

Working Paper Series

Recognising and Nurturing Rural Blossoms

Synthesis of papers presented in the Conference titled
“Rural India: Blossoming in Neglect?” August 28-30, 2018 Pune

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I. Introduction

Idyllic imagery about rural India is about physiocratic abundance, harmony and mutual help, simplicity, valour and chivalry. Non-idyllic imagery about of rural India focuses on poor connectivity, illiteracy, superstition, filth, poverty and disease, rigid caste system and patriarchy and a high degree of social oppression. While both have seeds and perhaps saplings of truth in them; neither is accurate in a holistic sense. Both lead to neglect of what needs to be done. The first tends to implicitly prefer the status quo with the not so implicit suggestion to leave the rural India alone save to provide for its simple needs. The second tends to assert needs for expansion of state-run services of all manner, along with continued doles, subsidies and freebies for rural India.

State and the urban elite are preoccupied with the development deficit in rural areas. All policies and significant proportion of the State expenditure are targeted at eliminating these deficits. The reality is that neither of the two images and views mentioned above suggest the need for a long-term view and long-term investments in physical or human assets. Little thought is given in either view to the possibility that rural individuals reconcile with the harsh reality around them and within that reality make strenuous efforts to improve their own conditions. Is it likely then that rural individuals have both aspirations and the agency to navigate within the constraints in which they live and achieve a better life for themselves and their dear ones than what either view suggests? Who among the rural people indicate such aspirations and agency? Who breaks out of their harsh bounds? Is there a systemic bias in this process? How do they break out of it? With whose help do they transcend the boundaries to which the harsh reality would constrain them? Are there lessons to be learnt from that process? Is it possible, without undermining or condemning the steps to correct the development deficits, to leverage these aspirations and the abounding agency of the rural people to transform the country?

Based on the papers presented and discussions that occurred during the conference titled “Rural India: Blossoming in Neglect?” (Pune, August 28-30, 2018); we explore these questions in this paper.

2. Dimensions of the neglect and its consequences

There is hard statistical basis for the general belief about poverty, illiteracy and poorer health parameters in rural India. Government had informed Rajya Sabha on May 9, 2016 that in 2011-12, average rural annual per capita income languished at Rs. 40770 compared to urban figure of Rs. 101000. Another estimate in 2015 shows that over half of rural Indian households earned less than Rs. 7500 per month compared to four times that for urban households¹. Drop in the share of agriculture in GDP of India has been much sharper than the drop-in proportion of population living in rural India. If one combines share of agriculture in the GDP with the rural share in population, one would crudely infer that an average urban person is about seven times better off than her rural counterpart. Female literacy in rural India is almost 20% lower compared to female literacy in India and just about 40% children reach 10th grade in rural India compared to much higher number in urban India. Demographic indicators such as child ratio and health indicators such as incidence of malnutrition and anaemia; also show rural India in a poor light. The State has the responsibility to help rural population overcome these deficits. Diverse welfare schemes have been formulated and

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/653918/average-monthly-rural-household-income-india/>

implemented for years by the State to overcome these deficits. The “Rights” wave and the legislations (Right to Food, Right to Education, MNREGA, Rights of Persons with Disability Act) framed under its influence made the State legally bound to provide for effective services for removal of many of these deficits. Revenue expenditure of meeting these responsibilities as well as those schemes launched under the force of competitive populism of the politics have consequently mounted. As a result of this all, the ability of the State to invest in enhancing the productive potential of the physical and human assets has been curtailed. Public funds have been invested sanitation, housing and rural roads as well but that has been a much more recent phenomenon. In some of the worst poverty affected regions of the country, one sees huge deficit in investments in productive infrastructure of effective irrigation, electricity, warehousing etc. Since such investments are essential for ushering in long term prosperity for the nation as a whole, effectively rural India acts as a drag on the economy and the society.

Urban elite, sensitive social workers and other members of civil society too have tended to be preoccupied with, possibly the more poignant dimensions of, the development deficits. They have been creative in discovering several alternatives for delivering the necessary services to the rural poor communities; alternatives which are cheaper to implement, are often based on more functional participation of rural communities and perhaps reach the usually unattended sections of the rural communities. In a relative sense, greater attention has been paid in addressing the past or present problems in education, health or livelihoods in an inclusive fashion than in nurturing community’s own efforts to overcome the constraints and break the oppressive bounds.

