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THE HINDU

Bees are vanishing: U.N. report

World food stocks in danger from decline in pollinator population



Pollinators are harmed by habitat loss and pesticides.— File photo: Reuters
Many species of wild bees, butterflies and other insects that pollinate plants are shrinking toward extinction, and the world needs to do something about it before our food supply suffers, a new United Nations scientific mega-report warns.

The 20,000 or so species of pollinators are key to growing fruits, vegetables and cash crops. Yet two out of five species of invertebrate pollinators, such as bees and butterflies, are on the path toward extinction, said the first-of-its-kind report. Pollinators with backbones, such as hummingbirds and bats, are only slightly better off, with 1 in 6 species facing extinction.

“We are in a period of decline and there are going to be increasing consequences,” said report lead author Simon Potts, director of the Centre for Agri-Environmental Research at the University of Reading in England.

The trouble is the report can’t point to a single villain. Among the culprits — the way farming has changed so there’s not enough diversity and wild

flowers for pollinators to use as food; pesticide use, habitat loss to cities; disease, parasites and pathogens; and global warming.

The report is the result of more than two years of work by scientists across the globe who got together under several different U.N. agencies to come up with an assessment of Earth's biodiversity, starting with the pollinators.

“The variety and multiplicity of threats to pollinators and pollination generate risks to people and livelihoods,” the report stated.

“These risks are largely driven by changes in land cover and agricultural management systems, including pesticide use.”

Dennis vanEngelsdorp, a University of Maryland bee expert, said, “Everything falls apart if you take pollinators out of the game. If we want to say we can feed the world in 2050, pollinators are going to be part of that.”
— AP

Economic Survey bats for GM crops



It also said the regulatory process needs to be evolved to address safety concerns of GM crops.

Stating that Indian agriculture has become a “victim” of its own success, the Economic Survey has favoured the use of hybrid and GM seeds along with better MSP, irrigation and national market facilities to boost crop yields and for bringing in major transformation in the sector.

The survey said safety concerns related to hybrid and genetically modified (GM) seeds need to be debated and tested so that their introduction is facilitated in the next six months. It also said the regulatory process needs to be evolved to address safety concerns of GM crops.

The Economic Survey for 2015-16, which was tabled in Parliament on Friday suggested the policies must incentivise raising of production of pulses and oilseeds, for which the country is heavily dependent on imports.

“Indian agriculture, in a way, a victim of its own past success — especially the green revolution. It has become cereal-centric and as a result, regionally biased and input intensive. Rapid industrialisation and climate change are raising the scarcity value of land and water, respectively,” the survey observed.

It said agriculture requires a “new paradigm” shift by focusing on raising yields with less inputs, prioritising cultivation of less water intensive crops, especially pulses and oilseeds, supported by favourable MSP regime and backed by better procurement system and research. Pointing out deep segmentation in agri-market, the survey said unified national market would boost farmers’ income.

On controversial GM crops, it said: “Concerns about affordability of hybrids and GM seeds, environmental and ethical issues in cultivation of GM crops, risk to the food chain, diseases spread and cross pollination have resulted in their non-introduction. These issues needs to be debated, tested, evaluated, so that introduction of hybrids is facilitated in the next six months.”

The adoption of hybrid and high yielding variety seeds is one definite pathway to raising productivity in Indian agriculture, it added. Stating that a host of studies have demonstrated significant net benefit of GM crops, the survey said, “Nonetheless there are good reasons for some of the public apprehensions on GMOs. Therefore, the regulatory process in India needs to evolve so as to address the concerns in a way that does not come in the way adapting high yielding technologies and rapidly moving towards the world’s agro-technological frontier.”

The government has allowed only Bt cotton for commercial cultivation and there is a moratorium on Bt brinjal. Currently, it is examining a proposal on

GM mustard seeds despite there being severe opposition to it among green activists.

Survey questions India's stand at WTO

The economic survey questioned India's unequivocal stance at the World Trade Organisation (WTO)-level negotiations on the need for developing countries to have an effective and easy-to-use 'Special Safeguard Mechanism' (SSM) to protect 'poor and very vulnerable' farmers from import surges and price dips.

The SSM is a tool, which, if given, will permit developing nations like India to temporarily hike tariffs to counter import surges or price falls of farm products. Differences between the developing and the developed world over the SSM issue had even led to the WTO talks breaking down in July 2008.

Though WTO members agree that developing countries should have an SSM, the differences are on allowing developing nations to hike tariffs above the commitments they (developing nations) made in the WTO's 1986-94 Uruguay Round talks.

Pointing out that as per the Uruguay Round decisions, countries including India, could raise tariffs up to a "very high level" even without the SSM, the economic survey questioned: "Why then, for a long time, has India been asking for the right to impose SSM, which is in effect asking for even more freedom to determine agricultural policies? The answer is not very clear."

The observations come even as the WTO members began work this week at the global body's headquarters in Geneva to take forward negotiations on the Doha Development Agenda on the basis of the decisions arrived at during the December 15-19 Ministerial Conference (WTO's highest decision-making body) in Nairobi.

The Nairobi Ministerial Declaration had incorporated the right of developing nations to have recourse to an SSM. The declaration also said SSM negotiations will be pursued in dedicated sessions of the Committee on Agriculture in Special Session.

During the Nairobi meeting, Commerce Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had said the SSM was important for developing nations to address import surges and price dips due to heavily subsidised imports of farm products from rich nations.

Pointing out that an instrument similar to the SSM was available to a select few WTO members (including rich nations) for over two decades, she said, therefore, the demand for SSM for developing nations was reasonable and pragmatic.

The survey said India's real need for SSM arises in relation to few items including some milk and dairy products, some fruits, and raw hides.

On these items, the survey said, India's tariff bindings (commitments at the WTO) are around 10-40 per cent which can be uncomfortably close to India's current tariffs, limiting India's options in the event of import surges.

“If that is the case, India should call for a discussion on SSM not as a generic issue of principle but as a pragmatic negotiating objective covering a small part of agricultural tariffs. Perhaps, in this instance, lofty theologizing about freedom and sovereignty needs to cede to mundane haggling over hides and hibiscuses,” the survey said.

Preserving water

The ban on tank irrigation in Kolar district has led to a borewell drilling spree, but the remedy is here. By S. Vishwanath



The sun beats down hot in February itself in Kolar district as you make your way to the tank behind a large hillock. The rains in November have been good and the tank is half-brimming with water, which is a beautiful sight. The open wells just below are full, yet the command area where rice should have covered the entire expanse green appears brown.

The farmer below is busy getting a borewell drilled. It has gone down to a depth of 700 ft., he says and will cost a lakh of rupees. This is puzzling and he explains that there is a ban in the district on using the tank for irrigation. The idea seems to be that it should be used to refill the aquifer by acting as a percolation tank.

A brief examination indicates that the tank has not be de-silted for years and virtually all recharge has stopped. In Kolar, upto 1.8 metres of standing water can evaporate in a year. Is it therefore that the magical resource called water which appeared as unusual rains of November will simply be gone with the wind? This seems a sheer waste of a scarce resource.

The question that emerges is why are we unable to fully understand the interface between surface water and groundwater? Why are we not able to put simple systems such as a water level measure, a evaporation measure and basic measures of understanding percolation?

There was a Tank Users Group constituted some years ago under a World Bank-aided programme called 'Jala Samvardhane', but that group is defunct.

Evaporating

In tank after tank, there is water yet it seems to simply be evaporating. Each tank is different from the other and we are simply unable to work with any degree of granularity to manage them. Bland district-level orders is how we operate. Empowered local groups are not a legacy we seem to leave.

The ban on tank irrigation has led to a borewell-drilling spree, thus depleting the very groundwater it seeks to conserve. The borewells will soak up electricity which was not required under tank irrigation and the very same paddy, a water-intensive crop, will be grown.

Only for the rich

Only the rich farmers who are capable of drilling borewells will be able to grow a crop. A situation of distress in agriculture will be further negatively reinforced.

By not understanding scientifically and hydro-geologically the interface between surface water and groundwater, by not understanding the capacity and behaviour of shallow and deep aquifers and by not influencing correct behaviour for the water use, we create and reinforce a water crisis with the best of intentions.

It is in the interest of us as a water-short and an agrarian society that we develop quickly a deeper understanding of aquifers and work with a unit which can preserve water from evaporation and if managed well provide drinking water security to people and livestock.

That would be water wisdom.

Odisha Cabinet nod for mega forest conservation plan

Odisha Cabinet on Friday decided to take up forest conservation through Vana Surakshya Samitis in villages bordering forest areas.

The State Cabinet chaired by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik gave its go-ahead to 'Ama Jungle Yojna', a plan for undertaking regeneration of forests over 2,60,000 hectares from 2016-17 to 2021-22

The State government will spend Rs 1170.02 crore for the scheme. "The main objectives of the scheme is to achieve sustainable forest management in the project area through forest restoration initiatives, along with providing income and livelihood opportunities to the forest dependent communities, so that the pressure on adjoining forests is relieved," said Suresh Mohapatra, Forest and Environment Secretary, here on Friday.

Fund to the tune of Rs. 521 crore would be sourced from Compensatory Afforestation Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA), Rs. 285 crore from State plan, Rs 322 crore from Mahatma Gandhi National Rural

Employment Guarantee Act and rest from National Rural Livelihood Programme, Mr. Mohapatra said.

In another important decision, in order to remove various practical difficulties being faced in implementation of Odisha Protection of Interests of Depositors Act, 2011 and for providing more teeth to the legislation, the Cabinet had approved several amendment to the Act.

“The legislation will be made more stringent. Steps have been taken to remove confusion between Section 7 which provides for compounding of offences and Section-6 which stipulates punishment for offences. Section-7 is proposed to be omitted,” said R. Balakrishnan, Finance Secretary.

“Amendment of Section 6 is proposed to be made more penalizing by enhancing the quantum of fine for persons managing fraudulent financial establishments,” said Mr. Balakrishnan.

Giving priority in payment to small depositors, it is proposed to include the legal heirs of such depositor in case of his or her death. Small depositor has been defined as the one who has deposited not more than Rs.10000.

The State Cabinet also gave its nod to constitution of Agriculture Cabinet under chairmanship of Chief Minister for taking policy decisions regarding development of agriculture.

M.P. reduces VAT on CSD cars, green vehicles and soya milk



Wife of Madhya Pradesh Finance Minister Jayant Mallaiya applying tilak on his forehead in Bhopal on Friday before he leaves for the Assembly to present the annual budget for the State.— Photo: A. M. Faruqui

The Madhya Pradesh government announced reducing VAT on a number of items such as CSD cars, soya milk and dialysis machine, while making battery-operated vehicles tax-free in the budget for 2016-17 presented in the Assembly on Friday.

Presenting his fourth budget, Madhya Pradesh Finance Minister Jayant Mallaiya also announced an entry fee of 6 per cent on goods in view of revenue “loss” due to the e-commerce trade.

The budget estimates a revenue surplus of Rs. 3,509.81 crore for financial year 2016-17. “The total expenditure is estimated to be Rs. 1,58,713.04 crore for 2016-17 while appropriation is estimated to be Rs. 1,70,753.99 crores,” Mr. Mallaiya said.

“The fiscal deficit for the year 2016-17 is estimated to be Rs. 24,913.64 crore,” he said.

Mr. Mallaiya said the State which has received four Krishi Karman Awards in a row and the one is working tirelessly to make agriculture a profitable venture has earlier made tax free 38 agriculture equipment. And continuing with this practice, it has proposed to make machines used for making bio-fertilisers and for milk processing as tax-free.

With an aim to check growing pollution, the State has also proposed to abolish five per cent tax on all types of battery-operated car and rickshaw, he said.

The State has also proposed to abolish five per cent tax on bags and envelopes made from bio-degradable material.

The government has proposed to reduce VAT on cars purchased from canteen stores by soldiers from 15 per cent to 4 per cent.

The government also proposed to extend the facility of relaxation in tax to goods sold from Border Security Force (BSF) and other Central Forces canteens on line Canteen Stores Department of Army, he said.

The minister said the government has also proposed to reduce VAT from 14 per cent to five per cent on number of items including soya milk, dialysis machine and its consumables, bio-fuel based and smoke free stoves and induction cook top parts and accessories.

The government has also proposed to impose VAT of five per cent on bicycles costing above Rs. 10,000. It has proposed to raise VAT from five per cent to 14 per cent on glass mirror and gas geyser among other items.

Referring to losses incurred to the State due to e-commerce trade, the government has proposed to levy tax at the rate of six per cent on entry of goods in the State.

Under the development head, the State has proposed to enhance budget of Agriculture and allied activities from Rs. 5158.37 crore (2015-16) to Rs. 5521.01 crore (2016-17), Irrigation and flood control from Rs. 6,255.83 crore to Rs. 7,494.92 crore.

