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THE HINDU

Of the possibilities of organic farming

The common question asked of organic farmers is whether they can produce enough to feed the world. The volume of yield is an issue that has bothered farmers, scientists and policy makers alike.

This is the question addressed by ASHA's (Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture) new book "Ecological Agriculture in India – scientific evidence on positive impacts and successes", that was released on Thursday. The book explores issues of productivity, profitability, social benefits, and challenges for organic farming.

In an interaction between Bernard Declerq, Claude Alvares and Sultan Ismail, pioneers in the realm of sustainable farming, on the occasion, the issues of the importance of preserving seeds, soil and challenging the dominant farming paradigm were highlighted.

Mr. Alvares, the editor of the Organic Farming Source Book and Organic Farming Manual, lamented the dwindling diversity of seeds. He said, "A society that surrenders control of its seeds, surrenders control of its society at large."

Underlining the skewed system of control and ownership prevalent among farmers, organic farmer Mr. Declerq said, "With the Green Revolution, the traditional farmer that was once independent was robbed of his cultural and economic sovereignty."

Sultan Ismail, the former head of the department of bio-technology and director of the Eco-Science Research Foundation, identified soil in itself as requiring conservation.

‘Do not pollute water in the hills’



The significance of the Blue Mountains as the ‘overhead tank of the State’ figured prominently in programmes organized by various organizations during the weekend to mark the observance of World Water Day.

Programme

In a programme organized under the aegis of the Aruvankadu-based Rural Development Organisation (RDO) here on Saturday, participants pointed out that the people of the Nilgiris can help prevent water-borne maladies in the plains.

The message conveyed was that through outdoor defecation and other forms of pollution the people here were placing those in the plains in jeopardy.

Presiding over the programme the Head, Indian Institute of Soil and Water Conservation (IISWC) O.P.S.Khola said many in the plains were dependent on the eco-system of the Nilgiris for their survival.

Senior Scientist, IISWC, S.Manivannan said that children should be used to educate their parents about water conservation and consequences of water pollution.

Warning

He warned that though the situation on the water front in the Nilgiris was now far better than in many other places, it will not remain like that for long.

In about 15 years from now, the rainfall pattern will change and there will be no rain in June.

The former dean of the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University K.K.Krishnamurthi said that the people should ensure that water is not wasted.

The Founder-Chairman, RDO, N.K.Perumal said that the organization has planned to put up one lakh toilets in the Nilgiris to prevent open defecation.

He added that already 24,000 toilets have been provided. In putting an end to open defecation the Nilgiris should be made a model.

The Head, United Planters Association of Southern India-Krishi Vigyan Kendra G.Ramamoorthy said that though places like Coonoor experienced heavy rainfall, run-off due to the poor retention capacity of the soil was a major problem.

NWEA Executive Committee member K.Vijay said that the stress was on making people aware that the Nilgiris was a water source even for Cauvery.

At another programme in the YMCA here, the Public Awareness Association of Udhagamandalam highlighted the role of the hills in ensuring the water security of the people in many districts.

At Kolapalli near Gudalur the Centre for Tribal and Rural Development Trust joined hands with Exnora International to educate people about water-borne diseases and how these illnesses can be prevented.

A sparrow-friendly market!



The wholesale vegetable market governed by the Agricultural Products and Producers and Traders Association (APPTA) here, a joint initiative of wholesale traders and farmers, has transformed into a sparrow-breeding place in the last few years.

“The cheerful house sparrows, once commonly seen flirting around the neighbourhood, are in real trouble now and they are vanishing from the centre of many cities and rural areas,” said S.S. Davidson, Adviser, Tribal Foundation, on Friday.

Addressing the World Sparrow Day celebration at APPTA Market, Mr. Davidson said, “Population of house sparrow is dwindling owing to a host of factors such as radiation from mobile phone towers, unregulated use of insecticides and mushrooming of concrete jungles in rural areas. Consequently, the sparrow has no proper habitat, food, safety and security to nest, breed and propagate its generation. Due to these reasons, the bird is facing extinction.”

With a view to improving its population and creating public awareness, Tribal Foundation launched a Sparrow Project eight years ago. Over 300 eco-friendly wooden nests for sparrows provided to the vegetable vendors are a success, as the chirping bird has started building its nests. A few vendors keep water in small vessels inside the market.

According to an estimate, the market boasts of around 1,000 birds, foraging the area and nearby paddy fields for food. They get safety and security from all kinds of predators as the traders are vigilantly guarding the nests.

The foundation has so far distributed over 500 boxes in APPTA Market and some residential colonies in the suburbs. A.D. Sobhana Raj, former Principal, Scott Christian College, said the only way to improve the population of sparrows was through artificial breeding.

A vegetable vendor, S. Vaikundaramani, said hearing the chirping and flirting of the sparrows was really an enjoyable experience. P. Subramanian, a banana vendor, said the market had become a thickly populated habitat of house sparrow.

S. Chelladurai, president of APPTA Market, distributed the eco-friendly wooden nest boxes to traders. A. Sivakumar and M. Arun, Forester of Kanyakumari Forest Division, participated.

Ban conversion of farm lands for other purposes: Farmers

Organic Farmers' Association has urged the government to impose a ban on conversion of farm lands for other purposes.

A resolution was passed at the 13th conference and training programme of the association here on Saturday.

The other resolutions passed at the conference were: the government should ensure direct disbursement of subsidy to the farmers, ensure sustainable livelihood programme for the farmers, issue Rs. 3,000 as monthly incentive to them, ensure a blanket ban for acquiring agriculture lands for Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and residential purposes and withdrawal of the Land Acquisition Act.

