

## **FARM YOUTH CAUGHT IN CROSS WINDS**

R. Dwarakinath

***India is on the move, but in part.  
For, the farm sector is lagging behind.  
It may soon become a drag on the economy.  
Hence, farm development requires renewed efforts,  
Farm youth must get critical attention.  
Matter brooks no delay.***

Farming is still the only source of human subsistence. No alternative is in sight. This ancient family occupation has survived over the ages through a process of transfer from father to son, generation to generation. But, in recent times, with an unprecedented externalization of farming, and under the pervasive influence of Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation, this process of transfer of occupational knowledge within the community is seriously dislocated. Also, the earlier institutional arrangements for formal education in farming like district agricultural schools, gramsevaks training units and farmers training centres have now disappeared. In the meantime, even as more rural youth are becoming literate, formal education system is seen to have shed all aspects of agricultural education. Thus, the rural drop-outs are missing both formal and informal orientation in farming since a comprehension of 'modern' farming is beyond the middle level farmers. As such, farm youth today are neither here nor there, with regard to farming.

### **Rural Society in deep disarray**

It is seen that rural people are a deeply disturbed lot, today. The way of life they had accepted as simple, quiet and desirable does not seem to enjoy any social standing at present. Things around farm people are changing so fast that there is little time to get their moorings. Most of the younger generation sees very little to cherish in rural life. Thus, rural youth, in their formative years, seem to find their role models elsewhere. In fact, the urban life, so visible now-a-days, appears to attract them in so many ways. As a result, in rural society, many things that were regarded as most valuable in Indian social life seem to have suddenly become out-dated.

In the past, village was a primary social system, where every body is known to every body else. Life styles were simple and transparent, governed by the local norms, customs and value systems. Bulk of the population lived by farming and the rest by providing the support services to farming, farm families and communities. People took pride in belonging to a particular village community. They were, in attitude and behaviour, mostly conformists, while deviants got promptly put in place.

Farming, just a generation or so ago, was a much simple family pursuit where the seed came from the previous harvest, manure from farm and home wastes and labour from the joint family. It was essentially a self-reliant occupation. The surpluses that occurred in good years were saved for a lean year later. The barter economy operated so well that it supported not only the landed families but also the landless families of artisans and the service providers. Such was the occupational pattern supporting the farming communities.

There were established processes of continuity in the village life. Made up of several castes and socio-economic groups, a farming community functioned as an extended family. But, all that is history, now. A huge food deficit in the early years of Freedom compelled the country to look beyond for help, which came ultimately as scientific farming technologies, ushering in the green revolution. This event touched the very roots of the Indian social life so suddenly and extensively that in one go the rural society stood transformed in its views, vision and preferences. It is possible to conceive that any other socio economic change entering the country would have started at the top of the society and seeped down slowly, in phases, reaching the village communities in its final stages. But, with the green revolution, it did not happen in this phased manner. It was the rural society that got the first exposure. This left very little time for the consequent social changes to take place as a gradual process. Consequently, many of the established systems in the farming community got dislocated. Generational transfer of farming knowledge was one of the major casualties. To a large extent, the source of new knowledge in farming was thus found to be located outside the farming community itself. The agricultural extension service, which took many shapes and roles from 1950s to 1990s, lost its track in subsequent days. Thus, now there seems to be a void in the process of transfer of new knowledge in farming to the farmers, particularly the younger farmers. This may hurt Indian farming very seriously in the days to come.

The danger signs are already visible. The agricultural growth rate has not recovered after the green revolution, in spite of the best of coaxing. In recent years, NSSO reported that nearly forty per cent farmers are inclined to leave farming if suitable alternatives are available. Also, most visitors to farming communities have observed very few young men engaged in farming, the burden being thrown upon the older generation. Who will be seen in farming, say, ten, twenty years later?

### **Policy must be based on ground realities**

Growth rate in agriculture is declining after the green revolution. Efforts in the last two decades to usher in a second green revolution or an ever green revolution have not yielded tangible results. Reasons are ready at hand.

Green revolution (mid 1960s to mid 1980s) was a combination of technologies – Hybrids and HYVs, powerful fertilizers and pesticides, and improved agronomic practices. These elements put together in a **Packages of Practices** produced phenomenal yield increases in assured farming situations like irrigated farms. They required expensive purchased inputs and better management in farming. In about two decades, it was seen that the green revolution had covered most of the assured farming areas. It had, however, bypassed the vast dry farming areas and a larger number of dryland farmers. Under these circumstances, it is obvious that any further substantial agricultural growth must come only from dry farming areas. However, policy is yet **recognise dry farming** as the next source of growth in agriculture.

There are some other features of present day farming that have to be taken into account in considering the future development strategies. The farm land, as the production base, has undergone some tremendous changes over the last six decades. These changes, in fact, define the production opportunities, and therefore influence the development strategies. Policy makers formulating the development plans have to necessarily take note of these factors.

