Agricultural Development in Assam

Umananda Phukan

Adequate attention has not so far been given to study the problems of Agricultural Development in Assam and the adjoining North Eastern states of India. As such the efforts to increase production and productivity of crops during the past decades were largely based on central directives and official initiatives. Thus agricultural development in Assam was relatively slow.

This book on agricultural development in Assam attempts to understand the nature of agriculture, and analyses the process of agricultural development in Assam from 1950-51 to 1984-85, a period of three and a half decades of planned development efforts. It takes into account available micro as well as macro studies on the various aspects of the agricultural economy of Assam.

The book examines the distribution of land, labour and capital, growth of crop output, agricultural system and the development efforts. It tries to bring out the main factors responsible for slow rates of output growth. Literature on economic development in Assam is not very large. This is the first book on agricultural development in Assam and as such it will be of immense value to students and teachers of the region. It will also be helpful to all associated with the agricultural development of the country in general and Assam in particular.

Rs. 120

Dr. Umananda Phukan (b. 1931) did his M.A. (Economics) and obtained Ph.D. degree from Gauhati University.

He worked in the Department of Agriculture, Assam from 1952 to 1967 in various capacities, the last 10 years as Agricultural Extension Officer/Agricultural Inspector.

He joined Agro-Economic Research Centre for N. E. India, Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat in 1967 where currently he is serving as Research Officer.

He has completed 20 research projects, and contributed 14 research papers to State as well as National level seminars. In addition to his three books: *Ex-Tea Garden Labour Population in Assam, Twenty Five Years of Agro-Economic Research in North East India* (jointly edited with Dr. P. D Saikia, 1985) and *Rural Development in North East India* (jointly edited with Dr. P. D. Saikia) he has to his credit 21 research papers published in reputed journals.

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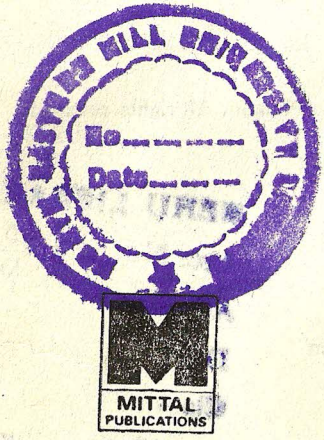
AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN ASSAM (1950—1985)

UMANANDA PHUKAN

Foreword
P. D. SAIKIA



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Contents

Foreword

Assam is known primarily as a producer of tea and oil. But agriculture is the basic source of livelihood of the majority of the population. The population of the State has been increasing at a faster rate than the rest of the country both due to natural growth and immigration. Agricultural production did not increase at an encouraging rate during the plan periods. Assam was self-sufficient in respect of rice production till the Second Five Year Plan period but became deficit in rice thereafter. This book highlights the fact that agricultural production in Assam is unstable because it depends almost entirely on rainfall. Although rainfall is heavy it does not help raising productivity of the main rice crop.

It has now become apparent that the green revolution in India has taken place only in areas which are endowed with irrigation, rural electrification, roads and developed markets. Favourable institutional framework in these areas helped the farmers to take initiative. The planners are aware of the fact that irrigation, specific technological research, efficient distributional network for seed as well as other inputs, rural electrification, development of markets, provision of credit etc., are necessary to remove the growing regional disparities in the agricultural development of the country.

Dr. Umananda Phukan, Research Officer of the Centre makes an attempt at analysing agricultural development in Assam during a period of 35 years ending with the last year of the Sixth Five Year Plan. He is perhaps the right person to undertake this study because he worked in the Department of

Agriculture for a considerable period of time and spent about 10 years as Agricultural Extension Officer/Agricultural Inspector prior to joining this Centre in 1967.

This book will fill a gap in the literature on agricultural development in Assam. It is felt that more research studies are necessary to solve the emerging problems of agricultural development. Modernising traditional agriculture is a difficult task, specially when millions of farmers produce under different socio-cultural, socio-economic and geo-physical conditions. It is expected that social scientists would give adequate attention to studying the problems of agricultural development.

I consider the book *Agricultural Development in Assam* as an important contribution and hope that it will be well received by students, teachers, research scholars and those associated with development.

P. D. SAIKIA

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Agro-Economic Research Centre for North-East India,
Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat, Assam.

