY comprise sustenance subsidies, which are not substitutes for farm input subsidies. The major issue here is about rationalization of subsidies. A distinction must be made because one cannot transfer farm input subsidies of a specific amount, which would be needed for a Punjab farmer, who is using irrigation and urea, to a Jaisalmer farmer, growing a gram that does not require urea. He may need fertilizer.

Such input subsidies have to be specific in design instead of being universal. This can be attempted and achieved provided there is a nationally consistent database. Working with the Punjab government one realizes that there is little data available to design better policies. One is not even talking about data that the government does not want released in the public domain but data on who is getting subsidies: Is it the large or politically connected farmer? Who is buying or selling what and such others? Such data can stimulate changes that will make a difference in policy-making and implementation.

To consider the other simpler aspects around documentation or vacancies, for instance, there is no e-documentation within the departments and the ministries. There is a 50 per cent vacancy in agricultural research staff and extension work. There is no money available for research and there is an overall funds crisis.



Political parties promise ₹3 lakh crores in cash transfers but are not ready to give even ₹5,000 crores to ensure the availability of a farm extension worker for every farmer

Farm extension services suffer from a 50 per cent staff vacancy even under the sanctioned strength approved many years ago. Again the 50 per cent that is engaged is made to work on the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan, election work, block development work, everything else except farm extension, in 50 per cent of the time. Political parties promise ₹3 lakh crores in cash transfers but are not ready to give even ₹5,000 crores to ensure the availability of a farm extension worker for every farmer. Big ideas will not transform lives but the unromantic, small, nitty-gritty changes will get the farmer across.

The funds shortage has interesting connotations too. No state government has enough money. Those with little access to natural resources are bankrupt today and the figures on loans in Punjab in Indian public domain/media are telling. Earlier, say three years ago, the ratio of transfers was 90:10 for many

centrally-sponsored agri schemes for transferring technologies. Now it is 60:40. It could be changed to 90:10 again, where the central government contributes 90 per cent of the money in the light of the on-going crisis for a period of five years. That will fill all the extension and research staff posts.

I have passionately emphasized that India's farm crisis today is a governance failure. It is not just a problem with political will but one of having a closed mind when it comes to understanding different perspectives on behalf of the people. A farmers' commission headed by a farmer could assess all existing programmes to help farmers and tell the government what is working and what is not. Yet when this issue is taken up with different political parties, whether BJP or Congress or others, they laugh at the suggestion of a farmers' commission being headed by a farmer. It appears that only



Photo: Pixabay

economists and bureaucrats are the repositories of agriculture wisdom.

The fundamental change needed is for a commission of practicing farmers to assess government programmes and to report to the government on the changes needed. Failing this, the country can never understand the farmer's problems though there will be discussions galore. In Punjab, for 60 years, from Independence till 2007, when Akali Dal-BJP government came into power, the total debt was ₹69,000 crores. In 10 years, the Akali Dal-BJP government took additional debt of ₹1,18,000 crores, taking the debt to ₹1,87,000 crores. The legacy debt has cascaded into a major financial crisis for the state. The Punjab government is only repaying this debt and has no money for anything else and there is accessible data that shows this. In 2019-20, Punjab's outstanding liabilities are projected at 39.7 per cent of the GSDP¹.

From 1947 till 2014 the government of India's debt was ₹53,00,000 crores. The total liabilities

of the government have increased 49 per cent to ₹82,00,000 crores in the last four-and-half years of the Modi government, as per the 8th Edition of the Status Paper on Government Debt. Clearly, finances are in a straight-jacket, leaving little leeway to fund development programmes. If the available funds are used for cash transfers for sustaining farmers, where will the public investment for irrigation come from?

Clearly, there will be trade-offs and one does not know how these trade-offs are organized or whether the political parties and bureaucracy are competent to decide what the best trade-offs are. Stakeholders should be involved while deciding what trade-offs they want because there are conflicting interests. Earlier the trade-off was proposed for restrictions on cotton that the farmer opposes; farmers are pressing for a no-restriction cotton export regime. Weavers, however, will seek restrictions. That is a trade-off that must be determined by the affected stakeholders; not academicians.●

¹ <http://punjab.gov.in/documents/10191/1008137/WP+final+20.06.pdf/bb385236-3c84-4c7f-8e5b-50ae73535593>

Convolutioned Issues Demand Understanding of the Core

Arindam Banerjee



Farming in an ecologically diverse country such as India is a very complex issue with a great number of crops, all with their own issues, different conditions of farming across different regions in the country. It not easy to make sense of what is going on. Three important aspects that help an understanding of the complexities are farmer incomes, farm credit and non-farm activities and their linkage with the agricultural or farming activities.



