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Banana board in Andhra Pradesh stressed

Banana is the third important fruit crop after mango and citrus in the state.



Banana gardens at Undavalli near Vijayawada. (Photo — DECCAN CHRONICLE)

Vijayawada: The food-processing industry has been urging the government to set up a banana development board in Andhra Pradesh, stating that it is necessary for promoting the latest farming techniques, ensuring post-harvesting facilities, development of processable varieties with high yields, and storage and marketing facilities.

Although the state government allocated Rs 10 crore as initial amount to set up the board, there is no progress till date on the subject. Banana is cultivated in an extent of 60,000 hectares in the state with an annual production of 32,42,000 MT.

It is the third important fruit crop after mango and citrus, occupying 8 per cent of the fruit-growing area in the state. Although it is cultivated in almost all districts, it is more prevalent in East Godavari, West Godavari, Kadapa, Guntur, Krishna, Visakhapatnam, Viziana-garam and Kurnool districts.

Banana is a very popular fruit due to its low price and high nutritive value. It is consumed in fresh or cooked form both as ripe and raw fruit. Due to

mishandling of the produce, about 25-40 per cent is being wasted while only 2 per cent is processed into value-added products and the remaining is used in raw form.

An economically-viable venture

At present, not much of product diversification of banana is done, as only a few industries are utilising the fruits for dehydration, chips and infant foods. Processing of banana for preparation of derivative products is a promising area since bananas can be pulped, juiced or concentrated, canned, sliced and dried.

Beverages such as banana wine, brandy and vinegar can be made economically.

There is need to promote and make available tissue-cultured plant material of all varieties for propagation.

The setting up of a banana development board on the similar lines of Mango Development Board is necessary for promoting the latest farming techniques, Potluri Bhaskar Rao, general secretary, AP Chamber of Commerce and Industries Federation (APCCIF), observed.

Ensuring post-harvesting facilities, development of processable varieties with high yields, and storage and marketing facilities needs to be taken into consideration on priority basis, he added.

“Although the state government has recognised the need and contemplated setting up banana board by allocating Rs 10 crore grant as initial amount (GO.Ms.no. 57), we understand that there is no progress till date on the subject,” Mr Bhaskar Rao observed.

Similarly, the state government had announced in 2015 the setting up of mango board with the support of the Central government, but the issue has not progressed till date. He requested chief secretary S.P. Tucker, in a letter, to intervene personally, to see that both banana and mango boards are set up fast in the state to make AP horticulture hub and to improve rural economy.

Paddy prices likely to increase soon in Andhra Pradesh

Scanty rainfall, poor water reserves drastically hit farmers.

Besides shortage of water, demonetisation had also contributed to a sharp drop in the extent of cultivation. (Representational Image)

Nellore: The rain-fed rice cultivation areas in Nellore district came down drastically following scanty rainfall and poor water reserves, especially in cultivation areas.

Out of the total paddy cultivation area of 7 lakh acres, cultivation is being taken up in about 4 lakh acres at Pennar Delta and a few other areas during the present agriculture season (Rabi).



Besides shortage of water, demonetisation had also contributed to a sharp drop in the extent of cultivation. The situation is certain to boost the cost of the rice and hit the rice industry, which exports raw rice as well as boiled rice to neighbouring states.

Secretary of the Federation of Farmers' Associations, C. Koti Reddy, has alleged that a large number of farmers dropped plans to raise crops even in the delta area, because of the cash crunch post-demonetisation and this had hit the farm labour hard.

“Those who have opted out of cultivation during the current season will not be in a position to raise the next crop also as they will not have any revenue to invest on inputs. Those who embarked on cultivation are now also not a happy lot since they were forced to borrow money from lenders as well other inputs from fertiliser dealers at high interest rates, because of the restriction on withdrawing cash from the banks,” Koti Reddy observed.

