Agrarian concerns, Food security and Sustainability

Rationale

There are three reasons for offering this course:

1. Vast majority of India’s farms are small and marginal holdings (8 crores in 1990, more than 12 crores in 2011). This mass based primary production system of the country is intricately linked to local ecology (including biodiversity, water, livestock, commons) as well as social practices (including caste, tenurial arrangements, labour practices, and the power dynamics of entrenched semi-feudal relations). An understanding of the relevance of small and marginal producers who are influenced by local and distant actors and forces, and are simultaneously active in non-farm informal sector, is essential for any student of development, especially those interested in catalysing welfare gains in rural India.

2. The contiguity and intricacy of the inter-linkages between the social and natural so evident in the fields of rural India have been overlooked by both forest-centric ecological concerns as well as food-centric agricultural concerns (when nearly 50% of our land area is degraded) articulated in development and sustainability discourses. Therefore, the social and ecological bases of the Indian farmers’ production practices and prospects deserves to be investigated in conjunction with each other so as to bring together the dynamic linkages between food needs and culture, farming as an occupation, and large scale changes in ecology and political economy.

3. Stemming from the challenge of feeding more than a billion Indians living in the times of LPG (liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation) with changing food habits and health needs, any thinking about the future of Indian agriculture has to be grounded in the obvious and legitimate concerns of food insecurity. Importance of this concern is reinforced by the facts on imports, exports and per capita availability of nutrients.
Understanding the track record of responses to this challenge is critical for interpreting the political economy of food security and the food policy discourse in contemporary India. It is imperative for a student of development in India to examine whether food security policies enable or undermine their own stated intentions, and to investigate the reasons and implications of such a mismatch between intentions and outcomes. This understanding needs to be developed through a sustained engagement with changing rurality in contemporary India, investigating questions related to livelihoods, agrarian distress, de-peasantisation and emerging alternatives.

**Objectives of the course and expected learning outcomes**

The course is expected to provide students with an overview of the actors involved in India’s agrarian sector and of the links between food production, consumption and sustainability as well as of the possible ways ahead. This course should enable the student to

1. Appreciate the intrinsic **inter linkages between food security, livelihoods, culture and local ecology and with political economy of land relations, production and consumption** in India.
2. Evolve a comprehensive understanding of the **status and politico-economic drivers of food security in India at national and household level** of the urban consumer and of the rural producer-consumer.
3. Explore the diverse ideas and critiques of the **role of family farms** in societal wellbeing and evolve a perspective on sustainability of small farm livelihoods, food, culture and ecologies within a globalised context.

At the end of the semester, students should be familiar with the ecological, economic, justice and welfare arguments for why small holders need to be sustained. Students should also be aware of the political and economic drivers undermining small farm livelihoods and of the ecological, cultural and nutritional implications of destabilizing small farms and of some possible ways ahead. In this learning process they will be familiar with the different meanings of food security at different scales, its distributional and nutritional underpinnings and its interface with consumption cultures so as to make themselves capable of planning and analysing rural development schemes and farm policies in general and more specifically at the regional scale.

**Syllabus:**

The course will be transacted in five units spanning 12 weeks, consisting of 24 class room sessions of 1.5 hours each (total 36 hours of classes).

**Unit 1 (Week 1 and 2; 6 hours): Introduction to Agrarian India**

Following a brief interaction on the rationale behind the course, units involved, assessment pattern and timelines, this unit will provide a bird’s eye view of the key features of agrarian India. Discussions will start with experiential understanding of the class on farmers and agriculture before moving on to the essential readings.
Changing nature of our production landscapes and farmer communities, food and nutritional needs of as well as the production, consumption, import and export of major food products will be highlighted in the backdrop of green revolution, urbanization and neo-liberalisation of agricultural economy. Though several dimensions around farming will be briefly unraveled, two simple readings will make it an interesting exposure in two weeks.

Essential:


Suggested:

**Unit II (Week 3 and 4; 6 hours): Food security, food regimes and sovereignty**
This unit unpacks the overarching concept of food security, building on the understanding from the previous unit on agrarian India. We will explore the politically convenient notion that pitches the consumer against the producer, while differentiating what food security entails in national and household contexts. Politics, governance, trade and distributional aspects are key in these discussions.

