

## AASHA – PM's New Hope

*PM AASHA- the new scheme intends to ensure MSP to farmers*

Procurement of food grains and ensuring minimum support prices to the farmers have always remained an issue of considerable contests and difference in opinions. While the first part of 2018 was rattled with the calculation of minimum support prices, the period leading to the procurement season has seen policy tweaks to ensure income support and satisfaction to farmers. The new PM AASHA (Pradhan Mantri Annadata Aay Sanrakshan Abhiyan), the Umbrella Scheme comprising of Price Support Scheme (PSS), Price Deficiency Payment Scheme (PDPS) and Pilot of Private Procurement & Stockist Scheme (PPPS) has thus been introduced.

MSP in general has not been able to meet the purposes, in its entirety, for which it was instituted. It has been realized that merely increasing MSP year after year was not sufficient to realise its full benefits. So through this umbrella scheme, the government intends to purchase notified commodities, either at MSP or through indirect means to ensure that MSP is provided to the farmers.

The pre-existent Price Support Scheme (PSS) has been expanded to include the physical procurement of pulses, oilseeds and Copra where in the Central Nodal Agencies and State governments would take the lead. It is also decided that in addition to NAFED, Food Cooperation of India (FCI) will take up PSS operations in states /districts. The procurement expenditure and losses due to procurement will be borne by Central Government as per norms. Under Price Deficiency Payment Scheme, inspired by the Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana of Madhya Pradesh, which pays the difference between the MSP and the market price, all oilseeds for which MSP is notified are expected to be covered. The direct payment of the difference will be made to pre-registered farmers selling his produce in the notified market yard through a transparent auction process. This scheme does not involve

any physical procurement of crops as farmers are paid the difference between the MSP price and Sale/modal price on disposal in notified market.

Another notable feature of this scheme is the involvement of private sector in procurement operation. In the case of oilseeds, states have the option to roll out Private Procurement Stockist Scheme (PPSS) on pilot basis in selected district/APMC(s) of district involving the participation of private stockiest. The pilot district/selected APMC(s) of district will cover one or more crop of oilseeds for which MSP is notified. Since this is akin to PSS, in that it involves physical procurement of the notified commodity, it is expected to substitute PSS/PDPS in the pilot districts.

PPS which has a longer history in the country and which procures the commodities on MSP, needs to be reinforced with better infrastructure. MSP, the price support for the farmers, although stood the test of time has been contested for its poor reach and hence its purpose. Awareness remains the key for the success of any programme. The success of the scheme hence hinges on the provisions for expansion of the infrastructure and procurement means and also on the awareness component. The PDPS, although abdicates the government from the responsibility of physical procurement and hence from the associated infrastructure machinery associated with it, there remains rather murky areas as well. Fear of an artificially induced slump in prices by traders is extant. The idea of compensating for the losses suffered by the farmer at the hands of the traders are further fuels market distortions.

PM AASHA is in extension to the recent increment of MSP and hence tries to derive the maximum advantages of MSP through different means. These measures are all in line with the larger purpose of compensating the farmers and ensuring a steady income. However, there should also be a concomitant investments in building logistics and infrastructure and increasing awareness.

## Kerala Agriculture – Post Floods

*Reclaiming farm lands post flood is going to be a task of mammoth proportions*

**A**fter, a historical flood that ravaged Kerala submerging and eroding vast stretches of land that displaced farms, roads, houses and lakhs of people, the state has embarked upon a long journey of rebuilding. The task at hand is a mammoth responsibility, as the state is staring at colossal losses in terms of infrastructure, livelihood, resources and most importantly morale. Although Kerala's agriculture contributes less than 10% of the state gross domestic product, the sector occupies an important position in the livelihood security and the ecological balance of the state.

The net area under cultivation occupies 52.06% of the total area in the State. Unlike the rest of the country, the agriculture scene in Kerala is dominated by perennial plantation crops. Coconut, rubber, arecanut, pepper, coffee, cashewnut, cardamom and tea — account for more than 65 per cent of total cultivated area in the State. Paddy occupies less than 10% of the net sown area of the state.

