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THE HINDU

‘Many opportunities in agriculture for students’

Opportunities do not come walking, you have to adapt every opportunity that comes your way to succeed in life, former deputy director general Indian Council of Agricultural Research E. A. Siddiq said.

Addressing the students of Sri Prakash Educational Institutions at Payakaraopeta in the district at the 38th annual celebrations of the institutions on Thursday, he said that there were lot of opportunities even in agriculture for the students and urged them not to restrict themselves to white-collar jobs. There is a need to protect our rich heritage and institutions like Sri Prakash are contributing by nurturing the talent among the youth, Andhra Natyam exponent Kala Krishna said and added that fine arts and performing arts help relieve stress.

March past

NCC cadets presented a march past. Secretary and correspondent Ch.V.K.Narasimha Rao, joint secretary Sri Prakash Educational Institutions Ch Vijay Prakash, principals of different colleges and schools of the group, students, parents and other public were present.

Plant clinic for diagnosing pests and infestations

The M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) along with an international organisation called CABI jointly piloted a project called plant clinic (PC) in Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Maharashtra through the institute's Village Resource Centres located in the regions.

The main aim of setting up such clinics is to diagnose pests and diseases in any crop and render accurate knowledge to the farming community. Basically it is a community-driven model, conducted in a common location, accessible to all categories of farmers in a village.

Need guidance

Farmers need guidance to distinguish the difference between pest and infestations, understand harmful effects of red labelled/banned pesticides, pest resurgence, resistance to pesticides etc.

“The clinic provides an array of technological solutions along with cultural, biological and chemical methods, which are nationally and internationally permissible, ecologically safe and environmentally sustainable for mitigating crop loss and enhancing plant health and economic benefit,” says Ms. Nancy J Anabel, Director, Information and Communications of the Institute.

The clinics are conducted fortnightly and do not cost any money according to her. Persons with agricultural background are chosen and trained by CABI as plant doctors to diagnose the issue and provide appropriate solutions. However, MSSRF encourages progressive farmers, who are reservoirs of pragmatic knowledge and traditional wisdom to be trained and enrolled in this.

A tool kit encompassing lens, microscope, laptop, projector, knife, gloves, tissue and sanitisers along with required templates to collect case history and issue prescriptions are given.

Prescription

Farmers bring their affected crop samples to the clinics to recognise the problem and get technological solutions. Every farmer is provided with a prescription, detailing the case history along with recommendations.

The PC treats the crop samples with the help of the comprehensive factsheets in the local vernacular brought by the farmers.

As farmers are hungry for information regarding their crop details the role of this plant clinic is more important to help offer appropriate knowledge to them to grow healthy crops which in turn generate better revenue.

Presently about 37 plant doctors serve through 14 Plant clinics; 391 clinic sessions have been conducted till now across Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Maharashtra, spanning 62 villages, in which more than 6,000 farmers including 992 women farmers have been reached.

Recently about 46 farmers from Varagoor village, Thanjavur District brought crop samples to the clinic and found them to be affected by rice blast.

After examining the tillers, the plant doctors recommended the right type of spray to be used. Timely application helped them save their crop with additional yield of 5.9 tons in 100 acre.

Case study

Take the case of another woman farmer, Ms. Dhanalakshmi from Pudukuppam, Puducherry, who chose agriculture as a profession, a few years back, struggled due to her no knowledge about the subject and discouragement from others.

“I was confused. I didn’t know whether I had taken the right decision. Thanks to this plant clinic concept I am able to diagnose and spot the pest and infestations if any on my paddy, plantain and mango crops,” she says.

Mr. Arunachalam, Pasupathikovil village in Thanjavur district realized an additional yield of 60 kg / half acre in Gingili crop by preventing 30 per cent yield loss from Jassids and wilt disease attack, when the rest of his fellow farmers realized a mediocre 250 kg /acre.

Another beneficiary

Similarly Mr. Gajanan Shyamraoji Wankhede, in Papal village in Amravati, Maharashtra could address leaf curling infestation in his capsicum and stem borer in his brinjal crop through one of the clinics in his region.

“We welcome farmers across the country to contact us for details on this and are ready to address their queries. If need be, more clinics like this can also be established in other parts of the country as well,” says Ms. Nancy.

