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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FROM AGRICULTURE TO AGRIPRENEURSHIP: AN EXPLORATION INTO THE AGRICULTURAL JOURNEY OF KERALA

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Abstract

Kerala has a rich agricultural history, an exploration into it is significant. The agricultural sector of the state has been shaped by different phases of development. An analysis of each phase would help understand how the sector was managed to survive from uncertainties and succeed from opportunities. Structural changes and technological revolution have made great impact on the farming sector. The outcome is the gradual development of a new approach to farming. A historical analysis is therefore crucial for understanding the present status of the sector.

Introduction:-

Kerala spread over 38,863 square kilometres, is bordered by Karnataka to the north and north-east and Tamil Nādu to the east and south. The state is endowed with diverse agro-climatic conditions owing to the presence ofWestern Ghats on one side and the Arabian sea on the other side. The rich geographical and natural resources like soil, climate, rainfall, etc gives impetus for experimenting diverse crops. Kerala is known as the 'Spice Garden of India', typically produces a variety of spices like pepper, cardamom, ginger, etc where pepper was considered as the trade monopoly by the colonialists in Kerala. Pepper was the single largest export earner even during the very early period of 1800 A D (Prakash, B.A, 1987). Later, plantation crops like tea, coffee, rubber etc. were introduced into the state. This does not mean that the state had not popularized paddy cultivation; paddy was the principal crop and Wayanad, the 'land of paddy fields' was once famous for its rice cultivation but later shifted its focus to cash crops. While Kuttanad and Palakkad are still the incumbents of the title 'Rice Bowl of Kerala'. The unprecedented structural changes since 19th century still hold its effect on the present period. However, one of the factors affecting the sector, the labour shortage, is no longer a problem as many people make a strong comeback to the agro-allied sector in the recent years.

The above context therefore gives us an incentive to historically analyse the sector for understanding its present status.

Farming As A Livelihood

Agriculture, as the chief economic activity, provided livelihood to almost the entire population. The cultivators were largely marginal land holders and majority of them worked on leased lands. Paddy, coconut, ginger, pepper etc. were the main crops cultivated by the people. Paddy was the principal crop cultivated mainly to meet the domestic

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requirements. On the other hand, crops like coconut and coconut products, pepper, ginger, cardamom etc. were the major export earners for the state. Later, efforts were taken by the state government to increase the area and production under paddy by providing irrigation and tax concessions to the cultivators. Accordingly, after meeting the domestic requirements, paddy was exported since 1840s.During this period, the price of rice was high and was expensive for the poorer communities who instead relied on tapioca for consumption. However, later the price fell down due to the import of rice from other colonial territories (Prakash 1987). This discouraged the rice cultivators who later switched to producing cash crops.

The colonial leaders imposed a high tax covering a larger portion of agricultural produce which adversely affected the cultivation. The moderate land tax and the subsequent liberal policies were introduced when a significant portion of cultivatable land came under the control of state in the 19th century (Prakash, B.A, 1987). Policies were also implemented to ensure the security of tenants of janmi lands. The land tenure system followed by Travancore was much better when compared to other regions in Kerala (Varghese1970).

The focus of the government was later concentrated on plantation crops as many farmers had changed their livelihood strategy towards growing plantation crops like coffee, tea and rubber. Tea and rubber alone provided major employment opportunities to people as the former provided regular employment and the latter provided employment to unskilled people. Agriculture continued to provide livelihood to majority of people in the state. By 1940, agriculture provided livelihood to around 70 percent of total population in Kerala (Prakash, 1987). In 1955-56, 53.1 percent of the total working population was engaged in agriculture (Government of Kerala 2016).

A good percentage of people still involve in the primary sector by adapting themselves in respect to the changing environmental conditions and market trends. They co-exist with the structural changes of the sector.

Witnessing The Structural Changes And Transformations

The shift from growing food crops to cash crops marked the beginning of structural changes in the agricultural sector of Kerala. The removal of duty on rice imports caused a fall in the price of paddy in the state and this made the cultivators to shift to other crops. The commonly seen transformation was from paddy to banana plantation where the cultivation makes the land dry, creating conditions for the next stage where banana was replaced by cash crops which further compact the soil, making it suitable for non-agricultural use (Jose & Padmanabhan. 2016). The increasing urbanization and particularly the inflow of remittance money from migrant workers have created a high demand for land in Kerala. For non-agricultural purposes, the primary focus has been on the paddy lands (Awani & Varghese2023). The paddy cultivators therefore had to use their land either for non-agricultural activities or for growing commercial or cash crops.

The structural transformation with the growth in industrial and service sector resulted in severe labour shortage in the primary sector. Paddy is largely a labour-intensive crop where the timely availability of labour is crucial. Over the years, wage levels are relatively high and given the cost of cultivation many farmers have thus shifted to less labour-intensive crops. Consequently, the area under paddy has been declining despite several attempts like the enactment of Kerala Conservation of Paddy and Wetland Act, 2008. The area under paddy declined since the middle of 1970's (Prakash1987). The area under paddy was 310521 hectares in 2002-03 declined to 205040 hectares in 2020-21 (Government of Kerala 2023). A similar decline in area has been observed for other major crops except for coffee, rubber and banana. However, most crops have managed to improve their productivity except certain crops like coconut, cashew and rubber. For instance, the productivity of rice and tapioca have increased from 2218 and 23164 to 3105 and 47127 respectively (Government of Kerala 2023).

Enhancing productivity is possible only through introducing new methods and technologies and making their efficient utilization. The state government therefore started focusing on promoting technology among cultivators particularly on the commercial crops that has high demand in the international markets. Attempts to impart technologies have started from a very early age.