The perennial nature of the crops have warranted replanting in vast stretches of area. Unlike the annual crops such as vegetables or rice, plantation crops need time. Pepper will take four years of minimal harvest, rubber about seven years, and coconut up to 10 years to start yielding to its fullest potential. The farmers are expected to wait for a considerable amount of time, before they can realize returns on investment. The state is thus expected to provide a long time support to the farmers. The state endowed with resources was already seeing a considerable decline in agriculture. The flood is therefore feared to alienate even the practicing farmers from agriculture, considering the economic losses and time required to reclaim the lost glory of these farms.

However, this could be a good time to review the status of crop insurance in the state. Kerala has only insured just about 2% of the gross cropped area and covered banana, paddy and tapioca under

the Pradhan Manthri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) launched in 2016. Under the more popular, weather-based crop insurance scheme, Kerala has covered areca nut, banana, cardamom, ginger, pepper, pineapple and sugar cane. During the kharif 2017 season, 25,666 loanee and 2,593 non-loanee farmers insured their crops and paid a premium of Rs 3.76 crore, while the gross premium was Rs 12.45 crore. Against the estimated claims of Rs 9 crore, the insurance companies settled claims of Rs 6.12 crore, benefiting 14,694 farmers. If the crop insurance scheme had covered more area and farmers were encouraged to insure their crops, it would have been a source of great relief.

Beyond crop insurance and the gargantuan groundwork that need to be followed, it will also be a right time to think about the future course of developmental activities to be pursued by the state. The new development model should be centered around sound principles of ecology, economics, and sustainable development. With the overpowering need to supplying the inputs for agriculture, it will also be a great opportunity to work upon climate smart agriculture. Flood and drought tolerant varieties, soil and land conservation measures, emerging pest and disease problems will become crucial issues. Another area of concern is the change in soil characteristics. The floods and erosion following landslides have washed away resource-rich soil in many parts. The soil pH was also found to be altered. The agricultural lands need to be subjected to soil testing to derive at the package of practices that need to be adopted to ameliorate the situation.

What the state is looking at is the complete upheaval of the agri sector. Rebuilding farms post floods is a huge obligation as these farms and farmers need to be better poised to sustain and overcome natural calamities in future. This opportunity can be seized upon to deliberate and develop a climate suitable package for the state and not repeat the earlier mistakes.

## Simmering Stubbles

*Stubble burning has to be managed effectively*

**L**ate October, the farms spread across the rice growing belt of North India, especially Haryana and Punjab burn, sending up plumes of smoke, the extent of which is felt across the NCR region. The practice of burning stubbles, post harvest of paddy has been one such tradition that has refused to fade over the years. Absence of an alternative and the inability of the authorities to enforce stricter measures has left this practice untouched. However, the increasing pollution levels choking the cities during the October-November months has called for an immediate intervention.

The agriculture centric states of Punjab and Haryana, the front runner states of green revolution, produces a significant amount of food grains essential for the food security of the country. The by product of paddy, straw which is also produced in huge quantities and which unfortunately finds no use in any other way are burnt away by the farmers to make way for the next crop. Resorting to burning stubbles has been an easier and economical process and has stuck with the farmers over the years. However, the ensuing pollution has persistently increased with years, with demands from every quarter, to put to rest the practise.

From the environment point of view, this is a serious issue that needs to be dealt with utmost urgency. It is not that the farmers are oblivious to the associated environmental problems. Stubble burning has so far remained the most effective way to eliminate the crop remnants from the fields and make the field ready for the next crop, wheat. There usually remains a very small window between the harvesting of paddy and sowing of wheat. Combine harvesters are therefore entrusted with the responsibility of harvesting, threshing and cleaning the separated grain at one go. The machines however, leaves about 80 per cent of straw (6-8" long) on the field. The left over straw which are practically

useless are burned as it is easier, faster and less expensive.

Over the years, many solutions to the problem have surfaced, although an effective one is yet to initiate at field level. As one of the reasons to stubble burning is to clear the field faster to make way for wheat sowing, the preceeding crop, in this case paddy, can be of short duration variety. Breeding for a reduced duration can help extend the planting window for wheat. But it still leaves behind stubbles. The most viable technology available currently to address this issue is Turbo Happy Seeder (THS) which is a tractor-mounted machine that basically cuts and lifts the standing stubble, drills the wheat seeds into the bare soil, and deposits the straw over the sown area as a mulch cover. The THS not only dispenses with the need for burning residue, but actually allows wheat to be planted even on fields containing straw. This takes care of the standing crop residue.

