

I. INTRODUCTION

With the rapidly rising pressure on the natural resources in the hill and mountain areas both for providing subsistence to the local population and to generate ingredients for the material well-being of the society in general, the associated demands on different resources have not only become more intense but complex also. Pressures have also been naturally felt on the local environment and social patterns of the areas and interactions among these have increasingly become consequential. Such situations, in turn, have generated some of the most vexing aspects of human predicaments in the hills. Population in the hills at present is facing the most challenging situation of all times as the hills are fast losing their ecological balance owing to ever increasing economic and human pressures. Much of this has been the result of the unplanned development programmes initiated in many of the hill areas without taking into account their geographical, ecological, agro-climatic, and socio-cultural structures.

Failure to take into account the special problems and needs of hill areas, in the formulation and implementation of the various programmes, have resulted in a distortion of hill economic profiles. Almost all the hill areas in the sub-continent represent a special case of economic backwardness which requires the immediate attention of the planners. The problems of economic backwardness in the hill areas stem from their peculiar geographical conditions. To achieve the objective of accelerated development it is essential to understand the wide range of factors which are responsible for this backwardness, which include special geographical features, highly dispersed population, the near absence of agricultural and general economic diversification, meagre infrastructural facilities, institutional and other related problems.

Himachal Pradesh, among all the hill areas of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region, is looked upon as a model for development, where gains of scientific research have percolated to the scattered fields over a vast and undulating terrain. When the State of Himachal Pradesh came into existence in India in 1948, there was hardly anything to guide the amelioration of the hill farmers. Whatever, planning models and research results were available at that time, were mostly relevant to only the plains. During the last three decades, the scientists and the planners were able to work out a developmental model which laid emphasis on opening up of hitherto inaccessible areas for most productive use of hill lands, mostly horticultural enterprises. This model of development has revolutionised agriculture in the State, the name of which has now become synonymous with apple cultivation. Even before apple cultivation was made a widely practised avocation, seed potato production had been developed as a viable economic activity in the mid/higher hills and by producing disease free seed potato in virus free altitudes, Himachal Pradesh helped the entire nation in diversifying agriculture. Even after the development of seed plot techniques for producing seed potato in the plains, the importance and value of seed potato growing in the State has remained the same.

The third dimension to agricultural development in the State was added when a summer season vegetable programme was introduced two decades ago. The steadfastness with which vegetable production was pursued in the State can be seen from the fact that while hardly 30,000 tons of summer vegetables were produced during 1966, more than 312,000 tons of the vegetables were grown during 1985. About 0.2 million small and marginal farmers were engaged in vegetable growing, and as such, almost 1/4th of the total population is directly or indirectly benefited by it. According to an estimate, Himachal Pradesh farmers supplied fresh vegetables worth Rs 500 million to the rest of the country, generating an economic activity of over Rs 2000 million.

This report in the next section provides a brief profile of the agricultural sector of Himachal Pradesh with emphasis on research and development efforts in the field of off-season vegetables. Based on a sample survey, Section III analyses production aspects of off-season vegetables with focus on cultivation practices, employment potential, and economic and financial returns. Vegetable markets and marketing aspects are examined in Section IV while Section V summarises the major problems facing off-season vegetable growers in respect to both production and marketing. Strategies and recommendations for the future are set out in the concluding section.