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Agrarian Development and Policy

AB Adegoroye

Department of Food Science Ambassador Crawford College of Agriculture, Ohio, USA

Corresponding Author; **AB Adegoroye**

Abstract

Agrarian development is a multidimensional concept encompassing the economic, social, institutional, and technological transformations required to uplift the agricultural sector and improve the livelihoods of rural populations. In the Indian context, agrarian development and policy have undergone significant evolution since independence, influenced by colonial legacies, socio-political dynamics, global economic trends, and ecological pressures. India's agricultural sector has been foundational not only for food security but also for employment, rural welfare, and socio-economic equity. However, the trajectory of agrarian development has been uneven, marked by regional disparities, policy inconsistencies, and structural inefficiencies.

Historically, India's agrarian framework was deeply shaped by British colonial policies that prioritized revenue extraction over rural development. The Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari systems institutionalized unequal land ownership patterns, leaving a legacy of landlordism, tenant exploitation, and fragmented holdings. Post-independence, land reform policies were introduced to redistribute land, eliminate intermediaries, and recognize tenancy rights. While states like Kerala and West Bengal achieved commendable success through movements like Operation Barga, many states failed to implement these reforms effectively due to political resistance and administrative inertia.

One of the landmark phases of agrarian transformation was the Green Revolution in the 1960s and 70s. This era brought significant technological advancements such as high-yielding variety (HYV) seeds, synthetic fertilizers, and improved irrigation techniques. Initially focused on wheat and rice, primarily in Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh, the Green Revolution dramatically increased food grain production and transformed India from a food-deficit to a self-sufficient nation. However, it also had unintended consequences, including regional imbalances, ecological degradation, increased input dependency, and exclusion of marginal farmers who lacked access to resources. To promote holistic agrarian growth, the Indian government has introduced numerous policy initiatives. The National Agricultural Policy (2000) aimed to ensure equitable, sustainable, and diversified agricultural growth with a target growth rate of 4% per annum. More recent schemes like PM-Kisan, PMFBY (Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana), Soil Health Card Scheme, and E-NAM (Electronic National Agriculture Market) were introduced to address income security, climate risk, soil degradation, and market integration, respectively.

Keyword: Agrarian Development, Agrarian Policy, Land Reforms, Green Revolution, Indian Agriculture, Rural Development, Agricultural Economics, Agricultural Market Reforms

Introduction

Agriculture has been the cornerstone of India's economy, employing a significant portion of the population and contributing substantially to the nation's GDP. Over the decades, the agrarian sector has undergone numerous transformations, influenced by historical events, policy interventions, and socio-economic changes. This article delves into the evolution of agrarian development and policy in India, examining its historical context, key reforms, contemporary challenges, and future directions.

Historical Context and Colonial Legacy

The agrarian structure in India has been deeply influenced by its colonial past. The British colonial policies, such as the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, introduced a system where zamindars (landlords) were made the owners of land, while peasants were reduced to mere tenants. This led to the exploitation of farmers and a decline in agricultural productivity.

Post-independence, the Indian government aimed to rectify these inequities through land reforms. The abolition of zamindari system, tenancy reforms, and land ceiling acts

were introduced to redistribute land to the tillers. However, the implementation of these reforms was inconsistent, with some regions like West Bengal and Kerala achieving notable success, while others lagged behind due to political and administrative challenges.

Key Agrarian Policies and Initiatives

1. **Green Revolution (1960s–1980s):** The introduction of high-yielding variety seeds, chemical fertilizers, and irrigation techniques led to a significant increase in food grain production, particularly in states like Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. This period marked India's transition from a food-deficient nation to a self-sufficient one.
2. **National Agricultural Policy (2000):** This policy aimed to achieve a growth rate of 4% per annum in the agricultural sector, enhance farm incomes, and promote sustainable farming practices. It emphasized the need for diversification, modernization, and improved access to markets.
3. **Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY):** Launched in 2016, this crop insurance scheme aimed to provide financial support to farmers in case of crop failure due to natural calamities. It sought to reduce the burden of premium on farmers and ensure timely compensation.
4. **PM Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN):** Introduced in 2019, this scheme provides direct income support to farmers, aiming to supplement their income and alleviate financial distress.
5. **Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY):** Initiated in 2007, RKVY aimed to incentivize states to increase public investment in agriculture and allied sectors. It focused on infrastructure development, capacity building, and promoting agricultural entrepreneurship.

Contemporary Challenges in Agrarian Sector

Despite various policy interventions, the agrarian sector faces several challenges:

1. **Small and Fragmented Land Holdings:** The average landholding size in India has been decreasing, leading to fragmented and uneconomical farming practices. This hampers the adoption of modern agricultural techniques and reduces productivity.
2. **Inadequate Access to Credit:** Many farmers, especially smallholders, face difficulties in accessing formal credit. They often resort to informal sources of credit that charge exorbitant interest rates, leading to indebtedness and distress.
3. **Market Inefficiencies:** Farmers often lack access to reliable markets and face price volatility. The absence of cold storage facilities and efficient transportation infrastructure leads to post-harvest losses and reduced income.
4. **Climate Change:** Erratic weather patterns, droughts, and floods have adversely affected agricultural productivity. The sector's vulnerability to climate change necessitates the adoption of resilient farming practices.
5. **Declining Soil Health:** Over-reliance on chemical fertilizers and monoculture cropping has led to soil degradation, affecting long-term agricultural sustainability.