Four sets of changes affect the sector. One, **the land-man equation** is changing rapidly due to factors like relentless population growth, changing life styles of urban and rural populations and competing demands for land. This creates the necessity of producing more out of less of farm resources. Two, **Agro ecology** is extensively deteriorating due to loss of vegetative cover in the terrain, over exploitation of ground water and rapid depletion of bio diversity around. The major effect is the impaired micro climate and reduced support to farming. Three, **Deterioration of farming practices** are becoming common, arising from low use of organic inputs, over use of chemicals and extensive practice of mono cropping. This has resulted in the decline of farm yields and intensified pest and disease problems. Four, **Alienation of the farm youth**, above all, is seen everywhere from their pronounced preference for urban life, disinterest in farming as a way of life and their common assertion that farming is an un-remunerative drudgery.

These emerging features governing present day farming, however, do not seem to figure prominently in policy formulation exercises. The general impression is that the same perception of the farming situation that formed the basis during the green revolution is held as valid even at present. The only exception is the new sensitivity to soil health.

At the same time, several studies and reports that appeared after the green revolution, about revitalizing the farm productivity, have a common theme to propose – enhancing irrigation, research and extension, economic incentives, infrastructure, market facilities and agro industries. Of course, they are all relevant and important, while they are not new. They are appropriate to agricultural development anywhere in the country. Really, they are the products of a macro level perception of the agricultural situation. They are regarded as **the necessary conditions** for agricultural development.

However, Policy is yet to recognize another reality. A farming community is made up several segments of population who happen to be dissimilar in their world views, resilience and risk-taking abilities. While the development opportunities created by the necessary conditions are readily availed by a small segment of the community, the Elites, (with better socio economic status, financial resilience and a wider world view), the larger proportion of the resource poor farmers, mostly in dry farming for a living, are found to be unable, as of now, to make use of these opportunities. Therefore, an adequate development strategy must include, as a necessary part, a capacity building component in its future efforts. This, actually, will amount to the creation of **the sufficient conditions** for development. Thus, the significant missing link in agricultural development planning at present is this want of recognition of the need for human resource development in the case of farmers.

### **Farm youth in aimless search for a future**

It is a matter of concern that the present generation farm youth are missing some of the opportunities of the past for their preparation for normal adult life. There were several processes in the society for this purpose starting from the traditional, informal procedures to the more structured arrangements. Almost all of them have vanished today

**Established traditional opportunities in farm life** – The rural life in the past evolved many ways in which youth in their formative years could gradually learn the acceptable ways of behaviour in the society. From this viewpoint, the family and the community were the primary schooling opportunities. Village life also provided several occasions, specially after the main agricultural season, in the form of folk dramas, folk songs, *Harikathas*, *Jathras*, *Bhajans* and the like for their cultural and religious learning. All these are regarded today as outdated issues.

**Initiatives as rural reconstruction ventures** – In the pre-Independence era, formal education too had elements that dealt with the virtues of simple, accepted rural life and occupations in the form of folk tales, moral stories and basic education elements. Also, there were institutions providing education in modern farming, like the district agricultural schools. Such institutions often came into existence as donations from far-sighted village leaders, and provided formal education in modern aspects of farming, along with practical training in the attached farms.

**Opportunities under Community Development Programme** – With Independence came many ventures aimed at rapid development of rural life. **Community Development Programme** and the **National Extension Service** were two of the notable ones. The most remarkable initiatives in this regard, for preparing the rural people and farm youth for change, were the **Social Education Programme** and **Farm Youth Training** activities. Special staff was recruited and trained to manage these activities. They became very popular and effective and survived for a few decades. The farm youth programme particularly was the most visible activity.

But, in the following years, the tremendous success generated by the green revolution bred an enormous amount of complacency in the policy making and administrative circles. As a result, both social education and farm youth activities were pushed aside as in-essentials. The consequences of this short-sighted action are being felt today. Farm youth are seen struggling in an aimless search for a future. In the preparation of farm youth for a dependable future life, neither the traditional systems are in place, nor do the institutions built later remain in operation. As such, farm youth today are becoming an easy prey to the cheap, often degrading and unproductive attractions of the urban life. The concern is that even the more sound and acceptable aspects in urban life are ignored in preference to the cheaper attractions. Essentially for this reason, the growth of farm youth today is seen as totally un-guided, and denied of the benefit of the lessons learnt so far. It is seen that the first sufferers are the youth, then the farming occupation, and ultimately the society as a whole.

### **Renewed rural development effort, a dire need**

It is an accepted reality that no country like India can exist without a healthy farm sector. It is a part of its survival. With its huge population, whatever the level of its economic attainment, it will not be able to sustain itself for long only by purchasing farm products. Recognition of this reality must be the corner stone of the development planning.

Driven by this realization, a review of the Indian farm sector would indicate some lines of future action. Any amount of exuberance that arises from the glorious green revolution in the past and the high-riding IT-BT revolution at present must not be allowed to over-shadow the danger involved in neglecting the farm sector any further. No advanced country in the world has neglected its farm sector.

