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THE HINDU

Changing dietary preferences push demand for small grains



Change in dietary preferences, rapid urbanisation, growing demand for processed foods and poor procurement price have scaled down production of small grains, especially pearl millet and shrunk the area under cultivation sharply in the district in the last decade.

But now, the same change in food habits, people growing more health conscious and realising the importance of consuming nutritious food have increased the demand for small grains and thereby encouraged progressive farmers to start cultivating pearl millet.

The Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Gandhigram Rural Institute, has been encouraging such farmers by offering quality hybrid seeds, extending technologies and assistance to raise pearl millet.

Once a poor man's staple food, pearl millet was forgotten even by people in the rural areas. The area under cultivation has been dwindling year after year owing to poor returns to farmers. Now, the total area under cultivation of pearl millet in the district is just 902 hectares. It was 2,038 hectares three years ago and 15,278 hectares, a decade ago, says Dr. Udayakumar, Programme Coordinator (incharge), KVK.

Now, this coarse grain has been gaining popularity among rural and urban people, thanks to growing health awareness.

To promote pearl millet, the KVK has distributed seeds of high yielding variety to a group of farmers at Marambadi panchayat. Now, growth and ear head size of the crop is

impressive. The height of the plant is also over six feet. The length and girth of the ear head and high tillering indicate that the yield will be around 1,500 to 2,000 kg, says A Arockiam, who has raised pearl millet in half an acre at Perikulathupatti village at Marambadi Panchayat.

“Marketing is not an issue. Present procurement price is Rs.30 a kg. I can sell them locally. Production cost is also very less because I reduce the use of fertilizers to the minimum and increase organic manure to enrich soil and plants. Water requirement for irrigation is also less. Previously, I had raised fox tail millet (Thinai) and sold it to the Agriculture Department. With adoption of new technologies and crop management practices, I hope that the yield will be more,” he says.

Low investment and better procurement price will certainly rope in more farmers towards cultivating Cumbu. The KVK will encourage more farmers to take up pearl millet cultivation, the coordinator added.

‘Price to remain steady’

The Agro Market Intelligence and Business Promotion Centre (AMI & BPC) has indicated that the price of small onions will remain stable in the months to come. The price advisory was based on an analysis of the prices that had prevailed in the Dingidul market over the past 17 years. The analysis was done by the back office of the AMI & BPC in the Centre for Agricultural and Rural Development Studies (CARDS), Tamil Nadu Agricultural University.

Price of small onion shoots up

Retail price of small onion is Rs. 50 a kg

Price of small onions has registered a steep rise in the city market over the past few days, triggered by poor arrivals.

On Friday, small onions sold at Rs. 40 to Rs. 42 a kg in the wholesale outlets at Gandhi Market, the city’s main market which caters to the retail markets in Tiruchi and its neighbouring districts such as Thanjavur, Pudukottai, Tiruvarur, and Nagapattinam. Just about a month ago, the wholesale price of the small onions was around Rs. 25 a kg here, according to traders. In the retail market, small onions were being sold at Rs. 50 a kg.

Small onions, known as ‘sambar’ onions, are widely consumed in Tamil Nadu. The unseasonable rain during this summer has damaged the crop in Udumalpet and Dharapuram areas, causing a sharp fall in the arrivals at the market, said A. Thangaraj, General Secretary, Tiruchi Onion Commission Mandi Traders’ Association.

Perambalur and Tiruchi are the major onion producing districts in the State. The crop is raised on over 8,000 hectares in Perambalur district and on about 4,000 hectares in Tiruchi district. However, stocks held by onion growers in Perambalur and Thuraiyur

have been bought for seeds by farmers in Erode and Tirupur districts as they have gone in for cultivation afresh, said Mr. Thangaraj.

According to Mr. Thanjaraj small onions were currently coming in from Karnataka but the arrivals were just around 100 tonnes a day against the city's requirement of about 200 tonnes. Arrivals are expected to pick up in about a month's time, he added.

Meanwhile, the price of Bellary onions, currently ruling at around Rs. 25 a kg at the market, could go up in the days to come if there was much export demand, Mr. Thangaraj said.

Farmers' organisations seek revised MSP for pulses

Farmers' organisations have asked the Union government to revise the minimum support price (MSP) for pulses, particularly red gram, for 2015-16 as what has been announced now is not based on scientific facts and the cultivation cost.

The Karnataka Pranta Raita Sangha, Karnaaka Red Gram Growers Association, All-India Kisan Sabha, Karnataka Rajya Raita Sangha and Krishik Samaj submitted a memorandum addressed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Deputy Commissioner Vipul Bansal on Friday. They said that the MSP of Rs. 4,625 fixed for red gram, including the incentive of Rs. 200, did not commensurate with the cultivation cost.

'No scientific approach'

The memorandum pointed out that the MSP for red gram did not reflect the present domestic and international market prices and the risk involved in cultivation in rain-fed areas. The MSP fixed for red gram, Bengal gram, black gram and green gram were irrational and the process lacked a scientific approach. The MSP for green gram and black gram, which were 90-day crops needing less expenditure, were more than that of red gram, which was a 210-day crop.

Poll promise

The farmers organisations wanted the Bharatiya Janata Party to implement the promises it made ahead of the Lok Sabha elections on the implementation of the recommendations of the Dr. M.S. Swaminathan Commission report. They demanded that the government revise the MSP of red gram to Rs. 6,500 a quintal and Rs. 6,000 a quintal for other pulses.

'MSP of Rs. 4,625 fixed for red gram, including the incentive of Rs. 200, is not commensurate with the cultivation cost.'

Special DPCs for summer crops

For the first time in the district, special Direct Procurement Centres (DPC) are to be set up soon at seven places in Chellampatti block to procure summer crops.

S. Ayyappan, Regional Manager, Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation (TNCSC), said at the farmers' grievance day meeting held here on Friday that the DPCs would be opened at Chellampatti, Valandur, Nattampatti, Kodikulam, Chokkathevanpatti and Nattarmangalam.

DPCs set up by the Civil Supplies Department usually function during single crop and double crop harvest seasons only. However, the district administration and Civil Supplies Department had made an exception this year to ensure that farmers received good returns for their summer produce, he said.

Collector L. Subramanian said that the centres would start functioning in the next few days. Payments would be credited to farmers' bank accounts to ensure speedy transaction and to prevent malpractices.

When some of the farmers expressed doubts about the system, Mr. Subramanian vouched for its transparency and said that future monetary transactions with regard to the DPCs would be carried out only through this mode.

A majority of the farmers, however, welcomed the new system. R. Manavalakannan, a farmer, said that "we need not pay extra any more."

Intermittent showers help farmers take up sowing



Low-intensity monsoon showers in the district have enabled farmers to take up sowing operations.

With clouds hiding the sun throughout the day, and intermittent low-intensity rainfall hitting parts of the district for the last three days, farmers have taken up sowing for kharif crops. However, actual rainfall received till Friday (as recorded at 8 a.m.) was less than the normal rainfall at 539 mm. The normal rainfall of the district for June is 1,267 mm.

According to data recorded by the District Statistical Office here, only Ramdurg taluk received rainfall more than normal rainfall for the month, at 84.2mm as against the normal 68 mm. In the rest of the nine taluks in the district, the rainfall was much less than the month's normal rainfall.

The cumulative actual rainfall received in the district during June as on Friday was 728 mm, as against the normal rainfall of 1,267 mm.

Ryots complain of delayed payments by sugar mills

Farmers participating in the monthly agriculturists' grievances day meeting at the Collectorate here on Friday complained that there was inordinate delay in the payment by the sugar mills for the sugarcane supplied to them.

