



# ALLIANCE FOR SUSTAINABLE & HOLISTIC AGRICULTURE (ASHA)

Food • Farmers • Freedom

## **KISAN SWARAJ NEETI**

### FOR SAVING OUR FOOD, FARMERS & FREEDOM

#### **Background**

Starting on October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010 (Gandhi Jayanti) at Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, more than 220 persons from across India took up a 71-day mobilization and outreach effort to fellow citizens, mostly farmers, across 20 states of India, to draw attention to issues around our Food, Farmers, Freedom. A broad alliance of more than 400 organizations across the country called ASHA (Alliance for Sustainable & Holistic Agriculture) came together, organizing public meetings, farmer interactions, field visits and citizen forums in 100 districts as part of the Kisan Swaraj Yatra, striking a dialogue with nearly twenty five thousand people, including farmers, consumers, agriculture scientists, political parties and governments. The Yatra drew fresh attention to the continuing agrarian crisis in the country, at a time when major policy directions are being charted out for the future of farming in this country. This Kisan Swaraj Neeti is an evolving policy framework that emerged from the Kisan Swaraj Yatra and the subsequent work of ASHA in various states of India.

It is apparent that any efforts by governments around rural employment, food security and tribal development are intricately linked to the health of agriculture in rural India and Agriculture cannot be compartmentalized as one Ministry or Department. Without addressing and solving the fundamental issues of Indian agriculture, all the development and welfare efforts will be building an edifice with a crumbling foundation.

The Kisan Swaraj Yatra, in its long journey through scores of villages, towns and cities of India, found that farmers are indeed struggling to have a viable livelihood and dignified living through farming and to hold on to their resources. We found that the ecological crisis in our agriculture is real and the damage is being experienced tangibly, whether it is related to land or water or seed. We also found that seed sovereignty is no longer an ideological or theoretical concept – choices related to Seed are indeed narrowing down for farmers, with seed monopolies of big corporations growing; issues around good quality, affordable, locally suitable diverse seeds in an accountable system throw up the need to look into seed self-reliance urgently.

The Yatra also found that ecological farming based on farmer-level innovations related to soil/pest/disease management and seed-breeding is indeed being practised on a wide scale and the government is yet to pick up its pro-active spread, given the current economic, environmental and health imperatives. Nearly everyone that the Yatri interacted with had concerns about food safety and quality and implications for their health.

Farmers repeatedly raised the issue of high costs of farming coupled with non-remunerative prices pushing them into distress. Adverse markets for farm produce are a result of both domestic pricing and procurement policies and mechanisms as well as international trade policies and norms being adopted, mostly in favor of industry and at the expense of farmers.

The Yatra also came across a number of communities struggling to hold on to their productive resources including Land, in the face of an onslaught from other sectors and players.

### **Kisan Swaraj Policy: An Overview**

ASHA believes that the government should ensure the following policy directions, to discharge the nation's moral responsibility towards our *Annadaatas* who are keeping us all alive; to avoid rural unrest and deterioration of our urban centres; and to have safe, nutritious, diverse and adequate food for all Indians.

1. **GUARANTEEING INCOME SECURITY TO ALL FARMING HOUSEHOLDS:** Farming should be made remunerative by recasting current price support system with correct valuation of costs incurred by farmers, reasonable margins over such costs and to include living costs. There is a need to set up a Farmers' Income Commission to address this. Further, a comprehensive social security legislation has to be enacted and implemented to cover all rural households and support systems for farmer-centric marketing brought in. Such Income Security should be the central objective of an express statute created for the purpose.
2. **ENSURING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN AGRICULTURE:** The natural resources that are the very basis for the livelihoods of millions of poor in the country are being impacted by agricultural technologies like chemical fertilizers, chemical pesticides and GM seeds. The government has to implement a time-bound plan of transition to ecologically sustainable agriculture – at the rate of at least 10% of cultivated land area each year – establishing support systems and incentives to achieve this. Further, chemical fertilizers and pesticides in our farming need to be phased out and entry of GM seeds stopped.
3. **COMMUNITY RIGHTS OVER THEIR RESOURCES:** A vibrant and politically stable India rests on the financial condition of rural communities and not on the profitability of a few large corporations. The basic resources of rural Indians upon which their livelihoods rest are being treated as mere commodities for corporations to profiteer. The forcible acquisition and diversion of agricultural lands, lack of prioritization of irrigation in our water policies, escalating seed and input costs, increasing seed monopolies in a pro-corporate regulatory regime and so on are issues of urgent concern as these directly impact farmers' livelihoods and are pushing them into deeper distress. The government should stop forcible acquisition of agricultural land and take up large-scale immediate steps to revive seed self-reliance of and agro-diversity with farmers.

