

NEWS



26 FEB, 2011, 04.12AM IST,

Slow agri growth a cause of concern: Shashanka Bhide, Senior Research Counsellor, NCAER

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The Advance Estimates for 2010-11 have provided some comfort that agriculture continues to be resilient, if not the fastest growing sector of the economy. Given a favourable monsoon, farmers will not disappoint in their efforts. However, for the 11th Five Year Plan, the first three years have been a setback in the case of agriculture. As against the targeted growth rate of 4%, we have now only 2% growth per year so far.

The high food inflation in the past couple of years has been a reminder of the work in progress of the status of agriculture and agricultural markets. The high prices of food items in the global markets have again drawn attention to the need for efforts to raise production, especially in countries with large populations.

The Economic Survey 2010-11 points to the need for raising productivity, diversification and investments throughout the supply chain to meet the challenges. The discussion stays away from commenting on the likelihood of persistence of high prices in the short term, as the strategies articulated are of long-term consequence.

The survey has argued the intensifying need for a second green revolution. The facts presented through a comparison of the rates of growth in production in the 1980s and in the first decade of the 21st century show that while foodgrain output increased by about 3% per year in the 1980s, the growth rate fell to 2% in the last 10 years. The per capita availability of foodgrain has fallen over the recent years. The array of programmes and initiatives has succeeded in achieving only modest growth.

The success, which is very striking in the numbers but received little attention has been that of cotton. The growth rate of production of cotton was 2.8% in the 1980s and it shot up to 13.58% in the last 10 years.

Whether it is irrigation, new seeds or merely price incentives, the success in cotton production is impressive. Actually rate of growth of pulses also improved in the latest 10 years compared with the experience of the 1980s. Even in the case of milk, the other major food produce, there has been a steady increase in per capita availability over the years.

The odd successes point to the potential of a variety of interventions or technological breakthroughs. However, continued support for the sector in the numerous, perhaps less glamorous ways cannot be overlooked.

The Economic Survey is perhaps not the place for evaluations of the various programmes and schemes. However, many of the programmes of the government are quite important and understanding their impact is quite important.

For instance, the agricultural insurance would be extremely important in providing protection to the farmers from the vagaries of nature. Importance of the support to farm extension can hardly be denied provided it is effective.

(The views expressed in the article are personal)

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