

THE HINDU

Online edition of India's National Newspaper

Monday, January 24, 2011

Date:24/01/2011 URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012462341400.htm>

Expert wants cosmic rays' impact on global warming assessed

N. Gopal Raj

Charged particles from beyond solar system possibly affect the pace, but the extent is not clear

The role of the cosmic rays has been highlighted

in a paper by the former ISRO Chairman, U.R. Rao

Dr. Rao points to a nine per cent reduction in the intensity of cosmic rays during the past 150 years

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: The impact of cosmic rays on global warming needs to be assessed. Are charged particles coming from beyond the solar system, known as galactic cosmic rays, affecting the pace of climate change? Possibly, but the extent to which it is happening is not clear, according to V. Ramanathan, a leading atmospheric scientist with the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at San Diego, United States.

The idea of galactic cosmic rays being an important factor driving climate change goes back over a decade. But the evidence remains ambiguous, observed the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in its Fourth Assessment Report published in 2007.

The role these cosmic rays could play has now been highlighted by a paper from the former Chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation, U.R. Rao. The work was recently published as a Discussion Paper by the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

As the cosmic rays pass through the earth's atmosphere, they turn atoms and molecules on their path into electrically charged forms called ions.

These ions then act as 'cloud condensation nuclei' to which water vapour can adhere and form cloud drops.

But during periods of increased solar activity, the intensity of cosmic rays reaching the earth is reduced. That, it is argued, will reduce the number of cloud condensation nuclei that form, thereby lessening cloud cover. With lesser clouds, more sunlight would reach the earth's surface, contributing to greater warming of the planet.

Quoting published work, Dr. Rao pointed to a nine per cent reduction in the intensity of cosmic rays during the past 150 years.

He estimated that the heightened warming of the earth that resulted would amount to 60 per cent of the warming attributed to increased carbon dioxide emissions. Consequently, the contribution of increased carbon dioxide emissions to the observed global warming would be considerably less than what was estimated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

In a commentary published as part of the Ministry's discussion paper, Dr. Ramanathan noted that the data in Dr. Rao's paper showed the cosmic rays decreasing in intensity from 1900 to about 1970 and levelling off thereafter. On the other hand, global average temperatures had shown a warming trend from 1900 to 1940, a slight cooling from 1940 to 1970, and with the current rapid warming trend continuing unabated since then.

'Logical mechanism'

The mechanism that Dr. Rao had proposed was logical, said Dr. Ramanathan when he spoke to this correspondent.

However, estimating the magnitude of its impact on global warming depended on trends in the cloud data derived from satellites. "But we now know that this satellite data itself has huge

problems,” he said. There were many links in the chain going from cosmic rays to cloud formation, he noted. At present, studies had established only the first link in that chain — of the cosmic rays producing cloud condensation nuclei. Data for other links in the chain — of such cloud condensation nuclei changing the number of cloud drops and that, in turn, affecting cloud cover — was still missing. Pollution and natural sources like sea salt also provided copious amounts of particles on which clouds drop could form. Dr. Rao's paper pointed out that the magnitude of the impact of cosmic rays on global warming could be potentially large. The paper should be taken seriously and the hypothesis he had put forward tested with suitable field studies, Dr. Ramanathan said.

Date:24/01/2011 **URL:**

<http://www.thehindu.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012461010300.htm>

Uzhavar Sandhais find more takers

K. Lakshmi and K. Manikandan

They offer a cheaper alternative when it comes to buying quality vegetables

Photo: A.Muralitharan



Cutting costs: Consumers at the Pallavaram Uzhavar Sandhai recently.

CHENNAI: 'Uzhavar sandhais' in the city's suburbs are getting more popular following the price rise, for they offer cheaper alternative when it comes to buying good quality vegetables. However, the patronage is not uniformly good, for access, maintenance and availability pose problems.

Of the five Sandhais in Tiruvallur district, including those at Tiruvallur and Tiruttani, the one in Avadi has good patronage, thanks to its proximity to the railway station. However, the Sandhais in Ambattur and Red Hills are virtually defunct.

In addition to accessibility, the Avadi example has more lessons to offer, such as flexibility in market timings.

The working hours of the market has been extended till 8 p.m. as several office-goers buy vegetables in the evening.

The farmer market in Ambattur wears a deserted look. Since it is away from residential localities, consumers and farmers do not consider it an easy option.

The one in Red Hills, which is hidden between the rice mills, also has poor response with only two shops being run by SHGs. Only 10 customers visit the market every day.

Change of site is the only solution, according to farmers, who choose options that make more business sense.

K. Rajendran, a farmer from Pammadukulam said, "I save up 20 per cent of agent commission by selling my produce here. I prefer travelling three km additionally to Avadi instead of Red Hills as there are no takers there."

The produce is sold at a cost 20 per cent more than the wholesale rate but 15 per cent less than the retail price.

R. Jawahar, a farmer from Erankuppam, said, "I prefer selling vegetables in other markets and returning to work in two hours than spending hours together at the Sandhais, where there is hardly any business."

Southern suburbs

The Uzhavar Sandhais in the southern suburbs have a story of their own.

The first Sandhai in the southern suburbs was inaugurated in Pallavaram in 2001. Subsequently, the government added four more such markets at Nanganallur, Medavakkam, Zamin Raayapettai and Keelkattalai. Nearly 1,000 farmers in St. Thomas Mount Block are registered at these markets. The daily sales here has been encouraging, especially after the recent sky-rocketing of prices.

“Unlike farmers here who cultivate brinjal, ladies finger, spinach, drumstick and gourd varieties in their own farms and sell them directly, we bring English vegetables from wholesale markets and sell them at lower than retail prices here,” said Amudha Valli, a vendor.

C. Saraswathi, a home maker in Cantonment Pallavaram, who visits the Pallavaram market more than once a week, said such markets helped the middle class and lower income sections.

On certain days, prices of vegetables are on a par with open market prices. For instance, the cost of onion was Rs. 25 a kg at the market in Zamin Raayapettai inaugurated on January 14, while it was the same in a city market. This is despite a 30 per cent concession on the inaugural day.

Meanwhile, the Agriculture Department is set to start 25 more Uzhavar Sandhais across the State and plans to open retail outlets in cooperative societies.

