

THE BURDEN OF BEING A KVK



The Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) is an exceptionally well-thought-out concept but at the same time it is an equally badly-executed project. The KVK is seemingly condemned to be a nonentity. In order to provide the much-needed push to agricultural R&D in the country, there are several good reasons for why KVKs need close scrutiny and course correction. Here Arun Balamatti dives deep into the KVK system.

INTRODUCTION

The Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) has an enviable role in organically connecting Research and Development (R&D) institutions. But no one cares about it. Recently there were a few adverse comments on the KVKs on a few WhatsApp groups. Someone wrote, ‘the KVKs are pathetic; they are still recommending banned pesticides to farmers’. Someone else wrote, ‘The KVKs have absolutely no understanding of natural farming; they hardly understand the ideology behind natural farming.’ When I recently made a career move, after a 10-year stint at a KVK, a senior bureaucrat exclaimed, ‘Wow, from a KVK directly to an international organization!?’ (As if KVK employees are not worthy of it!)

The comments sum it all up. The KVKs must be knowing everything, and doing everything, but can’t inspire. There are copious comments and opinions; but they are not new to KVKs. In fact, there has never been a dearth of derogatory remarks on KVKs from various corners, whether it’s about specific KVKs, or even a general remark about KVKs.

It is indisputable that KVK scientists must be updated continuously. But when some self-made messiah, intellect, or activist comes up with a new concept every other day, for example, conventional farming – organic farming – natural farming – zero-budget farming – non-violent farming, and so on and on...isn’t it a bit too much to expect one person to know all of these? Not just know but also get to the heart of each concept, especially when there are only debates around what they are not instead of deliberations on what they are.

It’s indeed an uncomfortable feeling and one doesn’t get accustomed to the negativity despite hearing it all the time. It’s fine to be criticized, but should the KVK be an eternal punching bag? Why does no one speak up for the KVKs?

THE BITTER TRUTH OF BEING A KVK

In a matter of two more years from now, by 2024, the KVKs will be celebrating their golden jubilee. Incidentally, the KVK is not really an institution. Having been set up as a project in 1974 by the erstwhile Planning Commission, the KVKs continue to be the longest-running project even after the Planning Commission made way for the NITI Aayog. Today, there are 732 KVKs in the country, at about one KVK per district, and still counting.

The KVKs were introduced as vocational training centers for agriculture and allied activities in the district. They were fully funded by the Government of India through the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). The KVKs were meant to be trainers’ training centers for Extension personnel; eventually, their mandate extended to the training of farmers, farm women, and youth on the necessary skills required for different agricultural activities. As agricultural research progressed during

the 1990s, from the typical Green Revolution technologies such as high-yielding varieties (HYVs), hybrids, chemical fertilizers, and irrigation, to exploring new possibilities such as short- and medium-duration varieties, pest and disease tolerant varieties, crops demanding less water-fertilizer and management, etc., the role of Rural Advisory Services (RAS) or Agricultural Extension became a lot more complex. The one major challenge facing agricultural research was the realization that not all technologies developed are equally applicable to every agro-climatic zone. In order to deal with this challenge, the KVKs were transformed into centers mandated to undertake technology assessment and refinement and organize frontline demonstrations to validate the location specificity of new technologies. The skill training was pushed down to the third priority of the KVKs. Surprisingly, the metamorphosis of the KVKs from being skill training centers to technology assessment centers doesn't find any mention in the public domain.

Despite their active and rather rigorous involvement in the long history of the agricultural development process, the KVKs haven't been given a deserving identity, recognition, and dignity within the R&D institutional landscape. The KVKs are the most abused entities and continue to be given an inferior status largely because of its *positioning, perception, and performance*.

WHAT REALLY AILS KVKs?

The KVKs never had a central role in the mainstream RAS/Extension Service; rather, they were meant to lend technical support to Extension agencies. This does not imply that KVK scientists are not meant to be updated. Instead, they should be a step ahead of all other players. It's just not happening because their positioning does not provide a space for this.

