Strengths of the traditional system

By Bharat Dogra

IN RAJASTHAN’S desert region, the traditional cropping pattern has been mainly based on bajra, moong, moth, til and gwar. These provide essentials of a balanced diet including cereals, legumes and oil seeds. Mixed cropping of cereals and legumes ensures that soil fertility is maintained. These cropping patterns, particularly traditional varieties of these crops, provide substantial good quality fodder relished by farm animals.

Traditional varieties provide food, which is relished by local people and is suitable to local climatic conditions. A baji rice roti, for example, has much better keeping qualities than wheat roti. These crops supported by green vegetables obtained from farm trees and milk products can provide a well-balanced nutrition. Above all, this cropping pattern needs relatively less water and traditional drought resistant varieties are available.

Any suggested change in crops and crop varieties should keep in view these essential strengths of the traditional cropping pattern and traditional varieties. Unfortunately changes in cropping pattern have been introduced or recommended without any understanding of the food security provided by the traditional cropping pattern varieties selected over the years by many generations of desert farmers. The contribution of any crop to human, animal and soil nutrition, its water requirement and its place in the mixed cropping system has to be carefully examined before its intro...

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duction. The special conditions of desert farming in which a lot of value is attached to food and fodder trees/shrubs standing in the field (such as khejari, ber, phog, pelu etc.) should be kept in mind. New agricultural techniques mainly the use of tractor has gravely harmed this valuable sources of human and animal nutrition, apart from displacing camels and bullocks from ploughing. It has been generally seen that wherever tractors have been introduced, there is a big decline in these valuable vegetation, which earlier grew without any effort and provided relief even in the worst drought years.

While several officials point to the spread of exotic species of trees like prosopis juliflora as an achievement, villagers and social activists regard it as harmful for local environment. According to a recent paper on food security in this desert region by the Desert Forum, Jodhpur, “The presence of Juliflora inhibits the growth of other native species and ground water under it and around it.” It is an example of policies alienated from people thatcrofters of rupees are spent on propagating tree species seen as harmful by a lot of people, while the most valuable fodder and food trees/bushes are harmed by government supported policies. While perhaps the greatest need is for reviving the ‘orans’ (village sacred forests) and ‘gohars’ (village pastures), government policies, which emphasise exotic trees that can harm indigenous vegetation, are more of a hindrance than help.

‘Orans’ are a beautiful example of how villagers have woven the responsibility of protecting trees into their cultural fibre. In this system a significant area of land is dedicated to a god, a goddess or legendary hero and it becomes the sacred duty of all villagers to protect trees in this area. The trees preserved in this way prove to be an invaluable source of fodder particularly in years of severe droughts when they can save the lives of a large number of animals.

A survey by the Nehru Yuvak Kendra, Barmer, in collaboration with the district administration and Gandhi Peace Foundation, Delhi, revealed that the tradition of Orans exists in 462 villages out of 1578 villages surveyed in Barmer district. However, due to various factors this has decayed in recent decades and orans now support only a small part of their potential greenery. Alongside a lot of invaluable medicinal plants have been lost.

Protection/revival of orans and gohars should be a main priority for cooperation between the village communities and administration.

Thar region has perhaps the richest tradition of cattle breeding in India, which led to outstanding traditional breeds like Tharparkar. It is tragic that while the excellent traditional breeds have been allowed to decay for lack of proper care, the government has instead spent its resources on cross-breed technology.

However, voluntary organisations like the Society for Upliftment of Rural Economy (SURE) deserve credit for keeping their priorities clear and working ceaselessly for protecting traditional breeds like Tharparkar.

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