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Agriculture Department gets first prize at expo

Special Correspondent

Exhibition held at fort from December 24 to February 10

— Photo: D. Gopalakrishnan



Good service: C. Rajendran, Vellore Collector, handing over the prize to Sivakumar Singh, Assistant Director of Agriculture, Anaicut, at a function in Vellore on Tuesday. Balasubramaniam, DSP, Vellore, is in the picture.

VELLORE: The Agriculture Department got the first prize among the pavilions put up by 18 government departments and quasi-government bodies at the Government Exhibition held at the fort here from December 24 to February 10.

C. Rajendran, Collector of Vellore, presented the first prize to Sivakumar Singh, Assistant Director of Agriculture, Anaicut, at a function held at the exhibition venue on Tuesday. The second prize went to the Police Department, the third prize to the Department of Rural Development and Local Administration and the consolation prize to the Social Welfare Department. The Collector also distributed cheques for Rs.20,000 each towards financial assistance to 14 beneficiaries under the Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammayar Marriage Assistance Scheme.

The Collector said that the exhibition has been organised in such a way as to enable the public to know in detail the various welfare schemes implemented by the government. The government departments also enlightened the public on the ways to obtain benefits of the government's schemes. He appealed to those who visited the various government pavilions to communicate the message of the government's schemes to those who did not visit the exhibition. The government has realised revenue of about Rs.10.36 lakh by way of entrance tickets to the exhibition. N. Aruljothi Arasan, Project Officer, DRDA, Balasubramaniam, Deputy Superintendent of Police, Vellore, Saroja Thiruvengadam, District Social Welfare Officer, and K. Saravanan, Curator, Government Museum, spoke. M. Vijayakumar,

District Information and Public Relations Officer, welcomed the gathering. N. Devaraj, Assistant PRO, proposed a vote of thanks.

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“Dam row leading to water crisis”

Special Correspondent

MADURAI: Any lethargy by the State Government on the Mullaperiyar dam row with neighbouring Kerala would certainly ruin the economy in southern districts of Tamil Nadu and also lead to water crisis in Madurai in the near future, said Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) general secretary Vaiko here on Tuesday.

Addressing a demonstration staged by the party’s district unit, he said that people from different parts of Tamil Nadu had expressed their willingness to intensify the stir by blocking vehicular movement to Kerala at as many as 13 points in the State. The governments should realise that a majority of essential commodities were being transported daily from Tamil Nadu to Kerala.

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Call for detailed study of climate change on water resources

Staff Reporter

Research and Development session of INCOH begins

— Photo: S.S.Kumar



(From left) INCOH chairman A.K.Bajaj, Union Minister of State for Water Resources Vincent H. Pala and IIT-M deputy director V.G.Idichandy at the inauguration of a research and development session of the committee in Chennai on Wednesday.

CHENNAI: The impact of climate change on water resources needs to be studied in detail, Union Minister of State for Water Resources Vincent H. Pala said here on Wednesday.

Inaugurating a three-day Research and Development session of Indian National Committee on Hydrology (INCOH) at the IIT Madras, he said various studies

indicated that changes in climatic condition could affect flow characteristics of the rivers and number of rainy days. However, most of the projections are based on inadequate data and hence require comprehensive study.

Pointing out that rapid urbanisation and industrialisation have interfered with the hydrological cycle, he said many issues of concern, including improper water management and poor maintenance of the canal systems, have emerged. There is a need to take into account the environmental and social issues to ensure sustainable development of water resources.

He said the Ministry funded research in various thrust areas being taken up by R and D labs of the government and educational institutions. Such sessions, which are organised to review the progress of the projects, help in improving the system.

Later, speaking to presspersons he said that out of the Rs.450-crore funds for water resource projects all over the country, nearly Rs.115 crore has been sanctioned for groundwater recharge projects in Tamil Nadu.

A. K. Bajaj, Chairman of Central Water Commission and INCOH, highlighted the activities of INCOH that provided technical support to the Ministry in evaluating research projects. So far, the Ministry has funded 71 projects of which 39 have been completed.

An accurate assessment of available surface and groundwater resources is essential for planning and implementation of projects, he said.

Mr. Bajaj said some projects to be presented at the meet have practical utility and are on the lines of priority areas such as water resources management during drought, evaporation control, artificial ground water recharge and flood forecasting.