Preface

Agriculture is a composite term and agricultural development is a difficult process. It is difficult to make a comprehensive study on agricultural development in areas which are generally backward and indepth studies on development are either scanty or absent. This is particularly true in the case of Assam. Data on many aspects of the agricultural economy of Assam are not available. However, this book seeks to use available data and information to understand the nature of crop production in Assam and analyse the process of agricultural development for a period of thirtyfive years ending in 1984-85.

The study shows that agriculture in Assam is moving very slow out of the traditional grooves and the output growth is very slow. The situation warrants serious thinking and pragmatic action plans. Agriculture being linked with all other aspects of the economy and being associated with the socio-cultural life of the population, accelerating agricultural development appears to be a difficult task. It is also very difficult to suggest specific action plans and policies for the development of agriculture. It is true that improved seeds, fertilizers and irrigation can make miracles but it is also necessary to take into consideration the ability and willingness of the people who cultivate the land. The cultivators work under diverse conditions and the human element has vital role to play in the development process.

This book originates from my involvement in writing two reports, Agricultural Development in Assam 1950-51 to 1975-76

and the District Level Study on Agricultural Development for the same period for the Agro-Economic Research Centre for N. E. India. Prior to that another study on Agricultural Development in Assam, 1950-51 to 1973-74 was done by Dr. Niranjan Saha, erstwhile Research Officer of the Centre. I was immensely benefited by the report by Dr. Saha. It is sad that Dr. Saha who later became Professor and Head of the Department of Agricultural Economics and Farm Management, Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat, passed away. He was a man with a clear perception of the problems of development of N.E. India. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to him. In my reports on Agricultural Development for the Centre I was assisted by a large number of my colleagues. Dr. K. Gogoi and Sri P. C. Neog were my associates in writing the district level study on agricultural development in Assam. I am indebted to them in various ways. I am indebted to the Agro-Economic Research Centre in all respects and this book would not have been written without my being in the Centre.

It is necessary to make it clear that this book is not a part of my official assignment. I am personally responsible for the views expressed, comments and errors. I have indicated the sources from which the data are taken at appropriate places.

I am greatly indebted to Dr. P. D. Saikia, Director, Agro-Economic Research Centre for N. E. India for his encouragement and help in writing this book. He was kind enough to go through the first draft of the book and to suggest improvements. I also thank him for writing the foreword to this book.

I offer my sincere thanks to Sri D. Gohain and Sri K. N. Bordoloi of the Centre and to Dr. B. K. Bhattacharyya, Associate Professor, Agricultural Statistics, Assam Agricultural University for their help in writing this book. I also thank my colleagues and friends for their encouragement.

Miss Manju Dutta and Sri Bipul Chandra Bhuyan typed the manuscript for the press. Sri Manik Chandra Dutta had typed a former draft. I offer my thanks to them.

I am indebted to my wife Soroj for helping me in correcting the type-script, to my son Chandrasekhar for correcting the tables and to my daughter Maitrayee for taking keen interest in my work.

I offer my sincere thanks to Mittal Publications, New Delhi for undertaking the publication of this book. I shall be amply rewarded if this book helps in understanding the problems of agricultural development and stimulates further research in problems of agricultural development in Assam.

UMANANDA PHUKAN

1

Introduction

Agriculture is the dominant sector of the Indian economy and crop production occupies the most important part of agriculture. The colonial rule in India left agriculture in most neglected condition for which it became difficult to feed the growing population of the country. Food became the main concern of the National Government and it became necessary to give attention to increasing food production on a priority basis.

India's food production increased from a bare 55.6 million tonnes in 1950-51 to 155.0 million tonnes in 1984-85. All India index number of agricultural production with triennium ending 1969-70 as the base, went up from 58.5 in 1950-51 to 155.0 in 1984-85. There were considerable increase in the productivity of crops. The per hectare average yield of rice in India was only 668 kg. in 1950-51 and this went up to 1425 kg. in 1984-85. Similarly, the per hectare average yield of Wheat for India as a whole went up from bare 663 kg. in 1950-51 to 1873 kg. in 1984-85.[1] All these indicate that there were spectacular achievements in respect of crop production during the last 35 years, i.e., from 1950-51 to 1984-85.

