



Gaon Panchayat for Reviving Indian Agriculture from COVID 19 Pandemic Devastation

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Introduction

Agricultural sector is considered as the backbone of the rural Indian economy. Around 70% of the rural households in India still depend on agriculture and its allied sectors for their livelihood. As per the census of 2011, 263 million people are engaged in agricultural sector. Indian agricultural sector contributes around 18 percent of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and provides employment to 50 percent of the countries workforce.

However, the occurrence of COVID 19 pandemic has devastated the agriculture sector of India in different ways. The reverse migration of labourers to the hinterlands, shortage of markets for agricultural products, etc; have created differentiated impact on agriculture across the country. While agricultural operations in the well endowed regions have suffered due to shortage of labour, the remote areas have received an excess supply of labourers. While some areas have suffered from the shortage of supply of food grains, some other areas have made remarkable loss due to lack of demand. Thus COVID 19 pandemic has brought new challenges and opportunities to the agricultural sector. Therefore it is worthwhile to focus on the strategies and policies for the development of agricultural sector as well as the Indian economy more particularly during post-COVID 19 situation. It is because agriculture in India plays a prominent role not only by supplying food-grains and industrial raw materials but also by creating demand for labour market.

Government of India has already announced huge financial package for the farm sector to save it from COVID 19 pandemic devastation. But mere funding from the govt. alone can not revive Indian agriculture. Rather, there must be proper policy implementation which requires sound involvement of rural people in organized way. Here comes the importance of Panchayati Raj Institutions and more particularly of the Gaon Panchayats to revive the agricultural sector. The responsibility of the development of agriculture has already been entrusted to the Gaon Panchayats by the 73rd amendment of the constitution of India. Gaon Panchayats of India can play strategic role to revive the agriculture sector. In this context, this paper has attempted to throw light on the strategies that may be

undertaken by the Gaon Panchayats to revive agricultural sector by creating gainful opportunities from COVID 19 pandemic devastation.

Relevance of the Gaon Panchayats for Reviving Agricultural Sector

In India there are 2.5 lakhs numbers of Gaon Panchayats. Socio-economic environment of different Panchayats are different. Therefore, in a vast diverse country like India, uniform strategies can not be undertaken or executed by different Gaon Panchayats. The prime responsibility of every Gaon Panchayat is to plan for creating gainful opportunities strategically to revive the agriculture sector by involving rural people. M.K. Gandhi also underlined the importance of Panchayat for rural development. He observed that the rural economy could be transformed into a better one through grass root level work, mutual cooperation and co-ordination of voluntary efforts of the people. He said “the greater the power to Panchayats, the better for the people.”

The 73rd amendment of the Constitution of India has already given constitutional status to the Gaon Panchayats as the grass root level organization for all round socio economic development for achieving social justice and equity. Accordingly, Article 243 (G) of the Constitution of India has already transferred 29 development responsibilities to the Gaon Panchayats. Accordingly, Gaon Panchayats of India have to perform various activities for agriculture and allied sector development like programmes for productive activities – agriculture, irrigation, animal husbandry, fuel and fodder, poultry, fishery, small-scale industries including food processing industries and land development programmes – land reforms, soil conservation, minor irrigation, water management and watershed development, wasteland development, social forestry and grazing lands, organization and control of rural markets and village fairs etc. The need of the development responsibilities of the Gaon Panchayats has become more realistic after the havocs from COVID 19 pandemic. Gaon Panchayat has to bear the responsibilities of agriculture development to ensure high living standards, poverty alleviation, food security and gainful employment opportunities.