R. D. Singh, Director of National Institute of Hydrology, said that besides about 20 projects to be discussed, seven new project proposals would be presented for funding. The application of new computing techniques in hydrology would also be discussed.

INCOH's member secretary Rakesh Kumar and IIT deputy director V. G. Idichandy also participated.

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Collector agrees to meet farmers on February 15

Special Correspondent

CHENNAI: Tiruvallur district administration has agreed to hold talks with Tamil Nadu Vivasayigal Sangam on February 15 over the issue of distributing government lands allegedly in possession of Karnataka High Court Chief Justice

P.D. Dinakaran to landless poor in Kaverirajapuram village.

This was conveyed by district project officer Meganathan to office-bearers and members of the sangam when they organised picketing on Wednesday to highlight their demands.

“We made it clear that neither the commission looking into the allegations against Mr. Dinakaran nor the mapping of Kaverirajapuram village by the Survey of India have anything to do with distribution of land,” P. Shanmugam, general secretary of the sangam told *Hindu The*.

According to Mr. Shanmugam, the project officer agreed with the argument of the sangam, but expressed his inability to give any commitment since District Collector V. Palanikumar was away in Pune, attending a training programme.

Later Mr. Meganathan contacted the Collector and he had agreed to meet sangam representatives on February 15.

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Bt brinjal: petitioner allowed to file appeal

Special Correspondent

Court disposes of plea after Ministry's order

CHENNAI: The Madras High Court on Wednesday said a petitioner who sought to declare the approval for the release of Bt brinjal in the country as null and void, is at liberty to file an appeal against the approval.

The First Bench consisting of Chief Justice H.L. Gokhale and Justice K.K. Sasidharan passed the order while disposing of a petition by K. Thiruthanikachalam, a Siddha medical practitioner.

The petitioner sought a declaration as null and void the approval granted by the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee in October last year for the release of the variety.

When the matter came up before the Bench, the Additional Solicitor-General, M. Raveendran produced a statement showing the decision on commercialisation of Bt brinjal, dated February 9, issued by the Union Ministry of Environment and Forest.

In the statement, the Ministry had announced its decision “to impose a moratorium on the release of Bt brinjal till such time independent scientific studies establish to the satisfaction of both the public and professionals the safety of the product from the point of view of its long-term impact on human health and environment, including the rich genetic wealth existing in our country.”

The statement also said that the government had decided to interact with all scientific institutions and civil society groups which had submitted various representations to the Minister.

Mr. Raveendran said the petitioner was at liberty to make his representation to the Ministry concerned. as an appeal was available to the petitioner.

Later, the Bench passed the order.

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Farmers throng collectorate

Staff Reporter

Photo: N. Bhaskaran



Farmers with the BT cotton plants thronged Dharmapuri collectorate demanding action against the seed sellers. — .

DHARMAPURI: Over 100 farmers thronged the collectorate on Wednesday demanding immediate relief for the loss they had incurred due to cultivation of Bt Cotton in about 45 villages in and around Harur, Morappur, Papaprapatti and Palacode.

They brought the plant with the flower infected with the disease to submit petitions to the Tamil Nadu Assembly panel.

P. Karunamurthy, an NGO, the shop owners were selling the Bt cotton seed without explaining its advantages and disadvantages. Hence, the farmers should be given relief to meet their loss due to the Bt Cotton.

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FICCI creates awareness of better agricultural practices

— Photo: K. Ganesan



SHOWING THE WAY: E.N. Sundar, Technical Director (EUREPGAP), FICCI, (FICCI), second from left, at a seminar in Madurai.

MADURAI: Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) has been creating awareness among farmers on good agricultural practices in 11 States to promote export of agricultural products to European countries and the US.

Maharashtra started exporting mangoes to the US after FICCI's pilot project created awareness among farmers there on the European Retail Parties Good Agricultural Practices (EUREPGAP), its technical director E.N. Sundar said at an awareness meeting for farmers of the district here on Saturday.

Though India was the second biggest producer of fruits and vegetables, its market share in export was just around 1 per cent though smaller countries such as Thailand and Singapore exported 18 per cent and 13 per cent respectively. Mr. Sundar attributed the poor export to the presence of residual pesticide and fertilizer in vegetables and fruits.

“This is because of excessive usage of pesticide, fertilizer and water,” he said.