Both the State as the prime mover of welfare interventions and civil society actors as the interlocutors and innovators striving for the well being of the rural people; tend to homogenise the rural people. The rural people are pigeonholed in stereotypes (e.g. He is a Dalit landless worker, she is an illiterate and oppressed mother of six children) forgetting that each rural individual is a unique creation of God, an autonomous entity who is no small in her vibrancy and zeal for life as the urban elite individuals. Each of these individuals views the world around her, assesses the external opportunities she perceives and the internal constraints she has to cope with and then chooses a path to follow to meet such life goals as she has set for herself. Her perception of the world around her, her perception of the constraints under which she has to operate, her life goals and the specific nuances of the path she has chosen; are all matters in the dark zone of benign ignorance or deliberate neglect of the formal state intervener or the civil society interlocutor. The state actors are overwhelmed with the huge numbers of the individuals in the rural poor category and have no time or energy to worry about individuals as flesh and blood human beings. The civil society interlocutor confronts and at times chooses to deny space to the individual possibly preferring to impose his own normative on them. This denial of the individuality is a much larger and significant neglect which the rural poor face.

Despite the neglect of investment and initiative, a fascinating spectrum of changes are to be seen in rural areas almost solely arising out of the predilections, aspirations and agency of the rural people at often times encouraged by civil society actors. Predilections can be varied and determined by individual fancies and the changes brought about by them may be isolated and small. Aspirations evolve in an unintended manner as a consequence of the reach of electronic mass media. To start with, the aspirations take the form of consumerism, often leading to the criticism of the urban elite that the rural people behave irresponsibly and do not spend their income on “necessary” goods. Yet

with continued exposure to media, opportunities and possibilities emerge and coupled with aspirations of the viewers, lead to their efforts to take advantages of these opportunities. Thus, both the consumerist appetite as well as orbit changing aspirations are unintended consequences of reach of mass media.

Risking the charge that we too suffer from the urge to pigeonhole people, it is possible to hypothesise that only the more capable and select among the rural individuals feel sufficiently motivated by their predilections, aspirations and emergent opportunities to adopt new forms of behaviour more appropriate to take their advantage. These individuals are likely to come from the group of males from relatively better off (and hence landed), relatively high social status (high caste). This is not to argue that the persons not belonging to this group have neither aspirations nor agency, but only to suggest a likely propensity. The selective adoption of a different behaviour to capture and reap opportunities would perhaps and naturally create new social divide in the rural society. We explore these issues in this paper to the extent permitted by the papers presented in the Conference. These pertained to the changes and behaviours observed in the light of the conditions in which rural people live. We looked at the changes in rural society arising out of the thrust on digital inclusion under the Digital India Program; at the way individuals are changing their consumption basket, at the way individuals respond to specific interventions like water harvesting structure, at the way individuals relate to the leadership opportunities opened up for them in women collectives and the way rural individuals take advantage of the world of opportunities opening up in the country as a whole. Each group of studies had inferences relevant to the specific subject matter as well as about the situation of rural India and how individuals copes with the issue. In preparing this synthesis we are primarily using inferences from these studies which have relevance to the neglect as well as the ways of coping and overcoming the neglect as demonstrated by people.

3. Inferences from the Studies

3.1. Digital Inclusion

A number of papers were presented on the current status of and barriers to digital inclusion of the individuals and households in rural India. This topic assumes importance in the light of the high profile “Digital India Program” of the Government of India. We discovered that rural areas do not suffer particular neglect when it comes to reach of data network, particularly after some private sector telecoms expanded their network in recent years. We also find that marketers of smart phones have been aggressive in leveraging the aspirations of rural individuals to adopt modern gadgets and have held to a sizeable penetration of smartphones. State too has created a large number of “E-kiosks” or “E-Governance Centres” under various names to help the rural population use digitally available services. Central and State Governments have uploaded and made available in a digitally accessible format a wide array of information, processes and services.

There are two aspects of the neglect here. The first pertains to the fact that there is virtually no mechanism to make it known to people what is available on the digital platforms in a manner in which they normally know about things around in the world. Secondly in a dominant majority of useful web-based services; particularly in banking operations; the customer interface of the websites is in English. Given poor levels of literacy and worse level of English literacy, this factor alone puts most of the services out of reach of the rural people. The third facet of neglect arises from the not unusual

approach of the formal state agencies to consider “household” as a unit ignoring all intra-household inter-personal power imbalance and dynamics. While smart phone penetration is impressive and data network reach remarkably high, most women are in no position to access the digital services. This happens for three reasons. In the first place the smart phones are almost exclusively retained by men giving their wife the old numeric key pad phone, if any, merely to receive calls. Secondly, female literacy and English literacy is even lower than the average rural literacy. And finally, virtually all E-kiosks and other formal outposts in the field are “manned” with scan women presence and no effort save the Google Sakhi program is made to build digital literacy among women.

