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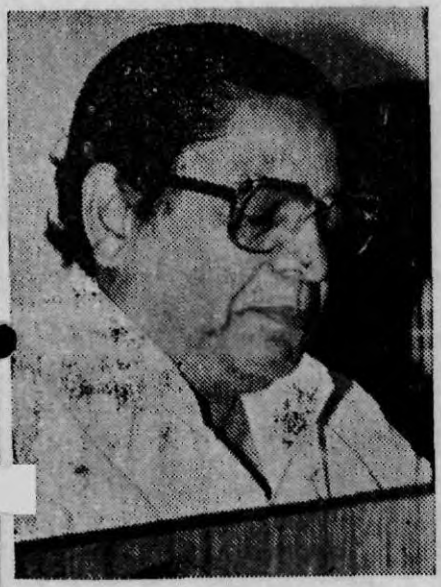

Need based Research and its Relevance

PJ THOMAS

I am indeed previleged to be present here this morning, in the midst of a galaxy of eminent agricultural scientists drawn from different disciplines of crop science and share some of my thoughts. I am neither a scientist nor an academician,

The attempts for need-based research on crop production techniques and processing aspects assume great relevance. The wide gap in communication that exists between the farmer in the field and the researcher in the lab has often imposed constraints in drawing up problem-oriented research programme directed towards adoption and adaptability. Shri PJ Thomas, Chairman, Rubber Board desires that the benefit of experience of the farming community should be availed of while drawing up projects for research. He was inaugurating the PLACROSYM VI at Hotel Aida, Kottayam on 17 December 1984. Following is the full text of his speech.

but one who has had the good fortune to acquire a certain degree of physical acquaintenance with the social, political and economic prospects and problems of plantation crops in general. Hailing from a traditional farm family of Central Travancore, the plantation crops best known to me are rubber, coconut, cocoa and pepper. My native district of Pathanamthitta grows almost all the crops represented by the Indian Society of Plantation Crops. Incidentally I may also recall in this connection that I had been the President of the Kerala State Karshaka Congress for a couple of years. This forum represents the farmer's organisation of the Indian National Congress. Therefore, I could legitimately claim a reasonable level of intimacy with all the crops you are deliberating upon.

In all the 5 Symposia held previously, I presume that you would have discussed ways and means of intensifying and co-ordinating result oriented research programmes aimed at better productivity from plantations. I am inclined to draw the inference that at this sixth PLACROSYM you would take stock of your past performance and try to rectify areas of deficiency. This would be necessary, because the scientists who have assembled here should be able to get back duly enlightened and guided on the course of action they should pursue to achieve the laid out objectives.

Though plantation crops occupy only 1 per cent of the total arable area in our country, they account for about 10 per cent of the export income. Again, out of the total earnings from agricultural exports about 80 per cent is shared by plantation crops. While almost all the plantation crops are in-exportable surplus only rubber and coconut continue to be deficient commodities.

Impressive performance

The fact that certain vital plantation crops like coconut and cardamom suffered severe set backs in recent years, despite the technological advances, should be of great concern to researchers, as much as it is to the economists in Government. Quite a few crops like rubber have performed impressively well over the years. Coffee and tea also have had unpredictable ups and downs. Cocoa faced the worst crisis due to reasons well known.

Whatever is said and done, the victim of all these natural and man-made hazards is the farmer. Unless we are able to repose confidence in the minds of the farmers on the long-term prospects and profitability of the respective agricultural enterprises they are involved in, we may not be able to register the rate of growth projected.

In this context attempts at need-based research on crop production techniques and processing aspects assume great relevance and significance. The wide gap in communication that exists between the farmer in the field and the researcher in the lab has often imposed constraints in drawing up problem-oriented research programme directed towards adoption and adaptability. A cost conscious farmer always looks for technological innovation of ease in application, May be the technology is there;

but is it accessible to him? Often it is not, because of the lack of a viable system of dissemination.

Research for farmers

I have had the good fortune of visiting many National and international crop research centres of standing. These centres have a creditable record in evolving appropriate technology; but what happens is that the technologies so developed are released to the farmers either too slow or not released at all. Researchers often sit relaxed with a feeling that their responsibility ceases with the evolution of the technology. Such precious knowledge, keeps confined to the files in the shelf with no chances of an outlet.

In situations of this nature, I would go to the extent of suggesting that the reseachers should shoulder the responsibility of communicating such treasured know-how to the prospective beneficiaries even before the proper disseminating agency comes to them. The researchers should acquire skills in communication and try to interact with farmers.

The benefit of experience of the farming community should be availed of while drawing up projects for research. Researchers should constantly be in touch with farmers for which a convenient system of rapport will have to be constituted.

Farmers should be encouraged to visit research centres and see for themselves the type of activities going on there. At the Rubber Research Institute of India, we have regular programme to conduct farmers, who come in teams and spend a fullday in the campus interacting with our scientific personnel.

This programme is immensely popular. It has helped not only to enhance the credibility of of the institute among its clients, but also to identify the felt needs of the farmers. Those of the farmers who volunteer to visit the Institute are generally innovators and the Institute finds it easy to spread new technology through them.

Based on experience I feel that Crop Research Centres would do well if they encourage farmers to visit them as frequently as possible, so that the feeling in the minds of farmers that research centres are ivory towers could be totally allayed.

Researchers also should be mentally prepared to shed their arm-chair attitude and white-collar culture and adopt a bare-foot style, so that they win the confidence and affection of the farmers.

I was told that Dr. Bavappa made a brilliant speech yesterday while addressing the General Body Meeting of the Indian Society of Plantation Crops. I am sorry that I missed it. I learn that he had very emphatically exhorted the scientists in plantation crops research the need for developing "low-cost and no-cost technologies. I hasten to record my deep appreciation to the timely call made by Dr. Bavappa.

Cost saving

The predominance and proliferation of petty and marginal holdings in the plantation industry in our country has necessitated the evolution of cost-saving techniques. More so, in the context of escalating costs of inputs and labour. Proper blending of the package of practices and vigorous exploitation of natural resources for energy and nutrient requirements of the plantation crops should also be attempted alongside.

Yet another aspect that should engage the immediate attention of scientific personal and research administrators is the possibility to explore cost reduction in research oriented ventures. The craze for importing sophisticated and expensive apparatus from developed countries is on the increase among our young scientists, while in our own country the fabricatlon of such equipments at comparatively cheaper costs should not be difficult. Being a developing economy, it would be worthwhile to have designs of research envisaged to suit resource constraints.

I was only trying to think a little louder in this august assembly of intellectuals. If we are to keep up our monopoly in certain plantation crops, well, we have to be competitive in cost, quality, efficiency and productivity. The largest single advantage with the plantation industry is that it is immensely labour intensive. As we are endowed with such massive and skilled manpower, our plantations can offer assured employment to a portion of them. To that extent the already grave social malady of unemployment could be offset.

The very large attendance in this symposium bears testimony to the fact that the Indian Society of Plantation Crops is an active organisation. I would appeal to you to keep up the high standards and quality of work you have been maintaining. The planting community looks up to you as their friends, philosophers and guides. I hope you would live up to their expectations and fulfil your social obligations towards them. I believe that this is the best course to be conscious of one's social accountability.

Well, friends, I find that you ha' a pretty long agenda before you. I wish all success to your deliberations. I think my collegues have tried the best to make your stay comfortable here. Of course, there are limitations, I hope you will put up.

With these few words I declare the PLACROSYM-VI open.