Raghupathi, a sugarcane farmer of Pernambut said that while the payment should be effected within 15 days of supply, the Ambur Cooperative Sugar Mills took three months to make the payment. Because of the delay, the farmers were unable to repay loans , and were forced to pay higher interest for the money borrowed

He wanted the district administration to take steps to either get the interest waived for the farmers who have supplied the sugarcane to the mills or ensure prompt payment by the mills.

R. Nanthagopal, Collector of Vellore who presided over the meeting asked the representatives of the various sugar mills to ensure early payment to farmers.

Mr. Raghupathi said that farmers producing jaggery legally were implicated in false cases accusing them of selling jaggery to the illicit arrack producers. He urged the District Collector to take steps to prevent the police from foisting such cases against them. He wanted adequate compensation to be paid to farmers who suffered economic loss due to drought, rains or winds.

Ramakrishnan, Personal Assistant (Agriculture) to the Collector said that the farmers can always produce and sell jaggery for genuine reasons.

As for compensation for crop loss, he said that the agriculture and revenue departments were in the process of making an assessment of the damage. Compensation would be paid to affected farmers based on the recommendation of the state government, he said.

Sekhar, a farmer of Gudiyatham said that the court had stated that the Uzhavar Sandhai in Gudiyatham which has been built on a garbage heap in the Robinson Tank should be demolished only after finding an alternative place for the farmers.

But the market committee was carrying out digging operations near the market which might result in damage to the Uzhavar Sandhai building.

He wanted an assurance that the Uzhavar Sandhai building would be reconstructed if it was damaged by the present activity, he said.

Perumal Reddiar of Ussoor said that the cows in the Ussoor area have been afflicted with serious fever. He urged the Collector to direct the animal husbandry department to visit the area and provide treatment to the cows. The Collector asked Dr. Manoharan, Deputy Director of Animal Husbandry, Vellore to look into the problem and take steps to treat the animals.

Monsoon may bring thundershowers

As rains batter Mumbai and parts of Andhra Pradesh, the advancing Southwest monsoon is expected to keep Chennai cool and bring thundershowers to the city over the weekend.

Several other parts of the State and Puducherry will also get light to moderate rains till Sunday. Nights may get cooler with the minimum temperature remaining around 26 degree Celsius.

Cloudy sky and late evening showers were possible over Chennai due to the presence of a low pressure area over west central Bay of Bengal off north coastal Andhra Pradesh and adjoining south Odisha, said officials of the Meteorological department.

Friday continued to be pleasant with the day temperature remaining at 33 degree Celsius in Nungambakkam, nearly four degrees below the normal temperature.

At Meenambakkam, the weather observatory recorded only 30.2 degree Celsius, nearly seven degrees below average for this period. The day temperature has been gradually falling since Wednesday following vigorous monsoon.

Chennai residents may expect murky skies and light rain till Sunday. The maximum temperature will remain at 33 degree Celsius for two days.

Since June 1, Chennai has received only 15.3 mm of rainfall, which is short by 31 mm, the average for the period.

Last year, the city recorded a monthly rainfall of 96 mm during June, officials said.

Egg price at all-time high



The increase in retail price of egg to Rs. 5 has not gone well with the consumers as prices of products involving egg as ingredient are also raised by the shopkeepers gradually

Rain lashes The Nilgiris

South West Monsoon hit The Nilgiris district on Friday, pushing down the temperature in the hills. According to sources, trees fell in a few places disrupting power supply and traffic, but the Highways Department and Tangedco officials attended to the problem to restore normality.

Trees fell in Fern Hill on Ooty-M. Palada Road, Doddabetta – Agalar Road and a few other places. Tangedco reported brief disruption in supply in Singara, Uppatti, Gudalur Pattavayal, Thummanatty and a few other feeders. The sources said that the disruptions were only minor, though.

The drizzle pushing down the temperatures saw residents pull out blankets, shawls and rain coats to warm themselves. Horticulture Department officials said that the rain was welcome as it would help the plants. But it did not impact tourist flow.

The sources added that the rain was late by almost a month as the hills received their first showers in the third or fourth week of May.

Ramnad gets Rs. 296.22 crore to pay crop insurance benefits

Over one lakh farmers in all 36 'firkas' will be paid the amount in the next 30 days, says Collector

After a series of struggles by the farmers, the governments and National Agriculture Insurance Company have released Rs. 296.22 crore towards crop insurance for the year

2013-14, the highest amount in the State even as the district administration commenced disbursement of the amount to the farmers.

The disbursement commenced on Thursday and the more than one lakh farmers in all 36 'firkas,' barring Rameswaram, where paddy was not cultivated and Ramanathapuram, where there was no complaint of yield loss, would be paid the amount in the next 30 days, Collector K. Nanthakumar announced at the farmers' grievance day meeting here on Friday.

To ensure absolute transparency and avoid irregularities in the payment, flex boards – giving details of the farmers, the credit availed by them and amount due to them – were being displayed in front of all the Primary Agriculture Cooperative Credit Societies (PACCS) and the farmers would be paid the amount through cheques, he said.

On the first day, 5,000 farmers were paid a total amount of about Rs. 18 crore, the Collector said and requested the farmers not to crowd the 29 branches of the Central cooperative banks to encash the cheques. They could visit the banks between 2p.m. to 6 p.m. for encashing the cheques, a couple of days after receiving them, he added. The beneficiary farmers should submit two photographs. While one photo would be affixed in the ledger against their name, the other one would be affixed on the backside of the cheque leaf with their signatures, the Collector said.

Kharif sowing begins in Ballari

For the first time in the district, sowing for kharif season has commenced in the month of June itself, thanks to the heavy pre-monsoon showers and the timely onset of monsoon.

As against the normal rainfall of 65.3 mm for June, the district has recorded actual average rainfall of 40.8 mm up to June 19. Due to good pre-monsoon rain, the farmers had kept their land in the rain-fed area ready by completing the ploughing, levelling of land and application of manure, and sowing operations were begun in earnest with the onset of monsoon.

As on June 19, around 29,439 hectares out of the total targeted area of 3.74 lakh hectares, which includes 1.54 lakh irrigated tract, has been completed, taking the sowing percentage to 8.1 per cent. Cereals have been sown in 15,958 ha out of total targeted area of 2.23 lakh ha; pulses in 1,705 ha out of 16,607 ha; oil seeds in 1,182 ha out of 87,011 ha and commercial crops in 10,594 ha out of 47,813 ha.

Sources in the agriculture department said that unlike in the past, this kharif season the sowing target of jowar was likely to be achieved due to the timely onset of monsoon. Earlier, due to delayed monsoon, the area targeted for jowar was used to cultivate other crops.

Paddy, jowar, maize, bajra, tur, cotton, groundnut, sunflower, chillies are among the major crops cultivated during the kharif season. Due to low yield and crash in prices last

year, the coverage of cotton may go down this season with farmers likely to prefer cultivating maize.

Joint Registrar, Deputy Registrars and Personal Assistant to Collector (Agriculture) would form a surveillance team and visit the PACCS to prevent any irregularity in the disbursement of the insurance amount, official sources said. The farmers were free to lodge complaints with the authorities if they faced any difficulty, they said.

The beneficiary farmers included about 86,000 non-loanee farmers and about 15,000 loanee farmers, the sources said. The loanee and other farmers who had directly paid the premium in the nationalised banks could get the cheques from the respective banks, they added.

Rains bring cheers to ryots

Rains that lashed the district for the last one week provided much needed relief to farmers on Friday too. Srikakulam, Gara, Narasannapeta, Tekkali and other areas received around 2 cm rainfall, according to officials. Many farmers feared than deficit rainfall in June with the statements of Meteorological Department that the Southwest Monsoon would not be so strong this year. Collector P.Lakshmi Narasimham asked the Agriculture Department to ensure proper supply of seeds in all the mandals.