Industry and Mining from Rs. 1940.93 crore to Rs. 2780.52 crore, Transport from Rs. 3929.44 crore to Rs. 4658.18 crore, General Economic Services from Rs. 661.01 crore to Rs. 926.76 crores and Social Service from Rs. 26,206.14 crore to Rs. 30,346.91 crores. - PTI

Global demand for FCV tobacco on the rise: Tobacco Board Chairman

Higher prices to continue for bright grades, he says

Flue cured Virginia (FCV) Tobacco auctions in Andhra Pradesh began on a promising note with bright grades notching up a price of Rs.140 per kg. and the trend could continue in the coming days as the global market for Flue Cured Virginia (FCV) Tobacco is picking up. “The global market for FCV Tobacco is picking up again and it has shown in the form of higher prices at the FCV tobacco auctions in Karnataka. We anticipate an increase of 3-5 per cent in trade volumes this year,” Chairman of Tobacco Board Manoj Kumar Dwivedi told *The Hindu* on Friday. Mr. Dwivedi who is presently Joint Secretary, Ministry of Commerce is holding additional charge as Chairman of Tobacco Board for the last five months.

A few factors like decrease in production of tobacco in Brazil and African countries due to shortfall in rains have also raised the demand for FCV tobacco. This development comes even after countries like Brazil and China, the two largest tobacco producing countries, which have devalued the currency.

FCV tobacco contributes a substantial amount of excise revenue of Rs.19,936 crore and a foreign exchange of Rs.5,652.17 crore (2014-2015). The Board keeping in mind the tumultuous turn of events last year, including suicides of tobacco growers saddled with mounting debts and low prices on auction floors, has taken steps to ensure that prices remained high in the present season. “We are continuously engaging the tobacco traders and ensuring that prices remain remunerative to growers. We are maintaining a balance between growers demand and trade concerns. The auction season divided into three phases is scheduled to end in 120 days,” Mr. Dwivedi said. By capping the production to 120 million kg, the Board has ensured higher demand for FCV tobacco. Growers have been support in the form of fertilizer and seed inputs and in spite of the absence of a regular Chairman and Executive Director, the Board has ensured that cropping schedule went on uninterrupted.

The Board is also working on Ministry of Agriculture to ensure that crop diversification scheme and crop insurance scheme are implemented from the next season, as announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Centre’s relief for 2015 kharif season crop loss lower than expected: Minister

Against Central team’s recommendation of Rs. 2,000 crore, sanctioned amount was only Rs. 1,541 crore



Karnataka is facing one of the worst droughts in the last four decades, says Krishna Byre Gowda

Even as the 10-member Central team held consultations with the State government here on Friday on crop losses due to drought in the rabi season of 2015, Karnataka is still concerned as the Centre did not consider loss assessment in full by its own team for the kharif season earlier.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting with the Central team, Minister of State for Agriculture Krishna Byre Gowda said the State had sought relief of Rs. 2,528 crore for the crop loss during kharif season of 2015. The Inter-ministerial Central team which assessed the situation had put the compensation level around Rs. 2,000 crore. However, the Centre had decided against the recommendation by its own team by giving a compensation of only Rs. 1,541 crore, he said.

He said though the crop loss due to drought in Karnataka was one of the worst in the country, the Centre had not given adequate compensation when compared to what Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh had received, he alleged.

Karnataka is facing one of the worst droughts in the last four decades, and has suffered crop loss of Rs. 7,208.86 crore in the 2015 rabi season. The State had sought compensation of Rs. 1,416.93 crore and the Central team was here to assess the situation, he said.

Revenue Minister V. Srinivas Prasad said the drought situation was the worst in 12 districts of the north interior Karnataka where 62 taluks had been declared 'drought-hit'. The major reservoirs in this region have only 36 per cent storage, the worst in the last 15 years, he said. Similarly, 52 per cent of minor tanks have gone dry while the storage in the remaining minor tanks is less than 30 per cent.

Expectations fly high

Be it the textile mills, micro, small and medium-scale enterprises (MSMEs) or the engineering units here, it had been a year of slowdown in the market.

They are looking for government support to improve their competitiveness. With just two days for the Union Budget, *The Hindu* looks at some of the demands of these units.

Man made fibre

Reduction in duties on manmade fibre is the main demand of the textile industry here.

With the share of man made fibre just 20 per cent of textile exports, it is imperative to make it price competitive.

With the tariff protection for imports, local producers are taking advantage of the import parity pricing policy, said chairman of Southern India Mills' Association M. Senthil Kumar.

The advantage for the cotton-based industry, which accounts for 80 per cent of the exports, is that cotton being an agricultural commodity, is available at international price.

The Union Government should consider removal of the 5 per cent import duty, 4 per cent special additional duty, and anti-dumping duty on manmade fibre and filament, and reduce the excise duty from 12.5 per cent to 6 per cent.

The government should allocate adequate funds for the revised technology upgradation fund scheme it announced recently and also for the arrears pending under the scheme, he said.

Engineering

Engineering companies from developed countries are sourcing components and sub-assemblies from India and Indian companies are directly exporting castings and motor pumps too.

The demand is more for specialised castings and CNC machining capacities. Hence, the engineering sector requires a Technology Upgradation Fund (TUF) on the lines of the one available for the textile sector.

This is one of the long-pending demands of the engineering units here, according to president of Southern India Engineering Manufacturers' Association V. Lakshminarayananaswamy.

When GST is implemented, the rate for pumps should be 11 per cent instead of the proposed 23 per cent plus 1 per cent.

With the Make in India initiative, the government should promote quality and acceptability of engineering products made here in the international market.

Allocations for the Credit Linked Capital Subsidy Scheme should be enhanced for low cost automation and to encourage investments in plant and machinery, including testing equipment, he said.

The export oriented units now enjoy exemption from Cenvat and VAT. However, it is reported that the exemption will be removed under Goods and Services Tax. The EoUs should be considered mini special economic zones.

MSMEs

The micro, small and medium-scale enterprises (MSMEs) have sought special treatment in areas such as market assistance, bank finance, working capital, term loans and Government procurement. These units also require support for development of brands.

The Union Government should establish industrial estates in districts where the concentration of MSMEs is high. MSMEs in the orange category (of Pollution Control Board) should get one-time clearance from the board. It is learnt that several applications for assistance from NABARD for pending for assistance and the Ministry of MSME is verifying these. The delay in receipt of subsidies is affecting the potential of the MSMEs, said Mr. Lakshminarayananaswamy.

According to S. Ravi Kumar, president of Coimbatore Tirupur District Micro and Cottage Entrepreneurs' Association, benefits of MUDRA scheme should be available to micro units and a separate MUDRA Bank should be opened.

This should service micro units as SIDBI does to small-scale units.

‘Revamp committee’

The farmers made an appeal for revamping the District Production Committee.

Speaking at the farmers grievances day meeting, S. Jayaraman said that the members who were originally nominated were not attending the meeting.

The need for revamping the committee was brought to the notice of the authorities repeatedly, but no action has been taken in this regard.

Even at today’s meeting no member of the committee was present, he alleged.

He also alleged that the officials who held senior posts and have decision taking powers were not attending the farmers’ grievances day meeting.

A senior official of the Agriculture Department informed the farmers that the department has already received order from the government for setting up a new production committee.

The new members will be selected soon, the official added.

Farmers in Kalaburagi burn their fingers in kharif, rabi seasons

They lost much of the Bengal gram and jowar crops owing to the failure of rains



The farmers have lost most of their red gram crop, which is their main stay, because of the failure of the monsoon. —File photo

The last agricultural season was one of the worst ever seasons for farmers in Kalaburagi district. Unlike previous years, when they could make up the loss suffered in kharif season in the rabi season, the farmers have burnt their fingers in both the seasons this year.

This year, the farmers lost their kharif crops and red gram, a byseasonal crop which is their main stay, owing to the failure of the monsoon in the beginning of the season and during the crucial flowering season. Also, it was a total washout in the rabi season too as they lost much of the Bengal gram and jowar crops with the weather gods playing a cruel game on their lives.

According to the official figures available with *The Hindu* on Friday, rabi crops on 87.58 per cent of the sown area were completely lost. Those who had taken up sowing rabi crops such as jowar, Bengal gram, and oilseeds ended up losing all that they invested. Of the 4.54 lakh hectares (ha) on which the rabi cultivation was taken up in the district, crops on 3.98 lakh ha was totally lost.

The loss suffered by the farmers who took up Bengal gram and oilseeds was heavy with almost all the crops withering due to lack of moisture in the soil because of the failure of the rains. Of the 1.96 lakh ha under Bengal gram, crops on 1.77 lakh ha was totally lost and even in the remaining areas the yield was less than the normal.

Similarly, farmers who had taken up sowing of oil seeds on 43,336 ha had lost their crops in 36,295 ha.

The situation was also not favourable for farmers who had taken up cereals, including jowar. Of the sown area of 2.02 lakh ha, crops withered on 1.78 lakh ha.

Among taluks, it was Aland and Afzalpur taluks which bore the brunt the most in the rabi season with the total loss reported in 80,885 ha in Aland taluk followed by 78,119 ha in Afzalpur. Jewargi taluk is close behind with a loss in nearly 60,000 ha. In Chincholi, crops on 47,255 ha was lost, in Chitapur, crops on 46,862 ha, in Kalaburgi taluk crops on 41,579 ha and in Sedam, crops on 43,451 ha was totally lost.

Aland and Afzalpur taluks the worst-hit in the rabi season, according to official figures

Effects of drought evident, says Central team

“I cultivated jowar in 10 acres of land. As against an anticipated yield of 10 quintals per acre, I got only one-and-a-half quintals per acre, with which I could not even recover the cost of inputs,” Shivaiah, a farmer in Vanageri village, told the Central team that visited Koppal district on Thursday to assess the damage caused to rabi crops due to the failure of rain.

Endorsing his views, Ramadas, Joint Director of Agriculture, explained that jowar suffered 60 per cent loss while sunflower was completely lost. The farmers, who had gathered there, exhibited the jowar and sunflower crop to impress upon the team about the gravity of the situation and also the extent of loss suffered by them due to the failure of rain.

Educating farmers

Mr. Ramadas responded in the affirmative to a query by the team on educating farmers on taking up cultivation of alternative crops and water conservation methods.

The Central team, comprising K.K. Mishra, Deputy Secretary, Union Ministry for Power, Brajesh Srivastav, advisor to Union Ministry of Water and Sanitation, Ramakrishna, Under Secretary, Union Ministry of Rural Development, R.B. Kowl from the Finance Department, went round several villages and made field visits to assess the extent of loss, besides interacting with farmers.

The team members sought detailed information from the officials concerned. The team also saw the works implemented under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, watershed development and the like.

Speaking to presspersons, Mr. Mishra said that that the district was reeling under drought condition was evident. It had suffered loss of crop caused due to the failure of rain and shortage of fodder, he said and added that the team would submit its report within a week.

Later, through a power-point presentation, the severity of drought and the loss caused by the failure of rain was explained to the team.

M. Kanagavalli, Deputy Commissioner, and R. Ramachandran, Ballari Zilla Panchayat Chief Executive Officer, accompanied the team during the tour of the district.

Govt. to create research-oriented jobs in fisheries sector: Minister

Nearly 224 students, who graduated from the Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies (KUFOS), received their degrees at the convocation held here on Friday.

Fisheries Minister K. Babu, who is the Pro-Chancellor of the varsity, conferred the degrees on students and presented medals to the rank holders.

The Minister said the government would create innovative research-oriented employment opportunities to attract professionals graduating from fisheries institutions in the State.

He said skilled human resource would be utilised effectively to improve the fisheries sector in the State.

KUFOS support

The Minister also pointed out that the government would implement research and development programmes in the sector.

The Fisheries Department would seek the technical support of KUFOS to boost inland aquaculture in the State, he said.

Indian Council of Agricultural Research Deputy Director J.K. Jena, in his convocation address, said there was a need to give greater focus to the development of entrepreneurship programmes in modern aquaculture, value addition and other emerging areas.

University Vice Chancellor B. Madhusoodana Kurup and Pro-Vice Chancellor K. Padmakumar were among those who attended the convocation.

Agri-polytechnic to come up at Haripad

An agri-polytechnic will start functioning at Haripad from the next academic year. The institution was officially inaugurated by Agriculture Minister K.P. Mohanan.

The curriculum will include agriculture, dairy and fisheries. Application of modern gadgets and latest farming methods will also be taught at the institute.

The two-and-a-half-year course will be spread over five semesters, which include practical sessions.

In order to help the local populace, as many as five seats at the polytechnic will be reserved for residents of Onattukara.

The decision on reservation for locals was taken in response to a demand by Home Minister Ramesh Chennithala, who also represents Haripad in the State Assembly.

The project is part of the government's initiative to make Kerala an organic State.

As many as five seats at the institution to be reserved for local residents

ACP has an outlay of Rs. 8,008 crore

The Annual Credit Plan for Madurai district released by Collector K. Veera Raghava Rao has a plan outlay of Rs.8008.40 crore to be made available through bank loans in the financial year 2016-17.