Europeans were very sensitive about use of fertilizers and hence FICCI had been promoting standards in application of fertilizers and pesticides and hygienic practices. He said that organic farming was expensive as no chemical fertilizer was used in that method of cultivation. Farmers could not meet their expenses with lower productivity, Mr. Sundar said.

District Revenue Officer Dinesh Ponraj Oliver said. “Farmers cannot export everything they produce, but they should produce what the market wanted. Farmers will have to make minor changes in their agricultural practices to produce better quality of fruits and vegetables and for their social uplift.”

K.P.T. Ganesan, chairman, Tamil Nadu Agricultural Marketing Board, stressed the need for farmers to go for value-additions to get more remuneration for their produce. He urged the farmers to sell their produce at the right price instead of resorting to distress selling. They could avail themselves of pledge loans for up to 75 per cent of the value of their produce from regulated market.

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Water level

MADURAI: Water level in the Periyar dam on Wednesday stood at 112.40 feet (136 feet) with an inflow of 205 cusecs and a discharge of 400 cusecs. The level in the Vaigai dam was 38.71 feet (71 feet) with an inflow of 37 cusecs and a discharge of 260 cusecs. The combined Periyar credit stood at 1,017 mcft.

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Paddy procurement at doorstep starts

Staff Reporter



CONVENIENT: Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation CMD Veera Shanmugamani, left, inaugurating the paddy procurement initiative in a field in Nagapattinam on Wednesday.

NAGAPATTINAM: Paddy procurement has gone straight to the doorstep of the farmer.

A special procurement committee has been formed to procure paddy from the fields of the farmer with a produce exceeding 300 sacks of paddy of 40 kg each.

The initiative was inaugurated by Veera Shanmugamani, Chairperson and Managing Director, Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation, here on Wednesday.

Earlier, he inspected procurement work at Keerapalayam and Vallampadugai in Cuddalore district. He also inspected direct purchase centres at Kollidam, Puthur, Agani, and Mayiladuthurai.

About 16 lakh metric tonnes of paddy would be procured this season in the State. Of this, about 12 lakh metric tonnes are proposed to be procured from the Delta districts and over 4 lakh metric tonnes from other districts. As of date, over 3.87

lakh metric tonnes has been procured in the State. Over 30,000 metric tonnes of paddy is being procured on a daily basis. The procurement is scheduled for completion by February end.

Over 1,123 DPCs are functioning under 159 procurement officers and 17 assistant managers in the delta districts. Further, a General Manager (Market), a Chief Manager (Commerce) and a General Manager (Quality Control) has been appointed for Thanjavur, Nagapattinam and Tiruvarur respectively to supervise the procurement activities in the district.

Control rooms have been set up in Thanjavur (9445190660), Tiruvarur (9445190661) and Nagapattinam (9445190662) for farmers' grievances.

Thanjavur

Special purchasing teams have been formed by the Corporation to purchase paddy in bulk, said Mr. Shanmugamani, here. Farmers who have nearly 300 to 400 bags of paddy can inform TNCSC. Lorries with weighing machines will go to the field and paddy will be procured on the spot by the teams. The aim is to avoid glut in DPCs and help farmers who have to move large quantity of paddy to DPCs.

With harvest picking up, daily arrivals in delta districts of Thanjavur, Tiruvarur and Nagapattinam is of the order of 26,000 tonnes. Out of this, 11,000 tonnes is the daily arrival in Tiruvarur district, 8,000 tonnes in Thanjavur district and 7,000 tonnes in Nagapattinam district.

To procure maximum paddy possible, each DPC is provided with Rs 4 lakh per day. Immediate action is taken against erring employees at DPCs. Three writers and two assistants who indulged in malpractices at Thiruikarukavur, Thekkur, Kalimedu and Budalur in Thanjavur district have been relieved from duties and alternate arrangements have been made. Similarly, writers from Kalanjeri, Ilaiyur and Olimithi in Tiruvarur district have also been relieved. Writer of Kadalangudi DPC in Nagapattinam district has also been relieved.

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Mettur level

TIRUCHI: The water level in the Mettur dam stood at 76.48 feet on Wednesday against its full level of 120 feet. The inflow was 868 cusecs and the discharge, 1,800 cusecs.

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FARMER'S NOTEBOOK

Converted motorbike performs various field operations

M.J. PRABU

The motorcycle converted polycultivator costs Rs.14,000-18,000

— Photo: Special Arrangement



Cheaper alternative: Mansukhbhai Jagani from Gujarat ploughing with his motorbike-turned-tractor.

