

“It is time to act now and do something to save agriculture”



R. Madhavan



A Mechanical Engineering degree from an Indian Institute of Technology is a passport to a wide horizon of opportunities for any student. But for R. Madhavan, who passed out of IIT-Madras in 1986 and took up farming as an industrial enterprise, it was a means to redefine the role of engineers. From being considered a fitting candidate for psychiatric counselling to an inspirational figure, he has come a long way. He spoke to Ajai Sreevatsan recently about his journey.

“In India, food is so expensive. Nobody can afford food. Poor families spend 70 per cent of their monthly earnings on food,” says R. Madhavan. “Technology has to be used to improve productivity. The cost per unit has to come down. Educated youth should take up agriculture as an enterprise and start value adding in villages through processing centres. Best of the brains should look at agriculture.”

But unfortunately in India, he says, agriculture is considered a lowly occupation and lack of technological intervention means we produce less than other countries in spite of our natural endowments.

“Agriculture is a science. Each plant is an industry. It is a life,” he added. Having left his well paying job with ONGC in 1993 and using all the money he had saved to buy six acres in Chengalpattu, he set out to prove exactly that – with the application of science, much of the drudgery and misery associated with farming can be overcome.

“At first, it was extremely difficult. There was no technology and nobody had practical information. All that the university departments could offer me were photo copies of books. How do you do farming with that?” asks Mr. Madhavan.

Eventually he learnt his ropes through trial and error and by devising a concept which he calls e-farming. He corresponded with an agronomist based in California – sending him pictures of crop growth, putting queries about pest control and then

adapting solutions to Indian conditions.

The experience was an eye-opener he says. "I never realised so much of science is required in farming." For example, 13 elements have to be properly balanced for a particular soil to be suitable for cultivation. I religiously sent samples to the district soil testing laboratory. But I soon realised that without even analysing, they were giving me a photo report copy assuming that soil samples from a particular district will have the same composition. That is like saying if you come from Tambaram, you have cancer."

According to him, the disconnect between agricultural universities and farmers is vast. "Students are not being taught how to farm. They are being taught how to get a certificate. Farmer does not know why agriculture universities exist."

Pointing out that 46 per cent of children in India suffer from malnutrition and we are worse off than Sub-Saharan Africa in child malnutrition he says the time to act is now and something urgent must be done to agriculture for the sake of future generations.

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World Wetland Day celebrated

Special Correspondent

CHENNAI: Slide shows, distribution of pamphlets and awareness programmes marked the World Wetland Day celebrations in the city on Tuesday.

Officials of the Kancheepuram Forest Division distributed pamphlets with the help of student volunteers from various city colleges near the Velachery bridge and at the Pallikaranai junction of the Thoraipakkam – Pallavaram Radial Road.

Forest Department authorities said there were more than 150 water bodies in the city and its suburbs, but due to urbanisation their number has come down to 27.

On the Pallikaranai marshlands, the officials said recent reports about the appearance of the white-spotted garden skink for the first time in the State and Russell's viper, the largest and the most widespread among Asian vipers, confirmed the invaluable ecological status of the marshland. Fish such as dwarf gourami and chromides occur naturally in Pallikaranai. Besides, the windowpane oyster, mud crab, mullet, half beak and green chromide are some of the estuarine fauna present in the marsh.

A total of 317 ha (about 793 acres) of the marshland had been classified as Reserve Land under Section 4 of Tamil Nadu Forest Act 1882. The process, of declaring this part of Pallikaranai as Reserve Forests, is on.

As part of the programme, the Trust for Environment Monitoring and Action Initiating (EMAI) organised an awareness programme.

A slide show on the wetland habitat and their status with the flora and fauna of these wetlands was conducted.

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Stress on raising more food crops

Special Correspondent

Farmers told to adopt latest technologies

PUDUKOTTAI: Farmers must concentrate more on raising food crops than cash crops and adopt latest technologies in cultivation and give up conventional methods to get more yield, said Collector A.Suganthi here on Tuesday.

