
Minister for Agriculture says "Punukula is 100% pesticides free and what has begun here is great"...

Punukula, Khammam District - November 23, 2004: The Honourable Minister for Agriculture of the Andhra Pradesh government, Shri Raghuveera Reddy was finally able to visit village Punukula in Khammam district of Andhra Pradesh on the 20th of November 2004 (a couple of earlier visits had to be postponed for various reasons). He traveled in a bus (that started at 5.30 am) from Hyderabad to Palvancha town and then onto Punukula along with a team of scientists from Acharya N G Ranga Agricultural University, from ICRISAT and senior officials from the department of agriculture (from the Commissionerate of Agriculture). His team also consisted of regional and national media representatives and he was joined in Khammam district by two Hon'ble MLAs – the MLA of Kothagudem (under whose Assembly segment Punukula village falls) Shri Vanama Venkateswar Rao and the MLA of Sathupalli Shri Jalagam Venkatrao. The team was also joined by the Khammam district Collector Shri Nimje, the RDO, the Joint Director of Agriculture, the Mandal officials etc. The visit was also joined by other NGO representatives who are successfully running NPM programmes with the help of Centre for Sustainable Agriculture in other districts of the state. The team reached the village at around 12.45 pm.



Their first stop was the field of Shri Maloth Veeru – his father Shri Hemla Nayak was also around to explain to the Honourable Minister and answer his questions. The Minister was keen on knowing more about the earlier practices related to pesticide use [how much and how frequent was the pesticide use, the costs etc.], and about the present practices. He wanted to know the difference between chemical cultivation and NPM approaches. The farmer responded by saying that they had already obtained ten quintals and that he is expecting ten more quintals out of his three acres. The Minister wanted to know about the cost of cultivation – the farmer explained that this has fallen from around Rs 7000/- per acre to only around Rs. 700/- per acre with the NPM approaches. Nayak pointed out that their net income could be around thirty thousand rupees this year. At this point, Ms Erla Dhanamma intervened to share her experience. She pointed out that market prices have fallen (around 1500/- rupees only per quintal) and farmers have been adversely affected, even though the yields are better and cost of production lower.



The second field visited was that of Shri Chikkula Venkanna, a young farmer. He greeted the Minister with some beneficial insects collected from his field, which he was holding in his hands. He pointed out the use of natural predators (a praying mantid in this case) and the fact that earlier, chemical pesticides used to kill such farmer-friendly insects too. He pointed out that with the NPM methods the natural ecological balance in his field has been restored. At this point, Dr Ranga Rao of ICRISAT, a senior entomologist, also drew the attention of the Minister to a Syrphid Fly in the farmer's field and its use. It was clearly established that indiscriminate pesticide use is ending up killing such beneficial insects too. The Minister sought to know more details about the economics of this

farmer too, and found that the farmer was in fact being able to save input costs by eliminating pesticide use.

The entourage then visited the neem seed crushing unit that women SHGs in the village are running as an eco-enterprise. The Minister enquired about the rate of purchase of neem seed as raw material. The women responded by saying three rupees per kilo of raw material, whereas the neem seed powder is sold at the rate of seven rupees a kilo. He wanted to know the available stock on that day – ten quintals, the women mentioned. He also was curious to know if the farmers of the village were buying from them. The women said that farmers use at the rate of ten kilos per acre and all those farmers who are in need of the material approach them and buy from their unit.

The Minister then walked to the Exhibition stall, set up next to the meeting venue. This exhibition had a display of the nature-based inputs that are used in NPM, as well as a poster-based story of the transformation process in Punukula village over the past four years. Scientists of Centre for Sustainable Agriculture explained the technologies and principles used in the NPM approach. The Minister was very keen to know more about pheromone traps and other such non-hazardous and low-cost methods. He was interested in the chilli-garlic extract method and opened a bottle which contained the extract to smell it. He found the exhibition very informative.



The third stop was the public meeting where the Minister, the two MLAs and the Collector along with their entourage listened with keen interest the experiences shared by farmers like Mr Margam Muthaiah, Mr Hemla Nayak and the Sarpanch Mr Thati Hanumantha Rao. While the Sarpanch welcomed everyone, Dr Chari provided the Introduction to the whole NPM effort.

Mr Muthaiah shared his experience with NPM and pointed out that earlier, with the use of pesticides farmers were getting deeper and deeper into debts, while their environment and health got damaged. There were even instances of suicides in the village. Then, SECURE [the local NGO] approached them with NPM methods. The farmers were not willing to accept these new methods and after much persuasion, four or five farmers including himself, tried out NPM. They obtained good results and slowly, more and more people started giving up pesticides.

