

Rainfed Agriculture and Tribal Communities in Central Indian Tribal Belt

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Background : In India, more than 60 per cent of arable land is rainfed where natural resources such as land, vegetation, water are degraded and not able to meet the demand for sustaining livelihoods of rural poor. As a consequence, productivity of agricultural lands is quite low and current farmers' yields are lower by 2 to 3 folds than what can be achieved in researcher managed plots and by commercial farmers. There is an urgent need to develop and manage available natural resources such as water and land for harnessing their full potential to sustain improved livelihoods in rainfed areas. Rainfed regions are those where crop production is exclusively dependent upon rainfall. In India rainfed regions cover 177 districts and exist in all agro-climatic zones. However, they are mostly concentrated in arid and semi-arid areas. Most of these districts are country's poorest. Rainfed regions account for 68 per cent of the total net sown area in the country, according to the Union Ministry of Agriculture. Though rainfed areas contribute in a major way to India's agriculture, the difference between the output of rainfed and irrigated areas is remarkable. This is cited as a major reason for increasing regional disparity in India.

As opportunities for further agricultural growth in irrigated regions get exhausted, food security and productivity growth in agriculture in India in the coming years will increasingly depend on improved utilisation of natural, human, financial and material resources and productivity growth in rainfed regions.

Central Indian Tribal Belt: The central Indian tribal belt, stretching from Purulia – Bankura in West Bengal to Banswara - Dungarpur in South Rajasthan is the home for about 80% tribal communities. This belt is the typical rainfed area, with the maximum issues and problems pertaining to subsistence agriculture, very poor irrigation infrastructure, dismal extension services and awareness among the tribal communities. Though the region is rich in natural resources, the geography, fragile environment and the low awareness levels of the tribal community has always pushed them in issues of food insecurity, malnutrition, migration, etc. Rainfed areas and central Indian tribal belt are synonymous to each other, as the main concentration and maximum area of rainfed dryland agriculture fall in the central Indian region, known as the "poverty belt" of India.

Central India Initiative: The Central India Initiative of the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, is an initiative promoted towards enhancing tribal livelihoods through Natural Resource Management based approach. The research undertaken by the Trust through the IWMI-Tata Programme, highlighted the key issues of land and water development and management (for more information www.srftt.org or www.cinicell.org). Under the Central India Initiative, the Trust has supported about 25 field projects in the region, which focus on various livelihood interventions such as: (i) improved agriculture promotion focusing on Kharif Paddy Stabilization and Kharif Maize Stabilization along with crop diversification; (ii) water resource development; (iii) allied livelihood interventions such as dairy, poultry, goatery, etc; (iv) forest livelihood interventions such as lac, tamarind, tassar, etc; and (v) promoting and strengthening community based organizations.

The Trust is keen in promoting various livelihood models, which helps in ensuring year round food security of the tribal communities and enhancing their income base. Towards this, the focus on market is being critically looked upon and the thought process of initiating livelihood interventions has been linked to market development. The Trust has specific plans to work in this rainfed region and dovetail the efforts with the major government and donor programmes. The Trust by 2011-12 has plans to put in about Rs. 45 Crores under the Central India Initiative with focus on improving the rainfed agriculture through technical and capacity building inputs for the tribal communities. The key focus is towards promoting land and water conservation and management. Integrated Natural Resource Management is the approach being looked upon for resource conservation and utilization along with looking for integrated farming system dovetailing livestock-agriculture in an integrated manner.

Apart from the focused approach of improving rainfed agriculture in central India, the Trust is presently involved in working on overcoming the agrarian distress in suicide regions of Vidharbha. The Trust is working closely with Government of Maharashtra and IFAD towards initiating a project on Convergence of Agriculture in Maharashtra.

Collectives for Integrated Livelihood Initiatives (CInI): CInI is an organization being promoted with the generous support of the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, with the key objective of strengthening the Central India Initiative and ensuring quality sectoral engagement of different stakeholders to promote better livelihoods for tribal communities. CInI is playing the role of resource organization to all the field partners in terms of providing technical support and ensuring quality implementation. The thematic areas identified by CInI to focus in the coming years are: (i) Kharif Paddy Stabilization; (ii) Kharif Maize Stabilization; (iii) Non Timber Forest Produce; (iv) Diversion based Irrigation; (v) Microfinance and Livelihoods; and (vi) Promoting and strengthening Community based Organizations.

CInI is looking towards working closely with different stakeholders towards ensuring long term committed field programmes for the rainfed areas towards enhancing tribal livelihoods.

Government of India programme: Rainfed Farming is complex, diverse and risk prone and is characterised by low levels of productivity and low input uses. The Government of India has accorded high priority to the holistic and sustainable development of rainfed areas through integrated watershed development approach. The key attributes of the watershed approach are conservation of rain water and optimisation of soil and water resources in a sustainable and cost-effective mode. Improved moisture management increases the productivity of improved seeds and fertiliser. So conservation and productivity enhancing measures become complementary.

A National Watershed Development Project for Rainfed Area (NWDPR) was launched in 1990-91 in 25 states and two UTs. The project was continued during Tenth Five Year Plan in 28 states inclusive of three newly created States and two UTs with the purpose of increasing agriculture productivity and production in rainfed areas. The guidelines for NWDPR have been radically restructured by retaining the technical strength and incorporating community participation. The watershed development programme is now planned, implemented, monitored and maintained by watershed communities. During Ninth plan, an area of 27.66 lakh ha has been treated. Now the scheme of NWDPR has been subsumed within the Macro Management of Agriculture scheme. The scheme is being continued for implementation during Tenth plan under the revised guidelines, with people's participation, covering more than 6000 micro-watersheds. It is estimated that an area of about 20 lakh ha would be developed during Tenth plan. In the first four years of Tenth Plan, an area of 1.59 million hectares has been developed at an expenditure of Rs. 793.82 crore.

http://india.gov.in/sectors/agriculture/rainfed_farming.php

A Watershed Development Fund (WDF) has been established at NABARD with the objective of integrated watershed development in 100 priority districts of 18 States through participatory approach. The total corpus of WDF is Rs 200 crore. Under WDF, two-thirds of amount is given for loan based project and one-third of amount is given for grant based project in the State. A number of externally aided projects are also under implementation on watershed approach, which covers an area of about 1.5 lakh hectares annually. All these programmes are being implemented in the central Indian tribal belt. However, there are critical issues in terms of governance and quality of implementation as is common in different government programmes. The field implementation of these programmes is not in good shape and most of them have not even reached 25% of the expectation. There is a strong need for the government to work with different stakeholders such as NGOs, research institutions and other donors towards a comprehensive approach of looking at the rainfed areas and resolving the issues of low agricultural production and unavailability of irrigation resources. The recent common guidelines had a plan to initiate a field pilot of dovetailing watershed programme with improving rainfed agriculture. Such models or demonstrations need large scale applicability and replications to ensure that the mainstream funds from government go in right direction. The NREGA has a good scope of improving the rainfed areas through a strong planning and implementation under the watershed development approach. Such models need to be developed and demonstrated for highlighting the impact on tribal and rural households.