BOOK REVIEW

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THE FUTURE OF INDIAN AGRICULTURE

YOGINDER K. ALAGH

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Review by

V. RATNA REDDY[1]

Indian agriculture is going through crisis as well as transformation. Crisis in terms of supporting the livelihoods of the rural communities and transformation in terms of changes that are different from the experiences of the last half- a century, especially after the green revolution of 1960s and early 1970s. As the profitability of agriculture and its potential to meet the cash needs of the farmers is on the decline more and more people are considering quitting agriculture as their main source of income. While proportion of people in this category varies depending on the monsoon and the market, the desperation is clear in the sector and majority of the farmers don't see their kin facing the uncertain prospects. As a result, changes in terms of composition of farmers (especially age and educational status of the farmers and land use) are changing. Apart from cash needs, farmers are facing new constraints of labour shortages, varying climate, etc., which are not only influencing the crop decisions but also adding to the desperation. The reasons for this situation originate from our inheritance (agrarian structure, policies, etc) though some of them are from very recent past.

The book under review written by Prof. Y. K. Alagh, one of the doyens of Indian agriculture (contributed as a researcher as well as policy maker), provides a lucid and comprehensive narration of Indian agriculture since independence. Apart from the introductory chapter, the book is organised in four parts viz., agricultural demand, meeting demands with growth; investment and technology and lessons and policies. Introductory chapter sets the background and overview of the book. Prof. Alagh narrates the inheritance of agricultural policies since green revolution and explains the deceleration and pickup of agricultural growth over the years. It is argued that Indian agriculture continues to be demand driven and this is expected to accelerate in future.

Chapter two delves deeply into the factors behind the demand for agricultural produce viz., population, changes in demand for food and feed, food security, poverty, income distribution and food subsidies. This chapter provides an exhaustive review of all the important studies dealing with these aspects. Demand for agriculture produce is moving away from cereals and food grains in favour of milk and milk products; edible oils, sugar, etc., though there are variations between different estimates. It is shown that the population dependent on agriculture and the share of rural population is declining faster than the official projections (Chapter 3). It is argued that the present plans exclude 10 percent of the urban population.

[1] Livelihoods and Natural Resource Management, 12-2-417/18, Saradanagar, Gudimalkapur, Hyderabad-500067, Email: vratnareddy@lnrmi.ac.in.

Decline in agriculture investments (public as well as private) is at the root of the agricultural slow down during 1990s and the investments have picked up later (chapter 4). Prof. Alagh rightly argues for agro-climatic planning and policies, which is his brain child. Seed varieties, land and water management practices need to be designed according to agro-climatic conditions. Unfortunately the agro-climatic planning is totally forgotten in the recent years. While institutional approaches are required for managing water resources, technologies play an important role in seeds and soils. Watershed management is critical for dry land agriculture. It is argued that a more holistic approach of combining technology and institutions is the way forward. Space and information technologies could further agricultural development.

In order to maintain a healthy growth of 3 to 4 percent agriculture needs investment to the tune of 12 percent of the GDP. But the recent experience indicates that even a higher investment (above 15 percent) is not able to sustain the growth (chapter 5). Resource degradation (land and water) could be one reason, as pointed out by Alagh. Similar investments and policies are required in forestry in order to maintain the resources and enhance its productivity. Therefore, there is a need for a relook at the magnitude and composition of agricultural investments. While Indian farmer has always responded to policy interventions, it is absolutely necessary to have right policies and conducive investment environment (chapter 5).

The future of Indian agriculture depends on formulating appropriate policies and institutions to implement the policies. The policy regime should consider and take into account the changing contours of Indian agriculture. These include:

i) declining viability of agriculture resulting in majority of the farmers (67 percent) inclined to quit agriculture. Micro studies reveal that most of the farmers prefer not to see their children end up as farmers.

ii) composition of farming households is changing- more and more of SC households are taking to farming (owner as well as tenant farmers), while the traditionally farming households are getting moving away from agriculture though trying to retain their lands.

iii) Households that are less dependent on hired labour, either through mechanisation or with more of own labour, tend to continue in agriculture. Labour costs are not only rising but also are becoming a major constraint for agriculture. It may be recommended that policy initiatives towards developing and promoting appropriate farm technologies be put in place.

iv) resource degradation (land and water) and distribution is a major concern. While more and more marginal lands are being brought under cultivation due to the population pressure and distribution of land to the landless, access to water remains a major constraint to improve agricultural productivity.

v) watershed development is identified as the most appropriate intervention for improving land and water resources, its design and implementation needs to be more scientific and holistic by taking hydrogeology and bio-physical aspects into account. Sustainable and equitable management of groundwater is critical for future growth in rain fed agriculture, which is also liked to sustainable watershed management.

vi) wide spread urbanisation is eating into fertile agricultural lands, adding to pressure on croplands and demand for marginal lands. There is need for comprehensive urban planning (centralised vs. decentralised) taking agricultural sector into consideration.

vii) climate change or variability is further adding to the farm distress - understanding the various aspects like exposure, sensitivity, resilience and adaptation across farm categories (small/marginal/medium/large) across agro-climatic regions.

viii) Of late micro experience suggests that agrarian environment is turning out to be conducive for corporatisation or privatisation of agriculture. While one need not brush aside or shy away from such developments, robust policies are required to protect the interests of the farming community in general and small and marginal farmers in particular.

This book provides a solid background for addressing these issues. It discusses both methods and analysis and provides insights into the Indian agricultural development over the decades at the macro level. It is a valuable source of literature and analyses and is a must read for all the students, especially the new generation researchers, policy makers and development practitioners. The book should be included as a reference at the university level.

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