P. Rama Mohana Rao, Principal Secretary (Agriculture), said the department has requested various government agencies such as Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board, Tamil Nadu Housing Board and the Chennai Corporation to provide space for farmer markets.

“We want to open 12 such markets by this month-end. Of the seven proposed in Kancheepuram, two have already been opened. The Chennai Corporation is in the process of identifying space for the markets in the city,” he said.

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012461850700.htm>

Fisherman strangled off Kodiakarai

Staff Reporter

28-year-old was killed by Sri Lankan naval personnel, say victim's associates



Fishermen staging a protest before taluk office in Vedaranyam on Sunday.

VEDARANYAM: A fisherman was strangled with a piece of rope allegedly by Sri Lankan Naval personnel. The victim and two others were fishing south east off Kodiakarai in Vedaranyam on Saturday night, his associates said.

Jayakumar (28), along with his brother Senthil (25) and an associate Rajendran (42), ventured out into the sea from Pushpavanam here on Saturday morning.

According to Senthil, the incident occurred around 11 p.m., when their boat was intercepted by the Sri Lankan Navy, about 20 km (11 nautical miles) south east off Kodiakarai, apparently within the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) dividing the country's territorial waters from Sri Lanka's.

Personnel on the Sri Lankan naval vessel allegedly accosted the boat and ordered the

three to jump into the waters. While the two jumped into the sea, Jayakumar is reported to have stayed put on the boat. One of the men from the naval vessel jumped onto the boat and tied a rope around Jayakumar's neck. According to survivors' account, the victim was dragged into the water with the loose end of the rope, strangling him instantly. The body was brought in the early hours of Sunday. A complaint was registered with the Vedaranyam Coastal Police. This was the second instance of an Indian fisherman being killed allegedly by Sri Lankan Navy in less than 10 days.

Earlier, a Nagapattinam-based fisherman was shot dead shortly after he had ventured out into the sea from Jagadhapattinam in Pudukottai district.

Three days ago, a few fishermen from Kodiakarai had alleged an attempted attack by Sri Lankan Navy when beer bottles were hurled at their boat. However, the fishermen did not register a complaint. While the IMBL is about 15 nautical miles in this part off Kodiakarai, it is fluid defined by the coastal contours.

A solatium of Rs.5 lakh has been announced by the government to the victim's family. Meanwhile, tension prevailed for sometime following protest outside the taluk office in Vedaranyam. The protest, led by O.S. Maniyan, Mayiladuthurai MP, drew support from a cross-section of people, with villagers from Pushpavanam, fisherfolk and CPI (M) functionaries participating. The protesters condemned the killing and also alleged callousness on the part of the governments at the Centre and the State. Jayakumar is survived by wife and two daughters. A police contingent has been stationed in Vedaranyam as a precautionary measure under Santosh Kumar, Superintendent of Police. Deputy Inspector General of Police and Superintendent of Tiruvarur were present.

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012458030300.htm>

'Switch to eco-friendly organic farming'

Staff Reporter

Three-day organic farming exhibition and seminar concludes

PHOTO: M.GOVARTHAN



For healthy produce: Farmers taking a look at the products displayed at the organic farming exhibition in Erode on Sunday.

ERODE: The farming community in Erode district was asked to switch to eco-friendly organic farming practices at the three-day organic farming exhibition and seminar, which concluded here on Sunday.

The exhibition was organised by the Lions Club of Erode Midtown at Malligai Arangam with the objective of promoting organic farming methods among farmers in Erode district.

Former Union Minister Subbulakshmi Jagadeesan, inaugurating the seminar, called upon government and various organisations to aggressively promote organic farming in the country.

Farmers who adopted organic farming methods, should be given proper guidance to get certificates from relevant authorities and market their produce. An effective mechanism should be brought in to help the organic farmers. This would help other farmers also to switch to organic farming methods.

A healthy agriculture sector was necessary for the country to ensure sustainable growth, she said and urged the farmers to encourage the younger generation to choose farming as their profession.

If the sons and daughters of farmers were sent to work in the Information Technology and other high profile sectors, there would be very few farmers left to produce food for the

entire country.

This situation should not arise. The younger generation should be motivated to become farmers, she stressed.

Concern

She also expressed concern over the conversion of fertile agricultural lands into housing plots in the country.

The food production of the country would go down, if the real estate sector continued to swallow agricultural lands.

Collector T. Soundiah, after inaugurating the exhibition, said that the farming community should volunteer to implement innovative organic farming methods.

The continuous use of chemical fertiliser had affected the soil health.

Farmers should realise this fact and come forward to adopt organic farming methods.

Nature scientist K.Nammazhwar, speaking on the occasion, said that the organic farming is the key to ensure healthy food production in the rapidly changing Indian economy.

State Planning Commission full-time member G. Kumaravelu, officials from government departments and members of various organisations also spoke. Lions District Governor P. Mani, Club President K. Nagarajan were present.

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012460560300.htm>

Call for maintaining genetic variability in crop species

Staff Reporter

COIMBATORE: The world is facing a serious threat in the form of dubbed genetic vulnerability due to excessive genetic uniformity in major food crops. This calls for maintaining the genetic variability in the natural population of crop species to combat emerging problems, Vice-Chancellor of Tamil Nadu Agricultural University P. Murugesu Boopathi said here on Thursday.

Inaugurating a three-week training on "Impact of Genomics in Crop Improvement – Perceived and Achieved" at the university, he said that the 'Genetic Marker Technology' had emerged as an appropriate tool to generate an array of DNA markers having several advantages over morphological markers.

"Thereby the DNA marker system has made it possible to develop genetic maps for several crop species, which was earlier not possible. Genomic tools have thereby paved the way for solving emerging problems in breeding new crop varieties with desirable traits," Mr. Boopathi said.

As a result, major and minor genes were able to be located and projections such as Candidate Gene Mapping, Quantitative Trait Loci, and Marker aided Selection (MAS) were made possible.

Based on MAS breeding, TNAU had released a new rice variety called 'Anna (R) 4' in 2009. This drought-resistant variety had a maximum yield potential of 4.5 tonnes a hectare.

"At present, TNAU is pursuing research on breeding varieties with saline resistance and pest and disease resistance traits using marker aided selection tools," he said.

Director of Centre for Plant Breeding and Genetics K. Thiyagarajan, and Professor of Plant Breeding M. Maheswaran, spoke.

