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Dismantling Agrarian Economy: An Appraisal of Agricultural Development Policies

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Dismantling Agrarian Economy: An Appraisal of Agricultural Development Policies

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Abstract: The biggest challenge before the post-colonial South Asia under self-rule was to devise an inclusive policy, legislation and strategy for emancipation of the masses; not only to restore political rights but to enable socio-economic rights to the people whose mainstay was agriculture and, thus changes in agrarian structure became the priority. Large numbers of agrarian reforms have been contemplated in all the South Asian countries to attain the objective of the 'land to the tiller' promise raised during the freedom struggle. Structural changes in the agrarian structure have been introduced through land reform legislation. Simultaneously, mechanisation and use of bio-chemical technologies have been emphasised in order to meet the growing need of the food for increasing population. It resulted into 'Green Revolution' which by increasing food production resulted into new kind of imbalances in the agrarian economy and village society. Thereafter, policy emphasis has been shifted to overall rural development instead of agrarian development. The subsequent developments have fastened the process of urbanisation and steadily agriculture became less significant. Mixed and dual economy was considered in consonance with the constitutional order and inclusive society. Such a model of economy was prevailed until the emphasis was shifted to the neo-liberal economy. It is, therefore, imperative to invent new model of economic inclusiveness with South Asian characteristics like socialism of Chinese characteristics in which there must be some kind of balance among various sectors of the economy (some kind of checks and balances shall have to be developed among agriculture, manufacturing and services sectors).

In essence, the analysis of the impact of past agrarian policies and strategies reveal that though agricultural production and productivity have increased, the agrarian structure and its commensurate life of the people have been dismantled in the villages. The village people have become subordinate to the urban sector. The cities have become centre of power and wealth. The urban splendour has reduced the village people to the squealer leading to suicide by farmers. It is obvious that eighty percent of South Asian poor are still living in the villages as a burden on the agrarian sector. However, there is no focus on sustainable agricultural development in the growth-oriented policies inspired by neo-liberal economy leading to concentration of wealth and power in the urban areas along with multilayered conflict in the South Asian Societies.

The agrarian history of the South Asian countries has been marked by several peasant movements for radical changes inspired by different ideological orientations. The first blow and also systematisation of the agrarian structure took place during the colonial period. However, different patterns continued in different areas under direct British rule and under the princely states during that period. The common components of agrarian economy remained the same in all the areas. The process of its dismantling started during the colonial period itself and accelerated by successive agricultural development policies and strategies during the post-colonial period. As a result of it the commodity production, proletarianization and class differentiation have all increased significantly irrespective of the agricultural development policies. The impact of them on the village community has been of the subject of intense debate. There is a long and intense philosophical and empirical debate on the theme of dismantling village and consequent loss of community life both in the Western and Asian countries. The scholar-leaders in the South Asian countries took cognisance of such a state of affairs and made revivalist approach and reconstructionist strategy integral of the national freedom struggle.

AGRARIAN ECONOMY

Agrarian economy constitutes Farms, Farming activities, Farmers and related socio-cultural activities and value system giving composite reflection of the village community life. Farms involve the size and ownership of the agricultural land had been of critical importance since the evolution of the settled life. The feudal hierarchical system was transforming during the colonial rule and impact of the freedom struggle provided a sense of direction while farming implies the traditional farming activities signified as the agricultural producers securing their livelihood through the use of family and animal labour on the family land wherein the agricultural implements were manufactured by artisans and carpenters in the village itself. Thus the farmers are as agricultural producers securing their livelihood through the use of family and animal labour on the family owned land.¹

