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Youth and Agriculture: A Contemporary Perspective

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India's rural economy and rural development have been based on agriculture for a long time. Agriculture is an important means of providing employment, income, livelihood security, and development of agriculture-based enterprises in rural areas. Therefore, for inclusive and sustainable rural development, it is essential for agriculture to be strong and profitable. In this context, rural youth are an important link in the future of agriculture. Youth can play an important role in adopting new technologies, promoting innovation, and better utilisation of available resources. Their participation in areas such as digital agriculture, drones, modern agricultural machinery, protected cultivation, agricultural processing, marketing, and agricultural entrepreneurship can transform agriculture into a modern enterprise. However, at present, a decline in the interest of rural youth in adopting agriculture as a profession or career is being observed. Uncertainty in agricultural income, increasing production costs, small and fragmented landholdings, natural and climatic risks, market-related difficulties, and better employment opportunities in cities are some of the major reasons. The perception of considering traditional farming as more labour-intensive and less profitable is also distancing youth from agriculture. The increasing disconnect of youth from agriculture can affect rural employment, migration, agricultural innovation, and overall rural development. Therefore, it is necessary to develop agriculture for youth not merely in the form of traditional farming, but as a modern, technology-based, profitable, and entrepreneurial enterprise. In this direction, the agricultural extension system, agricultural universities, FPOs, and other institutions can play an important role. Therefore, understanding the reasons for the declining interest of youth in agriculture and developing effective and practical strategies to connect them with agriculture is an important requirement of contemporary rural development.

Major Reasons for Declining Interest of Youth in Agriculture

The declining attraction of rural youth towards agriculture is not the result of a single factor. Several economic, social, technological, educational, and psychological factors are interconnected behind it. Uncertainty in agricultural income, increasing production costs, natural risks, limited land, market-related difficulties, and better opportunities in non-agricultural sectors are distancing youth from agriculture. The major reasons are as follows.

- 1. Uncertain Agricultural Income:** Income obtained from agriculture can be more uncertain compared to other occupations. Production quantity, market prices, weather, pests and diseases, and changes in agricultural costs directly affect farmers' income. Many times, despite good crop production, farmers do not receive an appropriate price in the market and therefore fail to obtain the expected profit. Such uncertainty creates a barrier for youth in accepting agriculture as a stable and attractive career option.
- 2. Increasing Cost of Cultivation:** The increase in the cost of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation, agricultural machinery, diesel, electricity, and labour has increased the total cost of cultivation. Particularly for small and marginal farmers, the increase in production costs directly affects profitability. If market prices do not increase in the same proportion, the profitability of agriculture decreases. The youth, who seek relatively better income

opportunities on the basis of their education and skills, may prefer to distance themselves from agriculture under such circumstances.

