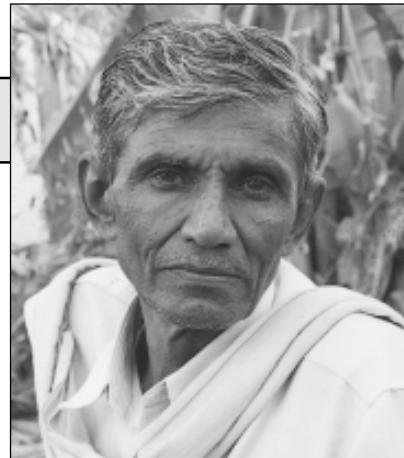


Small animals for sustainable farming



Livestock is very important in agricultural economy. Generally, most farmers raise cows or buffaloes for milk production. Even small and marginal farmers and landless agriculture labourers have cows or buffaloes. Poor people have been availing subsidised loans from banks under the government schemes, to purchase cows or buffaloes, without proper knowledge of their needs like, water, fodder, housing and medication and most of the times cannot repay their debts. These big animals need more fodder, more water and more space. They need around 30 kgs of fodder everyday (20 kg green + 10 kg hay) which is not available easily. Most of the agricultural labourers, owing to lack of space, tie these livestock at big farmer's houses. Thus, cannot collect dung and urine, which would have been 15% of the income. Again, lot of water is required for washing cows and buffaloes, regularly. These agricultural labourers who struggle to get a square meal, are forced to sacrifice their meals for collecting fodder. It is ironic that they have to sell the milk at Rs. 8/- or Rs. 9/- per litre while bottled drinking water is sold at Rs. 12/- or more per litre.

Small animals like sheep, goats, rabbits, pigs, native chicken etc., therefore, are always better. They are cheaper to buy, compared to cow or buffalo, require less space, water and fodder. They can easily graze even on tiny grasses and many varieties of leaves and weeds. Many farm wastes can be fed to them. They do not need costly external inputs like wheat bran and oilcake required for cows and buffaloes. These small animals could be taken care even by aged persons and young children. Usually agriculture labourers, who work on others fields, take 2 to 3 sheep or goats, tie them up at the edge of the farms and take them back with them in the evening. They earn Rs. 5,000/- or more in a year, without any expensive inputs on these small animals. Small animals are always more suitable than cows or buffaloes, as they are cheap and less risky.

Native chicken have proved to be the best source of income for rural poor without much investment. They are very much helpful on the farms in controlling weeds and insects. Around 20 to 25 native chicken can regularly provide eggs and meat for the family throughout the year. Similarly, goats can provide milk and income regularly at a very low cost, besides manure.

Animals convert biomass into food and manure in a very short period. In many cases, farmers cannot afford to own a pair of bullocks. Instead they can maintain a pair of donkeys for cultivation and transport. Not only they are cheaper but also easy to maintain. In olden days, people used to consider animals as economic security, like bank saving accounts, at times of crisis.

During the past 50 years, specialization of crop cultivation and industrial type of milk and meat production has resulted in destructing the complimentary and supportive farming practices. If farmers can carefully integrate vermi-composting from the leftover fodder and dung of these small animals, the farm income can improve considerably. A new problem is increasing due to the negligence of the commercial poultry

industry. They throw away their dead birds without properly disposing them. The stray dogs feeding on them regularly, start killing sheep, goats and chicken, when they do not find enough dead birds from the commercial poultries. This has to be prevented to save farmers from loosing their animals owing to attack by stray dogs.

It is also important to maintain the indigenous breeds, as they adapt well to the local conditions. For example, in the case of cattle, local breeds have smaller hooves and therefore the area they stamp is also very little. They always, place their hind leg in the foot print of the front leg while walking, thus reducing the area of stamping. According to Indian custom, cows are not used for cultivation whereas bullocks are used for land preparation. There is a hidden benefit in using bullocks rather than cows for ploughing. The cows pass out urine in a few seconds, where as the bullocks require longer time to pass the same amount of urine. Owing to the slow release of urine and with a greater frequency of 6-7 times, every square foot of land ploughed by bullocks gets fertilised with the urine.

The health care of the animals is very important and the traditional cures and medicines are better than the modern allopathic medicine system, which is very expensive and not available easily in the rural areas. Marketing bottlenecks should be overcome by empowerment of farmer's knowledge about marketing.

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