UPSC MAINS · ANSWER PRACTICE

Essay · Essay

Farming has lost the ability to be a source of subsistence for majority of farmers in India.

भारत में अधिकतर कृषकों के लिए कृषि जीवन -निर्वाह का एक सक्षम स्रोत नहीं रही है।

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Answer Hint

Agrarian distress; small and marginal farmers; fragmented landholdings; rising input costs; agricultural productivity; climate change; irrigation and technology; agricultural markets; MSP and procurement; rural indebtedness; crop diversification; allied activities; government initiatives; sustainable and remunerative agriculture

Model Answer

Introduction

Agriculture has historically been the backbone of the Indian economy, providing livelihoods to millions of households and supporting the country's food security. Beyond its economic contribution, farming is deeply connected with India's rural society, culture and social structure. However, despite technological progress and improvements in agricultural production, farming has increasingly struggled to provide a secure and adequate livelihood for a large section of Indian farmers.

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The statement that farming has lost its ability to serve as a source of subsistence reflects the growing agrarian distress caused by small landholdings, rising input costs, uncertain prices, climate-related risks and limited access to institutional support. Although Indian agriculture has achieved considerable success in increasing food production, higher aggregate output has not necessarily translated into adequate and stable incomes for individual cultivators.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply to increase agricultural production but to make farming economically viable, environmentally sustainable and socially dignified.

Body

1. The Changing Economic Position of Indian Agriculture

Agriculture continues to play a crucial role in India's economy by supporting rural livelihoods, supplying raw materials to industries and contributing to food security. Yet the economic position of individual farmers remains vulnerable.

A large proportion of agricultural households operate small or marginal landholdings. Such holdings often provide limited scope for mechanisation, economies of scale and the production of marketable surpluses. For many families, farm income is insufficient to meet expenditure on food, education, healthcare, housing and other essential needs.

Consequently, agricultural households increasingly depend on supplementary sources of income, including wage labour, livestock rearing, small businesses and migration to urban areas.

This does not mean that agriculture has become universally unviable. Commercial farming, horticulture, dairy production and other specialised activities can provide substantial returns in suitable conditions. However, the ability to generate adequate income remains highly unequal across regions, crops and categories of farmers.

2. Small and Fragmented Landholdings

One of the most significant structural challenges facing Indian agriculture is the predominance of small and marginal farms.

Population growth, inheritance and the subdivision of agricultural land have reduced the average size of operational holdings. Small farmers often face difficulties in adopting modern machinery, accessing affordable credit and investing in irrigation or storage facilities.

Fragmented plots also increase the cost of cultivation and complicate the efficient use of agricultural equipment.

Moreover, small cultivators generally have limited bargaining power when purchasing inputs or selling their produce. They may be forced to accept unfavourable prices because they cannot store crops for extended periods or transport them to distant markets.

Land consolidation where appropriate, cooperative farming, farmer-producer organisations and shared access to machinery can help address these constraints without undermining individual land rights.

3. Rising Input Costs and Declining Profitability

Farmers face substantial expenditure on seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, diesel, electricity, irrigation and labour. Fluctuations in the prices of these inputs can reduce profits even when crop yields remain stable.

The dependence on purchased inputs also makes cultivators vulnerable to market disruptions. Small farmers may borrow money at high interest rates to finance cultivation, increasing their financial exposure before the harvest.

In some regions, excessive dependence on chemical fertilisers, groundwater extraction and pesticide use has also increased long-term production risks and environmental costs.

The problem is particularly serious when input costs rise faster than the prices farmers receive for their produce. Under such circumstances, higher production does not necessarily lead to higher net income.

Promoting soil health, efficient irrigation, balanced nutrient management, suitable farm mechanisation and access to quality inputs at reasonable prices is essential for improving profitability.

4. Uncertain Agricultural Prices and Market Dependence

Agricultural income depends not only on production but also on the price received by farmers. Agricultural markets often experience sharp fluctuations because supply is seasonal, demand changes and storage capacity is unevenly distributed.

When many farmers harvest the same crop simultaneously, market arrivals may exceed immediate demand, pushing prices downward. Perishable commodities such as fruits and vegetables are particularly vulnerable because farmers may have little time to find alternative buyers.

Small cultivators frequently lack adequate storage, transport and market information. This can force them to sell immediately after harvesting, sometimes at prices below their expectations or production costs.

The Minimum Support Price system and public procurement provide important support for selected crops and eligible farmers, but their benefits are not equally accessible across all crops and regions.

Improved market infrastructure, transparent price information, warehouse facilities, processing capacity, farmer collectives and competitive marketing arrangements can strengthen farmers' bargaining power.

5. Rural Indebtedness and Financial Insecurity

Agriculture involves substantial expenditure before income is realised. Farmers must invest in cultivation while facing uncertainty about rainfall, pests, diseases and future market prices.

When crops fail or prices collapse, cultivators may be unable to repay loans on time. They may then borrow again to finance the next agricultural season, creating a cycle of indebtedness.

The problem becomes more severe when farmers lack access to affordable institutional credit, crop insurance or effective risk-management mechanisms.

Financial distress also affects household welfare. Expenditure on healthcare, children's education and essential consumption may be postponed to meet agricultural obligations.