**Through the above measures, the Government should ensure that all Indians have dignified access to adequate, diverse, nutritious and safe food.**

# Towards a Kisan Swaraj Policy

Farmers and citizens around the country, particularly through a pan-Indian outreach effort called the Kisan Swaraj Yatra covering 20 states and involving dialogues with tens of thousands of citizens, demand that the nation should devote urgent attention to the continuing agricultural crisis and allocate highest priority to the agriculture sector, ending decades of neglect. India needs a comprehensive policy which aims at making farming a viable livelihood for crores of medium, small and marginal farmers – this is essential for the nation's food security and for ensuring a vibrant rural economy as the backbone for a vibrant India. This is also essential for a politically stable nation.

It is clear that the Western model of agriculture cannot show the way forward for India – a model that carries high environmental and health costs, enormous subsidies to support a few agri-businesses and only 2% of the population. This is untenable here, especially given that millions of Indians live off agriculture - their livelihoods depend on the conservation of resources and appropriate technologies for existing landholdings, and any large scale displacement poses legitimate questions on the need for such a displacement and opportunities in other sectors. India's own experiences of successful ecological farming and very productive small-farmer agriculture are in fact a beacon of hope. At this historic juncture, India can and should build an approach that gives primacy to farmer's livelihoods, its soil, water and ecology, and people's health, setting an example to the world.

The new policy framework (Kisan Swaraj Policy) should be based on the four pillars of **economic Security and viability** of agriculture-based livelihoods, **ecological sustainability** to preserve the productive natural resources, **people's control over agricultural resources** including land, water, forest, seed and knowledge, in addition to **ensuring non-toxic, diverse, nutritious and adequate food for all Indians**.

## 1. Economic Viability and Income Security for Farm Families

The economic policies adopted by the Governments regarding agriculture have not improved the economic status of farmers; hence 'vibrant village economies' have remained only in dreams. The increasing impoverishment of farming has a cascading effect on all sections of people living off agriculture including agricultural workers and tenant farmers and it is also correlated to food and nutritional insecurity. Various government policies including the agricultural pricing and food security policies have neglected the fact that a large population in this country is directly involved in food production; pricing policies keeping only consumers and industry in focus have led to serious problems for the producers. Policies targeting the poor as mere consumers to be ensured cheap goods undermine the livelihoods of rural producers who ironically constitute a majority of the nation's poor. The National Farmers' Commission stated, "Progress in agriculture should be measured by the growth rate in the net income of farm families... moving away from an attitude which measures progress only in millions of tonnes of food-grains and other farm commodities" (<http://krishakayog.gov.in/4threport.pdf>).

Governments continue to talk about their support to agriculture in terms of how many thousand crores have been spent on subsidies or loan waivers, but with no assessment of how far the policies are improving the economic status and farmers' incomes. The Arjun Sen Gupta Committee report on "Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector" (2007) shows that on an average for all farmers in the country, the total income is Rs. 2115/- per month, while the expenditure is Rs. 2770/-. This deficit is worse in the case of smallholders (88.9% of rural households by landsize in 2004-05). While the average monthly income of a farm household from all sources is

estimated at Rs. 2115/-, the income from cultivation is at a pathetic level of Rs. 969/-. NSSO data (2003) shows that 48.6% of farm households were indebted, with the average amount of outstanding loans per indebted household stood at Rs. 25,895/- at the all-India level.

Serious underlying problems include:

- Increasing costs of cultivation due to intensive agriculture (high-external-input) models promoted. With an overwhelming number of cultivators not covered under institutional credit on farmer-friendly terms and conditions, this intensive paradigm pushes farmers towards indebtedness. This paradigm also affects the productivity of the farmers' resource base sooner or later. Such increasing costs of cultivation are exacerbated by withdrawal of state support to extension, input supply, regulatory mechanisms in favor of farmers etc.
- No remunerative prices: Domestic price policies very often do not even cover Cost of Cultivation officially calculated even as there are serious objections to the way costs are estimated. Added to this is the problem of lack of procurement even when floor prices are declared or any mechanisms which ensure that the minimum prices actually accrue to farmers. For those farmers who are not engaging with markets, there is no support available in any manner.
- Adverse international trade terms and conditions: The agri exim policies are not determined by farmers' interests but are usually tilted in favor of industry. Further, opening up our markets to goods and commodities from other countries meant pitting of our farmers against subsidized produce from elsewhere.
- Lack of mechanisms to reduce farmers' risk towards disasters: During conditions of drought and other disasters, in addition to crop failures for other reasons, mechanisms that exist to protect farmers from the risk are inadequate and very often, non-existent. Further, regulation of agri-business entities is not designed to protect farmers' interests and adequate liability mechanisms are missing in the case of many such regulatory frameworks.
- Increasing living costs of farmers: As lifestyle aspirations change and as government withdraws from basic services like healthcare and education, there is an increasing need for higher incomes for rural households. Such costs are not accounted for in calculating price support, for instance. It is assumed that it is enough to cover the cost of cultivation when price policies are determined!