Consumers can now register complaints on dedicated portal

To enable consumers to register their grievances against “misleading advertisements”, Ministry of Consumers Affairs and Food Distribution has launched a GAMA-dedicated portal. This portal covers six key sectors including; food, agriculture, health, education, real estate, transport, and financial services.

Consumers can register their complaints without any hassles with the launch of the portal, said the Union Minister for Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution Ram Vilas Paswan here on Friday.

He said to strengthen quality assurance regime for goods and services, the amendments to the Bureau of Indian Standards Act was finalised and the same would be tabled in the next session of Parliament. “With this, the market surveillance for the standards of testing of products would be made more effective,” he noted.

Mr. Paswan said his ministry had issued directions to all State governments to ensure proper functioning of the Consumer Protection Forums in all the districts and provide adequate infrastructure facilities. “The ministry has decided to release Rs.1 crore to each District Consumer Forum,” he said.

Noting that his ministry would convene a conference of all the State Food Ministers shortly, he said; “Issues related to protection of consumers interest will be dealt with in depth there.”

Jackfruit fair at Kumta

A two-day 8th Jackfruit Fair will be held at the Havyaka Sabhabhavana from Saturday under the auspices of Kadamba Marketing here in collaboration with University of Horticulture Science Bagalkot, University of Agriculture Sciences, Biodiversity International Centre, Bengaluru, and Vrakshalaksha Andolan.

The fair aims at introducing varieties of jackfruit items in coastal tourism, which would boost the fruit’s marketing potential and employment opportunities in Uttara Kannada district.

There will be exhibition and sale of jackfruit delicacies such as sambar, chips, papads, juice, buns, puddings, jams, parotas and samosas. Delegates from Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu are expected to participate in the fair, a release said on Friday.

Public help sought for heronry survey

The WWF-India and the Social Forestry Wing of the Forest Department have started data collection and monitoring of heronries in Thiruvananthapuram district under the Green partnership programme.

Heronries are communal nesting places of large water birds such as Indian Pond Heron, Great Egret, Median Egret, Little Egret , Cattle Egret, Grey Heron, Purple Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron, Great Cormorant, Indian Shag, Little Cormorant , Oriental Darter, Black Headed Ibis. Usually they build nests on tall trees and reed beds near paddy fields.

Kerala has about 15 species of water birds. Protection of heronries is important for the conservation and management of these species, many of which are an integral part of our agricultural and wetland ecosystem, according to State Director, WWF-India, Renjan Mathew Varghese.

Documentation of these heronries, information on the species breeding and knowledge of the current status of heronries are the first basic steps in the direction of chalking out a conservation strategy regarding these birds.

The WWF-India has requested nature enthusiasts and bird watchers to extend support for the survey. The public has been asked to provide details of any heronry near their home, workplace or the one spotted during travel to A.K. Sivakumar on mobile 9447386978 or e-mail (wwfklso@gmail.com).

Pesticide content not high



Farmers raised concerns regarding dip in sales of fruits and vegetables in the wake of reports that vegetables cultivated in Tamil Nadu, which were sold in Kerala, had high amounts of pesticides and harmful to health.

“Ever since the word is out about high pesticide content in farm produce from the State, there is a dip in sale of fruits and vegetables cultivated in places such as Melur and Tirumangalam,” a participant said at the monthly farmers’ grievance day meeting held on the Collectorate premises here on Friday.

Collector L. Subramanian said that six samples, including brinjal, mango, plantains, coriander and guava, were sent for testing and results showed that the pesticide content were within prescribed limits.

“The results have affirmed that healthy and organic farming is largely practiced in the district. We also carried out checks regarding sale of banned fertilizers and none of the authorised distribution points stocked them. However, banned pesticides worth Rs. 2 lakh were seized from sellers without permits and action was taken against them,” Mr. Subramanian said.

“Repair machines”

Some of the farmers appealed to the Collector to ensure that harvesting machines were maintained properly.

“When the belt or any other part of the machine gets damaged, the officials take their own time to attend to the repairs and we are forced to hire machines at a high cost from private parties,” a farmer from Samayanallur said.

The Collector assured the farmers that the repairs would be carried out on time and encouraged them to make use of the machines available in their areas.

“There are five machines available with the Cooperation Department and two harvesting machines with the Agriculture Engineering Department,” he said.

Initiate measures to ensure stability in arecanut prices: KRRS

Activists of the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS) on Friday staged a protest here demanding both Union and the State governments initiate measures to stabilise the price of arecanut.

Addressing the protest meet, H.R. Basavarajappa, working president of KRRS, said the price of arecanut, which was Rs. 800 a kg. in May 2014, had come down to Rs. 340 a kg. now. He blamed the increase in the quantity of import of arecanut for the decline in the price.

The total import of arecanut, which was 18,228 quintals in 2013-14, increased to 1,00,846 quintals in 2014-15, he said and urged the Union government to initiate measures to curb the import of arecanut.

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry, in the first week of June, had increased the minimum import price of arecanut from Rs. 110 a kg. to Rs. 162 a kg. The minimum import price of arecanut should be increased to Rs. 300 a kg. to bring in some stability in the price of local variety of the produce, he said.

Illegal import of arecanut was also one of the reasons for the fluctuation in its price. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry should establish a separate vigilance wing at the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence to stop the illegal import of arecanut, he said.

Mr. Basavarajappa urged the Union government to purchase arecanut at a minimum support price (MSP) to stabilise its price in the market. According to a research supported by cooperative societies engaged in marketing of arecanut, the average cost of production of arecanut is about Rs. 400 a kg. Therefore, the government should announce a minimum support price of Rs. 400 a kg. and its procurement at that rate, he said.

There has been a sharp decline in the yield of arecanut in recent years owing to fruit rot and yellow leaf diseases.

The government should extend adequate financial assistance to agricultural universities to take up research on ways to control the fungal and pest infection that was affecting the arecanut crop, he said.

Functionaries of KRRS Hittur Raju, S. Shivamurthy and Y.G. Mallikarjun took part in the protest.

Plea to make ATMA committees apolitical

It must be ensured that members of Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA) committees in all panchayat unions should be from the farming community and not from political parties, demanded farmers at the monthly grievance day meeting held at the Collectorate here on Friday.

It was informed at the meeting, presided over by Collector Sajjansingh R. Chavan, that inter-crops would be included in 'adangal' document and instruction to this effect conveyed to the village administrative officers.

In reply to a demand by Sri Krishna Perumal of Puthalam, the Executive Engineer of the Public Works Department (PWD) said that public had been asked not to dump garbage into north madai of Palkulam. Notices were issued to two house owners adjacent to the water body by the Puthalam town panchayat on June 4.

Devadoss of Ramanathapuram sought fishing auction details for ponds in Kalkulam taluk. An official replied that the fishing rights given to various individuals had been cancelled by the Padmanabhapuram RDO on September 19, 2014. Fishing rights for all the ponds and water bodies of the PWD would be auctioned next month.

Mr. Devadoss said that his repeated demands to survey the Uchikkal water channel in Vellichandai 'B' village to evict encroachments were in vain. He said that government lands adjacent to water channels must be protected from further encroachment.

Vins Antro of Vellicode demanded eviction of encroachments along AVM Channel and auctioning of trees that could earn revenue. To another query, an official said that a proposal to resurvey all revenue villages had been sent to the government for approval.

Joint Director of Agriculture Elango, Personal Assistant to Collector (Agriculture) R. Nizamuddin and Executive Engineer (WRO-PWD) Subramanian participated.

