**Agriculture, Economy and Youth**

**Abstract**

*The more an economy grows, the lesser the population involved in agriculture. This is what we have witnessed in the past. Being a rapidly developing economy, India also perceives a similar trend in its demography at present. The global concerns now are the movement of youth away from agriculture and the growing age of the farming population. Lesser number of operational holdings, increased per-capita landholding size, mechanization, and modernization has successfully helped agriculture in developed nations to thrive till date. Could India replicate the developed nations and successfully absorb the young labor force? Will commercial farming be successful in India? Here we discuss the demographic transition in agriculture and the possibilities of harvesting the youth dividends of the nation.*

***Keywords:*** Agriculture, Graduates, Economic growth, Migration, Farmers

**Introduction**

The demography of a country experiences a continuous change as it grows from a pre-modern economy to an industrialized nation. In the pre-modern era, high birth rate and death rates compelled human population to grow at a very slow pace with a low life-expectancy1. Improvements in agriculture and advancement in public health had led to a drastic fall in death rates; however, birth rates remained still or slightly increased. Thus, human population continued to grow at an unprecedented rate. With Further modernization, advancement in science and technology, and awareness, birth rate would decline and ultimately human population growth would stagnate with increased life expectancy. Consequently, the average/median age of human population increases with the economic development of any country. For instance, median age of population in developed countries like USA and Japan were 30.2 and 22.3 years in 1950, which has increased to 38.3 and 48.4 years in 20192. Even, the median age of rapidly developing economies such as India, China, and Brazil have also increased between 1950 (21.3, 23.9, and 19.2 years respectively) and 2019 (28.4, 38.4, and 33.5 years respectively)2. Conversely, some underdeveloped country like Nigeria had shown a decline in the median age over the same period (19.1 and 18.1 years). Almost all the countries experience similar transition trends in the process of economic development. Therefore, economic development and average age of the population of a nation are positively correlated. A similar kind of demographic transition could be seen in the agricultural sector as well. Industrialization and service sector boom are the major factors responsible for the economic growth of any nation. Productivity of labor in these sectors is comparatively higher than the agricultural sector, resulting in higher wages. This attracts a major chunk of less productive agricultural labors facing disguised unemployment towards the industrial sector3. The number of operational holding or the share of total population in agriculture decreases with the economic growth of any nation. As the country progresses economically, more and more people migrate and move out of agriculture.

**Why do people migrate from rural to urban areas?**

Migration, in general, is the movement of people, either within a country or across international borders. It includes all kinds of movements irrespective of the drivers, duration and voluntary/involuntary nature. Conflicts, violence and natural disasters are some of the root causes of migration and forced displacement. However, migration is often a thoughtful decision and an important component of household livelihood strategies, particularly in rural areas. Globally, rural migration accounts for nearly half of the total migration4. Risk is one of the most concerning factors which drive people towards urban areas. Agriculture is comprised of different types of risks viz, social, economic and environmental risks. Many migrants are obliged to move towards urban areas due to those risks such as poverty, food insecurity, lack of employment opportunities, limited access to social protection, natural resource depletion and the adverse impacts of environmental degradation and climate change on agriculture. Poverty and food insecurity are prevalent among rural Indian households. Because, a major proportion of Indian farmers have either small or marginal landholdings (owns less than 2 hectare of land) and they face difficulties in accessing credit, technologies, extension services and markets which would allow them to increase the productivity of labor and natural resources5. Further, employment in agriculture is linked with limited income, inequality in pay and opportunities, poor safety and health conditions. Besides, seasonality in agricultural employment restricts income stability among the rural households. Thus, Poor social recognition, lack of access to markets, and aberrant weather conditions pose a great threat for the nation to prevent rural to urban migration.