Despite the above neglect, access to the digital world and use of digitally available amenities and facilities is quite high. To be accurate, the current use of the net is dominated by You-Tube and WhatsApp. This is natural as lacking any information and skill about using more meaningful services yet wishing to be seen as keeping with the modern trend, hedonism takes over and people use the net for what gives them pleasure. More serious use of the digital platforms is done by migrant labour, students and there is enough evidence to indicate that women in SHGs persuade their young SHG Secretary or accountant to undertake operations on their behalf. Younger children are all encouraged to learn about the internet and information searching and there is much demand for training of youngsters in this regard. The fact that women rely on a woman colleague rather than their own son or husband should be an eye opener to the Government and the mistake of assuming that what reaches a household reaches the women as well should be seriously re-examined. Thus, individuals do find their ways of using the newly created opportunities despite their neglect by market forces like Banks and will blossom in the digital world though it may take a while.

Three recommendations that can be made based on these studies are (a) The State must direct all Banks and other agencies to ensure that their customer interface is in English, Hindi and one vernacular language of choice by a certain deadline. (b) Information about digitally accessible services particularly relevant for women, Dalits, persons with disabilities and similar marginal groups is prominently displayed near e-kiosks and a majority of them are staffed by women and / or Dalits; (c) State Governments must on priority launch or support program for promoting digital literacy among vulnerable groups including women to ensure that the digital world does not become crueller to them than the current world.

3.2. Volunteer leaders in collectives

Micro-finance institutions and livelihoods promotion organization in the main and most other civil society organizations for the purpose of carrying out their mandate have created a very large number of “collectives” or village organizations run on the basis of volunteerism for the benefit of the members. Promoting organizations encourage one of the women members to assume leadership and the leaders have to put in significant and sustained efforts in managing their own group and interfacing with the world on its behalf. A group of studies looked at what motivates women to take such leadership positions and what incentives do the leaders have to continue performing their roles. The idealism that similarly situated women develop a huge affinity towards each other and this extension motivation alone is adequate to spur some one to assume and continue with leadership rises largely from the minds of the officers of the promoting organizations. The idealism is even more naïve: it nudges these officers to deny, if they can, the SHG leaders from using their leadership position from claiming the first position in any sequence in which benefits are made available to SHG and further

would not want the position of the leader to remain with the same woman for too long. This idealism neglects the reality that those ladies who assume leadership roles go through their own life cycles and have their own personal and social life to lead. Uncompensated yet dedicated and devoted work for the group with virtually no private gain naturally sets in a situation of burn out. Promoting organizations expect the collectives to become institutionally, socially and financially sustainable institutions on the back of these overworked and uncompensated volunteer-leaders. To us this appears a case of an ideology led deliberate neglect of genuine expectations of volunteer leaders. The research done on this subject points out that there are a few patterns of coping and surviving in the neglect. The first is a mutual accommodation of sorts where a son or a near relative of the volunteer leader is absorbed in an appropriate role in the contract workforce for the support functions. The second pattern is volunteer leaders surviving in the over-worked and undercompensated situation by sheer mutual support derived from their own network. The final pattern is of unmitigated burnout and replacement of the more experienced volunteer leaders by younger blood. The last is clearly not a happy outcome. While collectives and their federal layers continue to exist, most of them still exist as synthetic organizations that come into vibrancy when the occasion demands and then fade into long periods of dormancy. Their institutional sustainability remains a distant dream. There is no discernible blossom in this neglect.

3.3. Women as beasts of burden

A set of studies explored the health consequences of rural women having to carry large headloads each day and also carry on other physically strenuous work. This situation arises out of multiple neglects. The need for women to typically carry head loads is for three reasons. Firstly, fetching water from, at times, distant sources for domestic use is typically their chore. Secondly, they trudge around wastelands and shrub forests lopping of branches and collecting twigs for burning in their hearth for cooking. Finally, they need to bring grasses for feeding dairy and other animals. Aside from these three causes, women also take lead and major load of farm tasks though rural men would like us to believe that the women merely assist them. The first major neglect is born out of patriarchy: men within the households believe and enforce the tradition that fetching water, fuelwood and fodder are women's tasks.