Farmers want encroachments in waterbodies removed

Waterbodies, the lifeline for farmers, in most parts of the district have been encroached and were under poor maintenance, aggrieved farmers said while seeking the intervention of Collector M. Karunakaran to conduct a survey of all the waterbodies and rid them of encroachments.



K. Murugan, Naguneri taluk secretary of Tamil Nadu Farmers' Association, alleged that the ruling party councillor Rajendran had encroached upon the waterbody at Vadamaneri near Kalakad and subsequently the water channel was blocked. Despite taking this issue to the attention of the authorities concerned, no action had been taken, he said.

The Collector, who presided over the farmers' grievances redressal meeting here on Friday, instructed the PWD officials to inspect the waterbody and remove the encroachments if the grievances were found legitimate.

The officials should submit a report after the inspection. Stern action would be taken against officials, if they failed to act, the Collector said.

Compensation

Meanwhile, a few affected farmers sought compensation for crop damage following unseasonal rains. An official said that crop loss assessment was being carried out to ascertain the extent of damage.

Onion crop also suffered damage following unseasonal rains at Keelapavoor and Melapavoor and banana crop at Shencottah, S.T. Sheik Mydheen said.

Banana crop on 13.6 hectares in Shencottah was affected and it had been taken to the notice of the State government, an official said.

Water storage

Joint Director of Agriculture C. Chandrasekaran said dams in the district had 32.78 percent water storage whereas the storage during the corresponding period last year was only 12.28 percent.

Based on the existing storage in dams, water was being released he said and asked the farmers to use it judiciously.

Krishnaveni, adjudged the best farmer from Sankaralingapuram near Sankarankovil in sericulture, was given a cheque for Rs.10,000 and revolving funds were also given to the beneficiaries.

Farmers share success stories

A two-day research extension programme for farmers, conducted by Veterinary College and Research Institute (VCRI) here under Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA), concluded here on Thursday evening.

The programme was conducted by the Department of Veterinary and Animal Husbandry Extension Education wing.

Lectures on seven topics were held. Cattle farmers shared their success stories to motivate others. There was also a debate session. Twenty-five farmers took part in the programme.

At the valedictory function, C.M anivannan, Professor and Head, Department of Veterinary and Animal Husbandry Extension Education, explained the objective behind organising the interactive session between farmers, scientists and extension agents.

S. Prathaban, Dean, VCRI; C. Chandrasekaran, Project Director, ATMA, and Joint Director of Agriculture, Tirunelveli; P. Mary Amrithabai, Deputy Director of Agriculture, Farmers Training Centre, Tirunelveli; S. Senthilkumar, Assistant Professor; and C.Mahalingam, Convenor, Block Technology Team and Assistant Director of Agriculture, Palayamkottai, were present.



Thought for food

The chair of the scientific panel of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has cut directly to the heart of the matter by insisting that quality assurance should be organised on scientific rather than bureaucratic principles and that it can only be ensured by testing the quality of the skills of testing personnel.

Without such “hyper-testing”, the potency of the safety regime cannot be assured. If even the skills of drivers of private vehicles are being tested at set intervals, to ensure that they do not pose a public threat, there is no excuse for failing to test the abilities of food assayers, who hold the health of millions in their hands. Besides, food testers have to be inducted in large numbers and their coverage area increased dramatically.

The discovery of lead and MSG in unacceptable quantities in [Maggi](#) noodles was the story of an unsung few working against all odds. Now, the odds must be tilted in favour of the consumer by raising a cadre of testers who specialise in food.

The chemistry of food calls for multidimensional laboratory skills. Foods have a constantly evolving profile, beginning as growing organisms and ending in spoilage, if not consumed. Through its life cycle, food is exposed to various chemicals, including hormones, pesticides, preservatives and substances in ground water. For the assayer, food presents a higher technical challenge than relatively inert materials. Significantly, the chair of the FSSAI scientific panel has strongly opposed the dilution of Indian standards on the plea of a shortage of technically qualified manpower.

Apart from the obvious benefits to domestic consumers, following global standards is essential for the interests of the export industry.

The Codex Alimentarius, a collection of standards promoted by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN in 1961 and supported by the WHO, is the document of reference for the international trade in food substances. Its standards are relied upon by the WTO to resolve disputes in the international food trade. To bring Indian standards below the benchmarks of the Codex could weaken the prospects of the export trade.

Perhaps the biggest challenge remains unaddressed. Despite the growth of branding since liberalisation, a significant part of the food trade remains in the unorganised sector. This is especially true of retailing, which is a popular source of income since no special skills are required, the margins are excellent and demand grows reliably. For ensuring domestic food safety, the challenge would be to ensure compliance across this huge industry segment without unleashing a new food inspector raj.



THE TIMES OF INDIA

Pesticides issue takes centre stage at farmers’ meeting

MADURAI: The ongoing issue about use of harmful pesticides on crops dominated the monthly farmers' grievance redressal day meeting on Friday, where an awareness lecture was held to sensitise farmers about the issue. Kerala authorities recently reported that pesticides were being used indiscriminately on vegetables sent from Tamil Nadu.

Head of entomology department from Agriculture College and Research Institute, Madurai M Kalyanasundaram delivered a lecture to farmers about the harmful effects of overuse of pesticides. He advocated integrated pest management by using bio-control agents like farmer-friendly insects, birds and reptiles and judicious use of correct pesticides.

Indiscriminate use of pesticides reduces the quality of food products produced by the farmers. They had to take particular care in case of produce exported to other countries. The Kerala government had recently raised the issue with the state government, said Kalayanasundaram. He also pointed out that at present around 5% of total farmers in the state have turned towards organic farming, which is a welcome move. The agricultural college offers an exclusive course on organic farming, he told farming community leaders.

After the lecture, farmers' leader M Pandian blamed the agricultural scientists who guided them towards chemical-based agriculture inputs. He said that way back in 1950, when he was a youth, all the farmers were called to Chennai and asked to adopt modern techniques of fertilisers and pesticides. "After decades, we are back in the same place and scientists are asking us not to use them," he quipped.

President of Sugarcane Farmers Association N Palanisamy pointed out that vegetable cultivation in Thirumangalam and Melur blocks have suffered a set back after the Kerala government's report and farmers have been affected due to slow movement of their produce. He demanded to know what the district administration had done in this regard. Another farming community leader P Manikandan made a rather strange demand to scientists to mass produce farming-friendly insects and reptile or birds and release these into the environment. "When poultry companies are able to produce lakhs of chicks in a single day, can't a bunch of owls or garden lizards be hatched in agriculture laboratories and released in farms?" he asked. Farmers also said there was little awareness among farming community on pesticides. Moreover, the government does not support organic farmers much, pointed out R Manavalakannan, a farmer from Chellampatti block.

Addressing the farmers, district collector L Subramanian asked them not to panic about the pesticides issue. Samples of coriander leaves, plantain, guava, mango and brinjal have been collected from the district and tested in Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore. "There are no harmful residues on the samples collected from the district. The lecture was organised to sensitise the farmers about the indiscriminate use of pesticides on crops. Moreover, agriculture officials have inspected all the pesticide outlets to check if any banned pesticide is being sold to farmers and they have not found any such items during raids," he said. He appealed to farming community leaders to educate other farmers in their villages about integrated pest management practices.

Vegetables not exported from Trichy on Friday

TRICHY: Vegetables were not exported from Trichy airport on Friday after several Gulf countries put brakes on import of perishables from southern Tamil Nadu. Exporters have cut down on procuring vegetables from wholesalers as the uncertainty continues. Authorities at Dubai airport have asked exporters to produce a health certificate for clearing the consignments containing vegetables.

Only coconuts and savouries were sent on a Sri Lankan Airlines flight that left to Dubai via Colombo from Trichy on Friday.

