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THE HINDU

Fruit and flower show attracts good crowd

A Yakshagana crown, a lighthouse, a veena, and two tablas made out of flowers, and a sculpture of Nandi made out of nine pulses, are some of the attractions at the three-day fruit and flower show, which began at the Flower Auction Centre, Doddanagudde, here on Saturday.

The venue was an array of colours. Fruits were carved into various shapes including fish, flowers, butterfly, rabbit, deer, snake, crocodile, swan, peacocks, and even a Yakshagana artiste.

A replica of Kaup lighthouse was created by using 9,000 roses, while the Yakshagana crown was created using 3,000 roses and gerberas.

The family of cartoon character 'Chhota Bheem' was created using 1,000 orchids and 800 alstroemerias.

Among the horticultural products on display were tender coconut, arecanut, cashew and black pepper, and fruits including banana and jackfruit. There was an exhibition of the 'Shankarpura Mallige' (Shankarpura jasmine) and 'Mattu Gulla' vegetable, both from Udupi district, which enjoyed Geographical Indication (GI) tag. The model terrace garden created on the terrace of one of the buildings of the centre attracted a good crowd.

Chandrashekhar Naik, Joint Director of Agriculture, said that the intention behind holding the show was to encourage farmers and also to create awareness among consumers.

B.V. Poojary, a farmer from Perdoor, said that the show was impressive as it introduced the farmers to a wide variety of agricultural, horticultural crops and floriculture. "After coming here, I feel I should also take up floriculture in my fields in addition to cultivating traditional agricultural and horticultural crops," he said.

Taking organic farming to next level

Telangana State Seed and Organic Certification Authority to improve marketing opportunities for organic produce

Ramana Reddy from Nagarkurnool has adopted organic farming 15 years ago.

His 30 acres include the 10 acres he had sold long ago unable to bear the costs of chemical farming, and bought again after he started making profits from organic farming.

“In the year 2000, I had grown 200 quintals of cotton, and after the costs of pesticides and chemical fertilisers, I was left with ₹11 in my hands,” he recalled.

With advice from friends and officials, he took to organic farming, and now he grows paddy, cotton, and chillies, all in organic way.

He has not even opted for BT Cotton, yet reaps 180 to 200 quintals of it, besides 25 to 30 quintals of chillies.

Success story

“I had sold my 10 acres for ₹95,000 in total. Now, I bought them back spending ₹35 lakh. Farmers and scientists from other states come to study my methods,” he announced proudly at the inauguration of the Telangana State Seed and Organic Certification Authority here. He expects the certification facility to improve the marketing opportunities for his cotton.

Requires patience

However, not everyone has such success stories. Rajyalakshmi and Sudha, growing mangoes in Keesara and Medchal respectively, are still struggling with farming sans chemicals. Venkat Reddy, another farmer from Nizamabad has not ventured to extend his experiment with organic farming beyond one acre, despite good results. Agriculture Minister Pocharam Srinivas Reddy urged the farmers not to get discouraged, as it requires patience to master organic farming.

National mission

Telangana State Government intends to gradually veer the farmers towards organic farming without it having adverse effect on foodgrain production.

Centre too is taking initiatives through its ‘Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojna’.

“Marketing and export opportunities will increase with the organic certification. Public health too will improve. Telangana is only second in the whole country in use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, which increases diseases,” Mr.Reddy said, after inaugurating the facility.

Secretary Agriculture C.Parthasarathi noted that organic farming is a comprehensive set of agricultural management systems, and not mere use of natural products. It involves treating the soil like a living being.

Certifying laboratories

He informed that the organic produce will be tested at any of the four NABL labs in the state, before being certified.

Noting that the world has about 350 lakh hectares of organic agriculture, of which 3.4 lakh hectares are in India, Mr. Parthasarathi said Centre and State governments are making joint efforts towards encouraging organic farming.

Director of the Authority K. Keshavulu said there were three attempts earlier to set up the authority, and that APEDA approval is expected for the newly established certifying agency.

With crops withering, whither delta farmer?

The delta region, considered the granary of the state, is facing great distress, thanks to monsoon failure and a combination of other factors, such as demonetisation, that have accentuated the situation. Farmers' organisations accuse the State of not treating the issue with sufficient seriousness, even as they struggle to live each day under the overwhelming burden of a debt which they can never hope to repay...

For farmers of the delta region of Tamil Nadu, the biggest festival of the year is naturally the harvest festival — Pongal. For each farmer, it is like a wedding in the family — the preparations are joyous and go on for three days.

Not this year, though. This year, Pongal was a dull, lacklustre affair in the rice bowl of Tamil Nadu. With the failure of both monsoons, which wet the lands and enable the water-intensive paddy planting process, coupled with the lack of Cauvery water, farmers have been traumatised. First, their short-term crop kuruvai failed, and then, so too did the long-duration paddy crop of samba, just as the farmers feared. Faced with mounting debts, the inability to pay them back and literally zero yield in some cases, farmers have been pushed to the brink. Pongal was no occasion to celebrate, at a time when the State is arguably witnessing its worst drought in recent times.