The society and culture so evolved under such a situation formed the village community life wherein socio-economic and political relationships evolved in consonance with the village community. However, feudal-hierarchical

relationship evolved over a period of time undermining the idealistic nature of agricultural economy. Both the idealistic nature of agricultural economy and feudalistic-exploitative relations started dismantling giving way to the different nature of the agricultural economy during the colonial period wherein agricultural economy became commoditifying instead of composite structure of socio-economic and political life which could be called as a village community life.² Two different processes of conservation and dissolution have been observed during the colonial period giving way to the national freedom struggle which addressed the problem of dismantling of the agricultural economy. Thus the agrarian communities undermined and perpetuated at the same time.³ Others, however, challenged that in the aftermath of the impact of colonial capital and transformation that follows, the peasant economies have ceased to be pre-capitalist. Hamza Alavi argued that while some the old forms may persist, their under laying structural basis were transformed.⁴ In fact the process of conservation and dissolution are observable but the degree to which the structures of peasant agriculture were preserved remains a matter of contention. Some argue that colonial economy had mainly pauperising and not a proletarianizing effect on the peasantry.⁵ This can be an argument of structural conservation, since pauperisation is a process of impoverishment but there is no qualitative change in the structural position of the peasants whereas the proletarianization essentially involved qualitative shift in the structural position of the peasants. By contrast Newton Gunasinghe emphasizing the perpetuation and reactivation of archaic production relations through the colonial period seems to agree with Alavi when he describes this as a no more than a continuity of formal appearance.

Moreover, conservation of the forms of pre-capitalist agrarian relations, such as share cropping tenancy and the use of unpaid family labour to cultivate small farms continues with slight modifications to the present but this formal conservation is now being threatened by the expanded use of wage labour.

TRANSITION FROM FEUDALISM TO QUASI-CAPITALISM

The agrarian economy with feudalistic-hierarchical relations started transforming into quasi-capitalistic agricultural economy⁶ but the role and contribution of the colonial rule had a mixed blessing.⁷ However, the scholar-leaders of the freedom struggle have intensively investigated the causes and consequences of the colonial rule and explained the process of the dismantling of the agricultural economy. They have discovered two different causes- the evolution of the feudalistic relationship in the agricultural economy and subsequently the colonial rule gradually in forcing the quasi-capitalistic form of the agricultural economy as the causes of the dismantling of the agrarian economy. Thereafter, they prescribed remedies with their revivalist approach and reconstructionist strategy.⁸ It had very little impact on the post-colonial agricultural development policies which evolved through Five different phases:

First Phase (1947—mid 1960's) witnesses tremendous agrarian reform, institutional changes, development of major irrigation projects and strengthening of cooperative credit institutions. Major land reforms including abolition of intermediaries, land ceiling, security of tenancy to fulfil the promise of the 'land to the tiller' were introduced during this phase.⁹ The Community Development Programme, decentralised planning and intensive area development programmes were also initiated for regeneration of Indian agriculture that was stagnated during the colonial rule.

In order to encourage farmers to adopt better technology, incentive price policy was adopted in 1964 and the agricultural Price Commission was set up to advise the government on the fixation of support prices of agriculture crops. Despite the institutional changes and development programmes introduced by the government during this phase, India remained dependent on foreign countries for food to feed the rising population.

Second Phase (mid 1960's-early 1980's) started with the adoption of new strategy for agricultural production in order to address the growing need of the food production. It resulted into 'Green Revolution'. The biggest achievement of this strategy is the attainment of food self-sufficiency.¹⁰ Agrarian reforms took the back seat during this period while research, extension, input supply,

credit marketing, price support and spread of technology were the prime concerns of policy makers.

Third Phase (1980's) started with the diversification in agricultural production. It resulted into fast growth in non-food grains output like milk, fishery, poultry, vegetable, fruits etc. which accelerated growth in agricultural GDP during the 1980's. There has also been a considerable increase in subsidies and other support to agricultural sector during this period while public sector spending in agriculture for infrastructure development started showing decline in real terms during this period but investment of their surplus by farmers continuously rising.

Fourth Phase (1990's) began with the initiation of economic reforms and liberalisation in 1991. It involves deregulation, reduced government participation in economic activities. Although there is no any direct reform for agriculture but the sector was affected indirectly by devaluation of exchange rate, liberalisation of external trade and privatisation of industries. During this period opening up of domestic market due to new international trade agreement as WTO was another change that affected agricultural sector.