Inflation increases both input costs and living costs for farmers, but the government response is typically to lower agricultural prices, resulting in a triple squeeze.

Support systems that exist in the name of farmers do not actually benefit a large number of farmers, both in their design and their implementation. Further, subsidies to agriculture and to farmers are relatively low in India, especially for smallholder, rainfed cultivators. Substantial chunk of subsidies are in the form of input subsidies propping up the industry and not farmers, and in the form of Food Subsidy for PDS. For example, while there is huge subsidy for chemical fertilizer industry, there is no support provided to farmers who use local methods/practices for soil fertility or use their own seed.

When it comes to agricultural credit by institutional players, manipulating of norms related to lending, location etc., has meant that the current situation is worse than the sad state that used to exist in the past. Cost and terms of credit are not in favor of farmers.

A specific mention has to be made of tenant farmers and women farmers here, who receive no benefit or protection. They are particularly vulnerable to a variety of adverse factors.

In the end, Indian farmers are ending up subsidizing others, at great cost to themselves.

It is in this context that ASHA's Kisan Swaraj Neeti focuses on an explicit aspect of policy that governments have to put in place: **that of guaranteeing income security to farmers.**

This will not only address the deep distress among farmers, but also generate a positive dynamic in the entire rural economy by enabling farmers to make positive investments into improving agriculture, by increasing their purchasing power, and by retaining more youth in rural areas.

**Guaranteeing Minimum Living Incomes:** The learnings from the global food crisis have shown that food security lies in viability of small farms (reinforced by processes like the IAASTD – International Assessment of Agricultural Science & Technology for Development); hence, retaining small farms is very important. ASHA asks for a guaranteed income security with the following components:

1. this has to be a legal entitlement of every farm household, to cover all cultivators including tenant farmers and to cover agri-workers too
2. there has to be a price compensation mechanism that pays out the difference between the market price realized by farmers and their legal entitlement for a minimum guaranteed income (correctly assessed cost of cultivation plus 50% plus living wages) whenever the legally entitled income levels are not realized
3. where required, either for particular crops or particular regions, direct income support on an annual basis should be paid
4. a comprehensive social security regime with healthcare cover, maternity and old age benefits and so on to be an integral part of design and implementation
5. a Farmers' Income Commission for designing, deciding and implementing this legal entitlement
6. farmers' collectives to be built and strengthened for collective marketing efforts, with support in the form of adequate infrastructure, capital and capacity building provided
7. capacity building and extension support for these collectives to expand work on reducing cost of cultivation for farmers by taking up ecological farming practices on a large scale and subsidizing practices/approaches that will allow internalization of inputs in a farming systems approach. Such subsidies should include support to labour costs for agricultural operations outside the purview of MGNREGS programme with other funding sources but using the same institutional set up for actual delivery of support.

## 2. Ecological Sustainability of Farming

Agriculture as an occupation and a way of life is directly dependent on Nature. The ecological damage caused by decades of intensive chemical-based agriculture is becoming increasingly clear and farmers are facing the adverse consequences on a large scale.

Soil health and fertility has declined drastically; the farm ecosystem which includes earthworms, beneficial insects, birds and diverse plants, has been badly disrupted in chemical farms; water systems have been poisoned; and groundwater has been depleted creating extensive dark zones. Farmers are seeing productivity declines despite heavier fertilizer application. While the government carries a public financing burden for propping up this kind of an intensive agriculture paradigm, no incentives are in place for farmers who practise ecologically sustainable farming. As per the government's State of Environment 2009 report: "Direct consequences of agricultural development on the environment arise from intensive farming activities, which contribute to soil erosion, land salination and loss of nutrients. The introduction of Green Revolution in the country has been accompanied by over-exploitation of land and water resources and excessive usage of fertilizers and pesticides." The report shows that about 44 Million hectares of land in India are degraded due to

salinity, alkalinity, acidity and waterlogging, compared to the net cultivated area of 142 MHa ([http://www.moef.gov.in/soer/2009/SoE%20Report\\_2009.pdf](http://www.moef.gov.in/soer/2009/SoE%20Report_2009.pdf)).

