

Transforming Rural India: The Road Ahead

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The history of rural India dates back to the history of nation that originated in the form of well-developed peaceful society- the Harappan civilization- organised by Dravidians in the Indus Valley during the period of 6th millennium B.C. Dravidians settled in and around Baluchistan (Pakistan) had knowledge about construction of brick houses, domestication of cattle and cultivation of wheat.[1] Also, they had knowledge on copper that turned out to be the prime mover for exchange of goods among people in the later period modestly facilitating the economic transaction leading to value economy. However, the system of Harappan knowledge on development of society could not develop further due to the decline of the Harappan system and later due to regular invasions from the west and central Asia- invasion by Aryans, Greeks, Persians, Mughal, British, Portuguese and French. The rule by the Shakas, the Kushans, the Maurayas and Guptas influenced the village administration system that evolved afterwards.

At present India, with an area of 3.3 million sq. km, is a country with probably the largest and most diverse mixture of races like Australoid, Mongoloid, Europoid, Caucasian and Negroid. Housing a variety of ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups, India stands unique in the history of humanity with the number of 1027 million populations of which more than 70 per cent of the people live in rural India speaking for about 17 major languages and 844 different dialects apart from number of other unclassified tribal languages.[2]

In a report released on population day on July 11, 2003, it has been stated that India shares 17 per cent of the world population, which crossed now 6 billion, spread over a territory which accounts for just 2.5 per cent of the inhabited area around the world. According to the report, the population growth in India is estimated to be 18 million per annum, which is equal to that of the whole Australian population. India thus produces one Australia every year. Whereas it's per capita cropland is the lowest in the world. During the last 50 years, as noted by the report, the population has nearly trebled from 36 crores in 1957 to 102.7 crores in 2001.[3] Against this brief background, this paper aims at providing new model for transforming rural India.

Conceptual Explanation

For development of a society, peace and order is pertinent. A society without social harmony cannot develop. Even if it develops, it will not be permanent. Therefore, peace, as a dynamic incentive, plays a central role in development. A nation like India, having 700 million people living in more than 60,000 villages with different social, religious and communal groupings should necessarily have conducive peace order without which it cannot last long.[4] Social transformation can only take care of the development of India in general and rural India in particular. Various methods can be adopted for getting people of India prepared for achieving the task of transforming rural India. In this context it may be stated that the "India shining

campaign” and “feel good factor approach” of National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which is now routed in the election held in May 2004 is a psychological one aimed at boosting up morale of the people for working towards the goal of developed India by 2020. Psychological approach may not help the suffering poor people for overcoming economic problems. Probably that was the reason why the NDA faced such a fate in the recent elections.

Secondly, knowledge economy, which is highlighted in the paper, stands to be explained for furthering the arguments for transforming rural India. Rural people can only rule the nation with commitment and conviction as they can provide good leadership from the staggering population strength of around 700 million people. It should be mentioned here that the twenty-five European Union (EU) countries put together have only 445 million.[5] Apart from physical strength, rural India has lavish knowledge power unexploited, as noted above.

Traditional knowledge in many fields starting from astronomy to agriculture is appreciated but not applied for the benefit of rural people of India effectively. For instance, hundreds of years ago, India could generate the power of knowledge responsible for a cycle of discovery from the very school of Aryabhata, who taught the entire world the method of counting by a great innovative invention of Zero. But, India lagged behind in utilising such knowledge compared to western countries, which exploited that knowledge for the benefits of their people and employed it to evolve fascinating technologies that have contributed to the growth of the material civilization today.[6] Same was the case with many African and Asian countries.