For more information contact Ms. Nancy J Anabel, Director, Information and Communications, MSSRF, III Cross Street, Institutional Area, Taramani, Chennai 600 113, email: anabel@mssrf.res.in, mobiles:9444391467 and 9445002060.

Seminar on safe water and food

The Laboratory and Technical Division (LTD) attached to the Cashew Export Promotion Council of India (CEPCI) here is organising a seminar on safe water and food at the CEPCI conference hall on February 28.

The seminar will be inaugurated by A.K. Mini, assistant food safety commissioner, Kollam.

Principal scientist of the LTD V.P. Potty said here on Wednesday that the seminar was aimed at promoting awareness of the need to avoid using water and food that were harmful for human health. He said that such food and water was the source of many diseases such as cancer.

Dr. Potty said that as per tests carried out by the LTD, four varieties of vegetables sold in Kollam had been found to be highly contaminated with organophosphorus pesticides. They are green chillies, curry leaves, cabbages, and bitter gourds. The chemical erythrocin was being rampantly used to give artificial colour and taste to watermelons and coal tar dyes were also used to give vegetables an artificial fresh look, he said.

But all such food was extremely harmful and people had to be aware of the safety levels of the food they consumed. He said that the seminar was being conducted in public interest.

The LTD, established in 1997 with Government of India funding, had the facility to conduct microbiological tests to identify such chemicals in food and water, he said.

CEPCI chairman Shahal Hassan Musaliar said that the LTD was a major laboratory in the country for food analysis. It was accredited to the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL).

He said that as per the Food Safety Act, all food stuff, agricultural products meant for human consumption, and drinking water had to be tested and certified by an NABL-accredited laboratory before being sold in the market.

Subsidy for Dalit farmers for installing irrigation system

The district has received Rs. 3.38 crore to be disbursed as cent per cent subsidy to Dalit farmers for installing micro irrigation systems on 590 hectares to enhance income from agricultural and horticultural crops.

Since micro irrigation systems save 40 per cent to 68 per cent water and minimise transpiration, cultivation area increases substantially and nourishing the crop with soluble chemical nutrients becomes easier while the growth of weeds is restricted to a greater extent.

To increase the yield and thereby the farmers' income from agricultural and horticultural crops, farmers are being encouraged to go in for micro irrigation systems with 75 to 100 per cent subsidy. Farmers who installed this system with grant to irrigate coconut, sugarcane, cotton, maize, orchards, flowering plants, vegetables and aromatic plants, got increased yield and attractive revenue.

As this system, being implemented in the district since 2012 under the National Sustainable Agriculture Mission, yielded better results in the past, Rs. 3.38 crore has been received to be disbursed to Dalit farmers.

"Small and marginal farmers from Dalit communities, who wish to apply for the grant, may submit their applications on or before February 28," said Collector M. Karunakaran.

As per this scheme, the beneficiary farmers should select one of the three recognised suppliers for installing the micro irrigation system in their fields.

The applicants should attach the Tahsildar's certificate recognising them as 'small or marginal farmer' along with the application.

"For more information, aspiring beneficiaries may contact the Assistant Directors of Agriculture or Horticulture," Dr. Karunakaran said.

Export earnings from tea drop by 10 per cent

Export earnings from tea have dropped by 9.8 per cent to Rs.3,928.94 crore between January and December, 2014, against Rs.4,355.23 crore a year ago on account of lower exports and a drop in the unit price of Indian teas.

In 2014, India exported 201.2 million kg, a steep drop, against 219.1-million kg. in 2013. In dollar terms, the value stood at $643.75 million against $744.2 million. During the year under review, the unit price dropped to Rs.195.3 a kg compared to Rs.198.8 a kg in 2013, as per the provisional figures now available.

The industry said that lower exports and earnings were mainly due to increased output by Kenya and Sri Lanka, which made more crop available in the international market at a time when India suffered crop losses in its peak production period in 2014.

Indian exports were down in many countries, including the CIS (mainly Russia and Kazakhstan), which accounts for 25 per cent of India's tea exports. Russia is the single largest importer.

Other countries, where lesser shipment of India teas were sent, were the UAE, Iran, Bangladesh and Pakistan. To promote teas, the India had sent a delegation to Russia, which had just returned. Another delegation is now touring Iran, where issues over residue levels in Indian teas have contributed to lower exports volumes.