Importance

to agriculture

Releasing the plan, Mr. Rao said that considering the prominence of agriculture in the district, Rs.5169.8 crore, which is around 65 per cent of the total outlay, had been allocated for such activities.

Collector said that importance had also been given to food and agro-processing units with an allocation of Rs.607.91 crore as they enable people to take up entrepreneurial roles.

Another Rs.205.26 crore has been allocated for creating infrastructure for agriculture like rural godowns and market yards.

The Micro, Small and Medium Scale industries sector has been allocated Rs.1521.3 crore and an outlay of Rs.384.44 crore has been planned for educational loans to students.

Representatives and senior officials from all the banks participated in the meeting.

Mr. Rao urged them to start working on achieving the loan targets right from the beginning of the financial year instead of focusing at the end.

‘Genomic technologies ensure food and nutritional security’

Eminent scientist Mahender Thudi of the International Crop Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), Hyderabad, has said that genomic technologies are vital for the food and nutritional security in developing countries.

Dr. Mahender, who was the convener of the one-day national seminar on “Omic Technologies for Better Food and Nutrition”, here on Friday, said that there must be a special emphasis on the genome sequencing research to come up with increased production and better nutritional value of the food grains.

Path-breaking research

His path-breaking research work was published in a high impact factor international journal such as ‘Nature’.

He stated that genome sequencing holds the key for future food security in the context of global climatic change and other challenges posed by the nature and man-made threats to agriculture.

In his presentation at the seminar, he dwelt on the topic of “Genomic technologies for better chickpeas to ensure food and nutritional security in developing countries”.

He along with Dr. Manish Pandey presented recent genome sequencing work on chickpea and groundnut which also got published in the internationally-acclaimed science journal, ‘Nature’.

Plenary session

The seminar witnessed plenary sessions on genes to genome technologies, genomic sequencing and trends in research aimed at food security and nutritional improvements.

Renowned scientists, including Kuldip Singh Dangi, Arun Kumar of CDFD, Professor Emeritus Subash Karampuri, Prof. N .Rama Swamy of the Kakatiya University, Dr. Pindi Pavan of Palamuru University and others from Prof. Jayashankar Agriculture University, Agriculture Research stations also took part.

Policy decisions

Seminar organising secretary Dr. Praveen Mamidala, said that the findings of the seminar and papers aimed at improving food and nutrition would be sent to policy-makers for further action and use as inputs in the policy decisions.

‘Give relief to all affected farmers’



A farmer airing his grievance at a meeting in Tiruchi on Friday. — Photo: B. Velankanni Raj

Farmers representatives have urged the district administration to ensure that all genuine farmers who suffered crop damages during the monsoon rain were given compensation.

Raising the issue at the meeting, P.Viswanathan, president, Tamizhaga Eri Mattrum Attru Pasana Vivasayigal Sangam, said farmers who had raised small onions, cotton and maize suffered losses due to the damage caused by the monsoon rain. Though the government has sanctioned compensation, all those who have suffered damages have not been given the relief. A proper survey of the affected farmers should be conducted in Thuraiyur, Manachanallur and Pullampadi taluks and the relief amount should be given to the omitted farmers, he said.

R.Raja Chidambaram, State Secretary, Tamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam, said disbursement of relief should be streamlined and all affected farmers should be compensated.

According to official sources, about Rs.7.51 crore has been sanctioned as compensation to farmers for crop damages in rainfed cotton in about 10,137 hectares mostly in Pullampadi, Manchanallur, Thuraiyur, Uppilliyapuram and Musiri blocks. Compensation has also been sanctioned for crop damages in small onions and tapioca, official sources said.

Mr.Raja Chidambaram said the state government has recently formed a committee under the chairmanship of the district collector to inspect tanks and ponds in the district and allow farmers to collect silt from their beds. The process of granting permission should be simplified, he demanded. He complained that some of the banks were auctioning jewels pledged for crop loans by defaulting farmers much below their market value and urged the Collector to initiate steps to check the practice.

Supporting his complaint, P.Ayyakannu, state president, Desiya-Thennindia Nadigal Inaippu Vivasayigal Sangam, charged that some cooperative societies were also indulging in such irregularities in auctioning jewels pledged by defaulting farmers.

Mr.Viswanathan urged the district administration to take steps to desilt all tanks in the district as the State government has earmarked substantial sum for the exercise. He expressed disappointment over the State government's failure to announce waiver of crop loans in its interim budget.

Ayilai Siva Suriyan, district secretary, Tamil Nadu Vivasayigal Sangam, affiliated to the Communist Party of India, said that the new crop insurance scheme announced by the Centre should be implemented only through the Agriculture Insurance Company of India Ltd. and not through private insurance companies. Branches of the Agriculture Insurance Company of India should be opened in the districts and individual farmers should be compensated for crop losses, he demanded.

Farmers leave for Delhi

A batch of around 300 farmers belonging to the Tamil Nadu All Farmers' Coordination Committee left on Friday for New Delhi to participate in the human chain protest they have planned to stage before Parliament on March 2.

Its coordinator P.R. Pandian said almost all parties in the State have backed the demands of the delta farmers and that they hoped that the AIADMK would also support their demands.

The struggle in front of Parliament was to highlight the issues including constitution of the Cauvery Management Board, Cauvery Water Regulation and Monitoring Authority, dropping plan to build reservoirs across the Cauvery at Mekedatu and Rasimanal, extending CISF security to the Mullaperiyar Dam, among other subjects.

Farmers' grievances meeting held

Concerns over the laying of gas pipeline through farms and poor realisation of prices for various crops, dominated the proceedings in the grievances redressal meeting which the district administration held for agrarian community here on Friday.

S.R. Madhusootheran, a farmer and coordinator of Tamil Nadu Farmers Livelihood Protection Committee, said the district administration should take initiative to inform the authorities concerned about the need to make amendments in Petroleum and Minerals Pipelines (Acquisition of Right to User in Land) Act so that farmlands were not used for laying gas pipelines.

On crop prices, the farmers wanted the district administration to make market interventions. Collector S. Jayandhi assured the farmers from Dharapuram area of necessary steps when they raised concerns about the bio-medical waste treatment plant coming up in the area.

Falling prices of coconut dominates meet

No procurement; farmers forced to sell coconuts to agents



A group of farmers breaking the coconuts at the Collectorate in Thanjavur on Friday in protest against the fall in prices.

Steep fall in the purchase price of coconut and the consequent setback to growers echoed at the farmers' grievances day meet here on Friday.

District Collector N. Subbaiyan presided over the meeting which was attended by officials from various departments.

Samy Natarajan of the Tamilaga Vivasyigal Sangam raised the issue of coconut farmers suffering due to the sharp slide in the procurement price of coconut in recent months. Agitated growers have been forced to throw out the coconuts on the streets to give vent to their pent up anger, he said.

Mr. Natarajan alleged that procurement of copra was not in line with rules and regulations as there the procurement of copra itself has fallen. The Union and the State governments must intervene in the issue and provide succour to the growers, he added.

Backing him, another farmer V. Veerasenan of Ponnalarayankottai pointed out that Thanjavur district occupied the second spot in the State in coconut production and more than 40,000 hectares of land had been brought under coconut groves.

The State government had stopped copra procurement since 2012 and the Centre's support price and incentive were not adequate to cover the cultivation cost. Unfortunately, the State government did not announce the support price and incentive at all compounding the woes of growers.

These factors had forced the growers to sell their produce to the private buyers and traders who were fixing atrocious rates. The Central and the State governments must immediately intervene to save the growers, he demanded.

Coconut growers alleged that the unbridled import of coconut oil has adversely impacted on the coconut oil production in the domestic market consequent to which the copra procurement has not happened to the desired extent. They wanted import of coconut oil restricted to ease the situation.

Kakkarai Sukumaran wanted the banks and lending institutions to stop auctioning off jewel pledged by farmers with the institutions. He also demanded that the banks waive all loans got availed by the farmers.

Later a section of the agitated farmers walked out of the meet and broke coconuts at the entrance of the Collectorate to highlight their protest. Thanjavur district vice-president of the Tamil Nadu Vivasa Thozhilalar Sangam V. Jeevakumar, Arignar Anna Sugar Mill Cane Suppliers Association secretary Thozhagiripatti Govindaraj and others spoke.

Shoot rearing optimises profit for sericulture farmers

The new method simplifies feeding of the cocoons

An improvised technique in sericulture introduced by the Department of Sericulture has started paying dividends, with farmers earning profits. Farmers earn an assured profit that ranged between Rs. 60,000 and Rs. 75,000 — every 45 days, right from the initial period.

In course of time, as the mulberry crop — the main feed for the silk worms — develops, the profit is likely to rise as high as Rs.1 lakh.

The new method involves infection-free growth of the eggs under hygienic environment. It simplifies the process of feeding the cocoons. It has given way to the old and conventional method of rearing the cocoons in the trays.



V. Ganesh, sericulture farmer, shows the cocoons that are ready for sale at his Manapparai farm near Tiruchi on Friday.— PHOTO: A. MURALITHARAN

“I could not get adequate returns from sericulture farming because of the contamination caused to the silk worms,” said V. Ganesh, a sericulture farmer of Samuthiram village near Manapparai, who had earlier adopted the conventional method of rearing of silk worms in trays which was not hygienic. Further, the old technique was labour intensive, as mulberry had to be fed leaf by leaf, he said.

After having given up sericulture farming about a decade ago, he has now returned to rearing silk worms under the Tamil Nadu Sericulture Development Programme. “The shoot rearing technique has facilitated me to ensure hygienic and fast growth of silk worms.

“The rearing shed is well protected from pollution, infection and contamination. One has to enter barefoot after cleaning the feet with running water at the entrance to the rearing shed,” says D. Natarajan, Technical Assistant of Sericulture Department which has been releasing subsidy to the sericulture farmers.

Mr. Ganesh said he had set up 32 beds each measuring 10 feet by five feet. He could harvest one lakh cocoons weighing about 100 kg to 120 kg which will be readily marketed within a couple of days at Rs. 350 a kg.

“Thus, I could earn a profit of Rs. 60,000 every 45 days and the profit is likely to touch as high as Rs. 1 lakh in course of time,” he says with a sense of confidence, indicating the scope for prospects.

High investment

Mr. Natarajan said that farmers preferred hybrid silkworm and the department supplied chawkie worms which undergo moulting process twice enhancing their growth. The department supplies netrica nets. As the initial investment was high, the department extended subsidy equal to one-third of the estimated cost.

The department has been popularising the latest shoot rearing technology among farmers. “We are hoping to further increase the area under sericulture in the district,” he said.

· *Sericulture department popularising the new method to increase the coverage*

· *Farmers who set up 32 beds for cocoons earn up to Rs. 65,000 profit in 45 days*

Erode farmers sceptical of Avinashi-Athikadavu water project



Apprehensions about practicality of Avinashi-Athikadavu scheme were echoed by farmers during the monthly grievances redressal day meeting here on Friday.

Farmers wanted to know if the project was worth implementing since it envisages sourcing water from the Bhavani Sagar Dam which was already facing shortage for maintaining supplies to the ayacuts covered by Lower Bhavani Project canal, Kalingarayan Canal and Thadapalli-Arakankottai canal.

There was no scope for Bhavani Sagar Dam to have excess water. The Dam had brimmed only thrice in the last 20 years, Suba Thalpathi, president of Thadapallai-Arakankottai Ayacut Farmers' Association said.

District Collector S. Prabakar who chaired the meeting and PWD officials said the farmers could convey their apprehensions to the Committee formed recently by the State Government to study scope for environmental and forest department clearances. Years back, the State Government had forwarded Rs. 1,262 crore scheme for the Athikadavu-Avinashi project, but it was rejected by the Centre during 2011, the farmers were told. As regards GAIL scheme, farmers mooted the idea of the Central Government, the State Government and the company together sharing the additional cost of Rs. 400 crore for re-aligning the pipelines along National Highways. Farmers said it would be unfair to let them suffer due to the draconian provisions of the PMP Act.

Farmers urged the district administration to keep implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in abeyance so that more farm workers would be available.

Officials assured to address the demand of the farmers for conduct of indirect auction at the regulated markets in Gobi and Sathy for banana. An assurance was also given that a public hearing will be conducted before finalising the proposed common effluent treatment plant at Kadayampatti in Bhavani town.

'Bhavani Sagar Dam already facing shortage for maintaining supplies to the ayacuts covered by LBP canal, Kalingarayan canal and Thadapalli-Arakankottai canal'

Wild animals continue to raid crops: farmers

The problem of wild animals invading farms along Western Ghats and damaging crop surfaced at the farmers' grievance day meeting here on Friday.

Zakhir Hussein of Vadakarai said wild boars and elephants were causing extensive damage to the crop. While the boars damaged small plants and tubers, the elephants caused damage to even decades-old coconut trees.