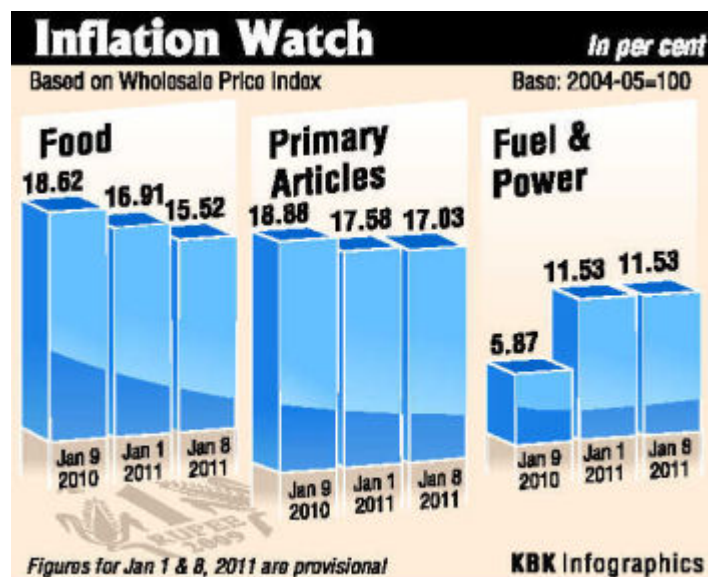
Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012450511600.htm>

Credit policy review: will it be inflation all the way?

The rise in global commodity prices will force the RBI to act through a rate hike

One of the main challenges before policymakers is to categorise the latest bout of inflation. Since food prices have been driving up inflation, supply side factors are held to be primarily responsible.



On the eve of its third quarter policy review, the Reserve Bank of India seems to have only one goal and policy option. It is usual for such reviews to articulate the several policy choices, the most prominent is growth versus price stability. This traditional dilemma remains but for a variety of reasons it has been relegated to the background.

The RBI Governor has said that the central bank is desperate to rein in inflation. Chairman of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council C. Rangarajan has called for a rate hike. The real issue seems to be not whether the RBI will raise the policy rates but by how much. Most observers think a 0.25 percentage point hike is definitely on the cards. But others feel that the hike will be higher by 0.50 percentage point.

The reason why a rate hike seems inevitable is, of course, inflation, which remains

stubbornly high. In December, WPI inflation shot up to 8.5 per cent on a year-on-year basis having moderated from 11 per cent in April to 7.5 per cent in November. In fact, after remaining in double digits for five successive months, WPI inflation declined to 8.8 per cent in August. By that time, the RBI was in a position to say 'that the likelihood of further rate actions in the immediate future is low'. That statement was, however, subject to numerous caveats. Inflation can never be out of the central bank's focus. In any case, the sharp spike in December has put paid to all talk of a 'more permanent pause' in monetary action. The RBI has admitted that its year-end target for WPI inflation at 5.5 per cent is unlikely to be achieved.

Special challenges

Among the emerging economies, India is not the only one facing inflation amidst robust economic growth. Brazil and China are also facing similar predicament, inviting strong monetary measures to curb inflation. But in most of the developed world the threat of inflation is in the distant horizon. As the RBI Governor has pointed out, the main worry in those countries is deflation. One of the main challenges before policymakers is to categorise the latest bout of inflation.

Since food prices have been driving up inflation, supply side factors are held to be primarily responsible.

However, the inflation process is much more complex and cannot be categorised into neat compartments such as demand-supply, food-non food and domestic-international. The price rise is due to factors emanating from all sides and that makes the RBI's task much more complex.

For monetary policy purposes, the WPI in use is not the most appropriate. Other countries use a representative Consumer Price Index or a Producer Price Index (PPI). Recently, the WPI was upgraded, by including a number of items that are relevant today and deleting those that have become obsolete. The base year was brought forward. Despite all these, the search for a new CPI continues.

Inflationary pressures today are underpinned by a number of factors.

- (a) Economic growth has accelerated and this has created its own upward pressures. Some producers are discovering their pricing power.
- (b) Global commodity prices, especially petroleum, have been rising. Recently retail petrol prices were raised yet again. The government is holding on to the diesel prices, which, unlike petrol prices, are yet to be decontrolled. Either way, inflation or inflation expectations are set to rise. Surely, the subsidy bill will go up.
- (c) Non-food manufactured goods inflation now at around 5.3 per cent is bound to go up as the high global commodity prices get reflected in domestic prices.
- (d) The government's rural initiatives and social sector spending have boosted aggregate demand.
- (e) There is a growing demand for protein products, milk, eggs and meat. Prices of these have gone up and are behind the surge in food inflation. In contrast cereal prices, wheat, rice and pulses have not risen.
- (f) The loose fiscal policy and the slow pace of fiscal consolidation are the other important factors.

It is the persistently high food inflation that has become the rallying point for all — political opposition to government policies. So sensitive it has become that the rising food prices would by themselves force the RBI's hands. Food inflation has eased marginally to 15.52 per cent for the week ended January 8. Unlike in the recent past, when high food prices were blamed on supply side factors, this time there are demand side factors too. The central bank can do very little to alter the supply of essential commodities by varying interest rates. Moreover, since any policy action operates after a lag, it will not be effective in situations where food inflation is temporary. However, when prices of food stuff remain high for a long time, inflation expectations will harden, necessitating a rate hike, among other measures.

Rate hike unavoidable

On balance, therefore a rate hike seems unavoidable. But the extent of increase —

beyond the almost certain 0.25 percentage point — will depend on a number of factors. The central bank's estimate of GDP growth for the current year will be one factor. So far despite the impressive 8.9 per cent growth during the first six months, the RBI has been conservative and has stuck to its 8.5 per cent estimate made earlier in the year. If the erratic but generally lower Index of Industrial Production numbers are any indication, economic growth may be slowing down in a crucial sector.

Strictly from the monetary side, the case for an aggressive monetary tightening, say, by 0.5 percentage point does not seem to exist. Broad money supply has been growing as per RBI's expectations. The money market has witnessed periodic bouts of liquidity shortages. However, besides the high food prices, the rise in global commodity prices, especially of petroleum, will force the RBI to act through a widely anticipated 0.25 percentage point hike.