3. **Small and Fragmented Landholdings:** Rural households in many areas possess limited agricultural land, and due to the division of land from one generation to another, the size of landholdings is continuously decreasing. Effective use of modern agricultural technologies, mechanisation, and large-scale commercial production can be difficult on small and fragmented landholdings. As a result, youth see limited possibilities of obtaining sufficient income from the available land. This situation attracts them towards occupations other than agriculture.
4. **Climate and Weather-Related Risks:** The success of agriculture is closely associated with natural conditions. Irregular rainfall, droughts, floods, extreme temperatures, hailstorms, cyclones, and changing pest and disease situations can affect agricultural production. Due to climate change, the nature and complexity of these risks are also increasing. Farming that continuously faces natural risks may appear to youth as a relatively insecure occupation.
5. **Considering Agricultural Work as Less Prestigious:** Among some rural families and youth, agricultural work is perceived as a traditional, labour-intensive, and less prestigious occupation. After acquiring education, government jobs, private-sector employment, or urban occupations are often considered more respectable and successful career options. This also affects the interest of youth in agriculture. This is not merely an economic issue but is also associated with the social perception of agriculture. Therefore, presenting agriculture as a modern business and entrepreneurial activity becomes important.
6. **Attraction towards Employment and Better Status in Cities:** Employment opportunities, regular wages, better infrastructure, education, healthcare services, and lifestyle opportunities available in urban areas attract rural youth. In contrast to seasonal and uncertain income from agriculture, regular employment in cities appears to be a more secure option to many young people. As a result, rural youth may leave agriculture and migrate towards construction, transportation, service sectors, industries, trade, and other non-agricultural occupations.
7. **Limited Access to Modern Technology and Investment in Agriculture:** Agriculture is rapidly becoming a technology-based sector, but all rural youth and farmers do not have equal access to modern technologies. Advanced agricultural machinery, drones, sensor-based farming, protected cultivation, digital agricultural services, quality seeds, irrigation facilities, and other technologies require adequate capital, training, and technical guidance. Due to limited access to these resources, rural youth are unable to fully benefit from the possibilities of transforming agriculture into a modern and profitable enterprise.
8. **Low Profitability from Traditional Farming:** In many areas, farming is still primarily based on traditional crop production. If farmers produce only traditional crops with low market value and do not integrate processing, value addition, branding, and direct marketing with production, the potential for profit remains limited. The youth seek occupations with higher income and greater opportunities for growth. Therefore, farming through only traditional methods may not appear attractive to them. It is necessary to integrate crop diversification, high-value crops, livestock, horticulture, processing, and agriculture-based entrepreneurship with agriculture.
9. **Gap between Agricultural Education and Actual Agricultural Business:** Agricultural education provides youth with knowledge of scientific production techniques and agricultural science, but in many cases, adequate coordination does not exist between education and the practical requirements of agricultural business. Along with production techniques, skills such as market analysis, financial management, business planning, value addition, supply-chain management, digital marketing, entrepreneurship, and risk management are also essential. If youth view agriculture only as a production activity and

do not receive practical training to operate it as a business, their possibilities of building a career in agriculture may decrease.

Overall, all these factors cannot be viewed separately from one another. Low and uncertain income + increasing costs + natural risks + limited land + market difficulties + better non-agricultural opportunities together influence the perception of youth towards agriculture. Therefore, merely providing agricultural technology training will not be sufficient to connect youth with agriculture. It will be necessary to develop agriculture as a profitable, risk-resilient, technology-based, and entrepreneurial enterprise and connect youth with the entire value chain, from production to market.

Impact of Youth's Disconnection from Agriculture on Rural Development

The distancing of rural youth from agriculture is not merely an agricultural issue; it also affects the rural economy, employment, social structure, agricultural innovation, and livelihood security. Youth are the active and dynamic human resource of any society. Therefore, their disengagement from agriculture can influence the pace and direction of rural development. The major impacts are as follows.

- 1. Decline in Rural Labour Force:** When youth move towards non-agricultural employment or migrate to cities, the availability of local labour for agricultural activities is affected. This may increase dependence on migrant labour and raise labour costs. The impact can be more visible in labour-intensive operations such as sowing, transplanting, weeding, and harvesting.
- 2. Ageing of the Agricultural Workforce:** When youth move away from agriculture, the responsibility of farming increasingly falls on older farmers. This can increase the average age of the agricultural workforce. Older farmers may possess adequate experience and traditional knowledge; however, they may face relatively greater difficulties in adopting new technologies, digital tools, and changing market systems.
- 3. Increase in Rural Migration:** When adequate and stable income opportunities are not available in agriculture, youth may migrate towards cities in search of employment. This reduces the active working population in rural areas and may affect local human resources and entrepreneurship. Increasing opportunities in agriculture and other employment sectors at the local level can help reduce involuntary migration.
- 4. Impact on the Adoption of Agricultural Innovations:** Youth can play an important role in adopting new technologies and digital platforms. Their participation is important in adopting and disseminating technologies such as drones, mobile-based agricultural advisories, digital markets, weather-based advisories, precision agriculture, and modern agricultural machinery at the local level. The decline in youth participation may therefore affect the pace of modernisation of agriculture.
- 5. Weakening of Traditional Agricultural Knowledge:** Traditional knowledge related to local seeds, weather prediction, soil and water management, livestock rearing, and utilisation of local resources is important in rural agriculture. If youth become completely disconnected from agriculture, the process of transferring this knowledge from older farmers to the next generation may become weaker. Therefore, it is necessary to connect traditional knowledge with scientific agricultural knowledge and transfer it to youth.
- 6. Negative Impact on the Rural Economy:** Agriculture influences various activities such as transportation of agricultural produce, agricultural inputs, machinery, processing, storage, marketing, and local trade. Weakening of agricultural activities and the movement of youth away from the rural economy may also affect local demand, investment, and entrepreneurial opportunities. Conversely, promoting agriculture-based enterprises can create new opportunities for employment and income in villages.
- 7. Potential Impact on Food and Livelihood Security:** Agricultural production and the livelihoods of rural households are closely interconnected. If there is a shortage of active and skilled human resources in agriculture and farm profitability remains weak, the long-term stability of agricultural production may be affected. This can also influence food availability and the livelihoods of agriculture-dependent households.

