

Agriculture cannot wait

M.S. Swaminathan

The Indian tragedy of extensive poverty and deprivation persisting under conditions of impressive progress in the industrial and services sectors will continue so long as we refuse to place faces before figures.

IN AN article published in the December 31, 2005, issue of *The Hindu*, I had summarised the main features of the Year of Agricultural Renewal programme recommended by the National Commission on Farmers (NCF) in its 3rd Report presented to Sharad Pawar, Union Minister for Agriculture and Food. The 4th Report of NCF submitted in April 2006 contains the draft of a National Policy for Farmers, titled "Jai Kisan," for widespread discussion.

For the purpose of this policy, the term "farmer" includes landless agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, tenants, small, marginal and sub-marginal cultivators, farmers with larger holdings, fisher men and women, dairy, sheep, poultry and other farmers involved in animal husbandry, pastoralists, as well as those rural and tribal families engaged in a wide variety of farming related occupations such as sericulture, vermiculture, production of biofertilizers and biopesticides, and agro-processing. The term also includes tribal families sometimes engaged in shifting cultivation, and in the collection and use of non-timber forest products. In all cases, both men and women will receive equal attention.

The Year of Agricultural Renewal, better referred to as the Year of the Farmer, is due to begin on June 1, 2006, with the onset of the South West Monsoon. Soon after Independence in 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru remarked: "everything else can wait, but not agriculture." He said this in the context of the Bengal Famine of 1942-43 and the acute food scarcity prevailing in the country in 1947. In fact, I recall that at the wedding of my elder brother in September 1947, there was a strict rule that not more than 30 guests could be provided with food. Our population was then 350 million. Today, our population is over 1.1 billion and thousands of persons are fed in the weddings of the rich, since where there is money, there is food. However, a recent report by UNICEF says India has the largest number of malnourished children in the world, nearly 57 million out of a total world figure of 146 million, an index of widespread poverty and deprivation.

Farmers' indebtedness is rising and farmland even in Punjab, the heartland of the green revolution, is being referred to by the electronic media as "killing fields." Yet, the economy is estimated to have grown at 8.1 per cent during 2005-06, on top of the 7.5 per cent growth recorded in the previous year. The services sector continued to be the major driver of economic activity, accounting for almost three-fourths of overall GDP growth. Indian companies raised an unprecedented \$40 billion in equity and debt. Merchandise exports rose by 25 per cent crossing the \$100 billion level. Unfortunately, more than 50 per cent of our population living in rural areas have no option except to remain silent onlookers of this new-found urban prosperity, conveyed night and day on television channels. This is the Indian enigma.

Having declared failure in achieving most of the Tenth Plan goals in agriculture, the Union Planning Commission is now busy preparing the Eleventh Plan. The NCF in its

4th report has pointed out that a business as usual approach in agriculture, ignoring Jawaharlal Nehru's "agriculture cannot wait" exhortation, would have at least the following three major consequences:

- Spread of agrarian distress and rural discontent, and spread of the Naxalite movement;
- Returning to a "ship to mouth" era, and the consequent erosion of national sovereignty in foreign policy;
- Jobless or even job-loss growth resulting in the expansion of urban slums.

What then should we do to end this sad chapter in our agricultural history and fulfil the "Jai Kisan" commitment made by Lal Bahadur Sastri? The steps to be taken are simple, doable, and affordable. They, however, need a change in mindset from regarding farmers as "beneficiaries" of small government programmes to treating them as partners in development and custodians of food security. Integrated action on the following five points will help to get our agriculture back on the rails.

Five-point plan

First, undertake soil health enhancement through integrated measures in improving organic matter and macro- and micro-nutrient content, as well as the physics and the microbiology of the soil. Gujarat has already issued soil health cards to farm families and other States can do likewise.

Secondly, promote water harvesting, conservation, and efficient and equitable use by empowering gram sabhas to function as "pani panchayats." Such "pani panchayats" should foster the establishment of community managed water banks and the recharge of the aquifer. A sustainable water security system should be put in place, particularly in rainfed areas lacking assured irrigation facility. This will be facilitated by mandatory water harvesting and greater attention to dryland farming.

Thirdly, initiate immediately credit reforms coupled with credit and insurance literacy. The Finance Minister has announced a reduction in the interest on short-term loans to 7 per cent; this should be regarded as the first step in a series of measures including the revitalisation of the cooperative credit system. The farm families' agricultural, health, and domestic credit needs should be attended to in a holistic manner. Also in chronically drought-prone areas, the repayment cycle should be extended to four to five years. Credit delivery systems should be made gender sensitive — only a small proportion of women cultivators have been issued kisan credit cards. Adequacy and timelines of credit availability are vital for institutional credit to be meaningful to small farmers.