Inaugurating a special campaign for the rabi crop season organised by the Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA), he appealed to the farmers to take special efforts to increase food production and protect arable lands.

Farmers could get good income if they switched over to latest technologies and farm mechanisation.

The cultivation area had been shrinking owing to construction of houses and other buildings and this would lead to food shortage in the future, she said.

The Collector said that several issues on agriculture would be discussed during the three-day campaign and the Agriculture, Horticulture and other departments had also put up stalls exhibiting latest farm equipment, showcasing best ways of cultivation.

Ms. Suganthi advised the farmers to take up paddy cultivation under system of rice intensification (SRI) method to get more yield. She also distributed welfare assistance worth Rs.5.25 lakh to farmers under various schemes.

P. Krishnasamy, Project Director of ATMA, explained in detail the objectives and salient features of the special campaign for the current rabi crop season.

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Mettur level

The level in the Mettur dam stood at 77.05 feet on Tuesday against its full level of

120 feet. The inflow was 868 cusecs and the discharge, 2,000 cusecs.

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Book on GM crops released

Staff Reporter

Coimbatore: Federation for Sustainable Development on Monday released a book for generating awareness on genetically modified crops titled “Vizhi alladhu Veezndhu Madi”.

The book was released by Organic Farm Scientist, Nammalwar and the first copies were received by Srivasta Organic Agri Farm and store founder, Shantha Ramasamy, Osai Kalidasan and writer Kovanandi. The Federation co-ordinator, Kongu M. Loganathan, said that to generate adequate awareness on the ill-effects of genetically modified crops, 10,000 copies of the book are going to be distributed across Coimbatore.

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Farmers’ association to file contempt of court petition

Staff Reporter

ERODE: Tamizhaga Vivasayeegal Sangam has decided to file a contempt of court petition in pollution issue.

A release from the farmers’ organisation says it has decided to move the court as the Erode district administration and Tamil Nadu

Pollution Control Board have failed to implement court orders to control pollution.

“The administration and TNPCB have failed to act against polluting industries in the district, as per the court orders. Erode has turned into a city of effluents and garbage and wherever one sees, it is not difficult to spot polluted water. To rescue Erode, the association has decided to move the court,” the release says. The farmers association has urged Erode dairy, Aavin, to pay arrears, pending for weeks, to milk producers cooperative societies. The union must pay the money immediately, the release says and asks the union management to check the quality of feed supplied. The farmers have also condemned the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board for banning the use of water pumped using free electricity for poultry. The Board should relax the norms.

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Water level

MADURAI: The level in the Periyar dam on Tuesday stood at 113.90 feet (full level 136 feet) with an inflow of 206 cusecs and a discharge of 403 cusecs.

The level in the Vaigai dam was 46.10 feet (71 feet) with an inflow of 38 cusecs and a discharge of 1,860 cusecs. The combined Periyar credit stood at 1,922 mcft.

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Importance of protecting wetlands stressed

Special Correspondent

— Photo: L. Balachandar



***Conscious:* Students signing a banner to stress the need for wetland protection in Rameswaram on Tuesday.**

RAMANATHAPURAM: The students of various schools in Rameswaram on Tuesday took out a rally to create awareness of the need to protect wetlands.

They also signed on a banner stressing the importance of preserving the wetlands, which were facing dangers by way of encroachment, pollution, letting effluents, plastics, lack of maintenance.

Other areas

The representatives of People's Action for Development, which is spearheading the awareness campaign, said though the government had identified four wetlands Gulf of Mannar, Mela Selvanoor-Keela Selvanoor, Kanjirankudi and Chithirankudi, the wetlands were spread in other areas of the district including Naripaiyur, Muhuntharayar Chathiram.

In danger

Many of these wetlands were facing danger due to various factors.

S. Kamalabhai, Deputy Superintendent of Police, Rameswaram, V. Jeyachandran, Head Master, Government Higher Secondary School, N. Jeyakanthan, NSS officer, J. Prabakarn and P. Chockalingam of People's Action for Development took part.