The tone of the policy statement is bound to be hawkish, leaving no one in doubt that inflation will remain the main concern in the days to come. C. R. L. NARASIMHAN

Date:24/01/2011 **URL:**

<http://www.thehindu.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012456810200.htm>

State asked to take strong stand on GM crop

Staff Reporter

BHUBANESWAR: Activists opposing genetically modified crop in the country here on Sunday urged State government to take a strong stand on the issue and frame bio-safety legislation to deflate pressure from multi-national companies promoting GM crop.

Addressing a press conference here, Kavitha Kuruganti of Coalition for GM-Free India, said latest scientific evidence on Bt Brinjal showed that unnatural, novel food could not be recommended for human consumption given the toxic results on rats fed with Bt Brinjal.

“The analysis on the bio-safety of Bt Brinjal done by Lou Gallagher, a toxicology and epidemiology expert from New Zealand on the behest of Aruna Rodrigues, the main

petitioner of the Supreme Court PIL on GMOs points out that food safety studies for Bt Brinjal were not conducted in accordance with published standards,” Ms. Kuruganti.

Activists demanded that the present Bt Brinjal dossier be rejected once and for all as Indian regulators and scientists assigned with the task to do assessment seemed to be predetermined to allow the GM crop.

Debjeet Sarangi, Member, UNCAGE (United Coalition Against Genetic Engineering, Orissa) apprehended, “the push for Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI) at the Centre clearly shows that State governments will not be allowed their constitutional right in the future with the enactment of such bills as BRAI and Seeds Bill.”

“We urge the Orissa government to enact bio-safety legislation at the State level so that its constitutional right as well as responsibility in the matter is upheld. We have already given draft legislation to the Minister for Agriculture Damodar Rout,” Mr. Sarangi said.

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012450551700.htm>

Organic farming gaining ground

R. Ramabhadran Pillai

Spices Board keen on encouraging the organic mode of cultivation

Call to reorient farming methodologies Rise in area under certified organic farming

KOCHI: Rising awareness on food-induced diseases has resulted in a steady increase in the demand for organic foods. Chemical presence, beyond permissible limits, in food items had been causing concern among stake-holders in the sector.

Demand for organic farm products had been on the rise in this backdrop.

With a view to capitalising this, several organisations in the State had come forward to encourage organic farming. A convention and exhibition, highlighting organic farming methods and associated activities, was held in Kochi recently. The interest evinced by many stakeholders in agri-business was palpable, with several technologies being demonstrated. Organisations such as Foundation for Organic Agriculture and Rural Development, Indian Organic Farmers' Producer Company Limited and Gandhi Smaraka Seva Kendram were among the entities which presented methodologies for large-scale conversion of farming into the organic mode.

Thrust area

The potential for organic farming in the State was a thrust area at a meeting organised by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India. Chamber secretary-general D.S. Rawat said the export of organic products during the current year from the country was to the tune of Rs.530 crore and the State's share was Rs.30 crore. The State should aim at increasing its export share in five years. Farming methodologies should be reoriented to facilitate certification of farm produce, he said.

. The National Project on Organic Farming is being implemented since October 2004 through the National Centre of Organic Farming at Ghaziabad and its six regional centres. Scientifically proven farming methods are promoted as part of the project. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research had taken up the All-India Network Project on Organic Farming. Experts pointed out that the technologies employed will help restoration of soil health and conservation of resources.

Zero-budget farming

The 'zero-budget farming' practices developed by Subhash Palekar, an agricultural scientist who advocates natural methods of cultivation, are also being followed at various places in the State. Cow dung is the main manure. He had been conducting workshops across the State. Over 100 farmers in Palakkad district had adopted his method and more people in other districts had evinced interest, according to M. Kurien, a farmer and coordinator of workshops on Palekar's method of farming.

The Spices Board too had been keen on encouraging organic methods of growing

cardamom and pepper.

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012450561700.htm>

Plea for low-interest loan to farmers

Staff Reporter

Chief Minister inaugurates Catholic Syrian Bank's 'Go green initiatives'

— PHOTO: Vipinchandran



GO GREEN:Chief Minister V. S. Achuthanandan hands over a copy of the souvenir of the Catholic Syrian Bank as part of its 90th anniversary celebrations to Chairman of the Cochin Port Trust N. Ramachandran at a function in Kochi on Sunday.

KOCHI: Banks should provide low-interest loans to farmers and cooperate with State agencies in helping farmers get a higher yield, Chief Minister V.S. Achuthanandan has said.

He was inaugurating the 'Go green initiatives' of the Thrissur-based Catholic Syrian Bank (CSB) here on Sunday.

The Chief Minister acknowledged the role played by CSB in the State's economy and said energy conservation and green measures initiated by the bank should be taken to more people. Mr. Achuthanandan also released a souvenir commemorating the 90 {+t} {+h} anniversary of the bank.

Speaking to mediapersons, the Chief Minister reiterated that advance tax would not be accepted from other-State lotteries. Cochin Port Trust Chairman N. Ramachandran, who formally announced the toll-free number for CSB, underlined the progress made on the International Container Transshipment Terminal project. He said the project was expected to be inaugurated by the Prime Minister by mid-February.

He also gave away solar study lamps to students and hawkers as part of the CSB initiative. The 'Go green' initiative is part of the 'Navati' celebrations of CSB. The bank branches at Ollur and Paravattani will switch over to solar power on this count.

CSB director T.S. Anantharaman welcomed the gathering and managing director and chief operating officer V.P. Iswardas proposed a vote of thanks. A statement issued by CSB said the bank, launched in 1920, is the oldest private-sector bank in the State. The bank had adopted two villages in the State as a corporate social responsibility gesture, it said.

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012461770600.htm>

'Set up board for farmers' welfare'

Staff Reporter

BANGALORE: Farmers and owners of agricultural tractors have appealed to Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa to set up a board for the welfare of farmers.

In a memorandum to Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa, Y.B. Inamathi, State general secretary of the Akhila Karnataka Raithara Haagu Krishi Tractor Malikara Hitabhivrudi Sangha, urged him to fulfil their 10 demands.

He said that farmers were reeling under financial crisis and banks were harassing them for loan recovery. Tractors were being seized with the help of hired anti-social elements, he said. He demanded that a board be set up to safeguard the interests of farmers. The sangha threatened to launch a Statewide agitation if its demands were not met.