“Losses mounting”

“At a time when farmers are getting a sale price of just Rs. 5 per coconut, the damage caused by the animals compounds the problem. The wild elephants crush down solar electric fences, bring down tall coconut trees within minutes and devour the fronds. If this situation of low selling price of coconuts and elephants damaging the crop continues, farmers will be forced to abandon farming and convert their lands into housing plots,” Mr. Zakhir said.

The farmers also complained that the measures being taken by the forest personnel to chase the animals back into the forest were inadequate.

“We don’t want the compensation of Rs. 500 per damaged coconut tree as we have to run from pillar to post to get certificates from three government departments. We appeal to the forest personnel to ensure a foolproof system to prevent wild animal invasion into the farms,” said S.T. Shaik Maideen, also of Vadakarai.

Plea for more DPCs

When farmers wanted more paddy direct procurement centres with adequate personnel, Collector M. Karunakaran said DPCs were functioning at 23 places in the district and two more would start functioning from Friday. He assured the farmers that steps would be taken to give money for the procured paddy on the spot as a section of the agriculturists complained of 48-hour delay in cash disbursement.

Dr. Karunakaran said surprise checks were being conducted at shops selling fertilizers, pesticides and other agro inputs and ‘stop sale’ order had been issued against 17 tonnes of fertilizers stocked in two shops in Shencottai taluk and a retail outlet in Maanur area.

Crop damage during northeast monsoon had been estimated at Rs. 4.88 crore and Rs. 2.21 crore was disbursed to farmers who suffered loss, he said.

“Forest personnel must ensure a foolproof system to prevent wild animal invasion into farms”

‘State suitable for raising medicinal, aromatic plants’



Students looking at medicinal herbs and spices during an exhibition conducted as part of a seminar being held by the AP Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Board at AU College of Pharmacy in Visakhapatnam on Friday. —Photo: K.R. Deepak

Andhra Pradesh is suitable for raising medicinal and aromatic plants and Chief Minister is encouraging the farmers to take up these crops, Commissioner for Ayush and CEO of AP Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Board D. Nalini Mohan said here on Friday.

These crops would be financially beneficial to the farmers and they would also receive crop loans and the government was also arranging e-marketing facility for exporting the product, Mr. Nalini Mohan said while speaking at the inaugural session of a State-level seminar organised by the APMAPD at AU College of Pharmacy.

AP was among the top three positions for the last 15 years in the cultivation of these plants. The drawback for the farmers raising plants for Ayurvedic medicines was that they lacked cold storage facility.

Regarding Ayush, he said 20 to 50 patients were visiting each of the 1,200 medical centres of Ayurveda, Unani and other Indian medical branches every day. Government was planning to set up 50-bed hospitals in each of 13 districts under PPP mode, he informed.

CEO of Koyal Foundation Krishna Rao, senior horticulture scientist Mutyala Naidu, a Girijan farmer Bhonja Rao, Principal of AU College of Pharmacy Rajeswara Rao, AGM of NABARD Prasada Rao, DFO Suryanarayana, Assistant Professor of Horticulture College (Venkata Ramna Gudem) D. Venkata Swamy and several others discussed management of medicinal and aromatic crops, marketing and other aspects.

A mini-exhibition on medicines made from plants was arranged and the products on display attracted attention of all.

Make full use of wastewater

In many small and medium towns, domestic wastewater is already being put to use by farmers. A look by S. Vishwanath

Summer is here and the scenario with the water storage in reservoirs is grim. It will be a tough ask to nurse them through to June when the rains are expected and that too only for drinking water. In such a water-scarce scenario, it is imperative we think of all forms of water, particularly wastewater, and put it to productive use. Sadly the State lacks a meaningful policy on urban water and sanitation management which would have encompassed the reuse of wastewater too. A simple wastewater policy as a guideline document to design projects and draw investments would be a good first step.

Here are some guidelines to consider while preparing such a policy:

It is important to differentiate between industrial wastewater and domestic wastewater. In no case should the two be allowed to be mixed.

Each city and town will have to develop its own strategy for managing wastewater. There could be a broad framework to understand and design schemes but no rigid template.

In many small and medium towns, domestic wastewater is already being put to use by farmers who grow all sorts of crops and vegetables with it. They make use of the nutrient component of the wastewater too as a supplement to fertilizers.

By pushing for safer use practice, by changing the crop palate, it may be possible to eliminate the need for wastewater treatment plants in many small towns, especially in arid and semi-arid parts of the State.

There is a strong component of ecosystem needs for treated wastewater. Wetlands and lakes can be kept alive and full provided the treatment is adequate. Fishing too is an activity which can be done in these tanks filled with treated wastewater.

Industrial, construction and other non-potable use of wastewater can have commercial potential especially where the opportunity cost of water is high. A market for wastewater can only be created by regulating groundwater in the surroundings from over-exploitation.

The reuse of wastewater can also be for recharging aquifers firstly by indirect means especially through lake and tank re-fillings and later by direct managed aquifer recharge.

Treatment technologies exist which can take wastewater to potable standards. They should be fully used in a scientific fashion by linking it with and blending with freshwater in river and stream flows and in lakes. Once a certain ecological journey has been undertaken by this wastewater, it can be used for potable purpose by overcoming the “yuck” factor.

S. Vishwanath

Need for reservoir at Kondapalli

Aim is to store Godavari floodwaters to meet the requirements of the capital

The year 2015 has been a watershed year for the areas that depend on the Krishna waters for cultivation of crops.

With utilisation of water over and above their allocated share by the upstream states of Karnataka and Maharashtra, the existing, ongoing, and proposed schemes on the Krishna are facing severe to acute shortage of water for irrigation, industrial, and even drinking purposes.

This situation was well predicted by engineers the moment the Central Government granted permission for raising the height of Alamatti Dam in Karnataka.

Andhra Pradesh has no alternative but to look to the floodwater of the Godavari to cater to its future needs. The capacity of the proposed tail-end dam on the river at Polavaram is just 75 tmcft.

The mammoth Polavaram project phase-I is scheduled to be completed by the State government by 2018.

Unfortunately, there are no reservoirs on the Godavari in the State.

The government has to plan for more reservoirs on either side of both the Left and Right Main canals of the Polavaram Project by lifting floodwater from these canals. There are a number of suitable places for locating reservoirs in the hills located upstream the Polavaram Left Main Canal (PLMC) that takes water to North Andhra.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the Polavaram Right Main Canal (PRMC).

There is, however, the possibility of developing four reservoirs with the cumulative capacity to store 30 tmcft at the tail-end of Budameru Diversion Channel near Kondapalli Reserve Forest.

The Kondapalli Reservoir would cater to not only the needs of the new capital but also the industries that would develop in the vicinity.

Former Superintending Engineer, who is an authority on the Polavaram Project, K. Haranath, said that as per the Hydraulics particulars of the project as approved by the Central Water Commission (CWC), the peak demand of PRMC was 12,600 cusecs. Out of this, the demand for Krishna Delta was 8,200 cusecs and the balance 3,400 cusecs was for the ayacut of the PRMC. But the PRMC was being executed with a head discharge of 17,500 cusecs.

Thus, there was a surplus discharge of 4,900 cusecs. Hence the total available discharge for Krishna Delta would be 13,100, which was more than the total required discharge of 11,754 cusecs for the ayacut of entire Krishna Delta. The total demand of 11,574 cusecs of Krishna Delta could be

met from the flood waters of Godavari and Budameru during the flood period of 90 days of August, September, and October months.

During rainy and flood days in River Krishna, the water from Budameru Diversion Channel is proposed to be pumped and stored in Kondapalli Reservoir, he said.

“After a day of rain, water is not released into the canals for two or three days. At such times, the water can be lifted to the Kondapalli reservoir and stored,” he said.

As the water would cater to the needs of the capital, funds going to be released by the Central Government for the building of the capital could be used for it, Mr. Haranath said.

The way forward

- *The Krishna failed to cater to the needs of the delta in 2015*
- *Over-utilisation of water by upper riparian States puts a question mark on various schemes on the Krishna*
- *AP has no alternative but to look to the floodwaters of the Godavari to cater to its needs*
- *Scope for four reservoirs near Kondapalli Reserve Forest*
- *Their cumulative capacity is 30 tmc ft*
- *Total demand of the Krishna Delta can be met from the floodwaters of the Godavari and Budameru*

Bees, other pollinators at risk, may hit food output

Bees and other pollinators face increasing risks to their survival, threatening foods such as apples, blueberries and coffee worth hundreds of billions of dollars a year, the first global assessment of pollinators showed on Friday.

Pesticides, loss of habitats to farms and cities, disease and climate change were among threats to about 20,000 species of bees as well as creatures such as birds, butterflies, beetles and bats that fertilise flowers by spreading pollen, it said.

“Pollinators are critical to the global economy and human health,” Zakri Abdul Hamid, chair of the 124-nation report, told Reuters of a finding that between \$235 billion and \$577 billion of world food output at market prices depended on pollinators.



Food output worth \$235 to \$577 billion depends on pollinators; study points to risks from pesticides, loss of habitat.

The food sector provides jobs for millions of people, such as coffee pickers in Brazil, cocoa farmers in Ghana, almond growers in California or apple producers in China.

Ever more species of pollinators are threatened, according to the study, the first by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) since it was founded in 2012. It was approved in talks in Kuala Lumpur.

IPBES is modelled on the U.N. panel on climate change, which advises governments on ways to tackle global warming.

“Regional and national assessments of insect pollinators indicate high levels of threat, particularly for bees and butterflies,” it said. In Europe, for instance, 9 per cent of bee and butterfly species were threatened with extinction.

The study pointed to risks from pesticides such as neonicotinoids, linked to damaging effects in North America and Europe. But it said there were still many gaps in understanding the long-term impact.

“It’s definitely harmful to wild bees, and we don’t know what it means for populations over time,” Simon Potts, a co-chair of the report and professor at the University of Reading in England, told Reuters.

The study also said the impact of genetically modified crops on pollinators was still poorly understood.

And it said the amount of farm output dependent on pollination had surged by 300 per cent in the past 50 years. The western honey bee, the most widespread pollinator managed by humans, produces 1.6 million tonnes of honey every year.

Still, the outlook was not all bleak. “The good news is that a number of steps can be taken to reduce the risks,” Dr. Zakri said.

Planting strips or patches of wild flowers could attract pollinators to fields of crops, and reduced use of pesticides or a shift to organic farming could also restrict the damage.

“There are some things that individuals on the ground can do,” Prof. Potts said. Smallholder farmers in Africa could let wild plants grow on part of their land, people in cities could plant flowers in their back gardens or window boxes.

In this file photo, part of a colony of bees are pictured on a beehive frame at the Apiarian Research Centre in Godollo, Hungary. Bees and other pollinators face increasing risks to their survival, threatening foods such as apples, blueberries and coffee worth hundreds of billions of dollars a year, the first global assessment of pollinators showed on Friday.

Rich feed off subsidies

India’s rich feed off subsidies worth over Rs. 1 lakh crore a year that are meant for the poor, according to the Economic Survey. And this figure only considers the subsidies on six commodities, two public utilities — the Railways and electricity — and one small savings scheme, the Public Provident Fund.

“There are a fair amount of government interventions that help the relatively better-off in society. In many cases, this takes the form of explicit

subsidisation, which is surprisingly substantial in magnitude,” the Survey said in a provocatively titled chapter ‘Bounties for the Well-off.’

The Survey classified the population on the basis of consumption data collected by National Sample Surveys. “Poor refer to the bottom 30 per cent of the population and the rich the top 70 per cent,” it said in a footnote. This categorises a sizeable portion of the non-poor as ‘rich’.

“These numbers are striking and have one policy implication: any tax incentives that are given, for example, for savings, benefit not the middle class, not the upper middle class but the super-rich who represent the top 1-2 per cent,” the Survey added.

Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian, the Survey’s lead author, argued that most commodities primarily consumed by the rich have a very low tax rate, in effect subsidising them at the cost of the poor. For example, the rich consume 98 per cent of the gold in the country, and yet gold is taxed at only 1-1.6 per cent (the Centre and the States combined).

The rich avail of an 88 per cent subsidy on kerosene, amounting to Rs. 5,501 crore and 86 per cent subsidy on LPG, amounting to Rs. 40,151 crore.

*“Commodities that are primarily consumed by
the rich have
a low tax rate”*

Traders threaten to stop import of pulses and wheat products

Odisha Byabasayee Mahasangha (OBM), a trader body, has renewed its threat to stop import of pulses, wheat and wheat products if the State government fails to withdraw VAT on these products By April 1 next.

“The State government had assured us to withdraw VAT on pulses, wheat and wheat products. But there has been no further development yet. If the government fails to keep its own promise, we will be forced stop import of these products,” said Sudhakar Panda, general secretary of OBM.