The association also urged the government to include organic farming in curriculum of educational institutions.

T. Doss, district president of the association, presided. M. Meena Dev, Chairman, Nagercoil Municipality, released the conference booklet. The first copy was received by Joint Director of Agriculture (in-charge) Ponkaatha Perumal and Personal Assistant to Collector (Agriculture) M. Nizamuddin.

Prizes for the best stalls in the conference were given by A. Mariya James, secretary, Rural Uplift Centre.

Exhibition of farm inputs conducted

The highlight of the day-long agri summit organised by the Confederation of Indian Industry Salem here recently was the exhibition of farm inputs.

Firms such as L and T, Suntech Gears, Texmo pumps, Suguna pumps, Arjun Energy Systems, Sun Edison Agro Power, and Jayshree Food Products had put up stalls to showcase their products. The stall of Sun Edison explained energising the pump sets using solar energy produced with the help of photovoltaic module. It also informed the farmers about the subsidy provided by the Union Ministry of New and Renewable Energy through National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development for commissioning solar pump sets.

The Victus Labs, Coimbatore, explained the climate smart farming techniques, where the farmers should be able to handle plant stress during high heat conditions and moisture stress. K. R. Arunkumar, technical

director of Victus Labs, said that his company had plant stress management products.

The agri meet was jointly organised by the Sona College of Technology. V. Jayaprakash, principal, Sona College of Technology, presided over the inaugural session. K. M. S. Rajeshkumar, chairman of the CII Salem, said this was the maiden attempt of the CII to help the farmers.

Reaping rich dividends through vegetable farming

A local self-help group (SHG) in the Kallyasseri panchayat here is scripting a success story by cultivating vegetables.

Irinavu Haritha Swayam Sahaya Sangham has turned eight acres of fallow land at Aravadithava into a vegetable farm. The patch of land on the bank of a natural pond had been left fallow till two years ago as the number of farmers declined over the years. This abandoned area now yields a good harvest of vegetables that the SHG says are free from pesticides.

A press release on the activities of the SHG says that the Agriculture Department, Agriculture Technology Management Agency, and the Irinavu Service Cooperative Society helped transform the land that had a thick undergrowth into a vegetable garden.

The group also says that required organic ingredients were added to the soil after a detailed soil test. Snake gourd, bitter gourd, beans, pumpkin, ash gourd, tomato, brinjal, spinach, and chilli are cultivated here. The SHG also says in the release that its initial worries about marketing its produces soon vanished as people came to their garden to buy farm-fresh vegetables. The group had built a traditional “cooler” on the ground with mud and bricks to keep their produces, it has been rendered useless as the demand exceeds supply.

Encouraged by the success of their initiative, the SHG is going to expand their farming activities in the area.

The 60-member SHG has employees, daily-wage labourers, and students. It is planning to market a local cucumber variety — Irinavu Cucumber. An exhibition garden on precision farming has also been set up by the group in the area.

The group says that its success ensured that it could repay the bank Rs.2 lakh it had borrowed for meeting initial expenses.

Organic farming fete

Organic Agricultural Fest, under the aegis of the Agricultural Department in collaboration with local agencies, began at Sreekantapuram here on Sunday.

The festival was inaugurated by district panchayat president K.A. Sarala.

Part of the fete

An agriculture exhibition, a photo exhibition, and a seminar are part of the organic agricultural fest.

— Special Correspondent

‘Raksha’ launched in Kozhikode



‘Raksha,’ the Kerala Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences University (KVASU)’s project for controlling stray dog menace, was officially inaugurated in Kozhikode on Sunday.

Though implemented as a pilot project in Thiruvananthapuram, the project is being implemented in its true sense for the first time under the aegis of the Kozhikode Corporation, which is bearing all the expenses for the sterilisation and rabies vaccination of the stray dogs in its limits.

Inaugurating the project, Minister for Agriculture and Animal Welfare K.P. Mohanan said preventing procreation was the only way to control the menace.

Administering rabies vaccines was an additional precautionary measure, he added. Mayor A.K. Premajam presided over the function.

A five-day sterilisation camp, under the Animal Birth Control (ABC) project of the Kozhikode Corporation, was also launched on the occasion.

The Corporation's job is to capture dogs from each ward during these five days, protect them in captivity for a day and prepare them for the surgery to be performed by expert surgeons from the KVASU's Veterinary College at Pookode in Wayanad in a specially designed Veterinary Critical Care unit.

The captured dogs, both male and female, are sedated before they undergo a Laparoscopic surgery.

Post surgery, the dogs are protected for another four days while they are administered antibiotics. The Rabies vaccine is administered just before they are left back on the streets.

To eliminate the possibility of native dog breeds getting extinct, the Corporation has to also take steps to protect selected pure-breed dogs and encourage members of the public to adopt them.

An ABC Support Group was formed to enable this as well as to ensure public participation in the project.

Meet to encourage young farmers

The Centre of Excellence in Environmental Economics (CEEE) under the Kerala Agricultural University (KAU) and the All India Radio are joining hands to organise a Yuva Karshaka Sangamam (Young farmers' meet), an initiative to encourage youth to take up agriculture.

The conclave to be held on March 25 at Regional Theatre, Thrissur, is expected to provide a platform for interaction between scientists, leading farmers and young agriculture entrepreneurs.