Drought, a scourge of humanity, makes living impossible for farmers, destroying land, men and farm animals alike. With the death of cattle, and lack of water for irrigation, ploughing barren fields becomes futile.

But not for Mr. Mansukhbhai Jagani an ordinary, not well educated farmer in Mota Devaliya village, Amreli district, in Gujarat who proved that “where there is a will, there is a way.”

Santi

Using his old motorcycle, the farmer developed a machine system called Santi for small farm holdings, complete with attachments for tilling, weeding and sowing. Several farmers in the district have caught on to the idea, and there are now close to 40 Santis in the district.

It costs between Rs. 14,000-18,000, making it much cheaper than other mechanical ploughs and it performs several functions such as weeding, ploughing and sowing for an acre.

Being a school dropout, Mr. Jagani in his tiny workshop, at his Mota Devaliya village, tinkered with a bullet motorcycle and converted it into a ploughing tractor which is much cheaper than a real tractor.

Extent of coverage

The bullet tractor ploughs an acre of land in just half an hour with only two litres of diesel.

“When a farmer asked me for a replacement for his two bullocks, I got a flash in my mind inspired by a local mode of transport, the three-wheel taxi chakdo (common transport in the region), and designed what I call Bullet Santi,” says Mr. Jagani.

The motorcycle’s engine was converted to a 5.5 HP diesel engine and the rear wheel replaced with an attachment with two wheels.

Once a tool bar was fixed to the attachment this unique machine could carry out various farming operations such as furrow opening, sowing, inter-culturing and spraying.

Cost effective

The machine proves to be cost effective and fuel efficient, can plough an acre of land in just half an hour consuming only two litres of fuel. Ten hectares of land can be weeded in a day and the cost of weeding is a mere eight rupees a hectare.

The farmer says:

“This contraption can be attached to any motorcycle having with at least 325 cc (6.5 HP) by replacing the rear wheel with innovative assembly unit designed by me. Various agriculture attachments can then be attached to it for various farm operations such as shallow ploughing, inter-culturing, weeding, sowing and spraying.

“This device has the potential to improve productivity and reduce operating costs for farmers who are currently using bullocks but cannot afford the cost of tractors or power tillers.”

With the help of National Innovation Foundation (NIF), Ahmedabad, Mr. Jagani got a patent in India and in the U.S. for this device.

Excellent response

Mr. Jagani’s innovation was also displayed at the Indian Science Congress at Pune and at the Swadeshi Vigyan Mela at IIT, Delhi where he got an excellent response.

He also got the opportunity to display his innovation in South Africa in an exhibition organized by the Department of Small, Medium & Micro Enterprises (SMME) of the Northern Provinces jointly with Commonwealth Science Council (CSC), London.

Global applications

The knowledge and skill of this rural genius impressed everyone present. In fact, his motorbike-polycultivator is considered a typical example of a product with global

applications.

With design inputs from NID, Ahmedabad, help in patent-application-filing from Boston, U.S., based THT, law firm and business-plan development by Sloan School of Management of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the innovation has literally gone places.

For more information readers can contact Mr. Mansukhbhai Jagani, Mota Devaliya, Amreli- 365410, Gujarat, Phone : 02791-276730, mobile : 9925447400 or GIAN (Grassroot Innovation Augmentation Network), Ahmedabad, Gujarat, email: maresh@gian.org, phone: 079-26768696.

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Methods of rice leaf mite control

Rice leaf mite has attained a pest status in the Cauvery deltaic regions of Tamil Nadu. Infestation starts early from the nursery till stem elongation stage.

Leaf mites feed on upper and lower surface of rice leaves. Usually they are more numerous on lower surface than upper surface.

Leaf mites are small and microscopic spider mites which pierce the leaf tissue and suck the exuding sap.

They multiply very fast under congenial conditions and damage the entire leaf portion under severe infestation.

Damage results in the appearance of yellowish brown specks which increase under severe conditions and whole leaf turns to greyish white and dries up.

Usually the initial symptoms of damage are from the periphery of the rice field and later depending upon wind speed directions the intensity of leaf area loss is manifested.

Most severe

The damage is most serious during the high temperature time with high relative humidity (June – July). Entire life cycle can take 8-12 days.

