

The Indian Express

Maharashtra needs to focus on food processing sector to generate employment

The processing of vegetables and fruits in Maharashtra has remained stagnant at less than 1.2 per cent creating a mismatch between growing demand from the global market and supply in the domestic market.

The food processing sector, which can attract investments and generate employment, has a huge potential in Maharashtra, which is the leading state in agriculture and horticulture.

A National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development report stated, “Primary reason for failure of the sector is lack of investment in infrastructure. This has resulted in a waste of 30 to 35 per cent fruits. And almost 40 per cent vegetables.”

NABARD has observed that neglect of food processing sector is responsible for the plight of farmers in Maharashtra.

Emphasising that the trend of processed food has become a global phenomenon, NABARD recommended a series of steps to the centre-state in its report.

A senior officer in the industries department said, “We have never taken food processing sector seriously. Our orientation was that vegetables and fruits should be produced and consumed. It was never considered as growth potential.”

In the last two years, the centre-state were forced to take major course correction to provide better financial remuneration to farmers and create alternative avenues for those depending in agriculture for livelihood.

In context of Maharashtra, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said, “Almost 55 per cent of our population in rural Maharashtra is dependent on agriculture. But it no longer sustains their livelihood requirements. As a result, we have decided to invest and explore agriculture allied sectors for sustained income for farmers and jobs for youths.”

While acknowledging the immense potential in food processing, he said, “The centre-state reforms in agro-industries has paved the way for promoting the food

processing sector. The state government has initiated the agro-industrial reforms to create one unit in every district.”

On Sunday, the government announced the opening of Patanjai Food Park at Mihan in Nagpur. Apart from Nagpur, the government has decided to set up three more mega-food parks at Ahmednagar, Satara and Wardha.

The list runs long, with the demand for two food parks in North Maharashtra and Marathwada. However, some projects are in the pipeline as logistics are being worked out.

The state government has allocated Rs 100 crore for infrastructure for food processing. But almost all projects would have a public-private partnership. The food processing policy mandates that investors will have to avail 100 percent produce from the domestic market to ensure higher financial returns to farmers on vegetables and fruits procured.

However, one mega food processing unit, it believes, will open up smaller units in providing job avenues to villagers. The districts where work is underway for food processing units include Kolhapur, Jalgaon, Latur, Nashik, Ahmednagar, Sindhudurg and Nanded.