Pesticide poisoning is killing thousands of farmers and farm workers every year and pesticide residues and water contamination due to agrochemicals are causing diseases like cancer, birth defects, premature deliveries, impotency, kidney problems etc. It is important to acknowledge the various environmental and environmental health related problems that are caused by synthetic pesticides in our agriculture and address this squarely.

When it comes to Water, the competing demands for water, depleting ground water and variation in rainfall due to climate change have become a regular phenomenon. Drought and floods have become the single largest reason for losing crops and livestock. The rapid increase in agro-chemical use in the past five decades, has contributed significantly to the pollution of both surface and groundwater resources, says the State of the Environment report, 2009. Promotion of water-intensive crops in unsuitable areas and increasing tubewells are leading to groundwater depletion and increasing debt burden. Water-efficient crops (like millets, pulses and oilseeds) and production practices (SRI, micro irrigation etc) need to be promoted. Rainfed agriculture needs a separate dispensation as most of the current subsidies are designed for irrigated areas.

There seems to be a mad rush towards Genetically Modified crops ignoring biosafety and other concerns. Without assessing the need, alternatives available, bio-safety, political rights of farmers and consumers, and trade security, releasing of Genetically Modified (GM) crops into the environment would be a disaster for farmers, consumers and our environment. The experience with Bt cotton in India clearly shows that the biosafety tests done were very inadequate to conclude that the crop is safe to human and animal health. More importantly, the claims that were made with regard to chemical pesticide usage (and its reduction) proved to be false. The annual average number of farm suicides in a state like Maharashtra did not decrease after the advent of Bt cotton but has actually increased. When it comes to other food crops like Bt brinjal, public opinion on GM crops was against their release and various state governments also have raised their concern. The health concerns with GM food crops as well as scientific evidence on their adverse impacts are increasing. In addition, the genetic contamination by Bt cotton has led to rejection of organic cotton from India. The recent controversial and discredited report on biosafety of GM crops in general and Bt Brinjal in particular by six Science Academies put a huge question mark on the abilities of the Indian scientific establishment to assess GMOs in an independent, rigorous, credible and unbiased fashion. It is not clear why India is rushing headlong with regard to this controversial, unproven living technology when many other nations are still treading cautiously. This is a technology that is unneeded and unwanted.

Given all of this, there is a need for an urgent push to re-orient Indian agriculture into an ecologically sustainable model. This is also supported by the IAASTD report which says, "A powerful tool for meeting development and sustainability goals resides in empowering farmers to innovatively manage soils, water, biological resources, pests, disease vectors, genetic diversity, and conserve natural resources in a culturally appropriate manner."

Sustainable agriculture methods are now shown to work at a large scale in many places – including On 33 lakhs of acres in Andhra Pradesh under Community Managed Sustainable Agriculture, which is being considered as the world's largest state-supported ecological farming project, on lakhs of acres under System of Rice Intensification (SRI) and its variants in other crops like wheat, sugarcane and ragi in many states, organic farming in several states, zero-budget natural farming by Subhash Palekar and his team of farmers etc. – leading to good production and higher net incomes for farmers.

It can no longer be said that ecological agriculture cannot happen at a large scale or that it cannot feed the country's growing demand. It is high time that we re-orient our support systems and research towards ecological agriculture, and create the synergies required to make any system successful at a large scale. For this ASHA proposes:

- an ambitious road map for a large scale programmatic shift towards ecological farming,
- special incentives including a Bonus for farmers rendering ecological services,
- demands for phasing out of chemical pesticides and fertilizers (All Class I and Class II pesticides should be banned in India, and others should be phased out according to a time-bound plan. This is important in the context of constantly-emerging evidence on the adverse effects of such chemicals as well as the possibilities thrown up by rapid expansion of ecological farming methods, including of NPM (Non Pesticidal Management of crops)) and
- demands for stopping any further releases of GMOs into the environment.

