

# Is the farming sector really doing well?



*The agricultural sector has its share of problems related to climate change, escalating input costs, and diminishing subsidies. BE's Isha Chakraborty spoke to Sampad Ranjan Patra, Director of Agriculture & Ex-officio Secretary, Agriculture Department, Government of West Bengal, about this.*

◀ Sampad Ranjan Patra

## **Q. What is the current situation of the agricultural sector?**

A. It is better now. Earlier, it was tough for the farmers to sell their produce since the agricultural sector in West Bengal is overtly associated with paddy cultivation. If farmers are unable to sell their produce, which is mostly paddy in our state, there is bound to be agrarian distress. But now, they can sell rice above their Minimum Support Price (MSP) and productivity has also increased highly. Mechanisation has pulled down the cost of farming over the years and farmers are getting good prices for their produce.

## **Q. Mechanisation is a growing feature of farming. But every farmer is not able to purchase the needed equipment at one go. What are your thoughts on this?**

A) Most of the farmers are small and marginal farmers whose average holding size is 0.77 hectares. This means that farmers don't have to purchase big machinery. But in the long run, big machinery is necessary and thus, we have introduced custom hiring centres in different places. These centres can provide the farmers with tractors, combined harvesters, and other costly equipment on rent.

## **Q. Are high yielding variety (HYV) seeds and seed banks helping farmers?**

A. Private companies have introduced new varieties of HYV seeds. Additionally, the government is also producing good quantity seeds. The government is also working with the West Bengal Seed Corporation and undertaken various measures to ensure better quality seeds. In the case of rice, we are mainly

using the OPI variety and not the hybrid variety of seeds since the hybrid variety needs to be replaced every year whereas the OPI variety runs for longer years. By using the OPI seeds, the seed replacement ratio reduces by 30% which in turn reduces input costs.

## **Q. What all can affect seed quality?**

A. With the humidity level in our country, it is difficult to actually maintain the balance needed for different seeds. But then it is relatively easy for rice whereas it is difficult for pulses. We have conditional go downs where we are storing our produce along with different cold storages. But in order to maintain the quality of the seeds, the quality of the storage or warehouses has to be improved as well.

## **Q. What are your views on crop insurance?**

A. Crop insurance is a very good programme. It is needed as farmers are taking risks and also because of the rapidly changing climate patterns that often imperil farming. The insurance programme is already going on but not all farmers are registered yet. There is scope for expansion. The government is collaborating with different insurance providers for working out innovative crop insurance programmes.

## **Q. Has demonetisation adversely affected the sector?**

A. Yes, it has definitely affected the sector but the impact quantification has not been done. Demonetisation was initiated in November, 2016, and it was the peak season for cultivation of potato and other rudy crops. So, the cultivation of these crops did suffer a major set-back. ■