India is a vast country with wide variations in natural, physical, economic, cultural and historical conditions. These conditions being divergent one cannot expect a uniform pattern

of agricultural development in the country. Thus the spectacular growth of aggregate output had however concealed lot of weaknesses in the process of agricultural development. National Commission on Agriculture (1976) stated that the major objective of Agricultural Planning was achieving self-sufficiency in foodgrains. This overriding priority tended to relegate the objective of balanced regional growth in the agricultural sector. Wide inter-state differences in the compound rates of growth of agricultural production was noticed. Some states like Punjab, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Haryana had much higher rate of growth than most of the other States.

Development of agriculture all over the world is historically slow and induced development of agriculture without structural changes is a difficult task. This difficulty is more pronounced in countries with high population density and high pressure of population on land. All these contributed to regional disparity or rather regional differences in the rate of growth of crop output and productivity. This aspect has drawn attention of both the planners and the scholars and it is now accepted that national programmes for agricultural development would be lame without location specific schemes and plans on the basis of agricultural regions. Macro-economic magnitudes and approach do not give deeper insight into the problems of agricultural development in India and therefore planning should be extended to lower level units, i.e., agro-climatic and agro-economic zones.

National Commission on Agriculture (1976) opined that perspective plans for agricultural development should be prepared for each agro-climatic regions and these plans should be integrated into the state level plans. In other words regional planning for agricultural development is necessary for balanced agricultural development. For a meaningful exercise on planning for agricultural development past experiences should be critically reviewed and constraints identified.

Available data and studies on agricultural development in Assam suggest that growth of crop output and productivity in Assam during the past years was not satisfactory. Recent studies indicate that higher growth of agricultural production was achieved in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra

and Gujarat. Assam and Bihar represented a situation of stagnation particularly after 1975-76. It was also observed that most of the traditionally rice growing areas of India had slower rate of growth compared to the wheat growing areas. Reference may be made to the findings of Sawant (1983).[2]

Assam Agricultural Commission (1975)[3] had reviewed the progress of agricultural production in Assam comprehensively on the basis of available data and observed that the system of cultivation in the state, by and large, remained traditional and output growth was mainly due to increase in area under crops. The Dobhasi Committee (1983-81)[4] opined that the Green Revolution did not touch Assam.

The ICSSR study on the Status of Social Science Research in N.E. India by Goswami and Phukan (1982)[5] indicates that studies on agricultural economy of Assam are limited in number. Most of the existing studies are partial and deal mostly in micro-level problems. Nevertheless, these studies provide valuable information for understanding problems of agricultural development and the problems of the rural areas. The studies done by the Agro-Economic Research Centre for N.E. India help in comprehending the agro-economic problems of the region. The studies have been abstracted and published by Saikia and Phukan (Ed. 1985).[6]

Saha (1975)[7] made the first study on Agricultural Development in Assam from 1950-51 to 1973-74 on the basis of data obtained from the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, and other agencies. The study estimated linear rates of growth of area, production and yield rates of 13 crops. Finding of this study is discussed elsewhere in this book.

Phukan (1978)[8] subsequently revised the study on Agricultural Development in Assam with data upto 1975-76 and estimated linear rates of growth of the 13 crops. A districtwise study on Agricultural Development by Phukan *et al* (1980)[9] for 1950-51 to 1975-76 give valuable information on the agricultural economy of the State. The findings of these studies are incorporated in this book at appropriated places.

Besides these studies, the study on Economics of Farm Management in Nowgong District of Assam by Goswami and

Bora (1977)[10] provides some basic information on input use and production of crops in Nowgong District of Assam.

An attempt is being made to study the process of agricultural development in Assam from 1950-51 to 1984-85 a period of 35 years of planned development. The study rests on secondary sources of data and information collected from time to time on various aspects of agricultural development programme in Assam. Sources of data are mentioned in appropriate places.

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Conclusion

The breakthrough in agricultural production in India was achieved due to the High Yielding Varieties of Wheat and Rice. The seeds, however could not bring the Green Revolution alone. Irrigation and Fertiliser were the two other important inputs which helped increasing production.

The Green Revolution originated in Punjab and Haryana where irrigation was developed. The Bhakra-Nangal project provided water to the Punjab farmers but it also created problem of high water table and salinity. Tubewells were considered as remedy to the problem and as such the farmers took to tubewell irrigation and this provided them added advantages. Rural electrification programme had enabled the farmers to use electricity for the pumps. Controlled irrigation was one of the vital elements in adoption of the High Yielding Varieties and farmers in the Green Revolution area took advantages of the favourable factors.