State seeks Rs.600-crore Central aid

Kerala Agriculture Minister K.P. Mohanan on Wednesday met Union Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh and sought Rs.600 crore to boost the farm sector in the State.

Mr. Mohanan submitted eight proposals seeking funds for improving irrigation infrastructure, development of ethnic fruit cultivation, promotion of high-yielding dwarf variety of coconut palms, farm mechanisation, and rejuvenation of ponds among others.

“Kerala is on its way to achieve self-sufficiency in agricultural produce. To achieve this objective, we need to expand the area of cultivation in fallow land and irrigation facilities,” Mr. Mohanan said after the meeting.

Of the total funds, about Rs.250 crore had been sought for this purpose, Mr. Mohanan said in the representation made to the Union Agriculture Minister.

Faced with labour shortage, the Minister demanded funds to promote farm mechanisation and promotion of high-yielding dwarf variety of coconut palm.

The State government also asked the Centre to raise the farm assistance given for crop loss due to natural calamity.

In search of quality fiscal adjustment

Ever since Reserve Bank of India Governor Raghuram Rajan talked about it, “high-quality fiscal adjustment” has become the buzzword for expectations surrounding the contents of this year’s budget. One can’t argue against high-quality fiscal adjustment. It’s like motherhood and apple pie. But it isn’t clear what it means. We know it doesn’t mean meeting the deficit target by squeezing expenditures in the last quarter of the fiscal year; running arrears with oil and fertilizer companies; or getting public sector companies to cough up additional year-end dividends. In the last few years, this has been the sad tale of fiscal consolidation. This year, too, the deficit target will likely be met by using some or all of the above tactics despite a massive respite from the oil price collapse, large ad hoc increases in excise tax on petroleum products, and an all-time-high equity market.

But all this is in the past. More relevant for next year's budget is what the government makes of the need to make quality fiscal adjustments. If one goes by the exhortations of corporate leaders and analysts, it is essentially increasing capital and lowering social spending (subsidies) as much as possible. Prima facie, the argument sounds fine. Capital (infrastructure) spending is good because it delivers higher and better-quality economic growth. If doing so requires running a higher deficit, it is still not a bad thing because the added expenditure goes into creating productive capacity, rather than being wasted in higher consumption.

No convincing evidence

But there are a couple of problems with this argument. First, it is very hard to find any convincing evidence, either in India or elsewhere, that an injection of public investment increases medium-term growth. The only discernible effect is that it raises growth in the year the spending occurs, which is exactly the effect that one would expect if the government increased social spending or raised the wages of civil servants.

Does this mean that the government shouldn't undertake infrastructure projects? Of course not. For a long time now, India has talked about the need for spending a trillion dollars on building infrastructure. The price tag has probably risen quite a bit with the new government adding ambitious river-linking, renewable energy and smart cities projects. The erstwhile Planning Commission, based on the pre-2008 global financial world, had divided the implementation between public and private sectors and how much was to be financed by domestic banks, the corporate bond market, FDI, portfolio inflows, and Central and State budgets. In turn, getting the implementation and funding going would require structural and regulatory reforms, including changes in environmental laws, land acquisition procedures, corporate bond markets, public sector undertaking (PSU) banking operations, FDI and portfolio investment limits.

The world has changed dramatically since then, and it is doubtful whether the pre-2008 calculations would work now. So, to get capital spending right, the government needs to revisit these issues, reformulate the medium-term spending and funding plan, and implement the needed structural and regulatory reforms. That’s the right way to recast public infrastructure spending, and not merely as a way to boost near-term growth, especially when there isn’t any compelling reason to do so. If anything, the global headwinds of the last few years have turned into tailwinds for India. Growth in the G-3 economies is expected to rise, oil prices are forecasted to remain very low, and global financial conditions are expected to remain easy. Under such conditions, it is hard to justify any fiscal boost to growth.

