CHAPTER 13

Problems and Prospects of Agricultural Development in the Hill Areas of Darjeeling —A Case Study of a Village in Kalimpong

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Introduction

The economy of India is still primarily agricultural one. Therefore, the question of agricultural development commands one of the topmost priorities in India which, despite being an agricultural country, is still a food-deficit one. This issue becomes all the more important and interesting in the context of a hill area like Darjeeling because the hill areas, due to various reasons are gradually growing more and more dependent on other areas for food supply. But unless these areas themselves are made self-dependent the high cost of transport will automatically lift the price level of food stuff. Moreover, the environmental handicaps are more acute in the hill areas and in many places no amount of investment seem to improve the situation.

Surprisingly but the study of agricultural development has not received due academic consideration and more so in the hill areas like Darjeeling. The present study is a humble attempt to fill up this vital gap left by the social scientists of our country. The present writer understands by agricultural development mainly : growth

in the agricultural production; innovation in the field of cultivation pattern; and production distribution implying that the poor section of the society should also receive their due share of the produce which should not be a monopoly of a few hands. It is high time that we all emphasize on this last factor.

The Region and the Village

A brief introduction of the region in general and the village in particular is necessary here. The Darjeeling District lies between 26°31′ and 27°13′ north latitude and between 87°59′ and 88°53′ east longitude. This only hill district of West Bengal has an area of about 1200 square miles including the terai subdivision[1] and is surrounded on the north by Sikkim; on the east by Bhutan; and on the south and west by the Jalpaiguri and West Dinajpur districts of West Bengal respectively.

The Kalimpong Subdivision is one of the four subdivisions of the District lying on the eastern side. This Sub-division was under Sikkim until 1706 when it was overruled by Bhutan. The British annexed it in the year 1865[2]. While the other two hill subdivisions—Kurseong and Darjeeling Sadar—grew predominantly as tea-plantation areas, Kalimpong grew as an agricultural subdivision.

The Tanek Village which is the basis of the present study falls in the Kalimpong Subdivision. It is located at 3 miles off the Kalimpong town and just above the Teesta Bazar. The altitude range of the

village is from 2,000' to 2,700' above sea level. It lies in the west facing slope but a small hamlet in the village called 'Nangsangdang' is located on the north facing slope. Excepting this hamlet, the village gets the sunshine almost throughout the day.

The village boundary is marked on the east by 7th Mile and Purbong villages; on the west by Teesta River and the Mangbar Forest; on the north lies the Mangbar Forest's Extension and Mangbar village on further north; and on the south lies the Tashiding village. The total number of households in this village is 234 and the population, 1370. The males represent 50.15% and the females 49.85%. The total amount of land in the village is 364.84 acres out of which 303.51 acres or 83.19% is cultivable.

The main crops sown in the village are paddy, maize, millet and pulses besides other subsidiary crops like tapioca, soyabeans, potatoes and vegetables. More recently, the ginger cultivation is getting popular in the village.

The following are the main obstacles to agricultural development found in the village :

a) Ecological

Though the aspect and the altitude of the village are quite favourable for agriculture, a major portion of the cultivable land in the village is unirrigated (48.23%). The irrigated land constitutes only 34.96%

of the cultivable land : 13.94% being uncultivable and 2.87%, homestead land. It was found that the production on a dry land is about 3 times less than the production on a wet land. The scope for the employment of labourers is also less on dry lands than on wet lands. But unfortunately, there is no chance of irrigating the vast areas of dry land where even the drinking water problem is very acute. Moreover, the Nangsangdang hamlet gets very little sunshine —for 4 to 5 hours a day. As a result the production is very low there.

An important ecological problem of this village is deforestation. The lower or the western portion of the village was completely covered with dense forest until a decade ago but it has been almost totally denuded for growing new plants. This has resulted into adverse effects in the village, more so in the irrigated areas. The frequency of the landslides and the breaking of the terraces has increased very rapidly as the base is unstable. Its ill-effect has not spared the house buildings either. As a result a significant amount of the village capital is spent annually on repairs etc. This has led to indebtedness of many people and those who could not afford it have been deprived of the equal amount of land being cultivated earlier. Moreover, the streams destroy a lot of land on their either side.

Recently a 'jhora bandhai' programme or 'walled protection from the stream' was done in some of the jhoras in the village but one cannot expect much from it as the base itself is unstable.

b) Landownership

The present study finds landownership as one of the important obstacles to agricultural development. The sharecroppers, for example, are found not permitted in most cases to use High Yielding Variety Seeds or cash crops on the leased lands. They have to bear practically all the cost of production but the share they get is only half. This is found to have eroded their initiative to produce more but they cannot give up the land either unless they have an alternative arrangement which is very limited in the village. Getting a new land for cultivation or building a new hut is not a matter of joke today.

The problem related to ownership of land is thus three-fold. Those who can invest on agricultural development do not do it; those who want to are not permitted to; and those who are engaged in self cultivation either lack the capital to invest or have other sources of income. The landownership is, however, not a very important a factor if the land on operational holding is not very much. But in Tanek, as the following table (Table I) would show, the land on operational holding is quite high and still more on the irrigated lands.