Now, their health-related problems as well as environmental problems have been overcome. The Minister was happy to hear this and wanted to know if the farmers had given up chemical fertilizers too. Muthaiah pointed out that while farmers have not given up chemical fertilizers yet, work on preparing their own vermi-compost material has begun and some farmers were using it. The Minister enquired about the cost of setting up a vermin-compost unit, to which Mr Muthaiah pointed out that local material is being used for composting while the earthworms were supplied by SECURE. The worms cost fifty rupees a kilo. Five kilos per pit are applied. He shared that one bag of DAP and one bag of vermicompost were applied to his land per acre.



The next speaker was the Sarpanch who pointed out that pesticides were causing a lot of economic and health problems in addition to pest problems. The villagers of Punukula realized that the pesticides were in fact responsible for increasing pest incidence and out of frustration, decided to stop using pesticides. He mentioned that a majority of the farmers in the village are not using even NPM methods but have simply given up the use of pesticides and that their results were the same as the others. He also pointed out that NPM approaches

sometime involve extra hardships on farmers and inputs needed for some of the inputs are not easy to collect.

He was followed by Mr Hemla Nayak who congratulated all the farmers of Pudukula and Pullaigudem who succeeded in their agriculture without the use of either pesticides or NPM approaches. He also felt that the yields with NPM approaches were at least one to two quintals higher than the ones who have not used even the NPM approaches.

Mr Hemla Nayak's speech was followed by the local MLA Sri Vanama Venkateswar Rao. In addition to congratulating the villagers for this path-breaking approaches, he promised to bring Kinnerasani waters to the village for drinking water and irrigation purposes. The MLA expressed his happiness that this-now-famous village Pudukula falls under his legislative constituency.

The MLA pointed out to the farmers that chemical fertilizer application has a relationship with increased pest incidence and therefore chemical pesticide use. He urged the farmers to understand this aspect also and change the use of chemical fertilizers also. He also elaborated on the ill-effects of pesticides.

The Sathupalli MLA Sri Jalagam Venkatrao spoke next. He shared his happiness at the positive initiative taken by the villagers here and hoped to see a similar thing happening in his own constituency. He expressed his hope that farmers who grow mango orchards in his assembly segment would be supported by scientists to overcome the use of pesticides.



The District Collector Sri Nimje promised that he will take this approach to the whole district through DWCRA and Velugu. He requested the Minister to do a similar thing at the state level. He said that he was convinced that crop cultivation without pesticides was possible. He appreciated the increase in net incomes by the decrease in the cost of production. He wanted better support prices for the farmers. He also cautioned against spurious bio-pesticides and bio-fertilisers.

The Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Sri Raghuveera Reddy spoke next and announced the following:

- After a long search, he had finally come across a village which is 100% pesticides-free – “this is great”, he said
- he appreciated the unified voice echoing from the villagers about the redundancy of the use of pesticides and the fact that they were all keen on giving up pesticides
- he appreciated the knowledge acquired by the farmers regarding different insects, and the fact that farmers are trying to restore natural ecological balance by bringing back beneficial insects
- he highlighted the fact that “saving was earning” and that farmers have been able to reduce their cost of expenditure substantially by eliminating the use of pesticides
- he congratulated the villagers for achieving all of this without compromising on yields – in fact, the yields of farmers have actually increased after this pesticide-free approach was adopted
- he pointed out that AP has the dubious distinction of being the Number One pesticide user in the country with sales worth eight hundred crores of rupees each year; he

- also highlighted the menace of pesticide residues appearing everywhere including the food that we consume and in mothers' breast milk
- he congratulated the villagers for becoming a model and ideal village for others to follow; he appreciated the fact that a positive effort has begun to change the current situation of agriculture here
- he requested the scientific community to do more research on this
- he announced that in the coming rabi season, 200 villages will be modeled along the lines of Pudukkula as Bio-Villages across the state
- he also invited organizations like CSA, SECURE and other NGOs promoting NPM in various districts to take part in a state-level workshop that would be organized soon to evolve this into a programme to be taken to other parts of the state
- he announced that this would be taken up in the Velugu-DWCRA groups
- he also promised that the Central Government would be requested to pay better prices for the cotton growers; he sought to dispel the notion that the farmers in the village had that the prices in the markets had decreased after they stopped using pesticides – he pointed out that the prices were low for all farmers across the state and not just here.



Dr Ramanjaneyulu of Centre for Sustainable Agriculture presented the vote of thanks. The Hon'ble Minister's visit ended with a Press Meet at the Pudukkula Panchayat which lasted around fifteen to twenty minutes.