

The importance of agriculture census

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SUBASH DASGUPTA

THIS year's agriculture census 2008-09 is in progress in the country, and the time fixed for sample surveys at field level was May 11-29. The survey report will be released in June 2009. It will be good if the report can be publicly available in time.

The last report of the agriculture census, 1996, was released in July 1999. An agriculture census is essential to obtain the detailed data/statistics/information necessary to keep the nation informed of the changes in the country's agriculture.

Agriculture census, which covers a wide range of activities and huge numbers of farm and non-farm holdings, is indeed a difficult task. The on-going census, for the first time, will also cover urban agriculture. Conducted every ten years, the agriculture census is the only source of official data that is

used for planning and forecasting. Although such type of activity has national significance, unfortunately, so far, it has received very little attention from our media and concerned stakeholders.

The current census is being conducted after 13 years, which is a long time, and a lot of changes occurred in Bangladesh agriculture during this period. The first agriculture census was conducted in 1960 during "pre-green revolution" period. Since then, we have been witnessing gradual changes in our agricultural development process, which has become more rapid since the late 1990s.

The accelerated changes, which are taking place should be identified through the census. It should be noted that all concerned persons would want to know the dynamics of such changes, and also who are the driving forces behind it. It is not enough to know only the changes in the classified farm categories and land holdings

belonging to them. Expectation from this census is much higher than from earlier ones. A need is felt for a wide range of accurate information about farm production, cropping patterns, cropping pattern-based land area estimation rather than commodity-based, farming systems, management practices and finances, as well as personal characteristics of farmers and farm household members.

Inadequacy of information in all previous censuses did not allow analysis of agriculture in terms of its inherent potential and problems vis-à-vis current developments. We hope that, this time, the authorities will give due emphasis to data collection, keeping in mind that our agriculture is a part of global agriculture and, because of that, the database should be wider and more diversified.

An old debating issue is the classification norms of farm categories based only on land availabil-

ity. Unfortunately, the concept still prevails. We have to see far it is accurate in the context of the changing scenario in the rural areas of the country. Some other criteria should be included in categorising farmers. Farm categories, based on only on land holdings, can be estimated by adjusting the data of previous censuses, as in the case of annual population growth data adjustment. Strictly speaking, we do not need a new census for this purpose, which was the dominating feature of all previous censuses.

My understanding is that our agriculture has to be broadly categorised into four groups: subsistence farming, semi-intensive farming, intensive farming, and commercial farming. Another option is to classify according to farming typology: hill farming, barind farming, coastal farming and flood plain farming systems. Classification of farming systems, as per rice growing eco-systems, seems to be another alternative.

The time has come to have a national consensus on this vital issue. A research program can be undertaken to look into the matter in more detail, and to come out with concrete proposals for deciding the best way to categorise farmers. It will be more useful and

informative if we collect data following any one of the above-mentioned categories.

There has been a growing concern about the quality of the data, which is often not too accurate. This needs serious attention of the concerned authority. The problem is that ten-year intervals are too long for the poor farmers to remember changes in their agriculture because they do not keep written records.

The BBS has the responsibility of providing quality, and accurate, data gathered through the census. For this purpose, a technical monitoring team could be constituted, and some of the information could be verified again in order to reconfirm their quality. It can also be done through post-enumeration survey. Leaving it only to the enumerators and some other officials of upazila and district will not be enough to ensure its quality.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) has been playing a significant role globally to assist developing countries in conducting their agriculture census. Bangladesh also received considerable support in the past from FAO in conducting the agriculture census. FAO provides both technical and financial assistance in this regard.

The idea to conduct a census after every ten years, as recommended by FAO, and most of the developing countries are following it still. The time has come to re-think about whether it would be appropriate to conduct this type of census at five-year, rather than ten-year, intervals in order to capture and record the rapidly changing scenario of our agricultural and rural development. In India, the agriculture census is conducted every five years.

