

Farmer's Woes -Empty Promises - Elusive Slogans

The NDA government headed by Narendra Modi has been parroting that it is taking all measures to double the income of farmers by 2022. Yet the peasants are not getting the minimum support price, which in practice became maximum selling price. Almost all the budgetary support to peasants has been withdrawn and they are left to the vagaries of weather unprotected. They landed in a debt trap and are committing suicides. This pathetic condition is due the implementation of anti-peasant policies by the successive governments. While making tall promises of turning agriculture into prosperous activity by ensuring world market prices to the agricultural prices, the government has been taking steps that depress the prices. Take the case of edible oils.

India used to import edible oils less than 100,000 tonnes – less than 5 per cent of domestic consumption during 1970s. These imports rose to 1.5 million tones in 1980 and further surged to 2 million tones in 1988. The import bill of edible oils stood second to that of crude oil. The government implemented Technical Mission for Oilseeds to augment the domestic production, which involved support to oil seed cultivation, infusing processing technology and creating remunerative price to oil seeds with financial support at every stage. Imports are regulated through taxation and canalization. Within a short period of six years, the domestic production increased by 78 per cent from 11.3 million to 2 million tones and imports came down to 0.1 million in 1992-93.

Then came neoliberal economic policies dictated by the imperialist monsters followed by the agreement of World Trade Organisation. Duty rates on the import of palm oil were slashed from 65 per cent in 1994 to 25 per cent in 1997 and to 15 per cent in the next year. As cheap palm oil imports flooded, domestic production suffered and never recovered since then. The traditional oilseed cultivation plummeted, peasants faced heavy losses and hundreds of small scale oil extracting industries closed their shops.

India has now become the largest importer of edible oils in the world with annual imports exceeding 15 million tonnes valued at more the Rs. 650 billion. These imports consisted largely of palm oil, a perennial plantation crop. Palm oil plantations in Malaysia are owned US multinational like Bunge and India became captive market for them.

Palm oil was neither a part of Indian production nor consumption till 1970. The share of palm oil in domestic edible oil consumption has increased from 2 per cent to 50 per cent in 22 years. As a result, millions of Indian peasants cultivating oil seeds on 26 million hectares are facing severe economic problems. As most of them are dry land farmers and lacks irrigation facilities, they have no alternative than growing oilseeds.

Even though past experience showed that Indian peasants can achieve self sufficiency in oil seed production, the government is continuing with the policy of promoting import of palm oil to the detriment of Indian peasants and the health of Indians. It is only benefiting foreign MNCs.

The government is not taking any steps to provide irrigation, extension services and financial support to the peasants on the specious plea that agricultural subsidies became a burden on the economy and Indian peasants are inefficient in cultivation.

Can anyone expect from such a government those measures that double the income of peasants? Such an illusion amounts depending on mirage to quench ones thirst.