The second problem lies with conflating subsidies with social protection. Subsidies hide the true cost of resources. This leads to inefficiencies. Consider the use of fertilizer: If it weren’t subsidised, farmers would use less of it, instead adopting different and perhaps better farming techniques. So, eliminating subsidies can be a good thing. But the government isn’t planning to do so. Instead, it is aiming to reduce the overall subsidy bill by better targeting through direct cash transfers. This is a welcome step, but it doesn’t improve efficiency much. The government needs to eliminate subsidies while simultaneously expanding targeted and demand-driven social and unemployment protection programmes and untied income transfers, not out of the kindness of its heart, but because such programmes are efficient. They provide fiscal policy the ability to respond quickly to growth booms and slowdowns without going through delays caused by the inevitable lags when government machinery has to identify the need to change policy, decide on the best ways of doing so, and then implement them. Often, by the time the government manages to implement such discretionary changes, the economic conditions alter dramatically.

Four constraints

But economic growth has stalled in India (notwithstanding recent GDP revisions), and at the centre of this slowdown is languishing corporate investment. There are broadly four binding constraints holding back investment that haven’t changed much in the last few years. In no particular order, India’s environmental laws, land acquisition framework, the structure of public-private partnership (PPP) projects and the high indebtedness of infrastructure companies (the counterpart of which lies in the very high and rising stock of restructured and nonperforming loans among PSU banks) appear to be the constraints. India’s pre-2008 growth miracle was driven largely by corporate investment, not public investment. Unsurprisingly, the growth collapse was also caused by plummeting corporate investment. So, in an obvious way, reigniting corporate investment is the key to getting India back on a sustained high-growth path. Of the four binding constraints, the first two are legislative. But the latter two lie in the purview of the government alone. So, instead of boosting infrastructure spending by a few percentage points, the economy would be much better served if budgetary resources were directed to easing the latter two constraints, either by the government's taking higher direct stakes in already-approved PPP projects or by increasing PSU bank recapitalisation.

Doing so is likely to get growth going more quickly than the limited sops the government may have planned for corporates and households by way of modest cuts in taxes here and there or a few percentage points of higher public spending that may or may not materialise.

Lowering the mortality rate of buffalo calves

Calf mortality is a common occurrence in buffalo rearing. Poor and unscientific management in calf rearing practices such as delayed and under or over feeding of colostrums, prolonged suckling duration, not practising weaning , deworming and dusting schedule regularly are some of the common issues.

Right feeding

Buffalo farmers are feeding less or more quantity of colostrum which affects the immunity of the calf and ultimately increases the percentage of calf mortality, due to naval illness and white scours.

To overcome this, farmers should feed the colostrum within one to one and half hour of birth and before it is allowed to suckle the mother.

It should be given in a small quantity along with curd or butter-milk in a spoon of edible-oil to help in removal of meconium and creating acidic medium which will not allow E.coli infection in the calf's stomach.

The ratio is 1 to 1.5 kg for smaller calves and 2.0-2.5 kg for larger calves up to the age of three months to ensure proper growth and vigour.

Buffalo farmers should feed properly balanced diet comprising necessary constituents of energy, proteins and micronutrients so that the calves gain body weight at the rate of 500 gm per day.

Weaning the calves after three months of age with most suitable hygienic maintenance conditions is advised and the umbilicus must be cut with a sterilized blade or scissors and antiseptic applied on the cut portion.

The calf should be kept on a dry, clean and warm floor free from unwanted material and the housing should provide necessary protection against inclement weather and predators.

Prescribed dosage

For the control of endo parasites the animal should be dewormed with a dewormer for the first time after birth at the age of seven days and later repeated after three weeks interval at least up to the six months by using prescribed dose.

Similarly ectoparasites should be controlled by regular spray of insecticides in the animal shed and surroundings.

(Dr. Rajinder Singh Sr.Extension Specialist (Animal Sciences), Lala Lajpat Rai University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Hisar Extension Centre, Rohtak-124001, email: raja.udaybhar@gmail.com.)

THE TIMES OF INDIA
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Supply rises, onion prices drop by 18%

NASHIK: The average wholesale onion prices at the country's largest wholesale onion market at Lasalgaon Agriculture Produce Market Committee (APMC) have declined by 18% in the last six working days following a rise in supply as against demand.

The average wholesale onion prices in the district APMCs, which were recorded in the range of Rs 1,475 to Rs 1,530 a quintal last week on February 16, declined to the range of Rs 1,260 to Rs 1,303 a quintal on Wednesday.

Speaking to TOI, Lasagon Onion Traders' Association president Nandkumar Daga said, "The supply of onions has increased a lot as compared to demand. As a result, onion prices have declined by Rs 100 to Rs 200 a quintal in the past few days. Besides, the arrival of summer crop has begun in Chakan and other markets in the state. As the supply will be good in the next couple of week, the price trend will naturally be downward for the next few days."