In this context, rebuilding the respect and dignity of rural society becomes necessary. India still lives in the villages. Nearly seventy per cent are rural population. It is they who made the green revolution a success. It is the rural progeny, migrating to cities and getting educated, that is leading the IT-BT revolution. Thus, the rural people have the innate ability to grow to newer heights. Even the advanced countries believe that the rural society is the nursery of the most cherished human values and behaviour. Therefore, there is a need to restart the **social education campaigns** both in the rural areas and in the urban centers.

The urban people must learn to respect and appreciate the rural way of life, rural values and customs for their own sake. There is no need to look down upon that culture just because it appears to be less sophisticated and less luxurious. In some ways rural life is more desirable way of life and less artificial in its form and content. It is good for social health that the urban society adopts a greater regard for rural life as the one supporting the urban way of life.

The rural people, on their part, must rediscover the virtues and values of the age-old way of life, tried and accepted by generations. Living close to nature, deriving benefit from nature but not damaging it needlessly is the most enlightened way of living with nature. Overcoming the unreal inferiority feeling, created in the recent times, rural population must regain their self-belief, self-respect and virtues of simple living. In terms of quality of living, helping others to live well is perhaps the most fulfilling way of human existence. Social education campaigns must be designed to make a beginning with this orientation with the urban and rural communities. .

In general, policy should ensure that farming becomes sustainable and remunerative, since farming is not a dispensable national activity but an indispensable activity. This means, policy should be willing to consider doing everything necessary for the farm sector to remain productive and rewarding. Similarly, systematic efforts are to be outlined in policy to take care of the rural drop-outs, since, on one hand, they deplete the farm manpower for the farming occupation and, on the other, create a social problem in the urban centres. Further, in selecting candidates for agricultural education, certain proportion of seats are to be reserved for candidates who make a firm commitment to go back to farming after their education.

### **Special focus on farm youth, farm women**

Communities are made up of families. Families are anchored by the elderly women in the family. In the farm family, women not only hold the family together, but also support the farm operations. They play very crucial role in the upbringing of the children. Harnessing their help in the development of farm youth cannot be over emphasized. The social education efforts must encompass this resource effectively.

In the case of farm youth, during the days of community development programme, enormous emphasis was placed on the development activities. Generally, young farmers' clubs were organized by most of the Gramsevak and AEOs. The group members got opportunities to participate in improved farming practices, livestock rearing, cultural activities and leadership development. For widening their vision, they were given opportunity to take part in study tours and competitions. Youth development programme was seen as one of the most useful and appreciated activity.

It is highly desirable that this kind of human resource development is restarted as early as possible. The focus should be not only on farmers, as at present, but also on farm women and farm youth. It must be really designed as a community education activity.

### **Placing agriculture in rural education**

While all other informal opportunities of preparing rural youth for a life in farming have gone, even formal education has sidelined agriculture, in its emphasis on technical education. This has created a serious problem. It is seen that the enrollment in schools has increased, most of them being rural boys and girls. Most of them become **drop outs** before they reach pre-university level. Then, in thousands, they go back to their rural homes. Then they face the question – what to do next?

The drop-outs may entertain a feeling that now they are superior to their elders. The existing farming, with its modern elements, has not remained traditional which they can learn in the family. Further, there is no agency that could lead them to present day agriculture. Naturally, they become an easy prey to the huge urban attraction. With or without the knowledge of their elders in the family, they sneak into the stream of migrants to urban centers.

A possible remedy to this is the introduction of familiarization courses on modern agriculture in the rural education system, even in the **know how** form. When some of them finally take to farming, there will be some opportunities for them to learn the **do how** also, from the development agencies and practicing farmers. But, today, there is no such opportunity.

There is another significant reason why formal, rural education system must include agriculture. Apart from filling a big gap, it would also highlight the importance of farming and rural life. This is strategic in itself.

### **Institutional support for farm youth development**

There is a network of institutions today, engaged in serving the practicing farmers, if not the future farmers. The SAUs, and their subsidiaries all over the State, are well equipped to serve in grooming of farm youth also. So are the KVKs in every district. In addition, the development departments of agriculture, horticulture and animal husbandry have their spread of organizations. All of them could be called upon to play a role in putting agriculture on its pedestal and prepare the farm youth for rural life avocations. All this is necessary in the nation building work.

Conducting seasonal rallies for farmers, farm women and farm youth is one way of calling attention to the critical place that farming occupies in the national life. Creating occasions where big achievers in the different phases of farming -- crop production, animal husbandry, horticulture, or sericulture – who have attained better levels of performance and have served their fellow farmers are duly recognized and properly rewarded.

It should be recognized that in the preoccupation of dealing with the critical problems of the day, the planners and administrators have overlooked the events that caused the kind of down-grading that agriculture has suffered in recent times. It is time that attention is redirected to building rural life in the manner it deserves, with all the creativity.

--o0o--