Recent Developments and Innovations

In recent years, several initiatives have been undertaken to address the challenges faced by the agrarian sector:

1. **Agroforestry Policy:** India became the first country to adopt a national agroforestry policy in 2014. The policy aims to integrate trees into agricultural landscapes to enhance productivity, improve soil health, and mitigate climate change effects.
2. **Watershed Development Programs:** Initiatives like the Mid-Himalayan Watershed Development Project focus on sustainable land management practices, water conservation, and community participation to improve agricultural productivity.
3. **Digital Agriculture:** The adoption of technology in agriculture, such as the use of drones, satellite imagery, and mobile applications, has facilitated precision farming, better resource management, and improved market linkages.
4. **Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs):** FPOs have been promoted to enable farmers to collectively market their produce, access better prices, and reduce transaction costs.

Case Studies of Successful Agrarian Reforms

1. **Operation Barga (West Bengal):** Launched in 1978, Operation Barga aimed to record sharecroppers (bargadars) and grant them legal rights over the land they cultivated. This initiative led to increased agricultural productivity and improved socio-economic conditions for farmers.
2. **Kerala's Agrarian Reforms:** Kerala implemented a series of agrarian reforms, including land redistribution, tenancy reforms, and the establishment of cooperative societies. These measures led to equitable land distribution and improved agricultural outcomes.

Future Directions for Agrarian Policy

To ensure sustainable and inclusive growth in the agrarian sector, the following strategies are recommended:

1. **Land Consolidation:** Encouraging land pooling and consolidation can help in achieving economies of scale, promoting mechanization, and improving productivity.
2. **Access to Credit:** Strengthening institutional credit systems and providing affordable loans to farmers can reduce dependence on informal sources and alleviate indebtedness.
3. **Market Reforms:** Implementing reforms like the Model Agricultural Produce and Livestock Marketing (Promotion and Facilitation) Act can facilitate better market access and reduce intermediaries.
4. **Climate-Resilient Farming:** Promoting practices like crop diversification, rainwater harvesting, and the use of drought-resistant seeds can help farmers adapt to changing climatic conditions.
5. **Capacity Building:** Training farmers in modern agricultural techniques, financial literacy, and digital tools can enhance their productivity and income.

Conclusion

Agrarian development and policy occupy a central place in the socio-economic trajectory of India, given the country's deep-rooted dependence on agriculture for food security, employment, and rural livelihoods. The evolution of agrarian policies over the decades reflects a complex interplay of historical legacies, political priorities, economic strategies,

and ecological realities. While significant strides have been made in transforming Indian agriculture—from land reforms in the post-independence era to the Green Revolution and the adoption of modern technologies—persistent challenges continue to threaten the sustainability and inclusiveness of agrarian growth.

The Green Revolution stands out as a landmark moment, boosting food grain production and ensuring national food security. However, it also highlighted regional disparities and raised concerns about environmental degradation, monocropping, and excessive dependence on external inputs like synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. The uneven distribution of its benefits exposed the limitations of a one-size-fits-all policy approach. This experience underlines the necessity of designing region-specific, farmer-centric policies that address both productivity and equity.

Recent policy initiatives such as PM-KISAN, PMFBY, e-NAM, and soil health card schemes signify a shift towards income support, risk management, market integration, and sustainability. However, these schemes require better implementation, wider outreach, and robust monitoring to truly transform rural agriculture. Many small and marginal farmers still struggle with access to credit, irrigation, storage, and fair market prices. Structural problems such as fragmented land holdings, declining profitability, and weak institutional support continue to cause distress among farming communities.

Furthermore, climate change has emerged as a critical challenge, causing frequent crop failures, droughts, floods, and other environmental shocks. This demands a decisive move towards climate-resilient agriculture, supported by investment in research, extension services, and climate-smart technologies. Additionally, there is a need to prioritize sustainable practices like organic farming, agroforestry, and integrated pest and nutrient management.

A reimagining of agrarian policy must also address the social and economic dimensions of rural development. Gender inequality in land ownership, youth disengagement from agriculture, and the marginalization of tenant farmers are issues that require targeted interventions. Empowering Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), promoting agro-entrepreneurship, and investing in rural infrastructure can enhance inclusivity and innovation in the sector.

Ultimately, agrarian development must be approached not merely as an economic agenda but as a social justice imperative. Policies must ensure that the benefits of agricultural growth are equitably distributed and that smallholders, women farmers, and rural laborers are not left behind. Participatory policymaking, where farmers are stakeholders and not just beneficiaries, can bridge the gap between intention and impact.

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