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Kumar, Dr.B.Pradeep

Department of Economics, Government College, Ambalapuzha

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How inclusive is Agriculture for Women folk? : A study of Kerala

Dr.B.Pradeep Kumar

Assistant Professor in Economics,
Government College, Ambalappuzha,
Kerala,
pradeepgck@gmail.com

As we live in the era of inclusive development, it is quite important that all sectors and segments must have a deserving place the realm of economy policies at all levels. No matter what policies have been implemented by the government over the years towards accomplishing the much cherished objective of inclusive growth, the agricultural sector that feeds nearly more than fifty percent of Indians finds itself in doldrums, having witnessed a persistent plummeting of its growth rates. The policy advocacies have not suitably encompassed the imperatives of agricultural sector although intermittently the need to rectify this loophole in framing policies have been rightly voiced by experts at many a time. The role of agriculture in sustaining the quality of growth rate has long been recognised. Agriculture sector through its linkage with all other sectors propels the growth spectrum and therefore the foundation of growth should have its foot landing on the firm support of the agriculture sector. The lukewarm attention that has been paid to the agriculture sector and its potential consequences are identified by many experts. For instance, Dr.Manmohan Singh, former Prime Minister, once said the agricultural sector in India has been beset with the problems of policy and technological fatigue.

Agriculture sector being the source of income and employment to a large number of unskilled and semi-skilled people, including those hailing from the disadvantaged communities and women from all walks of life, the meaningful and constructive progress of this sector is

immensely important for the accomplishment of the goal of “inclusive and faster economic growth” as envisioned in the 12th Five Year Plan. However, what worries us is the dismal performance that this sector has exhibited over years especially in a State like Kerala where land reforms were undertaken as early as in 1950s. Post- reform, particularly the agriculture sector has performed poorly and the space has been taken over by the Service sector. For instance, as the table reveals in 2013-14, the growth rate of agricultural in India stood at -2.8 percent whereas it was near 3 percent during the immediate decade of the reform. It is interesting to see that the non-agriculture sector has performed extremely well during the same period, touching its growth rate as high as near 10 percent. A slowdown in the growth rate of agriculture sector poses many threats to the existence of a large number of income poor and vulnerable people who historically depend on the agriculture and allied activities for livelihood. On the contrary, the up in the growth rate of service sector may be a direct blessing to the middle and rich income groups. A decline in the share of agriculture to SGDP is a natural outcome of the structural process that every economy undergoes but an absolute decline in the quantum of output generated in the agriculture sector signs an impending crisis that looms over the heads of marginalized and vulnerable people including women. Hence, sustainable growth of the agricultural sector is indispensable for the attainment of the objective of inclusive growth.

Table 1 Growth Rate of Agriculture and Non-Agriculture Sectors in Kerala

Sector	1990-91 to	2000-01 to	2013-14
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	1999-2000	2010-11	
Agriculture	2.53	0.27	-2.8
Forestry and Logging	3.69	2.00	3.4
Fishery	-0.37	0.32	5.43
Allied Service	2.34	0.46	-1.36
Non-Agriculture	6.24	9.41	
All Sectors	5.25	7.96	6.27

Source: Various reports of State Planning Board, Kerala

Women in the Agriculture sector in Kerala

In the agricultural sector, women play an undisputable role as women farmers, women entrepreneurs, women agricultural workers and women co farmers. But their presence has been more visible in the form of women agricultural workers. There is a dearth of data on women participation in the agricultural sector which in fact puts irreparable constraints on any study pertaining to women representation in various stages of agricultural operation. But it is true that they have been very active in the agricultural sector, both visible and invisibly. However, Census, 2011 has reported a lower work participation of women in the agriculture sector in Kerala (Geethakutty, 2012). One possible reason for this is the transition in the crop pattern in Kerala. In 1960-61, 45 percent of area was used for the cultivation of food crops and only 37 percent for cash crops. But in 2013-14, the area used for the cultivation of food crops came down drastically to just 10 percent whereas the area for cash crops went up to 62 percent. Cash crops being relatively less labour intensive, with cash crops replacing food crops the employment opportunities for women in the agricultural field might have plummeted, throwing many women partially unemployed. Moreover, as men workers are preferred in the cultivation of cash crops, the shift in the cropping pattern from food crops to cash

crops has cost the employment prospects of women in the agriculture sector.

