

Farmer as backbone to a prosperous India

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India's goal should have been to become an agriculture-oriented country. And since it is not, a new agricultural policy should be put in place so that farmers get access to irrigation facilities, markets, infrastructure etc

I would say that if the village perishes, India will perish too. India will be no more India. Her own mission in the world will get lost. The revival of the village is possible only when it is no more exploited." These were the words of the Mahatma, who believed that India cannot develop or prosper if our focus shifts away from the importance of developing our villages. Today, we are witnessing a major confrontation at the national level because political parties have been accusing each other of being anti-farmer. However, successive Governments have been negligent about the interests of the farmers. They have failed to create a society that is rooted for the enlightenment and all-round development of the rural areas.

Actually, India has never really carried out an intellectual debate on the pattern of development. We must keep up with the ethos of our society, our overall resource endowment and the demographic realities that characterise the size and spread of India's population. In reality, during the initial years of independence, we alternated between a form of Fabian socialism, accompanied with a fascination for the Soviet model of centralised development and emphasised on heavy industry. In the recent years, we have moved on to a pattern driven by the north American model of consumerism and capitalism.

Sadly, these imported paradigms and their muddled implementation have led to a widening of economic disparities, an intensification of the rural-urban divide and growing distress for the farmers across the country. Continuation of this trend will have adverse implications for our society. If we look back to the 1950s and 1960s, we can conclude that agriculture was the key to development. Also, importance was given to infrastructure for the growth of micro, small and medium scale enterprises, which had widespread employment opportunities.

In retrospect, India's goal as an independent nation from the very beginning should have been to become an agriculturally surplus nation. Comparisons with other nations would, of course, be inappropriate, but the example of Thailand has lessons for us. In the 1960s, Thailand promoted major reforms and undertook initiatives by which, it was able to generate large monetary surpluses from agriculture, which also provided significant capital for the initial stages of industrialisation.

Even today, India's economy is a hostage to the vagaries of the monsoons. The level of industrial activity and the demand for goods and services is heavily influenced by farm incomes and rural purchasing power from season to season. So, even in macro economic terms, we have not understood the value of the rural sector for the well-being of our country.

India's agricultural production area is larger than what China has. Yet, based on Food and Agriculture Organisation's statistics, in 2010, China produced 483.3 million tonnes of cereals and India produced only 250.8 MT. In terms of yield per hectare, China recorded 55 hg/ha and India attained only 27 hg/ha in 2010. Even Indonesia and Brazil had higher yields and the US, France and Germany were in the region of 70 hg/ha.

Of course, an important aspect of agricultural policy is that of ensuring sustainability and protection of the environment. In this regard, China and many parts of India as well have polluted and poisoned groundwater resources, rivers and other bodies of surface water and large areas of fertile soil. A new approach to enhancing agricultural yields must be developed around organic techniques, which would require substantial research and innovation and extension services to assist the farmers.

One of the failures in the past few decades has been the decline in the effectiveness of the agricultural research and extension system across the country. The first Director General of the Indian Council of Agricultural

Research, BP Pal, a brilliant leader and visionary scientist, who conceptualised and initiated the country's green revolution, set up a dynamic country-wide organisation, driven by a missionary zeal.

While the ICAR has expanded substantially over the years, it has somehow lost its effectiveness as a dynamic, forward-looking resource. It is now afflicted with creeping bureaucratisation and there is a lack of autonomy, a malady which cuts across several fields in India.

Governments both at the Centre and the States have often believed that providing loans and easier access to finance is all that is needed to bring about higher productivity and progress in agriculture. But actually, agriculture and related areas develop on the strength of multiple factors, which include proper irrigation, access to markets, rational price support schemes, existence of cold chains (for fruits and vegetables in particular), and continuous innovation to ensure "more crop per drop" and efficient use of all resources.

Cold chains require the input of electricity, which today can be produced from renewable energy sources on a decentralised basis. The Energy and Resources Institute has established a technology which is working in a village in Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh, wherein power for the village and refrigeration for storing perishable produce is generated by gasifying agricultural waste. Rapid growth of the agricultural sector will bring in a new wave of industrial growth, which will involve farm machinery and infrastructure.

In case of availability of water, we need to keep in mind the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which clearly projects an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme events, including heavy precipitation. There is an urgent need of infrastructure and adaptation measures, by which, the well-being of the farmers and their families as well as their livelihoods can be protected. Most importantly, agricultural research system needs to develop drought resistant varieties of crops so that the farmers are left with options in case the rains fail.

Improved management of water will also moderate the adverse effect of drought across the country, as would the creation of infrastructure to divert heavy rainfall to protect standing crops. Early warning systems will also be helpful for the farmers. Prices of food and food products fluctuate annually in the global market, but proper policies and price support programmes with widespread crop insurance schemes can counter the negative impacts of periodic downward income movements for the farming community.

Agricultural surpluses can be a major force for economic dynamism in the country as a whole. In a world heading rapidly towards worsening security of food supply, agricultural surpluses in India can be used for the assistance of poor and food deficit nations, apart from generating increasing revenues for the benefit of farming communities.

A totally new and visionary policy should now be put in place to ensure that India becomes a agriculturally surplus nation, which would usher in a new era in rural development.

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