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

Flowers come to life at university

Amutha Kannan

PHOTO S. SIVA SARAVANAN



MASTER STROKES:A student at the painting competition organised at TNAU in Coimbatore on Sunday. —

COIMBATORE: A profusion of crayons, colour pencils and water colours were used to give life to flowers and nature by school and college students at Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, here on Sunday.

The creations they came out with at the painting competition, organised as part of the Covai Flower Show to be held from January 29 to 31, reflected their love for nature.

Nearly 300 students from 30 schools in and around Coimbatore participated under various categories to colourfully bring out the themes 'Flowers' and 'Nature'. They let their imagination run riot on paper.

College students, too, got an opportunity to try their hand at not only painting but also poetry. They got to pen their thoughts in some 20 lines in modern and conventional Tamil verse. Though there were two themes to choose from, most of them had opted for the 'flower' theme. The younger ones used colour pencils and crayons while the elder ones used a combination of these along with water colours.

Flowers in various sizes, shapes and colours came to life in the small piece of white chart paper. The best works were exhibited by the second category which consisted of students from standards II, III and IV. Vibrant paintings depicting English and Swiss flower beds caught the eye. Rows and rows of flowers in lively colours were beautifully painted by S. Shurwin Selv, a Standard IV student of Stanes Higher Secondary School.

Since the themes were already informed by the organisers, the contestants came prepared for the competition. Sri Sowmini, a Standard VI student of Bharathi Matriculation Higher Secondary School, came up with a splash of colours depicting huge flowers against a backdrop of a pale blue sky with honey bees buzzing atop. The eagerness to take part in the contest had drawn a contingent of nine students from as far as Amaravathi Nagar. Students of Standards VII, IX and X of Sainik School had started as early as 6 a.m. to reach the university to give expression to their talent.

A panel of judges will select the first three places and five consolation prizes from each category. The winners will be notified after two days telephonically, according to M.K. Shivaa, the event co-ordinator. All students will be given participation certificates.

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 Mon, 24 Jan 2011

Weather

Chennai - INDIA

Today's Weather



Clear

Monday, Jan 24

Max Min

Tomorrow's Forecast



Cloudy

Tuesday, Jan 25

Max Min

30.2° | 20.7°

30° | 20°

Rain: 00 mm in 24hrs

Sunrise: 6:36






Humidity: 74%

Sunset: 18:05

Wind: Normal

Barometer: 1014.0

Extended Forecast for a week

Wednesday Jan 26	Thursday Jan 27	Friday Jan 28	Saturday Jan 29	Sunday Jan 30
				
26° 22°	27° 22°	27° 22°	28° 22°	27° 21°
Cloudy	Cloudy	Cloudy	Cloudy	Cloudy

THE HINDU Business Line

Business Daily from THE HINDU group of publications

Monday, January 24, 2011

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012450240900.htm>

Back Digging into farm subsidies

M.R. Subramani

Studies show that in the US too, like in India, it is the big farmer who benefits most from subsidies.

“Some good news for the economy. President Bush went on a month-long vacation,” said James Douglas Muir “Jay” Leno on NBC a few years ago. Of the many problems that Mr Bush created for the US economy, farm subsidies were a major one.

Time magazine wrote a few years ago: “If you eat, drink or pay taxes — or care about the economy, the environment or our global reputation — US agricultural policy is a big deal. It's also a horrible deal... It hurts Third World farmers, violates international trade deals and paralyses our efforts to open foreign markets to the non-agricultural goods and services that make up the remaining 99 per cent of our economy.”

Subsidy distribution

An NBER working paper ‘The buck stops where? The distribution of agricultural subsidies’ (<http://www.nber.org/papers/w16693>) acknowledges the fact that support for US “farmers” is often directed to individuals and corporations that seem to be at some distance from the farm.

The study, however, is more concerned with the distribution of farm subsidies. Results of the study conclude that subsidies have a significant impact on farmland values and that land owners are the real benefactors of the farm programmes. It also challenges the view that farmers need government support to remain in business.

More interesting, however, is its conclusion that US farm programmes provide a valuable insurance benefit. The paper reports evidence that owners benefit not only from capital gains but also from lease rates that incorporate a significant portion of agricultural payments even if the farm legislation mandates that benefits must be allocated to producers.

Financial support

The paper, by Barry K. Goodwin, Ashok K. Mishra, François Ortalo-Magné, deals with the 2008 Farm Bill that will provide \$284 billion in financial support to US agriculture until next year. The study has to be viewed in the background of what has happened with US farm

subsidies before 2008 and how the current President, Mr Barack Obama, will save \$2.3 billion in 10 years on subsidies.

In 1996, the US came up with the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996. It revised and simplified direct payments for crop. Unfortunately, commodities prices crashed during the period and Washington had to return to its traditional approach in 2002 that also drew criticism. The change led to some amusing situations wherein someone like former US basketball star Scottie Pippen was among the famous recipients of farm programme subsidies.

This led to some corrections in the 2008 Bill that stipulated that there would be no subsidy for those whose non-farm adjusted gross income was higher than \$500,000 and no direct payment for anyone with gross adjusted income of over \$750,000.

Dwelling on subsidy distribution aspects, the study found that expanding farmers were paying for the expected policy benefits in the farm assets they acquired and the current value of futures benefits were captured by sellers. Not just that, the owners extracted a large proportion of farm benefits from tenants through lease rates, while new owners benefited from a surprise increase in public transfers. This is similar to the plight of tenant farmers in India who are unable to secure loans from banks and derive various other benefits dished out by the Union and State Governments.

The study drew analysis from data on over 10,000 farms between 1998 and 2005. It found that price support payments have the strong effects. The study makes an interesting finding on the effects of government payments on land values to the effect of market returns.

The results of the study found that government payments exerted a significant effect on land values and the benefits typically raised land values by \$13-30 an acre depending on the type of policies. Interestingly, landlords engaged in cash rental arrangements with tenant farmers claimed \$0.32 in benefits for every \$1 of aggregated payments made by the government.

Land owners gain

Challenging the view that impoverished farmers need governmental support to remain in business, the paper says that it has found that land owners capture substantial benefits from agricultural policy. This is problematic given that these owners are distinct from farmers whose plight should be of real concern. Therefore, the paper suggests updating factors that determine the level of some of the payments they receive lest such events be revisited.