Can Agriculture Become an Attractive Business for Youth?

The movement of rural youth away from agriculture does not indicate that opportunities in agriculture have disappeared. The real challenge is that agriculture is still often viewed as being limited to “**crop production**”, whereas today it is developing as a broad **agribusiness**. It includes input supply, technical services, processing, value addition, packaging, branding, marketing, and digital services along with production.

If youth are connected with the entire agricultural value chain, agriculture can become an important sector for employment, entrepreneurship, and income generation. The major opportunities are as follows.

1. **High-Value Crop Cultivation:** Market-oriented cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants, flowers, specialty vegetables, and other high-value crops can provide better income opportunities to youth. Before undertaking such cultivation, it is necessary to study the market, climate, cost, and marketing system.
2. **Fruit and Vegetable Production:** Fruit and vegetable production is an effective means of agricultural diversification. Additional value can be obtained by integrating grading, packaging, storage, and direct marketing with production.
3. **Protected Cultivation:** Systems such as polyhouses, greenhouses, and shade nets provide opportunities for producing high-value crops under controlled conditions. For this, initial investment, training, and technical guidance are necessary. The government is also implementing schemes to promote such systems.
4. **Drones and Precision Agriculture:** Technologies such as drones, remote sensing, GPS sensors, and data-based decision-making provide new opportunities for youth. They can develop agricultural service businesses by providing services such as crop monitoring to farmers.
5. **Agricultural Machinery:** Purchasing expensive agricultural machinery can be difficult for small farmers. Youth can earn employment and income by making different agricultural machines available to farmers on a rental basis through Custom Hiring Centres.
6. **Seed and Nursery Business:** Considering the demand for quality seeds, planting material, and healthy plants, youth can develop vegetable and fruit nurseries and the production and marketing of ornamental plants as a business. Such enterprises can also be started on a small area of land.
7. **Dairy, Goat Rearing and Poultry Farming:** Income sources can be diversified by integrating livestock and poultry farming with agriculture. Through scientific management, improved breeds, proper nutrition, animal health services, and market linkages, youth can develop these activities at a commercial level.
8. **Food Processing and Value Addition:** Agricultural products can generate higher returns through processing and value addition rather than selling them in raw form. Processing and value addition of products such as pickles, jams, *badi*, grains, pulses, and spices provide entrepreneurial opportunities for youth. In this way, youth can perform not only the role of a producer but also that of a **producer + processor + brand creator + seller**.
9. **Agritourism:** In areas with natural, cultural, or agricultural attractions, agritourism can become an alternative source of income. Agritourism can be developed by integrating farm visits, rural lifestyle, local food, traditional agricultural activities, and local products.
10. **FPO-Based Businesses:** FPOs connect small farmers with collective production, input procurement, processing, and marketing. Youth can play roles in FPOs as business managers, marketing professionals, technical service providers, or entrepreneurs.
11. **Digital Agricultural Advisory and Services:** With the increasing access to smartphones and the internet, opportunities for services such as crop advisory, weather information, market information, farm record management, and digital marketing have increased. Youth can develop agricultural service enterprises at the local level and play the role of “**Extension Entrepreneurs**.”

