Land is an important productive asset subject to various uses. Among the different uses of land agriculture is the most important one. The sprawl in industrialization and urbanization is affects agricultural land leading to its scarcity. This change in turn definitely affects the ecosystem and socio-economic conditions. Thus, the existing land use / land cover pattern, changes in land use pattern and the relationship between population growth and food production is a matter of major concern. Erratic performance of the agricultural sector not only affects the availability of food grains but also the performance of the industrial sector. However, the agricultural sector is facing the most serious threats from an ongoing process of overexploitation and conversion into other uses resulting in a degradation and depletion of the agricultural land.

Rice continues to be the staple food of the people of Kerala though food consumption pattern of the majority of households underwent significant changes in the past few decades. The performance of the paddy farm sector is quite disappointing. The area and the production of paddy in the state have been declining since the mid seventies. In spite of the efforts of several individual, voluntary and government organizations, the wet lands present a bleak picture of struggling with their agonies. The growth trend in agricultural sector has not been consistent in Kerala with a decline in the contribution to the state income. Rice production in the state registered a negative growth as per the Economic Review, 2007. Being a consumer state, with the recent production trends, the state in general fears to be moving towards food insecurity.

Agricultural land conversion especially that of paddy fields, has been a burning issue both from the perspective of food security and its environmental impacts. Though agricultural land conversions have been banned under Kerala Land Utilization Order, conversions have been occurring in an unprecedented manner. As stated by the Economic Review, Kerala State Planning Board, the area and production of rice in Kerala which was steadily increasing till the mid seventies had to succumb to economic pressures emanating from other remunerative crops like banana, coconut and growth of construction sector, leading to a decline of more than 5 lakh ha. of area under paddy cultivation during the last two decades.

The conversion and reclamation of paddy cultivated areas to non agricultural uses is the major land use change that occurred in Kerala affecting the food security of the state. Rice production which registered a negative growth in the state is expected to worsen in the coming years which will further increase the dependency of the state on the outside suppliers. Resorts, homes and roads have taken up the paddy lands, though it’s not clear how much of the built up land have been recovered from paddy and water bodies. Further many of the neglected paddy lands have naturally evolved as a dense scrubland; some of them have lost the depth as they get filled with gravel, silt and plant debris.

Agricultural land conversion is not just a by-product of creeping industrialization and urbanization. In fact institutional factors, liberalization policies and market vagaries, anti inflation oriented government policies, increased migration of semi-skilled laborers etc have led to the non remunerative prices alongside an increase in the cost of cultivation. Small and marginal land holdings occupy a major share in the total cultivable land in Kerala. This has reduced the possibility of economies of scale in the farming sector. In such small and marginal land holdings the use of technology becomes inevitable but it has been thoroughly opposed fearing job losses, though in reality there is a shortage for farm laborers. Land conversion is in fact a typical response to the non-profitability of the sector as admitted by the National Agricultural Policy.

The rice growing agricultural wetland ecosystem provides an enormous range of products and services either directly or indirectly. The process of conversion of these wetlands leads to the degradation and depletion of this interface between terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and leads to socio-economic problems. Conversion of paddy fields leads to a number of socio economic and ecological consequences. Reduction in rice production impinges on the food security of the state. In addition it contributes to increasing unemployment and poverty, decrease in ground water recharging and prolonged water logging in villages. It also leads to destruction of rice producing ecosystem in terms
of land cover, land quality and capability, weather and climate and the list continues.

The country has already started feeling the heat of the inflationary potential of a shortage in agricultural production and its impact on the food security of the poor. This warrants the maintenance of agricultural land for agricultural purpose. Kerala Government is also planning to tighten up the existing provisions of the law. It would be foolish on the part of the Government to think that a piece of legislation can sustain the paddy production. If legislation could do all the magic then there would not have been any black markets and illegal operations. Making something illegal just make it go underground. If paddy production is not made remunerative, land will continue to be converted for other uses. Any reduction in the paddy area will naturally lead to a situation of increasing food deficit from the present precarious level.

Problems like acute labour shortage, availability of rice for imports from neighboring states, supply of rice through PDS, land reforms, decrease in the size of holdings, changes in the policy focus of different governments, non profitability of the paddy production, etc has led to the decline in the area and production of paddy in the state. These problems which appear to have been accelerated since the nineties, is increasingly making paddy cultivation economically unsustainable leading to a further decline in the area and production of paddy in the state. The uneconomic paddy cultivation is increasingly forcing the farmers to either leave the fields fallow or to convert it to other uses.

To be continued...

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