Towards Sustainable Food Security in Tripura

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**Analysing ways and means to ensure sustainable food security in Tripura, the author lays emphasis on the need to give a thrust to taking advantage of the technological developments in land use planning to raise productivity per unit of land and labour. He also gives other valuable suggestions.**

Tripura’s population has reached over 32 lakhs. With a total area of 10,486 sq. kms, the state’s population density is over 304 persons per sq. km. About 57% of Tripura’s geographical area is under forest and the net sown area is approximately 280,000 Ha. which accounts for nearly 27% of the state’s geographical area. Area sown more than once is 205,000 Ha. And cropping intensity is 173% as in 2001-2002 (Economic Review 2001-2002, Directorate of Economics & Statistics Planning (Statistics) Department, Government of Tripura).

Despite many physical limitations the state government has formulated perspective plans for attaining self-sufficiency in food and fish production by 2010 and reportedly also self-sufficiency in vegetable production by 2012. The technology mission is now operating in Tripura. Since Tripura’s available arable land is very limited, the main thrust needs to be given on technological development in land-use planning for raising cropping intensity, as well as productivity per unit of land and of labour. Emphasis is being given on expansion of irrigation facilities, increased use of fertilizers and manures and adoption of pest control measures etc.

An important aspect of the agricultural scenario in Tripura is that out of a total number of 3,11,000 cultivators 52000 are jhumias (shifting cultivators). Also there are 2,76,000 agricultural labourers in this state (vide speech delivered by Bhanu Lal Saha, chairman, Apex Cooperative, in the agricultural fair held on 28th January, 2005 at Bishalgarh, published in Dainik Sambad, Agartala, dated 28.01.05).

Tripura’s topography is hilly and there exist innumerable *tilas* (mounds) and *lungas* (valleys. Therefore land-use planning has to be tailored to the nature of slopes of land. Sri Saha has stated that 2,04,200 Ha of land having the slope ranging from 0 to 5% is under paddy cultivation. Land having the slope between 5 and 10% measures 2,14,900 Ha where vegetable is grown. Orchards cover 70,000 Ha having slope between 15 and 20%. It is also estimated that plantation crops may be raised in an area of 1,60,000 Ha with slopes ranging between 20 and 30%. Land having over 30% slope is suitable for forest and bamboo plantation. At present Tripura imports rice valued at Rs. 150 crores, eggs of Rs. 10 crores and fish of Rs. 60 crores (Saha,ibid). Therefore achievement of self-sufficiency in food and fish production is so important for Tripura.

**Improved jhum cultivation**

Tripura’s agricultural development cannot bypass or neglect the needs of the 52 thousand jhumias. Despite the implementation of jhumia rehabilitation schemes under plan after plan, many tribal households are still dependent on jhum cultivation for their livelihood. It is a way of life with them. And in recent times the social scientists, agronomists, anthropologists and NGOs have been realizing the fact that there is some inner sustainability of the system which is related to their age-old practice of growing crops in the hill slope. Moreover, in Tripura there is the most crucial factor of non-availability of enough land for resettlement of the jhumias in plainsland cultivation. Therefore, improvements in the system of jhum cultivation in hill slopes need to be carried out without causing soil erosion if the goal of self-sufficiency in food production is to be reached. The government has adopted the scheme of helping the jhumias to practise improved method of jhum cultivation to increase the net return earned by producing jhum crops. This scheme was given an added thrust in 2001-2002 when 4,479 jhumia families were assisted under this scheme. According to the Economic Review 2001-2002, average productivity of jhum rice increased from 600 kg to 1000 kg per Ha. (page 56)
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Rice is the most important staple food in the state and its total production increased from a little over 547,527 mt. in 2000-2001 to 5,87,377 mt. in 2001-2002 (Economic Review, P - 52). It would be quite feasible to push up the production of rice and also wheat and other food crops so that Tripura should be able to attain self-sufficiency in food production on the basis of the average requirement of consumption of food allowing for the estimated growth of population. But what is important to note is that such achievement of self-sufficiency in food production will not automatically ensure food security for the people of Tripura on a sustainable basis. In the National Food Security Summit held in New Delhi in February 2004 the President of India, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, addressing the valedictory function of the summit, pointed out that food security could be studied from three different viewpoints: “First, availability of food, which depends upon production and distribution; second, access to food that is guided by purchasing power and third, food absorption. Food absorption implies being able to assimilate the food consumed in order to live a healthy and long life. This can come about with good sanitation facilities and better healthcare infrastructure” (Towards Sustainable Food Security, published by M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai, P. 7). He has emphasized the need for launching the second green revolution to achieve enhanced production and distribution. This revolution should be characterized by having “the farmers in focus, farming technology as the friend, food processing and marketing as partners and the consumers as the angels to be satisfied”. In the President’s vision the technological challenge to be faced is “development of seeds that would ensure good yield even under constrains of water and land with ecologically balanced farming” (P. 7).

In Tripura’s topographical situation, problems of annually recurring floods and soil erosion need to be addressed by the Technology Mission. For ensuring water availability for agricultural production as well as for meeting needs of human consumption, particularly in the dry season, rainwater harvesting and tapping of underground water sources, suitable technology must be developed as also that for utilization of renewable energy sources. Adequate care must be taken in the use of bio-fertilizers for maintaining sustainability of soil fertility. Another urgent need is to conserve bio-diversity in Tripura and to utilize the indigenous knowledge about medicinal plants and herbs. Since the Technology Mission is working in Tripura, it should be possible to meet the technological challenges that Tripura has been facing.

83% of total population of Tripura, including 66.81 BPL families, live in rural area. For guaranteeing these families access to food their incomes have to be raised by providing self-employment opportunities and guaranteeing employment at least for 100 days in a year. The public distribution system also will have to be strengthened for delivering the projected benefits to the needy families. Enhancement of food absorption capacity of the members of BPL families will depend on the availability of safe drinking water and health care services besides clean environment and good sanitation in every village. Perspective plan for development of the forestry sector has to be oriented to meet the environmental needs as well as the needs of fuel and inputs for cottage industries etc.

Conclusion

Successful implementation of the perspective plans for achieving self-sufficiency in food and fish production, development of horticulture, animal resources and forestry sector will move Tripura forward on the path of economic growth. Yet the main thrust of planning must not miss the distributive aspects of produced goods and services so that the common people become gainers without which poverty cannot be banished from Tripura. It should be possible to guarantee availability of food by implementing food for work, employment guarantee, healthcare guarantee etc. programmes for the poor. For maintaining transparency in the execution of such social safety net programmes every household may be issued an entitlement pass book giving information about how such government’s programmes can be accessed, as opined by MS. Swaminathan in the all-India context (MSSRF, Towards Sustainable Food Security, P.3).

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