India has failed to utilise the industrial age, which ended in 1960 and could not also benefit from the information age that followed the industrial age between 1960s and 1990s. In fact, India came to realise the importance of the information age only when it entered into the process of globalisation half-heartedly in 1991. There were other international events driving this process, for example the demise of Soviet Union, the fall of Berlin wall, the fading of cold war and the new economic thrust for globalisation through World Trade Organisation (WTO), which emerged on January 1, 1995 after the Uruguay Round of GATT.[7]

It should be noted here that through the structural adjustment programme (SAP) of the World Bank/IMF, India entered the phases of both globalisation (the corporate driven agenda for removing all barriers to profit) and localisation (the people driven agenda for introducing ecological limits and social responsibility) without any serious homework. As a result, India has been unable to prepare the right environment for economic activities to take place in the era of globalisation. However, investment opportunities in India had been in increasing trend since 1991. As a result through 301 clauses of the US Trade Act many companies had entered India.[8] For instance, Cargill- the largest company dealing with grain trade and seeds; Bechtel- the world largest construction company; General Electric; Dupont- the company dealing with nylon plant and Enron- the gas and power corporation have already started operating in India, despite massive protests launched against these transnational companies by people of India in various states.[9]

In the beginning, people were very critical about India’s access to globalisation. In the later stage, the opposition mellowed down due to the realisation that there was something inevitable about it in the emerging new world. However, the opposition to issues relating to trade,

agricultural products, regulation of WTO and the role of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) continues in a milder form now. Despite that, Indian government has gone ahead in implementing certain provisions of WTO by carefully protecting all products including the agricultural produces, right from production to marketing, and accordingly generating support from many developing countries.[10] Brazil and China are working with India to create conducive trade climate with proper security umbrella for developing countries. They have been trying to promote the views of poor farmers from Latin America, Africa and Asia. In the Cancun summit in 2003, the views of the developing countries were further promoted and the response to this from the developed countries is still awaited.

While Indian economy shows the symptom of improvement after its entry into the globalising process, the improvement of agro-economy is yet to be seen. Awakening rural poor with their rich potentials is therefore, important to withstand the ongoing process of globalisation.[11] It is also important to note about the ground reality of rural India today, which is being developed as per government plan from 1952 when the first ever community development movement was launched. In addition, in 1971 “garibi hatao” -a movement for eradicating poverty as a whole was launched by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Unfortunately, they were not very successful. As a result, 320 million people live without basic amenities in India. Rural poverty remains the highest in Orissa, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.[12]

Instead of criticising the globalisation process all care needs to be taken to minimise the negative impact of globalisation. In this context, 189 countries in the United Nations (UN) Millennium Summit also adopted a historic Millennium Declaration in September 2000, which specifically appealed to all the developing countries specifically to transform their respective nation by way of eradicating poverty by 2015. India has adhered to the Millennium goal and since then it has been working accordingly.

Vision 2020

Transforming rural India needs a concerted plan. It is viewed as a process of human resource development. Transforming rural India is nothing but transforming India in general. Historically, India has had very good leaders with the vision of developing India. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi had vision for developing India based on his plan of ‘Sarvodaya’ through community development at the village level.[13] In the globalising world of today, a plan recognised to be a ‘new sarvodaya’ by many Gandhians for developing rural India in particular and India in general was proposed by no less than a person like the President of India, Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam. His message for developed India by 2020 is a new way for transforming India . It was considered by the government and accordingly the decision making process are directed to fulfill the objectives.

All political parties, although they may differ in approaches, have approved of his vision 2020.[14] As a result a parliamentary committee was formed and it approved a vision document with certain regulation to attain the status of developed India by 2020. Freedom, Democracy and Development of people are given with priority in this document for overall economic prosperity irrespective of any identity. The document covers agriculture, power, information and communication technology, industrial and education sectors, space, nuclear, defence

technologies, chemical, pharmaceutical, infrastructural industries and oil exploration. The sector-wise mission to realise the vision is enumerated below.[15]

Networking of Rivers for eliminating the periodical problems of droughts and floods;

Quality Power aiming at providing uninterrupted power by enhancing the output from one lakh megawatts to three lakh megawatts through sustainable energy resources like bio-mass, wind, solar energy apart from the power generated through hydel, thermal, and nuclear;

Providing Urban amenities in Rural Areas(PURA) through physical, electronic and knowledge connectivities, leading to self-sustained economic prosperity for groups of villages;

Information and Communication technology(ICT) by focussing on generating wealth of nation and by effective use of ICT in the areas of tele medicine, tele-education, and e-governance;

Tourism development by giving importance for inland water navigation, hotels, communication and tourist promotion;

Enriching Village Life by giving importance to children education and rights for growth of the society, avoiding gambling and liquor, becoming role models to children, cultivating learning, knowledge enrichment and success, protecting forest and preventing pollution and planting five trees or sapling at least.