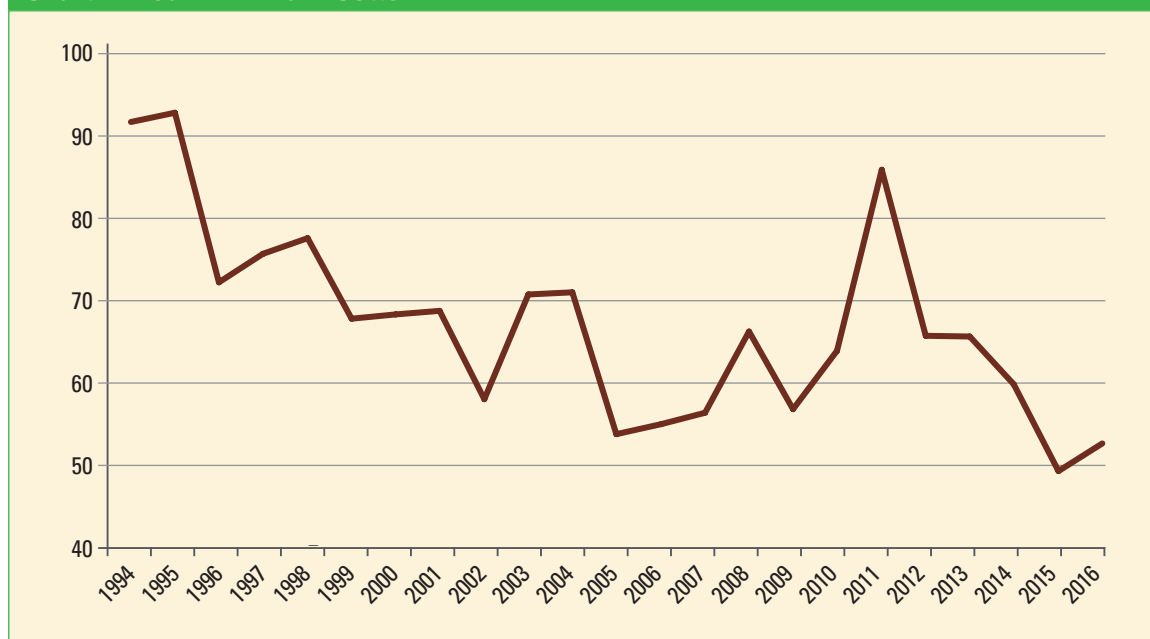
ARINDAM BANERJEE
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Professor of
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First, the crisis linked to farmer incomes. Crop prices are volatile, tending to go up very fast and then plummeting. One can make sense of what happened to crop price movements in real terms by looking at them since the 1990s and linking them to agricultural income of farmers. After factoring out the inflation by using a consumer price index for agricultural labourers to deflate the nominal prices, one finds that there has been some rise in prices of jowar, pulses and sugarcane. For all other crops prices, considered at real terms, there has been a systemic decline.

For cotton, the real prices have been lower than the 1994 prices for every year after that. This despite the cotton boom of 2010-12. One must understand what is happening to the



Chart-1: Real WPI: Raw Cotton



Based on Government of India Wholesale Price Index database



Photo: Dinodia

A shift in the terms of trade and their movements have made them adverse to agriculture from the mid-nineties, primarily because a large section of the rural population is a net food buyer

terms of trade between farming, agriculture and the rest of the economy. A distinct shift in the terms of trade and their movements have made them adverse to agriculture from around the mid-nineties. Much of this is primarily because a large section of the rural population is a net food buyer. The trend of food prices from the early 2000s to 2013 has been that of high food prices. Also, even when commercial crop prices are going up, much of the farmers' incomes are undercut by the rising expenditure.

The question is what kind of a lifestyle are farmers' incomes buying for them? It is not only about food but about the kind of access they get to health and education. There is a negative

trend in the last 25 years in terms of income, except for the food crops, particularly rice and wheat. In the case of maize and most other crops, the real incomes are either unstable or they have declined. One is not surprised to hear that nobody wants to stay in farming.

There were success stories for cotton in Gujarat till around 2005-06 but, particularly in the last 5-6 years, BT cotton has not fetched as much. In the case of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, real incomes from cotton have been stagnant for a much longer period. In case of soya beans, supposedly a profit-making crop, incomes have declined for major states such as Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra.



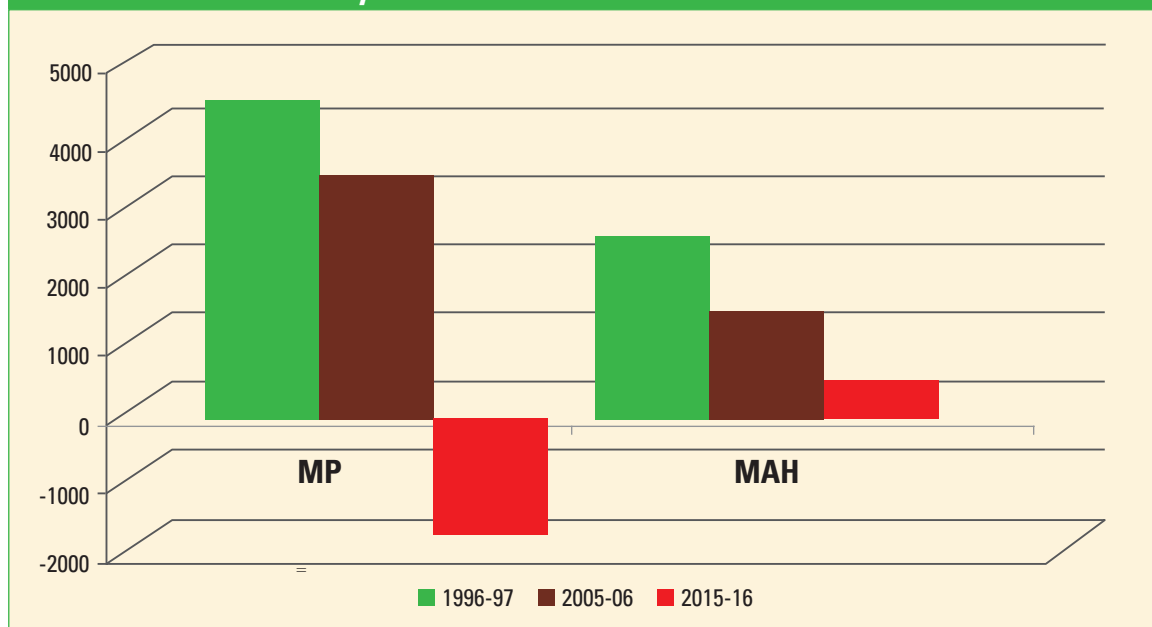


Photo: Pixabay

In the case of rice, there has been a distinct increase in terms of real income and that would have benefitted the large farmers, who are the net sellers of rice. They would have taken advantage of the massive export markets that emerged between 2009-13, when India exported large quantities of rice and wheat. Though, for wheat, there has been no distinct increase in real income of farmers.