Around 1.5 tonnes of consignments including vegetables are exported per day from Trichy airport. Exporters from Chennai airport are not facing a problem because vegetables form only a small percentage of the total exports. "Most of the vegetables go to south east Asia and not to the Gulf," said an airport official in Chennai.

Shipments from Trichy to southeastern countries are not hit but there is an uncertainty about exporting vegetables to Dubai.

As UAE has given a 15-day grace period to produce the certificate, the exporters are planning to use different agents who have different deadlines to ship consignments.

Damodaran N, an exporter, said that in Kochi exporters got a certificate from the Livestock Board and exported dairy products. However, it is not clear as to who should issue health certificate for vegetables.

He added that the exporters have to be given proper information on seeking the health certificates as the plant quarantine board was not authorised to provide a health certificate.

Though Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) has four food testing labs in Chennai, exporters do not want to send their consignments for testing because of the cost involved in transportation.

A three-tonne shipment containing vegetables, coconuts and dairy items that were sent by Sri Lankan Airlines flight to Dubai via Colombo, which were detained at UAE because of lack of health certificates, were later cleared after a show cause notice was issued to them.

A grace period has also been given to the exporters to submit the documents to continue export.

Gulf countries have issued a new set of guidelines for import of vegetables. Directorate of plant quarantine is not able to issue health certificate because ministry of commerce has not issued instructions.

India tries its hand at desi Bt cotton once again



NAGPUR: After a failed experiment in 2009, India is once again trying its hand at creating desi Bt cotton seeds. The city-based Central Institute of Cotton Research (CICR) this week signed a memorandum of understanding with Delhi University whose scientists have discovered a Bt gene - Tg2E-13. Research will now be conducted with the CICR to ensure commercial development of a genetically modified (GM) seed.

It is also learnt through sources that the CICR is also planning to tie up with Tamil Nadu Agriculture University for another gene discovered by a group of experts there. It will eventually work on developing a Bt cotton seed having both the genes.

The GM seed with two genes is expected to provide double protection against bollworm, the common pest hitting cotton crops. This will be projected as an alternative to the Bollgard 2 seed sold by US multinational Monsanto which has a monopoly on Bt cotton seed business so far since 2002.

"It will, however, take at least three years for the indigenous seeds to reach the market," the sources said.

It took eight years of research for Dr Deepak Pental of Delhi University to come up with the Tg2E-13. Now, CICR will further work on it, before it presents the seed for approval to the ministry of environment which is the approving authority for all GM crops.

The CICR will start with confined trials in a glass house. It will be followed by field trials in a restricted area. There are plans to develop a Bt variety (multiple crossbreeding) as against a hybrid (single cross-breeding). Currently, only seeds of Monsanto's Bt hybrid plants are available in the market.

A hybrid is a mix between a pure Monsanto plant with a local variety of cotton. The seeds of a hybrid plant can be used only once as the next generation does not have consistent characteristics. So, the farmer has to buy fresh stock of seeds every season.

In a Bt variety, on the other hand, seeds can be extracted from the cotton crop itself. To generate a Bt variety, the hybrid plant has to be repeatedly bred with the other non-Bt variety. "A plant with stable characteristics is generated after five such breedings," say scientists.

A Bt variety is known a better option as against the hybrid plant for the farmers as seeds can be easily generated from the regular crop itself.

However, sources admit that there is a long way to go. Apart from getting the approval from MoEF, the CICR has to ensure that it does end up in a debacle, as has happened before.

The University of Agricultural Sciences, Dharwad in Karnataka, had developed an indigenous Bt seed - Bikaneri narma (BNBt) after decade-long research. However, after it was commercially launched in 2009, it was found that BNBt had the Mon-531 gene originally discovered by Monsanto and not an indigenous version. The process was put on hold and referred to an expert committee, which recommended that the scientists should come up with an original gene instead of Mon 531. There has been no progress so far.

To ensure that new genes do not end up in a fiasco, the CICR will also have to ensure that Tg2E-13 and the other one developed in Tamil Nadu are different Mon 531.

Ranchi gets state's first modern fish market

Directorate of fisheries under the department of animal husbandry and fisheries launched its first modern fish market in Dhurva on Friday.

Agriculture minister Randhir Kumar Singh visited the market to welcome the fish vendors who have been allotted shops in the completely covered 22,000 sq ft fish market.

Director of fisheries, Rajiv Kumar, said that the idea for opening a modern integrated fish market was conceived to promote fish farming and marketing in the state where wholesalers and retailers will be accommodated to sell fishes of every variety under one roof.

The market was inaugurated by the agriculture minister of previous JMM led coalition government Mannan Mallick in 2014 but due to certain technical difficulties, it never functioned.

Shops were allotted to 13 applicants and more applications were received. "We have provision for at least 22 wholesalers and in addition to that the directorate is in a position to accommodate several dozen retailers if they are interested to hold shops under one roof," Kumar said.

Describing the facility as a unique and hygienic fish market, a first of its kind in state, agriculture minister Randhir Kumar Singh assured that he will support more and more fish farmers and promote them by providing adequate training and financial support.

The directorate has not been able to convince the wholesalers who have their private market at Mallah Toli near Daily market in main road.

Despite holding several round of meetings with the 29 wholesalers, the directorate failed to convince them and has now decided to issue eviction order.

"We cannot have a fish wholesell market in the heart of the capital and if they are not willing to shift to the integrated market, they can shift anywhere but they will not be allowed to continue at Main road for long," Kumar said.

The modern fish market aims at rehabilitating fish vendors selling fish near the airport. The fish sellers near the airport have repeatedly been asked by the airport authority to shift their open market since it often attracts birds and poses threat to flight safety.

Ryots in a fix as govt delays farm loan waiver funds

With the Kharif season set to start officially in the next couple of weeks, the state government is yet to release the second installment of Rs 4,250 crore due to banks this year that will enable farmers to roll over their existing loans and receive fresh ones.

The government, last year, paid Rs 4,250 crore to the banks as the first installment after it announced that it would pay Rs 17,000 crore in four years to them. The decision followed the government's announcement of farm loan waiver of up to Rs one lakh for each family involved in growing crops.

The situation is already turning critical for the agricultural community and farmers' leaders have said that if fresh loans are not issued within ten days, ryots would miss out on timely sowing and could face a repeat of miseries that haunted last year's kharif season which led to a spate of suicides by farmers.

"The state is receiving good rain across the districts. But it will go waste if farmers do not receive bank loans before June-end when sowing ends. It is already late, but there is no sign of the government taking steps to fulfill its promises regarding the farm loan waiver scheme," said M Kodanda Reddy, chairman of Telangana Kisan Kheth Mazdoor Congress.

S Malla Reddy, vice-president of All-India Kisan Sabha, said that many farmers have already started sowing after having borrowed money from private lenders. "These farmers are already in a debt trap. In some districts, especially Adilabad, moneylenders are having a field day. Farmers there have no option but to take loans at exorbitant interest rates going as high as 36% per month," he said.

Banks, meanwhile, expressed helplessness, as the rules restrict them from issuing fresh loans unless the existing loans accounts are closed. "Whoever is regular in repayment and those whose loan accounts are closed, will automatically receive fresh loans according to the revised scale of finance," said J Seethapathi Sharma, convener of the State Level Bankers Committee (SLBC).

Sharma said that loan accounts of the beneficiaries have been renewed, but they are expected to be closed before May 15 to be eligible for fresh loans.

With the government failing to pay the next installment, the renewed loan accounts have not been closed. While a few farmers have repaid the loan on their own and have availed for fresh loans, Sharma said that he could not give the figures as the data for May and June are expected by August.