The Outset Of Technological Revolution

Raising the production and productivity of crops had been the major concern for the state during all those years. Good levels of effort were made to support the cultivation of major crops particularly for the growth of paddy in the early period. Prior to 1800, small tanks and reservoirs were used in some places to support rice cultivation (Prakash1987). During this period, an interest on irrigation was developed.Since 1800, construction of dams was

begun andlater a department was started to execute public works for the expansion of irrigation facilities (Prakash1987). Adoption of technologies were prominent during 1900s, oil pumps and electric pumps were used for irrigation by farmers. Irrigation covered 31% of plan expenditure during 1951 and 1980 (Prakash1987). During this period, lift irrigation was popular and it guaranteed continuous availability of water to cultivators.

During this period, mechanization in agriculture was promoted by setting up Agro-Industries Corporation. The corporation was made responsible for the procurement and distribution of tractors, power tillers and pump sets to farmers on hire-purchase basis (Government of Kerala, 1971). The impact of the Green revolution of 1960s fell on Kerala too. The need for introducing new technologies was realized and accordingly high yielding varieties of seeds and crops, multiple cropping and integrated farming technologies, integrated pest and disease management techniques etc. were developed.The Kerala Agricultural University (KAU) established in 1971 and the research stations under the university plays a vital role in developing new technologies and disseminating those technologies to people. The Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) is responsible for bridging the gap between technologies developed at the research institutions and their adoption at the field level by farmers.

Demonstration of the application of precision farming techniques including the application of Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) by KVKs has become the latest trend and the post-harvest technologies by KAU has also been considered as a commendable contribution to the agricultural sector. An increasing level of application of these technologies can be seen among farmers in the state and considerable efforts in the form of training and practical guidance have been provided to the them. Turning the agriculture into a modern industrial system has therefore influencing many people into the sector particularly the youth. In Kerala, the involvement of youth in the agricultural sector has led to the development of an entrepreneurial approach to farming.

New Developments

Introduction of new technologies influence many people to enter into the primary sector with the aim of reaping substantial amounts of profits. The resulting profitability has enabled people to develop a passion towards agriculture. In Kerala, for the last few years the involvement of youth in the agricultural sector has been highly rewarding. With the available technologies they develop new entrepreneurial ideas to improve their productivity. The entrepreneurial ideas in turn influence the development of new technologies. Both entrepreneurship and technology are therefore interlinked to each other.

With the technologies, the farmers can produce new varieties of crops, processors can improve their processed agro-based produce, input manufacturers can develop and supply innovative agricultural equipment and tools and the service providers can provide innovative solutions to the above three categories of people. All these categories represent the value chains in agribusiness. However, the adoption of entrepreneurial principles into the business is what needed to be encouraged.

Agri-entrepreneurship or agripreneurship is the application of entrepreneurial spirit to create a sustainable enterprise in the agribusiness value chain (Kuka. 2021). In Kerala, the progress of the agricultural sector can be understandable from its level of adoption of entrepreneurship. Higher productivity and market driven approach have become the feature of the Kerala agricultural sector. This along with available technologiesdrives people to adoptentrepreneurship in agriculture and agribusiness value chain. The rise of agripreneurs has therefore become the latest development today.

The production of high-quality premium crops influencing the retail customers,farmer-friendly tools and innovative inputs for farming and processing thevalue-added processed products from raw agri-products, and the extension and advisory services by service providers are the major entrepreneurial activities in agricultural sector of the state.

An entrepreneurial culture has been created in the economy. Farmer groups like Farmer Producers Organizations (FPOs) are more strengthened than ever now. They undertake agripreneurial activities on a collective basis and help each stakeholder of the value chain to enjoy the benefits.The state has been providing all necessary supports to such groups and also supporting many individual agripreneurs in managing their start-ups. The Department of Post-HarvestTechnology at Kerala Agricultural University was established in 1998 to facilitate research, teaching and extension on post-harvest management. An Agri-Business Incubator at the University was launched in the year 2012 to assist people in processing activities by extending technological support. Training to agricultural graduates has

been given under the Agriclinic and Agribusiness Centres (ACABC) scheme.Technology transfer, information services and guidance, and financial and marketing support have also been providing to the agripreneurs.

Agripreneurship has major positive impacts on the economy. It helps in attaining economic growth through employment generation particularly in rural areas. This reduces the rural-urban migration and promote infrastructural development in the rural economy. Entrepreneurship in agriculture makes exploration of agricultural resources, reduce wastage of resources and ensures food security for the state.

Conclusion:-

The agricultural sector of Kerala has passed through various phases of development. The rich agricultural resources influenced many western powers to create monopoly in certain agricultural crops of the state. This caused major positive impacts on state exports but led to a general negligence on other crops.The structural changes further worsened the situation and food crops like paddy was ceased to be prominent. Structural changes driven by urbanization and dominance of non-agricultural sectors has resulted into labour shortages and increased cost of cultivation.Food crops like paddy was the only sector that was largely affected by this and considerable efforts were made by the state to revive the sub-sector. However, the export potential of non-food crops and their less-labour intensive feature influenced people to switch entirely towards these commercial crops.

The period of prolonged stagnation marked by a general fall in the production of all major crops promoted mechanization in agriculture and technological revolution in the primary sector. This helped in raising the productivity of crops including food crops like paddy. Higher productivity and profitability bought back many people into this sector and their entrepreneurial principles has helped in turning the agricultural sector into an agripreneurship one.

Agriculture once was a livelihood still remains to be the livelihood for many people.However, for this time, the outcome would be higher and would motivate still more people towards this sector. The legacy of the sector has been successfully managed till today with new approaches and methods. There is a high hope that it will continue to be managed wellin the future too.

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