



In the Punjab—an outstanding farmer revisited

On 5 June 1985, the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) honored 14 exceptional farmers in 10 Asian nations—truly pioneers in their own rite—by inviting them to the Philippines to participate in a special multilevel symposium that brought together outstanding scientists, farmers, and political leaders—all part of IRRI’s 25th anniversary celebration. As IRRI approaches its 50th anniversary in 2010, we are trying to locate these same farmers 25 years later to find out their progress and get some updates. The first one we found is Sardar Jagjit Singh Hara who farms in Punjab, the breadbasket state of India. In November 2008, departing Rice Today editor Adam Barclay and I visited him on his farm about 12 km outside of Ludhiana. He was billed as a progressive Punjabi seed farmer 25 years ago. Since his recognition then, Mr. Hara has often been visited by agricultural researchers and leaders who have come to see and evaluate his farming practices. Perhaps the most dramatic visit was the simultaneous appearance of a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and a future World Food Prize Laureate on the same day.

Something I had never dreamed of

My father, S. Ram Singh, was a progressive farmer and I would say that I inherited from him the gene that bestowed upon me my love for agriculture. After earning my master’s degree in economics in 1960, I worked full time on this farm to produce seeds, as my father had. I also continued to grow various crops [wheat, potato, corn, ground nut]. In 1966, when the rice revolution came, I started to grow rice, not only as a commercial crop but also for seed production.

In 1985, to my great surprise, I got a big honor when I was recommended for an IRRI award as an outstanding farmer. My wife, Surjit, was also invited but, because of family reasons, she couldn’t accompany me. It was a great occasion. I was so excited and elated that such a huge international honor would come to me—something I had never even dreamed of. It was gratifying to meet the 13 other Asian farmers recognized that day. I was unique [among that group] because I was a seed producer.



I returned home with a “charged battery” because I had seen so many field trials at the IRRI research center—how to add fertilizer, the latest hybrid rice technology, etc. I wanted to share those things I learned with my fellow farmers here. I acquired this culture of sharing experiences from the International Farm Youth Exchange Program in America, which I attended in 1966. Generally, people want to keep their knowledge to themselves, maybe to put it in book form and sell it. But I had a commitment, a vow, to share my experiences, such as those I had at IRRI. When I came back from

IRRI, around 100 farmers came to me and asked many questions, which I tried to answer. So, I would say I was married to IRRI.

Two more memorable occasions

On 22 April 1987, one great occasion happened. Norman E. Borlaug [the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate] visited me on my farm and, just by coincidence Gurdev S. Khush [IRRI’s then principal plant breeder and future 1996 World Food Prize Laureate] also came. So, hanging on my wall now is a unique and rare picture (*photo opposite page*) of these two world-renowned scientists—a wheat breeder [Borlaug center] and a rice breeder—with one fortunate farmer. It is difficult to describe in words how I felt that day.

In September 1991, [the then IRRI director general, 1988-95] Dr. Klaus Lampe visited the nearby Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), an institution I am deeply associated with. They told him about me, that I am an IRRI outstanding farmer awardee, and so he came to see me. When he saw my setup, he invited me to come to IRRI again. I told him, “Dr.



Lampe, some of my farmer friends want to come with me.” He said, “Okay, we cannot pay your airfares, but all other arrangements for your stay will be taken care of by IRRI.” Six of us came to IRRI in September-October 1992. It was a wonderful occasion. In my life, I have had many great experiences, but my two visits to IRRI and the visits of Drs. Borlaug and Khush to my farm on the same day are the most memorable ones.

Hara farm—a showcase for the rice-wheat rotation

Today, our farm is a joint family venture of 60 acres (around 25 hectares). Since my brother works in California, in the U.S., as an electrical engineer, I manage things around here. This is a large-scale demonstration farm, which is still in the process of resolving a big controversy. There is an ongoing debate in Punjab and all over India concerning whether or not wheat and paddy can be profitably grown in rotation. But when disbelievers come to my farm, I can prove to them that these two main cereals can be grown together.

Prior to the Green Revolution, rice was not popular in Punjab. It was grown only in the low-lying areas along the riverbeds and was not a regular crop like wheat, cotton, corn, etc. But, with the arrival of IR8 in India in the 1960s, along

with the package of practices for the Punjab cropping pattern, the crop has been grown here ever since even though the water table is getting lower in this part of the country.

Previously, government experts couldn’t convince farmers to transplant late. They transplanted early because there was a lack of mechanization, and diseases and insect pests were less of a problem. Recently, the government persuaded many farmers not to transplant before 10 June. Now, this year [2008], the results are very good. The water table is recharged and, luckily, the monsoon has also been favorable.

Wheat and rice are like two wheels on the same vehicle. If one wheel goes down, the other wheel cannot function either. I think these two “wheels,” wheat and rice, complement each other. This year, the yields and the price of both crops have been good, rice with a slight edge over wheat, I think. Most importantly, we are feeding the people. I feel proud that I’m producing good-quality seeds for my farmer friends so that they can have better and better yields (For more on South Asia’s rice-wheat cropping system, see *Strengthening the system* on pages 18-23).

Convincing the young that agriculture is a noble profession
[In his 1985 interview, Mr. Hara

said that he would not pressure his son, Gurshaminder, to follow in his footsteps on the farm. And, true enough, “Dr. G. Hara” is a senior consultant surgeon at the Oswal Cancer Treatment and Research Foundation in Ludhiana. Now nearing 70, Mr. Hara worries about who will take over the family farm—maybe his grandson, Tejeshwar, but that is by no means certain.]

It is a burning issue these days that no young educated, dedicated person wants to be in agriculture. Why? First, it is a very hard job. Second, opportunities for growth are limited. Most importantly, agriculture in developing economies like India’s is considered as a way of living, not as a profession. When trying to persuade my only son to stay on the farm, I suggested that he would get an opportunity to go abroad to see farms in America and Australia and to observe the research trials and experiments at IRRI. But he ultimately still said, “No. What is life on the farm? You work like a horse and there is no social life.”

Indeed, professions in the city are more glamorous and the current generation is more money-minded rather than service-oriented. Why am I in agriculture? I wanted to be independent and to not be tied to the monotony of the same chair in the same office with the same job. And, secondly, God is my boss. I learned to drive on a John Deere tractor when I was 13 years old and that hooked me on agriculture despite the drudgery and the risk.

Now, the situation is changing; the world is crying for food security. I hope good sense will prevail and that, someday soon, the world will declare agriculture to be a noble profession just like medicine, law, and education. 🍌

In the complete transcript of this interview at irri.org/today/Pioneer_Interviews.asp, Mr. Hara discusses mechanization, water management, economics, and the major challenges today in Punjabi agriculture.