The second neglect faced by the household in the often-ineffective systems of rural water supply. The proportion of rural households which enjoy a tap water source within their own premises is so small as to be completely ignored. Thus, it is safe to assume that most of the households fetch water for domestic use from sources out of their homes. The distance to source varies from village to village and state to state. Scarcity prone villages have to depend for several months each year on water supplied through tankers and the drudgery in fetching water from tankers involves both waiting period of an unpredictable length and the labour involved in carrying water home. While typical urban denizens would never select a rented accommodation if it did not have water supply within the premises, a typical rural citizen would be surprised if she found a home with such a supply. This neglect is institutionalized in so far as even the targets for implementation of drinking water schemes talk of bringing water within a certain distance from homes; not to each home. Similar state apathy and neglect relates to cooking fuel. The 68th Round of NSSO reported in 2015 that two thirds of rural households use fuelwood for cooking. The task of bringing fuelwood from sources: often the vanishing forests and shrub forests around the village, usually devolves on women in the patriarchal

rural society. Civil society actors had focused on improving the cook stove to try and make it emit as little smoke as possible and there also had been a strong move to popularize biogas as cooking fuel. Both these lines of attack on the cooking fuel issue have had some impact but neither completely eliminated the need for carrying headloads of fuelwood. Prime Minister Ujjwala Yojana in which the Government reports 5 crore households have secured LPG connections has been the first direct scheme to reduce if not eliminate the need for bringing headloads of fuelwood. The real effect of the scheme of course depends on the supply chain logistics and the poor women's ability to pay the cost of subsidised LPG cylinders and the reduction of drudgery on this account is yet to be firmly estimated. The headloads of grasses and crop residue to be carried for storage for feeding animals are the third ubiquitous sight and there is no evidence that this has reduced.

The studies revealed how the average time spent by women in such strenuous headload carrying and similar tasks is upwards of 3 hours each day. The studies have also indicated that these tasks leave deleterious impact on the musculo-skeletal health causing continuous and at times acute pain. These tasks also impact other dimensions of health; including prolapse and other issues with their reproductive systems. Women continue to suffer the neglect of inadequate systemic attention to their key issues as well as the neglect of the institutionalized injustice of the patriarchy in which they have to undertake these strenuous tasks despite their serious health consequences.

Aside from the Ujjwala Scheme regarding LPG connections, virtually no public program recognizes or provides for reducing the physical burden on women. Sporadic efforts in devising mechanisms for reducing the burden such as the "waterwheels" have recently been made. It suggested that serious public and CSR attention is needed in introducing and making available devices like the Waterwheels and wheelbarrows for carrying materials (water, fuelwood, fodder etc) that have got to be moved from one place to another and discouraging resorting to women as beasts of burden.

3.4.Gaps in urban and rural opportunities and consequent migration

If the neglect of rural India were oppressive and real, one would expect that the opportunities available to rural youth for improving their life conditions would be far inferior than their urban counterparts. This aspect was studied in a group of research papers presented at the Conference.

On closer analysis, the terms rural and urban are remarkably fuzzy. For decades, scholastic as well practical world has held that these terms are really ideal types while in reality a sort of continuum prevails from what can be termed "unquestionably rural" (say remote hamlets in Bonda Hills in Odisha) habitat to an "unquestionably urban" habitat (such as Defence Colony in New Delhi.) Even official classification is fuzzy. Census of India defines urban habitation as the one which has a population over 5000, population density over 400 persons per square kilometre and where 75% of working adults are in non-agricultural occupations. Census defines all habitations to be rural if they are not urban. Remarkably, even regions which are "unquestionably rural"; such as villages in Madhubani district of North Bihar meet first two parameters of the definition of the urban. Given this fuzziness, the hypothesis of sharp differences in opportunities available to rural and urban youth needs to be studied in a meaningful, productive way. These researches were about comparing opportunity sets available to rural youth with opportunities available to youth in proximate urban centres. Therefore, the studies do not throw any data to disprove the belief that opportunity sets available to

highly developed urban centres such as the metro-cities are vastly different from those available in remote and far flung rural areas in say the Central Indian tribal heartlands.