It may be recalled that the green revolution was assisted by a number of State actions under the New Agricultural Strategy. Among them, higher support prices under the progressive foodgrain price policy and procurement through the Food Corporation of India are important. The government also established the National Seed Corporation for the production

and supply of tested seeds. The seeds being the main component of the green revolution it was most essential that good seeds are supplied to the farmers in time. The need for location specific agricultural research was recognised and more adaptive trials for the new seeds were carried on. The co-operative societies in Punjab and Haryana provided credit to the small and marginal farmers to adopt the new seeds. It was the big farmers who took to the new seeds quickly because of their higher risk bearing capacity. Further, the big farmers had commercial drive for improvement. The small farmers followed the big farmers when they saw the results and were assisted with credit.

Wheat is the staple food of the people of Punjab and Haryana. They grow rice for the market. But both the States also became the leaders in production of rice. This experience is important. But it could not be repeated all over the country. In the entire rice growing belt the green revolution slowed down. Excepting in few states, the adoption of the new rice varieties were not up to the expectation of the planners. The Kharif rice which is the main crop of some of the States did not show signs of registering higher productivity growth. The natural constraints of growing rice under rainfed condition is one factor for this. Diverse condition of growing rice that exist in the rice growing tracts requires suitable varieties and the new varieties perhaps could not be evolved quickly to suit diverse situations. The technological research in rice was belated. Lack of irrigation may be taken as the key factor in many of the cases.

The discussion in the forgoing chapters had shown that rice is the major crop of Assam but the productivity of rice had not increased much during the period of 35 years, commencing from 1950-51. The schemes for development of rice productivity during this period was initiated by the introduction of the Japanese Method of Paddy Cultivation. When the new rice varieties were introduced in 1965 it was sought to be popularised and package of improved practices were recommended. Although new seeds have covered about 40 per cent of the rice area in Assam yet the adoption of the package of practices have not been equally matched.

There is an indication that the early-Ahu crop with HYV seeds and irrigation has the potential of increasing productivity of rice in Assam. But presently the area under this crop is very small in comparison with the winter rice crop. Irrigation is necessary to cultivate the early-Ahu rice crop. This suggests the possibility of a large rice crop in the Ahu season which shall offer facilities for adoption of improved practices with controlled irrigation. The winter rice crop being grown in the rainy season the scope for water management and fertiliser use in all types of land is not present. The cultivation of early Ahu would also increase the crop intensity of Assam to considerable extent and this would also reduce the incidence of seasonal unemployment of labour. The instability of agricultural production in Assam will be greatly reduced if the Ahu crop is undertaken in a large scale because the flood free season will be the season for this crop.

The question of creating pre-kharif and rabi season irrigation potential is most important for the future development of agriculture in Assam. Slow rate of productivity growth of crops may be largely attributed to lack of irrigation. But proper planning should be done in creating irrigation potential. The surface flow irrigation projects are not very much helpful. Therefore, surface lift and ground water lift irrigation under minor irrigation projects would be best suited to the local conditions provided they are installed properly and in areas where beneficiaries are willing to utilise the water and improve their land for using water. Sites for irrigation should be jointly sponsored by the beneficiaries, the extension officials and the irrigation department. Separate Command Area Development Agency should be created to teach the people the practice of water and input management in the new condition. Electric power supply, arrangements for repairs and quick replacements should be made so that the breakdown at critical period do not occur in the pumps.

Predominance of small and marginal farmers in the land-holding pattern of Assam may be considered as one of the major retarding factors for agricultural development. It is easy to say that new technology is applicable to all farm sizes. Yet, it is difficult to make many of the small marginal farmers

viable farming units. Some may continue to exist as farmers if inputs are subsidised on a continuing basis. Most of them can not generate enough surplus to repay credit. It therefore calls for broader policy measures to provide subsidiary incomes from horticulture, fishery, poultry, dairy etc. Employment in the non-farm jobs will be necessary. The situation will further deteriorate in the future with the increase of population and sub-division of land holdings.

As the condition of the hill districts of Assam is different separate set of programmes for agricultural development are to be taken. It is necessary to evaluate the programmes and find out means to make them effective.

