

## TOWARDS RURAL REJUVENATION

NOTE ON AGRICULTURE FOR ELECTION MANIFESTO OF .....PARTY

### THE CONTEXT

The present paradigm of high-external-input-based, intensive agriculture which is premised on “produce more and prosper”, has clearly failed India and has shown itself to be a “produce more and perish” model where rural India and its livelihoods are concerned. This model, which also rests on increasing commercialization and corporatisation of farming, has proven itself to be unsustainable. Punjab epitomizes this (given the intensive “yield-centric” paradigm adopted here), where decades after chasing higher and higher yields, the average monthly income for a farm household reached only Rs. 4960/- as per NSSO Situation Assessment Survey of Farmers Report (July 2005) (which is around Rs. 165/- earnings per day for the entire family, that too from all sources of income). While the average outstanding loans per indebted farmer household stood at Rs. 25,895/- at the national level, in Punjab it was Rs. 63,529/-. Punjab’s water has depleted and got contaminated, even as land got degraded on an extensive scale in the pursuit of this “produce more at any cost” paradigm. **At the national level, average monthly incomes of farm households (at Rs 2115/-) are lower than expenses (Rs 2700/-), pushing such households into a vicious cycle of impoverishment.** Farmers and farm workers do not experience any dignity in their profession and social status, as shown in official surveys, and repeatedly shared in fora after fora where they can be heard. The situation of women and tenant cultivators is more precarious and vulnerable.

This paradigm’s impact is seen on rural indebtedness and suicides, malnutrition and hunger and breakdown of urban infrastructure as people abandon farms and migrate, in search of employment. When it comes to hunger and malnutrition, the largest numbers are in rural India, ironically partaking in the food production process.

The very foundations of agriculture, namely Soil, Water, Biodiversity and Climate, have been seriously damaged by intensive agriculture. **The current model of high-input chemical agriculture has spoilt our soils (about 25% of the land has become saline and waterlogged), poisoned our water and farms, making agriculture unsustainable and created severe environmental health problems in various regions of the country.** It needs no emphasis to point out that farm livelihoods can be sustained only if resources like soil, water, biodiversity and associated knowledge can be conserved. 65% of our agriculture continues to be rainfed, now subjected to the additional risks of climate change.

**For the consumers, the current model has only provided increasingly non-nutritious and toxic food** with increasing rates of cancer, kidney problems, infertility, diabetes, obesity and heart disease.

Macro-data also points to unregulated and unchecked shift in control and ownership of resources like land and seed. Even brief visits to most parts of rural and peri-urban India show the huge land use and land ownership shifts, which may not be reflecting in any realistic fashion in the macro data yet. It needs no emphasis that the condition and position of cultivators and agricultural workers cannot be improved if these resources are not directly in their control. Their practical as well as strategic needs (for livelihoods as well as for sectoral parity in society) cannot be met if land, seed, forests and water are taken away from farming communities.

The truth is that India remains an agrarian nation with more than 60% people dependent on agriculture. **It is a myth to expect millions of farmers to leave agriculture and find other jobs** – despite the much-touted economic growth, the organized sector still provides jobs only to 9% of the population, and in the past 20 years, the industry has been able to create only 25 million new jobs which is only 4% of our working population. While agriculture as a sector continues to find very little relevance and support in

the GDP-led economic development paradigm, even during India's 'high growth' period of 9% GDP, only 2 million net new employment was created for the 55 million persons who entered the workforce showing this to be a jobless growth across several sectors. Agriculture continues to be the mainstay for a majority of workers in Indian economy, especially so in the case of women.

Instead of finding sustainable and holistic solutions for the crisis in agriculture, **governments** have been looking for quick 'technofixes' in addition to adopting industry-friendly policies. One of the most controversial of these is **Genetically Modified (GM) seeds**. Transgenic technology is imprecise, irreversible, uncontrollable and unpredictable. GM crops are therefore rejected or strictly regulated by the majority of countries because of the **risks they pose to health, agriculture, environment and national self reliance in seed**. However, it is seen that in India, the government touts them as the solution to the many problems in farming making it a costly and dangerous distraction from lasting solutions.