A Lasalgaon APMC official said the arrival of late kharif crop in the market was currently at its peak. "The daily arrival has increased to the range 22,000 to 25,000 quintals a day. This has led to the decline in average wholesale onion prices."

The average wholesale onion price at Lasalgaon APMC declined by 18% to Rs 1,260 a quintal on Wednesday, as against Rs 1,530 a quintal on February 16. The minimum and maximum prices were recorded at Rs 700 and Rs 1,428 a quintal, respectively. Around 27,000 quintals of onions were auctioned at Lasalgaon on Wednesday.

The average wholesale onion price at Pimpalgaon APMC was recorded at Rs 1,301 a quintal on Wednesday, as against Rs 1,500 a quintal on February 16. The minimum and maximum prices were recorded at Rs 800 and Rs 1,471 a quintal, respectively. Around 25,000 quintals of onions were auctioned at Pimpalgaon on Wednesday.

In Yeola, the average wholesale onion price at Yeola APMC was recorded at Rs 1,300 a quintal on Wednesday. The market was closed for four days because of the 10-day holidays from February 16.

Nabard gives Rs 1,000 crore for state’s rural infrastructure growth

PUNE: The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (Nabard) sanctioned Rs 1,141.22 crore for the state government under its Rural Infrastructure Development Fund (RIDF) for 2014-15.

A financial assistance of Rs 446.74 crore has been given for installing micro irrigation systems in 25 districts, Rs 114 crore for development of nine fish jetties and other infrastructure facilities to fishermen in the four coastal districts of Raigad, Sindhudurg, Palghar and Mumbai suburban, Rs 18.57

crore towards four projects for drinking water supply system in four districts, Rs 1.91 crore for development of Kharland - land with high salinity, (eight projects) in three districts and Rs 560 crore for 757 roads and bridges in all the 33 districts of the state.
The fund was set up by the Union government in 1995-96 for funding rural infrastructure projects and over the last 19 years, Maharashtra has been sanctioned loans for rural infrastructure projects covering various sectors like irrigation, drinking water supply, watershed development, anganwadi centres, check dams, warehousing, roads and bridges among others. Some of the cumulative benefits accrued on account of RIDF projects under all tranches in Maharashtra so far include strengthening of 15,486 km roads and bridges, benefitting 43,426 villages and connecting 16,141 marketing centres, 4,652 tourist spots and 5,472 pilgrim centres.

Development of watersheds has covered 1.40 lakh hectare while 14,446 villages have benefitted from construction of anganwadis. Further, wastewater management projects are being implemented in 122 villages covering a population of 2.88 lakh. The implementation of the projects has generated non-recurring employment of 4,701 lakh and recurring employment of 10,255.21 lakh mandays.

State offers 100/quintal to boost raw sugar export

KOLHAPUR: The state government is preparing to provide Rs 100 per quintal financial assistance for export of raw sugar. If it is added to the union government's plan, then a sugar factory will get Rs 500 per quintal financial assistance in all for the export of raw sugar.

The union government has already approved the proposal of Rs 400 per quintal assistance for raw sugar export. The Centre has also expected export of 14 lakh tonne raw sugar for which the assistance is announced.

State cooperation minister Chandrakant Patil said, "The financial assistance is meant for raw sugar export so that a significant chunk could go out of the country. Eventually, it will provide more funds in the hands of sugar factory management so that it can make payments to farmers. A large section of sugarcane cultivators is still to get full payment of the harvested crop mainly because sugar factories' claims of piling stocks of unsold sugar from last two seasons."

Vijaysinh Mohite-Patil, chairman of Maharashtra State Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories ltd, welcomed the decision as it would certainly benefit the sugar factories in the state as the sugar was not getting good price on the market.
"I hope the state government will make payment as soon as possible to factories so that we can disburse the payment to farmers. The raw sugar provides more options to the importer on processing hence its export is beneficial and convenient for the sugar factories. Sugar cubes are garnering demand hence there is always demand for raw sugar," he said.

He added that more than 150 sugar factories in the state have started crushing sugarcane but at the end of February less than 80 factories are crushing sugarcane. Hence, these factories will immediately need to switch to raw sugar production. Another challenge in raw sugar production is that it cannot be stored for a long time and has a limited shelf life.