It may be helpful if the small farming units are organised on the basis of fields and integrated action plans are taken up to create employment and income. Individual beneficiary oriented assistance schemes would be quite inadequate to tackle this major problem. This complex problem can not be solved only by technocratic and administrative actions.

The State suffered from lack of technical manpower to carry on the technological research and the extension work. This shortage continued up to recent years. This resulted in technically weak extension agency and slackening of technological research. It is only recently that the location specific agricultural research has been taken up. The belated emphasis on this aspect of building up of the technical manpower had its effects on the productivity growth in agriculture. Poor research support to extension agency continued till the time of introduction of the T and V system. But T and V system without the support of an efficient seed and input supply agency shall continue to be lame.

Assam did not try to formulate a long term agricultural development policy and strategy for action plans. The state policy for agricultural development was guided by the directives of the Planning Commission and the Central Government. The planning exercises were dominated by officials and planning was simply target setting for additional production.

It is a common knowledge that the State has no control over the decision making process of the large number of farmers. The targets of additional production set by the State

are therefore quite arbitrary in nature. Farmers are guided by various considerations and they also produce under certain limitations. What the State can do is to motivate them through a series of action plans. These action plans include, providing an alert and active extension service, development of appropriate technology for the specific farming conditions, production of certified seeds and its supply in time, supply the necessary inputs, provide credit facilities, provide irrigation and make adequate publicity of the actions taken. It should frame necessary policy to remove the structural constraints. Action should be taken up to remove ad-hocism and ritualistic functioning of the State apparatus.

It will be an error to say that the state had not taken plans to act on the required fields. But the attempts made during the last 35 years appears to be quite inadequate for accelerating the agricultural development process. There is a tendency for action plans sinking to the level of simple rituals after initial enthusiasm. Further, entire economic development process in the country appears to have been distorted by undue emphasis on non-economic issues both by the State as well as the people.

Farmers who are the ultimate people to shoulder the responsibility of increasing agricultural productivity should not be taken as ignorant people. They judge things on the basis of their experiences and decide to do what their physical facilities economic and social situations dictate. It is therefore necessary to understand the situation in which the farmers exist and adjust development programmes accordingly. Farmers on the other hand must be organised to take the benefits of the development programmes and demand services from the State as their legitimate right.

On the basis of the discussions so far made some suggestions may be offered and areas in which the State can take renewed action plans indicated.

(1) Creation of rabi and pre-kharif irrigation potential through appropriate type of irrigation projects and after proper survey of beneficiaries and their land holdings in the proposed command areas. Provide training on land development, water and input management to farmers.

(2) Promote location specific research on farm technology

and farm management to guide farmers as well as the extension agency.

(3) Provide extension services capable of giving tested technology and information as regards crop input-output relationship in specific areas. Agricultural Extension Service Centres be established to serve specific areas in addition to the regular extension service so that farmers get consultancy service from these centres. The Centres should be well equipped with information on all crops and soils of the area it serve.

(4) Establish sound network for production of certified seeds and make the required seed available to the farmers in time.

(5) Establish supply points for other inputs at village level.

(6) Effective steps to improve making facilities—ensuring procurement of produces at remunerative prices.

(7) Provide incentive for fishery, poultry, dairy, and horticultural enterprises. Commercialisation of these enterprises would be necessary as a measure of creating self-employment opportunities.

(8) State Planning Organisation be strengthened to formulate an integrated plans for agricultural development for the State. Expertise should be developed to prepare plans for each agro-climatic zones taking into consideration local problems and situations and integrate such plans to State level plan. Data base for the plans should be improved. Multiplicity of programmes and multiplicity of schemes may be avoided as far as possible.

(9) Training of farmers and training of officials should be a continuous process. The officials be trained to organise development programmes and identify local problems.

(10) Quick evaluation of programmes should be done and action required be fully discussed in the State planning organisation.

(11) Farmers should be encouraged to organise themselves for taking advantages of the programmes.

(12) Academicians, social scientists and others should take more interest in studying the problems of development of agriculture in Assam.

Agricultural development is a part of overall economic development process and as such it is intimately linked with all other sectors of the economy. Development of the non-farm sectors is also important for the development of agriculture. Agriculture cannot continue to absorb the growing population of the rural areas. It is highly necessary to take appropriate policy to create employment opportunities for the rural population along with intensification of agricultural development programmes.

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