Brian Riedel, an analyst of US budget, a few years ago said the same thing in a different tone: "If subsidies were eliminated markets would adjust," he said, adding: "Nobody would starve and farmers would stay in business. Obviously, people aren't going to stop buying food."

What is good for the US should hold good for India too, though there are no such payments for Indian farmers. For the growers here, the assurances are minimum support price, fertiliser subsidy, loans at lower interest rate and in the case of farmers in some States, free power supply.

The situation in India is that there are far too many small growers whose holdings are less than an acre and it is the big farmers who walk away with most of the benefits. Still, these payments are nowhere compared with what the US doles out.

In the Indian situation, the study is relevant insofar as fertiliser subsidy and the price support mechanism that provide insurance against the uncertainty in the commodities market. On the other hand, it is also true that rich farmers tend to gain more than medium or small farmers. Maybe, Goodwin, Mishra, Ortalo-Magné could spare some time to study the Indian scenario.

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012450681300.htm>

Back Farmers opting for hybrid seeds for better returns, lower risks

But the trend may increasingly lead to native crops becoming extinct.

A farmer will say to himself, that, by using the hybrid variety he will get 30 per cent higher yield. "Or that he will use Bt cotton and get higher yield. He is going to use less pesticide on this, and, that means his costs are reduced."

Kripa Raman

Mumbai, Jan. 23

It is quite common for Indians who visit the US to marvel at the size and colour of the vegetables and fruit they see in the supermarkets there.

However, it is not unusual to have them admit on their return that the Indian produce, which looks scrawny and shrunken in comparison, actually tastes better.

Dr Raju Barwale, Managing Director of seeds company Mahyco, admits that this is often the case.

Then why are seeds companies, such as his, selling to the Indian farmers, hybrid and genetically-modified plant varieties that will increasingly give the kind of produce that one can see in the US ?

Matter of choice

It is the economics of it, and it is a matter of choice, according to Dr Barwale, who estimates the seeds market in India to be around Rs 6,000-7,000 crore. An Indian farmer is free to grow whatever variety he pleases, whether 'native' (open pollinated), hybrid or genetically-modified (Bt cotton).

hybrid or gm

Most farmers are likely to choose the hybrid or GM varieties once they know that they give better returns on investment.

Dr Barwale says the farmer makes considered decisions.

“Because of the kind of work he is doing, the farmer is very risk-averse.

“He does not do anything impulsively, and if it is a new idea, then he finds out what his neighbours are doing.

“He may have ten acres but will initially only cultivate new varieties on one acre,” he says.

“A farmer will say to himself, that, by using the hybrid variety he will get a 30 per cent higher yield.

“Or that he will use Bt cotton and get X per cent higher yield.

“He is going to use less pesticide on this, and, that means his costs are reduced.”

Dependent on corporates

What about the farmer getting increasingly dependent on the corporate world for his supply of seeds — a concern that has been voiced by many agriculture activists?

Every season, he would have to buy them from the seeds companies, whereas earlier, he would just keep aside some of his own produce for seeds.

second crop

The farmer can grow a second crop from harvesting the seeds produced from hybrid or GM seeds. However, the subsequent generation of crops (F2, F3) will progressively produce less than the F1 generation which the farmer has bought from seed companies.

“The farmer buying seeds every year is by choice,” says Dr Barwale.

“There is no compulsion. Second, he buys because there is additional benefit for him, that is, a multiple of what extra he pays. “In the seed industry, the norm is that if you spend Re 1, then, you must get Rs 3 as benefit. So, if my seed costs Re 1 extra, the farmer must get Rs 3 advantage; sometimes, it is a multiple of four or five.”

Seed vaults

The danger of this trend, that native crops may increasingly become extinct and unavailable to the farmer as well as to seeds companies (which need primary material for creating new seeds) has been taken care of, says Dr Barwale.

preserving

Universities, seeds companies, as well as Governments across the world have seed vaults and genetic repositories that keep them preserved for decades together.

The essence of all this is that to feed a large population, flavour might have to be sacrificed.

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012450391200.htm>

Back Pepper market remains volatile



G K Nair

Kochi, Jan. 23

All eyes are now on Vietnam, the world's top pepper producer , a position enjoyed by India for several decades and until few years ago.

Traders are hoping the new crop will arrive next month and pull down pepper prices from the current levels. Overseas buyers, who had not covered fully for the first quarter of 2011, are still waiting for the arrival of the new crop, like many did in 2010, a move that turned out to be futile.

The reported reluctance to sell, and high internal prices in Vietnam could lead one to conjecture that either the crop may not be more than the previous season or the exporters/sellers want to show the buyers that there will be no selling pressure, as they anticipate, even after beginning of harvesting.

Growers in Vietnam, for the first time in 2010, received good prices for their 500 and 550 g/l faq pepper, which remained below \$3,500 a tonne until then. Prices for these grades, from last season onwards, are ruling at around \$4,500 a tonne, and hence, it is likely that they might try to do something to keep the prices at least steady at the current levels.

Ever-growing demand, without a corresponding growth in supply, could keep the prices stable, except for some market manipulations.

Since Indonesia has reportedly exhausted its stocks, there is a chance that there will be demand for Indian pepper till the new Vietnam crop hits the market, provided the Indian parity remains competitive with the current international prices, market sources said.

As far as the Indian new crop is concerned, arrivals failed to pick up to reach the normal levels of the season, which substantiate the argument that there is crop loss and holding back by the major growers, who already sold old pepper at above Rs 215 a kg some time ago, and are not in a mood to sell at the current levels.

According to growers in Pathanamthitta and Idukki Districts, the crop is estimated to be 40 per cent lesser. They claim that the total output may be around 30,000 tonnes, as against the official projection of 48,000 tonnes.

The reasons for the poor crop, according to the growers, are the untimely incessant rains,

which led to shedding of spikes and lack of pollination, resulting in low berry formation/setting. In addition, there was the usual problem of acute shortage of skilled labour for harvesting.

“The crop is too small and hence, the cost of production including the high harvesting cost has gone up significantly, and that, in turn, has made the current price not at all remunerative,” they said.

The pepper futures market continued to be a victim of the regular tug-of-war between bull and bear operators, leading to high volatility in the prices.

This phenomenon sends out wrong signals to the overseas markets.

Uncertainty and high fluctuations in the prices, often holds back exporters from making any commitments, apart from depriving the growers of better prices. The import lobby is also allegedly waiting for the arrival of the new Vietnam crop, in order to pull down prices here, growers said.

