

PADDY CULTIVATION: RECENT TRENDS IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture is the backbone of the Indian economy. The Central Statistical organization (CSO) reveals that in 1950-51, the share of agriculture in GDP (Gross Domestic Product) was around 55%. As the process of industrialization gathered momentum under the Five Year Plans, the percentage share of agriculture in GDP declined and reached a level of 13.6% in 2012-13. Rice is India's major food crop but the annual yield is a little less than one-half of the annual yield of China. Almost all the states in India grow rice. In India, West Bengal ranks first in rice production. The area and production of paddy in Kerala shows a declining tendency over the years. The highest negative growth rate in area under paddy is recorded in Kollam district and lowest in Palakkad district. Government has taken remedial measures to restore the area under paddy cultivation as well as the quantity of paddy produced in Kerala.

KEYWORDS: *GDP, Negative Growth Rate, Sustainability, Productivity, Minimum Support Price.*

INTRODUCTION

In India, rice is the staple food for about 65 percent of the population. It continues to play an important role in the country's exports. China is the largest rice producer contributing for more than 30 per cent of the world's rice output. India ranks the second position accounting for about 22 per cent of total paddy production in the world. The major rice producing states are West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Assam, Karnataka and Kerala. They together contribute over 95 per cent of the country's paddy production. In India, West Bengal ranks first in paddy production.

Since agriculture is a state subject, state –specific policies and actions are critical for the development of this sector. In the early years, paddy cultivation was the main agriculture activity in coastal and midland wet lands in Kerala. But, the area and production of paddy in Kerala shows a declining tendency over the years. The State achieved 50% self-sufficiency in rice production during 1972-73. The highest negative growth rate of paddy is recorded in Kollam district and lowest in Palakkad district. However, there have been commendable signs of a recovery in rice production in Kerala. The Government has taken steps to revive the area as well as the quantity of rice produced in the State.

Paddy is cultivated in three seasons in the thirteen districts of Kerala except Wayanad district. In Wayanad, there is no autumn paddy cultivation. Upland cultivation of paddy is the latest change in Kerala. The State and local governments in Kerala have started a number of programmes targeted to improve paddy cultivation. The Kerala government launched a Food Security Programme in 2008-09, which gives importance to rice production. State Budget in 2009-10 proposed a package programme, covering all the stages of paddy cultivation, from seed production to paddy procurement.

The share of gross cropped area under rice consistently came down to 28% in 1980-81 and 15.45 % in 2002-03. The main reason is the domination of commercial crops like coconut and rubber. Kerala farmers are shifting the area under paddy to coconut and rubber while the state has 50% short of rice production compared to consumption requirements. These activities led Kerala in to a state of food insecurity. Area under rice cultivation in Kerala was 8.7 lakh hectares in 1970-71 and it became mere 1.97 lakh hectares in 2012-13. During this period, production of rice declined from 12.92 lakh tonnes to 5 lakh tonnes. Area as well as productivity of land has made impacts on Kerala's economic, ecological and social development.

Demand for rice is expected to increase in future as population increases. So, there is a need to increase the rice production. But the land area under rice cultivation is declining. Major constraints for productivity and sustainability of paddy cultivation are the inefficient use of inputs (seeds, fertilizer, water, labour), climate changes, rising fuel prices, high cost of cultivation, and migration of labour, less preference for agricultural work by the youth etc. Raising the productivity is the only way to increase production in Kerala.

There are many land-related issues in paddy cultivation. It is argued that small size of farms is responsible for the low profitability of paddy cultivation. But the experience of China and other East Asian countries show that it is not a constraint. Timely availability of agricultural inputs is the main problem of most of the farmers. The increasing costs of production is the another reason. Marketing of the product poses a challenge to farmers. Government interference through direct procurement from the farm fields is suggested to solve this issue.

