

## Maati Tirtha, Maati Utsab

2 February 2016, New Delhi, Sanjeev Chopra



Sanjeev Chopra writes about policy initiatives, development interventions, and livelihoods in West Bengal.



This column derives its name and title from the farmers' festival organised annually by the district administration of Burdwan and the Agriculture Department of the Government of West Bengal. Farmers from all corners of the state congregate, the best among them are honoured with a plaque, a shawl and memento, technologies are on display from all the allied sectors, farm equipment demonstrations are held and "best practices and exemplars" are showcased. Universities, colleges, corporate houses, NGOs and CBOs also out up their stalls to highlight different aspects of development – ranging from the role of agriculture in the carbon cycle to the efforts of the Agriculture Department in achieving the Sustainable development Goals of the UN. This is also the occasion for the Chief Minister to spell out her development agenda on agriculture, horticulture, fisheries, marketing, procurement, farmer's incomes and everything connected with farmers welfare.



As she pointed out in her address, it's a celebration of the soil and the toil of the farmer, which leads to abundance, prosperity, and the welfare of humankind. However, neither the soil, not the toil has received due recognition - and this Festival is one small effort to ensure that appropriate credits are shared. She also took pains to explain to all those present on the occasion that agriculture was not to be posited "against" industry – these were not opposites, but complementary to each other. If agriculture is the Gourab (pride), industry is the Sourabh (lustre), and both could, and must walk hand in hand!

CM Mamata Banerjee announced a slew of measures for farmer's welfare, and her vision to ensure that farm incomes must double in the course of the next five years. This would involve a series of steps – from soil health cards to provision of quality inputs and fertilisers at MRP, extension services and advisories, provision for quality seeds, direct procurement from farmers to cut the intermediary margins and export markets for some of the iconic agricultural commodities of the state – ranging from scented varieties of rice, viz, Gobind Bhog to Radha Tilak, Kala Nunia and Teliapanji to exotic mangoes from Malda and Murshidabad with their niche qualities.

Likewise mandarin oranges from Kurseong, orchids from Kalimpong – in fact, each of the agri-climatic zones in West Bengal (and for that matter, India) has some unique products, which need to be recognised, branded and marketed, preferably through farmer's organisations or cooperatives. She mentioned her recent visit to Bhutan, and the proposed agreement with them for supply of good quality potato seeds. She also suggested that this venue be the nerve centre for ushering transformation of agriculture in West Bengal- it should be the farmer's classroom where the awardee farmers would interact with those who were interested in following their footsteps. These were farmers who had shown innovations in production, post-harvest management and integrated farming- farmers who had transcended the limitations imposed by the small parcel of land – and generated incomes which were four to five times higher than their counterparts by the dint of sheer hard work and technique.

This year's function was held at Burdwan in the premises of the Agriculture Department's farm adjoining the Agriculture College established by the BCKV and the Krishak Mandi, being established by the Agriculture Marketing Department. The venue is now being developed as the permanent site of the Maati Utsab-, which has become a very popular destination for the farmers. This state-level function is actually the culmination of block and district level "Kisan mela" where farmers get to see, discuss and pose issues concerning their fields and their crops with the officials of the departments, and scientists from the universities. These are becoming increasingly popular, for it is more than discussions on agriculture, which brings the farmers together. Both at the district and sub-district levels, and certainly in the Maati Utsab, folk culture, especially the Baol singers are an integral part of the Mela, and both their music and sartorial preferences add to the festive atmosphere of the celebrations. There are street plays to demonstrate Good Agricultural Practices and to share information about the relevant schemes of the government, especially the Soil Health Card and the Kisan Credit card. While on the Kisan Credit card, the progress of the state has been very good – the issue now is not coverage, but the quality and the quantum of the loan- there's much ground that needs to be covered on the soil health card. However, the good news is that the roadmap is now clearly laid out, and after the initial hiccups, the roll out would be quite fast.

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On display is the model of an integrated farm, which showcases how different activities – ranging from paddy production to poultry farming can generate higher incomes for the farmers family. Kiosks set up by the Animal Resources Development Department discuss the significance of balanced cattle feed- and the water bodies in the premises display the potential and scope of fisheries in the state. Farm equipment, especially those, which are amenable for use in smaller farm holdings generate a lot of interest- as also machinery which can be used for custom hiring by agri entrepreneurs.

Before closing, it should be mentioned that one of the co-organisers was the Indian Chambers of Commerce – an apex industry chamber with a very strong presence in West Bengal and the Eastern region. They had mobilised not just the agribusiness firms, but also the captains of industry from the state to join the programme, interact with the farmers and see for themselves how new partnerships could be forged.

And it is only through partnerships amongst all the stakeholders that Maati Utsab will achieve its goals – for as the CM pointed out, Maati belongs to all, and it does not discriminate!

*(The views expressed are strictly personal)*



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