Domestic demand

Domestic demand is yet to pick up, but for the severe cold wave conditions prevailing in the North-Indian States. However, some quantity of new pepper was moved out directly from the primary markets.

Last week, the market remained buoyant with all the contracts moving up marginally. February, March and April contracts were up by Rs 108, Rs 177 and Rs 188 respectively, to close at Rs 23,099, Rs 23,484 and Rs 23,807, a quintal.

Total turn over dropped during the week by 10,814 tonnes to close at 46,170 tonnes at the weekend. Total open interest moved up by 256 tonnes to close at 12,876 tonnes.

Spot prices also went up by Rs 100 during the week, to close at Rs 21,600 (ungarbled) and Rs 22,400 (MG 1) a quintal, at the weekend.

IPC Report

Black pepper: Pepper prices at origins were unchanged, except in Brazil and Vietnam, although pepper harvest in India has started.

No selling pressure has been reported. Trading activity in India was calm during the week, as indicated by trade volumes reported in the Commodity Exchange. Prices were relatively stable both in the spot market, fob as well as in the futures market. Pepper harvest in Vietnam is approaching, but offers are still limited. Vietnam is facing tide-up situation, with Tet holidays till mid-February. As internal prices are high, traders are cautious about immediate selling.

At HCMC, local prices stood at VND 90,500 a kg, up from VND 88,500 last week. In Lampung, prices were also stable. Offers are available but limited, since material from the previous crop has been exhausted. Pepper prices in Sarawak and Sri Lanka were also stable. Slight decrease was noticed in Brazil.

White pepper: The market for white pepper is also calm. Activity is expected to increase, when the Vietnamese crop comes to the market, by March. Prices were stable at all origins.

German pepper imports: During January-November 2010, Germany imported 26,575 tonnes of pepper, comprising of 25,124 and 1,451 tonnes of whole and ground pepper respectively, according to the IPC. Compared to exports in the same period last year, there was an increase of 2,098 tonnes or 9 per cent. Whole pepper increased by 8 per cent, while ground pepper rose by 12 per cent. Vietnam, Indonesia and Brazil remained the main suppliers of pepper for Germany. For the whole year of 2010, total import of pepper to Germany is estimated to be around 29,000 tonnes, against 26,200 tonnes in 2009, the report added.

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012450661300.htm>

Back Rubber Board to approach Maharashtra for GM rubber field trials

M.R. Subramani

Chennai, Jan 23

The Rubber Board plans to soon approach the Maharashtra Government to hold field trials of genetically-modified (GM) rubber.

“The Kerala Government is in-principle opposed to GM crops. Therefore, we plan to approach the Maharashtra Government, to allocate a plot for us for planting GM rubber,” said Mr Toms Joseph, Deputy Director (Economic Research) of the Rubber Board. The Kerala Agriculture Minister, Mr Mullakara Ratnakaran, a couple of months back wrote a letter to the Union Environment and Forests Minister, Mr Jairam Ramesh, opposing the clearance given by the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) for field trials.

His opposition was on the grounds that it would have an adverse effect on the ecosystem.

In his reply, Mr Ramesh said that without field trials, it would not be possible to ascertain any adverse effects to the ecosystem from GM rubber.

The Rubber Board has been given the go-ahead to hold field trials by the GEAC.

“We have been told that the permission has been given and we are waiting for the letter,” said Mr Joseph on the sidelines of the India Rubber Expo 2011.

The GM rubber plant, in which MnSOD gene, taken from rubber tree itself has been incorporated, is resistant to drought and stress.

Suitable place

It can withstand higher temperatures and can be introduced in Maharashtra where the temperature is higher than in Kerala that accounts for over 95 per cent of natural rubber grown in the country.

“The yield and other characteristics will be clear during the field trial,” Mr Joseph said. The development of GM rubber is significant in the wake of weather change affecting rubber production.

During the current fiscal, rubber production was estimated to increase to 8.93 lakh tonnes

(It) from 8.31 It last year.

However, with weather playing truant during September-October, it has been pruned to

Date:24/01/2011 **URL:**

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012451030200.htm>

Back Exempt horticulture from APMC Act, says CII farm panel chief

Farmers should be given the freedom to sell their produce directly to a food processing company, a consolidator or a retailer.



Mr Rakesh Bharti Mittal

Bindu D. Menon

New Delhi, Jan. 23

With the spectre of high food inflation haunting the economy, the Confederation of Indian Industry's National Council on Agriculture has sought structural changes to augment growth in the farm sector.

In an interview with Business Line, Mr Rakesh Bharti Mittal, Chairman, CII National Council on Agriculture, and Vice-Chairman and Managing Director, Bharti Enterprise Ltd,

outlines some corrective measures such as opening up FDI in multi-brand retail and also exempting horticulture produce from the APMC Act.

With food inflation peaking at 19.9 per cent, he says farm-to-fork mechanism can be best achieved when the Government enters into a “mission mode”, both at national and State level.

CII has been saying that there is a deeper structural problem in the way we manage our food security? What are the issues dogging the sector?

We strongly believe that the agriculture sector in India has to get into a mission mode both at national and at the state level. Anything that gets into a mission gets monitored and supervised. The Ministry of Agriculture must look at it seriously to avoid future food security issues. If timely interventions are made, it can help farmers at one end of the spectrum. We have come out with various recommendations where we have said that the Government should come out with input stamps, which means all subsidies must be through input stamps wherein the farmers must be at liberty to use subsidy for fertiliser, micro-irrigation, seeds or pesticides. While fertiliser subsidy may be indirect subsidy, this may go directly to the farmer. Input tax will give farmers flexibility.

You have also made some recommendations regarding land? What exactly are they?

Yes. We have also made recommendations on lease of agricultural land. Today it is regulated by an Act. It is 17-22 hectares in certain States. Small and medium farmers have about 1-2 acres and you can't use machinery and technology on such small holdings. So farm productivity is getting saturated. Unless interventions are made at a large scale, small and medium farmers will not benefit.

Therefore we are saying that if lease of agri-land is undertaken then small and medium farmers can aggregate land and private sector can come in.

Two suggestions we have made is that all State Governments must allow it (lease) and it should be permitted in long tenures, only then private companies will bring in technologies. Also government through legislation should say that the ownership will not change and leases will not have any tenancy rights, which means land will remain with the owners.