Adults are sexually mature when they emerge and mate as soon as possible. Egg laying begins in 1-3 days, and singly in rows along the leaf midribs and veins. Incubation lasts 4-9 days.

This is followed by the three immature stages – larva, protonymph and deutonymph.

The mite is active and breeds throughout the year building large population during hot

weather when the life cycle takes the shortest time.

Management methods

Use of chisel ploughing once in four years.

Create a rice free period by ploughing down stubbles between crops or follow rice fallow crops with pulses/green manures maize in endemic areas.

Maintaining the bunds free from weeds. Seed treatment with *Pseudomonas* at 10 grams/ 1kg of seeds.

Topdressing of urea with neem cake (5:1) with LCC (Leaf Colour Chart) based N and to avoid excess Nitrogen application.

Top dressing of 50 per cent potash fertilizer. Spraying of Profenophos 50 EC 1000 ml/ ha along with khadi bar soap 1.5 kg controls leaf mite.

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Farm Query

Paddy variety

Where can I get information on IET 7564 paddy variety? Is there any farmer cultivating it in Tamil Nadu?

S. JAGADEESAN

Tamil Nadu

The duration of IET-7564 (Prasanna) variety is 78 days. The grains are coarse and sturdy. About 2 tonnes can be harvested from an acre and is most suitable for delta areas. You can contact Mr. S. Ranganathan, Chairman, Centre for Cauvery Delta development studies and General Secretary, Tamil Nadu Cauvery Delta Farmers Welfare Association, No 126- first street, Lakshmi Bhavanam, Mannargudi-641-001, Tiruvarur district, Tamil Nadu, email:sranganathanratnam@gmail.com, phone: 04367-252170, mobile: 9442281037 for details.

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Endangered beauty

The inclusion of *Puntius denisonii*, a strikingly beautiful fish found in the Kerala segment of the Western Ghats, in the IUCN Red List is an important step in the struggle to conserve the biodiversity of the hotspot. The endemic 15-cm-long shoaling species, known locally as “Miss Kerala” and commonly as the Denison barb, is sought after by aquarium enthusiasts for its attractive colouration. It has a flaming red streak running from its snout across part of the body. Exceptional good looks seem to have imperilled this inhabitant of fast-flowing streams to the point that the IUCN says it is now vulnerable. The deterioration of its habitat, already fragmented and restricted to a few rivers — notably the Cheenkannipuzha (a tributary of the Valapattanam river), Achankovil, and Chaliyar — poses as serious a challenge as the growing demand from the globalised ornamental fish market. For want of a monitoring mechanism, the Denison barbs are being massively harvested even in reserve forest areas. Fortunately, recognising the vulnerability of this fish to extinction in the wild, the Kerala government has initiated some action to curb unrestricted capture and export.

The scientific estimate of freshwater fish diversity in the Kerala segment of the Western Ghats is of the order of 207 species, including food, ornamental, and sport fishes. Many of these are under threat. Unfortunately, harvesting and trade in fish is not monitored closely, as in the case of other wildlife. This lacuna is highlighted by the IUCN in its Red List literature. Simultaneously, the scope for ‘river ranching’ — the cultivation of the species in captivity and its release in the wild — needs to be explored seriously. Some dedicated scientists in Kerala are working to improve the weak captive-breeding record of the Denison barb, but a low female-to-male ratio complicates the situation. Any success in boosting captive stocks could theoretically relieve pressure on wild populations, although strong vigil would be necessary to prevent fraudulent certification. For now, there is a good case for prohibiting the export of specimens, dead or live. Meanwhile, the State government must take effective action to mitigate threats to the habitat posed by mining, hydroelectric projects, deforestation, and urban expansion. India has a rich trove of inland freshwater fish diversity. The vulnerability of this fish underscores the need to aggressively protect it under wildlife and biodiversity laws.

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By Anitha Jaishankar
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World to give Hosur roses on V-day

HOSUR: Roses exchanged by lovers across the world as they whisper sweet nothings to their partners on Valentine's Day this year, will in all probability, have come from villages around Hosur. Rose cultivation in this belt has increased substantially in the last seven years and, as the day of lovers draws near, farmers in this region are gearing up.

Though Europe and China account for around 65 per cent of the total number of roses exported from the Hosur belt every year, the export is expected to decline this Valentine's as the day falls on a Sunday in Europe. As it is a holiday, most people will not get to see their colleagues or loved ones at work, and this is expected to hit the rose business.