Malla Reddy said that unless the government acts quickly to release the balance amount to the bank, a disaster is in the offing. "While more than 900 farmers committed suicide in the last season, the government was not expected to be so indifferent," he rued.

C Partha Sarathi, principal secretary of agriculture, said that the government has taken note of the urgency and the second installment is expected to be released within four days.

"The proposal is with the finance department for clearance," he said. While the government has appealed to the banks to release fresh loans, Partha Sarathi said that an SLBC meeting has been convened on June 23 where the agriculture minister will try to convince bankers for loan disbursal.

The state is receiving good rain across the districts. But it will go waste if farmers do not receive bank loans before June-end when sowing ends. It is already late, but there is no sign of the government taking steps to fulfill its promises regarding the farm loan waiver scheme

THE HINDU **BusinessLine**

Existential question hangs over Grape Processing Board

The Indian Grape Processing Board (IGPB), constituted with members from the industry as well as senior central government officials, is currently headless, office-less, and more importantly quite clueless on whether it still exists or stands disbanded.

The IGPB's vice chairman Siraj Hussein, and secretary Venkatesh Swarlu, were transferred to other ministries earlier this year.

The term of the 15-member Board ended in February and on Mar 31, the IGPB vacated its office housed in the Western Maharashtra Development Corporation building in Pune.



As of now, there is no word on either the new incumbents or indeed the fate of the Board, and not even the former Chairman knows what IGPB's current position is.

Set up around six years ago under the ministry of Food Processing (FP), government of India, IGPB's mandate was to address industry problems and help promote grape products.

Nearly 80% of all grapes processed go into wine-making (the rest to raisins), and the stakeholders of the Board ranged from vintners, raisin producers, farmers, research institutes to the hospitality industry.

“There has been no communication from the Ministry of Food Processing on the status of the Board, and we are still waiting for some word from the cabinet,” rues Jagdish Holkar, who has just completed his tenure as Chairman of IGPB.

Both he and Sula Vineyards CEO Rajeev Samant have met up with the Union Minister of Food Processing Harsimran Kaur Badal, stressing the need to continue with the Board, but nothing concrete has emerged from them.

During the Board's six active years, its initiatives included pushing for a uniform national wine policy, advocating single window clearances for setting up wine units, organising events to promote the wine industry in India and abroad and even trying for survival packages for the sick units.

“We had also started the procedure for simplifying excise laws for wine in various States,” says Holkar, adding that this work is still incomplete.

There are around 110 wineries in India (including 72 in Maharashtra), nearly half of which are sick and face a severe liquidity crunch.

Despite this, over 90% are functional, leading to the Indian wine industry pegging a growth of over 20 per cent to touch approximately 10-11 million litres of wine production during 2014-15.

The trend is expected to continue in the current year as well.

To work around the uncertainty surrounding the IGPB, Holkar says he plans to approach the government of Maharashtra to set up a wine board in the State.

Kharif planting gains pace as monsoon progresses



As the South-West monsoon advances further into central India, sowing of key kharif crops such as rice, pulses and oilseeds has gained pace in key producing States.

Data released by the Agriculture Ministry show that sowing for the kharif season is down 7.4 per cent this year compared to the same period last year, mainly driven by a fall in acreage of coarse cereals such as jowar, bajra and ragi and sugarcane.

Crop-wise data

As of Friday, kharif acreage touched 91.61 lakh hectares (lh), down from 98.88 lh registered in 2014-15.

Acreage of rice, pulses and oilseeds, have risen marginally while coarse cereals such as jowar and ragi have witnessed a sharp fall.

Rice has been sown across 8.33 lh against 8.2 lh earlier while pulses have a recorded a 4.4 per cent increase to 4.51 lh as compared to 4.32 lh previously.

Coarse cereals acreage is, however, down more than 42 per cent, with 7.19 lh covered so far this year against 12.42 lh at the same time last year.

Significantly, the Centre had hiked the minimum support price (MSP) for ragi by ₹100/quintal earlier this week, from ₹1,550.

The MSP for jowar varieties and bajra were raised by ₹40 and ₹25 per quintal, respectively.

Monsoon progress

Though the onset of monsoon this year was delayed by about five days, the quick progress in last two weeks has resulted in 10 per cent rains above normal for the current season from June 1-18.

About 16 of the 36 meteorological sub divisions, accounting for 54 per cent of the area of the country, have received excess rains so far.

Meanwhile, the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) has said that the South-West monsoon — currently estimated at 86.5 mm, is likely to remain strong this month with another storm system building over the Bay of Bengal, which should bring more rain to parts of central and eastern India.

“Conditions are favourable for further advance of southwest monsoon into some more parts of Chhattisgarh, Odisha and West Bengal during next 48 hours. Conditions are also favourable for further advance into some more parts of north Arabian sea and Gujarat during the next 72 hours,” said the Met agency.

The IMD has predicted the four-month long monsoon to be at 88 per cent of the Long Period Average (LPA) of 89 cm.

An agency official, however, stated on Friday that rain is expected to be at 92 per cent of the LPA in July. Sowing of oilseeds has registered a marginal uptick to 2.79 lh from 2.22 lh while sugarcane is down to 41.58 lh from 43.92 lh earlier.

Cotton acreage has also fallen slightly to 19.66 lh from 20 lh at the same time last year.

Jute and mesta has been sown across 7.55 lh this year against 7.81 lh previously.

Tea prices at Kochi sale lose steam on higher arrivals



Prices of several tea varieties at the Kochi auctions declined this week on increased arrivals. In sale no 25, the quantity on offer in CTC dust grades was 13,33,500 kg, showing an increase compared to last week. Others were irregular and lower by ₹2-4 a kg and sometimes more as the sale progressed.

Though there was a subdued demand from major tea companies, a better enquiry was noticed from exporters and upcountry buyers.

Of the 14,500 kg on offer in Orthodox varieties, the market was lower and witnessed some withdrawals. A small quantity sold was absorbed by exporters, the auctioneers Forbes, Ewart & Figgis said.

In Cochin CTC dust quotation, good varieties fetched ₹90-130, mediums quoted ₹65-95 and plain grades stood at ₹57-65.

However, the demand was fair in leaf sales with 2,18,500 kg on offer in Orthodox category, which was up compared to last week arrivals. The market for good liquoring Nilgiri broken and whole leaf was barely steady. CIS and other exporters lent fair support.

In CTC leaf, the market for good liquoring bolder broken remained barely steady. The quantity on offer was 77,000 kg.

In dust varieties, Monica SFD quoted the best prices of ₹132 followed by Sholayar/Mayura SFD at ₹127. In leaf grades, Chamraj FOP-sup green tea fetched the best prices of ₹316 followed by Chamraj OP at ₹227.

Slack buying pounds pulses

Both pulse seeds and pulses continued to trade low on sluggish demand. Masur (bold) ruled flat at ₹6,450-6,500 a quintal amid subdued buying, while masur (Madhya Pradesh) ruled at ₹6,100. Masur dal (medium) went for ₹7,300-7,500 (down ₹150 from last week), while masur dal (bold) was ₹7,600-7,700. Urad (bold) fetched ₹8,000-8,100 (down ₹100 from last week), while urad (medium) ruled at ₹7,200-7,400. Urad dal (medium) was ₹9,600-9,700, urad dal (bold) ₹9,800-9,900, while urad mongar ruled at ₹10,900-11,100. Moong (bold) was being quoted at ₹7,000-7,100, while moong (medium) ruled at ₹6,000-6,400. Moong dal (medium) went for ₹8,300-8,400, moong dal (bold) at ₹8,700-8,800, while moong mongar ruled at ₹8,800-9,300 a

Monsoon casts a strong spell over western, central India



The monsoon has now reached roaring strength with a low-pressure area in the Bay of Bengal intensifying and the Arabian Sea preparing to host its own over next two days.