Mr. Panda said, “the State government on August 13 had decided to constitute a committee which would look into concerns of traders over imposition of VAT. The committee was constituted. We do not know if any report of the committee has been submitted. But we have made our stand clear if any concrete decision is not taken before April 2 next, we will surely stop import.”

The OMB has requested the State government to increase stock limit of pulses and edible seeds. The trader body has also asked suppliers of different commodities to maintain transparent price mechanism. “It has come to our notice that mall operators are offered lower price for commodities which we are buying at higher rate. If that continues in future, we will be forced to stop transaction with them,” he said.

Coming to the crunch



Brownies, cocoa almond cookies, sesame raisin bar, crispy Mexican chips, crispy Banana chips and spinach crackers at Snalthy Photo:S. Siva Saravanan

Three foodies, local ingredients and state-of-the-art technology offer crisp alternatives that are low on empty calories and high on nutrition.

Two years. One thousand trials. Sixty nutritious snacks. That’s been the journey of Snalthy, say young entrepreneurs S.K.Arun Kamaraj, T. Aswani Kumar, and S.Anbuchelvan. As they lead me to their production unit, Zimyu Foods at Ondipudur, they brief me about their quality control. Raw materials like spinach, mint, curry leaves, carrots and potatoes are run through stringent checks. They use only locally available ingredients. “We don’t use anything imported. All our pulses, dal, raagi, kambu, kudiravali, and white cholam are sourced from farmers here. We replace refined sugar with palm

jaggery that comes from Udangudi village and cane sugar that we buy from farmers in Udumalpet,” says Anbuchelvan.

As I bite into Snalthy’s delicious raagi bar made with roasted ragi flour, raisins and honey, the three friends tell me that they take their food very seriously. While Aswani Kumar runs an IT company, Arun Kamaraj is a structure consultant and Anbuchelvan’s Chocko Choza is into gourmet cakes and chocolates. When they catch up over weekends, there is food, laughter and bonhomie. “Arun is our garlic peeler,” laughs Anbuchelvan. “When we want to taste Ambur biriyani, we go all the way to Ambur. Nothing else will do,” declares Arun. “When friends land from Hyderabad, they have to bring us parcels of biriyani from Paradise. Friends from Madurai get us food from Amma Mess, and from Dindigul we get the biriyani...we pick them up from the station only on the promise of food packets,” laughs Arun.

They started Snalthy to give people a healthier alternative to junk. They don’t use refined sugar, refined oil, refined flour like maida, hydrogenated fat, baking powder, baking soda, emulsifiers, artificial colours, artificial flavours... in any form. Baking, roasting, toasting and seasoning are the methods adopted for cooking the snacks. No frying in oil or re-use of oil. “Everyone is addicted to snacking. We ourselves realised the negative impact it had on our own health. Most snacks are deep fried and you lose out on the nutrients in the process. So we bake. For instance, the cookies made with natural cocoa, almonds and wheat flour is baked for 60 minutes instead of the usual 20 to 25 minutes, dehydrated, and then packed to ensure that they remain crisp. For the raagi bar and dates bar that comes coated with black and white sesame seeds, there is minimal cooking,” explains Anubuchelvan. They also have exclusive snacks for diabetics, children, and pregnant women

I sample crackers made with millets in onion flavour. It is crunchy and flavourful. While the rusk made from whole wheat flour bursts with the goodness of spinach, the crispy Mexican chips are spicy and made with everyone’s favourite potato. As the products are made with zero chemicals and preservatives, shelf life becomes an issue. “We need a minimum of 45 days shelf life. With the help of in-house nutritionist, we crafted products from scratch. To avoid rancidity, the snacks are packed in plastic foil with nitrogen. The foil comes with aluminium coating to prevent light penetration. This ensures that the snacks stay fresh.”

The unit has a state-of-the-art oven that bakes all the snacks. Chef M. Balaji is experimenting with a healthy crust for pizzas and a healthier version of macaroons. “It was challenging to make snacks with limited ingredients. After repeated trials, we perfected the recipes now,” he says. I bite into warm coffee brownies, brownies with raisins, and the crunchy sweet banana sticks, and apple sticks.

Anbuchelvan hopes parents take note. “We are taking on big brands that have huge budgets on advertisements. We don’t. And we urge parents to keep an eye on what their kids are eating and introduce their children to healthier options. We hope we will be able to help them with Snalthy.”



Despite huge potential, valley produces only 4000 quintals of honey

The official figures reveal that Kashmir has only 40,000 bee colonies which experts say is less than half of the potential of the valley that has a diversity of flora.

Even as Kashmir has a huge potential for honey production, the valley produces only 4000 quintals of honey every year. The government has failed to attract people towards bee keeping and there are only 2500 bee keepers registered with J&K’s Apiculture department.

The official figures reveal that Kashmir has only 40,000 bee colonies which experts say is less than half of the potential of the valley that has a diversity of flora.

“While numerous varieties of flora are cultivated in the valley, the wild plants bloom for the most part of year,” says Ghulam Rasool Ganie, Assistant Entomologist at Department of Apiculture Kashmir. “We have a potential to sustain one lakh bee colonies. On average, a colony produces 15 kilograms of honey and thus we have a potential to produce 15000 quintals of honey every year”.

This year, the valley has produced only 3800 quintals of honey which is 200 quintal lesser than the last year. Officials blame a drought like situation in

north Kashmir of valley for the low production. “We had almost zero per cent production from Bandipora, Kupwara, and Baramulla districts of the valley resulting in lower production,” said an official of the department. According to the official data, around two lakh hectares of land are under cultivation for oil seeds and horticulture crops in state which excludes the area under the cereals and other crops that are self pollinating. Dr Suresh Kukroo, a retired Associate Professor of Sher-i-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences says that people are reluctant to raise bees for commercial purposes as they are not aware about its other by-products. “Besides helping in pollination, the people should know they can develop businesses by making honey, wax and other products by rearing bees,” says Kukroo. The bee keepers say the business is not profitable and that is why more people are not attracted towards it. “We do not get much profit from beekeeping. That’s why lesser number of people are in this trade,” says Suhail Ahmad, a beekeeper. “Because of cold winter and flower less season, we have to take these bee colonies outside the valley in winter. It incurs huge costs and also affects the bees”. Suhail also blames the state government for lack of cooperation and help. The officials, however, say that the government is trying every possible way to strengthen this industry. Planning Officer at the Department Nazir Ahmad says the government provides subsidies to the farmers under schemes like Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojna (RKVY) and National Horticulture Mission to boost the industry. “In addition of providing equipments on subsidy, Under National Horticulture Mission we have provided Rs 4 lakh subsidy for 500 bee colonies and Rs 4 Lakh subsidies to 500 hives,” Nazir says. Officials say the department has also opened demonstration centres at every district to train people in beekeeping.

Rs 1-lakh crore flowing out on the ‘well-off’; subsidies need to be reduced

The Survey said there are a fair amount of government interventions that help the relatively better-off in society.

The Economic Survey for 2015-16 on Friday called for reducing subsidies for well-off, estimating that around Rs 1 lakh crore is flowing as subsidies for six commodities such as cooking gas, railways along with small savings schemes. Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian, the author of the Survey, said well-off individuals should be taxed irrespective of the source of income.

“Subsidies for the poor tends to attract policy attention. But a number of policies provide benefits to the well-off,” the Survey said. Subsidy for six commodities amounts to Rs 91,349 crore, while implicit subsidy to rich on account of PPF schemes is Rs 11,900 crore, taking the total subsidy to well-off to Rs 1,03,249 crore.

The Survey said there are a fair amount of government interventions that help the relatively better-off in society. Addressing these interventions and rectifying some “egregious anomalies” may be good not only from a fiscal and welfare perspective, but also from a political economy welfare perspective, it said.

“The Rs 1 lakh crore of subsidy going to the better-off merely on account of six commodities plus the small savings schemes represent a substantial leakage from the government’s kitty, and an opportunity foregone to help the truly deserving,” it said.

The Survey has also suggested that the government should move in a phased manner to the exempt-exempt-tax (EET) method of taxation of small savings, especially for PPF, which is in exempt-exempt-exempt (EEE) category at present.

The New Pension Scheme (NPS) is already being subjected to the EET method of taxation. Therefore, deductions under Section 80C and 80CCD should be re-assessed to move toward a common EET principle for tax savings, the Survey said.

The Survey has called for deregulation of the urea market through payment of fixed subsidy directly to farmers and freeing imports. It has suggested a two-point reform package, saying urea imports should be decontrolled to increase the number of importers, and bringing urea under the nutrient based subsidy regime and paying subsidy directly to farmers.

The Survey said the number of subsidised bags each farmer can purchase should be capped and there should be biometric authentication at the point of sale to plug leakages.

For the power sector, the Survey has pitched for one tariff for all categories. Subramanian in his post-Survey conference said, when there is one price for

petroleum, there should not be different tariffs for power, adding that tariff and non-price regulations are impeding one market for Indian power.

The subsidy bill is expected to be below 2 per cent of GDP in the current fiscal due to fall in global crude oil prices, the Economic Survey added.

A Union budget for the village

Government must address the stress in the rural economy, seen in falling wages and incomes, which could reverse recent progress in rural areas



One of the strongest indicators of the distress in the rural economy and among the poor is the wage rate growth.

Last year in February, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had exhorted voters to vote for his party in the Delhi assembly election, claiming that his victory in the general election had brought luck to the country. Unfortunately, the voters of urban Delhi were not convinced and the BJP received a drubbing. The situation in rural India is no different, judging by the election results of the least urbanised state of Bihar some months ago.

That the economy is in crisis is no longer a matter of speculation. All indicators, except the mysterious GDP growth estimates of the Central Statistical Office, have been pointing to the worsening of the economy. Not to be left behind, even the Sensex was trading at its lowest since the government took over. The declining export figures and falling manufacturing numbers confirm what was already known to most people tracking the economy. The worst hit in this national crisis are the poor and vulnerable in rural areas. The rural economy has been under stress. But the extent and long duration of the distress have surprised many. To be fair, a large part of this has been due to the slowdown in the global

economy and the corresponding fall in prices of most primary agricultural commodities. The back-to-back droughts — only the third instance in the last hundred years — haven't helped the situation. While luck has certainly not been on the side of the rural poor who voted overwhelmingly to bring the NDA to power in 2014, a large part of the blame must be shouldered by the government for not only ignoring the warning signs but also aggravating an already fragile situation in rural areas.

The failure of the government was evident not only in its denial of the existence of a crisis in rural areas but also the cutback in funding for most rural programmes in the last budget. The worst cutbacks were reserved for agriculture and rural areas, with reduced spending on some crucial interventions such as the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana and the winding up of the Backward Regions Grant Fund. This was accompanied by reduced expenditure on irrigation schemes, such as the Integrated Watershed Management Programme and Accelerated Irrigation Benefits and Flood Management Programme. As if these direct cuts were not enough, the sharp reduction in expenditure on other programmes and the neglect of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) meant that whatever little support rural areas were getting in terms of public expenditure also dried up. There is a massive demand for MGNREGA work but the sudden awakening of the government in the last few months is certainly too late and too little.

The farmer was not only worried about falling output prices but also the increase in input prices and the non-availability of crucial inputs such as fertilisers. The price of diammonium phosphate had increased from Rs 10,000 per tonne in 2010 to Rs 25,000 per tonne by 2014. A similar increase has been seen in the case of the open-market urea price. This, coupled with shortages in urea and complex fertilisers, has meant that even basic inputs have been out of reach for average farmers. With the government using the opportunity of falling petroleum prices to shore up revenues by raising excise on petroleum products, even a significant reduction in diesel prices did not materialise for farmers.

The distress is now evident to anybody who has been tracking the rural economy. While this is obvious in the case of farmers, given the rise in farmer suicides across states, the worst sufferers are casual agricultural as well as non-agricultural labourers. One of the strongest indicators of the distress in the rural economy and among the poor is the wage rate growth.

The latest data from the Labour Bureau suggests that the wages of unskilled casual workers have declined in real terms between November 2013 and November 2015 by 2.14 per cent per annum. This is the first time in the last five decades that the wages of casual workers in rural areas have declined in real terms. Part of the reason for this decline is the worsening of the agrarian situation. But it has also been aggravated by lack of demand from the non-agricultural sector. The last five years before 2013 had seen a sharp rise in wages in real terms, at 6 per cent per annum, driven by rising rural demand and also an increase in government spending in different forms. Rural areas have not only seen an unprecedented slump in demand — this can be gauged by the fall in two-wheeler and durables sales — but they have also been hit by the decline in employment generation through public programmes.

The extent of stress in the rural economy is not just about wages and incomes. It is about making the rural economy an engine of growth — and also making growth inclusive. Falling incomes are not only going to hurt the economy in the short run. They will also likely reverse the process of development in rural areas that had been seen in terms of rising access to education, particularly among women, and nutrition. Unfortunately, there has been no recognition of the extent of distress in the rural economy, let alone concrete measures to correct it. While an increase in financial spending will certainly be required to revive sagging rural demand, the situation also requires political commitment to make growth inclusive. It may not be too late to do so, but the government should keep in mind that luck favours the brave. For this government, the time to take brave decisions is now.

