

What does a farmer really need today?

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When this question was posed to me by The Hindu, I started wondering, which farmer should I be talking? In this country of nearly 500-600 million farmers, there are farmers of all shapes, colours, sizes and status. There are farmers who cultivate apple in HP, cotton in Gujarat, wheat and rice in Punjab, millets in Rajasthan, Deccan, sugarcane in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and rice all over the country. There are farmers blessed with limitless irrigation water in Punjab and Haryana and the rainfed ones in the Telangana, North Karnataka, Marathwada and Vidarbha regions.

Their earnings range from Rs.200,000 per acre to under Rs.1000 per acres. While Punjab's prosperity flourishes the desperation of Vidarbha plunges farmers into new depths of sorrow.

Therefore how can one bring a homogenous, single vision of what a farmer wants?

In over three decades of my developmental activism, it is my experience that the biggest divide in farmer's perspectives is guided by gender. What men farmers want sets them acres apart from what women farmers want. With such wide variations between different segments of farming populations, I had a great difficulty in giving one short answer to what farmers really need. Besides though I am a farmer myself, I don't have to depend upon it for living. Therefore my personal opinion does not count when The Hindu wants to know **What does a farmer really need.** However I did the next best I could do. Talk to the farmers directly and find out what they think they really need.

For the last 25 years, I have been working with over 5000 dalit women farmers who are all tiny holders of less than two acres. But more than 60% of their livelihood is derived from their small holdings. In fact there must be more than 300 million small and marginal farmers in this country. And everyone who analyses Indian agriculture and farmers clearly says that the survival of these small farmers is crucial to the nations security and well being. In terms of food production unlike the neo liberalists hare brained idea of consolidation of farms to create large holdings is not only myopic but also wil spell disaster for India's food security. Some of the most respected food analysts in the world such as Miguel Altiery after over a decade of study have categorically said that small farms are the most efficient food producers. They even go on to prove through their authorative study that as the farm size increases the productivity goes down reaching an optimum around farm holding of 4 hectares.

Considering the fact that these farmers are the true backbone of India's agriculture and food security, I talked to a group of women farmers to

understand what do they want to stay on in agriculture. Most of these farmers were either landless or marginal farmers two decades ago. But with the support of the Deccan Development Society of which I am the Director, they got into active agriculture. All of them are ecological farmers and producers of food crops. Through their magnificent efforts they have become owners of lands between 5-20 acres though all these lands are non irrigated dry lands.

What do they need if they want to disprove the current doomsday discourse that declares small scale farming as dead and smallholder farmers as unviable, I ask them.

Rayapalli Susilamma, a 40 year old woman farmer who owns 3 acres of rainfed farm of which half an acre is mango plantation, one acre not cultivable and grows an amazing variety of food crops sees herself as a success and not an unviable farmer. She is proud that she does not have to go to the market and buy any food grains. She goes to the shop only to buy cooking oil, coconut oil, soap and surf.

They all want to own about five acres of farm, which they think will take care of all their needs : food, cash and a comfortable cushion. But bullocks, a milch animal, a couple of goats and a few chicken are an important possession they want. And the government must ensure that all farmers like them must own these animals that generates additional cash to support their children as they grow, go to the colleges to pursue higher education.

They dismiss the notion that small scale agriculture is unviable. This they believe is the cry of the lazy person : *Chesinonke Vyavasam; Cheyanonniki Vyavasam ledi* [One who can work, succeeds in agriculture; those who cant, fail]. But where are the current pitfalls?

The increasing cost of cultivation is their major worry. Weeding wages have gone through the roof. What used to be about Rs.100 just two years ago, has gone upto Rs 250 now. And even then people are hard to find. She blames NREGA. Everyone echoes this accusation. Though all of them also are benefited by the MNREGA since they all go for wage work in other people's lands, they still think that MNREGA has negatively affected their own agriculture. Continued this way they will all be reduced to farm labour than the proud food producers they are. To make MNREGA small farmer friendly, they say, agricultural activities must be included into MNREGA. Weeding, ploughing [incidentally ploughing costs have gone up by four times in last five years, they point out] and harvesting costs must be borne by MNREGA. If this is done, surely their agriculture will not be under any kind of threat.

I tell them that the big officers in the MNREGA do not share their concern. The biggies think that weeding is something that a small farmer can do on her own. They treat this argument with heavy contempt. "These fellows have no knowledge of agriculture. They think out of their hat". In drylands, particularly

on red soils, which is what millions of poor small farmers own, weeding in Kharif must be finished within two or three days. If you prolong it, it becomes unproductive. An acre needs a minimum of 25 persons. If the farmer does this on her own, it takes 25 days for her to finish the job. Weeds become unmanageable over this gap of time.