That is the only way to take agriculture to the next level. Absentee farmers are not giving their land and that is putting pressure on agriculture.

The third area we have talked about is research and extension. Very few initiatives have happened after the Green Revolution. That is where private sector needs to come into play.

Our own company Fieldfresh works with 4,000 farmers and provides extension services. In this case, we have recommended that average weighted deduction of 200 per cent should be allowed in the research and extension services. Statutes and regulation need to be changed, otherwise agriculture will continue to struggle.

Wastage of perishable goods has been a long-standing concern? How can it be reduced to ensure that both farmers and consumers get the best price?

We have been talking about the APMC Act in the last 7-8 years. Seventeen States have given a thumbs-up but it is not being implemented in letter and spirit. They have gone about arbitrarily making changes. The pressure of middlemen is also preventing State Governments from going ahead in full steam.

Therefore, we are saying exempt horticulture from APMC Act.

Farmers should be given the freedom to sell their produce directly to a food processing company, a consolidator or a retailer. Time will be shortened. Today you need licence to buy agri products. Why should there be licence for agri product? This will take care of food inflation.

You have been strongly advocating FDI in multi brand retail. How will this change the retail canvass?

For long we have said that opening up of the retail sector is beneficial for the industry as investments in organised retail will scale up the entire supply chain and ensure good prices to farmers as well as consumers. Today fresh produce moves at an ambient temperature, which leads to tremendous wastages. Opening up the sector will create infrastructure.

What are the recommendations which you would like to see implemented in the near term?

In the short term, we are seeking lowering of import duty, especially on fruit and vegetables, and imports. Looking at the rising prices of fruit and vegetables, the Government should react fast on lowering the existing tariffs (hovering around 30-50 per cent) and allow import of these commodities. The Government should incentivise private sector (both domestic and foreign), cooperatives and NGOs to come up with business models that directly link the growers with processors and retailers.

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012450651300.htm>

Back Mixed trend in Coonoor tea market

P.S. Sundar

Coonoor, Jan. 23

Darmona Tea Industry topped CTC market at Sale No: 3 of the auctions of Coonoor Tea Trade Association fetching Rs 150 a kg.

“Our red dust (RD) fetched this price. Our pekoe dust (PD) got the second highest price of Rs 149. In all, our seven grades got Rs 103 and more”, Mr Dinesh Raju, Darmona Managing Partner, told Business Line.

Homedale Estate, auctioned by Global Tea Brokers, topped the CTC leaf market at Rs 143.

“Our broken pekoe (BP) got this price. In all, our three grades got Rs 137 and more”, the Managing Partner, Mr Prashant Menon, said.

Shanthi Supreme got Rs 142, Vigneshwar Estate Rs 141, Hittakkal Estate Rs 137, Deepika Supreme Rs 136, Kannavarai Estate Rs 135, Wavertree Rs 134 and Professor Rs 131. In all, 71 marks fetched Rs 100 and more.

Corporate sector

Among orthodox teas from corporate sector, Chamraj got Rs 185, Kairbetta Rs 174, Havukal Rs 170, Highfield Estate Rs 161, Curzon Rs 156, Prammas Rs 152 and Quinshola clonal Rs 151. In all, 34 marks got Rs 100 and more.

Although the volume of 9.54 lakh kg offered was the lowest in over a year, teas worth Rs 82 lakh remained unsold as 12 per cent was withdrawn for want of buyers.

“Orthodox leaf market was barely steady with prices oscillating Rs 1-3 a kg. High-priced CTC leaf lost Rs 5-10. Cleaner blacker medium grades gained Rs 2-5 but plainers oscillated Rs 1-3. Orthodox dusts oscillated Rs 5-10. High-priced CTC dusts gained Rs 2-3, others irregular”, an auctioneer said.

Exports

On the export front, Pakistan bought in a wide range of Rs 53-85 a kg and the CIS Rs 53-79.

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012451711500.htm>

Back 'Provide farm loans at low interest'

Kochi, Jan. 23

The State Chief Minister, Mr V. S. Achuthanandan has urged banks to provide loans to farmers at lower rates of interest to increase food production. Addressing a function here to launch the 'Go Green' initiatives of the Catholic Syrian Bank, he said the bank should take the lead in providing all help to the agriculture sector in the State. The 'Go Green' initiatives of the bank should be implemented state wide, he said. The Chief Minister also released the 'Navathi' souvenir. The Cochin Port Chairman, Mr N. Ramachandran, distributed free solar study lamps to some school children and hawker lamps to street vendors.

Date:24/01/2011 URL:

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2011/01/24/stories/2011012450831500.htm>

Back Agri-fair at Bajagoli in Udupi from Feb 4-6

Our Bureau

Mangalore, Jan. 23

The Shri Kshethra Dharmasthala Rural Development Project (SKDRDP) – a Dakshina Kannada-based non-Governmental organisation (NGO) – will conduct its 31st ‘ kissan mela’ (agriculture fair) at Bajagoli in Karkala taluk of Udupi district, from February 4-6.

Dr L.H. Manjunath, Executive Director of SKDRDP, told Business Line here on Saturday, that SKDRDP has successfully conducted 30 kissan melas in several villages of Karnataka.

The event will provide technical knowledge and other facilities on a single platform for the entire farming community, he said.

Events such as cattle show, technical sessions and demonstrations on modern agriculture technologies will be part of the three-day mela at Bajagoli.

Modern agriculture technologies, problems faced by farmers and facilities available in the line departments, and so on, will be discussed at the technical sessions.

Subject-matter specialists will interact with farmers regarding organic farming, micro-finance and agriculture and farm mechanisation, among others. The women's sessions will focus on empowerment and problems faced by women employed in farms.

He said that agricultural universities, banks, insurance companies, farm machine and input manufactures, and progressive farmers will display their projects and products at exhibition stalls. Apart from this, there will also be a cattle show at the venue.

Promoted by Dr D. Veerendra Heggade, Dharmadhikari of Shri Kshethra Dharmasthala, SKDRDP is engaged in the empowerment of small and marginal farmers, Dr Manjunath

said.

Mr M. Veerappa Moily, Minister for Law and Justice, will inaugurate the mela on February 4. It is likely to attract more than three lakh visitors, he added.

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