The writer is associate professor, Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, JNU, Delhi

Hybrid, GM seeds need to be debated, tested

The survey said issues apprehensions concerning GM seeds need to be debated, to facilitate their introduction.

In the backdrop of apprehensions within the government on the issue of genetically modified seeds, the Economic Survey has favoured the use of hybrid and genetically modified (GM) seeds, citing examples of countries Brazil and China that have benefited from introduction of such seeds.

“A host of studies has demonstrated significant net benefits of GM crops with leading countries such as Brazil and now China opening up to new GM technologies and aggressively building their own research capacity. Nonetheless there are good reasons for some of the public apprehensions on GMOs,” the survey said.

“Therefore, the regulatory process in India needs to evolve so as to address the concerns in a way that does not come in the way adapting high yielding technologies and rapidly moving towards the world’s agro-technological frontier,” it added. The government has allowed only Bt cotton for commercial cultivation and there is a moratorium on Bt brinjal. Currently, it is examining a proposal on GM mustard seed despite there being severe opposition to it among green activists. The survey said issues apprehensions concerning GM seeds need to be debated, to facilitate their introduction. The adoption of hybrid and High Yield Variety seeds is one definite pathway to raising productivity in Indian agriculture, it said. “Concerns about affordability of hybrids and GM seeds, environmental and ethical issues in cultivation of GM crops, risks to the food chain, disease spread and cross pollination have resulted in their non-introduction, . These issues needs to be debated, tested, evaluated, so that introduction of hybrids is facilitated in the next three to six months,” the survey said. It said agriculture requires a “new paradigm” shift by focusing on raising yields with less inputs, prioritising cultivation of less water intensive crops, especially pulses and oilseeds, supported by favourable MSP regime and backed by better procurement system and research. Pointing out deep segmentation in agri-market, the survey said unified national market would boost farmers income. The adoption of hybrid and high yielding variety seeds is one definite pathway to raising productivity in Indian agriculture, the survey added.

hindustantimes

Economic Survey 2016 backs hybrid seeds in boost for GM food crops

India should look to introduce high-yielding hybrid seeds to lift its lagging farm productivity, a finance ministry report urged on Friday, in what is being seen as government support for cultivation of genetically modified food crops now banned.

Authorities are considering whether to allow commercial growing of genetically modified (GM) mustard, which uses a technology that could improve yields but draws strong opposition over fears of safety.

Some politicians have accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of trying to impose his government's decision on farmers relating to an "unsafe and unproven technology".



Authorities are considering whether to allow commercial growing of genetically modified (GM) mustard, which uses a technology that could improve yields but draws strong opposition over fears of safety

Permitting GM food crops is a big call for a country that spends tens of billions of dollars importing edible oils and other food items every year.

"Concerns about affordability of hybrids and GM seeds, environmental and ethical issues in cultivation of GM crops, risks to the food chain, disease spread and cross pollination have resulted in their nonintroduction," the annual Economic Survey said.

"These issues needs to be debated, tested, evaluated, so that introduction of hybrids is facilitated in the next three to six months."

The survey, released ahead of the presentation of Modi's third annual budget on Monday, said it is important to arrest a decline in food production to ensure sustainable livelihoods for farmers and food security for India's 1.25 billion people.

India's farm productivity is one of the lowest in the world, in some cases even below those of poorer countries like Bangladesh. On top of that, back to back droughts have made India a net buyer of some key commodities for the first time in years.

That has brought some urgency to policy makers, who have met as many as three times this year to discuss the fate of GM mustard developed by Indian scientists, including New Delhi's Deepak Pental.

Pental said he hoped the support from Arvind Subramanian, the government's chief economic adviser who prepared the report, would lead to a quick decision on his mustard variety that has been on trial for more than eight years.

"The regulatory process in India needs to evolve so as to address the concerns in a way that does not come in the way adapting high yielding technologies and rapidly moving towards the world's agro-technological frontier," Subramanian wrote.

If a commercial launch of GM mustard is allowed, it could pave the way for other food crops such as corn varieties developed by Monsanto, in one of the world's biggest farm markets. The company's cotton seeds are popular in India.

China is also seeking to improve domestic food production after state-owned ChemChina agreed a \$43 billion bid for Swiss seeds and pesticides group Syngenta.

THE HINDU BusinessLine

Gujarat to get its first quality evaluation lab by March-end



A Jayathilak, Chairman, Spices Board

Spices Board to set up regional quality evaluation lab at Kandla

The Spices Board of India on Friday announced setting up of regional quality evaluation lab at Kandla Port in Kutch to create testing facilities to check pesticide residuals and microbiological contamination in spices.

The lab, first in Gujarat and seventh in the country, is likely to be operational by March-end, informed A Jayathilak, Chairman of the Spices Board, ahead of the 13th edition of 'World Spice Congress 2016' being held in Ahmedabad between February 27 and 29.

Currently, the Spices Board has six such regional quality evaluation labs each located in Mumbai, Guntur, Chennai, New Delhi, Kochi and Tuticorin.

Gujarat assumes significance especially for the exports of spices such as cumin, coriander and fennel seeds. Setting up of a regional lab would make it easier and quicker to test various parameters like total plate count, yeast and mould count, coliforms, aflatoxin, moisture, colour value, volatile oil in the samples easier and quicker for exporters from the State.

According to Spices Board estimate, about 10 per cent of the total spices produced in India gets exported, which constitutes about 50 per cent of the world spice trade. During the April-October 2015 period, the spice exports from India touched 491,000 tonnes valued at ₹9,096 crore (\$1,416), up 12 per cent from the corresponding period of last year.

“India is the World leader in spices exports. But with new laws becoming more stringent in overseas countries, the quality issue has assumed more importance,” he told media persons ahead of the World Spice Congress. The event will have over 1000 delegates from India and abroad. The theme for the event is ‘TARGET 2020: Clean, Safe and Sustainable Supply Chain’.

Jayathilak raised concerns about quality issues faced by exporters and mentioned that the new lab at Kandla would be capable to identify pesticide residues, illegal dilution and other life-threatening funguses seen in spices with the use of advanced technology.

Govt offloads 1.16 lakh tonnes pulses seized from hoarders



About 1.16 lakh tonnes of pulses seized from hoarders have been disposed off in the open market so far to boost supply and contain rising prices.

In a written reply to Rajya Sabha, the Food and Consumer Affairs Minister Ram Vilas Paswan informed that 1,16,334.85 tonnes of pulses have been disposed off in the market out of 1,26,758.59 tonnes seized from hoarders.

Total 14,482 raids were conducted in 14 states and Union Territories.

In Maharashtra, 78,232.35 tonnes of pulses have been offloaded out of 80,167.44 tonnes seized from hoarders, while in Karnataka, 23,708.34 tonnes have been disposed out of 25,545.83 tonnes.

Replying to another question, the minister informed the house that the government is importing pulses through state-owned trading agency MMTC.

The delivery of 6,000 tonnes of tur dal and 1,000 tonnes of urad dal from Myanmar is expected.

About 4,927 tonnes of imported tur has been delivered out of 5,000 tonnes contracted from Malawi.

Pulses output is estimated to increase marginally to 17.33 million tonnes in 2015-16 crop year from last year's 17.15 million tonnes though it's still not sufficient to meet domestic demand.

India imports about 4-5 million tonnes of pulses every year to meet demand.

Let markets determine cotton seed prices: survey



With the government deciding to fix cotton seed prices, including royalty fee, the Economic Survey today said market forces should determine the seed prices and favoured higher competition among companies to check price cartelisation.

In December last year, the Agriculture Ministry issued the Cotton Seeds Price (Control) Order to fix the maximum sale price of the seeds, including that of genetically modified (GM) varieties.

As per the order, the government “would also determine the royalty fees or trait value for the technology provider“.

”... it is desirable to let markets determine the price of seeds... enhancing competition through more players can help check/reduce cases of price rigging and cartel formation,” the Survey said, citing previous experience and limitations in administratively fixing prices in India.

It elaborated that there are asymmetries or assumptions in the cost and price data and other related information.

Meanwhile, the industry body National Seed Association of India (NSAI) has supported the government’s decision to control seed prices.

The Mahyco-Monsanto Biotech Ltd (MMBL) on December 19 had filed a writ petition in the Delhi High Court challenging certain provisions of the order that seeks to regulate licensing of the cotton seed technology.

Bt cotton is the only GM crop allowed for commercial cultivation in the country. Over the last decade, Bt cotton technology has been adopted over 95 per cent of the cotton growing area, making India its second-largest producer.

Tea prices down at Kochi sale

Despite active vendor participation on good liquoring teas, prices of several varieties at Kochi auction were lower this week.

Though there were improved arrivals at 9,52,000 kg in CTC dust, the market was lower by ₹5 to ₹10 and sometimes more as the sale progressed. However, in sale no 9, there was fair enquiry from upcountry buyers and exporters.

Market for primary grades in orthodox varieties remained steady and the quantity on offer was 8,500 kg. A small quantity sold was absorbed by exporters.

In Cochin CTC dust quotation, good varieties fetched ₹105-149, medium quoted ₹96-123 and plain varieties stood at ₹83-101.

In leaf sale, the quantity on offer in orthodox grades was 144,000 kg. However, the market for select best Nilgiri brokens, whole leaf and fannings barely remained steady. There was also subdued demand from exporters and CIS countries.

In CTC leaf, the market for brokens was irregular and easier by ₹3 to ₹5 and sometimes more. It also witnessed a lot of withdrawals. The quantity on offer was 71,500 kg and there was fair enquiry from exporters and upcountry buyers.

In dust varieties, Injipara SFD quoted the best prices of ₹151 followed by Monica SFD at ₹150. In leaf grades, Chamraj FOP-Sup (green tea) fetched the best prices of ₹351 followed by Chamraj FOP at ₹301.

Inditrade Capital diversifies into agri-commodity financing

Focussing on the southern markets, the financial services company Inditrade Capital is looking at opportunities in agri-commodity and micro-financing business in a big way.

The company, through its subsidiary JRG Fincorp, has entered into the agri-commodity financing business in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The opportunity in this under-serviced market is significant and the company hopes to rapidly scale up the loan book at around ₹300-400 crore, Sudip Bandyopadhyay, the promoter said.

The commodity business in India, he said, was estimated at ₹10 lakh crore and close to 50 per cent was funded by banks, NBFCs, etc, and the remaining by unorganised money-lenders. “We wanted to enter in an organised manner to fund the business,” he said.

To a question on the recent fall in commodity prices, he said “it is a cycle and demand is likely to remain strong”. However, in non-agri commodities, there has been stress and the subdued demand will stay for some more time, especially in the precious metals segment, till the Chinese economy recovers.

Asked whether the firm is shifting its focus from equity markets, especially in these turbulent times, he replied in the negative, saying they would rapidly expand its broking and distribution business either directly or through its subsidiaries.

“For the time being, we will remain in the southern markets and further improve our presence, both in online and onboard trading, to provide customers a better experience,” he said.

The company is also working on tie-ups with large telecom players and banks to rapidly scale up their broking and distribution business in South India. There are also plans to get into micro-financing business to cater to the semi-urban market, he said.

Offer to pare farm tariff cap at WTO in exchange for freedom to hike MSP



National interest: The Survey warned against the “cost of reluctant engagement”, saying pacts like the Trans-Pacific Partnership ignore India’s interests (file photo)

Survey wants fresh look at protectionist steps; says FTAs haven’t boosted exports

Advocating a new negotiating position for India at the WTO, the Economic Survey has suggested that the country can consider offering a reduction in its “very high” tariff ceilings in agriculture.

In parallel, it can seek more freedom to provide higher levels of domestic support for items such as pulses in the form of higher minimum support prices (MSP), it added.

“This would be good for India, and India’s trading partners should be more reasonable about accepting this shift,” the Survey said.

It also warned against the “cost of reluctant engagement”, saying the US and other countries had negotiated pacts like the ambitious Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which ignored India’s interests and made it impossible for the country to change the terms if it decided to join the bloc later.

So far, New Delhi has been fighting for the right to provide MSP for food items without attracting penalties at the WTO as part of a “permanent solution” to the problem of calculating trade-distorting subsidies. It has not linked it to offering concessions in other areas (as the Survey has suggested).

Interestingly, the Survey said that it remains open on whether pressing for a “permanent solution” is vitally necessary. India had obtained a “virtual cast-iron legal guarantee” in 2014, which made the Bali decision permanent and put it on a sound legal basis, it pointed out.

“The particular policies being defended are those that India intends to move out of in any case because of their well-documented impacts: decline in water tables, over-use of electricity and fertilisers (harming health), and rising environmental pollution, owing to post-harvest burning of husks,” it said. Moreover, the government is committed to providing direct income support to farmers and crop insurance, which will not be restricted by WTO rules, it added.