From the positioning point of view, the KVKs are expected to play the role of a link agency between the R&D institutions in the lab-to-land continuum. That is the role the ICAR has defined for the KVKs. However, for this role the KVKs need to be accepted by the two ends of the lab-to-land spectrum – whether it be the research institutes or the extension agencies – but there is simply no formal structure in place. As a result, the research institutes such as the state agricultural universities (SAUs) or even the ICAR institutes do not consider the technology assessments of the KVKs as research and do not involve the KVKs in their research deliberations at all. On the other hand, overwhelmed by the burden of implementing the various state and central schemes the always-understaffed state development departments happily utilize the KVKs in all their campaigns, workshops, and training events, thereby jeopardizing the perception of KVKs on their true role.

From the positioning point of view, the uniformity and consistency of delivery of the KVKs' role took a beating for another reason, that of the different institutions hosting them. Although the full funding comes to the KVKs from the Government of India through the ICAR, out of the 732 KVKs in the country to date as many as 506 (69%) are being hosted by the SAUs, 103 (14%) by different NGOs, 66 (9%) by the ICAR research institutes, 38 (5%) are being managed by the state development departments whereas the others are operating under the deemed or central universities and other government institutions. Although all the KVKs have the same mandates, their technical abilities, modalities of program implementation, and hence the results and impacts are directly influenced by the specific objectives, goals, strategies, and the institutional culture of their respective hosts. Therefore, their variability is inevitable.

The deplorable part of the KVK management story is that its biological parent, ATARI (Agricultural Technology Application and Research Institute), the zonal coordinating unit of the ICAR, looks on helplessly as the KVKs undergo different acculturation processes at different host institutes. There is a lack of clarity on the role of ATARI while most policies are host-institute driven. ATARIs remain too small in staff size and are overdrawn with administrative roles, thus compromising on their crucial

technical support to KVKs. Except for the occasional induction training organized by ATARI no other institution has a plan to constantly train and update the KVK staff.

It is unfair to judge the KVKs without understanding the many other critical issues that influence KVKs' performance.

THE EXISTENTIAL QUESTION TROUBLING THE KVKs – WHO AM I?

The fundamental issue facing the KVKs is their identity. Apart from the support, guidance, and autonomy that the KVKs presumably get from their respective host organizations it is about how the farmers, R&D agencies, and most importantly the KVK employees perceive the KVKs and their role in the R&D ecosystem.

Majority of the KVKs – nearly 70% – are managed by the SAUs. The SAUs are often deploying the KVK scientists for their teaching, research, or any other work, or the KVK scientists volunteer to engage in these activities to build their scorecards, thus compromising on the KVK mandates. The NGO KVKs, on the other hand, by their proximity to the communities, with their creative and innovative approaches that help them break the shackles of 'prescriptive science' and despite their better strike rate in terms of bagging the zonal and national awards, are considered as 'technically weak'. The district development departments are always eager to achieve the targets of their technical programs largely by using the KVK scientists. And what do the farmers think of the KVKs? Their position is straight and simple: "Don't lecture us about who you are or what you are not, we have problems, please offer a solution!" The KVKs invariably end up being perceived by each stakeholder as mere event managers. This 'in limbo' position of the KVKs, unfortunately, has a direct impact on recruitment, staff morale, etc., and hence, eventually on the performance of the KVKs. No surprise that the KVKs have ended up being seen as places not meant for the meritorious; they are instead treated as 'temporary parking places' until one gets a call from either the SAUs or the ICAR institutes.

Barring a few exceptions, if one agrees with the above conclusions as the predominant public opinion on the 'state of KVKs' it is not difficult at all to discern that we are looking for the basic ingredients needed for good performance, such as pride, professional commitment, and motivation, in the wrong place.

KVKs ARE NECESSARY, BUT NOT THEIR ASPIRATIONS

Until one thinks of an alternative institutional mechanism, we need the KVKs for two important functions in the R&D institutional architecture.

The first is to provide timely, clear, accurate, and scientific feedback on the location specificity of new farm technologies, to the research system as to whether the technology is working as expected or does it require modification to suit the local agro-ecological conditions and/or farmers' needs. The second function is to periodically list the successful technologies tried out locally with a select few farmers and pass them on to the Extension agencies by skilling the Extension functionaries for large-scale promotion.