Last year, Hosur farmers exported around 1.2 million units of cut roses to Europe, but the number has significantly declined this year, J Manjunath of Sivadarsh Exports said.

This loss however, is expected to be compensated by large orders from countries in the Middle East, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada and Australia, said an official at Tanflora, Asia's largest rose farm. He added that the price of the bloom had increased from Rs 8 to Rs 40 this year, compared with Rs 8 to Rs 20 last season. Last year's prices had been low due to the recession, he said. Another reason the prices have shot up this year is because Hosur's roses have had a much higher demand as rose production in Pune (another key cultivation belt) has been affected due to last November's floods. Varieties with exotic names — Taj Mahal, Passion, Discovery, Bohemia, Kohinoor, Red Giant, Red Corvette, Apricot, Duett and others — are coveted by international markets. This season, rose cultivators in the region expect to export around 30 million units of cut roses.

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Samar Halarnkar, Hindustan Times
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Brinjal battleground

In 1997, in a field outside Delhi, government regulators forced scientists at the State-run Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI) to destroy India's first field of locally designed killer brinjals (aubergines or eggplants to the rest of the world).

India is littered with State institutions that fail their purpose or flatly refuse to crack down on erring colleagues, so the 1997 move against the government-grown brinjals was extraordinary. These were no ordinary brinjals. In the invisible reaches of their DNA, scientists had spliced in a gene that let the brinjals kill a caterpillar, which bores holes into it and forces farmers to use costly and poisonous pesticides. But the IARI scientists lost their field of dreams because they had not followed some of the safety procedures required.

India follows some of the most robust scientific protocols in the world when it comes to clearing genetically engineered crops. Even companies that get a gene cleared for use in the West must run hundreds of experiments for years, as several companies and public institutions are now doing in testing transgenic rice, tomato and bhindi (okra or ladyfinger). The tests include proofs of no ill-effects on animals, humans and ecosystems.

So, it was appropriate that when Union Minister of State for Environment Jairam Ramesh on Tuesday put on hold his government's own okay to Bt brinjal, he said: "My conscience is clear. This is my decision, and my decision alone."

By setting aside a nine-year process of scientific experiments and approvals and declaring an uncertain, unclear moratorium on Bt brinjal, Ramesh indicated he was taking it on himself to play God with India's attempt to introduce its first genetically engineered food crop and kickstart its second green revolution.

The first green revolution, driven by chemicals and hybrid seeds, is stalling. Yields have levelled off. Demand is growing as India prospers. Farmers are struggling with climate change, especially an increasingly unpredictable monsoon. The environmental damage caused by the indiscriminate use of pesticides is immense. The second green revolution holds out the promise of crops that — among other things — survive on less water, fight pests, and can be programmed to ripen early or late.

Genetic engineering, the manipulation of life at its most basic level, is a breakthrough on par with the splitting of the atom, and the discovery of fire. As fire enabled man to melt down metals and reform them into new materials, so too does genetic engineering allow us to take apart DNA, the building block of life, and refashion it to our needs.

Yet, as the protests that forced Ramesh to ignore the advice of his scientists indicate many are fearful, never mind if those fears are exaggerated and hyped.

The manipulation of the atom uncorked the genie of the atom bomb. Tinkering with the process of evolution could, equally, unleash unforeseen biological and economic problems, argue naysayers: Super-costly super crops that force farmers to forgo traditional practices; uncontrollable super weeds born after mating with genetically engineered super crops; and bugs resistant to Bt, or *Bacillus thuringiensis*, the soil bacteria that lends its name and genes to the super crops.

One of the problems with Bt brinjal in India is the association of Monsanto, the 109-year-old US multinational that part-owns Mahyco, the Indian company producing Bt brinjal. Monsanto has long had conflicts with green groups. The origins lie with its chemical business, which sold controversial products such as Agent Orange for chemical warfare and DDT. These suspicions have continued as the company became a pioneer and a world leader in crop biotechnology.

Other Bt crops, including cotton and maize produced by Monsanto and other companies have been reviewed, approved and grown widely in the United States, Canada, Australia, China, Brazil and parts of Europe. Thus far, there have been no reports of serious environmental or health problems. Then

again, as the critics argue, no one suspected the long-term impacts of DDT, a great mosquito-killer since World War II. It was later cited as a killer of birds and possibly a cause of cancer and banned in the US more than 30 years after its insect-killing properties were discovered. India is one of only three countries still producing DDT (China and North Korea are the others), though it's no longer used in agriculture.