MP and farmers' leader Raju Shetti said, "The state government should put a clause in the subsidy that it should be passed on to the farmers. There are no efforts to increase the income of sugar factories as raw sugar export will have minimum benefit to sugar sector. The existing stock of sugar is still there are demand is not jumping. It has eased a small portion of burden but major issues like payment to sugarcane cultivators are not yet clear. I demand that these sugar factories should be asked to make payments to farmers first from the raw sugar export subsidy."

He claimed that if farmers' payment is delayed further, the sugar factories will have to face the consequences in the form of strong agitation.

Veggie, fruit prices 50% crash after Pongal high

COIMBATORE: After the Pongal celebrations, farmers in the district have had little to cheer about. Retail prices of vegetables and fruit have crashed and they say the procurement price doesn't cover even 50% of the production cost.

A week after the Pongal festival was celebrated, vegetable prices dropped by 50% to 75%. A kilogramme of brinjal that cost Rs 70 to Rs 80 around January 14, is now available for Rs 16 to Rs 22 a kg. Tomatoes, which cost more than Rs 30 a kg before the festival, now costs only Rs 15 to Rs 18. "It is the same with small onions which used to cost Rs 40 per kg, but are now available for Rs 16 a kg," said G A Wahab, secretary, Saibaba Colony Daily Market Traders' Union.

However, the main victims are farmers "The procurement price of vegetables and fruit is sometimes less than a third of the retail price," said P Kandasamy, general secretary, Tamil Nadu Farmers' Union. "This is because the government has not set a minimum procurement price for vegetables and fruit."

He said the production cost of one watermelon is Rs 10, but wholesalers buy it for Rs 4.5 from the farmer and it is sold in the retail market at Rs 15. Similarly, tomatoes are procured for Rs 6 to Rs 8 a kg from a farmer when it costs Rs 20 to produce. "Tomatoes are labour-intensive because we need to set up poles to raise the crop. Fertilizers and pesticides are also expensive," said R Kanagaraj, a tomato farmer in Thondamuthur. Brinjal crops cost farmers Rs 10 per kg but are procured for Rs 5 to Rs 7.

Farmers said this has pushed them further into debt. "We have bank loans, but since we do not get back even the production cost, we are unable to pay them back," said Kanagaraj, who pledged his wife and daughter's jewels two years ago to pay part of his debt. "If we default for three years in a row, loans do not come in the fourth year," he said.

Retailers are not happy either. "We don't make much of a profit with prices of Rs 10 and Rs 12 for a kg for essential vegetables," said Wahab.

Consumers, however, are happy. Vegetable markets in Sai Baba Colony, Ganapathy, Kavundampalayam and other parts of the city are busy even in the middle of the day. "There seems to be huge stocks of all vegetables and fruits and prices are a lot more reasonable, so I can buy fresh veggies every day," said Subhashini Raman, a resident of S M Palayam off Mettupalayam Road.

BusinessLine

Why organic farming has not caught up yet in India

Development of organic agriculture as an alternative tool to address the ill-effects of chemical-based cultivation practices is a recent phenomenon in India. It had achieved dramatic progress in the beginning but could not maintain the pace. The growth of organic agriculture in India has been accomplished by three categories of farmers.

The first category is from no input or low input use zones, practising it as a tradition or by default with no organic certification such as the tribes of north-east region. The second and third groups are certified and non-certified farmers, who have recently adopted organic farming realising the ill-effects of modern agriculture and benefits under organic cultivation.

International scenario

Demand for organic food products is growing rapidly across the globe and amounted to $64 billion in 2012.

Commercial organic agriculture is now practised in more than 164 countries in an area of about 37.5 million hectare representing approximately 0.9 per cent of total farmland along with 549 certification bodies and 732 affiliates of International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement (IFOAM) from 113 countries.

The leading producers are Australia, European countries, Argentina and the US. Organic agricultural methods are internationally regulated and legally enforced by many nations, based on the standards set by the IFOAM established in 1972.

Exports

During 2013-14, India exported 135 products, realisation from which was to the tune of $403, million including $183 million contributed by exports of organic textile. Major destinations for organic products from India are the US, EU, Canada, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, South-East Asian countries, West Asia, South Africa, etc.