Powered by the twin engines, the monsoon is poised to unleash some heavy to very heavy rainfall over east, central and northern parts of the West Coast, including Gujarat.

Global watch

The US Climate Prediction Centre and the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts join the watch for an extended play of active monsoon conditions for the rest of the month.

In fact, the US Centre says that the low-pressure area in the Bay of Bengal would be pivot around which the monsoon would prosper over South Asia during the period.

“Any monsoon low formation over the Bay has the potential to bring widespread heavy rainfall across parts of South Asia,” the forecaster said.

India Met Department said on Friday that the Arabian Sea would join the monsoon party by spinning up its own ‘low’ in two days.

Arabian sea ‘low’

According to the European Centre, the Bay and the Arabian Sea systems would merge and drive up the rainfall to a new peak over central India. Indications are that Mumbai and surroundings would continue to receive heavy to very rainfall for the next few days as well.

Global models also hint at the possibility of South China Sea/northwest Pacific throwing a spanner in the monsoon works by conjuring up its own weather system during the next two weeks.

A concurrent ‘low’ forming in these sea basins just to the east of Bay of Bengal can spirit away some of the moisture and weaken the existing ones closer to mainland India (Bay and the Arabian Sea).

‘Enhanced monsoon’

In any case, the week ending June 23 will likely see enhancement of the monsoon. The ‘low’ in the Bay supports the potential for widespread heavy monsoon rainfall, including over Nepal.

The models support a continuation of enhanced monsoon activity, excluding the South, during the week that follows (June 24-30).

A drier phase is forecast to reach out from the central equatorial Indian Ocean (south of Sri Lanka) towards peninsular India during the period.

The monsoon has delivered excess rainfall of 11 per cent until Wednesday.

This can only go up during the weekend and into the next week with the Bay and Arabian Sea systems in full flourish.

Imitate nature's recycling ways for best results

Standing near the vermicompost pit he has built in his farm, Vasudev Singh, a smallholder farmer in Madanpur village, Deoghar district of Jharkhand looks elatedly at the flock of ducks in the small pond nearby. Walking towards the pond, he points to the fish catch that he will sell in the weekly market. Catching hold of the bottle-gourd creeper climbing up the duck shelter, Singh asks his wife to pluck the long green veggie for the day's meal.

His three-acre farm has a pond for fish cultivation, a shelter for duck poultry built above the pond and a cattle shelter. He feeds the ducks both produce and wastes from the field, namely grains and fodder. Farm waste also goes into the vermicompost. The ducks feast on earthworms from the vermicompost. Their droppings, in turn, conveniently serve as fish food. Additionally, a bulb glowing above the pond at night attracts insects, which fall into the water and feed the fish. Cattle excreta serves as manure after vermicomposting, while the urine finds use as pesticide. The duck population has grown from two initially to 35 today.

The vermicompost and urine have helped cut the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, thereby raising Singh's farm income, while the fish and ducks offer extra income as well as nutritious food for the family. "I have stopped migrating for work and earn enough to educate my eight children," he says.

Singh presents the perfect example of Sustainable Integrated Farming System (SIFS), a concept that advocates combining all farming activities in a profitable and sustainable manner. A farmer owns not just a farm but also other components such as livestock, water body, manure production and so on. "I have utilised the produce or by-product of one component as an ingredient or input for another," explains Singh.

Agriculture employs 47 per cent of the population, but is starved for innovation. Most farmers continue to rely on Green Revolution methodology.

Until 2011, farmers in Madanpur too followed the Green Revolution techniques of the Seventies. The shift to mono-crop culture, producing a single high-yielding variety, led to a rapid increase in the use of chemical-based fertilisers and pesticides. Input costs increased relentlessly, making agriculture unviable for small farmers. Moreover, they lost sight of forest gathering, livestock rearing and other alternative sources of income.

This situation is common around the country.

SIFS offers an innovative alternative, through diversity in production and interlinking all farming activities. "It merely tries to imitate nature, where waste from one process is the input for another. It tries to utilise varied types of plants, animals, birds, fish and other flora and fauna for production," says Anshuman Das of WeltHungerHilfe, a German developmental organisation which initiated SIFS in India, Nepal and Bangladesh.

The central government's Department of Science and Technology piloted the integrated system at 300 farms in 2003. Buoyed by the results, WeltHungerHilfe, with the help of local partners, initiated SIFS for 8,000 small and marginal farming families across India.

As Krishna Kant of Abhivyakti Foundation, one of the local partners, explains: "A micro-level plan is prepared for each village, where common resources are mapped and divided, and requirements such as irrigation facilities are developed. A farm design is also laid out for each household."

Farmers are trained to create a self-sufficient environment to improve productivity, says Rajesh Jha, from the Centre for World Solidarity. Apart from improving economic conditions, SIFS makes available a variety of food to farming families. A survey in Deoghar showed that farmers now consume 10-12 kinds of food as compared to just 3-4 earlier. Without doubt a health and wealth enhancer for our food providers.

Gujarat farmer harvests climate-smart cash crop: sunshine



A pioneering project in Gujarat has led to one farmer harvesting what could become the country's most climate-smart cash crop yet — sunshine.

A pilot project by Sri Lanka-based non-profit International Water Management Institute (IWMI) offered farmers the opportunity to sell excess energy generated by solar panels that drive their water pumps, and one farmer did just that. Instead of using the excess

energy to pump more groundwater to irrigate wheat and banana crops, Ramanbhai Parmar sold the extra energy he generated over four months back to the power grid.

He received ₹7,500 for 1,500 kilowatt hours (kWh) of electricity which, if used to run his water pump, would have extracted extra 8 million litres of groundwater.

“‘Solar crops’ are a very exciting example of a triple-win,” Tushaar Shah, IWMI senior fellow, said in a statement. “Farmers, the state, and precious water reserves all benefit from a single intervention.”

When solar-powered water pumps were introduced in Gujarat, it quickly transpired that farmers took advantage of what they saw as free energy to extract more water than they needed and groundwater reserves were depleted.

“We know that farmers are extremely responsive to incentives that improve productivity and incomes,” said Shah. “By offering them the chance to sell the electricity generated by their solar-powered water pumps, we could make agriculture in India cleaner and greener.”

Sunshine state

Gujarat gets up to 3,000 hours of sunlight per year, but at the same time suffers from extended dry spells. Giving farmers an opportunity to sell excess energy could encourage them to pump only the water they need, said IWMI.

IWMI estimates that around 11 million farmers across India currently connected to the electricity grid could install solar-powered water pumps and sell the extra energy produced.

According to the 2011 Census, about 33 per cent of India’s households lacked access to electricity. Scaling up the initiative could help relieve pressure on the state’s overwhelmed electricity board, said IWMI.

