

Agriculture and food in India: A half-century review from independence (Bruno Dorin and Frederic Landy)

Shruti Vats

Assistant Professor, Aryabhata College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Abstract

This book talks about the changes and revolutions that have taken place in Indian agriculture since Independence till 2001. The book fully cover all the issues related to food and agriculture during the five decade from 1947 to 2001.

Keywords: agriculture, food

Introduction

This book was originally written in French with an objective of giving the non Indian readers a taste of changes and revolutions that have taken place in Indian agriculture since Independence to 2001. The current book in English has a translated by Helen Burford from French.

It is simply a synthesis of scholarly articles, literature available and authors own field experience. No attempt has been made to analyze. In short it is a compilation of ideas, arguments, suggestions with easy to follow graphs from authentic sources. It is suitable for anyone who wants precise information on various topics before going into a detailed research. The book targets a broad readership including diplomat, engineers, entrepreneurs, researchers, teachers, students, any world citizen concerned about food and agriculture issues.

The review will start with the criteria that I have used to judge the book followed by a brief summary of the chapters, content and organization of the book. A critical evaluation has been attempted with my understanding and assessment of the book. Lastly a conclusion has been given summarizing the review.

Background

“More than a fifth of the world’s farmer’s lives in India, which has over a billion inhabitants to support and feed. From Independence in 1947 to the lifting of trade barriers in 2001, this book explains how the Indian Union has succeeded in becoming one of the world's leading food producers, but also why it is still a land of poverty. The various aspects of the question are addressed, from the environment (cultural and natural, local and international) to institutions and food products. The ins and outs of the green revolution are obviously discussed, but so are those of other less familiar coloured revolutions (white for dairy, yellow for vegetable oils, blue for aquaculture), not forgetting horticultural and poultry dynamics, as well as products that give India its flavour (spices, tea and other plantation crops). Three core issues are debated at the end: the unsolved problem of poverty and under-nutrition, the worrying deterioration of natural resources, and the recent economic liberalization. This half-century review, which takes the form of a handbook for a broad readership, enlightens us on both the past and future paths of the world's biggest democracy [1].”

Table of contents: Introduction.

1. The natural and cultural heritage: Nature: from sandy desert to evergreen forest; Population: a melting pot;

Government: between centralism and decentralization; Land: a focus for reform and conflict. Food: a cultural issue.

2. The tropical plantation: Spices and nuts: a taste of ancient India; Tea, coffee, tobacco: colonial plantations under state boards; Cotton: between agriculture and industry; Sugar cane: a green revolution flavour.
3. The green (cereals) revolution: The motive: to assert the independence of a young nation: - hunger in British India, - agriculture or industry? - the decisive crisis; The technical solution: a 'package' of three ingredients: - high-yielding seeds (hyv), - chemical fertilizers, - irrigation; The economic solution: procurement and redistribution: - procuring goods with attractive farm prices, - redistributing stocks to consumers at low prices, - collecting and distributing savings more efficiently; The reward: cereal self- sufficiency.
4. The Anand white and yellow floods: The white revolution of milk: recycling food aid: - getting up steam, - the liberalization circuit breakers; The yellow revolution of oilseeds: an impossible mission?: - the workings of the scandal, - Sam's oilcan, - business as usual.
5. The resurgence of vitamins and proteins: horticulture: a growing nursery: - a garden for middlemen, - a slow process, - a political ground; Animal protein: hatcheries and hindrances: - cattle meat: a world apart, - aviculture: soaring over cities, - fish and shellfish: fishing for currency.
6. The failure to eradicate poverty: A multitude of poverty alleviation programmes; Centralization, bureaucracy and corruption; chronic poverty and under-nutrition.
7. The sacking of natural resources: The water war; Environmental damages; endangered biodiversity.
8. Market liberalization: The jump into free-market economy (1991). The GATT agreements on agriculture (1994) and after: - domestic support: a missed opportunity for domestic reform, - export support: on the offensive, - market access: a comfortable reform; A huge market to satisfy (up to 2030).
9. Conclusion. Appendices Based on the authors' claim that the book is simply a synthesis and no analyses has been done by the author I would judge the book on the criteria that no where any attempt has been made on analyzing and inferring through suggestions. Also the book should fully cover all the issues related to food and agriculture during the five decade from 1947 to 2001.

Brief Summary

Chapter 1 begins by introducing the variations in climate in India and its impact on cropping patterns. Author also shows its concern about increasing population and its pressure on land and environment. History of Indian Population, religion and caste system and structure of Indian Government has been lucidly described. Implementation of land reforms to ensure social justice and economic efficiency has not been very successful as land distribution remains very unequal. Author shows how the food in India varies across regions as it a cultural and religious issue and a high percentage of people are vegetarians.

Chapter 2 describes the tropical plantation. Spices dates back in India since 14th century. India is a leading producer and exporter of spices but the old farming system in Kerala is an obstacle to promote high value added products. Tea, coffee and tobacco are produced mainly under state control. Author is concern about the failing domestic production even in presence of relaxed administrative controls, land has not been extended. There is also a room for increasing quality of cotton production by encouraging as there is a threat from American cotton. To achieve agricultural growth commodity chain for cotton need to be integrated like that of sugarcane commodity chain. Aryans being the first sugarcane producers, today it is produced at a large scale with protection through centre's support in the form of SMP(Statutory Minimum Price) and states SAP (State Advised Price).

