

Govt. and farmers must travel together in Agriculture Budget



V. Jeevakumar, advocate and farmers' welfare activist. For contact: vjeeva63@gmail.com

The Tamil Nadu government has come up with its fourth Agriculture Budget. It is welcome that four agriculture budgets have been presented so far after changing the Agriculture Department into the Farmers' Welfare Department. The budget report, which has the motto of 'safeguarding creatures of the earth,' has understood the woes of farmers who complain of rains wreaking havoc through drought and downpour. Hence, the report has announced a plan to set up special economic villages, considering that climate change is likely to make an immense impact in the next two decades. At the same time, the report has failed to understand that the voices of farmers with which Delhi is currently reverberating are relevant to Tamil Nadu too.

Procurement price

One of the promises that the DMK made in its manifesto ahead of the 2021 Assembly elections was pertaining to foodgrains' procurement prices. Way back in 2006, the M. S. Swaminathan Committee recommended a minimum procurement price inclusive of the production cost of foodgrains, which would leave the farmers with a 50 per cent profit. The DMK promised that if voted to power, it would set the price of paddy at Rs. 2,500 a quintal and the price of sugarcane at Rs.4,000 a ton, after considering the production costs as of 2021. Three years have passed, but the DMK government is still silent on the issue, this time too. Its apathy over the issue of farmers' livelihood is dangerous for the prices announced three years ago are not sufficient, considering the present ground reality. It is not enough to have anklets alone for a dance programme, but the feet should also be freed from shackles. Announcements are worthless unless they are translated into action.

The Tamil Nadu government's position on the Prime Minister's crop insurance scheme for kuruvai is also a matter of grave concern. The occupation of agriculture is mired in both drought and deluge. There has been no crop insurance for the kuruvai cultivation for the past three years. The Tamil Nadu government's indifference and Karnataka's betrayal over the Cauvery issue have added to the farmers' woes.

The farmers are now confronted with an abnormally woeful situation, struggling as they are with procurement price issues and the lack of relief for natural disasters, either from the union government or from the state government.

Names in people's language

Another demand being raised by the farmers is that the names of kharif and rabi denoting crops must be changed into local words. There are several names for crops in the farmers' spoken language such as samba, kuruvai, thaladi and so on. The rural farmers visiting

banks or government offices for getting agricultural assistance are confused over the names of kharif and rabi.

It is to be recalled that Anna was asked once, “What will you achieve by changing the name of the state as Tamil Nadu. Pat came the reply from him, “What did you achieve by changing ‘Parliament’ into ‘Lok Sabha’ and ‘President’ into ‘Rashtrapathi?’ I’m asking you what you will lose by changing the name of our state into Tamil Nadu”

This episode drives home the message that names should be in the people’s language.

So, the names of monsoon should necessarily be in the people’s language.

Need for hearing public opinions

The thrust given to cultivation of palm, neem, nochi leaf and ‘aatathodai’ in the agriculture budget is quite welcome. It is the farmers who acted like frontline warriors, augmenting food production, in the time of corona. The bio features of natural plants are their weapons.

The report gives distinction to the ‘three prominent fruits’ (mango, jackfruit and banana). At the same time, farmers of coconut, an oilseed crop in agriculture and a horticultural crop as well, are in distress because the coconut has been shifted from the agriculture department to the horticultural department. This change has been effected without consulting the coconut farmers who have recovered from the gaja cyclone’s destruction of about 27 lakh coconut trees.

With the help of value addition technology, coconut cultivation can get a boost. Similarly, ethanol obtained from sugarcane farming can be used as a fuel in vehicles and thus a new market can be created.

In the rice market, the ponni rice from Andhra and Karnataka is in high demand. So it is imperative to upscale the standard of the Tamil

Nadu rice and for the purpose, agricultural colleges and the university should be upgraded.

The Tamil Nadu government's Agriculture Budget has earmarked funds for mobile paddy drying yards. Similarly, the number of mobile paddy procurement centres should be increased.

With the private sector having a field day in the rice market, the prices of rice varieties have been spiralling. So, it is the need of the hour for the government to weed out corruption, increase paddy procurement and allot more funds.

The state government must raise the demand to have power in relaxing the paddy moisture content up to 20 per cent. It must also create facilities for procurement of pulses and millets and alternate crops, for their storage and marketing.

Agricultural tourism and others

At public hearings, farmers have put forward their suggestions on augmenting revenue in agriculture.

The agricultural tourism project attained fame in Italy and became successful in Maharashtra. The project has been raking in wealth through fishing, buffalo cart rides and harvesting of veggies.

Yet another cup of woes of the farmers is a set of troubles they face during the times of planting seedlings and harvesting crops. The government used to allow farmers to use Burma sets, sprayers etc. on rent. Factories manufacturing such machineries can be started so that the government can let them on rent and thereby augment revenue.

White paper

The farmers' yet another demand is information on practical implementation of the Agriculture Budget reports.

The past and present reports contain plans to set up agricultural industrial estates in the composite Thanjavur district through the Tamil Nadu Small Industries Development Corporation (TANSIDCO) and to form an agricultural industrial corridor between Tiruchi and Nagapattinam. What has happened to those plans?

Similarly, explanations are needed on implementation of the announcements on projects to set up labs to sift through the fertilizers to segregate artificial mixtures and to establish horticultural farms of fruits, vegetables and herbs at all girl students' hostels. Besides, a white paper is needed on the implementation of the announcements on funds for desilting operations, new power connections for agriculture, loans for cultivation, Tamil Nadu organic farm policy, open terrace garden and banks for country seeds.

As for the Cauvery issue, the farmers are now distressed over how Karnataka is making efforts to implement its Meketadu dam project and how Tamil Nadu takes initiatives over the problem. A turning point is badly needed in the journey of the agriculture budget.

James Norbury asks in one of his books, "What is important in a journey? Is it travel? Or starting point? Or the destination?" The traveller replies as follows: "We have been travelling together. That is important."

The Agriculture Budget is a journey. The Tamil Nadu government would do well to travel with the farmers together, winning their confidence.

Translated by V. Mariappan.