Agriculture is not a low profit activity. In fact, it returns farmers more than double the amount of cash invested. But the gap between investment and production keeps the cultivators away from paddy cultivation. Better job opportunities and attractive wages shifted the workforce to construction works. The high remittance from abroad especially from Gulf countries have pushed the real estate and construction sectors in Kerala. Land under agricultural crops and workers involved in cultivation transferred to real estate sector. Low profits, shortage of workers and sharp rise in their wages, conversion of paddy lands for construction purposes etc. are the major reasons for the decline in paddy cultivation in Kerala. Between 2007-08 and 2009-10, the area under rice cultivation in Kerala increased by 5,000 hectares and State's rice production increased by 69,300 tonnes. These increases may be described as insignificant, because of Kerala faced steady decline in rice cultivation during the 1990S and 2000S. The area under paddy cultivation in 2014-15 is 1,98,159 Ha. Paddy occupied 7.55% of the total cropped area in the state during 2014-15.

The main objective of agricultural development is sustainability. This goal is much more important in recent years with global recognition of achieving SDGs. Brundtland Commission 1987 defines sustainability as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Water logging, Soil erosion and ground water depletion are some of the problems leading to unsustainability of agriculture. Dr.M.S.Swaminathan appealed to the farmers as early as 1968 not to harm the long term production potential for short term gain.

Majority of Farmers are poor in Kerala. For making paddy cultivation a profitable activity, government procure paddy from farmers at reasonably high prices. Minimum support prices (MSP) announced by the government influence the rate at which farmers are able to sell their crop. While the Central government announces MSP for various crops, State government can decide to procure a crop at a price higher than that announced by the Central government. The minimum support price for paddy in Kerala has been higher than the MSP announced by the Central Government.

The State government policies related to rice procurement are also impressive. In the first half of the 2000s, primary cooperative societies had been purchasing paddy from farmers in Kerala. But these societies had no adequate storage or financial capabilities for procurement. So they incurred losses. Due to the absence of effective procurement by the government or its agencies, Paddy farmers were at the mercy of private dealers, mainly a small group of modern rice-mill owners in Ernakulum district. In such a situation the State government, in 2005, entrusted the Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation Limited (popularly known as Supply co) with the responsibility of purchasing paddy from the farmers of Kerala, mainly in the major rice-producing areas.

After every agricultural season, the farmer deposits the harvested crop with procuring agents (chiefly mills in the locality) recognized by Supply co. Based on the receipt of paddy issued by the agents, Supply co transfers money to the farmer's bank account. Public sector banks provide loans to farmers based on deposits made by supply co.

Kerala has established a strong set of democratic institutions at the local level. During the late 1980s, the State government started a programme of group farming for paddy cultivation. Padasekhara Samitis represent an institution that began as a part of group farming effort. Padaskhara Samitis and Krishi Bhavans- play a central role in programmes to restore paddy cultivation in Kerala.

State government policies on prices and procurement have helped farmers to receive steady prices. The public or cooperative sectors can also provide better security to farmers' income. The State government has started giving a monthly pension of Rs 300 to paddy farmers who are aged 60 years and above. There are also schemes to provide insurance to small farmers against crop failure.

In the last five years, Kerala government has taken initiatives to expand paddy production. Better technology in paddy cultivation should be fully explored. Mechanization of agricultural operations is still at an infancy stage. Availability of agricultural machinery at affordable prices to farmers and availability of skilled workers are the two major obstacles. Most agricultural machines now available in Kerala are imported. According to farmers, these machines do not always suit the soil conditions in the State. Farmers prefer seeds produced in Kerala (especially seeds available from Kerala State Seed Development Authority) to seeds produced elsewhere. Because of these seeds are suitable to local conditions and ensure higher yields. However, farmers face shortage of high quality seeds.

State and Central governments has taken steps to correct these shortcomings. Local manufacture of agricultural machinery needs to be encouraged. Kerala produces indigenous varieties of rice, including scented rice varieties such as jeerakasala and gandhakasala, and the medicinally important njavara variety. New efforts in agricultural and biotechnological research can help in the production of high quality seeds for the Kerala farmer.

Experts on Kerala agriculture have stressed the need for better irrigation and water management systems in the State. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme can be better utilized for solving the labour shortage in agriculture. Development of irrigation and water management are essential for rising rice production. Rice cultivation can be effectively combined with other occupations such as fish culture and livestock-rearing. More financial assistance to marginal and small farmers and greater encouragement to use modern inputs would have good output response and increase purchasing power of the rural poor. As a result of government initiatives, paddy cultivation in Kerala is showing signs of revival.

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