

# Going against the grain

Without concrete steps, the agricultural crisis is here to stay

JAYSHREE SENGUPTA

**T**ODAY more than before there is a serious agricultural crisis looming before us. Half of India's population (48.4 per cent) is engaged in agriculture, yet its contribution to GDP is only 17.4 per cent. It shows that agricultural productivity is very low by international standards. Even then, we are smug about India doing well and growing at 7.5 per cent, one of the highest growth rates in the world. Where is this growth coming from? Not from manufacturing or from trade and certainly not from agriculture. According to the Economic Survey 2015-16, agricultural growth was below 0.2 per cent in 2014-15 and is likely to remain low if the monsoons are not normal.

Widespread drought is inevitable this summer and already there are nine drought-hit states. This is because after two deficient monsoons, the rainfall during January, February and March was also disappointing and at 57 per cent below normal. Apart from water problem, there are other problems confronting the farmers. One wonders what will happen when things get worse this year and how many more farmers' suicides will take place.

The accurate number of farmer suicides is not known, but the numbers are alarming, and of all suicides in the country, they comprise 11.2 per cent. Evidence points to crop failure as the main reason, but other reasons ranging from psychological problems to alcoholism are, no doubt, present. Agriculture is no longer a remunerative occupation, especially for the small farmer, and 78 per cent farmers want to quit agriculture if given a choice.

There has been a steep rise in the cost of production in recent years. The MSP has also not been raised to the level as promised (covering the entire cost of production and 50 per cent profit) by the NDA government when it came to power and hence profitability has suffered. Along with low profitability, there are weather risks that a farmer has to bear. Still due to lack of alternatives, assets, and skills, farmers continue to till the soil and remain trapped in low value agriculture, despite the demand for high value products like fruits, vegetables and livestock. According to NSSO Households Survey 2013, the average annual



Not just low profitability, a farmer also bears weather risks.

income of the median farmer net of production costs from cultivation is less than Rs 20,000 in 17 states.

Agriculture experts like Dr MS Swaminathan have prescribed various solutions yet they have not been implemented. India is no longer entirely self-sufficient in food grains

states which have made investment in drip irrigation are better off during dry spells. In general, water is being over-used and wasted in many states because of free electricity given to farmers. Politicians granted free power in some states which led to pumping excessive water. In Punjab, the water table has

**Special agricultural zones need to come up in drought-prone areas. Fertilisers, better quality seeds and access to cheap loans are essential**

and pulses. Corn, soymeal, pulses, sugar and wheat are being imported. There is no way by which productivity can be increased without adequate supply of water. And yet water and irrigation remain sore points. According to the Economic Survey 2016, 60 per cent of the land is rainfed.

India supports 15 per cent of the world's population, but has only 4 per cent of the world's water resources. In the recent Budget, Rs17,000 crore over the next one year has been allocated for irrigation, but it is not something that can be achieved instantly. The enhancement of irrigation facilities will take time, but the crisis is immediate. Some

receded alarmingly and in general, India's water tables are declining at the rate of 0.3 metres per year. Indian farmers are also not able to use water efficiently and India exports water-intensive crops like rice, cotton, sugar and soybean. India uses two to four times more water to produce a major food crop than in China or Brazil.

In some western and southern states, the water level in reservoirs has fallen drastically. According to recent reports from the Central Water Commission, water levels in the country's major dams were at 26 per cent of their capacity, well short of the 10 year average. This may affect planting of crops and

electricity production, especially in the south-west part of the country. The water level in reservoirs in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Gujarat were also below normal.

According to the Central Water Commission, the most deficient basin is of the Krishna catering to Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. The water levels were 63 per cent below the 10 year average. In 91 major reservoirs in March 2016, water was 31 per cent less than last year.

Special agricultural zones have been talked about for a long time and it would be a good idea to establish them in drought-prone areas, with access to quality inputs to farmers inside the zone. Fertilisers and better quality seeds are also important. Above all, agriculturists need credit and access to cheap loans from the organised banking sector. The small farmer is compelled to borrow from money lenders for consumption purposes, pledging his crop for the loan. Around 40 per cent of farm credit is from informal sources with high interest rates.

Mechanisation and consolidation of small farms into bigger farms are questions that need attention, but these are difficult to implement without land reforms. Mechanisation is at a low level and is below 50 per cent for a majority of farming operations in India. Shortage of labour in some areas has led to more women joining the work force. Mechanisation, which is more appropriate for use by women, has to be introduced.

The excessive use of chemical fertilisers has led to the deterioration of soil quality and toxic ground water. More organic fertilisers have to be used by small farms, especially vermicomposts. Fertiliser subsidy formed 10 per cent of the total agricultural GDP in 2013-14, and yet, fertilisers have not increased agricultural productivity. There has been excessive use of urea which has led to soil nutrient imbalance and salination. Direct bank transfer is an option being considered by the government.

Also, the excessive use of chemical pesticides has led to pesticide residues being found in food products. These are carcinogenic. More bio-pesticides need to be encouraged, especially in small farms. Agriculture, undoubtedly, is the most troubled sector and requires crisis control.

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