**Who migrates the most and for what?**

Male and female of different age groups have reported that their current place of residence was different from the usual place of residence6. Nearly, 46 Crore Indians were found to be migrants, which was 30 percent (31.45 Crore) higher than that of the previous census (2001). They have migrated for different reasons viz., work or employment, education, marriage, business, moved with birth, moved with household and others. Men migrate mainly due to work and business, accounting for more than one-third of total migration. Generally speaking, women migrate in large numbers than men out of which, more than three-fourth of them migrate because of marriage. Further, more than 80 percent of the total migrants fall in the age group between 21 and 59 years. It is not surprising that rural youth (21 to 39 years) contributes more than 60 percent of the total migrants. Lack of employment and stable income are the most important reasons behind the migration of rural youth. Predominantly, youth from less developed states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar migrate towards better performing states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and New Delhi seeking better employment opportunities.

**Reasons for youth to avoid agriculture:**

 As we discussed above, there are many reasons for youths to migrate from rural areas towards urban places. The key reasons are unemployment, unstable income, and risk. But there are some more reasons which add to it when it comes to avoiding agriculture. Firstly, present day youth do not find agriculture attractive7. Agriculture today, is neither profitable when compared to other professions nor an easy job to do. Youths believe that, if they put in the same amount of time and effort in some other occupation, they could earn more profit. Moreover, agriculture is drudging and involves a lot of physical labor in it, which makes them feel that they are outdated. Besides, making quick money is in the minds of majority of the youngsters now a days, which is tough when they take agriculture as a profession. Even agriculture graduates prefer to be in a white collared job after their graduation, and are not interested in taking up farming as their career. This may be because, in the present era of technology, smartphones and Artificial Intelligence, youths like themselves to be technologically updated and use them in all walks of their life. Regrettably, agriculture seems to be lagging behind and provides less scope for the youngsters to use it to their preference.

Secondly, modern day youth not only prefer to have financial stability but also desire for a profession that would provide job satisfaction, scope for creativity, intellectual, cultural, and emotional gratification8. In contrast, agriculture is not socially recognized among most of the communities including the farming community. It is hard to accept that even farmers do not want their son or daughter to continue their hereditary profession. Parents, after being in agriculture for so long, witnessed the economic instability and risk attached to it. So, they are keen in diverting their children towards an economically stable profession. Thirdly, unavailability of land and capital for initial investments force the interested youths to prefer other professions at least in the beginning of their career9. Believe it or not, banks are hesitant to advance loan to youngsters who desire to do farming, considering the profitability and risk associated with the profession. Hence, youths convinced themselves that they should find a high-income job, earn and save money to invest in their passion in later part of their life. This prevents them from entering into farming in their early or mid-20s.

 Fourthly, lack of knowledge, skill and awareness about farming among youth10. Majority of urban youths do not even consider farming as a profession and they are unaware of farming and farmers. In contrast, rural youths are aware of farming but are not updated about the advancements in the field and fail to upgrade their skill to adopt modern technologies. If an aspiring youth fails to upgrade him/her or lack skill, he/she would lose his/her competency and cannot compete in this globalized market-based economy. Finally, yet importantly, a young farmer hardly attracts any bride to get married. Contemporarily, even if a young farmer is educated, innovative, and profitable in farming, he does not find himself attractive by the brides. This attitude of brides avoiding a young farmer as their life partner is one of the most important reasons for the youths to leave farming despite they don’t find any of the above-mentioned constraints.

**Can India replicate the developed economies?**

The developed economies like USA and Japan have very little proportion (3 to 4%) of their population engaged in agriculture11. Industrial revolution, led by a remarkable increase in agricultural productivity, assisted in absorbing the excess labor force that was moving out of agriculture. As a result, lands were consolidated under few large farmers, which enabled them to mechanize successfully. Ultimately, their productivity and profitability increased due to economies of scale. In Indian context, though food grain productivity has increased considerably since the green revolution, we are far behind the average global productivity in pulses, oilseeds, fruits etc12. Further, India has not witnessed a similar industrial revolution till date, leaving the growing labor force unemployed.