Tracing the policy trajectory of food security from independence, this unit will investigate protectionist project of newly independent India designing import substitution strategies (e.g: green revolution) and then moving to the popular imports based model and how in the pandemic ravaged world at present, we try to do both the above. We will see how the ‘free’ but ‘unfair’ trade regime together with an agri-business food-regime took food security away from the idea of alleviating hunger & malnutrition towards a trade facilitating tool.

Readings will be bit more denser than the previous unit. To facilitate learning, there will be other supportive resources like video talks.


Suggested:


**Unit III (Weeks 5, 6 and 7; 9 hours): Political ecology of vulnerability and distress**

As increasing yields/ productivity becomes the mantra for both food and livelihood security, why is it that the related increase in costs, declining ratio of outputs to inputs, as well as the diminishing capacity of land to support the family and its livestock get overlooked? As we explore how mis-informed policies add to the vulnerability of small holder farming, we also will reveal how distress in the hinterlands is then used to justify imports of farm products from scale-economized and subsidized farm sectors of the developed world as also corporatization of farming. The above discussion will link to the domestic constraints like restrictions on produce movements and on entry of traders, apart from the ecological and equity outcomes of lopsided subsidies for inputs and dominant food grains. A key learning outcome concerns linking the local with the global and understanding the dynamics therein, linking to the emerging concepts like deskillling, individualization and de-peasantisation. We want students to be able to see how markets simultaneously driven by demand and supply, and trade negotiations at the WTO, regional agreements or in the commodity markets determine small farm livelihoods and sustainability of Indian agriculture.

**Essential:**


Suggested:

**Unit IV (Weeks 8 and 9; 6 hours): How to approach sustainability in Indian agriculture**

Sustainability in the agricultural context – what does it mean to us? Is it about ensuring food and nourishment for all, about ensuring reliable livelihoods in farming or contributing significantly to economic growth and foreign exchange earnings or about following agro-ecologically prudent practices? Can it be all of these? Does sustainability construed as any/all of the above depend on scale of farming? How do the efforts at each of these objectives play out on small holders and poor consumers and in different production systems from in-land plains to riverine and coastal or mountainous terrains? Deliberating these in the backdrop of diverse farming ideologies will be an interesting discussion, building on students’ experiential accounts and literature.

**Essential:**


**Unit V (Weeks 10, 11 and 12; 9 hours): Why India needs its small holders and what can be done?**

Here we will train the lens close to the dominant but invisible player – family farms. This unit will see how small farms came into being as the dominant entity in different production landscapes of the country - the socio-economic entity that combines the roles of producer and consumer at the bottom of the economic pyramid; their practices, preferences and ecological relevance. Leveraging a broad-brush but historically informed characterization of agrarian relations and transitions in the dominant agrarian regions of the country, we will also briefly discuss differentiation among Indian small holders and how do they compare with their counterparts elsewhere, including the historical ‘peasant’.

While societies in the North are responding to globalization’s lengthening of distance between producer and consumer through mechanisms like farmers’ markets and Community Supported Agriculture; how is
it that in India the disconnect between primary producers of food and consumers is unchecked and widening? The course will conclude by deliberating the pros and cons of different strategies to address this reflected in dominant trends and institutions as well as emerging concepts. The changes in farm policies, farming activities and consumer needs driven by the pandemic (e.g. recent marketing reforms and pesticide ban), along with potential ways to deal with these and other challenges already discussed in the course, will be covered as part of the student projects.

**Essential:**
Negi V (2014). Where have all the small farmers gone! The story of Agriculture and the Small Indian Farmer. (Page 15-28)


**Suggested:**

**Assessment:** The plan is for continuous assessment throughout the five units with a combination of oral (30%) and written (55%) responses, including a project involving telephonic interactions with farmers and FPOs, followed by an analytical report. In each grading process, student’s incremental understanding during the course and effort put in will be the criteria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Weightage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Response paper</td>
<td>End of week 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Debate (small groups)</td>
<td>Part of weeks 7 and/or 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Project report</td>
<td>Week 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Class engagement</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>