

NEEDED: A SEPARATE BUDGET FOR THE FARM SECTOR

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A recent survey informs us that 40% of the practicing farmers want to quit farming in India. Though disconcerting, this fact does not surprise some of us who observe the sector keenly. While the current generation of farmers is seeking to move out of farming, the younger ones are unwilling to step in, because they consider farming to be an unproductive and unremunerative drudgery. Though the factors contributing to this situation are complex and varied, and the sum of consequences is difficult to predict in the short-term, I think a long-term public policy response is necessary, given the imminent and impending agrarian distress in our state.

The importance of the primary sector to the state need not be overstated, given the fact that direct and indirect dependence of our population on the primary sector is as high as 80%. Our food security situation is fragile as it is – Meghalaya's current food grain production can meet only 30% of our consumption requirement, while the rest is met either through imports from Andhra Pradesh or Tamil Nādu, or the PDS. How long can we depend upon other states for our own food is a question that remains unexplored. The urbanization process in India being so rapid, conversion of agricultural land into non-agricultural purposes is almost the norm in most parts of the country. Data indicate that India's cultivable land declined by

7,90,000 hectares between 2007-08 and 2010-11 – that is a third of the land area of Meghalaya. In other words, the country is losing agricultural land almost the size of Meghalaya every decade. Loss of agricultural land is a major factor behind food insecurity because it will reduce both food and employment. So, we need to shed some of our complacency that the country will be able to bail us out indefinitely. A contented soul, as someone observed, is a stagnant soul. If we lose the current skilled manpower, with no new entrants, the already fragile food security of the state will be further disrupted. So, it is in this background that I suggest that the Government should henceforth start the process of presenting a Farm Budget to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly annually.

Though the department of Agriculture was re-named as the 'Department of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare' in 2018, not a single farmer welfare scheme has been formulated or sanctioned by the department, yet. A separate budget for the farm sector perforce necessitates a farmer-centric approach and thereby, faith of the farming community on the government will be reinforced. The long-pending issues plaguing the sector viz., irrigation for the winter crop, appropriate technology development and induction, post-harvest management, regulating the exploitative markets, and emerging issues such as the changing climate, sustainable farming, depleting natural resources, FPOs, FPCs, natural farming etc. can all be addressed with greater precision and urgency. It is no longer going to be a business-as-usual approach. Three progressive states of the country viz., Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have already started presenting Farm Budgets. The tradition of having an exclusive budget for agriculture was started by Karnataka in 2011-12, followed by Andhra Pradesh in 2013-14, and Tamil Nadu in 2021-22. Andhra Pradesh is being seen as a success story because the GVA (Gross Value Added) by Agriculture has gone up by 52 per cent from Rs 52,569 crore in 2012-13 to Rs 79,980 crore in 2018-19, much more than the sector's contribution at the national level. I see several additional advantages in introducing annual farm budgets in the Legislative Assembly, some of which I list here below:

1. To begin with, a separate farm budget will mean that the government is keen to enhance public investments in agriculture and allied sectors and thereby, commits to boost the growth rate of our state's primary sector which is and will continue to be our mainstay for several more decades.
2. A Farm Budget, being farmer-centric will break the bureaucratic silos. It will be a unified and need-based budgetary exercise to cover agriculture, animal husbandry, water resources, fisheries, dairying, agriculture credit, cooperation, agro-enterprises, food processing, agricultural markets, organic agriculture, etc. The bureaucracy too will be required to brace itself to the changed circumstances. The position of the Agriculture Production Commissioner would need to be revived and empowered sufficiently so that the entire farm budgetary process is well-coordinated among the departments. Such a sectoral planning exercise will be sharper and coherent, the programmatic interventions will be better conceptualized, and the wasteful and unproductive allocations will be weeded out.
3. Both the government and the legislators will get a holistic picture about the progress or otherwise, of the primary sector. Undeniably, the current system is opaque, disjointed, and incomprehensible, to most people, to say the least. A separate farm budgetary exercise will enable the legislators to get sufficient time to discuss the sector's concerns and examine the demands with greater attention.

4. The delivery system at the technical level will become far more accountable, agricultural credit and insurance will have been streamlined, the uncertainties of agriculture will be offset, and the efficiencies that result through better utilization of the public funds will enhance the overall productivity of the sector.
5. And, in the long run, Annual Farm Budgets will pave the way for holistic farmer-centric policies. A separate farm budget will not impose any additional burden on the exchequer, it will just ensure that the exercise is focussed, concerted, and better coordinated, with greater clarity and understanding of the complexities of the sector.
6. Though agriculture and agricultural research, Fisheries, Animal Husbandry, & Dairying are all state subjects in our Constitution, historically the Government of India invested far more money in these sectors than our state. This skew in our prioritizations must go.
7. Studies indicate that agricultural research gives the best Return on Investment (ROI). In a recently published book 'Supporting Indian Farms the Smart Way' it was brought out that every rupee spent on agricultural research and development, returns Rs. 11.2, while the same money spent on education returns Rs.0.97 and Roads (Rs.1.10). As a state, we hardly invest in agricultural research. I cannot recall many meaningful state research outcomes that reached the farmers over the last several decades that I have worked in the state. It is certainly not because we lack competent manpower, for I know that there are a few Ph.D. holders in the Department, who could have been productively deployed in the Research divisions of the Directorate of Research, Training and Technology Induction (RTTI) but they are not. If we were to achieve any quantum leaps in the primary sector, we will need to create new institutions and new approaches. We depend upon the ICAR because we do not have any state-specific research institution which is a serious opportunity loss. Fifty years of statehood, and not even an Institute for Research in Primary Sector. A separate farm budget will lead us to think in this direction.

A Farm Budget, if presented for the Financial Year 2022-23, will become a benchmark event in the developmental history of the state and will have the effect of transforming the state's primary sector. When done, Meghalaya will be the first state in the northeastern region to attempt such an exercise. Such a budget would allow greater stakeholder consultation between farmers, and the Government, and it will be a paradigm shift. I urge the citizens, intelligentsia, legislators as well as the government to consider this suggestion seriously for the overall growth of our state.

(The writer is Chairman, Meghalaya Farmers' (Empowerment) Commission.)