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India looks at South America for farm revolution

NEW DELHI: India, looking to launch a second green revolution to boost its food security, has begun looking at distant South America where countries have been able to ramp up food production with new technology and farming methods. And to take lessons first-hand, Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar will visit Argentina, Brazil and Mexico this month.

"India has much to learn from the best practices of South America, especially Brazil and Argentina," R. Viswanathan, Indian Ambassador to Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, told IANS during a visit here.

The South American countries have overtaken the United States in soya production, accounting for 50 percent of global production, and significantly denting the American domination in the agri-business sector. With large swathes of land in a sparsely populated region, which accounts for 26 percent of global freshwater reserves, South American nations have the highest yields per hectare.

For Indian companies, which have been looking at farmlands for their agri-business, there is another attraction, the technologies that have been indigenously developed in these countries and applied in farming.

A revolutionary method is "no-till farming", which is applied in 80 percent of the land cultivated in the Mercosur countries (a trading bloc comprising Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay,). In this kind of farming, land is not ploughed. Instead, the agricultural residue of the last plant is allowed to enrich the soil. The seed is then injected into the soil through special machines.

Another technology which Pawar is likely to see in Argentina is the Silobag, a polyetherane bag that can store up to 200 tonnes of foodgrains on the field itself - that saves costs on building concrete storage units. "We have brought this to the notice of the agriculture ministry," said Viswanathan.

India faces a shortage of 15 million tonnes in storage capacity, one of the main reasons why hundreds of tonnes of food grains are wasted every year in the country. The technology figured at a meeting between Pawar and his Argentine counterpart, Julian Andres Dominguez here earlier last month.

Moreover, India can look to replicate the success of Argentina in turning agriculture into a high-technology sector. Viswanathan referred to the Argentine group Los Grobos, which has brought the outsourcing model to agriculture. Los Grobos cultivates 270,000 hectares in Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina, without owning a single plot of land.

It uses "precision farming", which employs software to determine the input distribution and monitors by satellite the location of the seeds and sprayer machines. At the same time, soil monitors give real-time information, helping the group head office to decide on the nutritional and other parameters.

All this could be brought to India for trial. Also, Indian companies can move to the continent to take advantage of the available technology and expertise for business in the agricultural sector.

Viswanathan said Indian entrepreneurs should vigorously explore the region "since South America has an agri-business ecosystem like the IT ecosystem in India - export-oriented with competent human resources and service providers that allow investors to focus on output and returns."

South America is a major source of oilseeds. It exports soya and sunflower oil worth \$1 billion to India annually. It is learnt that the Indian delegation led by Pawar would explore increasing the supply of edible oil and pulses to the subcontinent as domestic output has not been able to meet galloping demand.