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Teaching of Agricultural Economics: Report on Discussion

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On the occasion of the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, the Society decided to hold a special session to discuss problems of teaching agricultural economics at the under-graduate and post-graduate levels in the Agricultural and non-Agricultural Universities in India. Two invited papers, one relating to teaching in the Agricultural Universities, and the other relating to teaching in the post-graduate departments in non-Agricultural Universities printed in this issue provided the basic background to the discussion that followed.

The discussions were at two levels; on the general themes, and specific to the individual papers. Where the authors have taken account of the specific comments made in revising their papers for publication, these comments are not referred to in the summary of discussions below.

The discussion began by noting that the approach to the study of the agricultural economy in India had been essentially empirical. Historically, the enquiries by the successive Famine Commissions, the primary household and village level enquiries by Major Jack in Bengal, Dr. Harold Mann in Bombay, Dr. Gilbert Slater in Madras, the enquiries by the Punjab Board of Economic Enquiry, the surveys of rural indebtedness and credit enquiries in various provinces, the marketing reports of the Office of Marketing Advisor, and the stream of village surveys in the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's, underline this empirical orientation. Prof. Leonief's appreciation of this orientation of the American agricultural economists may also be said to hold true in the case of the Indian agricultural economic profession. But, it was pointed out that while most of our studies were empirical and quantitative to a very high degree, they were, unfortunately, not always analytical, or analytical enough. This may have been mainly due to our training at the University level.

Teaching of analytical methods in economics in the Agricultural Universities at both the under-graduate and even the post-graduate levels was heavily centred on production economics. It was pointed out that this was mainly due to the emphasis in the statutory mandates of these Universities to produce farm planners and extension workers. The rest of micro-economic analysis was neglected to a greater extent. There was a strong need for adequate training in micro and macro-economic analysis to students of agricultural economics, particularly at the post-graduate level. Some post-graduate students who participated in the discussion were very emphatic on this, and stated that such minor provision as may have been made in the existing syllabi of the Universities, was invariably neglected in the class.

In the General Universities, it was stated that agricultural economics was regarded by the students essentially as a descriptive subject; and the actual content of teaching in the class-room or the pattern of questions in the examination did little to correct this distorted understanding. There was general support for the contention of Professors Deshpande and Sawant on this score, though opinion was divided on the alternative approaches suggested by them for improving the situation.

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Note: Report on the discussion in the Special Session on Teaching of Agricultural Economics at the Golden Jubilee Conference of the Indian Society of Agricultural Economics at Bombay on 7th December, 1989. -Ed.

The second aspect of teaching about which there appeared considerable dissatisfaction related to the teaching and application of empirical methods. While in the Agricultural Universities, there was considerable emphasis on this at the Master's level, many maintained that the use of these methods by the learners was often very mechanical. There was no emphasis in teaching to apply tools discriminatively, to use only relevant tools for the task on hand and not bring unnecessarily heavy tools to handle analytical problems that can be better handled with simpler ones. In part, some felt, this arises due to lack of application of these tools to real world data in the class-room. Indeed, it was felt that the massive body of empirical information relating to Indian agriculture rarely seemed to find its way to our class-rooms. No wonder there is a general lack of critical judgment about the relevance of the available empirical information for the analytical frame. These are tasks which need to be handled at the post-graduate and research degree levels, if poor quality of the human product and frustration are to be avoided. At the General Universities, most students of agricultural economics were innocent of even elementary quantitative methods. Use of these methods in teaching and analysis would force them to learn these, since facilities for training in quantitative methods were available almost everywhere.

Some discussants from the Agricultural Universities said that economics has a relatively lower status at the under-graduate level: only 6 universities have a provision for Honours course in economics. At the Master's level job-oriented programmes like agricultural production, marketing and finance attracted main attention. Policy oriented subjects and analytical methods stood to suffer through relative neglect. And, finally, students, irrespective of their preparedness, insist on completing their degree in two years and the administration also thinks likewise. No wonder, the product is often ill-equipped.

Another aspect discussed related to the knowledge of technical agriculture in broad terms and its use in economic analysis. The students of Agricultural Universities of course had adequate knowledge of this; but there was little evidence of this in their analysis of economic aspects of agriculture. On the other hand, there was general ignorance about this amongst the students in the M.A. (Economics) class (even when they came from agriculturist families), and amongst the students of urban origin the ignorance was phenomenal. Several suggestions were made to devise ways of making the M.A. students informed about technicalities of agriculture in a broad way, though it was felt that mere visit to farms and Agricultural Universities cannot fill this gap. As for the students of Agricultural Universities, it was suggested that the relation between technology and economics should be clearly demonstrated in the course of teaching, and the research students should be made to check these at the farmer's level rather than merely hypothesising about them in their analysis.

Divergent views were expressed about the prevailing situation in Agricultural Universities. While some felt that the model teaching scheme formulated by the ICAR for the purpose should be given a fair trial, others felt that no uniformity should be imposed and departments should have freedom in the matter. In this connection, the changes in syllabi in the Indian Agricultural Research Institute over the past many years were referred to, but IARI appeared to be an exception rather than the rule in this matter.

Similarly, divergent views were expressed about the quality of teachers in the Agricultural Universities. While a few thought that there were well qualified teachers to teach analytical subjects who, however, were being used in a large measure in other tasks, a very wide body of opinion was dissatisfied with the training, background and competence of many teachers.

Two suggestions emerged in this connection: (1) There should be a deliberate policy of recruiting a certain percentage of teachers who had their post-graduate training in other

universities, including in non-agricultural universities, of course on a reciprocal basis, in order to avoid excessive in-breeding. In this connection, it was thought that the centralised examination by the ICAR to recruit teachers for Agricultural Universities and by the U.G.C. for the General Universities might help. (2) Most participants felt that periodic refresher courses for University teachers in their respective subjects were absolutely necessary. There was a persistent suggestion that the Indian Society of Agricultural Economics should take initiative in the matter.

Another aspect on which also there was wide consensus was the need for relevant teaching material. While a few participants said that there was good teaching material made available by their institutions to students, based on research in the departments, most participants were unhappy with the inadequate and rather unsuitable teaching material available. In this matter also, the Society, amongst others, was requested to take initiative.

In regard to the General Universities, some felt that the two-paper course designed by Profs. Deshpande and Sawant might prove too heavy, and needed appropriate pruning. They also mentioned inadequate access to literature for students in many Universities. Quality literature in regional languages, which have become the medium of learning in many universities, was conspicuous by its absence. In this connection, the provision of external examinees (who were not regular students) caused greater strain inasmuch as their background and access to literature being poor, they succeeded in pulling down the general level of performance expected.

There was very wide participation in the discussion. Speakers ventilated their sense of unhappiness with the existing state of affairs. The special session provided a forum for unburdening one's dissatisfaction and in this sense the session was a useful beginning. This needs to be followed up with some concrete measures for improving teaching of agricultural economics in India. This is imperative because for a long time to come the demand for professionally trained agricultural economists is bound to remain significantly high.