

Copyright © 2014 HT Media All Rights Reserved

Sun, 03 May-15; Hindustan Times - Delhi; Size : 192 sq.cm.; Page : 9

‘Monsoon has changed, farming must too’

Although such late revival patterns tend to improve the rainfall scenario, they can still roil farms because of crop cycles. The IMD's study was published recently in the journal *Mausam*.

Some previous studies, too, have shown that peak monsoon months were shifting to August and September, with more extreme rainfall events. "Peak rainy months are moving to August-September, monsoon withdrawal is getting delayed to mid-October and merging with northeast [winter] monsoon. So farmers will have to adapt to these changes," said Gauravendra P Singh, a monsoon investigator with the IMD.

For a good harvest, the monsoon must not just be timely but also evenly distributed across various food-bowl states. Given current farming practices, good rain in June and July is vital, as farmers sow a variety of kharif crops such as rice, maize, corn, pulses, soya and cotton. Varieties developed during the green revolution are primed for these two months.

Alive to the challenges of climate change, the government has taken cautious steps towards

adaptation. "We have long realised this. But the challenge is to replace a whole range of crops and varieties, ensure they are high yielding, too, and then popularise them with farmers," said HS Gupta, the director-general of Borlaug Institute for South Asia and former head of Indian Agricultural Research Institute.

For instance, under Gupta's watch, a new variety of basmati called "Pusa 1509" was developed. It can be planted in July-end with an even higher yield, rather than June as its lifespan has been brought down from 165 days to 120 days.

The state-run National Initiative on Climate Resilient Agriculture project has developed flood- and drought-tolerant rice varieties, while global farm consortiums such as CGIAR are trying to popularise a rice-sowing technique that requires less water.

Shorter-duration crops and conservation farming are now two "well-regimented" government-backed climate adaptation strategies. The latter is based on three principles: minimum tillage of land, always-covered-with-crops land and mixed cropping. But these remain very limited in reach.

However, only 3% of farmers are either aware of or willing to change tried and tested varieties, according to a survey cited in a recent statement made in

Parliament. This reflects a lack of trust, since farmers have to spend a lot on seeds.

"We have begun in right earnest. But what we do not have an answer to, at present, is how to bring them to the field, when farmers are so used to older varieties. This cannot happen without a national farmer re-education programme," Gupta said.

"The government should continue with its efforts to revamp cropping patterns, to shift the focus from growing water intensive crops in the rain-fed areas to the water abundant regions of north east India, which have the potential of becoming the food bowl of the country," said Chandrajit Banerjee, director general, Confederation of Indian Industries (CII).