Policy support

KAU officials said the current market and policy support were attracting large number of educated youth towards farming, both as individual enterprises and group activity. The active presence of Non-Governmental Organisations and youth organisations in this sector was acting as a driving force.

“Consequent to increased public awareness on food safety, the thrust on micro-level farming - in terraces, backyards and even in public places - has increased. The literate mass in Kerala is pursuing and aiding safe food production through partial and modified revival of homestead farming. Attracting and retaining youth in agriculture is not a mere slogan. More and more of them pursue specific areas in farming and

make use of modern methods of information-sharing and marketing. When some focus on collection, multiplication and spread of traditional varieties, some others focus on restoring traditional food diversity (yams, leafy vegetables, tubers, foodgrains) and gather the traditional knowledge in this regard. The social media such as Whatsapp and Facebook are being successfully tapped by them,” said P. Rajendran, Vice Chancellor, KAU.

Interviews with young entrepreneurs had brought to light the possibility to ensure sustainability of safe food production and ecosystem health with the active support of the youth, said Dr.P. Indira devi, Head, CEEE.

“It is in this background that a one-day workshop is being organised for the young farmers. The major objectives are encouraging effective information-sharing, promoting organic/eco-friendly agriculture, facilitating a platform for sharing, documenting and highlighting the experiences of the young farmers to project successful models, providing technical support to improve the profitability of farming, disseminating the culture of eco-friendly farming practices and organic farming,” she said.

KAU Vice Chancellor, Directors of Research and Extension, AIR Station Director, scientists and farmers would partake in the event, she said.

Scientists caution farmers of banana weevil attack



Scientists of the Agricultural Research Station (ARS) and Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), Virinjipuram have cautioned banana growers in Vellore to keep an eye on banana pseudostem weevil attack on the plantation. A team of scientists had recently spotted high incidence of pseudostem weevil attack on a banana field at Kavasampattu.

R. Rajendiran, director of Tamil Nadu Rice Research Institute, Aduthurai, along with M. Pandiyan, professor and head of ARS and KVK and scientists from ARS, Virinjipuram spotted the pest attack during a visit to a field recently.

The banana pseudostem weevil is a serious attack on bananas. The pest affects varieties of bananas such as “karpuravalli”, “mondan”, “rashthali” that is cultivated in large areas of the district, officials said.

“At least 4,000 hectares of land are under banana cultivation in the district. The incidence of this pest attack is found high in poorly maintained fields. It also spreads to nearby fields,” Mr. Pandiyan said.

Scientists said that being a monophagous pest, the weevils multiply in area where banana is cultivated continuously. This was the case with the farmer at Kavasampattu who has been continuously raising bananas on one acre of land, he added.

Both larvae and adult pest can cause severe damage. As adults are strong fliers, it can move from plant to plant. In the grub stage, it can make extensive tunnels in the leaf sheaths and bore into the pseudostem.

How can farmers detect this pest attack? Scientists said the affected trees show small pin-head size holes on the lower leaf sheath and pseudostem, gummy exudation from the pseudostem, yellowing and withering of leaves, decaying of peduncles resulting in immature ripening of fruits. Infested plants have dull yellow green and floppy foliage, while heavily infested ones produce small bunches and are easily blown off by the wind, scientists said.

“Farmers should keep the plantation area clean and neat. The fallen leaves should be removed and the area should be free from waste to prevent this pest attack,” he said.

A. Suganthi, agricultural entomologist suggested that farmers take up management measures such as use of healthy planting materials and burning of severely affected stems.

Traps can also be laid for the weevils by cutting and placing old pseudostems. Adult weevils were attracted to the cut stems to lay eggs. Chemical application can also be done for effective management of the pest by using Tamil Nadu Agricultural University’s banana stem injector.

However, pesticides should not be applied after emergence of the bunch.

Professor Pandiyan said that farmers have been cautioned of this pest attack. “If they spot the pest attack, they can bring the samples immediately to KVK,” he added.

Water scarcity hits prospects of good yield of red chillies



Farmers who had raised red chillies in several parts of Uppilliyapuram block in the district are a worried lot because of the poor monsoon and shortage of water for irrigation. A number of farmers, who have raised the crop on rain-fed belts, have incurred huge loss due to sharp fall in yield.

Farmers said that they had cultivated the variety during the Tamil month of ‘Purattasi’ in anticipation of rains. But the failure of monsoon had disappointed them to a great extent.

According to official sources, the area under cultivation of red chillies had got reduced to 40 hectares this season from the usual 100 hectares. Apart from the non-availability of water for irrigation, pest attacks had compounded the problem.

The drought-prone condition together with the pest attack had brought down the average per acre yield from 1.5 tonnes to just 500 kg, say the Horticulture Department source.

They said that the drought-prone condition was a factor conducive for the pest attack in red chillies.

In Uppilliyapuram, the crop is mainly raised in Erakudi Badharpettai, Reddiyapatti, and Okkarai villages. January and February was the peak period when the crop was harvested but most farmers had abandoned the crop in their fields, as it had withered away. Chikathambur and

Nagalapuram villages were major belts in Thuraiyur block for red chillies.

A number of farmers of Chikathambur near Thuraiyur said that they had incurred a huge expenditure for raising the red chillies but the yield was so poor that they had not even harvested the crop.

They plead for adequate compensation for the loss in yield.

Life term awarded

A court here has awarded life imprisonment to a farmer for beheading a youth.

