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RE-ASSEMBLING RURAL INDIA

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Abstract

Standard narratives about rural and agrarian India construct it as a bundle of problems that need to be addressed through measures that are largely drawn on received economic ideas about agrarian/rural-industrial/urban transitions. Such approaches overlook much of the potential of rural and agrarian India—the vast wealth of agricultural biodiversity, the knowledge systems and the evolved, ecologically- sustainable practices, pluri-economic activities but reify the caste-based (and hence class-based) structures with their iniquitous access to resources. Combined with this are dominant approaches and models that promote a productivity-based form of agriculture, overlook the multiple non-agrarian economies and livelihoods, and which seek to adversely integrate rural India into a dominant national and transnational capitalist system. The results of such models and approaches have meant that rural India has been placed into conditions of economic retrogression, ecological devastation and social turmoil. Addressing such problems, future approaches need to conceptualise the possibilities of rural India through alternative perspectives that recognise the specificities of varied ruralities and build on their strengths and advantages. These include promoting ecologically-sensitive agricultural practices that are worked on a combination of new production models that include group agriculture, the establishment of agro-processing, art and craft, and other industries run on the principles of social justice and equity. The viability of the village as a pluri-economic and decentralised production centre can only be sustained by viable public institutions such as the panchayat, and the health and education sectors. Overall, there is need to recognising the centrality of rural citizens as key to a flourishing democracy that is built on decentralisation, plurality and sustainability of economic and social systems.

(VERSION TO BE READ)

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Post-Colonial rural India has been subject to an unusual form of structural inversion. While its key structural characteristic, that of being defined by the caste-system has been largely retained, the potential of a long tradition of sophisticated knowledge systems that made possible heterogenous and sustainable agricultural systems and complementary cottage industries (weaving, smithy, wood crafts and artisanal goods) has largely been relegated, rendered obsolete and or erased. Matching this inversion, there has been the imposition of models that are ecologically, economically, and socially inappropriate but which suit political expediencies. As a result, contemporary rural India is constituted and marked not only by complexity but also by contradictory trends. Even as overall poverty levels have decreased (with increase in real wages) and there has been improvements in basic infrastructure and the provisioning of food through the public distribution system, reports indicate extant forms of agrarian distress (associated not only with a decelerating agricultural economy, and expressed mostly in the form of suicides by farmers), migration, malnutrition, human trafficking, and multiple forms of human and civil rights violations.

Adverse Integration into the Dominant Assemblage

The adverse integration of India's diverse and plural agricultural and rural systems has implications for the ways in which the rural and the agricultural are politically, economically and socially positioned and impact the livelihoods, citizenship rights, and

opportunities for being for rural citizens. The economic integration of rural India into the dominant apparatus is evident in the extent to which agriculture has been increasingly commercialised, making external inputs and technology dependency the primary route for increasingly integrating even the smallest producers into a capitalist circuit. The overall impact of this has meant an increasing differentiation of rural society with varied significance for each of the different classes. Access to capital, market, and technology has leveraged large land holders to combine agricultural incomes with entrepreneurial, business, and political capital. The result is that many large land owners are now regional political satraps who see the rural as primarily a vote bank and are no longer vested fully in the economic and ecological sustainability of the region. While increases in real wages have improved the lot of the landless, it is the small and marginal cultivators who are entrapped into the circuits of indebtedness, precarity and high-risk agriculture that the new models of capital-technology and external inputs agriculture enforces. The resulting retrogression in agriculture has meant that small cultivators especially seek to be out of agriculture and their strategies consist of the choices of either leasing out their land to large cultivators (thereby reversing the gains that the land reforms in some states and regions had initiated), selling their land, or even abandoning cultivation (which accounts for the growing proportion of cultivable land that is rendered into fallow or conditions of disuse). The ecological impact of such a dominant model of agriculture has rendered agriculture to become an extractive industry and much of this is evident in the extent to which soil, water and seeds are in severe conditions of depletion. Matching this is the expansion and intensification of the extractive economy in the Adivasi and especially forest belts where a rapacious approach to resources, especially minera extraction, has defied all democratic norms and ecological concerns. New techno-financial regimes seek to integrate the rural into the larger administrative and financial structures that do not assure either transparency, efficiency or expediency. Instead, as the

implementation of Aadhar, demonetisation, and GST have highlighted these are the new mechanisms of surveillance and subordination that have only made life more onerous and cumbersome for a majority of rural citizens.