Soyabean (70 per cent) lead among the products exported followed by cereals and millets other than basmati (six per cent), processed food products (five per cent), basmati rice (four per cent), sugar (three per cent), tea (two per cent), pulses and lentils (one per cent), dry fruits (one per cent), spices (one per cent).

Certification requirements

Total area under organic certification in India in 2013-14 is estimated to be 4.72 million ha with 15 per cent are certified and the rest under forest area. India has the highest number of organic producers in the world (5,97,873), mainly due to small holdings.

The country has internationally acclaimed certification process for export, import and domestic markets which is regulated by National Programme on Organic Production. There are at least 18 accredited certification agencies which are responsible for the certification process. Though Government initiatives such as National Project on Organic Farming, Horticulture Mission for North-East & Himalayan States, National Horticulture Mission, National Project on Management of Soil Health and Fertility, Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana and also Network Project on Organic Farming of Indian Council of Agricultural Research aims at promoting organic agriculture in the country.

However, there is a wide gap in scientific validation and research compared to the progress in the same for general agriculture. Also, there is a need to aid farmers with advisory services (technical and managerial support to form cluster and adopt best management practices).

Key problems faced by organic farmers during the transition phase are non-realisation of premium . A number of State Governments have already made significant strides in organic farming such as Sikkim, Mizoram and Uttrakhand to turn the States completely organic.

However, to accomplish the desired dream, importance must be given to have a mechanism compensating farmers' sacrifice during initial year of land conversion. The emerging business opportunity in retailing of organic farm produce has drawn the attention of many private parties. This has led to establishment of direct link between farmers and retailers/exporters.

Institutional initiatives

However, each unit is still working in isolation. The International Centre for Competencies in Organic Agriculture (ICCOA) started a knowledge centre for all the stakeholders in 2004 with a view to establish itself.

According to Mukesh Gupta (Executive Director, Morarka Foundation, Jaipur), ICCOA has played the critical role in bringing all the stakeholders together for over a decade now. So far, initiatives of ICCOA such as workshops, training programmes, conferences, seminars, trade fairs, projects, research studies, publications have proved remarkable for growth.

Strong linkage among the organisations in the sector indeed may be a crucial factor in deciding the pace of growth of organic farming in India.

The writers are associated with NIAM, Jaipur. Views are personal.

New turmeric finds takers in Erode

Demand for new turmeric increased in Erode markets on Wednesday with all produce on offer getting traded.

"All the 1,500 bags of new turmeric which arrived were sold. In addition, 5,700 bags of old turmeric arrived and of these, 2,700 were sold. The price of old turmeric was up Rs. 100 a quintal and new turmeric by Rs. 200," said RKV Ravishankar, President, Erode Turmeric Merchants Association.

He said receipt of new orders from North India has been delayed and traders are hopeful of getting fresh upcountry orders within a week’s time.

Salem Turmeric which is the best in quality was sold at Rs. 9,200-9,400 a quintal at Erode, but only 20 bags arrived.

At the Erode Turmeric Merchants Association sales yard, the finger turmeric was sold at Rs. 6,194-8,616 a quintal; the root variety Rs. 6,010-8,139.

New turmeric: The finger variety fetched Rs. 6,588-8,769 and the root variety Rs. 7,010-8,239. Of the 2,306 bags that arrived, 832 were sold. At the Regulated Market Committee, the finger turmeric was sold at Rs.7,499-8,588; the root turmeric Rs. 7,277-8,341. Of the 843 bags on sale, 677 were traded. At the Erode Cooperative Marketing Society, the finger turmeric went for Rs. 7,369-8,589 and the root variety Rs. 7,369-8,311. Of the 905 bags on offer, 809 were picked up.

At the Gobichettipalayam Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Society, finger turmeric was sold at Rs.7,200-8,569 All the 145 bags found takers.

India can become the food basket of the world

Food processing is one of the fast growing sectors of the economy. The industry has been growing at an average rate of 8.4 per cent a year, way ahead of the agriculture and manufacturing sectors. It is a major generator of employment with around 65 lakh people engaged in various food processing activities.

By serving as a bridge between agriculture and manufacturing and by meeting the basic need of assured supply of healthy and affordable food to all people across the country, the sector has the potential to be a major driver of India's growth in the coming years.