The field studies indicate that the gaps between opportunity set available to youth in rural areas and those available to youth in urban areas are not remarkably wide. The gaps appear wide in relatively under-developed areas such as Mandla in MP than in a better-developed locale such as Hyderabad in Telangana. We infer that there is not too much difference between the so-called rural and the so called urban in proximate geographies primarily because of continuation of the same cultural ethos in both the areas, weakness of the differential enablers and significant improvement in transport and communication networks which reduces the effective differences as experienced by rural youth. It is, however, important to note that this conclusion of “not very wide gaps in opportunities” is valid for rural and urban areas contiguous to each other. These studies truly reflect that rural people try their hardest to blossom even under conditions of relative neglect in terms of absence of institutional infrastructure as well as amenities for personal development.

A logical fall out of the perceived gaps in opportunities faced by rural youth and the opportunities in distant urban centres; further reinforced by sheer force of livelihoods stress occurs in the form of large-scale circular migration of rural people. Ajeevika Bureau’s Centre for Labour and Migration Studies has been looking at the issues and challenges experienced by rural youth in the process of migration. The papers presented by them in the session on migration paint a rather stark picture. There appears to be at least a convergence of interests if not actual conspiracy of the elite in rural and urban areas. Livelihoods stress and indebtedness (to local money lenders and other powerful elites) forces rural youth to migrate; the urban employers hire them for a pittance and work them in sweatshops; there is no inter-generational mobility and the migrants are in a cleft of subsistence wages and high cost of living in cities leaving very little possibility of savings and investment in building their own future. Wives of migrant workers accompanying them have a particularly harrowing life during the migration period as they struggle to keep pace with work load in place of employment and their reproductive roles in the completely unfamiliar and hostile fragile housing in the destinations. The concerns for safety of migrant labour are utterly non-existent and some lines of work such as stone carving tend to be virtual one-way tickets to early death of the workers due to a high incidence of silicosis. Clearly escaping the difficult and hopeless rural life by migrating without sufficient skill upgradation is no way to blossom given the poor state of social safety nets in urban destinations.

3.5. Water of life

Water control is key to sustained rural livelihoods in the primary sector of farming, animal husbandry and fisheries. The method of water control typically adopted by the State followed in the past what Tushaar Shah calls “constructive imperialism”; characterized by construction of huge dams along with canals for irrigation. Such mega-projects on rivers do result in sizeable pondage of water and create a sense of water security as well as a potential for irrigating crops in downstream valley areas. Such structures are quite irrelevant for looking after the water control needs of the rural poor living in undulating terrains and in catchments of rivers or in highlands which simply cannot be serviced by any canal network. Conventional strategies of expanding irrigation potential had neglected such vast terrains. Rural poor coped with the situation by evolving life patterns based on rain-fed crops alone and by trying to use what water they could access. For several decades now, efforts have been mounted to assist rural poor living in drought prone regions and uplands access water through a range

of strategies. Two classes of such strategies were studied by scholars who presented their work in the Conference. These two pertained to farm ponds and to the newly popular method of deepening stream beds in what has come to be termed “Doha” methods.

Farm ponds of different capacities are constructed in different parts of the country. In regions with relatively high population pressure, virtually all lands are brought under cultivation and there is strong resistance to devoting lands for water storage alone. In such places, “Doba”, or “5% model” type small ponds are created in cascade over paddy terraces and perform the very useful function of providing some supplementary water when the paddy crops suffer moisture stress. In regions of less land scarcity and high rainfall, much larger farm ponds make sense. A study of farm ponds constructed by Tata Steel as a part of their CSR activities was conducted and ponds were shown to have produced very salutary results in terms of crop security against moisture stress, by facilitating cultivation of additional, small but higher value, crops using the stored water and significantly added facility of domestic and recreational use.

In moderate to low rainfall areas, as in Karnataka which has trap soils over-laid on basalt, such ponds make little sense since the water retention, and use poses challenges, and there is a strong possibility of causing waterlogging in farms a little downstream. Farm ponds constructed here tend to be lined with plastics serving the purpose of storing either rainwater or water pumped from nearby wells for application to crops at appropriate times. These ponds tend to be expensive and with low returns. In Marathwada and Vidarbha areas, a new movement for deepening stream beds to effect storage of water which would otherwise have flown down has gained momentum. Such deepening is done in patches, leaving intermittent portions of stream bed undisturbed at original levels. Each deepened portion is called “Doha” meaning a pool. Studies of streams deepened in this fashion were done in these regions and were found to have led to salutary results in terms of increased water security for animals, facility for domestic uses and most importantly recharge of wells adjoining the stream. The last leads to the possibility of supplementary irrigation to cotton crops or even an extra crop after kharif soybean is harvested. Very significant income increase occurs as farmers acquire confidence in water security and are encouraged to opt for bolder initiatives.