Safeguard measures

On India’s fight at the WTO for the right to impose special safeguard measures (SSMs) — a provision to increase import duties on farm items in times of distress — the Survey said the country needs to question the extent to which it needs the measure.

“India’s only need for SSM arises in relation to a ...fraction of its tariff lines — some milk and dairy products, some fruits, and raw hides. India should call for a discussion of SSMs not as a generic issue of principle but as a pragmatic negotiating objective covering a small part of agricultural tariffs,” it said.

The Survey further pointed out that the impact on export performance and trade outcome of the free trade agreements signed by India so far is a “mixed bag”.

It also said that while the trade impact of the TPP may not be seriously adverse in the short run, a careful analysis is needed to respond to long-term challenges.

Revamp tax structure for another dairy boom

While India is the largest producer of milk remains a matter of pride, scaling up productivity, economic upliftment of dairy farmers and addressing adulteration are matters of concern.

Domestic dairy industry presents a plethora of opportunities. We see a sharp rise in demand for milk and milk products as the industry is globalising.

Dairying in India is not just an economic activity. It is an integral part of our society, our culture. No other industry can claim to touch lives of millions of farmers; more than half of them landless.

Given market access, remunerative prices to farmers, dairy can become a potent tool for equitable growth and income distribution.

Genuine impetus to the dairy sector leading to its growth will lead to that elusive balanced and inclusive growth minimising the impact of inflation.

Milk production has grown rapidly approximately at 5 per cent per annum since the 1980s. It, however, dipped to 3.5 per cent during the 11th Plan.

For the livestock sector to achieve target growth of 77 per cent in the 12th Plan, milk production has to grow by at least 5 per cent.

Livestock accounts for 30 per cent of GDP of agriculture. Unless the livestock sector maintains a growth of 7 per cent, agriculture growth will be majorly hampered.

Therefore, there is a strong case for reforms in the sector in Budget 16 – 17. I would wish to list the desired reforms under the following heads:

Taxes: Milk being perishable, it is necessary to convert it to products viz., milk powder, butter, cheese, etc.

Hence, to keep parity with other agri-produce, it is reasonable to ask that milk products be exempted from any excise duty, sales tax, and similar other taxes.

To maintain quality, longer shelf life and proper packaging of milk products is essential.

Packing of milk products should be construed as processing for preservation and the packaging industry should be exempt from all duties like excise, CST, Octroi, etc and should be considered under the food processing industry.

Almost 46 per cent of milk production in India is consumed as liquid milk. Of this, only 15 per cent is processed and packed.

This leaves huge scope for adulteration. The answer to adulteration is in processing, pouching and packing of milk.

This is a costly affair. It is, therefore, highly recommended that packing material for milk to be exempt from excise and CST/ VAT.

At present VAT is applicable at 5 per cent on Skimmed Milk Powder and at 12.5 per cent on milk products like table butter, cream, etc.

Uniform VAT structure at 5 per cent for all milk products would be a great incentive for the industry, besides addressing the high customs duty (25-28 per cent) that prevails for imported dairy machinery.

Skills development: This would be a game-changer. Service Tax (currently at 14 per cent) on skilling for dairy industry should be waived.

Also, many more new dairy technology institutes on the lines of the ones in Karnal, Anand, Udaipur, Bengaluru should be announced.

Export subsidy: 2015 has been extremely turbulent for the dairy industry. As the year closed, stocks of SMP peaked and prices plummeted. India is no longer immune to global pricing trends.

Exports were negligible as Indian SMP became uncompetitive in the international markets.

About 200,000 tonnes of SMP stocks is available in the country. Therefore, it would augur well for the industry to receive ₹25-30 a kg export subsidy on SMP to liquidate stocks carried over from 2015.

The writer is Managing Director, Govind Milk and Milk Products. Views are personal.

Kochi tea prices lose steam



Despite active vendor participation on good liquoring teas, prices of several varieties at Kochi auctions were lower this week.

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Cotton wilts on weak demand



Cotton price moved down on the back of weak demand from mills. Also, slow buying by exporters put pressure on the price on Friday.

Traders said that global market was not good which reflected in the domestic prices. This is because of the fear that China (till now a big importer) might offload its reserve cotton in the global markets.

Gujarat Sankar-6 prices in the local market have fallen by ₹200 to ₹33,400-33,500 a candy of 356 kg.

According to traders, price may fall further in coming days.

Kapas or raw cotton declined on limited ginning demand. *Kapas* was down by ₹10 to ₹880-950 per 20 kg and gin delivery *kapas* stood at ₹950-975 per 20 kg. Cottonseed was traded down by ₹5 to ₹425-475 per 20 kg.

Edible oils heat up on higher demand

Edible oils market ruled firm on Friday on higher demand and volumes on expectation of possible duty hike in the Budget. Malaysian palm oil futures ruled flat but domestic futures showed uptrend. Vikram global commodities quoted Malaysian super palmolein at ₹558/10 kg. Liberty was quoting

palmolein ex Ghatkopar at ₹535 and ex Shapur ₹536 for 15 March, super palmolein ex JNPT ₹557 and ex Shapur ₹559, soyabean refined oil ex Shapur ₹620. Ruchi was quoting palmolein ex Patalganga and ex JNPT at ₹532, soyabean refined oil ₹611 and sunflower refined oil ₹765. Allana's rates: ex Khopoli palmolein ₹530, soya refined oil ₹612 and sunflower refi. oil ₹765.



BCE spot rates (₹/10 kg): groundnut oil 940 (940), soya refined oil 610 (610), sunflower exp. ref. 685 (680), sunflower ref. 765 (760), rapeseed ref. oil 780 (775), rapeseed exp. ref. 750 (745), cottonseed ref. oil 600 (600) and palmolein 517 (512).

Business Standard

National agri market portal contract given to Nagarjuna Fertilizers

Online trading in 21 commodities on pilot bases to begin from April

Farmers in Karnataka are a privileged lot, as they get the best price not only in the mandi in their area, but also from traders based anywhere in the state, and that too on transparent online platform. Come September, farmers in outside that state will also be able to sell their produce to traders offering the best price from anywhere in the country, provided they are connected to the national market network.

This will be possible under NAM, a project linking 585 major mandis known as Agriculture Produce Market Committees (APMCs) electronically. The software contract has been awarded to Hyderabad-based a Nagarjuna Fertilizers and Chemicals-led consortium, which will be ready with an online platform for the pilot project in April and by September, about 200 mandis would have been linked electronically for trading.



A project to bring major farm commodity mandis under a single platform that provides a national market to farmers, with price transparency, has been implemented by the Small Farmers Agribusiness Consortium. SFAC has been appointed the technology service provider. In July, the government had announced a project called online National Agriculture Market (NAM) scheme with allocation of Rs 200 crore for three years.

"Online trading of 21 selected agricultural commodities will begin on the National Agriculture Market in the month of April 2016 in 20 pilot mandis, that will help bug fixing if any in the software and by September 2016, about 200 mandis will be integrated with this platform and start trading of selected commodities online", said Vasudha Mishra, MD, SFAC. She also said the plan is to link 585 major mandis by September 2017.

Nagarjuna Fertilizers and Chemicals Limited (NFCL), along with the Techno Brain Global FZE, a global IT company with a presence in India, Kenya, UAE and other parts of the world, will provide customised technical support. It will also help in developing software, and operating and maintaining of the NAM portal for five years. Training will be imparted to the participants of NAM portal state-wise. The consortium will have to hand-hold the project, giving training and maintaining it for five years.

Mishra also said, "We have mandated them to use open-source software, which helps us in customizing software suitable for specific commodities and the state or mandi's requirements, apart from saving cost." Similar existing projects are on Microsoft's net system. If the project moves as per plan, then by September 2016, a total of 200 mandis would be linked, another 200 by March 2017 and the remaining rest 185 mandis by September 2017.

The government is extending financial assistance in the form of subsidy to states, for linking their mandis or APMCs under the NAM project. Each state has to give its consent.

The concept is not new in India. NCDEX E-Markets Ltd, a subsidiary of Agri centric commodities derivatives exchange NCDEX, has already linked the mandis of Karnataka and farmers in that state are able to sell their produce to the best bidder. Commission agents or arhatiyas also deal on that platform. The farmers are even paid money on the spot and they produce they are selling there is graded and assayed, and the prices are quoted accordingly.

NCDEX E-Markets has started linking mandis from Andhra Pradesh and has now signed a similar agreement with Gujarat. Spokesperson of NCDEX E-Markets confirmed that it has received a mandate to link mandis in Gujarat electronically. How will such state specific project affect NAM? Mishra says, "Both Gujarat and AP have agreed to link their mandis to the NAM platform once it is operational".

When a farmer sells his produce on the Karnataka's common market platform, he gets the best price quoted by anyone from any mandi. Similarly, under NAM, a farmer can sell his produce to anyone in the country who offers the best price. Assaying and grading of produce will have to be handled by the respective state.

Subsidy bill expected to be below 2% of GDP: Economic Survey

The Economic Survey further states that the fertilizer subsidies are very costly, accounting for about 0.8% of GDP. They encourage urea overuse, which damages the soil, undermining rural incomes, agricultural productivity, and thereby economic growth



The Economic Survey 2015-16 tabled in the Parliament Friday states that the rationalization and reprioritization of subsidies through better targeting would play a vital role in fiscal consolidation and in targeting expenditure more towards inclusive development.

The total subsidy bill is expected to be below 2% in proportion of GDP. The 1.7% decline in major subsidies was due to a near 44.7% decline in petroleum subsidy during April - December 2015 while other major subsidies- Food and Fertilizer-increased by 10.4% and 13.7% respectively during the period.

Distortions in urea are the result of multiple regulations, which firstly indicates that urea is only subsidized for agricultural uses. Subsidies like this violate what we call the One Product- One Price principle. Black market effects are aggravated by further regulation- canalization.

Secondly, the black market hurts small and marginal farmers more than large farmers since a higher percentage of them are forced to buy urea from the black market.

Thirdly, some of the urea subsidy goes to sustaining inefficient domestic production instead of going to the small farmer.

Economic Survey: India needs debate on GM crops, hybrids to facilitate introduction

The Survey said that due to consecutive years of drought in the country the farm sector needs a transformation to ensure sustainable livelihoods for the farmers and food security for the population



In one of the clearest indications of the Centre's roadmap on GM crops, the Economic Survey 2015-16 tabled today in Parliament said that India needs to debate, test and evaluate the environmental and ethical concerns on GM crops, their risk to the food chain, diseases spread and cross pollination in the next six months to facilitate their introduction

“The adoption of hybrid and High- Yielding Varieties seeds is one definite pathway to raising productivity in Indian agriculture,” the Survey said. The broader hybrid category also includes GM seeds.

The Survey which many experts are considering as an precursor to the 2016-17 Union Budget to be tabled in next week also said that due to consecutive years of drought in the country the farm sector needs a transformation to ensure sustainable livelihoods for the farmers and food security for the population.

Read our full coverage on Union Budget 2016

“The transformation in agriculture has to be steered by raising productivity in agriculture, by investing in efficient irrigation technologies, and efficient use of all inputs,” it said.

On irrigation, the Survey said that there is a scope for increasing the coverage of irrigated area across the country to increase productivity in agriculture. For this, the survey suggested higher public investment in the irrigation sector.

It also advocated for larger share of funds to be pumped in MGNREGA and other employment generating schemes for creation and maintenance of community assets including de-silting and repair of tanks and other water bodies that are used for irrigation.

On fertilisers, the Survey highlights the need to rationalise the subsidy through adoption of the DBT platform and in case of P and K fertiliser subsidy, with the Nutrient Based Subsidy (NBS) scheme, a fixed amount of subsidy will be given on each grade based on their content.



THE TIMES OF INDIA

Polyhouses catch fancy of farmers in Bijnor

BIJNOR: Polyhouses, also known as greenhouses, have caught the fancy of farmers in Bijnor district. A polyhouse is a plastic greenhouse covering a patch of land where crops are grown. The interior heats up as solar radiation from the sun warms the plants, soil, and other things inside the building faster. Also, crops are protected from the ill-effects of weather such as untimely rain and hail.

Under the National Horticulture Mission, farmers are being given subsidies to use polyhouses. Not only this, several educated farmers have also taken up the practice in Harewali and Dodraj villages.

Himanshu Tyagi, 35, an MBA graduate, quit his job at a private company to take to farming. "I worked with a private firm for nine years and earned Rs 12 lakh per annum. Once I got to know about polyhouses, I quit my job to become a farmer. I have built four polyhouses on 10 bighas of land owned by me. It cost me a total of Rs 1 crore to build these four polyhouses. Thanks to the subsidies, half the cost was taken care of. I grew roses in two polyhouses and capsicum in the others. This year, I got my first crop from the polyhouses and sold the produce in the markets of Delhi and Uttarakhand. I have five people working on my land now," said Tyagi.