According to Public Prosecutor M.S. Dorai Muthuraj, S. Mariappan (36) of Nalli near Sattur in Virudhunagar district, who was working abroad, married one Meena of Kuruvikulam. When he returned to India with the aim of securing a job here, Meena asked her husband to continue in the earlier work. As he refused, Meena committed suicide, which paved way for enmity between Mariappan and Meena's cousin Sangili Madasamy alias Sangili (32) of Kuruvikulam.

Though Mariappan was cited as an accused in the suicide case, he was acquitted by a court which worsened the enmity further.

Against this backdrop, Sangili beheaded Mariappan at Sankarankovil in 2011.

Cotton auction

Cotton was auctioned for Rs. 10.5 lakh at the Kolathur Regulated Market functioning under the Salem Market Committee on Saturday.

A total of 66 farmers of Kolathur and surrounding villages had brought 1,000 bags of cotton and 250 bags of groundnut for the auction. Traders from Tirupur, Magudanchavadi, Konganapuram, Gobichettipalayam participated in the auction. While the cotton was auctioned for Rs. 10.5 lakh, the groundnut was auctioned for Rs. 4.20 lakh. R. Sellathurai, secretary of the Salem Market Committee, presided.

14 new mobile Maveli Stores

The Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation (Supplyco) will open 14 mobile Maveli Stores in the State in the next fiscal, Minister for Food and Civil Supplies Anoop Jacob has said.

Speaking after inaugurating a Supplyco supermarket at Panamaram here on Saturday, Mr. Jacob said that the mobile Maveli Stores would be stationed in high range and backward regions of the State. The government had been actively intervening in the market to stabilise the prices of essential commodities and 13 such commodities were being distributed at a subsidised price through Supplyco outlets. Measures had been initiated to convert those Maveli Stores that had a turnover of Rs.10 lakh a month to supermarkets. As many as 30 Maveli Stores would be converted into supermarkets in the initial phase,

Such a move would help ensure better services to the public, the Minister added.

Mr. Jacob said that when the Supplyco had started paddy procurement by providing minimum supportive price, there were 40,000 farmers registered under the scheme and now their number had increased to 1.72 lakh.

Training programme for farmers held

Sugarcane farmers from Marayur and Kanthallur were given training at the Sugarcane Breeding Institute, Coimbatore, as part of a project submitted by the Marayur and Kanthallur Krishi Bhavans for helping farmers to improve production through innovative methods of cultivation. As many as 23 farmers participated in the programme that provided awareness on modern ways of farming .

– A Correspondent

5,857 tonnes of fertilizer ready for distribution

Kanyakumari district had 5,857 tonnes of fertilizer ready for distribution to farmers, said Collector Sajjansingh R. Chavan here on Friday.

Addressing farmers' grievance day meet, Mr. Chavan said 35,884 coconut saplings had been distributed to the farmers during 2014-15. Till March 18, 581.50 tonnes of paddy seeds, 67.76 tonnes of dhal seeds and 0.050 tonnes of vegetable seeds were also given away to the farmers.

Follow norms, says Krishi Kendra review panel



A high-level panel set up to examine and review the performance of Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVKs) has recommended strict adherence to norms.

“In the case of NGOs, their credentials of dedicated working for espousing the cause of farmers and development of agriculture may be thoroughly examined before sanctioning KVK. The basic norms and criteria of quality sizeable land and potential of the host organisation to effectively implement the KVK should not be compromised,” it said in a report submitted to the government.

The committee, headed by former Agriculture Secretary J N L Shrivastava had submitted its report last month and The Indian Express has obtained a copy of the 46 page report exclusively. The panel also has called for an emphasis on skill development.

“As per instructions from PMO, Skill Development training for rural youth has to be given more emphasis by KVK...The process of skill

development may be strengthened by establishing linkages of KVKs with National Skill Development Council,” the report says.

The Indian Express on May 16, 2013 had reported that proper procedure was often overlooked in the allotment of KVKs, and that former agriculture minister Sharad Pawar had personally intervened to recommend some NGOs runs by powerful politicians and their relatives in violation of norms.

The committee, which was constituted by Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh on December 15, submitted its report last month.

The panel, which visited just four KVKs located near Delhi (three run by Agriculture Universities and one run by an NGO), found that “KVKs lack expertise in the area of processing and value addition; agro-meterology; agri-business; and diagnostic services.”

It also recommended KVKs to forge PPPs at the district level to technically support the initiatives of “private extension service providers”.

The Indian Express had reported that these KVKs get up to Rs. 2.50 crore per year but there is no system of evaluating their performance. The committee has recommended that apart from the quinquennial review, “external evaluation may also be initiated for critical monitoring and evaluation of KVKs”. The report also says that the number of Zonal Project Directorates may be increased for better monitoring.

Giving due importance to the Northeast, the committee has recommended to ICAR to “create one more coordinating and monitoring unit in the region.” The panel has also recommended that KVKs should be linked up with Sansad Adarsh Gram Yojna and Pradhanmantri Sinchai Yojna and

MNREGS, adding that they should “proactively identify suitable technologies, service providers, experts and organisations.

The KVK scheme is funded by the Centre and there are 641 centres in the country. Of these, 99 are run by NGOs.

THE HINDU BusinessLine

To boost exports, Centre may revive interest subvention plan

With exports declining for three consecutive months in an uncertain global market, the Centre is looking at reviving the interest subvention scheme to give select sectors a boost.

The Commerce Ministry is working out the details of the scheme, which would entitle exporters of beneficiary sectors to get credit at a subsidised interest rate.