Another important task is to provide commodity production statistics, which are the key components in forecasting production. Forecast of production is necessary for two reasons: to estimate the country's food security situation and to make the country's food budget. Without reliable data relating to crop yields and the area available for crops, forecasting production would be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Along with agriculture census, census on agricultural inputs supply is also extremely important for boosting our agricultural production. To save resources and time, concerned authorities have to give due attention to this proposal. Otherwise, the current census will be a half-hearted exercise. To me, for some reasons, a



PHOTOGRAPH BY DR. SUBASH DASGUPTA

census on input supply systems is more important than even agriculture census. The time period (May 11-29) for the census does not seem to be appropriate as it coincides with the harvesting of boro rice, which is going on full swing across the country. In this situation, farmers may not have spare time to give interviews. Finally, the agriculture census is the largest statistical operation undertaken by the BBS. On the other hand, the BBS has limited manpower both at national and at

grass-roots levels. In view of that, it is being conducted under a project fully funded by the government. In future, we can take the help of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) and Directorate of Food (FD). If BBS, DAE and FD could work together at grass-roots level in collecting information, it will solve much of our problems with regard to getting accurate information on the country's agriculture situation.

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Inclusionary policy towards the adivasis

On April 24, the Center for Indigenous Peoples Research and Development (CIPRAD) and Tribal Welfare Association (TWA) jointly organised a press conference at the Reporters' Unity, Dhaka, appealing to the caretaker government to allocate budget for indigenous peoples of the plains. Similarly, in 2007, CIPRAD and TWA appealed to the caretaker government for inclusion of adivasi issues in the national budget.

ALBERT MANKIN

EVERY year when the national budget preparation time comes, various professional groups, political

parties, civil society members, labour parties, sympathisers of the disabled, and women's groups present demands to the sitting government for inclusion in the national budget. During the

period, daily papers are full of news of roundtable conferences making demands and recommendations.

It is noted that in the whole process of the national budget

preparation the adivasis are neglected. Constitutionally, adivasis (ethnic groups) are included in the "disadvantaged group." There has been a tradition of neglect from the beginning of the budgetary exercises since 1972.

The government, as well as the groups mentioned above, might assume that the allocations for the majority population will invariably "trickle down" to the indigenous peoples. Development practitioners will testify that it is not so simple. As corruption and rent seeking reigned in every sphere of public resources management, access to scarce resources by the indigenous peoples communities at local and national level was almost a dream.

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PRSP 2005 (page 150) states: "Over the years the adivasis have been made to experience a strong sense of social, political and economic exclusion, lack of recognition, fear and insecurity, loss of cultural identity and social oppression." It further added: "Mainstream development efforts have either ignored their concerns and/or had negative impacts on them."

Jumias from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, due to their unique

position, get some budgetary provisions for development. By contrast the plains adivasis (approximately 2 million in 43 ethnic groups) are in a disadvantaged position. One research shows that Tk 6 to 7 crores are allocated annually through the Special Affairs Division (SAD), under the Prime Minister's Secretariat. The plains adivasis have to be engaged actively in the management of funds, and have their participation ensured in program policy development. Several workshops/seminars organised by indigenous people categorically recommended transparency in SAD funds management, and their accessibility to the funds.

As mentioned in the PRSP, one of the most marginalised communities in Bangladesh are the adivasis, having had no enabling conditions built into various national institutions, legal systems, finance and budget and, thus, they have continued to suffer many kinds of deprivation. This has resulted in large-scale alienation of indigenous communities from national political, social and economic activities.

Building space in the national budget is inextricably linked to rights recognition, and will certainly lead, to some extent, to the development of deprived and marginalised communities in the country. The caretaker government is certainly aware of the deprivation of adivasis, and it is time to ensure inclusion of their issues in the coming national budget for 2008-2009.

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It's curtains for men, as scientists map the female DNA

BY SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT

SCIENTISTS in Holland last week announced that they had for the first time mapped the complete DNA of a woman. The DNA of the human male was mapped in 2001, and boffins have also done a number of lesser beasts, such as the dog, the bear, the E. Coli bacterium, the fruit fly, the mouse, and finally, last and definitely least, the human female.