A more effective **new path, namely Ecological Agriculture**, has now been repeatedly documented as the **best approach by leading national and international studies** such as the 'International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development' (IAASTD) done by FAO, World Bank and UN agencies. Pioneering work across the country has also shown that ecologically and economically sustainable agriculture, which is socially equitable, is possible and beneficial, creating win-win situations for producers and consumers. Ecologically sustainable farming has no space for agro chemicals, GM or corporate control over agriculture and natural resources.

#### **ASHA'S CHARTER OF DEMANDS TOWARDS KISAN SWARAJ**

ASHA believes that the following policy directions should be ensured, to discharge the nation's moral responsibility towards our *Annadaatas* for keeping us all alive; to address its obligations towards various development goals; to ensure the vital function of food sovereignty; to avoid rural unrest and deterioration of our urban centres; and to have safe, nutritious, diverse and adequate food for all Indians. It is high time that policy makers/political parties squarely address the issue of farm suicides, a source of national shame. This should include relief and rehabilitation for families of farm suicide victims. A manifesto for sustainable and productive agriculture, which provides food security/sovereignty to the nation and dignified livelihood for farmers rests on 4 pillars, namely:

- (1) Income security for all farm households, so that producers find viability and dignity in their profession, and are not forced to leave agriculture out of distress,**
- (2) ecologically sustainable farming systems, to preserve productive natural resources so that livelihoods can be sustained,**
- (3) people's control over resources such as land, water, forests, seed and knowledge as a key to viable and sustainable livelihoods,**
- (4) non-toxic, diverse, nutritious and adequate food for all Indians.**

Important components of each of these 4 pillars are given below.

#### **1. Income Security for all farm households, ensuring minimum living incomes**

Sustainable farm incomes and well-being of producers and agricultural workers have to be the main parameter by which agriculture and rural development ministries would be made accountable. This is a fundamental shift from viewing agriculture as a technical issue to one of livelihoods.

- 1.1 Farm Income Commission** to oversee and ensure minimum living incomes accrue to all farm households, through annual assessments and focused recommendations. A basket of measures such as remunerative prices for all crops along with timely procurement, and social security for all farm households – especially small farmers, tenant farmers and agricultural workers, to deliver minimum dignified livelihood for all farm households. There should be a recasting of current price support system with correct valuation of costs incurred by farmers, reasonable margins over such costs and to include living costs, with procurement made effective and expansive.
- 1.2 Adequate insurance and compensation mechanisms** to provide for risk-buffering and disaster relief. This should include crop losses by wild animals as well as industrial pollution.
- 1.3 Promotion of low cost, sustainable agriculture**, instead of high chemical, high water, high energy agriculture systems which lead to high indebtedness and high risk.
- 1.4 Price Compensation or Deficiency Price Payment system**, to ensure that any deficit in price realization over an entitled remunerative price is paid up to food producers.
- 1.5 Promotion of decentralized agricultural infrastructure at rural level** for Storage, Procurement, Processing and Marketing through farmer organizations and institutions. Concurrent with this should be a collectivization of all producers so that they can benefit at both production and marketing ends.
- 1.6 International trade in agri-commodities only if** India makes farm livelihood security a sovereign, non-negotiable policy priority in any multilateral or bilateral trade negotiation, whether it is WTO or FTAs; we should engage in trade deals only if there is a level playing field, that too after a debate with domestic stakeholders.