The PURA

Apart from general vision with mission for developed India by 2020, a separate treatment for rural development is also advocated in the vision document specifically covering certain important areas for developing villages in areas like health-care, education, networking of rivers, knowledge connectivity and transportation facilities by connecting villages to the mainstream of the cities.[16] The PURA mission (Providing Urban Amenities in Villages) requires the government to concentrate on developing villages like the urban areas of India. Accordingly, all facilities available to the people in urban areas should also be provided to people in the villages. Such development would arrest the exodus of villagers to the urban areas making the urban management easy.

The growth and development path, which is in different setting now due to globalisation, is also planned to be in a new environment wherein the cost cutting and competitiveness hold the key to success.[17] Also, there have been different approaches to growth- export growth, labour intensive growth and focus on service sector. Moreover, the government also plans for setting up a task force on job creation so as to find out various new means in this direction. It should also be mentioned that in view of the large scale mechanisation in the agricultural, plantation and manufacturing sectors, it is not likely that the government can generate more jobs in these sectors. So far as the Industries are concerned they want the government do away from the labour laws which do not, according to them, suit the existing globalised trend which lays emphasis on competitiveness.[18]

As a matter of fact reforms and growth have become unfortunately the anti-thesis of labour and employments in the era of liberalisation and globalisation. Thus, varying growth with employment generation seems to be very tough for the government which aims at creating 10 million jobs a year. Moreover, the trend is not encouraging as the public sectors are freezing employment and wages. The task force should therefore make an arrangement for creating more jobs even in the public sectors by wooing the private sectors to invest in new and innovative areas so as to generate more jobs. ¹⁹

In the food sector, India is planning to feed the entire population with sufficient food stuff thereby making India hunger free by August 15, 2007 which marks the 60th anniversary of India's Independence. For attaining the goal, the government is planning to adopt the following measures²⁰: taking care of the pregnant and nursing mothers, infants and preschool children, youth, adult, old and infirm persons in the rural India in particular; developing community food Banks; promoting national food guarantee scheme(NFGS); sustaining and strengthening agricultural progress and management of changes especially in reference to technology, ecology and trade; implementing grain Bank Scheme(GBS) in tribal areas and Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana.

The recent initiatives in the power and transportation sectors, although it has certain drawbacks, is a welcome one. It should be noted that the government of India is planning to develop more power by exploring the means for involving the private sectors in the field of power production as well as transportation. Privatisation in these areas are needed, but they have to be ably made to fall in line with government of India's regulation for the advantage of people. The recent proposal of the government for laying four lane roads is very much in support of PURA.[21]

Therefore, more employments should be created for rural youths who constitute nearly half of the population of India. If the rural youths are empowered, rural India will be more than urban India and the urban India will be attracted towards rural India. As of now, most of the educated people settling with jobs in urban India never even visit their native places in the rural settings. According to NCERT reports, nearly eighty percent of the educated masses are from rural areas.

Knowledge Revolution

To give shape to the vision of converting India into a knowledge superpower, initiatives were taken by the Union Cabinet from 2003 and a panel of experts were appointed for directing all the ministries, related administrators to work for the objective. According to the panel members the proposed plan for making India a knowledge superpower will include the networking of important areas such as education, health, information technology(IT), bio-technology and financial services. To this effect, the Planning Commission has unveiled a report on India Vision-2020 on January 24, 2003.[22]