“The proposal would be first sent for approval of the Expenditure Finance Committee and then the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA),” an official from the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) told *BusinessLine* .

There is, however, no clarity yet on when the Foreign Trade Policy, which includes incentive schemes to support sagging exports, would be announced.

“Although there is a general expectation in the Commerce Ministry that it will be unveiled on April 1, there is some uncertainty as the Commerce Minister will be out of the country during the month-end,” the official said.

Priority list

The interest subvention scheme, if finalised, could be announced either as part of the FTP or independently.

“It is part of the non-Plan expenditure of the government and is not directly related to the FTP,” the official added.

While products from the small-scale sector and labour-intensive industries remain in the priority list of items being considered for the interest subvention scheme, sectors that hold potential for growth such as pharmaceuticals and certain engineering items are also in the running, the official added.

The rate of subvention, earlier pegged at 2 per cent, is also to be finalised. “It all depends on the level of expenditure the EFC is comfortable with,” the official said.

Exporters’ choice

The previous interest subvention scheme, that expired last April, included items such as handicrafts, carpet, handlooms, readymade garments, processed agriculture products, sports goods, toys and a few engineering items.

To find out the effectiveness of the previous interest subvention scheme, the government has approached the National Institute of Bank Management, Pune, to do an impact analysis.

Exporters have long been calling for revival of the scheme as cheaper finance could help them retain their share in the increasingly competitive global market.

“Ideally, we would want all sectors to be covered under the subvention scheme because most have taken a hit, but at least the crucial ones, both small and big, need to be included,” said Ajay Sahai from exporters’ body FIEO.

The Commerce Ministry is also trying to analyse the reason for the decline in exports in the last three months.

It is mostly due to a combination of weak world demand, falling value of major currencies such as the Euro and the Japanese Yen, which is making exports dearer.

Time the govt fixed the urea problem

The subsidy skew in favour of nitrogenous fertilisers has seriously compromised soil quality



Soil rich Budget wise Akhilesh Kumar

There has been a serious anomaly in the policy framework for fertiliser for the last five years. It was expected that this would be addressed in this year's Budget, but that did not happen. The anomaly is that urea is under direct control. Its MRP is fixed by the government and subsidy is variable.

Its price has been extremely low for several years. Other fertilisers such as NP/NPK (phosphorus and potassium) have been under indirect control through the nutrient based subsidy (NBS) policy since April 2010.

Under the NBS policy, subsidy is fixed and manufacturers have the freedom to fix MRP within "reasonable limits". Due to a cap on subsidy and the rising international market prices, MRP has gone up significantly in the last five years.

The extremely low price of urea and high prices of other fertilisers has led farmers to overuse urea. There is a serious imbalance in the use of fertilisers, leading to a decline in the response of yield to fertiliser use. This has been adversely affecting agricultural productivity.

The ratio malady

The NPK ratio, which is a measure of balanced fertilisation, is highly adverse. At a macro level, the desirable NPK ratio is 4:2:1.

When the policy framework was almost the same for urea and other fertilisers, NPK ratio at the national level was 4:3:2:1, quite close to the desirable level. In 2013-14, it deteriorated to 8:2.7:1 and in Punjab and Haryana it was as bad as 38:6:1 and 53:11:1 respectively.

According to the Economic Survey 2013-14, “For each unit of K, 8.2 units of N are being put into the soil, instead of the 4 units required. The incremental output from the excessive 4.2 units of N is zero or somewhat negative. This purchase of urea, beyond what is required, works out to roughly 50 lakh tonnes. Farmers and government are wastefully spending Rs. 8,540 crore on this. These costs are ultimately paid by the consumers as higher food prices and higher taxes, in return for a zero or negative impact upon agricultural output.”

The report of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) recommends that subsidy on urea be reduced, while enhancing it on P&K to arrest the hugely adverse NPK ratio: “Fertiliser subsidy, which has increased by more than five times during the last ten years, must be restructured and rationalised. Since the adoption of NBS, the retail prices of P&K fertilisers have risen while the price of urea (N) has remained fixed. The differential between the prices of urea and P&K fertilisers has widened leading to excess use of N at the expense of P&K fertilisers. The price of urea needs to be increased by at least 15 per cent and the subsidy enhanced on P&K fertilisers to reduce their effective MRPs keeping the fertiliser subsidy constant.”

Urea-centric policies are perpetuating imbalance in the use of fertilisers. The ministry of petroleum and natural gas is proposing to re-prioritise the allocation of domestic gas; priority for NP/NPK has been relegated to last position, whereas urea has been pushed up to fourth place. This means urea subsidy will go up.

Right the balance

There is an imbalance in subsidy rationalisation. Urea has been subsidised to the extent of 75 per cent, whereas 25 per cent is realised from the market. The subsidy on phosphatic fertilisers, namely diammonium phosphate (DAP) and muriate of potash (MOP) is 35 per cent

and 41 per cent, respectively, against over 80 per cent before the introduction of NBS.

The policy framework should be uniform for urea and other fertilisers by bringing urea also under the NBS policy regime. The MRP of urea should be increased only in a phased manner.

The import of urea should be de-canalised. Fertilisers should be accorded highest priority in the allocation of domestic gas, and equal priority between urea and P&K fertilisers should be maintained.

Soil testing based application of customised fertilisers should be encouraged. Apart from primary nutrients, NPK fertilisers fortified with secondary/micro nutrients should be brought under the NBS policy and incentive provided to encourage such usage.