Humanity will at last be able to conclusively identify genetic differences between men and women, a spokesman said.

As usual, scientists have taken years to discover what the rest of us already know.

For example, I know from personal experience that men are genetically programmed to have no opinions whatsoever about the colour of curtains. I have spent years strenuously attempting to have an opinion on the subject, but it is simply not possible.

Unfortunately, women are genetically programmed to not notice that men have no opinion on this topic, and will ask their partners for one repeatedly throughout their lifetimes.

And my last words will be: "Er. Ah. Um. I don't know. Uh, white?" "White? Are you crazy? What about all the soot?"

Here's another example of gender-specific programming. If a man puts something down and then cannot find it, he is genetically programmed not to look for it but to ask the nearest woman where it is. She will then find that it is exactly where he left it and she will hand it to him. It's a kind of comforting ritual.

There are genetic differences in shopping, reader Sara Wan said. Men buy things according to how many unnecessary functions they have, which is why the world now has Internet-connected refrigerators and Bluetooth-enabled rice-cookers. "If we could calculate just how much money is wasted by men buying gadgets with functions they never use, we'd probably have enough to solve all the world's problems," she said. Good idea, Sara. I'll see if I can find a gadget with that function for you.

A reader who did not want her name used said: "I am a married woman. My husband has several functions he does not use."

Moving right along, a gentleman named Dan said he had seen statistics which said that married men live

longer than single men. This could be true. Or maybe it just feels like it.

Men and women also have very different body-clocks. This can easily be proved by observation of The Midnight Conversation, which I'm sure all couples have.

Her: Zzzz. Her: Do you think we have enough quality time, I mean, as a couple?

Her: I mean, when was the last time we really talked?

Her: We don't talk enough.

Her: You do.

Her: What did you say?

Her: Nothing, Zzzz.

Anyway, I guess these scientists in Holland may come up with some useful information that guys can use. You know what they say. There are two periods when men don't understand women: before marriage and after marriage.

I shall leave the last word to a female reader. "Imagine a world with no men. No crime and lots of fat, happy women."

And the right colour curtains as far as they have at home.

More offensive, sexist trash can be found at www.vittachi.com.

Great leap forward

With the world spotlight on China after the May 12 earthquake, the leaders wasted no time in taking decisive action, and what the world has witnessed since is one of the largest mobilisations and the most extensive rescue operations in response to a peacetime natural disaster in human history.

WENRAN JIANG

THE massive earthquake struck China's Southwest Sichuan province while Beijing was fending off criticism over its hard-line handling of the unrest in Tibet, backtracking on promised free access for journalists throughout China leading up to the summer Olympics, and mounting its own hostile attack on the Western media.

China's image in the West was turning negative. And given the military junta's dismal handling of the cyclone that killed more than 100,000 in Burma only days earlier, the world held its breath on how China would react to its own disaster that has so far left more than 55,000 dead and 5 million homeless -- the worst in over three decades.

The world had good reason to worry. When the last mega-earthquake, that killed 250,000 in

Tangshan, occurred in 1976, China was a closed society suffering from 10 years of internal political turmoil, and the government tightly controlled the flow of information, not so different from the generals of Burma today.

Beijing did not mobilise a nationwide rescue and refused outside help. Reform and openness that followed have changed China dramatically. But old habits die hard. The Chinese government's initial cover-up of the SARS epidemic in 2003 led to deadly consequences around the world, and indicated that China had a way to go before claiming to be a responsible world power.

With the world spotlight on China after the May 12 earthquake, the leaders wasted no time in taking decisive action, and what the world has witnessed since is one of the largest mobilisations and the most extensive rescue operations in response to a peacetime natural

disaster in human history.

President Hu Jintao issued a nationwide call for an "all-out" effort in the rescue operation minutes after the earthquake; Premier Wen Jiabao immediately flew to the disaster zone to set up the relief command center; the People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff Operations Department implemented the emergency-response measures less than 30 minutes following the quake; and within 90 minutes, China's 200-member elite search-and-rescue team boarded a plane in Beijing with equipment, medical supplies and search dogs.

