



International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology
Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347 -6435 (Online)), Volume 15, Issue 3, March 2026

Status of Rainfed Agriculture in India: A Comprehensive Review Based Analysis

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Abstract: - Rainfed agriculture constitutes a significant component of India's agricultural system and plays a crucial role in ensuring food security, rural livelihoods, and sustainable resource management. A large proportion of India's cultivated land depends primarily on rainfall rather than irrigation infrastructure. Despite contributing substantially to the production of food grains, pulses, oilseeds, and coarse cereals, rainfed agriculture remains vulnerable to climatic variability, low productivity, and socio-economic constraints. This article reviews the existing literature on the status, significance, and challenges of rainfed agriculture in India. The review incorporates contributions from scholars, government reports, and institutional studies that examine the productivity, sustainability, and policy framework of rainfed farming systems. The analysis reveals that rainfed agriculture supports a majority of small and marginal farmers and contributes significantly to national agricultural output. However, issues such as soil degradation, erratic rainfall patterns, inadequate infrastructure, and limited institutional support continue to constrain its development. The article emphasizes the importance of watershed management, climate-resilient technologies, crop diversification, and policy reforms to enhance the productivity and sustainability of rainfed agriculture in India.

Keywords:-

Rainfed Agriculture, Dryland Farming, Watershed Development, Agricultural Sustainability, Rural Livelihoods, Indian Agriculture

I. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture continues to play a pivotal role in India's economic and social development. A significant portion of India's agricultural production relies on rainfall rather than irrigation systems, making rainfed agriculture an essential component of the country's farming landscape. Rainfed agriculture refers to farming

systems where crop production depends primarily on rainfall and natural soil moisture.

According to the Planning Commission (2011), rainfed areas constitute nearly 60 percent of the net cultivated area in India and contribute about 40 percent of the country's food production. These areas are home to a large proportion of the rural population, particularly small and marginal farmers who depend on agriculture for their livelihoods.

Rainfed agriculture is predominant in semi-arid and dry regions of India such as Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and parts of Tamil Nadu. These regions are characterized by limited irrigation facilities, low soil fertility, and high climatic variability.

Despite these challenges, rainfed areas play a crucial role in producing essential crops such as pulses, oilseeds, millets, and cotton.

Understanding the status of rainfed agriculture is therefore essential for ensuring food security, rural employment, and sustainable agricultural development in India.

II. CONCEPT AND CHARACTERISTICS OF RAINFED AGRICULTURE

Rainfed agriculture is commonly defined as agricultural production that relies solely on rainfall for water supply. According to Rockström et al. (2007), rainfed farming systems occupy nearly 80 percent of global agricultural land and produce a significant share of the world's food supply.

In India, rainfed agriculture is often associated with dryland farming systems, which are characterized by:

Dependence on monsoon rainfall

Limited irrigation infrastructure

Low soil moisture retention capacity

High vulnerability to drought and climate change

Dominance of smallholder farmers

These characteristics make rainfed agriculture highly sensitive to environmental and climatic changes.



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III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON RAINFED AGRICULTURE

Several scholars and institutions have examined the dynamics of rainfed agriculture in India.

Vaidyanathan (2006) emphasized that rainfed regions represent the most vulnerable agricultural zones in India due to their dependence on monsoon rainfall and limited irrigation infrastructure.

He argued that increasing productivity in these regions is essential for reducing rural poverty.

Rao and Venkateswarlu (2012) highlighted that rainfed agriculture contributes significantly to the production of pulses, oilseeds, and coarse cereals. Their study indicated that nearly 90 percent of pulses and 80 percent of oilseeds are produced in rainfed areas.

Reddy (2003) examined the economic performance of rainfed farming systems and concluded that low investment in infrastructure, research, and extension services has constrained productivity growth in dryland regions.

Fan and Hazell (2001) argued that public investment in rainfed areas yields higher returns in terms of poverty reduction compared to investments in irrigated regions. Their research suggested that improving rainfed agriculture could significantly enhance rural incomes.

Rockström and Falkenmark (2000) emphasized the importance of water management in rainfed agriculture. They highlighted the potential of rainwater harvesting and watershed development in improving crop productivity.

ICRISAT (International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics) has conducted extensive research on rainfed agriculture in India. Their studies suggest that improved crop varieties, soil moisture conservation techniques, and integrated farming systems can significantly increase productivity in rainfed areas.

National Rainfed Area Authority (NRAA) (2012) reported that rainfed regions support about 60 percent of India's livestock population, making them vital for both crop and livestock-based livelihoods.

Pingali (2015) noted that the Green Revolution primarily benefited irrigated regions, leaving rainfed areas relatively underdeveloped. As a result, productivity gaps between irrigated and rainfed regions continue to widen.

Kerr (2002) analyzed watershed development programs in India and concluded that such programs have significantly improved soil conservation, water

availability, and agricultural productivity in rainfed regions.

Joshi et al. (2005) emphasized the importance of integrated watershed management in improving agricultural productivity and reducing vulnerability in rainfed areas.

IV. CURRENT STATUS OF RAINFED AGRICULTURE IN INDIA

Rainfed agriculture occupies approximately 85 million hectares of cultivated land in India, making it one of the largest rainfed agricultural systems in the world.

These regions contribute significantly to the production of several crops:

91% of coarse cereals

90% of pulses

80% of oilseeds

73% of cotton

Rainfed agriculture also supports a large livestock population and plays a critical role in maintaining rural livelihoods.

However, productivity in rainfed regions remains significantly lower than in irrigated areas due to resource constraints and environmental challenges.

V. MAJOR CHALLENGES OF RAINFED AGRICULTURE

5.1 Climatic Uncertainty

Rainfed agriculture depends heavily on monsoon rainfall. Variations in rainfall patterns can lead to crop failures and economic losses for farmers.

5.2 Soil Degradation

Large areas of rainfed land suffer from soil erosion, nutrient depletion, and declining soil fertility.

5.3 Limited Irrigation Infrastructure

Many rainfed regions lack adequate irrigation facilities, making them vulnerable to drought conditions.

5.4 Low Technological Adoption

Farmers in rainfed regions often have limited access to improved seeds, fertilizers, and agricultural technologies.

5.5 Market and Institutional Constraints

Lack of market infrastructure, credit facilities, and extension services further restrict the development of rainfed agriculture.



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VI. POLICY INTERVENTIONS AND GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

Recognizing the importance of rainfed agriculture, the Government of India has launched several programs aimed at improving productivity and sustainability.

Key initiatives include:

National Rainfed Area Authority (NRAA)

Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP)

National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA)

Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana (PMKSY)

These programs focus on soil and water conservation, watershed development, climate-resilient agriculture, and improved resource management.

VII. FUTURE PROSPECTS OF RAINFED AGRICULTURE

Experts believe that rainfed agriculture holds significant potential for improving food security and rural livelihoods in India. Increasing productivity in rainfed regions could substantially enhance national food production.

Key strategies include:

Development of drought-resistant crop varieties

Promotion of millet-based farming systems

Integrated crop–livestock farming

Efficient water management

Strengthening agricultural extension services

VIII. CONCLUSION

Rainfed agriculture remains a fundamental component of India's agricultural system and rural economy. It supports millions of farmers and contributes significantly to the production of essential crops such as pulses, oilseeds, and coarse cereals.

However, rainfed regions continue to face numerous challenges including climatic variability, soil degradation, low productivity, and limited institutional support. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy interventions, investment in agricultural research, and the promotion of sustainable farming practices.

Strengthening rainfed agriculture will play a crucial role in enhancing food security, reducing rural poverty, and promoting sustainable agricultural development in India.

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