Cheelamamidi Laxmamma, in her late '30s has nurtured her 3 acre unirrigated dryland farm with great love and care for decades. **“In monsoon crops, the pace of weeding must be fast. It must be done within a space of 2-3 days.** Depending on the soil type, 20 to 40 persons are needed. Current rates are around Rs.200-250 per person. Therefore it costs between 4000 and 6000 per acre. The total income from one acres might be around Rs.8000. Under these circumstances how can the weeding wages be met? We borrow from local moneylenders or from DW CRA groups at 3% interest to complete weeding. *Kinda Meeda, Kinda Meeda chesindaaka vyavasam nadavane nadavadi.* [Unless we keep juggling with resources, agriculture becomes impossible]. Add to this the fact that smaller crops [translation : Millets] need more weeding. More weeding for **female** crops;[translate food crops] less for **male** crops;[translation: cash crops] Therefore the government must offer 100% subsidy for millets and 50% for cash crops by including this activity under MNREGA.

This is the only area where these proud women farmers in spite of their small holdings and difficult farming need help. Banks do not lend any money for their dryland farming while they offer hundreds of thousands of rupees as loan to the cash crops such as sugar cane, potato, turmeric, ginger, cotton etc., crops that are water guzzling and resource eroding. This is a blatantly unfair banking policy loaded against small dryland farmers.

While the small scale women farmers are extremely modest in their needs, men farmers, true to their mettle, homed in on issues that are monetary. Right price, scientific price is their first need. All crop prices must be fixed at 50% more than the production costs they say holding Swaminathan Commission report as their bible. Most of these men farmers can be described as medium scale farmers and cultivate sugarcane, turmeric, cotton etc. but with a small portion of their land dedicated to food crops. They are also members of the KRRS, Karnataka Rajya Raita Sangha, the oldest and most powerful farmers organisation in India. Therefore many of their perspectives are derived from the KRRS political views. But in spite of this, they are also dryland farmers and imbibe its culture. Therefore they are nostalgically unhappy that the agrarian relationships have degraded severely over the last decades. They see that increasing monetisation and loss of the exchange culture are at the root of this situation. We used to give our jowar and borrow mirchi from them. They would give us turmeric and take our mangoes. Thus without money we lived like a community. But now the community has been destroyed. As is wont for the KRRS members they hold the government for creating this situation. The recent manifestation of such anti farming policy of the government, according

to the, are the MNREGA and PDS. MNREGA has been killing farming. In this argument, they are strangely in tune with the small scale women farmers from the excluded sections of the society. This is very significant for the policy makers to observe. The uninformed view of the MNREGA bureaucrats on agricultural operations is far from the reality of small farmers, men and women. The men farmers from Bidar say that their old attitude about labour has changed. They have learnt to respect the labour and are ready to treat them with the dignity they deserve. And in terms of MNREGA they are ready to meet 50% of the wages from their pocket if the government offers the other 50% from MNREGA. This is a win win situation for the government and labour they assert. Some of them want MNREGA scrapped completely from Southern states. They say that agriculture offers 365 days of employment in these states and it is an untruth perpetuated by the government that labour finds it difficult to get themselves employed here.

While such day to day issues do create deep unhappiness in the minds of farmers some of the more global issues also exercise their thinking. For eg agricultural research which is conducted in this country with no reference to farmers and without their partnership is deeply resented by them, In an iconic event called *Raitateerpu* [Farmers Verdict] where farmers were the jury in front of whom scientists, research administrators and private seed companies had to defend their actions, one of the verdicts said:

2. Government must seriously recognise farmer innovations, respect such innovators and suitably compensate scientists in the formal institutions. Such innovations must get sufficient publicity.

Thus the farmers proclaimed themselves as scientists of the same stature or more than agricultural scientists who had very little idea of the farming realities. In a series of Farmer Round Tables conducted in Karnataka as a sequel to the Raita Teerpu, farmers clearly said that agricultural research must be liberated from the research institutions and handed back to farmers themselves. The jury was composed of 70% small and marginal farmers dalits and adivasis from the ecologically disadvantaged areas of Karnataka and had 50% representations from women. Therefore it is so much more significant that they saw their own capacity for research in such positive terms and wanted government recognition for it.

To sum up, what farmers want is not a simple list of what we need. It is as complex as farming itself. And if one takes into account the shades of farming in terms of farm size, farming environment and the socio-economic contexts in which farmers live, the complexity grows exponentially. But to sift them and offer the support that each segment of farmers need will be a creative challenge for governance. This challenge must be accepted by the government squarely and the needs met on a war footing.