

Dilemmas in Agriculture

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FARMERS COMMITTING SUICIDE is a common practice in India today. Why should it be so? Many scholars—nationally and internationally famous persons have gone into this issue and have come up with some worthy explanations and suggestions.

The *Book under review is based on the personal experiences of Narendranath or Naren, as he was affectionately called, who practised organic farming on 32 acres of his ancestral land in the village Venkatramapuram of Chittoor District of Andhra Pradesh for 22 years—from 1987 to 2009. Naren, a product of Delhi University, started his career as an officer in the State Bank of Hyderabad—left it after a few years, joined an NGO—the famous *Lokayan*—left that also after a few years all because he was not interested in making a career but was itching to do something for the village people. Naren had written down his experiences and views and died prematurely in 2009 in his late fifties. The document was edited and supplemented by his wife Uma Shankari who happens to be the daughter of the famous Tamil writer of 1950s to 1970s, T Janakiraman.

MANGO AND COCONUT

Out of the 32 acres of the farm area, Mango was grown on 24 acres (some 600 trees of 25 varieties). Inside the Mango gardens there were 600 coconut trees. Paddy was grown on two and a half acre of wetland. On another plot of 2½ acres where paddy or sugarcane was grown subject to availability of water. Otherwise they grew ragi, jowar and groundnut in the rest of the area.

Most noteworthy are the four tables on the cultivation of Paddy, groundnut, sugarcane and tomato—all pertain to the year 2007. The author has summarised the input output costs. For paddy comparative data is given of four different farmers. Net realisation per acre varies from Rs (-) 450 to Rs (-) 10,090!

For groundnut, data pertains to two farmers who grew groundnut in two different seasons for rainfed crop income varied from Rs (-) 40 to Rs 3460. For irrigated crop it was Rs 5750 per acre. For sugarcane for two farmers the net income was Rs (-)14,760 and Rs (-) 7735. For tomato Net income varied from Rs 85,000 to Rs 1,60,000 (We know in the case of tomato the fluctuation is the greatest. Perhaps the year 2007 was a good one for tomato growers in Chittoor District).

Displacement

About the displacement of farmers from their lands, forced and voluntary, Naren raises some pertinent questions:

- is the particular industry necessary, what will it produce, how and for whom is the product useful?
- will it pollute land, water and air of the surrounding areas so much that neither people nor other life forms can survive without their health getting affected?
- if agricultural lands are given away for industry, how will it impact food production locally and nationally?
- how to ensure alternative employment and livelihood and adequate incomes for the displaced farmers?
- who will take the decision regarding the siting of industries, the operations involved in the industry?
- if displacement is inevitable, how to ensure smooth, humane compensation-rehabilitation package for the displaced people?

Well, neither the Central Government nor the State Governments have applied their minds on the above points. They have shown great eagerness to align lands to the business community without a care about its repercussions on the farmers.

WATERSHED DEVELOPMENT

Though watershed development is an important component of the exercise in moisture conservation, including revitalisation of tanks (there was this strange argument by some government officials that tank revitalisation was not part of watershed management as the same was not mentioned in the programme! The issue was later clarified), several other steps also need to be taken.

The farmer's keenness to grow water intensive crops like sugarcane and paddy has to be traced to reasonable returns and assured income that they tend to provide. So one has to try and evolve combinations of cropping patterns which require less water and give reasonably attractive returns, low or medium level of risk and effort. Turning to horticulture or growing of forest related medicinal plants like *amla* are a few options. The neglect of dry land crops such as ragi, bajra etc. have had a telling effect both on the nutrition level of people in the area and tendency to convert to water intensive crops. If the prices of these crops were higher, they may return to these crops. In the meantime, people's eating habits have also undergone a sea change. They no longer consume these dry crops (sajja, korra, jonna) having converted to subsidised ration rice with a little smattering of ragi powder thrown in if at all. Eating rice is considered socially superior to eating ragi or jowar.

GREEN REVOLUTION

There is no doubt that green revolution did help India to become more or less self-reliant in food, nay, cereal production, but the flip side of green revolution has been daunting since the last two decades: soils have become low in fertility due to insufficient organic matter, pesticides have become a grave health issue, yields of crops have stagnated, ground water is becoming both scarce and polluted, genetic base and bio-diversity is shrinking. All this resulted in minus growth in agriculture by the turn of the century-this is also India's achievement in 4 decades of Green Revolution. India is now reduced to importing even cereals, not just pulses and oil seeds. WTO has further made India a pawn in international food trade and highly volatile prices and conspiracies of international cartels.

Organic farming is easier said than done in present day situation. Farmers are aware that traditional seeds are less prone to diseases and they taste better, but the yields are low. Farmers know that farmyard manure is better and so is green leaf manure for paddy. But where is the farmyard manure in the quantity?

DAIRYING

There is an informative table on dairying (P.57). Considering the low price of milk, it is not exactly a paying proposition. Local breeds which could be maintained on minimum fodder are gone and hybrid cattle need large quantities of fodder and are prone to diseases.

There are two short interesting write ups on Naren in this book. One is titled 'Truly Extraordinary' by K Balagopal, a famous civil liberties activist and another titled 'What I learnt from Naren' by Harsh Mander published in *The Hindu* on 26th September 2009.

Balagopal says: "Gandhians thought he was a communist. Communists thought he was a Gandhian"—what a compliment!

About the book under review, Dr Onkar Mittal has observed "this piece of writing brings out the complexities and nuances of the agricultural crisis in a very profound way and yet in an accessible language". □□□

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A PERSONAL STORY

by Gorrepati Narendranath

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