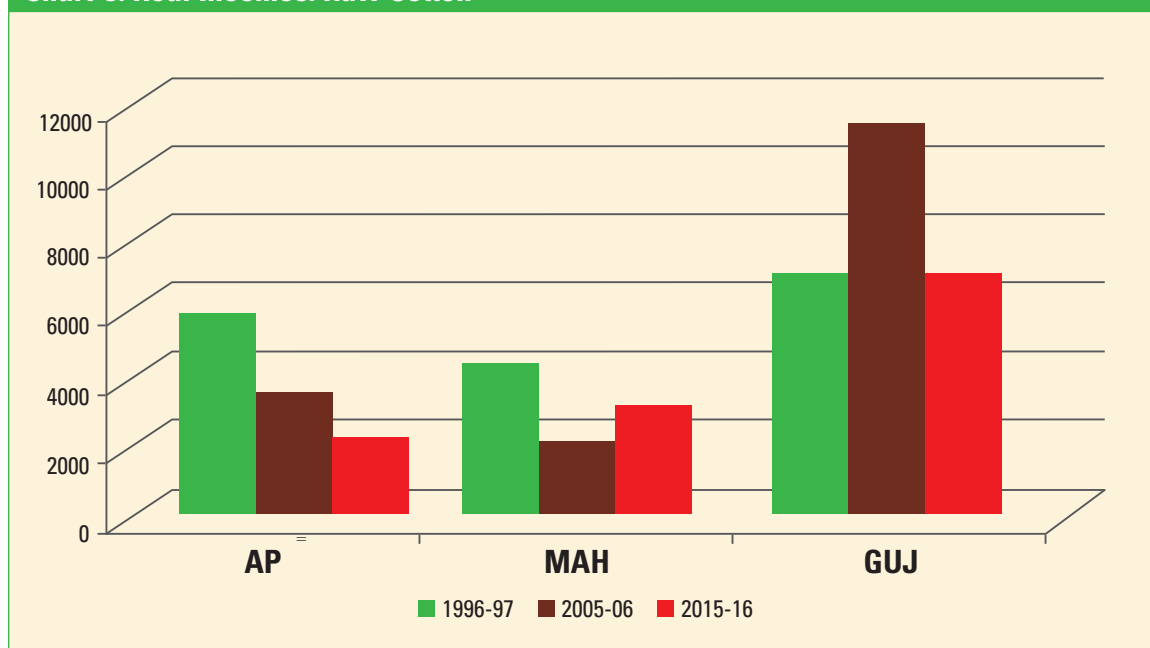
In all the complicated and fluctuating price situations for different crops and farmers, there is a kind of systemic adverse movement and impact on agriculture. This brings one to the question of not just applying price controls but whether or not one agrees with the position that farmers, being small-scale producers, need to be supported in perpetuity. One must also decide on the scope of intervention while discussing stability of incomes and prices. What is the scope of intervention that needs to be exercised as a state and what would be given up? Merely announcing MSPs is of no help.

There is literature on the debate in the 1980s critiquing the Indian agriculture policy system and asking for more liberalization for farmers who were disallowed to export without any protection of their interests. There were also discussions on widening the coverage of procurement amidst the trend of declining public investments. The latter were suggestions that states paid little heed to. In terms of price

Chart-2: Real Incomes: Soyabean

Based on the CACP data on 'cost of cultivation'

Chart-3: Real Incomes: Raw Cotton



Based on the CACP data on 'cost of cultivation'

stability and income, much has been lost to the farmer over two and a half decades and it is not easy to revert to the earlier situation. Some sort of price stabilization mechanism has to be thought of to resolve these issues and one cannot rule out control over trade, imports and exports.

The second is the terms of provision of credit to farmers. In the 1970s, for every ₹100 lent to the farmer, the professional money lender charged ₹36; an exorbitantly high interest rates. This was just two years after the bank nationalization. In 1990-91, that figure came down to ₹17.5 with greater reach for institutional credit. Much of the credit has been cornered by large farmers but that does not prevent policy emphasis on reaching agricultural credit to small and marginal farmers.

Yet, agricultural and professional money lenders are again provisioning for ₹33 of the ₹100 in what is a regrettable reversal. Agricultural credit has grown after 2005-06 but does not reach the marginal farmers. Much of the credit gets disbursed in the urban metropolis to agriculture multinationals. What is needed is a revival of the priority sector lending

in the genuine sense and not simply in terms of numbers.

The third is in the context of the larger agrarian distress. Non-farm activities must have certain linkages with the agricultural or farming activities and this will require new institutions. The composition of employment in the rural areas shows a major shift out of agriculture in the 1993-2004 into the construction sector. There was more in 2004-10, a period of very high growth. In 2015-16, the so-called reserve army or surplus population or residual labour in agriculture seems to have somehow shifted to the construction sector. As a result, the output per worker in the construction sector plummeted. Earlier, the value added per worker in construction was nearly

four times that of agriculture, whereas now that figure has come down to 1.6 times. These problems are bound to occur when people are sought to be shifted out of agriculture in a mechanical manner by not addressing the core structural problems of agriculture but simply looking for other activities instead.

