

THEME NOTE

***LOOKING BEYOND INCOME PARADIGMS:
BRINGING RURAL DIGNITY IN INDIA'S POLICY DISCOURSE***

National Seminar

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The preamble of the Constitution of India emphasizes on the dignity of the individual as its prime focus while talking about fraternity. Besides, dignity of children and women are mentioned as the fundamental objectives of the state policy. The question of dignity has largely been confined to urban centric development discourse in terms of ensuring availability of essential services. The development discourse in case of rural development on the other hand has largely banked upon economic growth centric model especially focusing on enhancement of farmers' income. The recent discussions about government agenda of doubling farmer income or the farmers demand for a universal MSP for all crops also fall in this category. This discourse assumes that agricultural income enhancement is possible and will result in overall improvement in rural development and ultimately lead to enhancement in the quality of rural livelihoods. Other than the narrative about legalizing Minimum Support Price, in the recent past government's own version of development is focused on new marketing or supply chain solutions from the private sector, farmer Producer Organizations and lately from Cooperative Development.

However, this dominant narrative tends to ignore a few major developments that have taken place in the case of rural as well as agricultural economy. First, rural households have moved towards income diversification leading to a reduction in their dependence only on income from agriculture in general and farming in particular. According to NSSO report 2019 on status of rural household income there are 4 % rural households which are non-agricultural. Besides, more than 98 % non-agricultural households possess less than 1 hectare of land. Amongst agricultural households Approximately 70 % of agricultural households possess less than 1 hectare of land. In terms of monthly income of agricultural households, around 39 % of income comes from households' wages whereas 6.3 % income comes from non-farm activities. Only 37 % of monthly income is from crop production.

Secondly, rural households are also emerging as major consumers of various food as well as non-food items. According to NSSO report published in 2003 (NSS 59th round report on Consumption Expenditure of Farmer Households), the total average monthly consumer expenditure of an agricultural rural household at all India level was around 502 INR. Out of this an agricultural household was spending 278 INR on food items whereas around 224 INR was being spent on non-food items. In the case of overall rural households, out of a total 554 INR monthly consumer

expenditure, 298 INR is being spent on food items whereas 255 INR was being spent on non-food items. Amongst the non-food items the three major components were clothing and footwear, medical expenses and education expenditures. In some states expenditure on medical as well as education is much higher than other states. Punjab, Haryana, and Kerala primarily fall into this category other than states like Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.

This situation must have changed further. As the existing data reveals, there has been a rise of newer middle classes in rural India with increasing diversification of household income. The emerging consumption pattern also highlights that rural households spend almost equal amounts of money on non-food items. In other words, there is a cultural shift in aspirations, needs and demands of village households, especially the youth. The youth of villages also aspire for an urban kind of lifestyle, infrastructure and other recreational facilities within the rural areas.

However, unlike the urban development discourse where there is a constant government focus on ensuring control of food prices, availability of quality food items, medical facilities, education facilities or effective local transportation, housing, sanitation, and cleanliness etc, there has been no such discussion in case of India's rural areas or in the emerging small towns. Even if such issues are discussed, they are taken up in specific case studies or pilot projects.

Though in the past two decades the government has focused on a more holistic vision of rural development, its focus is largely on road connectivity or livelihood opportunities, especially MGRGA. There has been hardly any discussion on how to ensure achieving a dignified life in rural areas.

The idea of dignity as a concept is about an individual or a group of individuals feeling valued. In political philosophy, the concept of dignity is about one's sense of worthiness, value and distinctiveness. Apart from a sense of human dignity, how to instill a sense of citizenship in a person belonging to the rural society is a challenge that the policy makers in India haven't confronted yet. This conference is not about getting into conceptual debates of what constitutes dignity. There are studies showing how the idea of rural in India is already undergoing a transformation. Scholars have defined it as "incomplete transition", "hollowing out", "vanishing" or "dilapidation." Even though a majority population of India still lives in its villages, making

villages spaces with dignity and value and installing confidence in its people of citizens who are cared and valued has not been a focus of policy discourse. Instead, its disappearance is considered as a natural developmental trajectory.

This seminar is an attempt to initiate a dialogue in this field. We believe that achieving dignity in India's villages is contingent upon a focus in government policy on providing quality health facilities, education facilities, transportation, recreational facilities, and sanitation and cleanliness facilities in its villages. Merely focusing on physical infrastructure is not enough. Apart from physical infrastructure, the real challenge of the state policy is twofold: one to ensure quality of such services and two develop trust of rural citizens in these services.

Consequently, there is an urgent need to dedicate a larger portion of the budget to providing for quality health, education, drinking water etc. Besides, there is a need to develop effective planning process to ensure efficiency along with wider people's participation and trust in such facilities.

When the political parties are competing to give more and more freebies, the question arises on the availability of resources to meet essentials that will help people lead a life of dignity instead of always looking up to urban centers for such amenities. Besides, availability of essential services results in higher cost of living pushing rural populations further into debt trap. Above all, lack of basic services, which is considered the responsibility of any state, creates a sense of mistrust between citizens and the state. The legitimacy of any state is contingent upon its ability to provide quality services which are easily accessible and available.

We attempt to seek answers around other connected questions which have been marginalized in the income centric policy as well as political discourse. Is there a need to focus on other areas as well? What about the questions of better health, education or drinking water in India's villages? In contemporary political discourse, these questions are not associated with policy of rural development. Instead, they are seen as connected questions of access to health or education to all. A special focus on providing such facilities in rural areas is missing as a focus in the current policy discourse.

Through this seminar, we attempt to ask the question: in what ways can a dignified life in rural areas be achieved? What kind of issue areas in case of rural infrastructure development (especially in the field of health, education, communication and recreational activities) be achieved? How does an income centric discourse take away the focus from other substantial issues of rural development? Does India need an alternative way of rural planning and development? If yes, then how does this planning process need to be institutionalized? How the process of infrastructure-building be made inclusive, gender-sensitive and accommodative to the demands and concerns of diverse rural social groups?

We attempt to initiate a dialogue on some of these questions. Research papers, work in progress, writings based on ongoing PhD thesis etc are invited from scholars from India as well as from other parts of the world. We encourage comparative insights from other countries as well.

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