A problem of plenty for soyabean



Soyabean prices have been moving sideways over the last five months after a turbulent spell last year. A sharp surge in global production has led to excess inventories of the crop triggering a price correction.

According to data from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), global soyabean production in 2013-14 (October to September) was 283.74 million tonnes, a 5 per cent increase from the previous year.

The USDA estimates global production will shoot up another 11 per cent to 315 million tonnes in the 2014-15 season. This surge in production is expected to result in inventory of 89.53 million tonnes by the end of the season. This oversupply in the global market is expected to keep soyabean price subdued.

Domestic Scenario

Export demand for soyabean meal (used as a feed ingredient) is a major driver of prices in the Indian market. Soyameal exports have dropped in the last one year. Data from the Solvent Extractors Association (SEA) shows that meal exports in the current financial year (2014-15) stand at 6.14 lakh tonnes as of February. This is a sharp 76 per cent lower when compared with the 25.59 lakh tonnes exported over the same period the year earlier.

There are two main reasons for the drop in exports. BV Mehta, Executive Director, SEA, says, “Indian soyabean meal is priced higher by at least \$50. This is what has turned the importers’ focus towards cheaper avenues”. Secondly, “Iran, one of the major importers of Indian soyabean meal, has started importing cheaper meal from Brazil and Argentina after the sanctions on the country were removed” adds Mehta. In the current fiscal between April 2014 and February 2015, exports to Iran have fallen to 3.62 lakh tonnes, down 68.5 per cent compared with the year earlier, shows recent data from the SEA.

Export woes to continue

A strong or immediate revival in the Indian meal exports is not likely. Ankita Parekh, Research Analyst, Nirmal Bang Commodities, says, “Indian exports could take a further hit as fresh arrivals are set to enter the market now from the South American countries.”

What may also impact domestic soyabean prices is the increase in soya oil imports due to cheaper price. India’s soya oil imports have more than doubled to 6.83 lakh tonnes during the November 2014-February 2015 period from 3.39 lakh tonnes in the same period the previous year. “Cheaper imports will keep domestic soyabean price under pressure. The oil price has to go up to encourage domestic crushing which in turn can push the soybean price higher”, says Mehta. The other factor that could keep the prices under check is the lower demand from China. Perna Sharma, Research Analyst, Emkay Global Financial Services says “Consumption in China which accounts for 60 per cent of the global demand is expected to remain subdued and grow at a much slower pace”.

Technical Outlook

Short term: Soyabean futures contract traded on the National Commodity and Derivatives Exchange has been range-bound between

₹3,300 and ₹3,500 since late December. It is currently poised near the lower end of the range at ₹3,345. A reversal from ₹3,300 in the coming days can keep the contract inside the range for some more time. However, the bias is bearish for the contract to break below ₹3,300. Such a break can drag it lower to ₹3,200 in the short term.

On the other hand, a strong break above ₹3,500 can ease the downside pressure and take the contract higher to ₹3,600. But such a rise looks unlikely as the key 200-moving average resistance is poised at ₹3,495.

Medium term The reversal from the October low of ₹2,871 seems to be losing steam. It suggests that the recent rally is just a corrective bounce of the overall downtrend that has been in place since May last year. Having said that, the medium-term outlook is bearish. The contract can revisit ₹3,000 levels in the coming weeks. A break below ₹3,000 can drag it to ₹2,880. It will also increase the risk of the fall extending to ₹2,700 over the medium term.

Traders with a medium-term perspective can go short on the contract. Stop-loss can be placed at ₹3,650 for the target of ₹2,900. Intermediate rallies to ₹3,500 and ₹3,600 if seen can be considered to accumulate long positions. The outlook will turn bullish only on a strong break above the 21-month moving average hurdle. But such a strong rise looks unlikely.

Rabi rice acreage down 10%

The area under rice in the Rabi season has dropped some 10 per cent to 38.27 lakh hectares (lh) compared with 42.56 lh during the corresponding period a year ago, data released by the Agriculture Ministry on Friday which showed.

Preliminary data on the sowing of summer pulses showed that 0.18 lh had been covered in Gujarat, 0.14 lh in Karnataka, 0.10 lh in West Bengal, 0.09 lh in Uttar Pradesh and 0.05 lh each in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.

The area under summer oilseeds had been reported as 2.19 lh in Karnataka, 1.26 lh in Odisha, 1.22 lh in West Bengal and 0.87 lh in Gujarat.

Meanwhile, Minister of State for Agriculture Mohanbhai Kundaria informed Parliament that Rabi crops, such as mustard, wheat, potato and pulses had been hit in numerous parts of the country due to the unseasonal rain and hailstorms.

Foodgrains production will likely to decline by 3.2 per cent to 257.07 million tonnes (mt) in the current season to June.

The Minister said that according to reports, around 27 lh under Rabi crops had been affected. Around 614.69 lh has been sown for the Rabi seasons, 535.35 lh under foodgrains and 79.34 lh with oilseeds.

Union Minister Radha Mohan Singh will visit Maharashtra and Kundaria is undertaking a visit to Gujarat while Sanjeev Balyan, also Minister of State for Agriculture, is already in Uttar Pradesh to assess crop damage.

Meanwhile, the Agriculture Ministry has assigned officials to different States for assessing the damage to crops .

RP Singh, Director, Directorate of Cotton Development, will assess the damage in Maharashtra; AK Tiwari, Director, Directorate of Pulses Development in Madhya Pradesh; MC Diwakar, Director, Directorate of Sugarcane Development in Uttar Pradesh; Narender Kumar, Director-in-charge, Directorate of Wheat Development in Haryana; A Ansari, Statistical Investigator, Directorate of Millets Development in Rajasthan; Subhash Chander, Joint Director, Directorate of Millets Development in Gujarat.