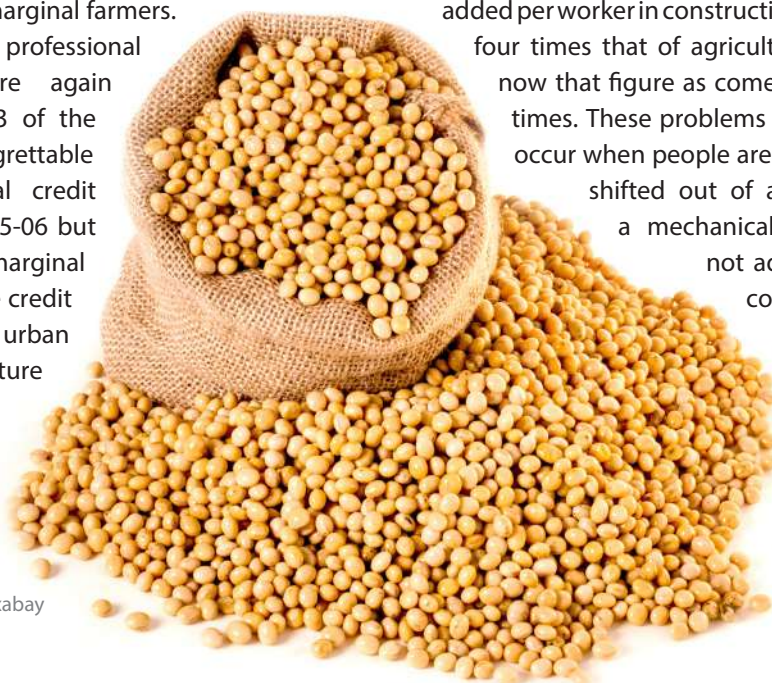


Photo: Pixabay



Point Counterpoint

Harsh Mander: I have two points from every speaker as policy recommendations, to present a range of ideas here. Utsa Patnaik stressed on the importance of protecting the economy and the Indian farmers as well as the need for massive rise in public investment in the farm sector. Siraj Hussain, focussed on the 105 million unirrigated farm sector with micro irrigation and watershed development instead of large irrigation projects along with the promotion of crop diversity. Ajay talked of initiating the shift of 20 per cent to 25 per cent farmers away from the farm sector, either to rural India itself or other occupations in the countryside and of the need for massive expansion and agricultural extension and research with the union government supporting it substantially. Arindam spoke about the need for price stabilization

mechanisms, including control of trade, as well as for massive expansion of credit in private sector lending with the focus on marginal farmers.

Utsa Patnaik: Arindam raised the question of credit, which is at the heart of the whole problem of indebtedness-driven farmers' suicides. Farmers, like anybody else, need money to produce. A producer of shoes or cement does not commit suicide. Why is it that when farmers take credit they are unable to repay? Just taking credit by itself is not a problem. The problem here is the inability to repay the credit. This brings one to the question of uncertain output plus uncertain price that, in the farmer's case, presents a unique combination of adverse circumstances that that no other sector of production faces. Therefore, it must be treated very differently.

Siraj Hussain said that farmers have received good returns for cotton this year but what about three years earlier and three years from now? The whole problem is around this volatility of prices and incomes that farmers face. I was in Kerala for several months and travelled in the areas where farmer suicides were rampant between 2006 and 2010. They were not cotton farmers but producers of tea, coffee and spices of various kinds. There were offices of commodity boards in Bangalore for coffee and spices, whose function was to procure from the producers under a voluntary procurement programme. If you wanted to sell your pepper or coffee, the commodity board would purchase it at a minimum support price.

This particular procurement function, under central government directive, was given up from the mid-1990s under pressure from WTO regulations. They stopped procuring, which meant that these producers were thrown at the mercy of the transnational company that then came in and contracted with them. Transnationals never pass on the rise in prices to the producers. If global prices are rising, they take the benefit because they have already contracted with the producers at a fixed price. When the global prices crash, as happened with spices and coffee in this period, they pass on the burden to the farmers they have contracted with by finding fault with quality, not buying and so put the burden of the fluctuation on the farmers. It was a very traumatic experience visiting the households of the farmers where the earning member, usually a male, had committed suicide. There was a new tendency of even teenage daughters committing suicide. In patriarchal societies, girls are made to feel like a burden, even in progressive states like Kerala. Due to the enormous burden of patriarchal attitudes, if the father has committed suicide, the girl feels as if she is the burden on the family because she has not been sufficiently educated to earn a living and the family does not now have the money to marry her off.

I strongly feel that bureaucrats cannot sit back and say it is impossible to give minimum support prices for so many crops. They did in the past and have to do it now. How is it that bureaucrats ran the country efficiently after Independence but cannot do so now? Why is it that a well-to-do farmer like Mr Jakhar says that farmers do not mean their own demands? Does he believe that farmers are so frivolous that more than three lakhs have committed suicide and have marched hundreds of miles to put

The point about cotton exports is not disallowing them totally but not allowing exports at the expense of peoples' livelihoods. If the crop is not enough to feed India's own weavers, exports must be stopped

forward demands they do not really mean? Maybe the well-to-do farmers do not need it, they do not care whether they get MSP or not, but 80 per cent to 90 per cent of the farmers do want MSP. They have demanded it again and again and if a government cannot undertake measures to provide minimum support prices to stabilize their income, that government does not deserve to run the country.

The farmers are not going to keep quiet and just come marching. As one farmer in Maharashtra said some years ago, "You have so far seen only *atmahatya* (suicides), from now on you will see *hatya* (killing)." In other words, one can expect violence and the farmers will not be to blame because their patience has been tested. To come back to the question of not allowing cotton exports, the point is not about disallowing exports but about reminding policy-makers that Nehru and other founders of economic policy, which survived for 40 years after Independence, did not allow exports at the expense of peoples' livelihoods. If the crop of cotton is bad and there is not enough to supply India's own weavers, exports must be stopped. If there is a surplus production, of course exports should be permitted. That is a completely rational policy and one cannot have a situation where the government looks at the interest of only one class of people.

This crisis is quite complex because the interests of both producers versus consumers, food producers versus raw material producers, raw material producers versus manufacturers, who use the raw material, have to be taken into account. It is a very complex balancing act but it has to be done, otherwise India cannot get out of the mess created by opening up to free trade that has been an absolute disaster.

First, why should India continue with free trade when the people who have advised India to do so



themselves practice protectionism? Second is the issue of a legislative ceiling on what the government can spend. The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act (FRBM) implies giving up sovereignty by insisting that the government cannot spend more. On the eve of the 2008 global recession, Mr P. Chidambaram, then finance minister, proudly said: "We have more than met the requirement of the FRBM Act because the fiscal deficit has been reduced to 2.7 per cent and we were required to reduce it to 2.8." Reducing the fiscal deficit to that level means that the country is creating unemployment and loss of income for lakhs of people. The way forward lies in scrapping the FRBM Act. Actions have to be bold.