He reminded that they cannot pay cheques to farm labour and suppliers of seed and pesticides. He said most of the farmers raised super fine variety (Jilakara Masoori) yet the cost may cross `50 per kilo in the retail market because of the drop in cultivation area.

Rice millers also subscribe to the opinion of Koti Reddy. A rice miller, P. Kishore Reddy, said the current scenario would drastically affect their industry, which depends mostly on export.

According to Reddy, 80 per cent of the industry is surviving on exporting raw and parboiled rice and the balance 20 per cent are specialised rice mills meant to process a fine variety of rice which is being raised now mostly in delta areas.

He said the rice varieties raised in rain-fed areas are ideal for export and paddy-to-rice conversion is also 5 to 6 bags (75 kg each) more than the paddy produced in the delta.

He added that rice millers from East Godavari and Miryalaguda in Telangana, concentrate on Nellore to buy fine variety rice. This will also affect their business as well give room for sharp increase in the price of the rice.

Andhra Pradesh farmers unite to break coconut ‘mafia’

Farmer-Producer Organisation set up with 1,000 farmers.



The organisation will be registered under Companies Act within 20 days.
(Photo: Representational Image)

Rajahmundry: Coconuts grown in Konaseema region continue to remain popular in many foreign countries like Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka but the farmers are being exploited by traders.

To overcome this issue, authorities are setting up a Farmer-Producer Organisation (FPO) with as many as 1,000 coconut farmers especially from Ambajipeta mandal in Konaseema region.

The organisation will be registered under Companies Act within 20 days. Farmers having managerial expertise will be selected and one of them will be made chief executive officer while a 10-member board of directors will be constituted. The FPO will prepare a business plan to develop infrastructure to process and market coconuts for domestic and international market.

As it gets registered under the Companies Act, it can raise loan from various sources including from state government, Centre, Nabard, cooperative societies

and also from private industrialists to expand the develop the market further. The quality of Konaseema region coconuts, especially the tender ones attract people for the water.

Farmers in the region are exporting coconuts and tender coconuts to several northern states like New Delhi, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Odisha. With several temples in these states, the demand for coconuts is high.

Tender coconuts are also in huge demand in these states especially during the summer season. Horticulture authorities say that farmers in the region are being exploited by traders who buy the coconuts relatively at cheap cost and then export them to northern states to make good money.

Many farmers are of the view that since sufficient quantity of quality coconuts is available at a single point, domestic and international buyers approach them and they sell the product directly to them avoiding any role of middlemen and get the profit for themselves.

Horticulture assistant director (Amalapuram) Ch. Srinivasulu said, “Though the local farmers are producing huge quantum of good quality coconuts, lack of expertise to find potential market for their produce results in their exploitation. We are grouping them to float an FPO and will train them in capacity building to handle the business of any volume on their own to get profit for themselves.”

THE HINDU

Water released from Thirumoorthy Dam

Minister for Housing and Urban Development Udumalai K. Radhakrishnan on Wednesday opened the shutters of Thirumoorthy Dam to release water for irrigating a total of 94,362 acres of agriculture land in Tirupur and Coimbatore districts.

Public Works Department (Water Resources Organisation) sources told *The Hindu* that it was planned to discharge a total of 1,200 mcft (million cubic feet) of water in a single wetting over a span of 10 to 12 days. “It is mainly to help the farmers irrigate the standing crops”, said the officials. Farmers in Tirupur, Palladam, Sulur, Pollachi, Madathukulam, Dharapuram and Udumalpet falling under the Zone-3 of the Parambikulam Aliyar Project area would be benefited by the water release.

The outflow of water from the dam stood at 200 cusecs on Wednesday. “Even though there has been no inflow of water into the reservoir area of the dam, we

are expecting to get an inflow of water through Contour canal from Thursday”, said the PWD (WRO) officials.