Mahesh Kumar, Assistant Director, Directorate of Wheat Development will survey Punjab.

Decision soon on extending duty-free import of pulses

The government may allow duty-free import of pulses beyond March as the production in this rabi season is expected to fall compared to last year.

Speaking to media on the sidelines of a trade event on pulses, Keshav Desiraju, Secretary, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, said the Centre will take a decision on extending the duty free import of pulses in the next few days.

Assuring the industry of a stable export-import policy, he said: “We must also safeguard the interests of farmers, traders and consumers. We cannot have a healthy market if the needs of these stakeholders are not met.”

The pulses processing companies have urged the Centre to set up a ‘Dal Mill Upgradation’ fund of Rs.5,000 crore, similar to the Technology Upgradation Fund set aside for the textile industry.

Pravin Dongre, Chairman, Indian Pulses and Grains Association, said the 20,000 dal processing mills are fragmented with an average processing capacity of 2-5 tonnes a day.

“We need large mills with the latest technology to process around 300 tonnes a day. The investment to set up such units works up to Rs. 100 crore as procuring land alone will be a major expense. We need government support in the form of interest rate subvention and duty-free import of machinery,” he said.

Large-scale mills will not only deliver better quality products but also reduce cost and cut wastage by extending the shelf life of dal at the consumer end, he said.

Dongre expects pulses imports this year to cross an all-time high of four million tonnes recorded last year due to lower domestic production and rising demand.

Pulses prices will start increasing from June due to lower output, he said.

Lift restrictions

Urging the State governments to lift the stock restrictions as done in Rajasthan, he said contrary to common belief prices tend to go up in the long term with such limits. Prices may fall initially as traders and farmers offload their stock at the same time. The stock availability will be constrained when it is required the most. Chana production in this rabi season is expected to fall 15 per cent to 55.63 lakh tonnes due to early withdrawal of monsoon last year and hailstorm early this year damaging crops in Madhya Pradesh, said GGN Research which conducted the study on behalf of IPGA.

However, lentils and yellow peas output may increase to 64 per cent and 32 per cent to 7 lakh tonnes and 6 lakh tonnes, said the report that was unveiled in the conference.

IPGA plans to hold Pulses Conclave at Jaipur next year to conduct various activities in line with the UN declaring 2016 as the year of pulses.

Consortium to improve green cover in Tamil Nadu

A Consortium of Industrial Agroforestry (CIAF) has been launched at Forest College and Research Institute to improve the green cover of Tamil Nadu.

Good response

About 100 members from farming community, research organisations, wood-based industries, nursery growers, plantation developers, tree felling groups, producer organisations, tree grower societies, Forest Department, Krishi Vigyan Kendra, banks, NGOs and insurance companies have enrolled as members of this consortium.

The members have avowed to carry forward the momentum of the ICAR-sponsored NAIP project on “value chain in industrial agroforestry in TN,” which came to a close in 2014.

The value chain model, forest college sources said, not only brought all the stakeholders to a common platform but also helped improve agroforestry plantations by popularising high-yielding improved clones of Casuarina, Melia, Ailanthus, Subbabul, Dalbergia, Kumizh and Kadham.

Wood farming growth

A study of the achievements of the seven-year project revealed that the area under contract wood farming (involving 25,000 farmers) in the State had crossed 70,000 acres; wood productivity up from 80 to 100 tonnes/hectare to 150 and the rotation period reduced to three years.

Farmers have benefited from the minimum procurement price and the industries dependent on wood supplies such as paper, plywood, matchwood and biofuel-from assured supply of quality raw material. The credit-linked insurance cover boosted the sentiments of the farmers, the findings noted.

Greengrocer revolution



Fresh take More than 90 per cent of the country's ₹4.5-lakh-crore market for fruits and vegetables is unorganised courtesy krishi naturals

With a hoot, the green-and-white three-wheeled electric carts arrive on the streets of Bengaluru each morning. Equipped with tablets, Bluetooth printers and GPS, these battery-operated carts go from street to street selling fruits and vegetables sourced fresh from farms around the IT capital. Packed at the FreshWorld warehouse, each item has a price tag, buyers are given receipts and the warehouse inventory is automatically updated after every transaction.

In Mumbai and its suburbs, fresh produce from Nasik, Pune and Sholapur reaches households by nine every morning. Harvested the previous evening, the produce is loaded on trucks before midnight and arrives by 3am at the warehouse of Go4fresh in Navi Mumbai. The staff work till 7.30am to clean, grade and pack the fruits and vegetables, which customers have ordered online a day before.

And in Vadodara, Ketan Parmar is helping farmers' cooperatives sell their vegetables and milk to households in the city.

As more than 90 per cent of the country's Rs. 4.5-lakh-crore fruit-and-vegetable market is unorganised, a new movement is underway to take fresh produce directly to consumers, minus the intermediaries.

With rising incomes, consumers are willing to spend an extra buck to buy food products that promote health and wellness. A report by consultancy firm Technopak, however, observes that independent retail is not adequately geared for food and grocery selling in urban India. "Corporatised retail needs to find innovative ways of tapping into this surfeit of opportunities on the platforms of nutrition, portability, and convenience," says the report.