One cannot actually hedge around the problem of gargantuan proportions. One cannot do a little bit here and there and expect the problem to be fixed. In terms of the macro policies, no matter how diverse this country is, or how many different crops, or classes within the population, certain macro policies have impacted 90 per cent of the population adversely. One of them is this meaningless cutting back on state development expenditure and investment, which the country must stop. Anyone who is serious about addressing the agrarian problem has to scrap the FRBM Act. The other is that bureaucrats should not talk about things being impossible. Nothing is impossible if there is the will to do it and one is really serious about addressing the agrarian problem.

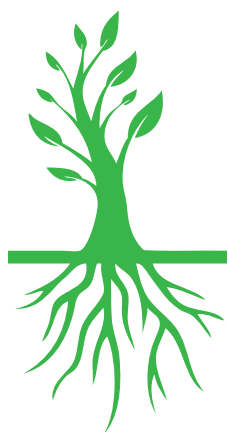
Siraj Hussain: Two significant issues have been thrown up in these discussions. First, the need for more extension personnel has been emphasized here but experience of the last 15 years shows that the private sector has come forward and done the extension work for several horticultural crops and, therefore, the model of only government officials undertaking extension work may not be highly relevant. For example, the increase in fruits and vegetables production has come largely through the initiative of the private sector. It is not the horticulture department's extension worker who went to the farmers to teach them about using new hybrid seeds or the technology to be used. The revolution that India has seen after the National Horticulture Mission was launched by the UPA I is now evident. India is a large producer of bananas and pomegranates; mangoes and grapes are exported and farmer incomes have gone up as a result. This is reflected in the data on farmers income. This is why



Certain macro policies have impacted 90 per cent of the population adversely, like the cutting back on state development expenditure and investment. This must stop

demand for consumer goods from the rural sector has picked up. With considerable extension work by the private sector, there may not be any need to fill up every single vacant post for extension workers because technology also takes care of some work.

Second, a very detailed report produced by ICRIER and OECD shows how export restrictions have harmed the farmers. I was the joint secretary when these restrictions on export were imposed during the food crisis in 2007-08. I moved the proposal for banning exports of rice, wheat and other crops at that time. Within the UPA, the recommendations of Mr Sharad Pawar (believed to be very powerful) would not be accepted, even though he had a much better pulse of the market.





The then government wasted a great deal of time removing the restrictions and India lost out because the global cycle of high prices was petering out. There is a need to restructure the CACP and bring better coordination between trade policy and price policy.

Ajay Jakhar: First, I never said farmers do not want MSP. Farmers want MSP but the leaders know that the government cannot give it. These are two different things and there is nothing to be apologetic about in pointing this out. Personally, I want MSP for all crops but will I get it? Second, I do not think MSP has ever been given for all the 23 crops; that has never happened. Everyone wants it but no one is distributing the largesse. Rather than defining problems that everyone has been doing here, the point of the session is to identify what change is needed and what can be achieved. One, the APMC Act that restricts trade of perishables is a state subject and the central government can do nothing about it if the states do not modify their acts. We have spoken about this to the central government and to the Prime Minister's office. As in GST, where the centre compensates the states

for loss of revenue, there should be a compensation under APMC Act too.

The total revenue collected from perishables under the Act is between ₹7,000 crores and ₹8,000 crores for the whole country. The state governments should remove the tax or make it 0.5 per cent on perishables, allow free flow of trade on perishables with compensation for the next five years. Such measures are needed to actually get things moving under a centre-state regime. Another problem is of common lands under panchayats or in towns that have been taken over by large farmers. A carrot and stick policy is needed here with legislation to the effect that if common lands are not used for common purposes, the panchayat will not get finance from the state or the central governments. Besides, there should be financial incentives for having biodiversity reserves in each village. The centre could take two hectares on rent in every village to facilitate a biodiversity reserve for allowing nature to rejuvenate itself.

Third, mechanization has led to great debt in the country. A tractor or a trolley means an investment of ₹4-5 lakhs and the tractor needs to be worked between 500 and 700 hours for the investment to



be financially viable. With ownership of five acres, no farmer can use it for more than 10-15 days in the entire year on one farm, though interest has to be paid for all the unused hours. This is one reason driving farmers to debt. The solution lies in devising ways for farmers not to have to own the machinery that they use. These small incremental changes will lead to big changes. Macro economic solutions are very important but very difficult to roll out in a country as diverse as India.

Arindam Banerjee: In terms of the point Mr Jakhar made regarding converting input subsidies to cash transfers; I am weary of the idea. If we replace the existing subsidies and expenditure by cash transfers that would be disastrous. India's rural society is divided by social hierarchies, on the basis of caste and gender and the levels of indebtedness that have infiltrated the society. Any kind of transferring welfare measures to cash is essentially going to strengthen the surplus appropriation by money lending or landlord classes in the rural areas. It is possible that a bank officer will notify the money-lender when the money is coming. Before one can withdraw it and put it in one's input expenditure, the money lender is going to expropriate it. Transfer of welfare measures in cash, which is substituting our in-kind services, is hence a bad idea.

Second, the question of structural transformation with at least 25 per cent being moved out of agriculture needs to be rethought. In terms of the

larger point made by Prof. Patnaik made, if you look at the macro picture, the transformation taking place in the developed countries is not happening in India. If farming is not lucrative and does not give access to decent standards of higher education and health, of course one would like to move out. The same applies to the IT sector. If the pay is not enough, one quits the industry. However, there is a crucial difference between the IT sector and agriculture. The sector employs less than one per cent of India's workforce while agriculture has 47 per cent of the workforce. Hence that is not feasible from a macro perspective.

