



INTERVIEW

'It's a misconception that the Indian farmer is unwilling to pay'

Simon Wiebusch, president of Bayer South Asia, on how Indian farming has benefited from the use of better-quality inputs

SIMON WIEBUSCH, THE president of Bayer South Asia, heads three Indian businesses—Bayer Cropscience, which is a listed `25,000 crore market cap company, as well as the unlisted pharma and consumer health businesses. In an interview with Forbes India, he talks about how Indian farmers have the potential to move up the value and productivity chain, why farm labour is likely to become scarcer and the seed as well as information solutions that the company is providing to them. Edited excerpts:

Q For an Indian farmer, life hasn't gotten easier in the last five to 10 years. What, according to you, are the biggest problems?

While India is calorie sufficient, one sees there are problems from time to time. For instance, you see the monsoon not behaving etc, and so, all of a sudden, we're not exporting onions and we're rethinking rice exports. So, while we are barely calorie sufficient, we're completely under-nurtured. If you want to be seeing 1.4 billion people move up that ladder, you need to ensure they get access to affordable, broad-based nutrition, which usually comes with a broader basket of food than simply rice and dal. Now, you can obviously add nutrients and say, okay, you take some vitamins, etc, you can do fortification. Fundamentally, in a country like this, where we have the agricultural potential, you need to give more access to horticultural resources.



Simon Wiebusch, president, Bayer, South Asia

Q Demographically, they (Indian farmers) are above 45. Their children are not going to go into farming. What does that tell you?

We are seeing that the abundance of labour that we used to have available in agriculture is no longer there. The problem is threefold. First, the number of people who are willing to do farm labour. Second, the cost of that labour to the farmer and third the readiness of that labour to work hard.

So, you'll find a lot of farmers that will tell me, I am getting labour that is expensive and that guy is lazy.

Q With small land holdings, could cooperative farming be the answer?

Farmer producer organisations are the first tangible step which is taking place, but yes, what we do see in especially the more affluent areas around the big metros is land renting. So, you see more professionalisation...

I'm starting to rent land and cultivate it in larger plots. And that's specifically with capsicum, which has higher value, and is easy to sell in the metro cities. The other topic that is prevalent and that is connected is then the mechanisation. So, if I don't have labour, I need to go for mechanisation. Mechanisation usually doesn't lend itself to half

Absolutely. Who uses it? The rich farmer in Bengaluru that is growing capsicum, right? But it is being used more and more. When you look at it, and this is something we also completely miss in some of our discussions, is that the proliferation of 4G in this country has come to a point that I have not met a single farming family that would not have

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had one smartphone and every single farmer is ultimately moving from feature to smart. The moment you have a picture phone, it is a different world you're in. That is where we see YouTube, WhatsApp moving very quickly, and yes, ads, apps help to have pre-information. So, if we meet a farmer today, often, they will say, "Oh, yeah, I've seen it on the screen. Will you tell me how to do it?"

Q Bayer has a large seed business in India. How willing is the Indian farmer to pay for the best quality seeds that improve productivity?

The Indian farmer is at least as smart as any other farmer in the world. This is sometimes a misconception that they are not willing to pay. They're also, in many cases, capable to pay. Kisan credit cards, direct transfers, even somewhat organised off-take systems, which are happening in the non-mandi states, are putting money into farmers' pockets. Do they always spend it on the right stuff? I mean, we can have all these discussions, but the fact of the matter is, there's not a lot of farmers out there which are happily going to have poor yields. You don't intentionally mess up or ruin your farm.

Q Bayer is working with farmers to enhance productivity. I saw that it has launched an app to provide crop as well as weather data...

Forbes India Crossword No. 9

BY MANGESH GHOGRE

Solve a customised puzzle with each Forbes India issue that holds clues from the worlds of Indian business and culture, themed around this fortnight's magazine. This issue's theme, for instance, is Independence Day

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ACROSS

- Famed American action toy
- August 15th highlight
- One-_-_-_: Meeting types
- Anthem part

DOWN

- Anthem part
- ___ Man of India: Sardar Patel
- Anthem part
- Dedicated address?
- Suffix with employ
- Fluffy dog, popularly

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S	E	N	O	N	O
E	D	A	R	A	P
E	O	J	I	G	

Mangesh Ghogre is the first Indian to have constructed crosswords for The New York Times. A Mumbai-bred investment banker, Ghogre recently moved to the US on an Einstein visa, acquired for his crossword skills. He will be making bespoke crossword puzzles for Forbes India, which can be solved in under five minutes.

• SAMAR SRIVASTAVA