

Can farming be a career choice?

If a hypothetical MBA graduate looked at a career in farming, what kind of counselling would she get?

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LONG BEFORE career counselling showed up on the evolutionary timescale of job profiles, career choices in India were driven largely by social forces. For example, the early 1990s saw career preferences driven towards the medical sciences; the late 1990s onward, engineering remained the preferred choice till about the early 2000s; since when almost everybody wants to do an MBA. From late-2000s onward, many started pursuing their own entrepreneurial dreams. Today, we see that even after an MBA, some have taken to politics, film-making, tuition centres, and even stand-up comedy. We have witnessed growing job diversity that has facilitated the need for more and more career counsellors.

The job of career counsellors is to help candidates make a choice after a careful examination of the monetary, social and personal rewards in relation to each alternative in question. With or without the aid of career counsellors, many have found suitable applications for MBA degrees. Both management and governance are crucial in business, politics, education, healthcare, or any environment where problem-solving is a key feature. It is nat-



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ural, therefore, to speculate the possibility that someone (with administration skills) driven by social motives may want to solve the hunger problem of a billion people.

We specifically ask that in a hypothetical world where somebody wanted to take up farming as a full-time profession, what kind of counselling would she receive? We begin by identifying that farming is important. Contributing to around 18% to our domestic income, agriculture also provides livelihood to over half our workforce. As home to a sixth of humanity, we need agriculture to thrive for its critical role in ensuring food security. So we rule

out the problem of lack of demand—nobody wants to serve in an industry that faces a demand-deficit. Here's what the informed counsellor will have to say to an enthusiast who wants to be different:

First, the problem of uncertain income. With low and stagnant productivity (less than 2% per year), declining farm income, and the reported incidences of farmer suicides, there are no natural incentives to engage in farming that depends heavily on nature, and involves higher uncertainty and risk as compared to other sectors.

Around two-thirds of our net sown area is rain-fed. Unlike farmers with assured

irrigation facility, those solely dependent on rainfall are restricted to cultivation of crops only during the kharif season (erratic rainfall during which adds to uncertainty). All this doesn't even account for pests and diseases leading to usage of chemicals.

Second, the issue of long-term growth. Chemicals deplete natural resources such as land and water—the major inputs in farming. Increased use of fertilisers and pesticides is both a cause and consequence of the challenge of new pests and diseases. In the long run, higheryield (our population is growing) is associated with degraded soil fertility. In addition, increased depletion of groundwater resources affects irrigation. So, while big farmers can dig deeper using tractors for tilling, farming becomes unviable for small farmers due to unsustainable practices. Eventually, even the big farmers will have to face the adverse effects of over-depletion.

Third, the problem of credit and investment. Small farmers with less than a hectare of land (85% of farmers) cannot access credit from formal institutions, as small plots of land do not make valuable collateral. Borrowing from private lenders at usurious interest rates means they have to pay off debts using their own produce. Lack of institutional support is accompanied with the decline of social capital (family relations and community support) that used to be important as a safety net.

In conclusion, our career counsellor would present our candidate with information on the complex nexus between ecology, socioeconomic conditions, institutional structure and the changing role of the state that characterise Indian agriculture. For farmers (not aspirants), the reality is bitter. The absence of alternative sources of on-farm employment forces them to undertake distress migration to eventually become daily wage workers. At this stage, if our candidate has still not made up her mind, then the counsellor throws in additional piece of empirical observation—around 40% of farmers are no longer interested in farming (NSSO, 2003).

Policy intervention focused on making agriculture an economically-viable source of livelihood for farmers requires sustainable and equitable resource-use, coupled with gainful non-farm job opportunities with better working conditions. Reviving farming as a career is clearly a long-drawn process. For now, it is wise for young minds not to tread the path of despair, but to save themselves from saving others.

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You must keep three roadblocks in mind: uncertain incomes, problem of long-term growth, and the problem of credit and investment