Today, the farmer is squeezed in the organized capital space both at the input and output side as big multinationals have made an entry. There is need to think of new institutions of farmers' co-operatives to push back organized capital with farmers taking control of some of these upstream and the downstream channels. It is going to be very difficult unless they are supported by regulations and the state. The overarching question would be how to make agriculture profitable for farmers, including the small and marginal ones, instead of simply lamenting about farming incomes.

Ajay Jakhar: I never talked of transferring welfare into cash transfers. In fact, I specifically said that welfare is different from farm inputs and one cannot transfer welfare to cash. Also, by giving fertilizers to farmers one is eroding natural resources and promoting the use of chemical fertilizers.●

View from Diu: Saving the Hoka

Lopamudra Maitra Bajpai

Travelling down the clean, wide and open beaches of Daman and Diu in western India, one cannot help but notice the dotted clumps of the hoka tree. It is actually a palm that is unique to the region and commonly known as the doom palm, the gingerbread tree or the doom palm elsewhere in the world. In Diu, the only place where it grows in India, its edible oval fruit is very popular.

Yet the Hoka had slipped into a condition of extreme vulnerability; in the endangered category till one man's effort gave it a new lease of life. Ramesh Chandra D. Raval's single-minded devotion has not only preserved this palm that enhances the region's biodiversity but also its remarkable landscape.

The locals will say that the very interesting tree was probably planted in Diu by Portuguese invaders in the 15th-16th century and that these trees (*Hyphaene thebaica*/*Hyphaene dichotoma*) must have travelled from the Arabian Peninsula or the northern half of Africa, to which the palm is native.¹ It is widely distributed there and tends to grow wherever there is groundwater.

The botanist will tell you that this "branching Doom Palm" is the only palm tree in the world that branches. Visit Diu, in the south coast of the Kathiawar peninsula, separated from the mainland by a tidal creek, and there is this interesting



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palm, its tops spreading out into fronds, adding to the picturesque landscape. It is a dioecious palm, growing around 17 meters tall. Its fruit is often used to make local toddy. Elsewhere, fruit sellers sell it to locals and tourists. Nestled mostly the regions of Moti Daman, the hoka is often the muse for various tourists in the region, who have their own story to narrate.

Once the Hoka palm took to the local soil, it wove its way into local minds and hearts and customs and traditions. Raval talks of the "belief" associated with the hoka. "The saplings will grow into maturity when they are worshipped by a kumari (pre-pubescent girl)". The palm inspires other beliefs too. Yet, despite its cultural moorings, the trees were

facing extinction, until the last decade. The Botanical Survey of India has declared it an endangered species in Daman & Diu; the price that the palm has paid for "development". Raval's conservation work added a new chapter to environment protection in the region.

Interestingly enough though, Raval's pioneering preservation work for hoka began amidst not the flora but the fauna of western India. Raval has been an avid activist for conservation of the Gir lions of Gujarat for several decades. His work with the hoka palm began as an offshoot of his work on lion conservation, despite his never having had any formal training in environmental studies. Indeed, Raval had settled in Diu as a Sanskrit language teacher at a government school in 1979 and taught secondary classes between 8-10.

He was inspired to work on lion conservation after a visit to the Gir Forest National Park in Gujarat and thus began his encounters with the lions; his observations often helping other environmentalists. By the early 1990s, he started working on his book titled, "Singh Jeevan Darshan", published in Gujarati in 1993. Much acclaimed as it recorded Raval's experiences and observations across 12 years, it is the only one of its kind with reference to a close-study of the lions of the region. Ramesh has been awarded and rewarded by local authorities for his conservation work and his house is referred to that of the man who works with the lions of Gir.

Ramesh Raval's preservation work with the hoka palm is different and of more recent origin because the unique tree caught his attention

The hoka palm probably came to Diu courtesy Portuguese invaders, travelling from the Arabian peninsula or north Africa to which it is native



¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyphaene_thebaica

Hoka and the Forest Department, Diu

The forest department of Diu says: The Forest Department has precisely appreciated the significance of this endemic species. Now in Diu, the species is protected under special provisions of the law. The Department undertakes plantation activities on every possible land. The seedlings of different forest species, raised in the Forest Nursery, are distributed free of cost among the individuals, institutions, organizations etc.

Forest Department is mandated to protect the green wealth of Diu through people's participation and by enforcing various Acts & Rules. Various participatory and awareness programmes are being organized to mobilize the mass support to surge ahead with the departmental objectives.

around 2003. He read up about it and started working towards expanding its planation within Diu for he had realized that hoka was specific to the region and could not be grown anywhere else in India. Information in public domain confirmed that hoka trees belonged to Schedule I tree category and were on the verge of extinction.

His initial thoughts on preservation and conservation took a giant leap into reality the next year as he organized a tree-plantation drive on the occasion of his birthday on December 4. Raval created history with a hoka-plantation drive of 1,008 saplings, assisted by several schoolboys in 2004. The drive was witnessed by invited dignitaries of the region, including a former Diu collector.

Since the palm was associated with kumaris, again on his birthday in 2005, Raval arranged for a puja of the saplings planted a year earlier by several kumaris. "I thought of completing the venture thus, so that the trees could take roots and grow into mature and strong ones. This was an excellent programme and saw a large turnout by locals, school children as well as dignitaries of the region", he says.

However, not all the thousand saplings had survived though "around nine hundred had survived and taken roots". Fortunately, the save-the-hoka feeling has been supported at the government and there is hope. There is despair as well. "There are various development works going on in the region. Unfortunately, as a result, several plants have been removed as acres of land and verdant covering have been cleared over the years."



Photo: Pixabay

Hoka/Doum in Egypt

According to the Egyptian Antiquities Department, the Doum palm was considered sacred by the ancient Egyptians and the seed was found in many a pharaoh's tomb. On September 24, 2007, a team of Egyptian archaeologists led by Zahi Hawass, discovered eight baskets of 3,000-year-old doum fruit in King Tutankhamun's tomb. The fruit baskets were each 50 centimetres high. The fruit are traditionally offered at funerals.