Straight-to-plate pioneers

It is this frontier that several new players are trying to conquer. While all of them aim to take fruits and vegetables straight to plate, they are also attempting to carve out niche strengths. After all, they have to differentiate themselves from roadside vendors.

FreshWorld has its eco-friendly, high-tech carts; Parmar's Krishi Naturals is taking the organic route to Gujarati households; and Go4fresh is

positioning itself as a one-stop-shop for farmers to sell their day's harvest, irrespective of differences in quality.

Parmar and his team explain to farmers the benefits of organic cultivation and train them to use natural inputs such as jaggery, pulse flour, and cow dung and urine.

Other retail segments have seen major transformations, but fruits and vegetables continue to be sold through the age-old method of street vending, says FreshWorld founder Rajiv Rao. His company wants to bridge the gap by “marrying the art of street vending to the science of modern retail.” His company is using technology to position products differently, as well as to promote professionalism and punctuality in services.

Maruti Chapke, CEO and founder of Go4fresh, has used his years of experience at Reliance Fresh and Future group's Big Bazaar to fine-tune the farm-to-fork model. In organised retail, stores struggle to find and retain trained manpower. “Home delivery solves that issue,” he says.

Parmar discovered firsthand the advantages of dealing directly with consumers during a pilot project he conducted in the Saurashtra region for his social entrepreneurship studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. “I learnt that selling to businesses (B2B) is not a good idea as they are not willing to pay a premium for freshness or quality.” After completing his course, he launched Krishi Naturals in 2012 to directly offer consumers organic vegetables under the Hariyali Topli brand.

Avoiding fresh mistakes

Aside from focusing on the front-end to improve customer experience, each of these companies is innovating the back-end of operations. Typically, a farmer's produce arrives at a collection centre before moving to a warehouse, followed by wholesale and retail sellers, and finally to consumers. The farm-to-home players load the produce directly from farms to trucks, ferrying it to the warehouse for direct dispatch to consumers.

As supply chain is the key to profitability, no stone is left unturned to master what the retail biggies have failed to learn in the fresh produce business.

“You can win only through supply chain efficiencies and not opportunistic buying from farmers,” says Chapke. His strategy is to buy

all the produce from a farmer. “If I buy only the best quality fruits and vegetables, the farmer won’t be able to find buyers for the rest of his produce. So we buy everything and sell according to the quality to various categories of consumers,” he says.

Chapke’s primary target is individual consumers, who are sold the best grade fruits and vegetables, followed by Horeca (hotels, restaurants and canteens) and the institutional buyers manufacturing juices, pickles and jams and similar products. “This way, we ensure that farmers are offered the most convenient and fair means of selling their produce. And it helps us get best rates as we are buying in bulk.”

His company, Go4fresh, calls its nearly 60 associate farmers one day in advance with its requirements based on the orders received on its website. Krishi Naturals follows a similar strategy, but on a weekly basis. “We know our consumers, their preferences and order a week in advance,” says Parmar.

The key ingredient for these start-ups is undoubtedly near-accurate forecasting. “Since we know the orders, we plan our purchase accordingly and inform the farmers beforehand,” says Chapke.

Chopping losses

According to the Central Institute of Post-Harvest Engineering and Technology (CIPHET), Ludhiana, fruits and vegetables worth Rs. 13,300 crore go waste annually owing to the absence of cold-storage facilities and inefficient handling. These start-ups are plugging the loopholes. “As we telephone farmers directly, the inventory is very small. Any leftovers can be sold to other customers. So wastage is marginal,” says Chapke.

This, in turn, helps cut losses. Krishi Naturals is operationally profitable, while FreshWorld is confident of turning profitable by March 2016 and Go4fresh by June this year. Importantly, this profitability is neither at the cost of farmers’ livelihoods nor does it make the products unaffordable for consumers.

Prices are 10-25 per cent higher than those of roadside shops or carts. But consumers are not complaining. “I am assured of the quality and don’t have to spend hours cleaning my leafy green vegetables. All the products are clean and sorted. And I know my spinach has not been grown around Mumbai’s railway tracks but in farms,” says Hemangi K Sharma, a regular buyer at Go4fresh.

For Nitya Patel, Krishi Naturals is synonymous with reliable quality. “I don’t have to worry about picking the best for my family. Their produce is organic and certified. Above all, it is fresh; not re-hydrated with water repeatedly,” she says.

Branded veggies

To find more buyers, Krishi Naturals representatives make presentations at housing societies. “If you have a family doctor, why not a family farmer — this is the point we make. If we are brand-conscious about clothing and footwear, we should be brand-conscious about food also,” Parmar reasons. The approach seems to be working, as demand has grown and Parmar is now trying to rope in more farmers.

Chapke’s Go4fresh is tapping Mumbai’s big housing societies by creating micro-entrepreneurs — residents who sell its fruits and vegetables within the society. Each day, the micro-entrepreneurs receive and sell produce worth Rs. 10,000; any leftover produce is sold to institutional buyers. They each earn about Rs. 800 a day.

FreshWorld recently opened a convenience store as well. “Through this format, we will be close to consumers. We don’t have to be in a mall... the neighbourhood store concept will work well for us,” says Rao.

He wants to increase the number of carts from 22 to 60 by the year-end and expand to other cities. Similarly, Go4fresh plans to enter Delhi within a year. Parmar is eyeing Surat as the next destination, followed by Mumbai.

As the demand for fresh produce meets supply from a growing community of internet-savvy farmers who are reaping the best rates for their harvest, there is a greengrocery revolution in the making.