Fifth Phase (2000-2014) started with the turn of the Century in order to address new challenges posed by past agricultural development policies. Thus, New Agricultural Policy was launched in 2000. This aims at attaining output growth rate of 4 percent per annum in agriculture sector based on efficient use of resources. This was the first time government of India released National Agricultural Policy. It simply focussed on what ought to be done in this sector but how and when policy goals and objectives would be achieved was not part of the policy document. There was no timeline for attaining the set policy objectives and no action plan was envisaged in the policy document. Subsequently, Indian National Policy for Farmers of 2007 stated that prime farm land must be conserved for agriculture except under exceptional circumstances. This policy has been relaxed to facilitate accelerated industrial growth and infrastructure development. Thus, the land acquisition and development policy has always been politically controversial in the country and populism gained prominence instead of socio-economic rationale.

In essence, the agricultural development policy during all these phases primarily focussed on tenancy reforms, allotment of newly irrigated land, use of improved varieties of seeds, fertilisers, chemicals, mechanisation in order to increase food production. Still, the people are heavily dependent on agriculture because of the alternative job opportunities and redistributive policies failed to appropriately address class composition of the village society. Moreover, importing cheap food grains adversely affected the agrarian economy by making agricultural activities unviable. However, the agricultural subsidy has somewhat helped the farmers but agricultural labourer could not get any relief but for them Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has substantially ameliorated the conditions of the agricultural labourers in the countryside.

IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES

Post-colonial agricultural development policies have been resulted into significant changes in the agricultural sector. The Land Use Pattern has changed in all parts of the country affecting the employment and land holding structures. The share of agriculture in employment declined from 82 percent in 1950/51 to 72 percent in 2001. Share in GDP also declined. As regards the agricultural workforce, 28.1 percent were registered as agricultural labourer and rest as cultivators whereas 45.6 percent were registered as agricultural labour, the rest 54.4 percent cultivators during this period. This shows that agricultural workforce has shifted from cultivator to agricultural labourers implying proletarianization in the agricultural sector. Simultaneously, Number of operational holding has also increased but area was not increased significantly. It implies that the size of operational holding has been reducing. It indicates that inequalities in land distribution are being reduced but number of uneconomic holdings is increasing.¹¹

Agriculture and allied sectors like fisheries, forestry account for 13.7 percent of the GDP in 2013 and about 50 percent of the workforce. The economic contribution of agriculture to India's GDP is steadily declining with the country's broad-based economic growth. Still demographically the broadest economic sector and plays a significant role in the overall socio-economic life of the country. India is one of the largest exporters of agro-products.

India has made immense progress towards food security after independence. Indian population has almost tripled and food production has quadrupled. There has been a substantial increase in availability of food grain per capita. India underwent food shortage crisis during 60's of the last century and thus focussed on significant policy reforms to attain the objective of food self-sufficiency. It ushered into 'Green Revolution' by using improved varieties of seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, chemicals, agricultural mechanisation combined with better farming knowledge and productivity. The initial increase in production was centred on the irrigation areas of the states like Punjab, Haryana and Utter Pradesh with the farmers and government focussing on farm productivity and knowledge transfer, India's total food grain production soared. Such a rapid growth in farm productivity enabled India to become self-sufficient by the 1970's. It also empowered smallholder farmers to seek further means to increase food production and productivity.¹²

Agricultural economy underwent structural changes between 1970-2011. The GDP share of agriculture has fallen from 43 percent to 16 percent. This is not because of reduced importance of agriculture or consequence of agricultural policy. This is largely because of rapid economic growth in services, industrial output and non-agricultural sectors in India between 2000-2010.