There should be greater and sustained focus on rain-fed agriculture and drought adaptation. There is a need for such a Mission with adequate budget allocations for rain-fed production systems to address issues across the value chain, establishing support systems for dryland crops like millets, pulses and oilseeds. It is also important to allocate at least fifty percent agri-research funding immediately towards research on Ecological farming/sustainable agriculture using participatory approaches, and redirect the agenda of the NARS from corporate-driven high-input intensive technologies to farmer-led sustainable technologies. In this context, it is important to democratize and make the NARS institutions accountable to the sustainability of agriculture. The country's response to Climate Change and the National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture should focus on resilient systems, locally adapted varieties, and ecological farming practices along with increasing biodiversity, which will act as the best adaptation for climate change, instead of pursuing "climate-proof" GM crops.

### **3. Ensuring Access and Control over productive resources to farmers**

Land, water, forest, livestock and seed are the primary resources for the population engaged in agricultural occupations. It is imperative that the control over these resources remain squarely in the hands of the people whose lives and livelihoods depend on such resources and not taken over by large corporations. The trends are alarming. There is a large-scale shift of land from agriculture. Recent studies show that in Andhra Pradesh lakhs of acres of agricultural land have been shifted towards other purposes in the past twenty years – with estimates ranging from 5% to 10% of the cultivated land area. Large-scale forced displacement of farmers for SEZs, "infrastructure development and industrialization", urbanization, coastal corridors, highways and industry is a huge problem triggering protest movements across India from Uttar Pradesh to Tamil Nadu.

An equally critical problem is of forest resources being alienated from the control of tribal communities, in violation of the special protections offered by the Constitution and some progressive legislations. Control over water resources, and the push towards water privatization are another area of contention over an agricultural resource, all the more important because of the alarming depletion of our water resources and contamination due to agriculture and industry.

Now, seed (*beej*) is another critical resource under threat, to add to *jal*, *jangal*, *zameen* that have been at the centre of resource struggles for decades. Privatization of the seed sector has been accompanied by poor regulation, and unbridled processes of handing over control of the most valuable seed varieties and germplasm to the corporate sector. The latest example is the agreements that five state governments have signed with Monsanto to pay the company hundreds of crores each year to purchase its hybrid maize seed and provide captive market, while protecting

the company's claims of proprietary rights over the seed. Many government research institutions have agreements with such MNCs to promote research which suits the MNCs' interests and not the interests of the farmers, including by violating national legislations like Biological Diversity Act. Monsanto has cases ongoing against the AP and Gujarat governments arguing that the government cannot regulate the prices and royalties of seeds. Despite the concerted demands from farmer organizations, political parties and some state governments, the Seeds Bill tabled in the Parliament doesn't include provisions for regulation of seed prices and royalties, and doesn't empower state governments. It is important to recognize, conserve and promote farmers' seed varieties and knowledge/skills of breeding. Setting up of community seed banks, supporting farmer-breeders, emphasis on participatory varietal breeding and promoting agro-diversity based farming etc., are urgent steps to be taken up by the government.

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

The issue of agricultural technologies, cropping patterns and practices is closely linked to availability of non-toxic, diverse, nutritious and adequate food for all Indians. Choices for consumers are getting squeezed on all these fronts. Interpretation of food security to only mean specific quantities of rice and wheat from a few pockets in India, in a centralized implementation framework, has jeopardized the food and nutrition security, which includes food safety, for most Indians. The right to safe food and right to informed choices of citizens of this country are being constantly threatened, including with the push for GM foods. On the other hand, the public financing burden on the government, first in terms of support to wrong technologies that are eroding farmers' productive resources and then to support a centralized PDS, is ballooning year by year. The government should ensure that all Indians have access to non-toxic, diverse, nutritious and adequate food by promoting ecological farming based on agro-diversity, especially from the drylands of the country.

Recasting all food security schemes including the PDS into universal and decentralized systems of local production, procurement, storage and distribution, by including millets, pulses and oilseeds as an integral part of such schemes is an urgent imperative. Further, the government should ensure that consumers' right to informed choices with regard to chemical residues and GM foods is ensured through proper standards and labeling regimes.

#### **Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA)**

Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture is a network of individuals and organizations working to create an enabling environment for ecologically safe and economically viable sustainable agriculture. The Alliance is an effort to bring together practitioners, farmer organizations, researchers, policy makers and consumers onto a platform to promote successful experiences of sustainable agriculture for further scaling up and mainstreaming. **THIS IS AN EVOLVING DOCUMENT BEING REFINED THROUGH CONSTANT DIALOGUES WITH STAKEHOLDERS; THIS SHOULD BE READ WITH MORE DETAILED INDIVIDUAL PROPOSALS UNDER THE MAIN COMPONENTS OF THE KISAN SWARAJ NEETI. (This version is dated 10<sup>th</sup> December 2011).**

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