Farmers urged to adopt modern practices

A one-day workshop, held at the Zonal Agricultural Research Station (ZARS, V.C. Farm) on Wednesday, underlined the need for farmers to hold discussions and visit farmlands of progressive cultivators to improve farming practices and thereby yields.

T. Shivashankar, Dean, University of Agricultural Sciences (UAS-B), addressed the farmers and urged them to regularly visit the fields of those who are employ modern farming practices.

The establishment of Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVK), UAS, and other agencies has stopped farmers from continuing age-old practices such as visiting fields of other farmers to enhance their knowledge to get better yields, Mr. Shivashankar lamented.

“Transferring knowledge from achievers to other farmers is the need of the hour when the State is reeling under drought. Many progressive farmers who have technical, experimental capabilities have already invented a good number of products to simplify farming practices and address the issue of labour scarcity. Such farmers are playing an important role in improving farm practices through their inventions. Utilisation of such equipment would help farmers get better yield and save more money,” Mr. Shivashankar said. The farmers were also urged to adopt integrated farming practices to effectively tackle the agrarian crisis.

Vishveshwari Bhangi, assistant director, V.C. Farm, assistant extensional director Venkatesh, subject experts C.M. Savitha and Kamalabai Kudagi, assistant trainer H.M. Mahesh, progressive farmer K.C. Shivaram and farmers from different parts of the district were present.

From farmers to consumers the organic way

With a catchphrase “Raitharindha Grahakarige” (from farmers to consumers), young and educated farmers practising chemical-free agriculture, are making use of the ongoing Bahuroopi international multilingual theatre festival as a “forum” to push their “vision” and “mission.” These second generation farmers wish to market chemical-free and pesticide-free farm produce directly to the consumers and eventually become “entrepreneurs.”

A stall has been put up by them at Bahuroopi where they have been marketing their produce, explaining the importance of the produce and how they have cultivated them the natural way as popularised by Subhash Palekar. Be it *Kempakki* (a red rice variety) or Amaranthus seeds (which are rich in nutrition)

or toor dal and ragi grown naturally, the young farmers — some of them who have just passed out of college and want to step into their fathers' shoes — have managed to draw the attention of those visiting the festival. Identified with Amrita Bhoomi, a charitable trust and an international centre for sustainable development, which is managed by Chukki Nanjundaswamy, daughter of veteran farmer leader M.D. Nanjundaswamy, they launched the initiative of taking farmers' produce to the consumers here on December 25 last year.



The naturally grown produce is available in front of Kukkarahalli Lake here every Sunday from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m. Abhilash, a BA graduate farmer from Hosamalangi village in Kollegal taluk, whose father Rechanna won the prestigious Plant Genome Saviour Community Award in New Delhi in December last for preserving exotic paddy varieties, says, “I want to make it big like my father. I want to produce seeds and distribute it among fellow farmers.” Abhilash has grown Kempakki — which he claims “has medicinal value and is good for joint aches.” Inspired by Mr. Palekar, Naveen Kumar B.I. from Hassan district has cultivated yelakki banana using the “zero farming” method. Similarly, Raghu from Jyothigowdanapura and Mallikarjun from Hondarabalu village have grown toor dal using the same method. Muttegowda has produced ragi, veggies and leafy veggies.

Tanuja, an MBA graduate from University of Mysore, whose father is a farmer in Kollegal taluk, assists them in their marketing on behalf of Amrita Bhoomi. As a steady stream of visitors throng the stall, Ms. Tanuja explains to them how different are the products sold at their stall from what is available elsewhere.

She explains the difference between the banana grown the usual way and that is grown the natural way, which is available at their stall. Since the start of Bahuroopi, over 500 kg of bananas have been sold.

She says Amaranthus seeds, which is the “secret behind the strength” of Soliga tribals and grown extensively by them, has found many takers.

30 more agricultural market yards to come up soon

A separate market yard for lime will come up at Nakrekal at a cost of ₹2 crore, says Irrigation Minister T. Harish Rao

Irrigation Minister T. Harish Rao said 30 new agricultural market yards were being set up in the State in addition to the 150 existing ones.

