

New Farmer, Old Paradigm

Agriculture in western India is different from that in the Gangetic Plain. Wheat is much less important than rice, bajra and jowar. Cotton is grown in Maharashtra. The farmer has been taking on biotech seeds, moving over from the earlier desi varieties to long-staple cotton and now seeds which give a good crop with shorter growing periods, saving on pesticides and nutrients. A larger area is being devoted to pulses and oilseeds. Suresh Prabhu, coming from Nashik, knows all this and also about fruits and vegetables (grapes and onions). At Buenos Aires in the WTO Ministerial last December, he stood by the time-honoured Indian line: Agriculture and food security first. So, I was surprised when at a Delhi brainstorming session at the end of February he said that other issues are also of relevance.

The typical middle farmer in Western Maharashtra and Vidarbha makes his sowing decision knowing that the price he will get will be lower than the price he sees. When I went to my co-operative (co-op), where I originally met Minister Prabhu before he became a minister, the pulse price was around Rs 190/kilo. The kisan knows this will go down. But by how much? It went down to almost the MSP levels. That's ridiculous.

The towns and traders were happy. Imports were high. Australia, Canada and East Africa, not to mention the US, grow pulses to export to India. In fact, the Canadians cleverly claim "green box" subsidy exemption under WTO rules for pulses on the ground that they fix nitrogen in otherwise monoculture, wheat-growing Prairies. I have been advocating tariffs against these subsidies largely by commodity boards abroad. Finally, the Government Of India imposed tariffs, but it came too little and too late.

The farmer does not want the price he saw at the sowing time, but the MSP is a joke. So, they said MSP plus 50 per cent. A nice round number. But even if this is declared, who will buy? Wheat and rice have the Food Corporation of India (FCI). But pulses, oilseed and inferior cereals have so-called procurement agencies, which are broke and do only ceremonial purchases. Fruits and vegetables don't even have those. The co-ops stick to cane and, of course, milk. Maharashtra's cotton experience never recovered from the monopoly purchase fiasco as compared to GUJCOT in Gujarat where my socialist friend, the late Sanat Mehta, was more market-friendly. The tragic response in Delhi to farmers suicides was to give loans for buying goats.

The last time I was travelling on the national highway from Nashik to Mumbai, in the fancy eateries on the road, farmers coming in on bikes with traditional clothes and Gandhi caps would order a bottle of red wine and cheese or chole bhaturey or Marathi chicken with that lovely kokum flavour. You can see this on the road from Pune or Ahmednagar to Rahuri. Some may want the sparkling wine with tandoori chicken. But not all the grapes have the wine market. Policy has to come to grips with the new realities. If you visit a farmer, he may tell you that a new buffalo has been purchased because the "bai" has some spare time.

But the price of milk can vary by 10 per cent in markets around the farm. The milk co-ops are not that efficient. Some farmer-producer companies are coming up but shifting them from the Company Affairs Department to the good old Agriculture Department will bureaucratise their governance, given the history of the latter. An increasingly complex agriculture is crying for new paradigms.

So, the kisan is on the road. It breaks your heart. Almost like the rebellions Spartacus led against the Roman empire. Can we at least protect the costs of say, the top two-thirds of farmers ranked by productivity? Will we meet their capital and land costs? Will they get help for infrastructure for first-stage processing and transport in Census towns, which mai bap sarkar still calls villages?

These abound in western India. When we do and have the right macro-economic and trade policies, the kisan will get back to his land and tubewell — a deep one here. Until then, the saints go marching in.

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