Explaining how a polyhouse is set up, he said, "Once the skeletal structure is ready, it is covered with a poly-sheet. All vegetables are grown inside the polyhouse itself. The extremities of weather, such as excess cold or rain, have no effect on my crop. Moreover, it is much easier to use drip-irrigation techniques in a polyhouse. I save about 60% water with this irrigation method."

Dipti Chauhan, an MSc in horticulture, who has applied for a polyhouse, said, "Since I have studied horticulture, I am aware of how a polyhouse works. I will soon build one in my native village of Faizpur."

KFD has Sattari cashew farmers in a tight spot

Keri: Horticulturists engaged in cashew plantations from various villages of Sattari fear the presence of Kyasanur Forest Disease (KFD) as this virus has prevented them from venturing into the plantation.

KFD, a tick-borne viral disease that broke out in 2015 in Pali, has affected villagers from various villages of Sattari this season as well. As many as 100 patients have already been found suffering from KFD and two persons have allegedly died.

Valpoi MLA Vishwajit Rane, told mediapersons, "The government has failed miserably in its duty of placating the horticulturists involved in cashew plantation about KFD. So far, the government has also failed to make the KFD virus vaccine available on a priority basis and undertake a focal immunization strategy. Villagers are afraid to enter cashew plantations to reap the yield on account of this tick-borne viral disease and this will hamper their sources of livelihood."

On February 25, residents of Valpoi town along with some councillors met veterinary doctor Shirish Betkikar and expressed their dissatisfaction over the apathy of government officials in proper disposal of dead monkeys.

As incidents of monkey deaths have been reported from Keri, Shirol; people from these villages too are scared to enter their cashew plantation. Health officials in co-ordination with other government departments have been involved in awareness drives regarding KFD but so far no strategy has been shared on how to deal with ticks, and this has increased fear among the villagers. To voice their concern, villagers from various parts of Sattari are planning to stage a morcha in Valpoi on February 29.

Panchayat budget brings cheer to Kottayam rubber farmers

Kottayam: The district panchayat budget presented by vice-president Mary Sebastian at the Panchayat Council Hall on Thursday brought good news for rubber farmers here.

The panchayat will extend financial support to rubber producers' societies to start new rubber based industries. The panchayat has also set apart Rs 2.20 crore for rubberizing one road in each panchayat.

The budget earmarked Rs 5.94 crore for the development of basic facilities at the government poultry farm in Manarcad and the fund will be used to develop facilities for poultry farmers. The production of country chickens will be increased in the farm and they will be distributed to the farmers through various projects of the panchayat. The project ultimately aims at reducing the import of eggs from neighbouring states. An organic fertiliser manufacturing unit based on chicken manure will also be established in the farm.

An amount of Rs 1.10 crore has been earmarked for making the district a wasteland-free region. Organic farming will be encouraged in barren lands and water hyacinths will be used for making fertilizers. The budget also sets apart Rs 52 lakh for buying a weed harvester.

Another major project that the panchayat plans envisages is 'Thanima', which aims at producing and distributing saplings of rare variety of edible fruit-bearing trees.

The project also aims at selling organic farm products through mobile markets. It provides Rs 30 crore for Jawahar Housing Scheme, Rs 45 lakh for constructing 'girl-friendly rooms' in government school and public toilets.

An amount of Rs 60 lakh has been set aside for providing medicines for mental illness free of cost. One school each from the 22 panchayats will be selected to be upgraded to smart schools. An amount of Rs 1.50 crore is provided for this. It also sets apart Rs 54 lakh for developing the sports infrastructure in the district.

Higher tech support, credit top farmers' budget wishlist

Noida: Farmers of Gautam Budh Nagar have come out with a wishlist for inclusion in the Union budget.

In a letter to the Prime Minister's Office and the finance minister, farmers from over 200 villages of the district, under the banner of Kisan Sangharsh Samiti, have demanded financial benefits and modernisation schemes.

They also want that an agri-engineering institute be set up in each of the 74 districts of UP.

"There is a need for modernising our agriculture and also to create a breed of technology-savvy next generation farmers for India. So, agro-engineering institutes in rural areas of India is most pertinent. We certainly demand such institutes be opened in each of the villages of UP for educating the next generation farmers," Dushyant Nagar, convener of the Samiti, told TOI.

The farmers have also proposed an amendment in the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojna, announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in January. "We want coverage of any amount of loss in crop yield under the scheme. So far, the scheme covers those farmers who have lost up to 90% of their yield," Nagar said.

As UP goes to polls in 2017, the farmers expect the Union budget to be generous towards the rural population and the farming community. "We have requested that the Kisan credit card limit be set on the basis of the land owned by the farmer. Farmers should get at least 50% of the value of the land they own," Nagar said.

"We have also requested that special schemes be given to us to enable us to import modern technology into our fields. We should get subsidies to acquire such technology. Over all, the request is to keep the farmers in mind while preparing the budget," said Ranveer Nagar, convenor of Grameen Panchayat Morcha and head of Sadullapur village in Greater Noida (West).

Farmers also want change in mortgage laws. "Instead of keeping our land on mortgage for buying agri-machinery, the government should consider keeping the machinery itself on mortgage. Farmers who are dependent on rain should be given benefits on diesel, so that they can irrigate the fields

artificially. We also propose that there should be a scheme to help farmers make use of rain-water harvesting for irrigating their land," head of Charauli village in Jewar, Mahesh Charauli, said.

"The most important issue plaguing the farmers of India is scarcity of water and improper irrigation. Special attention needs to be drawn towards monsoon-dependent farmers of Bundelkhand, eastern UP and western UP. We hope our requests are heeded in the upcoming budget," Nagar said.

Prices of seasonal fruits soar as summer sets in

Watermelons have hit the markets and roads in the city with the onset of the summer. This year, the prices have gone up with one kilogram of the fruit is sold at 20. A medium size watermelon costs around 100. Last year, the same size of the fruit was sold for 70 to 80.

"Price is high as we have got only a limited stock right now. Once the harvest is on, the price will automatically come down," said P Manikandan, a shopkeeper in KK Nagar.

The supply is minimal in the last one week as season's initial harvest is reaching the market. Watermelon is grown mostly in northern districts like Kancheepuram, Tiruvallur and Villupuram. It is grown in some parts of Dindigul and Theni districts as well.

K Madhumitha, a homemaker said, "I prefer to give my son fruits like watermelon. It is completely safe and helps to maintain the fluid in body. Ice creams and roadside sherbet pose the risk of throat problems and other health issues."

Seasonal fruits like watermelon and tender coconut serve as respite from the scorching sun and help beat the heat. Sale of tender coconut, fruit juices and roadside special 'nannari' sherbet, which are available throughout the year, has also increased as people started feeling the scorching heat. Sale of fruit juices, sugarcane juice, sherbet and tender coconut has also spiked. However, their prices have not increased. M Hari, a tender coconut commission agent from city, said sales have picked up due to the increasing temperature. Around 35,000 to 45,000 tender coconuts are being sold in a day in the city. There is no change in the price as there is abundant supply from Coimbatore and Theni districts to the city.

DECCAN Chronicle

Tur dal drenched in market due to hailstorm in Adilabad

Hundreds of farmers had brought the red gram to the Adilabad market.



Farmers staged a rasta roko at Punjab Chowrasta alleging that Food Corporation of India officials had refused to purchase the red gram, to benefit private traders. (Photo: PTI)

Adilabad: Adilabad was hit by a hailstorm on Friday evening, that drenched the tur dal that was stored at the market yard for sale. The brief hailstorm also washed away some of the tur dal. In a separate incident, one person was killed by a bolt of lightning.

Farmers staged a rasta roko at Punjab Chowrasta alleging that Food Corporation of India officials had refused to purchase the red gram, to benefit private traders.

Food Corporation of India officials had announced that they would not purchase the red gram after February 25. Hundreds of farmers had brought the red gram to the Adilabad market. This stock was affected by the hailstorm.

Elsewhere, agriculture worker Shoba, 32, of Nipani in Tamsi mandal died after being struck by lightning while she was working in the field.

THE ECONOMIC TIMES

Hilsa preservation and research centre set up in Sultanpur



The state government has also provided temperature-controlled mobile vans and cycle-mounted ice boxes for selling fish.

KOLKATA: The West Bengal government has set up a Hilsa preservation and research centre in Sultanpur. The state government has also provided temperature-controlled mobile vans and cycle-mounted ice boxes for selling fish.

These activities are regulated by fishermen's cooperatives have ensured a steady income for the cooperatives.

Counting the success of the fish farming segment in Bengal, state finance Minister Amit Mitra said, "Fish farming in West Bengal is a big industry now, employing thousands of people. Mamata Banerjee-led West Bengal Government has been very proactive in encouraging commercial fish farming. The government has taken many steps, both to encourage fish farming, and address its allied issues, and to provide fish cultivators with all forms of support."

The government has provided 8,741.94 tonnes of nutritionally-balanced floating feed for free to 13,000 fish farmers for the first time in West Bengal, with a financial involvement of Rs 23 crore.

Not just this, training programmes have also been arranged for fishermen on

issues related to fish conservation and conservation of lakes and wetlands.

The government has also taken efforts to preserve local varieties of fish, like the boroli of North Bengal. Hatchlings have been released in lakes, ponds and streams to ensure a steady catch for fishermen all over the State.

Measures have been taken to provide safety to fishermen who go out to the sea. Almost 1.38 lakh such fishermen have been provided biometric cards. About 1,000 distress alert transmitters have been distributed among them. E-registration has been started for sea-going vessels. 11,409 such certificates have already been given.

Cultivable land has declined: Government



The decline in agricultural land has been mainly due to diversion for non-agricultural purposes such as urbanisation, roads, industries and housing, Radha Mohan Singh said.

NEW DELHI: Cultivable land in the country has marginally declined but the trend of increasing agricultural production is still expected to continue, the government today said.

Replying to a question in Rajya Sabha, Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh said that cultivable land in the country has marginally declined from 182.7 million hectares in 2005-06 to 182 million in 2012-13.

The decline in agricultural land has been mainly due to diversion for non-agricultural purposes such as urbanisation, roads, industries and housing, he

said.

The Minister mentioned various government initiatives like those on irrigation and soil health and said that as result, agricultural production in the country has been showing an increasing trend except in years affected by floods, droughts and other natural calamities.

"Despite marginal reduction in cultivable land the above trend is expected to continue in future," Singh.

One of the members wanted to know that if agricultural production was showing an increasing trend, what were the reasons of distress among farmers as there have been a number of cases of suicides.

Singh replied that one of the reasons is that cost of production is more while the produce may not fetch a good price.

Economic Survey calls for big changes in agri-sector, bats for GM crops



Economic Survey suggested the policies must incentivise raising of production of pulses and oilseeds, for which the country is heavily dependent on imports.

NEW DELHI: Stating that Indian agriculture has become a "victim" of its own success, the Economic Survey has favoured the use of hybrid and GM seeds along with better MSP, irrigation and national market facilities to boost crop yields and for bringing in major transformation in the sector.

The survey said safety concerns related to hybrid and genetically modified (GM) seeds need to be debated and tested so that their introduction is

facilitated in the next six months. It also said the regulatory process needs to be evolved to address safety concerns of GM crops.

The Economic Survey for 2015-16, which was tabled in Parliament today suggested the policies must incentivise raising of production of pulses and oilseeds, for which the country is heavily dependent on imports.

"Indian agriculture, in a way, a victim of its own past success -- especially the green revolution. It has become cereal-centric and as a result, regionally biased and input intensive. Rapid industrialisation and climate change are raising the scarcity value of land and water, respectively," the survey observed.

It said agriculture requires a "new paradigm" shift by focusing on raising yields with less inputs, prioritising cultivation of less water intensive crops, especially pulses and oilseeds, supported by favourable MSP regime and backed by better procurement system and research.

Pointing out deep segmentation in agri-market, the survey said unified national market would boost farmers income.

On controversial GM crops, it said: "Concerns about affordability of hybrids and GM seeds, environmental and ethical issues in cultivation of GM crops, risk to the food chain, diseases spread and cross pollination have resulted in their non-introduction. These issues needs to be debated, tested, evaluated, so that introduction of hybrids is facilitated in the next six months."

The adoption of hybrid and high yielding variety seeds is one definite pathway to raising productivity in Indian agriculture, it added.

Stating that a host of studies have demonstrated significant net benefit of GM crops, the survey said, "Nonetheless there are good reasons for some of the public apprehensions on GMOs.

Therefore, the regulatory process in India needs to evolve so as to address the concerns in a way that does not come in the way adapting high yielding technologies and rapidly moving towards the world's agro-technological frontier."

The government has allowed only Bt cotton for commercial cultivation and

there is a moratorium on Bt brinjal. Currently, it is examining a proposal on GM mustard seed despite there being severe opposition to it among green activists.