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'Reverse migration helped in keeping agriculture sector afloat'

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MADURAI

G.R. Chintala, Chairman, National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), discussed the challenges and opportunities for the agricultural sector and rural economy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Excerpts from the interview:

Question: What were the major challenges faced by the agricultural sector during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Reply: When the nationwide lockdown was announced, the rabi harvest was taking place across the country.

At a time when everyone was wondering how agricultural activities would continue, the Central government announced several relaxations for the agricultural sector. Every grain that was produced in the country was procured by the government during the pandemic.

Another presumption was

that new agricultural activities would not start during the pandemic, which turned out to be wrong. There was a mass reverse migration of workers to villages during the pandemic and all these workers took to agriculture, increasing agricultural operations across the country. With the southwest monsoon almost coming to an end, we are expecting a bumper harvest. So, crossing 300 million tonnes of food grains is not going to be a big challenge.

During the pandemic, the Union government ensured that credit was accessible to farmers. The Agriculture Infrastructure Fund announced by the government has created enormous opportunities for improving the economy. All these measures ensured that agriculture and allied activities were not affected during the pandemic.

Q: What will be the focus

areas to revive the livelihood of thousands of workers who have reverse migrated to their villages?

R: A lot of people hailing from States such as Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh, migrated from the cities to their villages. The government tried to provide employment opportunities through Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, but the migrant workers were equipped with better skills. So, the NABARD has recently sanctioned projects to train close to 15,000 people in various skills. In addition to it, bank loans are given to them.

This will create more entrepreneurs in rural areas, who will not need to migrate back to the cities.

Q: An estimate of ₹110 crore was fraudulently credited to the bank accounts of 5.5 lakh ineligible people in Tamil Nadu under the PM KI-

SAN scheme

R: The positive aspect is that the problem has been identified and the recovery from the fraudulent accounts are under way. PM-KISAN scheme is one such scheme where the money disbursed by the government completely reaches the bank accounts of farmers. The current scam has alerted the officials to have more safeguards while disbursing funds to the bank accounts of the farmers.

Q: What are the plans to revive the rural livelihoods severely affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

R: Women constitute a significant portion of the rural population. Today, the rural women have contributed remarkably through self-help groups and microfinance.

An intense focus on these areas would continue for the revival of the rural livelihoods.

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