Moreover, in India, agriculture is considered as a source of livelihood than as a source of income. Unlike western countries, people in India are emotionally attached to agriculture and are very reluctant in selling their farmland at any price. Hence, it would be very hard for policymakers to move the excess labor out of agriculture and consolidate the farmlands, restricting the benefits of economies of scale. Most of all, access to capital, knowledge, and information is very limited to Indian farmers when compared to their counterparts, reducing their competitiveness in the global arena. Finally, the participation of women in labor force is negligible in India, leaving the vast potential of entrepreneurship in women untapped. So, there exist a lot of differences between India and the existing developed countries, and we as a nation should innovate better policies and strategies to replicate their transition13.

**What is the need of the hour?**

Overall, one can witness that agriculture as a profession, lacks attraction among the youngsters. For an agrarian economy like India, with more than half of its population below 30 years, attracting youngsters into agriculture is vital14. Indian agriculture has to be reformed to appeal young population, particularly rural youth. The primary sector still has a vast scope to absorb a great volume of unemployed youth. Trivializing the youth potential not only have direct economic costs but also lead to violence against the society, increased crime, depression and other mental health issues, which will have a cascading effect on the economy8. To attract youth, agriculture should be made profitable, competitive, and dynamic. This is possible only when educated youth invest their time and knowledge in agriculture. Otherwise, government should implement programs that would impart required skill and support the rural youth in modernizing agriculture.

Rural male migration towards urban cities has provided an opportunity for young rural women to make decision on their farmlands15. With increased women laborers and owners, female friendly machineries, technologies and enterprises would enhance the involvement of the rural women in agriculture. As Dr. M. S. Swaminathan pointed out that agriculture must be both intellectually satisfying and economically rewarding to attract youngsters­16. So, promoting Farmers Producer Organization (FPO), contract farming, protected cultivation, integrated farming etc. would minimize the risk involved in agriculture and at the same time would ensure a stable income. Further, location specific agri-business opportunities must be explored and technical and financial assistance could be given to potential youth to limit the local communities from migration in search of employment.

Besides, creating awareness about new opportunities in export oriented production, custom hiring centers, FPOs, agri-clinics, soil and water quality testing laboratories, climate risk management centers etc. is of paramount importance in attracting and retaining youth in agriculture8. Above all, promoting entrepreneurship can definitely motivate an individual and assist in strengthening his/her economic status. At the village level, extension agencies can train rural youth on value addition, marketing, advertising and branding to extend their market opportunities. Promotion of agro-tourism will also provide opportunities for youth to get ideas to create new livelihood options.

**Concluding remarks:**

Only 4.68 percent of the total workforce in India is skilled­18, which is very low when compared to other developing countries like China (24%) and extremely incomparable with developed countries like USA (52%), Japan (80%) and South Korea (96%). Though Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), NABARD farmer’s club, National Skill Development Council (NSDC) have been involved in imparting skill to rural youth, they could not bring a major change. Recently, schemes like skill India, stand-up India, start-up India, Pradan Mandri Krishi Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Attracting and Retaining Youth in Agriculture (ARYA), were introduced by the Government of India and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). These schemes spot many rural youths and provide required training and impart skill to take up a diversified farm business.

However, without the involvement of enthusiastic youth in modern agriculture as forerunners, any policy or program by the Government would be less effective. Despite the fact that India is following the transition path of developed economies, its ability to replicate them in modernizing agriculture is debatable. The prime motto should be to educate people and enable them to identify potential agri-business opportunities. This would assist in absorbing the semi-skilled rural youths and regulate their migration towards urban cities in search of employment. Besides, shaping agriculture according to the ability and preference of women is the need of hour. Reducing unemployment and increasing real income are very important for a nation to achieve economic development. Agriculture and youth have untapped potential to drive our nation in achieving this goal.

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