The failure to address the entrenched social and economic inequities and distortions of rural India and its agrarian systems are compounded by the political response to such trends. Far from policies that could effectively address the myriad and interlinked problems, the state has deployed programmes which do not emanate from any significant policy framework and are instead piecemeal, ad-hoc programmes that seek to alleviate the problems faced primarily by large farmers or dominant landed caste groups. Populist programmes such as free electricity for irrigation, moratorium on loans, minimum support price, and more recently the income support schemes (announced primarily just before elections) to farmers have all been garnered primarily by the landed elite and have not resulted in the resolution of key structural problems. At another level, the state's attempt to address extant rural distress and the political system's attempt to appease voters has resulted in the deployment of 'welfare governmentality' which as the late Kalyan Sanyal described is the attempt by the state to appease the deprived majority even as it deploys preferential policies that enable capitalist 'accumulation by dispossession'. The growth of such 'welfare governmentality' via a large number of provisioning programmes (such as food public distribution system, anganwadis, midday meals, housing schemes etc) combines with electoral populism such as the distribution of consumer goods (TVs, fans etc), especially during elections and has led to the growth of a class of middle men or 'political entrepreneurs' who act as mediators in enabling people to access these goods. The impact of this has been two-fold. At one level there is the diffusion of political mobilisation across class and regional lines and a failure to seek addressal for real structural problems/issues. The inability of rural citizens to realise the

foundational problems of their situation and or to have risen in protest against the draconian demonetisation and the imposition of GST are examples of the extent to which periodic 'welfare governmentality' have appeased and silenced rural citizens. At another level, it has led to increasing tensions and conflict in rural societies as is evident in the rise of violence related to 'cut money' in the case of West Bengal. That the real results of such economic distortions have not manifested in worsening conditions across the rural belts is largely linked to the fact that since the mid 1990s the integration of rural India into the urban economy has enabled a proportion of the rural citizens to have non-rural and non-agricultural incomes which in turn have enabled the growth of a new rural middle class which is increasingly an aspirational rural middle class that also seeks to be integrated into the dominant society and subscribes to the spreading political religion of Hindutva.

In sum, the state has subject rural India to the contradictory imprint of an 'economics of neglect' by failing to allocate adequate funds and administrative support, and a 'politics of rescue' in which problems are declared to be resolved by periodic doles of goods and or money. At each juncture, the submergence of key challenges with populist appeasement and policies has resulted in compounding the problems. What such adverse integration indicates is that the citizenship of rural residents has been severely compromised and democratic deficits that mark their lives also constitute the very fabric of the political system. The absence of political accountability, the strengthening of patronage democracy in which political representatives are also enveloped within the neoliberal economy mean that the rural and agrarian have become only a site of political manipulation and economic expropriation.

Re-assembling the Rural:

In identifying these challenges and seeking to formulate new policies and programmes, it would be pertinent to call for a fundamental shift in conceptualising rural and agricultural economies and to recognise the foundational rights and needs of marginalised citizens (small and marginal farmers, adivasis, forest-dwellers, landless workers, fishing community, pastoralists, and plantation workers etc). The definitions and assessments of what are until now been identified as indices of ‘development’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘democracy; need to shift. Instead of being associated with markers of mainstream lifestyles, financial access, and electoral participation respectively, the meanings and impact of these categories must enable a realisation of decent and appropriate living for all. Tying this to policies that enable the flourishing of the ecological and cultural diversity of people that enable localised administration and management will be key. In sum, the new orientation for policies for rural and agrarian India must eschew the adverse integration of ruralities of India into a political and economic apparatus that expropriates the labour, resources and capital of rural citizens, distorts their knowledge, skills, and identities, and depletes the natural resource base and ecologies of rural regions.

New imaginaries, parameters, approaches, and political will are required to re-assemble the key structures of rural India. If the existing caste/class structure is taken to be the key barrier, then the rich corpus of knowledge systems in agriculture, medicine, architecture, land-use, natural resource management, weaving, smithy, pottery, carpentry, and a range of craft and artisanship can be recognised for their potential and possibilities. If instead of the ‘adverse integration’ of rural India into the dominant industrial-urban-capital-market assemblage, a

process of ‘decentralised consolidation’ becomes the guiding marker, then many of the challenges of the complexities and contradictions that have emerged over the past decades can be addressed. Critical and holistic reviews of all existing programmes related to rural and agrarian India are urgently required. Unpacking the limitations of such programmes, their negative impact and fallout and conceptualising regionally appropriate and viable practices which can be interlinked to a range of factors will be key. At least four key domains and structural shifts are required to re-assemble rural India in order to address the entrenched structural contradictions and enable the potential to be realised.

A: Rural as Viable Political-Economy and Societies: Challenging the Rural Vs Urban and Agriculture Vs Industrial Divides.

The rural and the agricultural must be recognised as foundational economies that have significance for the national economy and the well-being and citizenship rights of a majority of people. Economic planning and political decision-making need to focus on enabling new economies in rural spaces that will address the conventional rural vs urban and industrial vs agricultural divides. New rural processing, production and value-addition units will provide better economic value to rural products and generate employment. Both decentralised and small-scale agro-processing units, and value-addition units, new manufacturing and assembling units need to be established in rural areas itself. As J.C. Kumarappa (1892-1960), known as ‘Gandhi’s Economist’ elaborated, rural India and its resources and knowledge systems have the capacity to generate not only livelihoods to a large population but can also emerge as examples of a ‘permanent economy’ which can challenge the limitations of the ‘growth’ oriented but unsustainable models of neo-classical economics. Aligning with recent ideas such as ‘de-growth’ and ‘circular economies’, the possibility of decentralised, varied,

and people managed rural production units have the potential to address the key problems of rural unemployment, migration and indebtedness.

