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### Assam- General impressions on agriculture and horticulture sectors

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***'Advantage of economic growth is not that it increases prosperity but that it extends human choices' – Arthur Lewis***

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The changing contours of agriculture in every region is determined by a complex interaction of geographical, social, demographic and institutional factors, which is tremendously varied in a huge country like India. Assam is no exception to this.

Assam was a wonder story in the nineteenth century. The discovery of 'tea plant' in Assam and as a follow-up to the famous Bentinck Tea Committee report, tea cultivation became a commercially viable proposition [the first tea company was registered in 1839] in the State. With processing and ancillary industries springing up around tea gardens, Assam then led other States in agriculture development and entrepreneurship skill. It continues to dominate in production of certain vegetable crops and some of the horticulture and plantation crops. Besides tea, it is the leader in production of bamboo, Ginger, Chillies, Peas, etc.

However, today, it is a different story. It is said that Assam is endowed with 'green' everywhere, but hardly any sign of green revolution is seen in the State. Despite being endowed with rich natural resources like alluvial soil and agro-climatic conditions best suited for agriculture, this State had recorded a very slow and sluggish growth rate, much below the all-India average.

The demand and supply equation for food in Assam shows that demand for food outstrips the production and the gap is increasing over time. It is estimated that by 2010 the rice production in Assam would be 14.73 lakh tonnes, that of wheat 0.74 lakh tonnes and oil seeds would be 1.07 lakh tonnes.

#### ***Demographic features***

Assam has a population of 266.38 lakh [2001 census] of which about 89% live in the rural areas. One feature in Assam is that the decennial growth rate of population was lower than that of the country as a whole [18.85% vs 21.34%]. Again, the literacy in Assam is very much comparable with the national average. It was 64.28% as against 65.38% for the country. Compared to other States in the North Eastern Region including Sikkim, the State is more industrially developed, particularly in the tea and petroleum sectors.

#### ***Agro-climatic zones***

Assam has been divided into six agro-climatic zones. These are :

- i) North bank plains [Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur and Darrang],
- ii) Upper Brahmaputra Valley [Goalaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and Tinsukial],
- iii) Central Brahmaputra Valley [Nagaon and Morigaon],

- iv) Lower Brahmaputra [Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nalbari and Kamrup],
- v) Barak Valley [Karimganj, Cachar and Hailakandi], and
- vi) Hill districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar.

### ***Operational and ownership Holding***

The farmers holding less than 1 ha of land accounted for 60.3% of total holdings and 19.3% of the total operated area in the State. The share of farmers with size class between 1-2 ha was 22.2% of total holdings and 24.5% of the total operated area. On the other hand, the large holdings [20 ha and above] constituted only 0.09% with 11.3% of the total operated area of the State. The average size of operated holding in the State also had declined to 1.27ha.

### ***Farm mechanisation***

The growth of farm mechanization in Assam is slow. With the introduction of large-scale irrigation through NABARD supported shallow tube wells [STWs], requirement of farm power has increased considerably. However, the availability of farm power to the farmers was barely 0.3 hp per ha, which has become one of the inhibiting factors towards increasing area under double or multiple cropping in the State.

### ***Livestock***

The State has over 80 lakh cattle population, followed by about 27 lakh goats, about 11 lakh pigs and a little over 7 lakh buffaloes. However, the livestock population of Assam being non-descript type, their average productivity is comparatively lower than those of many other states in India. The livestock development in the State could not make much headway due to non-availability of adequate good quality animals, other inputs and inadequate provision of technical & extension support. Poultry farming is largely confined to backyard rearing in Assam.

### ***Water resources and fisheries sector***

The State is rich in surface water resources covering an area of about 3.65 lakh ha. Rivers occupy over 56%, while beels and ox-bow lakes occupy about 28% of the water resources. Besides, the ponds and tanks contribute a little over 7% of water resources in Assam. With 90% of the population in Assam consume fish as their staple food, fisheries is one of the important sectors of rural Assam. But, the domestic consumption of fish is mostly met by importing fish and fish products from several other states particularly from Andhra Pradesh.

### ***Plantation and Horticulture***

The diverse agro climatic zones of Assam offer great potential for cultivation and development of plantation and horticulture crops. This sector is a critical component in the envisaged “ever green revolution”. The area under horticulture crops is about 8.57 lakh ha [about 22% of gross cropped area]. It ranks sixth in the country in the

production of vegetables and fruits. Besides, a variety of spices are produced in the state. Bamboo is occupying the pride of place among the plantation crops [though included under forestry] in Assam. The horticulture crops that could be successfully grown and commercially exploited would cover fruit crops [pineapple, banana, citrus], vegetable crops [cabbage, tomato, beans, brinjal, etc] and ginger. Though most of these crops have been cultivated since long, the productivity levels are very low due to non-adoption of modern methods of cultivation, negligible use of quality inputs and poor post-harvest infrastructure.

### ***Employment opportunities and rural industrialization***

At all India level, the rate of growth of employment on current daily status basis declined from 2.7% per annum during 1983-94 to 1.07% per annum during 1994-2000. In rural areas, it declined from 2.4% to 0.67% per annum during the corresponding period. Employment elasticity of output growth in agriculture declined from 0.7% to 0.01%. The situation in Assam is more adverse than all India position.

Rural poverty and proliferation of urban slums can be arrested only if we are able to move nearly a third of the landless labour in Assam from un-skilled on-farm to skilled non-farm jobs. This will be possible, only if we *give concurrent attention to production, processing, packaging and marketing.*

### ***Agri-exports***

Fruits and vegetable consumption has high income elasticity. Rising income will ensure that consumption growth will be sustained. Currently, fresh produce accounts for nearly 95% of the total produce sold in the market. In India, the processed fruit and vegetable sector is estimated to grow to Rs.2000 crore by 2005. Realisation from the value added products is more and hence rise in value addition makes the sector more attractive to investments.

### ***Economic reforms and Assam***

The economic reforms of 90's that swept the country did not bring any significant change in the economic well-being of Assam. The agriculture sector continues to be dominated by mono-cropping that too by paddy, low level of farm mechanization, etc., inhibiting its growth. The industrial development is almost stagnant in the state. While every other State is making efforts to attract foreign direct investments [FDIs], Assam has not received any such investment so far. How are we going to change this situation? What can we do to bring about the change? These are some of the questions this document attempts to address.