The realisation of biotechnology's promises will depend on how well we manage them. India has thus far approved only a genetically modified version of cotton, carefully watching its promises and pitfalls. The results have been scientifically promising, not so much economically.

When Bt cotton was introduced in March 2002, after similar fire and noise, farmers in the first major field study reported using up to 80 per cent less pesticide (some is needed, as the effectiveness of the Bt cotton against its tormentor worm reduces with age). Mint quotes a report from the State-owned Cotton Corporation of India as saying that between 2001 and 2006, Bt cotton helped boost yields from 308 kg per hectare to 508 kg per hectare (still below the world average).

Here's the rub: Bt cotton seeds can cost up to 200 per cent more than normal seeds. Many Indian farmers fear a time when they may have little choice but to buy such seeds.

So, we can forgive Ramesh for caving in to public sentiment and overplaying his hand. But unless he quickly reveals a specific, clear plan for Bt brinjal, he risks jeopardising our next leap forward.

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print/507469.aspx>

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Pranab puts GDP growth at 7.75%, stimulus exit talk builds up

Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee said on Wednesday the economy could grow by 7.75 per cent in 2009-10 – a clear sign of a rebound in a drought year hit by inflation -- amid speculation that his budget later this month for the next fiscal year could set the tone for a phased withdrawal of fiscal stimulus measures.

The measures were announced last year to counter the downturn in which a global financial crisis was compounded by a monsoon failure.

“With the latest GDP data on 2009-10 indicating 7.9 per cent growth in the second quarter, the growth outlook for the next two quarters and for the whole year is expected to be in the upper range of more predictions for the Indian economy,” Mukherjee said at a function.

The latest data could set the tone for withdrawal of stimulus measures announced last year to counter a downturn and all eyes will be on the budget for 2010-11 that will be presented later this month.

“The budget can attempt a roadmap for exit,” C. Rangarajan, chairman of the prime minister's Economic Advisory Council told reporters in New Delhi.

Mukherjee's estimate matches the upper end of the band envisaged by the Economic Survey for 2008-09, which was also echoed in a mid-term review of the economy in December. The Central Statistical Organisation (CSO) on Monday forecast GDP growth for the full year at 7.2 per cent, while the Reserve Bank last month put the number at 7.5 per cent.

Many of fiscal stimulus measures, however, have left a gaping hole in public finances, forcing the government to borrow a record Rs 4 lakh crore or 6.8 per cent of the GDP in the current fiscal year.

"The government has little choice but to begin the much-needed process of fiscal consolidation in the upcoming budget. It will likely come through with a credible plan to cut the fiscal deficit to 5.5 per cent of GDP," said Rajeev Malik of Macquarie Securities.

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Govt can attempt stimulus exit in Budget: C Rangarajan

The government could provide a roadmap for exiting from the fiscal stimulus when it presents its budget on February 26, C. Rangarajan, Chairman of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Economic Advisory Council said on Wednesday.

"What I am saying is the budget can attempt a roadmap for exit," Rangarajan told reporters.

He also said the stimulus exit should be a gradual transition.

Chetan Chauhan, Hindustan Times

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Food Security Bill back on govt table

The UPA poll promise of a Food Security Bill is back on the cards with the government expecting better agricultural growth in 2010 and a fall in food prices.

"The worst is over as far as food inflation is concerned," Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told a conference of chief ministers on Saturday. The good crop prospects and Indian prices being broadly in line with international prices, the PM was confident that food prices would stabilise.

With this, the government has called a meeting of Group of Ministers (GoM) on Food Security Bill — put on hold because of 2009 drought — to discuss the basic tenets of the proposed law on Friday. Finance Minister Pranab Mukerjee, who heads the GoM, is expected to make some announcement in the budget this month end.

The proposed law aims at covering all residents but before that the government wants to strengthen the public distribution system (PDS), which the PM described as outdated, to plug leakages. As per the governments estimates there is 30-40 per cent pilferage of food grains in the PDS system.

According to government officials, an important issue on the agenda of the GoM is the initial draft of the proposed bill.

However, the issue of who would be entitled for the subsidised food is yet to be settled. The government is looking at whether only below poverty line families should be covered or all, irrespective of income. There is a view that the government may find it difficult to fund subsidised food for all.

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