
Book Reviews

Distress in the Fields: Indian Agriculture After Economic Liberalisation Edited by R. Ramakumar, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2022. P.xxi + 484.

As one of the world's largest agrarian economies, Indian agriculture provides significant support for economic growth and social transformation. It not only ensures food security to 1.4 billion people, but also remains as a source of livelihood for nearly half of the population. The economic liberalisation policies ushered in since 1991 have impacted the agrarian sector significantly. In the post liberalization period, between 1990-91 and 2020-21, the foodgrain production has increased by 68 per cent, pulses production by 62 per cent and oilseeds production by 80 per cent despite a decline of three million hectares in the net area sown. The resilient agriculture has enabled the Government to roll-out one of the largest food security programmes, 'Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana' during the Covid pandemic to 80 crore poor people which covers two-third of the country's population. Nonetheless the viability of farming as a source of livelihood is a subject of great concern for the peasantry and policy makers. This edited book narrates the agrarian distress in the post-liberalisation period, in sixteen chapters under six major themes, with an introductory chapter by the editor on economic reforms and agricultural policy. The introductory chapter, the highlight of the book, empirically analyses the policy changes, its outcome and growth in different phases of the Indian agriculture. The chapter dissents with many of the liberal economic development policies and ideas.

In the first theme on 'Land and Agrarian Relations' Madhura Swaminathan traces the issues related to growing inequalities during 50 years from 1960 in terms of agricultural growth across regions, incomes, and land ownership. Vikas Rawal and Vaishali Bansal in their chapter on 'The Land Question in Contemporary Rural India' argues that the landlessness and inequality in land ownership increased over decades and the common narratives such as proliferation of small and uneconomic holdings, disintegration of large holdings and disappearance of tenancy have weak evidence. In the last chapter on this theme, 'The Forest Land Rights of Tribals' Geetanjoy Sahu assesses the impact of the 'Scheduled Tribe and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006' in recognising the individual forest rights based on the data from Palghar District of Maharashtra. The traditional core issues in the theme have been well addressed except for other issues related to the theme like common property resource management, contract farming experiments, women rights to land, collective farming experiments through farmer producer organisations, technology enabled land management issues like digitisation of land records etc.

The next theme addresses 'Investment and Expenditure in Agriculture' in two chapters. S. L. Shetty reason out the increasing marginalisation of land holdings along with rising fragmentation hinders investment in agriculture. The inequality in the farm

sector accentuated due to trade-offs between subsidies and agricultural investments and the higher private investment on labour-saving mechanisation through institutional credit. Gurpreet Singh and Sridhar Kundu analyses the declining trends in public investments in agriculture and its skewed composition towards crop sector.

Under the theme on 'Agricultural Trade,' the lone chapter by Sachin Kumar Sharma, Teesta Lahiri and Suvayan Neogi narrates the domestic support measures in agriculture under WTO agreement and its trends, issues, and challenges. Other issues of interest include export competitiveness of agricultural products, export value chains, trends in export and import of agricultural products etc. Some of these topics are mentioned in the introductory chapter.

In the fourth theme on 'Costs, Profits and Incomes,' the chapter on 'Economic Liberalisation and Fertilizer Policies in India' by Prachi Bansal and Vikas Rawal analyse the significant changes in the fertiliser policies since 1990s and conclude that post-liberalisation policies resulted in increase in prices of fertilisers other than urea and thereby accentuated the urea bias in fertiliser application. Tapas Singh Modak examines the 'Transformation of the Irrigation Economy in India' and describes how the shift towards private groundwater Irrigation is associated with greater inequality in ownership and access to irrigation. Biplab Sarkar analyses the agricultural price policy and concludes MSPs announced by the Government did not compensate for the actual cost of production in majority of the states and the procurement is low compared to the total produce. In a plot level analysis of cost of cultivation and profitability, Ashish Kamra found that the Government's 'getting prices right' policy led to increase in input prices and decrease/stagnation in output prices after early 2010s. Aparajita Bakshi's analysis reveals that agricultural income for majority of the households are inadequate to meet, either the consumption based or the income-based, poverty standards. Also, small farmers stay on in agriculture despite low income due to the inability of non-agricultural sector to absorb the surplus labour from agriculture and provide adequate income and employment.

In the theme on 'Credit and Insurance,' Pallavi Chavan and R. Ramakumar relates trends in agricultural credit to the changes in banking policy, particularly the changes in priority sector lending policies. The interesting findings of the chapter include disbursement of large proportion of agriculture loans through urban and metropolitan branches, 'March bunching' though limited agricultural activity in March and decline in the share of long term credit in total agricultural credit. Awanish Kumar narrates the implementation of crop insurance in historical perspective and bring out several design and conceptualisation issues plagued the PMFBY, the flagship crop insurance scheme in the country.

The sixth and the last theme is on Agricultural Marketing and Food Security. Sukhpal Singh examines regulatory aspects of market reforms with respect to two central acts on contract farming, viz., Agricultural Produce and Livestock Contract Farming and Services (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2018 and The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act,

2020. This chapter highlights the gaps in the acts and argues elaborately the conditions for adequate safeguards for small farmer inclusion. Sudha Narayan discusses the regulatory framework and the range of market reforms including the farm laws of 2020. The chapter summarises issues related to market access and monopsony, fragmented markets, price for quality, aggregation, post-harvest losses, price support and procurement; and policy uncertainties. Anmol Somanchi, while analysing the food security policy and reforms in public distribution system, finds that the PDS has grown steadily over years and has become central to our welfare policy. The chapter also highlights some drawbacks such as coverage based on outdated population figures, non-inclusion of pulses and millets; and the absence of a responsive grievances redressal mechanisms.

To sum, the book with disaggregated analyses using granular data on many aspects, provide deeper insights into many critical issues of agricultural development. The chapters tell the other side of the outcomes of our agricultural development policies in the last two decades. This tome, a valuable addition to the existing literature on the subject would certainly be of interest to students, researchers, and policy makers to understand the post-liberalisation development process and policies in agricultural sector.

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