Chapter 3 talks about the Green Revolution. The 1964-66 political and economic crises acted as a catalyst to takes measures towards subsidizing a production based model in the specific areas chosen by the government. Secondly, to ensure food availability for all, a Public Distribution system was introduced. This system supported by banks, enabled India double its cereal output in the next 20 years and in few years it was in fact exporting. Role of policies and even individuals like Subramaniam (Minister for food and agriculture) and Swaminathan (appointed director of IARI) were highlighted.

Chapter 4 enlightens on the success stories of white and yellow revolutions. White revolution supported by cooperative network of social diversity among Indian farmers and regions, most of those untouched by green revolution, lead by a single man Kurein made India the leading milk producing country today. Through Rajiv Gandhi focus on Technology Mission on Oil seeds (TMO) and Sam Pitroda's efforts, Indian government focus on decentralize decision making. Followed by NDDB strategies of recycle aid in kind the yellow revolution become successful. But the success was short lived.

Due to main focus on cereals the horticulture, aviculture and fish farming are mostly neglected by discussing Indian agriculture. In chapter 5 author talks about growing middle class which demands more of egg, fish, fruits and vegetables. In spite of problems such as poor quality, lack of refrigeration facilities, saturated transport infrastructure, limited industrial packaging and processing capacities cultural and political issues, India today is the world's second largest vegetable producers. NDDB played its role here as well by establishing Safal outlets across India.

Chapter 6 puts forward the drastic picture of India where even after achieving self sufficiency in agricultural production, millions of Indian are poor and children are malnourished. Inefficiency of government and factors like corruption, poor policies have been accused for the lack of

food security in India.

Chapter 7 talks about the exploitation of the water which is highly subsidized for agriculture is of great concern. Deforestation and over- grazing are also problematic. It also shows authors concern about the hijack of genetic heritage of some countries by big multinationals through patent laws. India's plantations like neem, turmeric with their therapeutic uses, needs to be saved. India has though moved towards globalized intellectual protection since as long as 1928.

Chapter 8, covers the effect of liberalization on Indian agriculture. Due to domestic electoral pressure and weak multinational constraints, the reforms were limited in the agricultural sector. Input subsidies could be maintained despite financial burden. Indirect support of agriculture exports has increased from year to year. Non-tariff barriers were removed in 2001 but they were replaced by high custom duties. With increasing in internal demand in India, it needs to focus on increasing productivity which no more can be achieved by green revolution. There is also a need for broadening of fields of investigation and research and to shift focus from cereals to other crops.

Evaluation

Apart from information on land, crops, techniques, methods as usually expected from a book on agriculture, this book has compiled the course of events happening in politics, policy making, governance and institutional structures, in fact the role of individuals has also been highlighted. All this helped understand the importance of government decision making etc which actually are behind the changes that took place in Indian agriculture.

Very briefly, the book talks about the situations prior to Independence before going into the half century review of food and agriculture in India. It provided the reader a base for understanding the changes that have taken place after colonization.

That said, the focus of the book has not merely being on the Green Revolution but it also introduced the reader to the less talked about white and green revolutions which played a major role in the success of agriculture.

The first five chapters places a efficient picture of the systems, governance, institutions, policies and their role in bringing about the agricultural revolutions but from chapter six onwards, the flaws in these very factors have been shown. Rightly so, all the corruption and lack of accountability in the structure has actually been the reasons behind a stagnant productivity in India as pointed out by the author.

Critic

Author gives a very flattering picture in the initial chapters followed by the mention of problems in the latter chapters. But I feel there was a scope for presenting various other ideas regarding green revolution. For instance, while saying that green revolution was focused on specific areas, it could also be mentioned that what were the ill effects of such a selective progress. Like how it lead to the growing disparities and inequality among regions. Similarly, while saying that a large percentage of production comes from eight major states, one should also mention the reasons behind why other states were doing poor apart from talking about institutional and governance related problems.

The focus of the book has primarily being a macro one, neglecting the effect on individuals.

Coming towards the end of the book, in chapter on market

liberalization, the authors' claim of pure synthesis seem to blur a bit. Using its own sources from other publications and projecting the Indian food demands for 2030 and thereby suggesting the steps that India should take to meet its future demand, is simply an analyzes.

The book is expected to be free from authors own perception and ideologies to be simply a collection of literature but in conclusion one gets a hint of an anti-socialist writer condemning the protectionist policies India had.

Conclusion

Climate, Natural heritage, policies, programmes, institutions, processes and governance: all the factors which lead to the green, white and yellow revolutions on one hand are also the reasons behind the poverty, malnutrition, degradation of resources and environment as well.

Book covers all issues related to agriculture and food ranging from crops, climate, and plantations to oils, milk, vegetables, food supply, irrigation, resource use, related liberalization policies. The book has done justice to the objective it was written for. An overview of all the events that have taken place during the five decades post independence including the great green revolution and smaller but worth mentioning White and yellow revolutions. The problems and major issues such as poverty and food security have been lucidly discussed.

Authors have been critical about the functioning of bureaucrats and politicians in India which is true to some extent. As rightly pointed out by the authors, a sustainable doubly green revolution is required to meet the demands of its rapidly growing population in the near future.

References

1. Dorin Bruno, Landy Frederic. Agriculture and Food in India, CSH-Manohar-Editions Quae, 2009.