

Agrarian crisis needs long-term solutions

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A rural-oriented approach to development is needed. Farmers from Punjab stage a protest at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi. PH

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BEFORE the "Green Revolution" of 1968, India was pejoratively said to have a "ship-to-mouth" existence. Punjab was at the forefront of ushering it in, and has been, along with Haryana and western UP, the workhorse in ensuring food security to the nation. In the process, Punjab has paid a heavy price; it has depleted its precious resources— underground water and soil minerals.

Farmers are in distress, as farming is not a profitable business. Reports of farmer suicides continue apace. According to a survey, 40 per cent farmers wish to quit farming. This is basically the fallout of short-sighted policies on agriculture across decades. For the sake of short-term food security, long-term sustainability was neglected. Lured by MSP for rice and wheat, Punjab farmers adopted the current monoculture of rice-wheat cropping pattern and abandoned crop diversification.

Prof. M.S. Swaminathan had issued the following warning in January 1968, which seems to have gone unheeded: "Exploitative agriculture offers great dangers if carried out with only an immediate profit or production motive...The initiation of exploitative agriculture without a proper understanding of the various consequences of every one of the changes introduced into traditional agriculture, and without first building up a proper scientific and training base to sustain it, may only lead us, in the long run, into an era of agricultural disaster rather than one of agricultural prosperity."

Today, Punjab is not a picture of prosperity. Many states have surpassed Punjab. During 2011-12, the per capita income in Punjab was Rs 78191, which was much lower than that of Tamil Nadu (Rs 84058), Maharashtra (Rs 87686), Haryana (Rs 109227) and Goa (Rs 192652). The main culprit is the lack of far-sighted, visionary policies to ensure sustainability of agriculture and the environment.

I searched for Punjab's current "Agriculture Policy" and found only a draft titled, "Agriculture Policy for Punjab," dated March 22, 2013. The 58-page policy statement is woefully inadequate. It never sets any timetable, nor tells who is to do what, nor lists any expected outcomes. The policy statement is vague and non-specific. In fact, there is no new recommendation or policy action in it! The policy statement was found to be totally silent on such significant issues as "women empowerment", "crop

insurance", "rural development" and "farmer suicides". The policy statement did recommend addition of another bureaucrat to the already top-heavy administration. Here are some suggestions to counter the crisis.

Improve rural economy

The majority of Punjab's population (62.5 per cent) is rural so rural development must be the core of an agricultural policy. Under the current scenario, primary production of all foodgrains, pulses, oilseeds, fruits and vegetables primarily occurs in villages; however, their storage, milling, processing, packing and distribution takes place in the cities. This is in stark contrast to the situation in Europe and North America. Villages must have industries based on primary agricultural production and must manufacture products that are of use in agriculture and animal production in villages and markets in the cities. The storage, grading, processing and packaging of all or most of the agricultural commodities should be based in villages to add value to the primary produce, to enhance the income of the producer and create employment in the rural communities. Rural areas should be provided internet facilities at much cheaper rates than cities. This should help create knowledge-based "techno-villages" in Punjab.

Agricultural sectors and associated industries should be located in the villages. These are: grain storage, milling, processing, packaging and distribution; seed production, packing, storage and distribution and horticultural production under plastic, packaging and marketing.

To augment farmers' income, rural tourism needs to be given impetus. The government should provide up to 80 per cent matching funds for building village-based tourist resorts and youth hostels and for upgrading homes for bed-and-breakfast in selected villages near historical sites.

Swaminathan Commission Report

Only a few days ago, 10 years after submission of the recommendations of the historic National Commission on Farmers (NCF), MS Swaminathan, while speaking at an event, called for a comprehensive policy support to revitalise agriculture and shared the vision of the National Commission on Farmers (NCF). At the same event, General Secretary of the All-India Kisan Sabha, Hannan Mollah, urged the government to implement the report in the face of increasing agrarian distress.

Crop diversification

Some 50 years ago, Punjab's cropping intensity was only 120 per cent but now it is 190 per cent. With the lower cropping intensity, a balance between water extraction and aquifer recharge could be maintained. According to noted rice expert, GS Khush, climate change is expected to exacerbate the water problem, as Himalayan glaciers, which supply water to Punjab's rivers, are retreating. He indicated that in 1985 less than 5 per cent of the wells were unsustainable, but by 2005 that number had increased to more than 60 per cent and that if this trend of aquifer depletion continued, Punjab's groundwater might be entirely exhausted in the next 15 to 20 years. He suggests crop diversification to be the single most important intervention and advocates that area under rice can be reduced from 2.7 million hectares to about 1.5 million hectares and that hybrid maize can be the alternative, as it is emerging as a food-security crop because of its rising demand as a livestock feed.

Debt protection

To prevent suicides, farmers must be provided just compensation. Those who get burdened by debt must be given "debt counselling" to prevent possible suicide. There should be a law that would allow a debt-ridden farmer to file for bankruptcy in extreme situations.

Training agricultural scientists

The PAU faculty was highly diversified in the 1960s and 1970s. A large number of faculty members were trained in the US, Canada, Australia, or England. However, currently there is much inbreeding, with more than 95 per cent faculty having received their basic and doctoral degrees from PAU. For novel ideas to be infused into the educational system, training in advanced countries is a must. The state government should provide regular funding for sending Assistant Professor-level scientists for receiving at least one-year post-doctoral training in cutting-edge technologies in advanced countries.

Henry Ford once said, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got." Business as usual will not help solve the agrarian problems.

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