Rani could not sleep for days after her husband, V. Murugaiyyan (48), committed suicide in November. The samba crop that he had planted on a three-acre piece of land he had leased out in Pirinjamoolai in Nagapattinam district had withered.

“I am an illiterate and have no land. We have nowhere else to go and all of a sudden, feel orphaned after my husband took his life, unable to bear the burden of debt any longer,” rues Rani. She has a 11-year-old child with mental illness and a daughter studying Plus-Two to take care of.

There are other such “Ranis” in the State, the government concedes to a far lesser number than farmers' organisations and the opposition parties.

While desperation drove many farmers to end their lives, the stress put such pressure on many others that dozens died of cardiac arrest following the failure of crops in Thanjavur, Tiruvarur and Nagapattinam districts and in other parts of the State.

“We faced an unprecedented situation this year with the failure of both the South West and the North East monsoons. Water from the Mettur dam was inadequate and the groundwater table in the delta has gone down badly,” observes Mannargudi S. Ranganathan, general secretary, Cauvery Delta Farmers Welfare Association.



Many farmers in rain-fed regions of the State launched agricultural operations after an initial burst of rainfall but were deceived as there was no more rain till the monsoon withdrew.

The crisis is not restricted to the Central region of the State. Murugesan, a marginal farmer in Sambakulam in Mudukulathur taluk of Ramanathapuram district, had borrowed ₹20,000 for paddy cultivation and another ₹30,000 for chilli cultivation but lost both the crops. “Every day, when I get up in the morning, I swear in the name of God I feel like ending my life,” he says, looking up at the skies. After losing the crops, he became a daily wage worker and is struggling to make ends meet, he says.

Droughts are not uncommon to the farmers of this arid district but this year, many of them burnt their fingers after borrowing money from private money lenders in the 'absence' of credit facilities in the Primary Agriculture Cooperative Credit Societies after the demonetisation drive.

Water, cash crunch

"Karnataka brazenly braved all Supreme Court directives to discharge water in the Cauvery to save the standing crops in Tamil Nadu. The Central government turned a blind eye to it too. Prime Minister Narendra Modi demonetised high-value currencies and restricted withdrawal limits, compounding the crisis for the farmers who were in dire need of funds for farm operations and most importantly disbursement of wages for labourers," observes Mr. Ranganathan.

The denial of cash-giving kuruvai and the failure of the samba put paid to the hopes of the delta farmers. The short-term paddy crop used to give them the necessary wherewithal to help them raise the long-duration samba paddy crop in most of the delta region or in areas where bore wells could be used to irrigate the fields.

There is a misconception that the delta reaps three crops in a year and farmers are asking for more. That is definitely not the case. The predominantly clayey nature of the delta soil allows raising of only paddy during any time of the year. If assured water for irrigation is available, farmers raise kuruvai and thalady paddy crops with the help of sub surface water in restricted areas, while in most of the regions in Thanjavur, Tiruvarur and Nagapattinam districts, only samba paddy crop is being cultivated using water flowing down through Cauvery and its branches, besides help from the heavens. Kuruvai as a seasonal paddy crop has remained a mirage since the seventies.

Despite the State government announcing kuruvai and samba special packages carrying cash incentives, the farmers continue to suffer. "I need to buy water for irrigating my withering samba paddy crop. Those who have bore wells charge ₹100 to ₹150 per hour and one acre piece of land requires 10 hours of pumping to fully irrigate the area. For such four wettings, my entire return is taken away, observes S. Durairaj of Erukkattur village in Tiruvarur district.

A Central team fanned out to various parts of the State to assess the drought impact. Ironically, parts of the delta region received moderate rain ahead of the Central team's visit, leaving farmers ruing their fate. The unseasonable rain over the past few days in Nagapattinam and Tiruvarur districts has raised apprehensions among farmers, who had raised paddy with the help of pump sets in some parts of the delta. The ryots fear that continued rains at this stage might flatten the fully matured paddy crop.

The farmers are also upset with the mode of crop insurance scheme. "Crop insurance in the present style is not indemnifying me against any crop loss as such. The mode of crop

loss and damage assessment, compensation arrived at and also the time taken for disbursement of the compensation are awful and are in fact unfathomable to farmers. Even if we don't get to fix the price of our produce, we must at least know the damage-compensation mechanism, which must be transparent and farmer-friendly," says farmer T. Mathialagan of Paappanadu village in Thanjavur district.

As agriculture took a beating this year, the situation of the landless farm workers seems far more complicated. "At least, farmers have some lands to rely upon after overcoming the crises in the future. We don't have a today and we won't have a tomorrow," points out V. Jeevakumar, Thanjavur district vice-president of the Tamil Nadu Vivasaya Thozhilalar Sangam.

The failure of the paddy crop is set to trigger a massive fodder crisis as well. In areas where sub surface water is being used for irrigating thalady paddy crop, production is expected to plummet sharply again, resulting in a huge loss for farmers despite their hard work. Excess dependence on sub surface water and overexploitation have resulted in depleting water table levels. Already a drinking water crisis looms large over the state. Unless the State government steps in with farm loan waivers and better crop insurance policies, the future seems bleak, say farmers. They pray for a reasonable monsoon the next year, and the strength to last until then.