According to it, the government of India plans to provide 100 per cent elementary education to rural people apart from eliminating poverty and unemployment. It also aims at increasing the per capita income of the rural people so as to attain a GDP growth of 9 per cent per annum by 2020. The government consequently envisions that the entire population of 1.35 billion will be

better-fed, dressed and housed, healthier, more educated and longer living than any generation in the history of India. More interestingly, it also envisions that the employment in this sector would fall from 56 to 40 per cent in the coming years and therefore it will be managed by creating more jobs in the unorganised labor sectors mostly from small and medium scale industries, transport, agriculture, agro-forestry, fisheries, tourism, IT education and health.[23] The planning commission also recommends that the government of India should make the rights for the job as constitutional one and manage to control the flow of rural population to urban areas. It is expected that the urban population would rise from 25.5 per cent to 40 per cent in the coming years.[24] Providing urban amenities in the rural areas in related fields of trade, technology and investment can help the rural masses to settle down in their respective villages.

Therefore, value added information, referred to as knowledge, has to reach the rural people. All the instruments required have to be transmitted and properly installed in places from where people can have access to vital information on various fields like health, education, cultivation, fishing, climate and employment. If there is any constraint faced in the knowledge network, relevant actions to overcome such constraint has to be immediately initiated.[25] Through demand-driven information, knowledge centres will have to be built by training the local people to operate the centers and own the same in course of time. For this, “antyodaya model” has to be adopted which will take care of the deprived people, especially the women and children, disabled and old people in their respective areas.

Effective usages of technology can help the rural masses by empowering them in the information field. Initiatives like the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can help establish various facilities for the purpose of empowering people and therefore for transforming rural India as a whole with the sole aim of eradicating poverty by providing employment to all.[26]

E-governance grid via a network of information kiosks providing sales tax forms, income certificates, domicile certificates, caste certificates, ration card forms, driving license, company registration, khasra-land records, landholder’s passbook of land rights and loans, rural language e-mail, commodity/mandi marketing information system, public grievance redressal, forms of various government schemes, below poverty line family list, employment and matrimonial news, rural news papers, e-advice for conflict resolution including in the family economy management, and free e-education for rural children.

For instance, M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation has been doing the needed jobs by setting up information villages in Tamilnadu and Pondicherry. The project established by the foundation in Pondicherry has won the Stockholm Challenge Award under the Global Village category 2001.[27] It plays an important role in building a knowledge based electronic rural society connecting villages through a hybrid wired and wireless network-PCs, telephones, VHF duplex radio devices, email and dial-up telephone lines, which facilitate both voice and data transfer enabling the villagers to get vital information for their day today life. It accentuates an integrated pro-poor, pro-women, pro-nature orientation to development, helps the community own the technological tools and encourages collective action involving local volunteers to gather information, feed it into an internet for providing access to different villages.[28]

The ICT can play a crucial role apart from providing vital information on prices of agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, pesticides; outputs— rice, vegetables, market; entitlement to the large number of schemes of the central and state governments; health care information relating to the availability of doctors, paramedics in nearby hospitals, women's diseases, cattle diseases; transport relating to road conditions and cancellation of bus trips and weather condition for sowing as well as fishing.[29] However, the government need to have a “people centric” plan rather than a mere “ICT centric” approach.[30]

Conclusion

Since 1952, India has been striving to transfer rural India with the support of many institutions, individuals and organisations. At present, there are a number of schemes embarked on this purpose in accordance with UN Millennium developmental agenda approved by 189 countries, including India in 2000. India, therefore, should rejuvenate itself, without merely feeling proud of participating in the globalisation process or achievement in the field of ICT.

The other priority area in which the government should concentrate now is ‘education’ with the commitment of attaining 100 per cent literacy. Also it should plan for such an education that would provide employment and help people in the long run to achieve productivity-oriented literacy and participate in the higher education leading to research in specialised areas. Such transformation will pave the way for a developed India in the future. Therefore, the government has to work not only for accelerating employment, growth and investment but also for providing social harmony, peace and ‘purposeful knowledge infrastructure’ by promoting the welfare of the farmers, farm labourers, youths, women and weaker sections of rural India.

Endnotes and References

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