Fourthly, bridge the growing gap between scientific know-how and field level do-how both in production and post-harvest phases of farming. This could be done through a slew of measures including the training of one woman and one man of every panchayat as farm science managers, establishing farm schools in the fields of outstanding growers, adding a post-harvest technology and agro-processing wing in every Krishi Vigyan Kendra, and organising nationwide lab-to-land demonstrations in the areas of agricultural diversification, food processing, and value addition.

Also knowledge connectivity as proposed under Bharat Nirman should be accomplished by establishing village knowledge centres or "gyan chaupals" throughout the country. Small farmers should not be subjected to administrative and academic experiments in the area of crop diversification without first linking the farmers with the market for the new commodities. Crop-livestock-fish integrated production systems are ideal for small farmers since this can also facilitate organic farming. Success in agricultural progress should be measured by the growth rate in farmers' income and not just by production figures. Low economic risk, high factor productivity, avoidance of ecological harm, and assured income must be the bottom line of all agricultural research and development strategies. Had we adopted a pro-small farmer biotechnology strategy, we would by now have had Bt-cotton varieties whose seeds farmers could keep and replant, unlike in the case of the hybrids marketed by private companies.

Scientific strategies should include attention to both on-farm and non-farm livelihoods. We should confer the power and economy of scale on families operating one hectare or less through management structures such as cooperatives or group farming as well as contract cultivation based on a win-win model of partnership for both the producer and the purchaser. Institutional structures such as small holders' cotton, horticulture, poultry, and aquaculture estates can be promoted by stimulating the formation of self-help groups at the farm level. Concurrently, we should launch an integrated rural non-farm livelihood initiative by revamping and integrating numerous isolated non-farm employment and income generation agencies such as the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, Small Farmers' Agri-business Consortium (SFAC), textile, leather and food parks, agri-clinics, and agri-business centres.

Unless market-driven multiple livelihood opportunities are created, the pressure of population on land will grow, the indebtedness of small farmers will increase, and the agrarian distress will spread. Poverty will persist so long as asset-less rural families remain illiterate and unskilled. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme provides a unique opportunity for imparting functional literacy using computer-aided joyful learning techniques. We should use new technologies to leapfrog in the area of human development in villages. At the same time, knowledge without access to the inputs to apply that knowledge will have no meaning. Input supply systems need review and reform.

Finally, the gap between what the rural producer gets and the urban consumer pays must be made as narrow as possible, as has been done in the case of milk under Dr. V. Kurien's leadership. The National Horticulture Board was created for this purpose over 23 years ago, but like the SFAC, it also lost its way. It can only be hoped other expensive new programmes such as the Fisheries Development Board, the National Rainfed Area Authority, and the National Horticultural Mission will learn from the success achieved by agencies such as the National Dairy Development Board, the Indian Space Research Organisation, and the Atomic Energy Commission in achieving specific goals in a time-bound manner, and benefit from strong professional leadership.

There is an urgent need for a National Land Use Advisory Service, structured as a virtual organisation on a hub and spokes model. The spokes would cover the major agro-climatic zones and farming systems, for providing proactive advice to farmers on land and water use through an integrated analysis of meteorological, agronomic,

and marketing data. There is also need for an Indian Trade Organisation mandated to protect the livelihood and income security of farm and fisher families. At the same time, there should be a risk stabilisation fund and a farmer-centric Minimum Support Price (MSP) and Market Intervention Scheme (MIS).

Agriculture in our country is based on the technology of production by the masses. As a consequence, it is the backbone of the national livelihood security system. The Indian tragedy of extensive poverty and deprivation persisting under conditions of impressive progress in the industrial and services sectors will continue so long as we refuse to place faces before figures. The NCF has suggested the mainstreaming of the human dimension in all agricultural programmes and policies, the adoption by the National Development Council of a National Policy for Farmers, and the establishment of a State Farmers' Commission by every State Government.

This is to give voice to the voiceless in the formulation of farm policies including the preparation of the 11th Five Year Plan. Let the Year of the Farmer help to shape our agricultural destiny in a manner that farming once again becomes the pride of the nation on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of our Independence on August 15, 2007.

(Dr. Swaminathan is Chairman, National Commission on Farmers.)

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