Raval's work continues unabated though, often as a lone drive against many odds. "I continue to encourage the plantation of hoka trees, inspite of varying and changing circumstances. I even tried to help the replantation of these trees in parts of Gujarat. I had gifted more than 200 saplings to the forest department of Gujarat but they did not take root despite utmost care". Clearly, it is only the Diu ecology that supports the hoka growth and development and this is the belief that inspires his conservation work.

Hopefully, the hard work will pay off and the hoka palm will continue for decades, surviving as a symbol of conservation. If a 3,000-year-old doum fruit (hoka) could remain preserved in King Tutankhamun's tomb, certainly it will survive with care and attention in Diu.²

² The genus of the doum palm Tutankhamen's tomb may be different from the one in Diu.



REVISITING SUNDARBANS' AMAR KHAMAR

Harnessing Women Power to Consolidate Organic Footprint

Dhruba Das Gupta

50



From left: Farmers Manjumi Mondal, Promilla Mondal, foodblogger and farmer Sayantani and farmer Sujata Mistry – after cooking at the annual food function

The message was 'eat seasonal, eat local', as Sayantani was busy curating a menu with local produce grown by the women farmers of the Sundarbans. It was a veritable celebration of the unique bonding between Mousumi Mondal, Promilla Mondal and Sujata Mistry with popular foodblogger of 'A Homemakers' Diary' fame, Sayantani. These entrepreneurial farming women of the region had organized themselves under the food startup, Amar Khamar, to grow, promote and sell organic food.

That Sayantani's ancestral home was at Sagar Islands in the Sundarban belt helped; she perfectly understood the ethos and the original flavours of homemade dishes in the villages of the world's largest mangrove estuary. She had become a brand ambassador of sorts for these farmers by hosting an attractive dessert Kalabhat Yogurt Mango Parfait, perfect for the summer, on her foodblog.

Made with kalabhat – a traditional rice variety organically grown by the women farmers of the Sundarbans – this rice makes an excellent dessert and is sold on the Amar Khamar (see Farmers' Forum June-July 2018) digital platform. What these women did not imagine was the kind of hit the dessert would be with the audience at the annual food function that they held every March, the month of International Women's Day.

Sayantani held a number of meetings with the women as they chose to adhere to the 'eat seasonal, eat local' slogan, with Sayantani's curation making the menu even more exclusive. A year ago, on the occasion of the annual function, they had only sourced the rice varieties from the Sundarbans. This year, every ingredient – the vegetables, condiments, non-vegetarian items and the components for the dessert – was sourced locally. The decision was that all food items, including those with a short shelf life that could be produced by the women, would be sold through Amar Khamar, once the infrastructure was in place.

The annual food function, held in Kolkata, was a runaway success, followed by requests from overseas pouring into Sayantani's mail box enquiring about the rice varieties used for cooking. Her entire calendar was quickly booked with orders. "All those who tasted the food cooked that day by the women farmers have taken the



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recipes of khudghanta and kalabhat payesh (dessert)", she told Farmers' Forum.

The Sundarban recipes on her blog have been big hits and Sujata, Mousumi and Pramila are feeling rather chuffed about themselves, particularly seeing Sayantani's overseas followers rushing in with their bookings for when they visit their homeland, generally in the winters. "When they come here at the end of this year, I can cook for them with the rice varieties grown by farmers here". The kankra puishak (crab-Malabar

spinach) has been a particular hit; so has the alur ghonto (potato curry). "These have been relished by all that day and I am getting requests to post the menu on my foodblog", says a happy Sayantani.

Amar Khamar means 'my farm' in Bengali. It is an online food startup based in Kolkata that runs the digital selling platform www.amarkhamar.com for organic foods. It has been sourcing its online products from the Sundarbans women farmers since November 2017 and has recently added a well-established women's co-operative from north Bengal under its umbrella.

"After our initial journey, we realized that making our back-end more capable was essential to ensure our sustainability. Our focus in the past year has been to re-organize our supply chain", Sujoy Chatterjee, development consultant and founder of the food start-up Amar Khamar told Farmers' Forum.





Amar Khamar has striven to keep the scale small and manageable at this stage so that quality is not compromised and limited its ambit to about 50 self-help groups

Thus the past 12 months have seen the entire back-end production management work of Amar Khamar re-visited and re-organized. The first year of digital selling experience had exposed the team to the realities of sourcing organic rice produced by the farmers and the need to re-orient the modes of generation of community knowledge and learning, if quality and brand value had to be ensured. This would ensure a greater acceptance of the type and quality of product that was a standard expectation at Amar Khamar. This remains a fundamental requirement in building the Amar Khamar brand of products, thus ensuring a higher customer base in the near future and also more assured returns for the farmers.

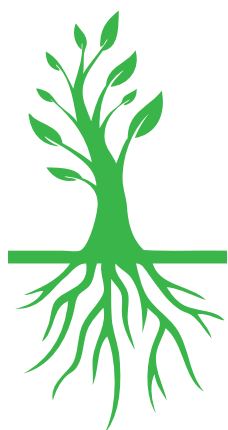
To begin with, Amar Khamar has personalized its selling, with a clutch of videos¹ ranging from personal messages by women farmers, to seed sowing to how to buy on the Amar Khamar platform. This is being combined with a showroom that is coming up in Kolkata to showcase the products of the women farmers and also subsequently adding perishable items to the buyers' list.

The good news is that the product base has expanded and now includes 13 varieties of fine rice, six varieties of thicker rice, four varieties of pulses and allied products (only one variety sold earlier) and five varieties of honey (made from mustard, eucalyptus, litchi, black cumin and the commonly available Sundarban honey). The famously grown north Bengal rice variety, Tulai Panji, is now available in its parboiled and non-parboiled forms, grown by women farmers from north Bengal.

