A success story in parched Bundelkhand

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Prem Singh believes that "sustainable farming" can pave the way for policy change. Photo: Rajeev Bhatt

Prem Singh's farm has plenty of water, fruit-bearing trees, and organic products

In the parched, brown landscape of Uttar Pradesh’s Bundelkhand region, where hundreds of distressed farmers have taken their lives in the past few decades or have been forced to migrate, Prem Singh’s farm is an exception.

In the fabulous green farm, there is plenty for everyone: abundance of water-bodies for animals to drink from, many fruit-bearing trees, a steady produce of organic products, healthy cattle, well-nourished soil and natural fertilizers and, importantly, a steady flow of income. The 32 bighas of land that Mr. Singh shares with his three brothers also boasts of a one-of-a-kind rural museum, the Humane Agrarian Centre. A farmer-activist based in Banda’s Badokhar Khurd village, Mr. Singh believes that his experiment with “sustainable and traditional farming” could be replicated at a larger level, and could pave the way for a policy change.

“The idea is to ensure the prosperity of the farmer’s family, ecological balance and food security of the country.”

He calls his pioneering method of sustainable farming ‘Aavartansheel Kheti.’ Loosely translated, as per a book he co-authored with Belgium environmentalist Johan D’Hulster, it means ‘periodic proportionate farming.’

Key elements of this approach are crop rotation, organic farming, animal husbandry, food processing, planting and research for improving soil fertility and seed development. The essence is to minimise the farmers’ reliance on the market while improving their standard of living.

The farmer would have to utilise his farm by dividing it into three parts: one-third would be used for rearing fruits and crops, the other for growing timber and the remaining portion for animal husbandry. Mr. Singh’s multi-pronged technique, pioneered and implemented by him for over a decade, is similar to the idea of farming Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been propagating in his addresses to farmers.

The farmer, known in the area as “pragatisheel” or progressive, advises farmers to not directly trade their produce in the market but to sell the processed extracts. For instance, sell paneer but not milk, and so on. “That will link the farm to the kitchen. And also give the customers a better quality and nutritious product,” said Mr. Singh. Some of the popular products at his farm are amla pickle and candy, cow ghee, mustard oil, organic rice and flour (wheat, gram, and barley). Asked whether it was practical for small farmers, Mr. Singh said, “yes,” with certain adaptations and adjustments.

Born in 1964 into a farming background, Mr. Singh studied philosophy in Allahabad University but soon turned to his ancestral vocation. In 1995, he adopted a traditional method of farming, triggered by his dismay at the “negative impact” of the Green Revolution.

He says the Green Revolution and other policies played a big role in dismantling the traditional structure of farming and pushed the farmer to the mercy of unsustainable methods, which also harmed environment. Mr. Singh links it to the present crisis, where three consecutive droughts, with bouts of unseasonal rains and hailstorm, have devastated the morale of the Bundelkhand farmer.

“The outside knowhow of some experts was forced upon farmers. Till 1980, not a single bag of urea was purchased in Bundelkhand. But due to the government’s policies, farmers were forced to abort traditional and more sustainable methods, eventually leading them into debt-traps,” Mr. Singh said. “Every time a farmer commits suicide, the government says he was burdened by debt. What is the key reason for the debt? The farmers are dying because they follow the schemes of the government. This is the real injustice.”

Droughts are not new to Bundelkhand. As per records, in the last century it witnessed 17 major droughts, 10 of them caused by deficient rainfall. But the traditional water-recharging methods, numerous ponds, and natural harvesting techniques of people then mitigated the scarcity. The steps taken by the government in the last three decades have nullified the work of the ancestors, Mr. Singh said.

“The crops grown then did not require much water. With the Green Revolution, underground water began to be extracted heavily to sustain the thirst of the seeds. The local seeds were tested and adapted to fight drought. But the seeds introduced by the government needed excess water and urea to grow. Tractors further increased the costs,” Mr. Singh said.

At the centre of it all, said Mr. Singh, was the ruling class’ apathy towards farmers, manifested in their lack of representation in policy formation. The farming sector was bearing the brunt of their mistakes and excesses of the industrial and service sectors.

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