Table I

Landholding Pattern in Tanek

Land	Total Land in acres	Amount of Land on self-cultivation	%	Land on Operational Holding	%
Irrigated	127.55	58.30	45.71	69.25	54.29
Non-irrigated	175.96	134.46	76.42	41.50	23.58
Total	303.51	192.76		110.75	
	%	61.06		38.93	

This table shows that more than one third (38.93%) of the total cultivable land in the village is under operational holding. Taken the irrigated land separately, the percentage is even higher (54.29). The percentage of dry land on operational holding is also not very low (28.58).

c) Occupational Change

In agricultural development in Tanek village is being neglected also due to the occupational changes which is again due to a change in the value system in the wake of urbanization and modernization processes and the environmental limitations on the other hand.

In this village, the educated people are engaged in service or business occupations. They hire labourers for cultivation though some of their family members also join in the agricultural operations. Those who

are left to agriculture purely are both educationally and economically backward. Even this section of society is found more interested in the Military Services, construction works in town or elsewhere where they get a higher wage. A labourer in the village gets Rs. 2-3/- per day if female and Rs. 4-5/- if male but if he is a skilled labourer like a mason or a carpenter he gets usually from Rs. 15-20/- per day.

The movement of labourers outside the village is, however, not entirely due to a higher wage in the non-agricultural sector but also due to a lower employment capacity of the hill agriculture which is characterised by single cropping and vast amount of unirrigated and unirrigable lands. Whatever may be the reason, the process of agricultural development is impeded due to a labour shortage in the agricultural sector.

Problems of Innovation

The structural barrier discussed above is certainly the major deterrant to the agricultural innovation. But my fieldwork also delineates other inherrent difficulties with the innovative measures themselves. Examples may here be given of the High Yielding Variety Seeds and the fertilizers.

1 High Yielding Variety Seeds:

Among the H.Y.V. Seeds only the paddy (Japanese variety) and maize were introduced in the village. Some of the villagers tried these crops initially but later on gave

up. The main difficulties related with the H.Y.V.paddy were: shortness of the weeds,which created the shortage of fodder for cattle, difficulty in threshing the grains, which doubled the labour cost, difficulty in cooking properly and a lower market value than the local paddy. The problems with maize were: the germination of grains before being fully ripe as the top of the corn-ear remained uncovered, could not be stored as it was susceptible to cricket (ghoon), could not be hanged on bamboo splits as outer cover was too weak, which created the problem of storage, and finally, when pulverised the percentage of husk was more than the percentage of the grains.

b) Fertilizers : The main fertilizers used in the village were uria, dolamite and super-phosphate. The use of these fertilizers increased the production initially but the land soon became acidic which could not be overcome easily. Moreover, the fertilizers were not available every year, at the right time and at a reasonable price. The year in which it was not used the production was virtually nil. All these factors discouraged villagers to use them anymore.

Some Prospects

The above discussion clearly suggests that there are more problems than the prospects which appear still very bleak. The ecological balance is not an easy job to regain,

the landownership problem is equally dislodgeable, nor the problem of occupational change is easy to solve. Very recently, the Planning Commission of India has sanctioned a huge amount of money for eco-development but its success still remains to be seen.

Under such circumstances any suggestion would appear like a drowning man catching at a straw. However, a few suggestions may be furnished here.

First of all, agriculture should be regarded as a part of the society and not a separate entity needing a separate planning altogether. In a Parsonian conceptualization of society[3] the agriculture may be regarded as one of the sub-systems of the society and since these subsystems are interrelated and interdependent the development of agriculture should also be accompanied by a simultaneous development of other subsystems like education and political system.

Another idea is to change the pattern of cultivation. The existing pattern does not help to conserve the soil nor does it help in rebuilding the physical ecology. The orange cultivation, for example could well be done in this village. The experience of Karnataka shows that it is quite feasible though the landownership may initially pose a problem. This would not only control the soil erosion but would

also be an ideal form of afforestation. Marketing would not be a problem and in case it became one, small factories could be opened to process the product, which would in turn be a source of employment also.

Inputs are necessary for agricultural development but a careful testing of soil and other technical necessities should also be fulfilled. The activities of the development agencies could be diverted towards this direction. But this is not sufficient: the outputs should also be properly channelised. Otherwise only a few capitalists like the Kainyas (Marwaris) and Biharis (as it is seen now) shall be benefitted from it while the cultivators shall remain poor.

An important issue regarding agricultural development is land reform. In the case of hill areas this measure may not be of much help because the average size of landholding is below 1.00 acre. Moreover, there are many difficulties regarding the land redistribution in the hill areas because of the varying fertility of soil, convenience of location, no uniform population density, unequal efficiency of the farmers etc. Nor a total structural change seems to have been very helpful for agricultural production. The comparative study of China and India by Kalyani Bandyopadhyay[4] shows that, despite a structural change, China's food production till 1973, keeping 1930's as the base year, has fallen by 7.3% while India, without any structural change has marked a 10% increase in the same period.

However, the more important problem of today is distribution than production.

There are some scholars like Montgomery[5] to whom education is very important for an agricultural development while others like Kerridge[6], Maddison[7] and Jacoby[8] emphasize on tenurial change or land reform. There are again some scholars like Lundahl[9] and Robertson[10] who do not consider sharecropping as an unproductive tenurial system.

Therefore, it is clear that the problem of agricultural development has not been streamlined nor all the scholars are of one opinion regarding the measures. In any case it can be said that some of the problems of agricultural development are specific to a region while others are of universal nature. A policy which does not pay due weightage to the specificity of the nature of problems is liable to fail.

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