12. Agriculture-Based Start-ups: Youth can develop start-ups in areas such as input delivery, farm mechanisation, supply chains, storage, food processing, e-commerce, agri-fintech, and advisory services. For this, along with agricultural knowledge, skills in business planning, finance, marketing, technology, and networking are essential.

13. Need to View Agriculture as a Business: A change in mindset is necessary to attract youth towards agriculture. If agriculture is viewed merely as the activity of “**growing crops on land,**” the opportunities may appear limited. In contrast, when agriculture is viewed as a complete “**farm-to-fork**” **value chain**, numerous opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship emerge.

For example, youth need not remain limited to vegetable production alone. They can develop their role across the entire chain: **Nursery → Production → Grading → Processing → Packaging → Branding → Direct Marketing**. Similarly, businesses related to drones, agricultural machinery, digital advisory services, and food processing can be started without owning large areas of agricultural land.

Therefore, the objective should not merely be to increase the number of young farmers, but to develop **young agripreneurs** who can create new opportunities for employment and income across the entire agricultural value chain. This can make agriculture an important foundation for rural development and local employment generation.

Role of Agricultural Extension in Connecting Youth with Agriculture

The declining interest of youth in agriculture cannot be addressed by considering it merely an economic problem. It is necessary to convince them that agriculture offers sufficient opportunities for modern technology, innovation, entrepreneurship, and dignified income. In this direction, the role of the Agricultural Extension System is very important.]

Traditionally, the objective of agricultural extension has been to provide technical knowledge related to production. However, with changing circumstances, extension should not remain limited to technology transfer. It needs to be developed as a knowledge, skill, entrepreneurship, and market-support system.

- 1. Beyond Production Technology towards Business-Oriented Agriculture:** It is not sufficient to tell youth only which crop should be grown and how it should be cultivated. They also need to understand what to produce, how much to produce, where to sell, and how to obtain higher value from the product. In other words, agricultural extension needs to provide guidance from production to the market.
- 2. Developing Successful Young Farmers as Role Models:** Successful youth engaged in farming, horticulture, dairy, mushroom production, protected cultivation, farm mechanisation, food processing, FPOs, and digital agriculture can be presented as role models. Their farms can be developed as learning farms or model youth agripreneur farms, where field demonstrations, exposure visits, and interaction programmes can be organised.
- 3. Youth-Focused Farmer Groups:** Youth can be connected through exposure visits, demonstrations, capacity building, FPO production activities, input management, processing, packaging, and marketing. At the same time, opportunities can be created for youth in marketing, accounting, digital services, and business management.
- 4. Linking Entrepreneurship, Incubation, Innovation and Practical Farm Management with Scientific Agricultural Knowledge:** Entrepreneurship, incubation, innovation, and practical farm management need to be integrated with scientific agricultural knowledge. Concepts such as “**Campus to Village**” and “**Lab to Land**” should be made more effective and practical.

Thus, the role of agricultural extension should not remain limited to “telling farmers about technology.” It should connect youth through the entire pathway of Knowledge → Skill → Enterprise → Market. This approach can make agriculture more attractive to youth and more effective for rural development.

Changing Role of Extension

The agricultural extension of the future will not merely explain “how to grow a crop,” but will also guide youth on:

What to produce → How to produce → How to reduce costs → How to increase value → How to reach the market → How to develop a business

This transformation can play a decisive role in connecting youth with agriculture. In this way, the Agricultural Extension System can guide rural youth in the transition from farmer to agripreneur, technology user to technology provider, and job seeker to job creator.

If extension institutions successfully connect the aspirations of youth with emerging opportunities in agriculture, agriculture can become not only more attractive to youth but can also provide new momentum to rural employment, entrepreneurship, and inclusive rural development.