Farmers’ role

While food processing sector has done very well, we need to applaud the farmers for their contribution in this achievement. During the last 10 years, we have made phenomenal progress in terms of foodgrain production, which has increased from 213.2 million tonnes (mt) in 2003-04 to 264.4 mt in 2013-14, increasing at an average of more than 5 mt a year.

Production of fruit and vegetables has gone up over the years. In the five years ending 2012-13, the horticulture sector has shown an average growth rate of 4.4 per cent. Agricultural production is one of the important aspects, but what is more important is to bring what we produce in the land to the table. Wastage in India is very high.

There is a need to minimise post-harvest losses, which are estimated at as high as Rs. 44,000 crore a year. Wastage in cereal is as high as 4-6 per cent; in fruit and vegetable it is still higher at 18 per cent. Wastages can be minimised by improving infrastructure for storage, transport and increasing the level of processing.

The challenge is not only to produce more, but also add more value to what we produce so that the farmers can get better returns for their produce and the consumers can have high quality nutritious and safe food products at an affordable price.

Long-term partnership of processors and farmers on mutually beneficial terms is essential. Some of the processors have entered into contract for procurement of agricultural produce from the farmers at an agreed price. With no further intermediation, the farmer is assured of a reasonable return and the processor is assured of adequate, timely supply of raw materials of required quality. This kind of collaboration is critical for the success of the food processing industry in India.

What have we done?

Backward linkages and mainstreaming of producers and processors are critically dependent on infrastructure. Developing Mega Food Park is a step in this direction. The scheme enables establishment of backward and forward linkages covering the entire food processing value chain by providing state-of the-art common infrastructure and processing facilities. Four Mega Food Parks are already operational and two more will be operational during this year.

Successful supply chains supported by cold chain infrastructure have been established for some specific products like apples, grapes, bananas and vegetables The ministry supports 121 cold chains. However, we have miles to cover. Cold chain gap is huge—nearly 30 mt. Private initiatives and support from financial institutions are essential. The successful interventions need to be replicated across commodities and regions to have a full impact in terms of bringing down losses.

Cost of credit continues to be high. Availability of credit at 14 to 15 per cent rate of interest discourages large scale investments,particularly in a sector which has a large concentration of small scale industries. Rate of interest is high despite the fact that cold chain is declared as infrastructure. Recently, even Food Parks have been declared as infrastructure. Banks should consider easy availability of credit given the new status accorded to the sector.

Loan to food and agro-based processing units with investment in plant and machinery was revised upward by the RBI from Rs. 5 crore to Rs. 10 crore for coverage under indirect finance to agriculture category in priority sector lending (PSL) and later brought down to Rs. 5 crore. RBI can relook at the PSL classification to ensure greater flow of credit to this sector.

The agriculture and food processing sectors should be treated as composite sectors. Commercial banks need to chip in with their efforts and the RBI should bring the entire sector under PSL.

Make in India

Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the ‘Make in India’ campaign on September 25, 2014 inviting global companies to set up manufacturing units in India. Twenty-five key sectors, including food processing, have been identified in which India can become a world leader.

Given our resource potential, India can become the food basket of the world. In the context of the ‘Make in India’ campaign, we will look forward to seeing India as the preferred production hub for processed foods and as a global food factory. It is important for us to work on the ‘Made in India’ brand for the food processing industry and position ourselves accordingly. During my interaction with the industry, I have realised the need for human resource development to meet the growing requirement of managers, entrepreneurs and skilled workers in the food processing industry.

Skill development

According to a study conducted by the National Skill Development Corporation on Human Resource and Skill Requirement in the Food Processing Sector, the annual human resource requirement in the food processing industry is estimated at about 5.3 lakh people, including about one lakh in the organised sector.

Hence the unavailability of skilled and semi-skilled manpower across different levels to handle various operations is a major issue in the food processing sector.

We will ensure active and meaningful participation of all stakeholders, including private, public and cooperative sectors. We also realise that an enabling financial and fiscal environment is crucial for the growth and development of the food processing industry. We will work towards that end.

Excerpted from the speech delivered by the Union Minister for Food Processing Industries Harsimrat Kaur Badal at the YES BANK – Ministry of Food Processing Industries National Conference on Spurring Finance and Investments in the Food Processing Sector, held in New Delhi