In all of this, Amar Khamar has striven to keep the scale small and manageable at this stage so that quality is not compromised and limited its ambit to about 50 Self Help Groups (SHG) – up from about 23 groups the previous year – and some additional individual women farmers who have shown promise in working to the quality and production standards specified by Amar Khamar. Each SHG usually has 10 farmers and each SHG decides who among their group will produce for the start up.

The geographical area has increased and includes two districts – Darjeeling from north Bengal (one

¹ <https://in.video.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search?fr=yhs-ima-001&hsimp=yhs-001&hspart=ima&p=amar+khamar+videos#action=view&id=1&vid=eadb0caef0c72ced21aa5a27a438e8de> (Amar Khamar); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFKJrKGLR5c> (how to buy); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tg7xdBOD7II> (know your farmer)





block) and North 24 Parganas from South Bengal (two blocks – a block is the unit level of a district). In North 24 Parganas, the mouzas or revenue villages involved are Dhuchnikhali, Atapur and Manipur, while in Darjeeling the revenue villages involved are Madhovita and Dhupibhita. The nodal organizations or NGOs to which the SHGs are attached are Mrittika Prayas and Paschim Sridharkati Jana Kalyan Sangha from the south and Madhovita Rangin Maach Chaash Co-operative Limited from the north. These nodal organizations are directly attached to Amar Khamar and manage the SHGs.

Scarcity of water and salinity ingress are the chief troubles facing farmers in the Sundarbans, forcing them to grow their main produce during the monsoons, when both these problems are easier to deal with. Keeping this in mind, the most important strategy has been two-fold:

- Complete the farm production planning with the producer SHGs by June, before they start

Within the first year, a core group of seven women farmers has been created. They show leadership in communicating with SHGs and creating demand for training in organic cultivation

sowing the seeds of the products that they supply to Amar Khamar

- Making the production and entrepreneurship training fully field-based and demand-oriented instead of being pre-decided and based at Sundarban Gyan Bikash Kendra (or simply Knowledge Centre) at Dhuchnikhali.

The most transformational aspect of the initiative has been that the community knowledge centre at Dhuchnikhali does not plan the training initiatives. Anindya Sundar Das, Project Manager of the Knowledge Centre, run by Mrittika Prayas, which became the first nodal for Amar Khamar, says: "We have, within the first year operations, been able to raise a core group of seven women farmers from the community who have shown leadership in communicating with SHGs and creating greater demand for our training in organic cultivation. Last year, on an average, we had one meeting every week with farmers who wanted to work with us and we held 11 training programmes, each a week-long (shortened from the original 19-day module) with a total of 220 participants; more than double of 100 in the previous year".

Spread over the year, all the programmes were conducted on-field by three experts: Shyamoli Gayen for agriculture, Kalidas Naskar for livestock training and Ramakrishna Mondal for an oversight of the training. All three of them report to Umapati Sarkar, a very experienced organic farmer, who monitors the entire training process. This has



made training both demand-driven and ensured its wider spread.

Sujata Mistry, one of the seven women farmers, who mobilizes other SHGs and farmers to produce organic food, says: "In government programmes, the practice is usually to offer a stipend to farmers. Our training programme is superior in that we tag these farmers with a live guide who micro monitors the entire production process. This guarantees the quality levels and the personalization ensures that the farmer wants to stay on with Amar Khamar for a much longer period".

Every farmer associated with Amar Khamar goes through a gradual process and does not have to commit her whole produce from the word go. This way, she also rationalizes her expectations from the online selling platform and keeps open other selling avenues.

An innovative addition to the production gamut has been the growing livestock and bringing in adivasi farmers into the movement. Two women farmer leaders have motivated and oriented these adivasi women farmers, whose main products are the Black Bengal goats and poultry. These two are the most viable in the region that wants to concentrate on livestock, since cultivable land can get affected by the vagaries of the river Raimangal that flows close to it.

Black Bengal goats are famous for

their mutton, which is a delicacy. Being a perishable item, it is not possible to sell it on the Amar Khamar platform as yet. The Knowledge Centre has taught the adivasi farmers how to bargain with prospective buyers, who for long have been duping these farmers and earning huge profits. Now, the margin of earnings from these goats has increased to 100 per cent, says Project Manager Das.

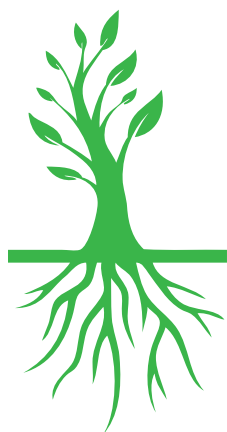
Women farmers with very limited means of farming and soils with high degree of salinity problems have also been taught how to treat soil in sacks and then use these sacks to cultivate vegetables. This is a practice that has been perfected over the past two years, taught by the Knowledge Centre. Women have found this to be more productive and economical because it takes less space. Using this technique, a range of produce, chillies, brinjal, ridge gourd, turmeric and ginger, is being cultivated profitably.

Other innovative practices, such as cultivating rice and honey bees in the same field and using kitchen gardens extensively to supply organic farm fresh vegetables for the city markets, are all in the pipeline. The objective is to broaden the product base.

Self Help Groups working with Amar Khamar have learnt to keep faith in the institution. Nari Kalyan (formed November 2002) saw only one member contributing rice to Amar Khamar to begin with. This season, three of the 10 members will supply rice. That faith in the start-up is growing slowly but steadily as is clear from the fact that the men are readily asking their womenfolk to be a part of this initiative. They have seen the higher incomes and availability of the money at one go instead of coming in parts.

Pramila Mondal of Nari Kalyan sums it up succinctly: 'The money we earn from Amar Khamar has increased the respect our families have for us and we also know our rice is well-received in Kolkata. This gives us a sense of identity that we never have experienced before. Also, today I have an equal say on the spending the money that I earn'.

It is this relationship of equality with her spouse and family that she wishes to put on a sustainable footing; along with sustainable food and a sustaining society.



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