As of the moment, the lumpy investments needed in the construction of farm ponds and for deepening stream beds need an external capital infusion and a nudge; both of which come from an external development organisations. However, as the success of “Galmukt dharana ani jalyukt shivar” (ponds free of silt and farms with water”) movement of Maharashtra shows, these interventions serve as useful models which can be taken to scale with popular participation. The huge popular response to these movement has demonstrated again that rural communities have the zest, agency and aspiration to overcome the difficult agro-climatic situation complicated by long-standing neglect from sectoral elites. The clear recommendations of these studies are that investments need to flow towards appropriately designed decentralised water harvesting methods to ensure that the “dream of har khet me paani” can become a reality.

3.6. What the markets reveal

Among the efforts, rural poor make, are activities which produce products or services either for the local markets or nearby urban markets where it could be sold for earning incomes. Conventional wisdom in promoting livelihoods thus suggested the production of goods and services considered to

be appropriate for rural areas. The for quite some time products thought by livelihoods promoters to be appropriate and hence encouraged as livelihoods activities by the poor have been confined to a limited set. However, consumption habits and demand for goods and services has been changing, and the old conventional products are perhaps a part of history. A group of studies was undertaken to understand what do the rural markets reveal about rural consumption demand. This knowledge would then be useful for modifying the list of activities that can be taken up for production as a part of livelihoods promotion efforts. The studies have revealed that the world is indeed flat: there is little to differentiate between rural and urban markets regarding demand for goods and services. Rural consumption levels have risen perhaps a shade faster than incomes, and the consumption basket has undergone a significant shift from the one that prevailed earlier. Non-food items have shown a massive surge in demand. Non-cereal and packaged foods have shown strong gains within the food consumption basket. Services relating to maintenance of two-wheelers, mobile phones and internet usage have a strong demand as also the demand for tutorial classes for students. These studies do reveal that despite the hardships and the neglect they experience, the force of aspiration is causing significant changes in the consumption and lifestyle of the rural poor. The question as to what this implies for livelihoods promoters was not asked in these studies. The force of aggressive marketers with deep pockets pushes their branded and packaged goods in rural markets in an unending stream. Rural producers will need to devise unique offerings; possibly based on hyper-local tastes and cultural traditions which can counter these forces because the national marketers would have difficulties making such offerings.

3.7.Sunrise in the East?

East India, which meant to refer to states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha and the Seven sisters for this paper, suffers from a multitude of natural and human-made difficulties that cause perpetuation of a high degree of poverty of the people in that region. Regions mentioned above are generally water-rich, high rainfall and high population density region. Sub-Himalayan plains in the middle and lower Gangetic basin and the floodplains of Brahmaputra and Barak in the North East are extremely flood prone and very densely populated. In these parts, the chief contributors to poverty are very tiny land holdings, insecurity of tenancy of land, recurrent and variegated nature of flood-induced damage, poor infrastructure including poor electrification and general neglect from the organised markets. Expenditure on rescue, relief and rehabilitation from floods tends to reduce the investible amounts with the State. The peculiar combination of flood calendar and temperature regimes restrict cropping seasons: crops in kharif tend to be very unreliable and summer crops untenable due to the onset of storms and disturbances starting from late April. The hilly regions in East India were under forest cover, have very patchy availability of croplands, are inhabited mainly by tribal communities and suffer from problems of political instability. These conditions deter private sector investment. Plains people survive primarily on *Rabi* crops and income from migrating labour. Hills people are in general poor and neglected.

There is evidence that in recent times, significant community led as well as externally induced efforts at providing reliable water control to smallholders can impact the incomes of the poor. Due to the abundance of groundwater, the usual agricultural pumps designed for high-head and moderate discharge are unsuitable for the region and low head moderate discharge pumps are not available at all. So, Chamola reports that; on their own, smallholders have taken to using sub-1HP and other small

pumps powered by domestic electricity supply or by diesel, to irrigate small plots on which to grow higher value crops. Furthermore, there is an increasing trend to harness solar power to drive such small pumps. Other scholars have also noted sporadic efforts at the collective deployment of larger but solar-powered pumps. There is a reason to believe that despite an environment of overall neglect of their needs, smallholders are learning to cope by their agency and somewhat out of the box solutions of solar-powered small pumps to increase their incomes and well-being.

