

Bringing pulses to the forefront

19 April 2016, New Delhi, Sanjeev Chopra



Sanjeev Chopra hopes that the staple source of protein gets requisite consideration in policy-making and that the FAO mandate yields positive results for farmers.



While most newspapers have been writing about the "succession" battle for the post of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, few have reported on a resolution that has great significance for a substantial chunk of farmers and consumers in the country. The resolution in question is the "Poor Man's protein": it is a direction to the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) mandating it to celebrate 2016 as the International Year of Pulses (IYP) in collaboration with governments of member countries and relevant organisations, NGOs and stakeholders. This unanimous resolution was passed to recognise and acknowledge the salient role played by this particular crop as an essential source of vegetable protein, and an integral part of the global strategy to improve nutrition. This was acknowledged in the National Kharif conference organised by the Union Agriculture Ministry last week at New Delhi, and there was renewed emphasis on this important component of the National Food Security Mission.



Let's look at the big picture. Although pulses are grown in more than a hundred and seventy countries, India occupies a unique position in the domain of pulses whereby we are the world's largest producer, consumer, as well as importer of this commodity. Therefore, IYP means a lot to India. We grow pulses in 23.5 million hectares, which means that at least an equal number of farmers are engaged in the cultivation. Even though we produce approximately one-third of the global harvest (18 million of the 64 million tonnes), our productivity (789 kg/ha) is well below the global best. With over 4000 kg/ha, France is way ahead of Canada, which has yields of nearly 2000 kg/ha. USA, Russia, and China also have yields ranging from 1600-1999 kg/ha – and so we still have a lot of catching up to do. We, therefore, need to strategise a production enhancement strategy with at least three clear and quantifiable objectives. First, we need to increase productivity by ensuring access to water, seeds, and technologies; second, we need to ensure a support price, or a dynamic price discovery so that the production becomes profitable, or at least, at par with the income from production of cereals; and thirdly, we need to cut the dependence on imports. The third aspect is very important as even a marginal increase in demand in India, leads to a steep increase in global prices.

As things stand, the demand for pulses is likely to grow on account of rising incomes, the inclusion of pulses in the PDS of several states, as well as growing health awareness about shifting to a protein based diet. Currently, we import about 4 million tonnes of pulses, but even then, the per capita consumption is well short of the WHO recommendation of 29.2 kg per capita per year. Harsh as it may sound, the per capita availability of pulses in India has registered a decline from 22-kg per capita per year in 1951 to approximately 15-kg per capita per year at present. In fact, for a country where a large section of the population is vegetarian, the per capita requirement of pulses should be pegged higher. That is why; pulses were included within the ambit of the National Food Security Mission.

Let's take a look at the leading pulses producing states in the country. Madhya Pradesh takes the lead with 5.4 million hectares, followed by Rajasthan (4.20 mha), Maharashtra (3.92 mha), Karnataka (2.46 mha), UP (2.31 mha), and West Bengal (2.18 mha). The area under pulses has been shifting to paddy as more areas come under irrigation, and the interventions for paddy are clearer, focussed, and pronounced than pulses!

What should be done

First and foremost, farmers must find the production of pulses more remunerative, or at least as remunerative as paddy. This has started happening, but the focus of the Union and state governments is still paddy and wheat. A conscious decision has to be made with regard to procurement, for in the absence of an assured MSP, farmers have to resort to distress selling. One significant difference between the procurement of cereals and pulses is that the former are the mandate of the FCI, the latter of NAFED. Given the precarious financial condition of NAFED and its affiliated organisations, it is not in a position to carry out the procurement function with the same felicity as the FCI. The funds at the disposal of NAFED are a fraction of those available to the FCI. Moreover, the government policy with regard to losses on account of procurement operations on pulses is not as clearly defined as in the case of cereals. The government directly controls FCI, and therefore, the goals, directions, and operational strategies are in sync. NAFED, on the other hand, suffers from liabilities, fanatical crisis, and a board, which is often in conflict with the government of the day, and is dependent on state federations for its operations.

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Perhaps in the IYP, a well-defined strategy, with all the stakeholders: farmers, state governments, processors, procurement agencies, Ministries of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Affairs and the NITI Ayog can get together to discuss an action agenda with a clear target that over the next five years, productivity must move to at least a 1000 kg/ha, and a robust organisation for procurement must be available on the ground in the NFSM districts. The Government of West Bengal is preparing a position paper on a strategy for pulses with the support of the Bengal Chambers of Commerce and Industry to address some of these issues in the coming months.

One hopes that the poor man's protein gets an honourable place in policy circles and that the mandate of the FAO yields positive results for the farmers.

(Sanjeev Chopra is Additional Chief Secretary to Government of West Bengal. The views expressed are strictly personal.)

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