There are large sources of irrigation like Ground water, wells and energised tube wells and surface water canal, rivers tanks, rainwater harvesting projects for agricultural activities besides construction of large dams. Of these ground water is the largest. In 2010 only about 35 percent of the agricultural land was reliably irrigated and about 2/3 of the agricultural land was cultivated and dependent on monsoon. Agriculture is nearly 13 percent of GDP and 10 percent of export earnings. Still, India has the largest herds of buffalos and cattle and thus largest producer of milk and has one of the largest growing poultry industries. The country is also focussing on clean and green production methods for getting premium prices of agricultural production in the market. It is more than in any other country.¹³

Similarly, cropping pattern is significantly changing. Area under non-food crops is increasing as proportion of the total cropped area but still there is dominance of the food crops. Non-food crops increased from 23.3 to 34.7 percent between 1950/51 and 2001. It reflects a shift from subsistence crops

to commercial crops, from wheat and rice to other cereals and pulses. It is because of the market and profitability. There is also declining trend in productivity which can be addressed through shifting from wheat and rice to other cereals and pulses but wheat and rice coupled with other crops are backed by Minimum Support Prices (MSP) and input subsidy in order to meet the growing requirement of food grain for increasing population.¹⁴

National Agricultural Policy in 2000 has streamlined the agricultural credit system for addressing the problem of credit requirement in the agricultural sector. As a result of which, the agricultural credit has increased Rs. 86981 Crore in 2003-2004 to 446779 Crore in 2010-11. An annual compound growth rate is about 25 percent. The commercial Banks recorded considerable growth from around 36 percent in 1993-94 to about 75 percent in 2010-11. The cooperative banks despite their wide net work lost their dominant position, their share declined from 58.3 to 15.8 percent 1993-94-2010-11. Share of regional rural banks has increased from 5 to 9.4 percent. Moreover, the tenant farmers, sharecroppers and oral leases have no access to institutional credit.¹⁵

National Agricultural Policy 2000 stated that private sector participation will be promoted through contract farming and land leasing arrangements to allow accelerated technology transfer, capital inflow and assured market for crop production. However, there has not been any significant participation by the private sector in agriculture.

The consumption pattern is also changing non-cereal consumption is increasing. The consumption of vegetable, fruits, milk, egg, meat, fish, and edible oil shows increasing trend while cereal and pulse consumption is declining.¹⁶ Moreover, the share of food in total household budget is also declining. This might have been because of the reduction in energy requirements.¹⁷ On the whole, the aggregate agricultural output increased annually at 2.6 percent during 1950/51 to 2006/7. Annual growth rate was highest during 1981/82- 1990/91 and lowest 1950/51-1965/66.

In sum, Agricultural workforce has shifted from cultivators to agricultural labour force, the number of uneconomic holdings has an increasing, and area under food crop is shifting to non-food crops and within food crops shifting from cereal to non-cereals. Growth trend of aggregate agriculture as well as

sub-sectors of agriculture except forestry is showing declining trend during post WTO period. It indicates mixed performance and diverse impact of agricultural development policies.

It is apparent that agricultural development policy was focussed on increase in agricultural production by various means and supporting activities. It was, in fact, agricultural output and product-centric and thus major policy shift has been contemplated after 2014 ushering in the new phase of farmer-centric policy for increasing the income of farmers. It was ambitiously announced to double the farmers income by 2022 for which concrete policy is yet to be formulated and action plan is to be initiated. However, it is obvious that some major policy changes are most likely in the direction from “country’s food security” to the “farmer’s income security”.

The evaluation and assessment of the past policies reveal that the anti-feudal mobilisation, tenancy reforms, mechanisation, use of improved varieties, use of chemical and fertilisers and growing importance of wage labour indicates the structural changes in the agrarian sector which is completely dismantled from its traditional form can be called as quasi-capitalistic agricultural economy. However, there are certain structural continuities still persists,¹⁸ there are small holders who still rely on family labour. There are also trends that small family farmers are who lease out their land to big land owners rather than cultivate it themselves what we call it “hidden tenancy” It is because the size of land holding is not sufficient to earn livelihood from it or involved in other commodity production activities. Whatever the efforts for conservation of agrarian economy may accomplish not so much its revitalisation as its simulation.

