

# It's problem of plenty for Bengal potato growers

Debajyoti Chakraborty & Falguni Banerjee | TNN

**Burdwan/Hooghly:** Not a crop failure, it's a bumper produce that is dogging the potato growers of Bengal.

And the story of their plight remains largely untold while the opposition and the government fight over the farmer deaths across south Bengal. The farmers — who fail to get enough price even after a bumper harvest — remain in the dark themselves, forgotten by the powers that be.

Two potato farmers in Burdwan ended their lives in the past two weeks. It's said that it was the bumper crop that forced them to take the extreme step. Because of a bumper crop, there now is a huge gap between the actual price and what the farmers should have got for their produce.

Here is a story of two farmers from Shaktigarh, Burdwan. Sheikh Sukur Ali and his brother Sheikh Ali Hussein had cultivated potato on nine bighas. They also cultivated potato for PepsiCo on a much smaller plot of 9 acres under contract farming. PepsiCo will buy their produce at Rs 275 per bag of 50 kg. But they are not getting Rs 135 a bag for the Pokhraj variety they grew on their 9-bigha land. "And the A-1, Jyoti and Chandramukhi varieties will be reaped in the last week of February or the first week of March," Sheikh Sukur Ali says. He has already taken an Rs 70,000 loan from SBI for cultivating potato. He took the loan for he couldn't sell 460 bags of paddy of the past season.

West Bengal Cold Storage Association vice-president Patit Paban De said, "Even as the government's yearend deadline got over, there are nearly one lakh tonne of potato lying unsold in 405 cold storages across the state. The cold storages need to be cleared now for the new crop. Farmers are now selling the crop for whatever price they get. For a 50-kg bag they are getting not more than Rs 100 even if it's sold in Orissa; where the cost and transportation prices make it nearly Rs 175 of a 50 kilogram packet."

Susanta Saha (24) cuts a desolate figure in Memari's Rajpur'. His father Amiya Saha had committed suicide. The first thing Sushanta says is that he would never return back to the field — a graduate, he works in a private firm in Malda and would continue with it. "My father committed suicide due to debt in market. We have failed to sell the paddy of last season but still cultivated potato on 8 bighas of land. The crop is still in the field and will be reaped on March, but due to poor market price he chose to end his life in frustration. The state government instead of helping us is claiming that he was a heart patient and committed suicide as he could not bear the treatment of heart ailment. I have to sell the crop in the market to get relief on his bank loan and re-



## WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

- Production in other major potato growing states UP and Punjab — which gets through by mid October — has been exceptionally good this year on the back of favorable weather

- Bengal's traditional potato export markets of Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Orissa, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh, have been flooded by produce from Punjab and UP. Lesser transportation costs make import from these states cheaper than Bengal.

- Such stiff is the competition that Punjab has already exported 40,000 quintal of fresh potatoes to even Bengal.

- Farmers and traders — who were holding on to their stock in anticipation of fetching better prices — are now

going in for distress selling.

- The result: take for example the Orissa market. Rs 100 per 50 kg packet are the price being offered to farmers; they need to sell this at atleast 175 per 50 kg packet to recover the money invested.

## WHAT'S THE GOVT DOING?

- The state had extended the deadline for storage of potato till December 15 — has further extended it till December 31 — in order to help release the entire quantity of produce.

- The state government has sanctioned Rs 400 crore to consumer cooperatives under Confed, Benfed and ECSC last year to purchase potatoes. This, however, remained mired in allegations that the potatoes were never purchased from farmers. The amount purchased, however, was just a drop in the ocean

turn back to my workplace," Sushanta says. His uncle, Ashok Saha alleges, "The local MLA has never been to our home, how they would know why he ended his life for." The anger is evident which the opposition is fanning.

West Midnapore, Bankura, Burdwan and Hooghly account for almost the entire potato produce — Hooghly with 27 lakh metric tonne potato last year topped the charts. The problem isn't that acute Hooghly's 137 cold storages, like in the other districts. The same pictures greet one in Bankura. Asit Das, a Baital villager, is yet to put a figure to his actual losses — the second year in a row. Meghraj Bhadra, a Kotulpur resident who works in his field and also trades potatoes, says he'd cultivated in 10 bigha of land. "The initial harvest is unsold; I really don't know what I will do with the new crop."

Chittaranjan Banerjee, Director, Burdwan Central Cooperative Bank said that the government deadline to clear out the cold storage stocks is leading to distress sales of potato in 105 cold storages (in Burdwan) at Rs 70 per 50 kg packet, which means a mere Rs.1.30 per kilogram.

Potatoes are sold in the retail market at nothing less than Rs 10 per kilogram even to this day. Banerjee explaining the distress says of the Rs 76 crore disbursed last year to potato cultivators, only 2 per cent has been recovered. This year, another Rs 80 crore has been disbursed. For an average farmer in Bengal — heavily dependent on Boro and Rabi cultivation — a poor price for paddy first, followed by an even worse price for potatoes has left them reeling.

Would Bengal then continue to suffer after a bumper harvest? Both Banerjee and De feel that the solution lays partly in government playing a more active role to export potatoes to Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Arab counties, where local consumption is more than they produce. The farmers also need to opt for alternative farming of mustard, cereals and wheat — which the state imports from outside. A Minimum Support Price (MSP) can also stop farmers being victimized by unscrupulous agents. The farmers also should also consider using organic fertilizers as the cost of chemical fertilizers is very high.