Adaptable Strategies for the Gaon Panchayat for Revival of Agriculture

Agriculture sector of India has been badly affected by the reverse migration of labourers from the agriculturally endowed regions to the hinterlands. While agricultural operations in the well endowed regions have suffered due to shortage of labour, the remote areas have received an excess supply of labourers. In India, many labourers from eastern states have been getting employment in farm sector of western and southern states in marine fishing, post-harvest activities, livestock management, marketing, and in the creation of agricultural infrastructure. But the occurrence of COVID 19 pandemic has forced the migrant labourers to return back to the hinterlands. It has created negative impact on agriculturally developed regions like Punjab, with the proximate cause being the harvest of important rabi crops like wheat and mustard, resulting in a higher production cost. Now, an estimated 23 million migrant labourers) are expected to have returned to their native places from urban areas due nationwide lockdown for COVID 19. Rural India might be incapable to absorb such a huge quantity of migrated labourers. Because rural India excessively is dependent on agriculture where there is widespread

disguised unemployment. This signifies the adoption of needful strategy for gainful employment not only by the central or state government but also by the local governments particularly by the Gaon Panchayat

Reverse migration of labourers has provided an opportunity for Gaon Panchayats to engage the returned labourers in gainful employment. Gaon Panchayats may take initiatives for productive use of the returned labourers in different agro-based labour-intensive sectors like livestock, fisheries and food processing which have not been developed over the years. Labourers can also be used for creating and revamping of rural infrastructure (both farm and non-farm), godowns, water management and in food and fodder processing. However, improving the land and labour productivity is a critical issue. For the development of agriculture and allied sectors, Gaon Panchayats may raise the activities under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme for saving from pandemic devastation.

The agriculture sector of India is already characterized by poor agricultural marketing. The occurrence of COVID 19 pandemic has worsened the demand supply chain in agricultural marketing more heavily. While some areas have suffered from the shortage of supply of food grains and industrial raw materials, some other areas have made remarkable loss due to lack of demand. Due to lack of sound agricultural marketing and storage facilities, farmers have to sell their harvests to the local traders, middlemen and money lenders at very low prices. It is because of the inability of the poor farmers to wait for long after harvesting. To save the farmers from the clutches of middleman, government has already introduced regulated market. Yet, the problem has not been solved. Regulated market is seemed to be suffered from locational disadvantage and support facilities. It demands the introduction of decentralized marketing operations where Gaon Panchayat can play a pivotal role. Gaon Panchayat may provide storage facility like rural godown, drying platform, weighing machines or grading equipments to benefit farmers. Gaon Panchayat may also facilitate by opening local market centre and thereby Gaon Panchayat may encourage local informal traders for their purchases by licensing them.

One important reason for poor performance of the agricultural sector is the small and fragmented land holdings. The provisional agricultural census 2015-16 has revealed that the average size of operational holding has declined to 1.08 hectare in 2015-16 as compared to 1.15 hectare in 2010-11. This decrease of operational landholding indicates the diversion of land for non agricultural use. The problem of small and fragmented holdings is more serious in densely populated and intensively cultivated states like Kerala, West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. States having high percentage of net sown area like Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh have holding size above the national average. Also there is a serious gap among small farmers, medium farmers and big farmers in terms of landholding size. Scientific cultivation in such a small land holding is not possible. Therefore remedy lies on the consolidation of land holding or cooperative farming. Here Gaon Panchayat can play a crucial role for consolidating fragmented landholding or for cooperative farming. Gaon Panchayat can initiate the process of lease land farming to remove the problem of small and fragmented land holding pattern and even by forming community groups. Gaon Panchayat may also encourage the formation of agricultural cooperative societies among the small and marginal farmers. If Gaon Panchayat makes certain

provision for assistance for lease land farming or community farming, then the problem of small size of operational holding would be removed.