The institution of caste continues to be an important component in the social and political organisation of the village and agricultural economy even though its present functions are radically different/changed from what they were earlier. The caste system has lost much of its rigid and obligatory character. It is no longer important as a mechanism for extracting surplus and services from duty-bound low caste groups. Low caste groups have successfully relinquished compulsory caste services, which they now describe as demeaning work. They have given up use of derogatory caste and individual names. On the whole the village social order has been infused with an egalitarian ethos that resists

hierarchical arrangement. Caste is seen as a matter of cultural heritage and personal identity rather than a mark of superiority or inferiority. Moreover, the policies and politicisation (democratisation) is redefining rules of the social organisation at the village level wherein the traditional agrarian economy has almost been dismantled in favour of quasi capitalistic agricultural economy.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

Irrespective of some impressive achievement in terms of agricultural development, it is embedded with serious problems of limited market access options, lacks cold storage, food packaging as well as safe and efficient rural transport system. It causes one of the world's highest spoilage rates, particularly during monsoon and other adverse weather conditions.¹⁹

World Bank has categorically mentioned that “slow agricultural growth is a concern for policy-makers as some two-thirds of India's people depend on rural employment for a living. Current agricultural practices are neither economically nor environmentally sustainable and India's yield for many agricultural commodities are low. Poorly maintained irrigation system and almost universal lack of good extension services are among the factors responsible. Farmers' access to market is hampered by poor roads, rudimentary market infrastructure and excessive regulation”

Accelerated economic growth is having very limited positive effect in promoting agricultural development and thus agricultural growth rate per annum very slow. Moreover, Indian farmers receive just 10 to 23 percent of the price of Indian consumer pays for exactly the same produce, the difference going to losses, inefficiency and middlemen whereas in developed countries farmers receive 64 to 81 percent of the prices consumer pays.²⁰ Still there is low productivity due to very small land holdings and inadequate use of modern sustainable practice of agricultural growth.

World Bank has listed large number of problem facing India's agriculture including large agricultural subsidies are hampering productivity, enhancing investment, overregulation, price risks, uncertainty, government interventions in labour, land and credit markets. India has inadequate infrastructure and services, water allocation is inefficient, unsustainable and inequitable.²¹ The

irrigation infrastructure is deteriorating and there is over use of water. Finally, World Bank has concluded and warned that Food security will be a big problem by 2030.

Moreover, the emerging trend of farmer's suicide due to agrarian distress is an emerging issue in India. The National Crime Records Bureau of India reported 13754 farmer suicides in 2012. It accounts 11.2 percent of all suicides in India. Reasons may be monsoon failure, debt burden, government policies, public mental health, personal issues and family problem.²²

In essence, required level of investment for the development of marketing, storage, cold storage, and infrastructure is estimated to be huge. The government has not raised investment in marketing and storage infrastructure. In 2015 NDA government announced to double the farmers' income by 2022²³ and Start-ups with niche technology and new business models are working to solve problems of Indian agriculture and its marketing but it has to go a long way to have sustainable agricultural development.

CONCLUSION

Whole society was organised according to the agricultural activities in the past but policy practice compartmentalised the comprehensive nature of agriculture and focussed on a particular component of agriculture and traditional balance has been disturbed in which cities became the centre of power and wealth not merely market place for exchange of goods and services.

Agriculture has become a commodity and product whereas it was not merely a product but way of life and whole socio-culture, economic and political structures and processes were structured accordingly.. It is therefore, obvious that agriculture as autonomous activities of organising social and political life has been dismantled. It has become subordinate to the modern industrial and services sectors. Such a process gave way to the modern problems of urbanization, environmental degradation and larger ethical and moral issues consisting of cultural core of the society.

In the face of material changes, expansion of educational opportunities, greater democratisation one cannot sustain appeal of traditional community

life just by being nostalgic yearning for an imagined past. Community is at once a thing, a particular and peculiar aggregate of people, and a feeling, a set of attitudes towards one another held by the members of that aggregate. Such a thing was integral to agricultural economy which has been dismantled from its pristine purity. It is obvious that the past is imbued with material misery but present atomisation of humans is also posing a challenge to bring people together in a community of the sensitised people. In nutshell, initial agricultural development policy was farm-centric in which size and ownership of farms were the main concerns, subsequently it became farming-centric in order to meet the food requirements of the increasing population and finally it became farmer-centric focussing on the condition of the farmers.

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