

Need for changing agricultural practices

Farmers who were leading a self-reliant and honourable life, have been facing many problems in agriculture during the past decade. These problems relate to decreasing land productivity owing to soil and water erosion, declining natural resource base, fast changing food habits and lifestyles, ecological disproportions and globalisation. In many cases they were forced to sell away their lands and migrate to cities to earn their livelihood.

Production for the far off markets necessitated use of external inputs like chemical fertilizers, hybrid seeds, pesticides, irrigation etc. Increased dependency on high cost external inputs in agriculture also made farmers to depend on external credit on a regular basis. Dependence on credit for agriculture, a matter of shame during 1960s, became an absolute necessity by 2000. Cultivation of cash crops like cotton and tobacco, also led to scarcity of fodder. This resulted in farmers giving up animal husbandry, thereby resulting in acute scarcity of farmyard manure and making the use of chemical fertilizers inevitable. Adoption of modern technologies in agriculture like tractors and pump sets have resulted in the neglect of draught animals. Even the livestock production has been totally changed into industrial type of production from backyard system.

Agriculture in India, was an integrated cultivation of crops, animals and trees to meet most of the family and community needs rather than market. Trees played an important role in providing green manure, fodder, fruits, fuel and timber besides conserving soil water and hosting beneficial insects and birds. We had more than 15 species of cereals which were drought and pest resistant and were more nutritious. It is necessary to revive the traditional knowledge on seed selection and preservation to bring back the self-reliance and seed availability at the time of sowing.

Animals provide manure, food and income and are used for cultivation and transport economically. Different animals can be fed on farm wastes efficiently which provide financial security at the time of distress. In Indian culture, cattle are treated as an integral part of the family. After undergoing the huge losses from adapting crossbred cows like Holstein, Frisien and Jersey, farmers are fast changing towards indigenous cattle, since their maintenance is cheaper and the male calves can be used for cultivation and transport.

Similarly, rural population is fast changing their medical treatments since synthetic drugs have become more expensive and found to create side effects. They now started growing medicinal plants like Neem, Aswagandha, Asparagus, Aloe vera, Adathoda etc., for medication of both humans and their livestock. Some NGOs are educating them about their cultivation, processing and use.

The Government's concern of impending scarcity of fossil fuel resources is an encouraging factor for promotion of ecological agriculture. However, the fear of lower food production and availability of bio-mass is coming in the way of progressing

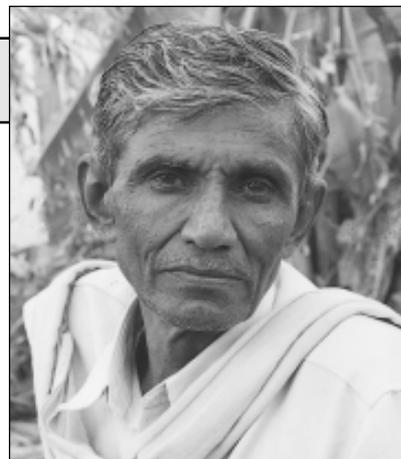
towards organic farming. Cuba's success in providing food security, sovereignty and total agricultural productivity is an example of what could be done if there is political will.

In Cuba, during 1993-2003, ecological farming system was enforced, making them self-sufficient in their food production. Importance was given to the regeneration of their traditional agriculture knowledge and use of locally available natural resources. Understanding the importance of cow dung in agriculture, Cuba was the first country in the world to ban cow slaughtering.

The goal of Organic farming, therefore, should be based on economic interests by popularizing production of seeds, vermi-compost, botanical pesticides etc., among small farmers, so that they could make their livelihoods at their own villages, rather than migrating to cities.

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Themes for LEISA India

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How farmers organise themselves to practice LEISA

The development of Low External Input Sustainable Agricultural systems benefit greatly when farmers work together in some way. Farmers organise themselves for various reasons –for instance, accessing and managing scarce resources or inputs like water, seed, biological inputs, credit etc. Also, there are examples of farmers organising themselves for collective action, for eg., marketing of produce, for better bargaining power.

Farmer groups may be formal or informal, be very loose or highly structured. In addition, the local socio-political and cultural environment does influence the successful formation as well as operation of such institutions. Small and local groups might have grown to be part of other regional or national networks. We would like you to share these experiences, the advantages and the constraints in each case. Similarly, there are many examples of farmer organisations successfully working with enabling organisations, such as NGOs, research institutions or advisors and taking an active role in spreading the knowledge on LEISA.

In the forthcoming issue we want to examine some of the reasons and ways in which farmers organise themselves in relation to sustainable agriculture, and how these groups manage themselves effectively. Please send us your experiences relating to the development and the processes involved in establishing such organisational processes.

Deadline for submission of articles : 31 January 2007.