



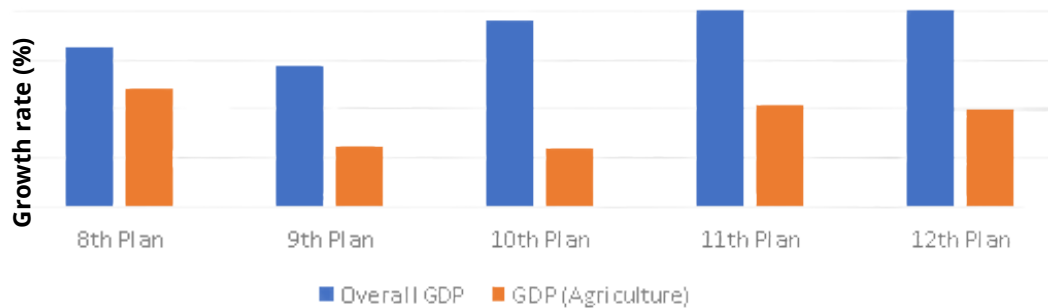
INDIAN AGRICULTURE: ISSUES AND PRIORITIES

Dr. Harshika Choudhary
Consultant (Agricultural Economics)
Institute for Social and Economic Change,
Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

What is so distinctive about Indian agriculture? Most of the farmers in India are practicing subsistence agriculture. They own a tiny piece of land, grow their own crops, cultivate it with help of their family members and consume it with little surplus to sell in the near market. Indian agriculture is characterized by fragmented land holdings, high dependence on rainfall, labor-intensive cultivation, and dominance of food crops.

Growth in agricultural GDP has shown high instability since the introduction of economic reform in 1991. It fluctuated from 2.5 percent in the 9th plan to 4 percent in the 12th plan as shown in figure 1.1. Volatility is much higher in agriculture and allied sectors as compared to other sectors in the country. Small and marginal farmers are more susceptible to the vagaries of the monsoon and climate change. Also, agricultural commodity prices are unstable as the short-term production and consumption elasticities are low.

According to the Tendulkar Committee Report on Poverty Estimation, the percentage of the population below the poverty line is 25.4 in rural areas and 13.7 percent in urban areas



According to the Tendulkar Committee Report on Poverty Estimation, the percentage of the population below the poverty line is 25.4 in rural areas and 13.7 percent in urban areas. Nearly 75 percent of the Indian poor are from rural areas and their livelihood is directly or indirectly dependent on the performance of the agriculture sector. Thus, the economic growth of a country like India is highly dependent on the agriculture sector. It is the most effective means to reduce poverty, unemployment, and hunger.

Indian Agriculture is associated with the 'Green Revolution' that started in the mid-1960s. Pioneered by M.S. Swaminathan, it enabled the nation to become self-reliant. It transformed India into a food-surplus nation. India became an export-oriented country. It was possible due to the adoption of modern methods, infrastructure, and technology. For example, the use of high-yielding variety (HYV) seeds, tractors, irrigation facilities, pesticides, and fertilizers.

*According to
the 2011
Census,
every day
2,000
farmers are
quitting
farming as
their main
occupation*

Issues In Agriculture

Fragmented land holdings, dependence on erratic rainfall, lack of mechanization, poor quality seeds, lack of credit, and low prices. Though we should not forget the first-generation issues, we should prepare ourselves to meet the second-generation challenges too, especially related to sustainability, lower soil quality, massive use of synthetic fertilizers, the adoption of new agricultural technologies, excessive use of pesticides, urbanization on agricultural land, and fragmented supply chains.



An important issue is the migration of the next generation of farmers into other sectors. According to the 2011 Census, every day 2,000 farmers are quitting farming as their main occupation. The income of a farmer is as low as one-fifth of a non-farmer. Moreover, the farming population is aging without having a suitable occupational alternative.

Conventionally, the Indian agriculture system is characterized by caste-based rich peasants, the tenancy of absentee landlords, occupational land tenures, and parasitic landlords. These are the major historical obstacles in the path of advances and development in agriculture.

The total state-owned storage capacity of 37 MMT is held through three public sector agencies viz. Food Corporation of India (FCI), Central Warehousing Corporation (CWC) and State Warehousing Corporation (SWC)

The other issue that the agriculture sector should urgently address is the production and distribution of quality seeds for crops by government organizations. The majority of the farmers do not have access to the seed supply from the National Seed Corporation (NSC), State Farmers Corporation of India (SFCI), and State Seed Corporations (SSCs). Warehouses or storage facilities in the rustic regions are either missing or terribly lacking. Under such circumstances, the farmers are obligated to sell their produce immediately after the harvest at the prevailing market prices causing distress sales. Other issues include less area under leguminous and fodder crops, which ultimately affects the natural fertility of the soil. The soils are losing their resilience characteristics.



As far as the economic status of farmers is concerned, there is a lack of credit facilities and the farmers are not getting remunerative prices. In several parts of the country, most of the farmers remain in heavy debt. This has resulted in many farmers committing suicide.

*As per the
Central
Water
Commission,
85.3% of the
total water
consumed
was for
agriculture
in the year
2000*

Priorities in agriculture

Unfortunately, India ranks as low as 117 out of 193 countries (Sustainable Development Report 2020). As the climate crisis escalates, there is an urgency to maximize collective effort. There is a need to achieve sustainable development goals and transform the lives of farmers and consumers.



We need to educate our farmers to judiciously use the farm inputs for making the environment more sustainable. Better agricultural technology can improve productivity and reduce yield gaps. Irrigation facilities like drip or sprinkler irrigation and rainwater harvesting must be improvised at the farm level. Allied sectors like horticulture, and fisheries also need to be pushed forward. It will make the small farm holders economically sustainable, and they can diversify their source of income. Subsidies must be given to farmers following more environmentally friendly procedures. Linking small farmers with the urban retail supply chain will enhance the productivity and income of farmers. Globally, conservation agriculture has provided a common thread for the application of five sustainability principles—efficient use of water, reduced use of agrochemicals, improved soil health, adaptation to climate change, and doubling farmer income.

Just 14 per cent of farmers have registered on the National Agriculture Market (eNAM). Of those who have registered, 51 per cent have not benefited from the trading platform.

*The Hindu
(Business Line)
July 10, 2019*

Easy access for farmers to advance agriculture technology, and government-funded research with on-the-field trials will enable the country to progress further. Although the government has adopted measures in the form of schemes or programs such as PM Fasal Bima Yojana, PM Krishi Sinchai Yojana, e-NAM, soil healthcare, etc, through rationalizing public expenditures, such schemes must be implemented with high economic returns. Lagging regions of central and eastern India such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, U.P. must be prioritized while implementing the agricultural schemes by the government.

Women are pivotal to the success of agriculture. The Sustainable Development Goal 5 (1), of the United Nations(UN), seeks to grant property rights and tenure security of agricultural land to women the world over. Along with farmers in general, the Indian government must take concrete steps to improve the economic status of women cultivators. Many have hailed the three bills pertaining to market reform in Indian agriculture as a watershed, but there is a need to resolve complex issues such as the large variation across states impeding the emergence of a single national market.