Responding to a query in the Legislative Council here on Wednesday about a proposal to set up an agricultural market yard at Samsthan Narayanpur in Bhongir, the Minister said there were certain criteria for it. The market should generate ₹15 lakh income per year, there should not be any other market yard within 15 km radius and it should generate a fee of ₹5 lakh. He, however, said a sub-market yard at Samsthan Narayanpur has been notified at that place under the agricultural market committee. He disclosed that a separate market yard for lime would come up at Nakrekal in eight acres of land at a cost of ₹2 crore, a sweet lime market in 12 acres under SLBC project in Nalgonda and ‘Dondakaya’ market in Devarakonda highway with a cost of ₹60 lakh.

The Minister said in view of good red gram yield - 4.8 lakh tonnes- for this time in the State, the government was setting up 70 purchase centres through four State and Central agencies.

Over 60 centres were already set up and 1.32 lakh tonnes of red gram was purchased at a minimum support price of ₹5,050 per quintal. He asked the legislators to go to the market yards to see whether the farmers were getting the MSP.

Meanwhile, Mr. Harish Rao said 11 irrigation projects, to be taken up at a cost of ₹7,669 crore, were included in the Prime Minister Krishi Sinchai Yojana and in this, the Centre would extend assistance of ₹1,196 crore while ₹537 crore was already released. The rest of the amount would be released through NABARD.

Focussing on the marginal farmer

The sluice gate on the Bhakra main line canal in Khanauri-Kalan village in Sangrur district, Punjab, has become infamous. According to reports, it is a suicide point for farmers and their families. Typically, 30-45 corpses are found in the canal on average every month. Farmers’ suicide in Punjab is a major worry: over 2,632 farmers are reported to have committed suicide between 1995 and 2015, in the land famed for its Green Revolution, according to State government records. Mansa district alone accounts for 1,334 suicides. Adding

farm labourers raises the total to 4,687 reported suicides. The reasons for this vary: cotton crop has been whittled by whiteflies, basmati's market price has declined, the local moneylender has hiked up rates to 20 per cent. The farmer ekes his way to penury.

Farmer suicides are not a new trend. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2,195 marginal farmers reportedly committed suicide in 2015 (of which 834 were in Maharashtra), while 3,618 "small farmers" undertook such drastic steps, with Maharashtra alone seeing 1,285. More curiously, a larger number of small farmers rather than marginal farmers reportedly committed suicide in States like Maharashtra, Telangana and Karnataka. Somehow, small farmers are also bedevilled by the agricultural crisis, and this is not the case in just the traditional drought-stricken States.

On input costs

Agriculture in States like Punjab is typically a monoculture of wheat and paddy. When input costs associated with fertilizers, crop-protection chemicals and seeds rose, along with fixed costs associated with agricultural equipment such as tractors and submersible pumps, agriculture became economically unviable. Prices have risen — of arhar seeds and staple crops like paddy and sugarcane, of fertilizers and plain barley. The old days of farmers handing seeds as family heirlooms to their sons are long gone. Hiring labourers and animals is expensive. With an increase in application of crop-protection chemicals, soya bean has seen a massive jump in pesticide cost. Given a jump in input costs, cultivation costs have gone up in multiples. The total cost of cultivation for wheat rose three times from 2004-05 to 2012-13.

While traditionally the blame is cast on the usurious local moneylender, NCRB data highlight that 2,474 of the 3,000 farmers who were reported to have committed suicide in 2015 had loans from local banks, while those who had loans from moneylenders were just 9.8 per cent of the total. Maharashtra reported 1,293 such suicides for indebtedness, while Karnataka had 946. Meanwhile, farmers in Punjab are estimated to have an outstanding debt of Rs. 69,355 crore. Somehow, the traditional moneylender is seemingly more "flexible" than local banks.