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Farmers take to road, seek release of water

Special Correspondent

Over 800 court arrest on National Highway 49

SIVAGANGA: More than 800 farmers and cadres of almost all political parties were arrested on Tuesday when they squatted on the National Highway 49 between Thirubuvanam and Manamadurai demanding the release of the Vaigai water to save the standing crop in Manamadurai region.

M. Gunasekaran, MLA, (AIADMK) (Manamadurai constituency), K. Thangamani, Chairman, Manamadurai Panchayat Union, (CPI) Kasirajan, district secretary, Congress, Archunan, district secretary, CPI (M) and many leaders of farmer's associations were among those arrested.

Traffic was disrupted on the NH in the morning as the farmers including women picketed traffic movement in at least six places.

The police had to send in forces to various places to clear the road.

Mild force

Since the farmers refused to move out of the road while pressing for their demand in some places, the police used mild force to chase them away and then arrested them subsequently.

The agitators claimed that they were beaten up by the police.

All of them were kept in marriage halls in Manamadurai.

There was a report that a section of farmers refused to eat the lunch served to them saying that their aim was to attract the government's attention to release water to save the crop.

They said that paddy raised in about 40,000 acres in the Manamadurai region, which was in the advanced stage for harvest, was withering due to lack of water.

Though they withdrew the picketing agitations a couple of times based on the promise from officials, the water was not released so far.

Collector Mahesan Kasirajan told 'The Hindu' that though the demand of the farmers was genuine, the PWD officials had apprised him that the present water level in Vaigai and other sources was not enough to serve the purpose.

They had also explained to him that even if the water was released it would not reach the areas in need.

The Superintendent of Police, N. Rajasekaran, said though the police were forced to arrest all of them as they tried to block the traffic movement, they were released in the evening.

Policemen had been instructed to closely follow the situation.

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Farmers to learn new fish culture techniques

Staff Reporter

Indian Council of Agricultural Research aims at increasing production by imparting methodical training

— Photo: A. Shaikmohideen



good: Corporation Commissioner K. Baskaran inaugurating a workshop at St. Xavier's College, Palayamkottai, on Tuesday.

TIRUNELVELI: The 2-day workshop for the inland fish farmers on murrel culture techniques commenced at Centre for Aquaculture Research and Extension (CARE) of St. Xavier's College, Palayamkottai, on Tuesday.

The Indian Council of Agricultural Research, with the objective of substantially increasing murrel production by imparting methodical training to inland fish farmers, sanctioned to CARE in October 2008 a grant of Rs.3.20 crore under its National Agricultural Innovation Project's Production to Consumption Scheme.

Under this four-year long programme, CARE in association with Central Institute for Freshwater Aquaculture, Bhubaneshwar, Orissa and the research centre at New

College, Chennai, would train 100 inland fish farmers every year on the culture of murrel, a freshwater fish variety known for its medicinal properties, provide the beneficiaries with thousands of murrel seeds and fish feed and also assist them in marketing the harvested adult (one-year-old) murrels, weighing about 1 kg to 1.250 kg.

“Since one kg of murrel is being sold between Rs.200 and Rs.250 in the market, farmers who go for murrel cultivation will certainly get attractive revenue,” said Principal Investigator of the consortium and Director, CARE, M.A. Haniffa.

Since only 750 of the 2,250 ponds and small irrigation tanks in the district, on an extent of over 9,600 hectares, had been put into use for fish culture (mostly carp variety), the training programme was conducted.

In the training sessions that commenced on Tuesday, nearly 75 fish farmers were participating and they would be taken to an aqua farm near Palayamkottai following the theoretical sessions.

The participants were trained in seed production and feed formulation for murrel culture.