## 2. Ecologically sustainable farming systems, to sustain viable farm livelihoods

- 2.1. Converting Indian agriculture to ecologically sustainable farming**, at the rate of at least 10% of cultivated land area each year. This should begin with rainfed areas, where evidence shows that ecological/organic farming practices appropriately supported by a knowledgeable and effective extension system can increase yields and improve net incomes.
- 2.2. Ensuring agriculture research is farmer-empowering** and that 50% of research funding is on low-cost, ecological farming. Such research should be assessed with a ecological sustainability index too, apart from conventional cost benefit analysis. Farmers' needs and not corporate agendas must drive research and therefore, participatory research approaches are to be incorporated.
- 2.3. Declaring a moratorium on open-air release of GMOs**, including field trials and commercial cultivation, as per recommendations of several credible bodies, including a Technical Expert Committee of the Supreme Court and the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture.
- 2.4. Stopping schemes and subsidies promoting usage of chemicals in farming, and** phasing out all agrochemicals gradually. As a first step, an immediate ban on those pesticides that have been banned elsewhere. Ecological practices, including diversity based cropping systems that effectively manage pests and climate change, to be promoted instead, with adequate attention and support lent to livestock-related issues, including native diversity revival.
- 2.5. Incentivizing ecological agriculture by ensuring that adequate extension and other support is extended to farmers, particularly marketing support as well as a special bonus for the ecosystem services rendered by organic farmers.** Separate mechanisms for large scale training in agro-ecology, farmer field schools, large scale campaigns and the dissemination of knowledge in local languages should be put into place.
- 2.6. Separate and appropriate dispensation towards rainfed farming and drought adaptation**, with focus on appropriate cropping and technologies; life-saving irrigation for all crop land is important.

While advocating the above demands on environmental sustainability of farming, ASHA seeks to emphasise the symbiotic relationship between ecological farming and smallholders – both need each other to survive and thrive.

### 3. Community control over agricultural resources

- 3.1. **Open source seed systems and not IPR-enabled corporate control of seed** resources to be put into place. Bio-piracy to be checked by treating all NBPGP passport information as established prior art. Seed sovereignty is an integral part of sustaining farm livelihoods. The Seeds Bill to be amended to be farmer friendly and farmer-accountable.
- 3.2. **Instituting a comprehensive land ownership and utilization policy** protecting farmers, tenant farmers and women farmers' land rights. Halting acquisition or diversion of agricultural land for non-agricultural use. Revisiting land reforms to ensure land (and its development) for the landless is an integral part of ensuring that land as a primary resource is with farm families.
- 3.3. **Privatization of water resources to be halted. No surface water use for commercial/industrial purposes.** Life-saving emergency irrigation systems to be assured for all cultivated land.
- 3.4. **Forestry approaches** should recognize community ownership as well as governance on this valuable resource and the letter and spirit of PESA, FRA etc., to be implemented fully, to uphold the socio-cultural and livelihood correlations of forest-dependent communities.

### 4. Ensuring non-toxic, diverse, nutritious and adequate food for all Indians

- 4.1 **Ensuring safe, nutritious and adequate non-toxic food** for all citizens by phasing out all toxic technologies in our food and farming systems and immediately bringing in/enforcing labeling for pesticide residue-laden food and GM foods to uphold the right to informed choices of consumers.
- 4.2 **Ensuring all food security schemes, including the PDS, are based on decentralized systems** of local production, procurement, storage and distribution. Diverse and nutritious crops such as millets, pulses and oilseeds to be included in PDS and food schemes. Organic vegetable kitchen gardens to be promoted, especially as part of ICDS scheme using women's self help groups.
- 4.3 **Acknowledging the role of Forests as Food Producing Habitats, for reshaping our forestry approaches** and ensuring that uncultivated foods are recognised as important nutritious free sources of food for the most marginalised at the most critical times of hunger.

Education, including at the schooling stage, related to sustainable agriculture and farm livelihoods is very important to create a society sensitive to all the above issues.

#### **Note prepared by ASHA - Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture**

ASHA is a network of over 400 farmer and civil society organisations, leading scientists from the fields of agriculture, biotechnology and ecology, economists, public health specialists, consumer activists and others. Detailed background information available ([www.kisanswaraj.in](http://www.kisanswaraj.in)). Please contact any of the following persons for additional information:

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