An important cause of low agricultural productivity in India is inadequate capital. Though institutional credit facility has been increasing, however, credit from non institutional sources can not be ignored. Poor farmers have to borrow capital at every step of farming for seeds, manure and fertilizers etc. This problem of capital has become more acute after making severe loss by farmers due to COVID 19. This inadequacy of capital of farmers may be solved under the guidance and planning of Gaon Panchayats. In many cases farmers does not approach to banks or other institutional sources due to ignorance as well as reluctance. Sometimes when they approach, they can not get fund due shortage of sufficient documents. Again, the bank officials may be reluctant to provide fund for losing faith on recovery. In all these cases, Gaon Panchayat can help the poor farmers not only by giving the guidance but also by monitoring the utilization as well as recovery. Gaon Panchayat may also encourage the farmers for agricultural credit cooperative society which can help the farmers a lot. The experiment of SEWA Bank of Ahmedabad, Gujrat proves that rural entrepreneurs can profitably manage a cooperative bank. When the rural entrepreneurs themselves own a bank, they take keen interest in its management and ensure a high repayment rate, which creates surpluses and earn them attractive dividends (Bhatt, 2004).

Another important drawback of agriculture in rural areas is the inadequate storage facilities. Due to lack of storage facilities, rural farmers are compelled to sell their produce immediately after harvest even at very low prices. Such distress sale deprives the farmers of their legitimate income. This problem of shortage of storage facility has become more prominent during lockdown period for COVID 19. The Assam agriculture minister Atul Bora said that due to lockdown the farmers of the state have been facing huge losses. "The cost of loss could be around Rs 40 crore. This year's vegetable production in the state is much more as compared to the previous years. But due to lockdown, most of the farmers have failed to sell their produced vegetables in the markets," he said. This situation could have been avoided if there were adequate storage facilities. A recent study by National Academy of Agricultural Sciences (NAAS) highlights that the lack of access to a storage facility "is the most important cause of post harvest losses for all types of food in India." Raising the food storage facility at the village level will not only help the farmers to prevent food loss but also the village can be self reliant during the time of distress. Recently, Prime Minister of India has insisted on Atmanirbhar Bharat or a self-reliant India. While interacting with Gaon Panchayats on April 24, on the occasion of National Panchayati Raj Day, he highlighted that Indians have to learn an important lesson from COVID 19 that villages have to become 'self-reliant and self-sufficient'. Though a village can not be self reliant in every aspect, however, self reliance may be possible in case of stocking food grains for uncertain period. Gaon Panchayat can achieve this by providing storage facilities at the village level. Adequate storage facility will help not only for making the villages self reliant but also help the farmers to sell their products at reasonable prices in reasonable time. Gaon Panchayat can initiate the process for storage infrastructure at village level in near future from the recent Government of India's announcement of Rs.1 lakh crore packages for boosting agricultural infrastructure of which Rs.500 crore is earmarked for providing subsidy to build storage facilities.

Indian agricultural has been facing a lot of problems. To remove these problems and to make the sector as a key contributor to GDP, proper agricultural planning is very essential where the Gaon Panchayat can play a pivotal role as entrusted by the 73rd amendment of the Constitution of India. Gaon Panchayat has to prepare Panchayat level agricultural plan by involving local people through Gaon Sabha in coordination with the experts as well as government's departments. Framing of agricultural planning requires data collection about the socio-economic status of households, land use pattern, major crops, irrigation pattern, agricultural practices etc and analysis with the help of experts. Accordingly, strategies should be undertaken for collective development. Preparation of strategies should focus on some interventions like soil and water conservation, maximization of irrigation use efficiency by increasing use micro irrigation technology, promotion of crop management practices, promotion of allied sectors etc. Effective agricultural planning also requires resources identification both from governments and naturally available resources.

Conclusion

Agriculture in India has been playing a predominant role not only for providing rural livelihood and food supply but also for supplying industrial raw-materials and contributing towards GDP of the country. But this sector is overwhelming due to large number of small and marginal farmers who are unorganized and unable to reap the benefits of agricultural innovation. The declaration of lockdown by government due to COVID 19 has raised the distresses of the farmers almost in every aspect losing the faith for survival. Therefore, time demands the support to farmers from the government. Recognizing the need, government of India has already announced huge financial packages for the farmers. But doubt arises regarding the actual beneficiaries and utilization. Since Gaon Panchayat, as the grass root level government, is directly involved with the local people and more accustomed with problems and prospects, therefore, it must play the vital role for the development of the agricultural sector as well as of the Indian Economy.

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