3.8.Social enterprises pertaining to the rural activities

The discussions in the session on Social Enterprises in the agriculture sector in India looked at two different and yet parallel trends that seem to be coexisting at the same time.

That agriculture in India is in distress is a cliché. Farmer agitations at several places in the country in the last few years, depressing farm prices across farm commodities in Indian and global markets, the country moving from a regime of penury to that of surpluses in most of the agricultural crops, lack of rural employment in hinterland forcing many youths to abandon agriculture as an occupation resulting in migration, those perusing that vocation as a last resort, scenes of suicides and hopelessness pervading across the country- all these are now part of the national concern.

So, while, there is almost a sense of hopelessness pervading in the minds of all those who are working on the issues of agriculture, simultaneously there is a growing sense of enthusiasm or maybe even euphoria as evident in the emergence of many start-ups focussing on promoting a 'different' kind of agriculture that promises a new deal for farmers. In the conference, we debated this emerging ecosystem of social enterprises.

The lead paper traced the history of the evolution of the concept of SE beginning with a 1970 position articulated by a leading Economist, arguing that private business has to solely exist to generate profits for and on behalf of their stakeholders that is shareholders. The discourse has come a long way from 1970 to 2018 from that narrow definition of a business to the latest proposition of Prof Yunus where social enterprises are expected to tackle the problems of poverty, unemployment and environmental destruction. While there are numerous publications by both practitioners and academicians, there is still no consensus on ONE single definition of what is a Social Enterprise. However, amongst the diverse literature, there is an emerging agreement that SEs attempt to address social cause and business is a means to achieve those goals. The purpose precedes profit.

The discussion led to some pointers as mentioned here. Businesses are becoming social, and NGOs promoted for undertaking social work are getting engaged in commercial/business activities. The purpose is more important for any enterprise to be called as SE. When the purpose of an enterprise is to address a social deficit, it is an SE. SE attempts to achieve this goal of overcoming deficit through a revenue model (business) and hence SE is a blend of cause and profitability. There are three clear dimensions: financial return, social good and environmental gain. Any business or SE has to position itself on all the above three dimensions. Increasingly, there is a greater emphasis on the social accountability of business. There is a continuum between grants and capital for investment in a business. It is not a black and white phenomenon. Ecosystem supports an entrepreneur in many ways. Through the ecosystem, one can draw upon several critical support be it in finance, mentoring, networking and marketing. Lack of adequate players in the ecosystem might affect the SEs in their growth.

The workshop had presentations of reflections and learning from academic institutions who have taken the lead in knowledge building and incubating social enterprises. It was pointed out that while many events and convenings are being organised across the country, those are largely concentrated in metro cities thus leaving a large yet dynamic non-English speaking population out of this discourse. In addition to this language exclusion, research and knowledge building on themes of rural and tribal entrepreneurship is inadequate. Several questions remain unanswered concerning the efficacy of the SEs seen as a silver bullet by many in the development sector.

As a follow up to the conference, VAF plans to study 20 social enterprises in the Agriculture sector, understanding their management challenges. The study is expected to lead to better appreciation of the ground realities in terms of the following aspects – how the enterprise balance the social and the business dimensions; what are the strategies adopted for raising resources and reaching products and or services to the last mile; how human resources are recruited and retained and to what extent the enterprises are contributing to the social impact besides being profitable in operations.

3.9.Societal evolution or compulsive urbanization?

It appears to us that the rural and urban are not really to be contrasted with each other completely. The dichotomy of rural-urban is overlapped. In the first place, the standard practice of defining the urban and leaving the rural as a residual category creates a fuzziness in the terms. From the following table, it is clear that there are habitations which meet only one criterion of urbanity, two criteria and those which meet all the three.

| Sn | Habitations | Is population above 5000? | Is population density above 400 per sq. Km? | Do 75% of adult workers have non-farm occupations? |
|----|---|---------------------------|---|--|
| 1 | Small villages in remote tribal hinterlands | No | No | Yes, but also forest-dependent livelihoods |
| 2 | Company towns as in mine headquarters, defence establishments | Often, no | Usually no | Yes |
| 3 | Large villages in central India | Yes | No | No |
| 4 | Large villages in Gangetic planes | Yes | Yes | No |
| 5 | Tehsil level and larger towns | Yes | Yes | Yes |

Even when all three criteria are met, there would still be a considerable variation among these urban areas. Moreover, there are these unbroken strings of habitations that exist in thickly populated coastal areas such as South Konkan and Kerala as well as in Assam; where the boundary between one habitation and another is a purely administrative matter with no corresponding social or economic counterpart. Rural-urban are thus terms employed for convenience rather than with strict scholastic precision.