High demand

Inaugurating the training session, Tirunelveli Corporation Commissioner K. Baskaran said women self-helps, now engaged in various business ventures, should take-up lucrative murrel culture as demand for this freshwater fish was quite high in the market. Rector, St. Xavier’s Educational Institutions, Rev. Fr. Britto Vincent SJ, Principal of SXC, Palayamkottai, Rev. Fr. Alphonse Manickam SJ, former Dean of Fisheries College and Research Institute, Tuticorin V. Sundararaj spoke.

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Water in 19,000 TN villages not potable

By By Our Correspondent
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Feb. 2: Groundwater in over 19,000 villages across Tamil Nadu is ‘unsafe’ for human consumption and dangerously contaminated with nitrates and fluoride. Worse, 60 per cent of the western districts, which includes the wealthy Coimbatore region, is contaminated and the situation is ‘only slightly better’ in places like Madurai and Tiruchy, says chief water analyst T. Jayakumar of the Tamil Nadu Water Supply and Drainage Board (TWAD), who led an extensive study of groundwater contamination.

“We tested water samples collected from 1.5 lakh handpumps across Tamil Nadu and were shocked that the groundwater has become unsafe in more than 19,000 habitations with nitrates and fluoride contamination,” Mr Jayakumar told this newspaper, adding ominously, “Rectifying the situation is a tough process.” The team which worked on this ‘statewide analysis of water quality report’ found that 35 per cent of groundwater is non-potable, nitrates and fluoride being major pollutants.

Dharmapuri, Erode and Virudhunagar are severely contaminated with fluoride and TWAD has even put out alerts telling the public not to drink the unsafe water, according to Mr Jayakumar. Mr Jayakumar said the board was “doing its best trying to reach safe drinking water by TWAD overhead tanks and street pipelines”.

But locals say that the supplies fall far short of the demand. “We get TWAD water once in three days. It’s only natural that people turn to unsafe wells when their kitchen pots go dry,” says Kokilavani Manirasu, chairman of the Erode panchayat union.

“Nitrates react with the hemoglobin in blood and reduce its oxygen-carrying capacity. Nitrogen poisoning could be disastrous, causing retardation, lethargy and, in the long run, cyanosis,” explains Dr Kanagasabai, dean, Kilpauk Medical College. Doctors warn that excess fluoride in water causes bone deformities and teeth decay.

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Rs 999 bag eases price rise pinch

By By Our Correspondent

Feb 03 2010

Feb. 2: With the Chennai middle-class feeling the pinch of the price rise, the state government’s new initiative to sell 50 grocery items, including atta, sunflower oil, toor dhal, Horlicks, tea at a cost of Rs 999 in eight of Chennai’s urban cooperative stores — Kamadhenu — has seen enthusiastic response.

Middle-class people in Mylapore, Triplicane, Nungambakkam and other areas say this is helping them handle their monthly budget better.

The Triplicane Urban Cooperative Society (TUCS), packaging and selling the goods, calls it market intervention to keep prices of essentials under check in the outside market. “Nearly

1,000 packages were sold in less than two days of introducing them. This market intervention helps in correcting the prices in the open market,” Mr S.G. Sakthi Saravanan, special officer, TUCS, told this newspaper.

The government-supported model has been effective as proved during the festive season of December-January. “We sold vegetable packages at almost 50 per cent of the open market prices from December 25 to Pongal period. That was the time when vegetable prices were skyrocketing. The market prices corrected fairly afterwards,” said Mr Saravanan.

“We save a minimum of Rs 200 while buying the Rs 999 package. This is a great relief for salaried people like me,” said Ms Mathiazhagi who had come to the Kamadhenu store at Raja Annamalaipuram. Said Ms Suganthi at the Kilpauk Kamadhenu store, she could buy toor dhal at Rs 75 per kilo here whereas it cost over Rs 85 in the open market. The monthly budget for provisions for a family of three has risen from Rs 2,000 to Rs 5,000 in the last two years, with the price essential commodities going up, point out many housewives and people like Mr Kumaran who is a regular at Kilpauk Kamadhenu.

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