Strengthening institutional credit, improving the accessibility and reliability of crop insurance, expanding financial literacy and ensuring timely settlement of legitimate claims can reduce vulnerability. Debt relief may provide temporary support in severe distress, but sustainable solutions must also address the structural causes of inadequate farm income.

6. Climate Change and Environmental Vulnerability

Agriculture is closely dependent on weather conditions. Erratic monsoons, prolonged droughts, floods, heatwaves and changing pest patterns can adversely affect productivity and farm income.

Small and marginal farmers are particularly vulnerable because they often lack irrigation, savings, insurance and alternative livelihood opportunities.

Groundwater depletion and soil degradation further threaten agricultural sustainability in several regions. Practices that maximise short-term

output without considering ecological limits can eventually increase cultivation costs and reduce resilience.

Climate-resilient agriculture requires a combination of measures:

- Expansion of micro-irrigation and efficient water management.
- Development and adoption of climate-resilient crop varieties.
- Crop diversification suited to local agro-climatic conditions.
- Soil conservation and restoration of degraded land.
- Weather forecasting and timely agricultural advisories.
- Wider access to effective crop insurance and risk-sharing mechanisms.

The objective should be to protect both agricultural productivity and the natural resources on which future production depends.

7. Limited Diversification and Dependence on Traditional Crops

Many agricultural households depend heavily on a narrow range of crops. Such dependence increases exposure to crop-specific price fluctuations, pests and climatic shocks.

In suitable regions, diversification into horticulture, pulses, oilseeds, medicinal plants and other higher-value crops can improve income opportunities. Dairy, poultry, fisheries, beekeeping and agroforestry can provide additional sources of earnings.

However, diversification must reflect local conditions. Farmers require access to suitable seeds, technical advice, assured markets, cold storage and processing facilities before shifting away from established crops.

Without these arrangements, diversification may expose farmers to new risks instead of improving their financial position.

An integrated farming system combining crops with livestock, fisheries or other suitable activities can distribute risk across multiple income sources and improve the utilisation of farm resources.

8. Government Initiatives and Their Limitations

The government has introduced several measures intended to improve farmers' welfare and agricultural productivity.

- **PM-KISAN:** Provides eligible farmer families with direct income support.
- **Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana:** Seeks to provide insurance protection against specified crop losses.

- **Kisan Credit Card:** Facilitates access to agricultural credit.
- **Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana:** Supports irrigation development and improved water-use efficiency.
- **e-NAM:** Seeks to improve market access and facilitate electronic trading in agricultural commodities.
- **Soil Health Card Scheme:** Encourages soil testing and more balanced nutrient management.

These initiatives address important dimensions of agricultural distress, but implementation challenges remain. Farmers may face difficulties with awareness, documentation, insurance claims, timely payments, infrastructure gaps and access to markets.

Government support must therefore be evaluated not only by the number of schemes introduced but also by the extent to which they improve actual farm profitability, reduce risk and enhance household welfare.

9. The Need to Shift from Production-Centred to Income-Centred Agriculture

India's agricultural policies have historically focused substantially on increasing production and ensuring food security. These objectives remain essential, but the next stage of agricultural transformation must give greater attention to farmers' net incomes.

Higher yields alone cannot guarantee prosperity if input costs are excessive or market prices are inadequate. Policies should therefore consider profitability across the agricultural value chain.

Important priorities include:

- Strengthening farmer-producer organisations and collective bargaining.
- Expanding food processing, cold chains and rural storage.
- Improving access to reliable agricultural extension services.
- Encouraging suitable crop diversification and value addition.
- Supporting rural non-farm employment and agro-based enterprises.
- Promoting digital advisory services and better market information.
- Ensuring transparent and timely access to public support.

Such measures can help farmers capture a greater share of the value generated by their produce.

10. Building a Sustainable and Dignified Rural Economy

Making agriculture viable requires a broader transformation of rural development. Farming households should not be compelled to depend exclusively on cultivation when land and water resources cannot support adequate incomes.

Rural industries, food processing, renewable energy, handicrafts and service-sector employment can create supplementary livelihood opportunities. Skill development and better rural connectivity can help diversify income without forcing distress-driven migration.

At the same time, agricultural workers and tenant cultivators must not be overlooked. Access to institutional credit, insurance and government programmes should account for the diversity of rural livelihoods.

Women contribute substantially to agricultural operations, livestock management and household food security. Recognising their role through improved access to land rights, credit, training, technology and farmer institutions can strengthen rural economic resilience.

Ultimately, agricultural development must be judged by its ability to provide stable incomes, protect natural resources and improve the quality of life of farming households.

Conclusion

The inability of farming to provide adequate subsistence for many Indian farmers is a serious developmental challenge. Small landholdings, rising input costs, unstable prices, indebtedness, climate risks and limited market access have weakened the economic security of numerous agricultural households.

However, agriculture has not lost its potential to support livelihoods. Its viability can be restored through better technology, stronger market institutions, diversified income sources, effective risk management and policies that prioritise farmers' net returns rather than production alone.

India must move towards an agricultural system that is productive, remunerative, climate-resilient and inclusive. The goal should be to ensure that farmers are not merely producers of food but also economically secure participants in the country's development. **A prosperous India requires an agricultural sector in which those who nourish the nation can sustain their own families with dignity.**