We, therefore, have to accept that the usual connotation of the term rural refers to some ideal type loosely held in one's mind. This ideal type could be a mere stereotype derived from one's perceptions about type of housing, breadth and condition of streets, amenities of electricity supply, drinking water, sanitation, sewerage disposal and solid waste management, frequency of public transport to nearby urban centres, institutional infrastructure concerned with banking, commerce, education etc.

Granting the essential fuzziness and construction of the "rural" in our mind, it is undeniable that the rural areas suffer from development deficits. To a substantial extent, they arise out of the allergy which professionally trained men and women display when asked to stay and work in rural areas. Doctors meant for rural health centres flock the district offices under one pretext or other. Teachers appointed to rural schools find a barely capable local youth and ask him to carry on their job for which they share a bit out of their fat salaries. Bankers commute to rural branches thus reducing the effective customer interface they can have with the rural population. The allergy came about because of the poor state of public amenities and perceived living conditions in rural areas. Be that as it may, the result is that state and the educated urban elite have failed rural India. As has happened elsewhere in the world, often the tendency is to say that it would never be possible to service rural India in order to eradicate the development deficit fully and it is imperative that the pace of urbanisation increase if services are to reach the people. Shades of this unarticulated argument are to be found in diverse state programs.

Rural poor flock to the cities and urban areas in search of livelihoods. Yet, the proportion of rural poor who wish to cut the umbilical cord leave their habitat permanently irrevocably is restricted to mainly the highly educated among them. The village and the habitat provides a sense of identity and belonging to the individual. It provides a social connection. It is not uncommon to see that people who migrate to cities form associations and groupings of people coming from adjacent areas; for extending the sense of belonging and to enhance their sense of identity and belonging.

Given the vastly increased frequency and density of social and economic exchange between rural areas and urban centres; caused by the media revolution; reach of Government and non-government agents, penetration by marketers of a wide variety of products and migration of people; it is not surprising that rural people seek and aspire to acquire the amenities living conditions of the urban locales. However, given the advantages of living in rural areas, the rural people attempt meeting their aspirations of acquiring urban comforts within the set of constraints they face where they live. These aspirations give rise to the agency and opportunistic behaviour of the rural people. They try to take advantage of every possible opportunity to better their conditions. This change is the natural process of social evolution that is occurring across the length and breadth of the country.

4. Nurturing the blossoms

A more important set of questions is how does one nurture the blossoms? How does one recognise the agency of the rural people in time and provide intellectual, financial and policy support to turn them in the most constructive directions? How does one encourage rural people themselves to find appropriate solutions to the severe problems they face? The current trend is to identify a problem, let experts ponder over it and come up with solutions and then provide massive financial and policy support for their implementation in an externally directed pattern of implementation. These may not prove to be most efficient or popular and could, in fact, prove to be counter-productive. A prime

example of counter-productive measures was the large-scale program of closing the use of all open water sources for controlling guinea worm in Rajasthan. This program did control the worm menace but led to excessive drawl of groundwater leading to much accelerated and the irreversible incursion of fluorides in all water sources. It is commonly observed that contractor-constructed brick and RCC houses done under the PM Housing Schemes are often not used by the potential users who take their possession but continue to stay in huts constructed to their preference. Numerous other instances of rural people declining to adopt externally directed programs are available. The need is to encourage rural people to evolve solutions to their problems and then help them implement them; even though this may conflict with the notions of efficient and rapid program implementation.

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About VikasAnvesh Foundation

The Vikasanvesh Foundation (VAF) is an initiative of Tata Trusts which was launched in 2017 as a research organization. The Foundation demystifies the processes of development in the Indian context by undertaking high quality research. In addition to working on themes pertaining to health, education, livelihoods and water in the rural areas, the research at the foundation aims at exploring the interstices of these disciplines. The Foundation engages with a range of partners across India for both problem identification and conducting research on otherwise unexplored themes. Its objective is to assist policy makers and development practitioners by providing practical policy recommendations based on empirical research findings.



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