The sheer political determination of the top leadership and hands-on involvement helped in unprecedented mobilisation of all government resources. At the very core of the rescue-and-relief efforts is the rapid deployment of 130,000 PLA soldiers and paramilitary police forces within days of the

disaster.

The operation has moved five percent of China's 2.3 million military personnel to the disaster zones; it has coordinated joint movements of army, navy, air force and other units which have engaged in air-dropping and parachuting, and moving relief supplies by railway, trucks and on-foot marches to isolated towns and villages.

Hundreds of rescue and medical teams and hundreds of tons of needed supplies of all kinds have poured into the quake areas.

The Chinese media simultaneously broke away from traditional control and provided around-the-clock live coverage of the unfolding rescue operations. The images of a tearful Premier Wen in the epicenter comforting crying babies, the selfless young PLA soldiers clawing with bare hands in a desperate fight against time to save lives, the thousands of dead children under collapsed school buildings, and the joy of survivors pulled from the rubble sent shockwaves throughout China and triggered a never-before-seen emotional response from the Chinese public.

The tragedy has rallied the nation and brought out the best in its citizens. The masses that were used to government-sponsored political movements in the past are now taking their own initiative: Lines of people donated blood and filled the blood banks, opened wallets to give cash now counting in the billions of RMBs, and rushed from far away, even from other countries, to volunteer in the disaster region.

Just as the opening of the domestic media galvanised the Chinese public, the free access given to foreign journalists in the quake areas has resulted in positive reporting by the foreign media, spurring worldwide sympathy toward the earthquake victims and praise for the Chinese government.

China opened itself to the world for help, allowing foreign rescue and medical teams to enter the country for the first time to assist in relief operations, and accepting generous donations flooding in from around the globe.

Now the world has good reason to be impressed. Beijing's rapid response to the current crisis, the heroic stories of survival and rescue, the nationwide outpouring of

support, and unprecedented open media coverage of relief efforts have produced more than tens of thousands of life-saving miracles.

China has sent a clear message to the world that it is no Burma. Chinese leaders have set an example for the xenophobic generals in Rangoon on how to execute a disaster-relief operation, which may well have influenced the Burmese decision to accept an Asean-led international assistance mission more than two weeks after the cyclone.

But for a tectonic shift to occur in the world's perception of China as a new kind of superpower, Beijing needs to do more than demonstrate that its crisis management is better than Burma's or that post-earthquake Sichuan is no post-Katrina New Orleans.

First of all, the Chinese leadership faces the challenge of translating the initial success of this disaster relief into long-lasting benefits for the Chinese people. While Beijing should be congratulated for its human-centered rescue efforts, extending such an approach to other areas such as Tibet would win China greater respect. A global power whose responsibility begins

at home applies to China now more than ever before.

And when the victims are buried and the reconstruction process begins, Beijing should encourage a nationwide debate on the lessons of the catastrophe. It is no doubt tempting for the Chinese Communist Party propagandists to convert the current high-level support of the Chinese people into a glorifying feast for the party and to re-assert tighter control over the media on politically sensitive issues.

But the CCP could confront a legitimacy crisis unless it gives honest answers to thousands of grieving parents on why so many schools collapsed in a country that has built some of the world's best skyscrapers in Beijing and Shanghai.

It is also high time for China to reflect on its development strategy that has heavily favoured the cities over the countryside, the coastal regions over the interior and the rich over the poor during the past two decades.

Furthermore, China will be tested for its willingness and ability to play a more active international role, commensurate to its growing

world-power status. While it is understandable that the Chinese public has been emotionally involved in such a calamity so close to home, the country will command universal respect when its government and its citizens display as much care to other humanitarian crises around the world as they have at home.

The Chinese responses to the immense tragedy have moved the country toward a more open and responsible society. But China will remain in the spotlight in this very eventful year as the Olympic Games approach.

China could make a great leap forward beyond its borders when it is willing to play a more active role in alleviating human suffering in countries such as Burma, Sudan and Zimbabwe, and take the lead in world affairs beyond its well-defined but narrow national interest.

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