Although this is the defined role of the KVKs there is, unfortunately, no formal mechanism in place either for the KVK to deliver its role or for the R&D agencies to patronize the KVKs. So, what are the KVKs doing then? They are still meticulously implementing their on-farm trials (OFT, technology assessment) and frontline demonstrations (FLDs) and sitting on precious data unable to push it meaningfully into the Research and Extension continuum. The related training events on OFTs and FLDs are being conducted. Some KVKs are producing and sharing excellent quality planting material

with farmers. However, of late, most of the time the KVK scientists are being drawn into organizing event after event popularizing the various central schemes, mobilizing hundreds of farmers every time, inviting the Members of Parliament (MPs) and the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), literally feeling bruised and bitter. By doing this, the KVKs are running the risk of being seen as aligned to certain political parties, losing the credibility and goodwill that they have built with farmer communities over many years, and in the process, diluting their mandated responsibilities. Under the circumstances, if they continue working this way, a celebration would be the last thing on their mind, no KVK is likely to feel even a minimum sense of accomplishment as the KVKs approach their golden jubilee year in 2024.

Maybe, the Government of India, or more hopefully the ICAR itself, will feel the need to take a relook at the current state of KVKs. Here are a few issues and suggestions to salvage much from the KVKs that help R&D agencies, and of course, farming and farmers in India.

ENERGIZING THE KVKs – CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

While the government is keen on establishing newer KVKs and covering every district in the country there is a need to take a balanced view on the expansionist policy, especially if it is at the cost of strengthening the existing KVKs with the necessary infrastructure. What's the plan for moving towards self-sufficiency? Although this was the original plan, it was eventually dumped and the KVKs continue to function under a perennial fund crunch.

Positioning of KVKs at the district level in the Lab-to-land and Land-to-lab continuum

On account of their role as the link agency between the R&D institutions, the KVKs must liaise with the research institutes at the central (e.g., ICAR), the state level (e.g., SAUs), and the state Extension agencies at the district level such as the Department of Agriculture, Horticulture, Animal Husbandry, Sericulture, Fishery, Forestry, etc. But each one has its own character and culture. It calls for a review, by the ICAR, to think of the proper positioning of the KVKs so that they get the necessary attention, and also ensure that the KVKs are part of a formal chain of command. A realignment of the KVKs will have a double advantage – it will increase the accountability of the KVKs on one hand, and on the other, bring value to the precious data they keep generating from the grassroots.

Establish a National KVK Academy

Agricultural development is a dynamic process; there are new opportunities as well as newer challenges every other day. This calls for the KVK scientists to be up to date, which is also an ongoing process. Although structurally the KVKs are rather small, each member has a distinct and important role to play. The head of a KVK must be conversant with technical, administrative, and financial matters along with the skills necessary for handling relationships with farmers, development departments, and the media. Each scientist is supposed to be an expert in his discipline and at the same time should also be a skilled generalist in offering solutions to a wide range of agricultural problems that the farmers bring to them on a day-to-day basis. The scientist handling the soil testing laboratory must be competent to analyse, diagnose and offer timely management solutions and guidance.

It is mandatory for each KVK to have a minimum of 21 hectares of its own farmland, the management of which is the responsibility of the Farm Manager – a highly underrated role. While the present qualification and experience required for a farm manager are that of a beginner it was envisaged during the early years of the KVKs that they would generate at least a part of their annual budget from the 21 ha land at their disposal. The 21 ha land is a great resource to demonstrate frontier technologies, try out innovations, develop nurseries and mother orchards, and garner income to

showcase what it means to apply science and technology in farm management. This role certainly demands the capacities of a higher order.

Competence with handling digital technologies is another area that is confined only to one staff, the Program Assistant (Computer). While the person should be able to manage the compilation of technical and financial data she/he must regularly keep feeding the data into the zonal level MIS software, the KVK website, as well as the national KVK portal. This apart, with the advent of social media, there is immense demand for developing apps, short videos, and infographics for sharing knowledge with various stakeholders. This means that it is not enough for one staff but for all the KVK staff members to acquire not merely basic digital literacy but many other skills as well.

Given the need for this amount of diversity in roles and skills the frequent staff attrition and new recruitments don't help; it keeps disrupting knowledge management at the KVK as also at the zonal level (ATARI) where the data is aggregated. Therefore, there is great need for regular capacity development of the KVKs' staff, which cannot be handled at the KVK level. A national institute along the lines of National Academy of Agricultural Research Management (NAARM) is necessary for the KVKs to regularly conduct various training events, such as induction, role clarity, collection and processing of scientific data, refresher training, reporting, and communication skills using digital and social media, and so on.