Business Standard

How Kisan Call Centres work

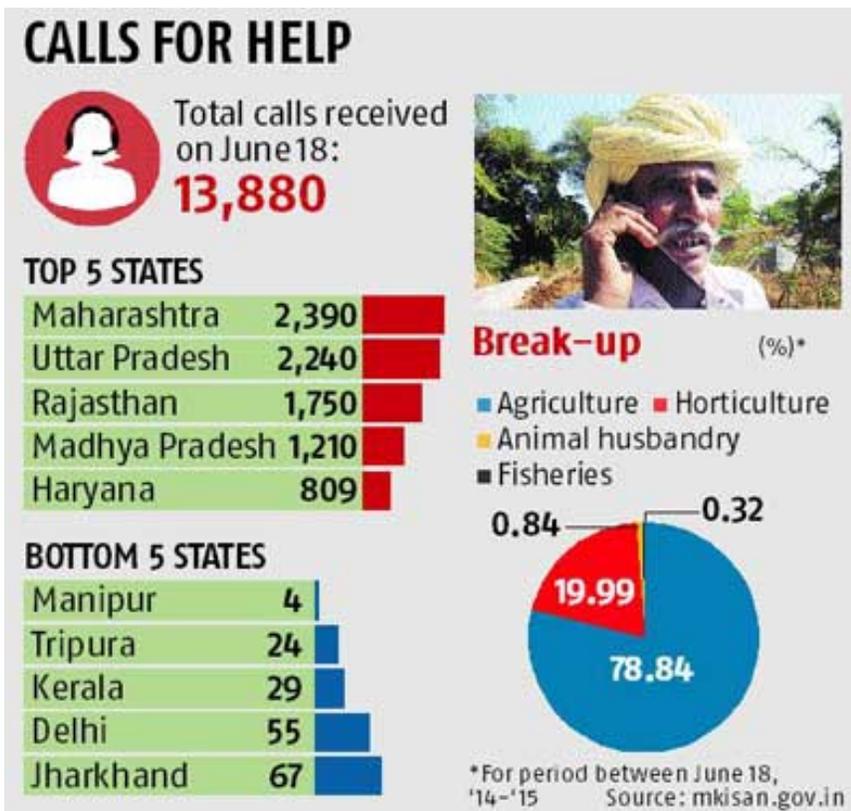


At around two in the afternoon at the [Kisan Call Centre](#)(KCC) in Central Delhi's Indian Agriculture Research Institute, India's premier agriculture research body, three employees are lazily unlocking their doors after an extended lunch break.

The three men, all in their early 50s, are the agriculture 'experts' who answer farmers' queries which [state-level call centres](#) lack the expertise to answer. But for the past one hour, they have avoided work. Unabashed and with a smile on his face, one of them explains how. "Every day between one and two in the afternoon, we turn down the server. This ensures that the phone doesn't ring and we have our lunch in peace."

He occupies a large room. But one which lacks the usual paraphernalia you would notice in a call centre. For one, there aren't any headphones. Instead, he takes his calls on a 1980-model landline phone with rotary dial. As the server is switched on, his phone rings. "So your mango tree is drying, right?" he asks the caller from Bihar's Muzaffarpur district. "This can happen for two reasons: Either the tree has been infested by termites for which you need to use an insecticide, or you have a large stone near the roots, which is not letting the tree get its nutrients. Nothing much can be done if it is the latter."

He puts the phone down. A couple of minutes later, it rings again. It is another caller from Bihar who wants to know what can he do about his lemon tree, which is not flowering. He suggests changing the watering time. Then there are calls where he and his colleagues can offer little help: How to get a bank loan, complaints against district officers for not paying compensation for failed crop, and even when will the next earthquake strike. They say such calls are more frequent than those which directly relate to agriculture.



"In the days following the Nepal earthquake, a lot of people called up to ask when the next earthquake would come," says another official with a laugh. "We would tell them no such technology has been developed thus far."

KCCs began work in 2004. Since then, the government has opened 14 KCCs across India, which receive around 14,000 call each day. However, these calls are not evenly distributed across the country. About 50 per cent of these calls come from four states - Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Very few calls come from the Northeast, Kerala, West Bengal, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

Further, around 80 per cent of the callers have questions related to agriculture, while only 0.83 per cent have questions related to animal husbandry and 0.26 per cent relates to fisheries. Horticulture forms 20 per cent of the total calls.

When its concept was developed, the KCCs were envisioned as a multiple-tier system. In the first stage, a farmer would call the KCC to ask his questions. The operators in KCC, who are all graduates in agricultural science, were expected to answer routine questions. In the second stage, agriculture scientists and officials of state governments were meant to be involved. They were to be roped in when the KCC employees could not answer farmer queries. But employees of the state-level call centres say rarely does this chain flow.

"Officers in the state government tell us they don't want to be disturbed with these questions. So we rarely go to them now," says one of the employees of a state-level KCC.

The system struggles at another stage, too. This is due to a lack of integration between government departments and the KCC. For instance, a common question which farmers call to ask is about the rates of their commodities in the mandis. But KCC employees struggle to answer it as few mandi websites are regularly updated. The same holds true for weather updates. Also, KCC employees say they find themselves at a loss when farmers inquire about new government schemes as few government departments send them information in advance.

"This leads to loss of trust with the farmers. When the farmer asks what the price of his commodity in the mandi is, we answer looking at the website which is usually not the live rate as these websites are not frequently updated. As a result, often the farmer accuses us of lying because he is aware the price is different," says a KCC employee in a state capital.

Kharif sowing shows signs of revival, but still a long way to go



Even as southwest monsoon makes its way to north India, sowing of most kharif crops has picked up pace.

But it is still less than 2014, especially because of a drop in the acreage of coarse cereals, particularly maize.

However, experts warned against making any firm projection on kharif production based on the current pace of sowing as the total area covered so far is just 8.7 per cent of the total area that is usually covered during the kharif season, which is 105.28 million hectares.

The total acreage under all kharif crops was around 7.35 per cent less than the same period last year at 9.16 million hectares. Till last week, this difference was over 8.5 per cent.

In western parts of the country, though, the rains continued their strong run and Mumbai was battered by heavy showers since the last 24 hours, throwing life out of gear.

Coarse cereals have been planted in around 0.71 million hectares till June 19, down from 1.24 million during the same period last year.

Farmers tend to hold on to their coarse cereals crop at times when rainfall looks uncertain as it matures fast and can survive on low moisture as well.

The biggest thrust to sowing will come in the months of July and August, when the monsoon settles over the critical pulses, oilseeds and cereal growing regions of central, north and western India. It is here that the forecast available till now does not look promising enough.

The Pune-based Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM) in its last weather update said that a low pressure system will develop over the southern Bay of Bengal, which could give good rainfall over central India between June 21-25 and thereafter it might move towards the northern parts of the country between June 25-30. The southwest monsoon might cover the entire country by June and the rains would be normal to above this month.

But, thereafter IITM said that rainfall might go down in the first week of July. India Metrological Department (IMD) too said in its update that all models are suggesting an overall decrease in monsoon rainfall over most parts of the country in the beginning of July.

If the rains loose their intensity in July after the covering the entire country by June end then that could have an impact on the final harvest as that is the time when real thrust to sowing comes.

But, how big that impact would be remains to be seen.

India Ratings in a report said today that the correlation between the kharif food grain output and monsoon rains (June-September) declined to 0.3 over FY05-FY14 as compared with 0.6 for FY97-FY04, which shows the increased resilience of Indian agriculture to absorb deficiency in monsoon rainfall.

It further added that if 2015 monsoon is as per Skymet's forecast of 102 per cent of LongPeriod Average (LPA) then agriculture GDP will grow by 2.1 in 2015-16, but if it matches the IMD's forecast of below normal rains then farm GDP could grow at 1.0-1.5 per cent in 2015-16.

Further, if north India gets poor rains and overall showers are also weak, then GDP would grow at 0.0-0.5 per cent in 2015-16.

So far the rains since June 1 have been 10 per cent more than normal, largely due to good rains over central, south and east India.

Till June 19, however, paddy has been sown in around 0.83 million hectares, up from 0.82 million hectares, pulses have been sown in 0.45 million hectares, which is just 4.16 per cent of the normal area, up from 0.43 per cent during the same period last year.

Oilseeds have been sown in around 0.27 million hectares, marginally more than the 0.22 million hectares that has been sown last year. In total, oilseeds are planted in around 18.23 million hectares of land during the kharif season.