There are five types of women in the agriculture sector: women farmers, co-farmers, women agriculture workers, agriculture business operators and farmer groups. Census, 2011 reports that in Kerala 21 percent of households are female headed. It has been proved by studies that even in men headed farm households; women engage daily for 3 to 4 hours in agriculture operations without receiving monetary rewards (unpaid workers). Roughly 40 percent income of such men headed farm households is owed to unpaid work rendered by women co farmers. Recently, thanks to the Kudumbashree, women have come forward to form 'farmer groups' which are actively involved in hiring cultivating on land that remain uncultivated by its owners for long. Women agricultural workers have been very active in Kerala. But owing to decline in agricultural operation, their presence has come down. But the advent of MGNREGS has changed the scenario. Today, 94 percent of workers of MGNREGS are women and MGNREGS works are mainly land development related works. Recently, the presence of women in agricultural business has gone up in Kerala that too thanks to the initiatives by Kudumbashree and SHGs. In the transportation sector too women have started showing their presence.

Impediments to the Development of Women Inclusive Agriculture System in Kerala

Keeping in mind the relevance of Agriculture in Kerala's sustainable development, it is imperative that the time ripened enough to address the problems that impede the attempts towards realizing a women inclusive agriculture system in Kerala. Studies have shown that the lack of access of women to farm information, different types of critical farm inputs at the right time and price, information regarding the subsidies, availability of land, and

marketing are areas that require attention by the policy makers and governments. This calls for devising mechanisms and institutions for positive discriminations in development that ensure the participation, contribution and benefitting from the agriculture sector by women folk in the State. In this paper our next attempt is to briefly present some of the concerns that may hinder the efforts to attain the inclusion of women in the agriculture sector of the State.

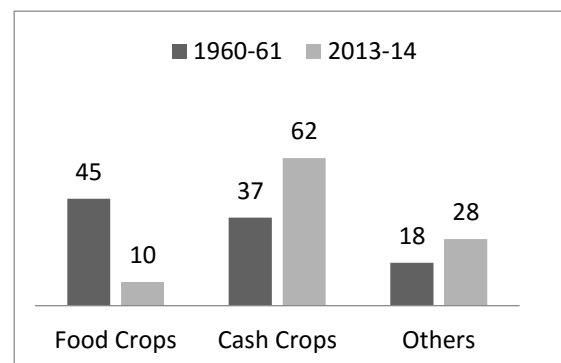
One area that needs urgent attention is the problems associated with climate change. Climate change has started posing challenges to the agriculture sector elsewhere in the world. In the case of Kerala where rain fed agriculture constitutes 80 percent of mode of agricultural production, variations climate change raises many hurdles. Studies have shown that Wayanad district, where women participation in MGNREGS is very high in the State, would be the first affected district due to climate change in Kerala.

Kerala has been witnessing a sharp fall in the area under the cultivation of many crops especially food crops. Cultivable lands have been converted for non-agricultural purposes including the construction of residential houses. Moreover, cultivable lands even in rural areas owned by rich people remain uncultivated for years. The decline in agricultural land area especially paddy land has resulted in reducing the ground water level in the State which will have serious implications in the State.

The changes in the cropping pattern and cropping systems over years have turned against the interest of women agricultural workers in the State. As mentioned at the outset, the transition from food crop dominated cropping pattern to a cash crop dominated one has in fact substantially reduced the demand for women agricultural workers. As we know, in Kerala four type of cropping system are followed viz. Paddy

based low land cropping system, coconut based mixed cropping system, mono crop plantations and homestead based cropping system which is unique in Kerala. Of these, the first and the last used to ensure women participation although in the case of homestead based cropping system the women participation is invisible. In Kerala, there has been a continuous decline in the first and the last cropping systems. This has resulted in reducing the involvement of women in the agricultural sector in Kerala. It needs to be mentioned here that in recent times, certain attempts have been made to encourage women to engage more in homestead mixed cropping system by the Department of Agriculture.

Figure 1 Change in Cropping Pattern in Kerala



Source: Economic Reviews, Kerala State Planning Board

Although Kerala has been hailed as an agrarian State, with the share of Agriculture in SGDP plummeting to as low as nearly 12 percent, it has in reality becomes an agrarian State sans agriculture (Geethakutty, 2012). It could be rightly called a service sector state where more than 76 percent of SGDP is sourced from service sector. Since the working environments in the service sector is far better than the agriculture related works, women naturally tend to rely on the service sector for employment irrespective of the quantum of payment they are likely to fetch from the Service sector compared to the agriculture sector. Women who work just to supplement and not to substitute the main source of income to their family prefer

better and quality working environment to the filthy working atmosphere. As co-farmers women used to support their male counterparts in various aspects of agricultural operation from sowing to marketing. But now, even farmers disappear themselves from the field of agriculture, not speak of co-farmers.

Conclusion

For a more inclusive development, one can hardly deny the role of agriculture sector. But, unfortunately contemporary development strategy does not appear to be adequately addressing the problem of agricultural sector. As agriculture still continues to be offering jobs to many people including women, for more inclusive development, pro-farm policies must find place in the development agenda of both Centre and State governments. Self Help Groups led by Women must be financially and technically supported by the Institutions so that they can constructively contribute to the advancement of agriculture sector.

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