Make KVK service mandatory for teachers and scientists in the SAUs

The government has made it mandatory for doctors to serve in rural areas for a minimum length of time. The rationale here is different. The reason it is necessary for every agricultural researcher and teacher at the ICAR and SAUs to be serving in a KVK is different. It calls for a closer analysis of what is happening to agriculture graduates being produced by the SAUs year after year. It is apparent that over 90% of the graduates go on to pursue higher studies. It is indeed good for them and good for society. But what exactly is the goal of higher education? It is not simply a search or hunger for knowledge. The graduates pursue post-graduation to become researchers or teachers. Again, it is not really a wrong aspiration. But the painful point here is the fact that no one wants to go back to farming or work closely with farmers. The aspiration for higher studies is to get into a white-collar job and not to persevere in farming or to work with farm families.

RAS/Extension, unfortunately, is not a preferred occupation. The implications of someone becoming a teacher or a researcher without hands-on experience is that their teaching lacks substance and the research lacks an agenda or hypotheses that emanate from the grassroots. One must understand that agriculture is not merely a body of knowledge, it is also a skill. And the skill can only be acquired by practicing. The ICAR, therefore, must find ways of incentivizing Extension or Rural Advisory Services (RAS) primarily to strengthen agricultural education and research. A 3- to 5-year tenure upfront for every agricultural professional at a KVK has a multiplier effect on RAS, research, and education.

In fact, it is generally acknowledged that most of those who have had a stint with the KVKs early on in their careers owe their later success to the perspectives they gained from their KVK service.

Revisit the roles and responsibilities of KVK staff

In the present system, the head of the KVK is burdened with an excessive workload. It is but natural that the head must be responsible for everything. This doesn't necessarily mean he or she does everything. An annual plan demands at least a week's time for preparation and another week for travel and participation in the zonal planning meeting. Ditto for the annual review workshop. At least one week to take part in the national KVK conference. Another fortnight to convene, prepare and complete the scientific advisory committee meeting at the KVK level. Add to these the planning and

review meetings of different central schemes and projects each KVK handles. Plus, the quintessential field visits to monitor the OFTs and FLDs.

The head is literally expected to be on wheels continuously and in the forefront of all these events. On the other hand, there is one or the other report, data, or updates to be sent to the ATARI almost every day, including the replies to questions in parliament. This means the head must be in front of the computer every day. Being on the toes and before the computer simultaneously isn't something one can manage without support and cooperation from the team. However, when the other scientists in the KVKs are qualified and talented it is but natural that they would have their own aspirations. But when they know they are not getting relevant exposure or platforms to showcase their talents, nor the opportunities to lead any of the activities how will they feel a sense of belonging? Why would they feel accountable when it is the head who will be facing the music all the time? Once this thought seeps in it really puts the head in a precarious situation. The sharing of roles and responsibilities and the delegation mechanism therefore calls for a reality check.

Safeguard KVKs from being overdrawn into non-technical and political events

The KVKs provide direct access to the farmers at the grassroots level for the Central Government. Unfortunately, this has become quite a burden for the KVKs in recent years. For every agriculture-related event, occasion, launch, or live telecast the KVKs must mobilize farmers, invite MPs and MLAs, prepare a report and video clips, and dispatch them on the same day. If the KVKs are drawn into such activities, especially when such activities have nothing to do with the KVKs' mandated activities, the KVKs are not only likely to get distracted but also tend to lose the goodwill built with the farmer communities so painstakingly over the years. The KVKs must identify themselves among the stakeholders only from their mandated work and nothing else.

CONCLUSION

Dr Peter Kenmore, the then (2012) Country Representative in India, Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, New Delhi, said that the KVKs are brilliant institutional innovations inspiring the world in the 21st century. Around the same time, the ICAR was mulling the idea of replicating the KVK concept in African countries. Every deliberation on the KVKs ends up with singing paeans on how important the KVKs are and why it is necessary that they must be strengthened; yet somehow no one bothers to walk this talk.

There is an apocryphal story told about Sir M. Visvesvaraya, a modernist visionary. It is said that when he saw the white cascades of water at the Jog Falls in Karnataka, he exclaimed: "What a waste!" His engineer's mind saw hydroelectric potential when others saw the raw beauty of the waterfalls.

The KVK potential is certainly being wasted; ironically, there is no beauty around the KVKs that one wishes to bask in.

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