B: Re-Structuring Agriculture for Ecological Restoration, Natural Farming, and Climate Change Resilience:

As several studies have elaborated, the Green Revolution as dominant model of agriculture in India has led to ecological, economic and social instabilities. Much of rural India now bear the negative imprint of this model which is being buttressed by the inclusion and promotion of the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ (4IR) inputs such as drones, sensors, genetically modified organisms etc. In addition to these, there is the new trend of co-opting alternative approaches such as ‘agro-ecology’, the ‘trusteeship approach’ and the recent promotion of millets to endorse the international declaration of 2023 as the ‘Year of Millets’. Much of these have rendered agriculture to become part of the ‘extractive economy’ and policies to address these deprecations are required on an urgent basis. In their place, a range of schemes and programmes that enable the restoration and conservation of soils, water, and seeds are urgently required. Recognising regionally diverse agro-ecological complexes and the knowledge systems associated with them can be key to halting the current agricultural regimes that have promoted a separation of agriculture from ecology (and the subsequent depletion of natural resources and loss of biodiversity) and of production from local food cultures (that have also resulted in widespread malnutrition). Similarly, for forest-dwelling and Adivasi habitations, the recognition of habitat rights and the promotion of regional conservation cum production models can be worked out. Instead of the allocations of annual payments (such as Kisan Samman) to cultivators (mostly to the landed and to those with titles), it may be more important to incentivise cultivation practices that combine three

dimensions. These include providing incentives and support so that cultivators can be encouraged in the following ways: (1) facilitating transition to sustainable agriculture (which is now required on an urgent bases); (2) conserving natural resources (of soil, seeds, water and biodiversity); and (3) instituting and practising climate resilience practices which will decrease the risks associated with sharp climate fluctuations and loss of crops.

D: Farmer Producer Organisations and Group Farming.

Attempts to address the vexatious issue of landlessness and the problem of sub-optimal land holding (86 percent of holdings, with the average size of only 1.15 hectare) need to go beyond a 'land distribution model' (for which there is no political will nor will it result in positive impact). Even as the issues of landlessness and sub-optimal land holding continue, many regional states have formulated policies which have repealed earlier 'land reform and distribution' Acts and have promulgated new laws that permit both a neo-liberal agricultural land market and the increasing integration of rural land into the larger speculative real estate markets. Instead of these policies, strict rules against the growing consolidation of land under large owners or corporates should be formulated and policies that promote group farming, agricultural and rural cooperatives and Farmer Producer Organisations that are a voluntary collective of farmers of all castes can be encouraged and supported through various schemes. Case studies of some of the Farmer Producer Organisations and group farming indicate the high potential that these structures have for addressing both issues of both the landless and marginal and small farmers. In addition, such collectives or networks can provide leverage to farmers in market and capital transactions thereby enhancing their bargaining power.

D: Functioning and Effective Public Institutions

There is an urgent need to ensure that the key public institutions such as the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs), and the education and health sectors become viable, democratic and effective institutions. Despite the fact that many panchayats have been captured by vested interests, they have the potential to be decentralised bodies that can foster practices of democratic governance. Their high potential is evident in the fact that some villages have drawn on this institution to: (a) challenge caste hierarchies, privilege and power (b) to facilitate local development (c) enable women to emerge as leaders and (d) make democratic institution building and accountability possible at the most foundational level. Failure to adequately monitor, support and fund the PRIs have led to them languishing in many states and the failure to realise their potential.

Similarly, the failure of key public institutions such as the health and education systems to cater to the needs and aspirations of rural citizens exacerbate the absence of 'opportunities for being' for a large proportion of citizens. The ability of these institutions to deliver high quality services will lessen the burden on the rural population to access these services through private capital or to fall into debt traps. As studies have indicated, the absence of these basic services are concomitant with lower standards of living and with negative impacts on overall economic performance. To realise these, completely new health and education policies will have to be facilitated so as to enable a range of institutions to cater to varied needs and levels of rural requirements.

Conclusion:

Cases across India that have successfully promoted organic or sustainable agriculture, the slow growth of farmer producer organisations, and evidence from various regions that highlight the positive contributions of panchayats indicate that all the above suggestions are feasible. What is required is a shift from dominant parameters and perspectives that seek to fit rural India into existing dominant economic models.

Albert Howard, considered a pioneer of the natural farming movement (and a former British colonial administrator who had worked in Indore and who credited his knowledge to India's farmers) had asserted presciently, "The real arsenal of democracy is a fertile soil, the fresh produce of which is the birthright of the nations" (15: 1947/2013). Extending his recommendation, it would do us good to recognise the centrality of rural India as the site of varied soils encapsulating both, biological and socio-cultural diversity, and as being the foundation on which decentralised democracy, social justice, economic equity, and ecological sustainability can be imagined and realised. Recognising and strengthening the ecological and social diversity of rural India will be the route to strengthening the cultural plurality and lived democracy of India.