Besides technical interventions, technology to convert paddy straw into economically important products can be a route that can be pursued. Ethanol production from paddy straw has been addressed recently which can be taken up if conducive policies are developed. Besides this the state governments need to actively pursue this issue consistently. So far the states has not been very effective on cracking down on this not so clandestine activity. Farmers, a prominent vote bank in these regions cannot be pressurized into adopting an alternative way of clearing the fields as stubble burning. Every year from October- November, this problem pops up, the state governments acknowledge the problem and move on.

No matter whatever technological advances are made, until an effective leadership is established to navigate the issue and reach a consensus, stubble burning will continue and the entire region will be plunged into a smothering smog.

## Shifting Policy Perceptions

*Jhum Cultivation needs an inter-ministerial approach*

**J**hum cultivation practised for centuries in the North East, has remained controversial in its operation and execution. Considered archaic and detrimental to the environment, Jhum practitioners had endured years of policy neglect and contradictions. Similar sentiment was echoed in the recent Niti Ayog's publication that recommended that the Ministry of Agriculture should take up a "mission on shifting cultivation" to ensure inter-ministerial convergence. This comes in the wake of the fact that this type of cultivation has been misrepresented and misunderstood in many policy statements.

Jhum cultivation also referred to as the slash and burn agriculture, is the process of growing crops in patches of land after clearing the land of trees and vegetation and then burning them. About half a million families in northeast India practice jhum, over an area of roughly half a million hectares (5,000 square kilometres). Considered as detrimental to environment due to the emission of greenhouse gases, soil erosion and subsequent siltation in reservoirs and loss of nutrient rich top soil, the type of cultivation has been recommended to be banned. However, certain studies have also revealed that soil recovers its nutrients after a forest patch has been cleared for agriculture and the patches that lie fallow for several years have higher pools of nitrogen and phosphorous. The study also found organic matter in the soil of the oldest fallow is not significantly different to that found in uncut forests indicating that long-fallow shifting cultivation can be sustainable. Beyond the reasons and rationale associated with environmental effects, policies and perceptions rarely look at the 'human element' involved. Not only are their livelihoods, but Jhum cultivation practices have deeper social and cultural connect with the lives of its practitioners. Jhum cultivation should therefore be approached respecting the interests and traditions of the people involved.

Unfortunately, the cultivation practice have elicited divergent approaches from the Central as well as State government departments of forests and environment,

agriculture and allied departments. Shifting cultivation lands fall under the purview of agriculture when they are in the cultivation phase, but the same lands come under forests during the fallow phase. Thus, the same piece of land is subjected to different laws, regulations and management, which become self-contradictory. It affects upland farmers, restricting their control, decisions and investments on such plots. The document has therefore called for policy coherence, emphasizing the fact that land for shifting cultivation should be recognised as "agricultural land", where farmers practice agro-forestry for the production of food rather than as forestland.

According to the report, the fundamental characteristic of shifting cultivation—two different types of land use on the same piece of land—has never been considered while formulating policies on managing shifting cultivation. The oversight has led to the present policy incoherence and contradictions in the management of shifting cultivation.

Shifting cultivation fallows must be legally perceived and categorized as 'regenerating fallows', which may, if given sufficient time, regenerate into secondary forests. The government has to realize that the practice of shifting cultivation could increase forest cover through the regenerating fallows. Hence the report advises to duly recognize the fact and to give due credit to the practice. According to NITI Aayog, a review of all relevant legal regulations and frameworks should be initiated immediately to develop a solution that respects the rights of access and management of the recognized tenure holders.

A range of enabling programmes and policies is needed to provide the right environment to support communities to overcome the challenges. Hence the "Mission on Shifting Cultivation: Towards Transformative Changes" under the Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare is highly warranted. The mission would set an institutional mechanism that ensures inter-ministerial convergence, particularly with the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change and Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, as well as with other related ministries/ departments at the centre and NE states.