Retailing agriculture

Solving this crisis requires an inclusive approach. Our policies should encourage integrated pest management, an approach that focusses on combining biological, chemical, mechanical and physical means to combat pests with a long-term emphasis on eliminating or significantly reducing the need for pesticides. In Vietnam, over 2 million of the Mekong Delta's rice farmers adopted a "no spray early" rule, curbing insecticide applications within the first 40 days of rice planting. Predatory beetles that commonly prey on rice

pests were sustained, encouraging the crop while cutting pesticide use by over 50 per cent.

The local fertilizer industry needs support — timely delivery of subsidies would improve working capital requirements, enabling them to manage costs through internal sources rather than external loans. Delayed payments can cause an interest outgo of Rs. 3,500 crore for fertilizer firms annually. State seed policies should focus on encouraging contract farming, along with identification of new genotypes for treating pest and disease syndromes, as well as adverse weather conditions. Precision-farming techniques like Systematic Rice Intensification can help increase seed production in this regard.

Our farm equipment policy needs to be retailored with a focus on manufacturing farming equipment and implements that are currently imported. Subsidies should be rerouted to ensure lower collateral requirements, longer moratoriums and payback periods for farmers seeking to buy equipment and entrepreneurs seeking to setup Custom Hiring Centres (CHC) for agricultural equipment. Companies with a corporate social responsibility focus on agriculture can be further encouraged to invest in capacity-building initiatives, skill development and the establishment of CHCs.

We need to ensure that institutional financing is available and accessible and benefit provision is simplified while disbursed funds are effectively monitored. States should seek to establish early warning signals, monitoring farmers who go past set limits and seek unsustainable loans. Village-wise lists of deeply indebted farmers must be prepared annually to identify farmers on the flight path to penury and potential suicide. The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, along with the local administration, should be tasked with analysing such lists for macro and local policy interventions, along with devising timely loan restructuring initiatives, insurance claim settlements and better counselling.

Finally, such individuals must be treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. Given the hard struggle of making a living in agriculture these days, such farmers face big odds for sustaining their families and educating their children. Travelling through the by-lanes of suicide-stricken villages in Bijnor, Bahraich, Kheri, Allahabad, Aligarh and Moradabad is a humbling and disconcerting experience.

Even distributing Rs.50,000 per distraught marginal farmer family has had little impact; so deep is the scale of agrarian distress. Our efforts in crowdfunding have been a palliative for over 3,000 farmers, but only systemic change can transform their situation. The marginal farmer requires more than just hope now.

They show the way in terrace farming

Two months ago, they sowed a few tomato and chilly seeds in 60 growbags. On Monday, those 63 people went back to the terrace of White Cast Building in Muthalakkulam to see the fruits of their labour. And the joy was evident.

It was the model organic vegetable garden prepared by the Save Green Agricultural Cooperative Society. The growbags on 800-sq.ft terrace now has ripe tomatoes, green chillies and ladies fingers.



Celebrating the 63rd All India Cooperative Week, 63 prominent persons in the city, including Mayor Thottathil Raveendran, councillor P. Kishenchand, District Cooperative Bank president Manayath Chandran and Communist Party of India district secretary T.V. Balan, sowed the seeds in November last year.

“Our aim is to make people understand that terrace farming is viable and effortless,” said president of the society M.P. Rejul Kumar. “With just 60 growbags, a person can meet the needs of her home and at least two nearby families. With 100 growbags, one can even start selling vegetables,” he added.

Traditional methods

The garden was prepared using the traditional agricultural methods and natural manure. The only difference is in irrigation.

“We have used drip irrigation method here. It saves water and serves the purpose,” he said.

Save Green provides all necessary help to set up vegetable gardens in the city, including on terraces.

“We are getting a lot of enquiries and some have already started the gardening. We are also planning a get-together of people who have set up vegetable gardens on their terraces,” he added.