

PANDEMIC LESSONS FROM INDIA : NEED TO RE-FOCUS ON RURAL NON-FARM LIVELIHOODS

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**PANDEMIC LESSONS FROM INDIA :
NEED TO RE-FOCUS ON RURAL
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INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic in India will long be remembered, not just for the second largest number of persons infected by the SARS-CoV-2 virus in any country and the large numbers of those who unfortunately died, but also for the gigantic humanitarian crisis that was inflicted upon migrant workers in different cities and towns. These workers found themselves stranded, abandoned, left to their own devices when the nationwide total lockdown was announced overnight, with no jobs, no earning opportunities, few if any savings, no means to buy food or pay rent, and with no means even to return to the villages from which they had come and where they could at least get basic food and sustenance, and avail of familial and social support systems.

They were also left highly vulnerable to the virus, living in extremely crowded and unhygienic conditions mostly in slum areas with little possibility of maintaining physical distance, and few if any sources of clean water for maintaining hand hygiene. The meager food or other support that NGOs and civil society groups could extend,

and the little financial support the Central or state governments belatedly extended, was insufficient and uncertain. Finally, in sheer desperation, the migrants started a mass reverse movement to their respective villages, sometimes over a thousand kilometers away, by any means possible, even on foot. Many tragically died on the way.

When they finally reached home after arduous and harrowing journeys, and spent the requisite time in quarantine, they again faced uncertainty and penury. Besides the few who had at least some land, whether owned or leased-in, most had returned to the very circumstances due to which they had originally migrated to far-off cities, namely no jobs or earning opportunities in their native villages, not even agricultural labour. Even the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which is expected to provide at least 100 days of employment to each household on demand, proved to be insufficient to sustain all the unemployed or under-employed in the villages. Data shows that not even half of this total MNREGA entitlement had been met over five years during 2015-19.¹ So the returning migrant workers, adding to the already under-served rural unemployed, clearly strained the system further. It was only the special outlays provided due to the Covid-19 pandemic that made the Rural Development Ministry spend Rs.76,800 crore on MNREGA beneficiaries during April-November 2020 compared to about Rs.50,000 crore in the same period the previous year.² As a result, once the lockdowns were lifted and economic activities in cities resumed, large numbers amounting to around two-thirds of the migrant workers, returned to the cities where they earlier worked, but now to less employment security, incomes and benefits.³

This unfolding scenario once again focused attention on the rural economy and its inability to provide adequate employment, forcing large numbers to migrate in search of work. Clearly, there is a "push" factor driving out-migration of workers from rural areas. There is also the "pull" factor of higher wages and better conditions in states like Punjab and Haryana for agricultural labour, and in Kerala and other southern states in construction, hospitality and other services. The fact is, however, that while exact figures are unavailable, around 100 million persons are estimated to migrate from rural areas for work, with a large proportion going to towns and cities for non-agricultural work.⁴ A survey by the Centre for Study of Developing Studies also found that in 2017-19, around 80% of these daily- or weekly- wage workers earned less than Rs.10,000 per month.

Question is, can the process of rural out-migration be reversed? If so, this would clearly require new jobs to be created in rural areas. A further question then arises: which sectors have the potential to enable this?



RURAL EMPLOYMENT SECTORS

Almost all studies point to a sharp and steady decline in agricultural employment over recent decades. It has become almost a cliché to point out that the share of agriculture in GDP has declined from 41% to 14% between 1972-23 and 2011-12, while the share of agricultural employment has declined from 73.9% to 48.9% over the same period.⁵ Besides out-migration, rural labour, in particular among scheduled castes who earlier engaged mostly in farm labour, has increasingly moved to employment in the Rural Non-Farm Sector (RNFS).⁶ With growth in the rural economy, especially in census towns, employment in RNFS has grown during 1980- 81 to 2009-10 mostly in the construction sector, from 4.0% to 16.0% and in hotels/restaurants/trade from 6.7% to 18.0%, but only to a small extent in manufacturing, from 9.16 to 11.85%.⁷ Various studies have shown that earnings from RNFS employment could be as much as 2.4 times more than from the agricultural sector,⁸ besides being all-year rather than seasonal.

As one study puts it, the relatively small base of the RNFS located within a large rural population does not reflect limitations of this sector but in fact indicates the pent-up employment potential in this sector.⁹ Intuitively, this is also likely in the rural non-farm manufacturing sector (RNFMS), chiefly for lack of policy intervention as we shall see below. This is the policy gap this Brief seeks to address.



RURAL NON-FARM LIVELIHOODS: BRIEF ACCOUNT OF PAST POLICY INTERVENTIONS

In the first few decades after Independence, a great deal of emphasis was given within the process of planned development to heavy industries and to building science and technology infrastructure and capabilities as the foundation of self-reliant development. It was believed this would attract surplus labour from the rural areas and the farm sector. The actual trajectory of development, however, led to a somewhat different

scenario as regards employment. For one, the growth in the organised industrial sector was far outpaced by growth of the unorganised sector, often by several multiples, while wages as a percentage of gross output declined.¹⁰ In other words, employment generation did not keep pace with industrial development. Recognising that what were then called small-scale industries (SSI), later classed as small and medium enterprises (SMEs), generated more employment and were also significant contributors to economic development, government support for SSI became an important element of government policy. However, most of these were located in urban or peri-urban areas, and contributed little to rural development or employment.

What may be termed "rural industries" were actually remnants of traditional artisanal enterprises such as of weavers, carpenters, blacksmiths and other metal workers, leather workers, potters, oil extractors, food processors or product makers, cane and bamboo workers, and similar others. These are the inheritors of much of the scientific and technological knowledge of India, who suffered from de-industrialisation during the colonial period, and may therefore have been expected to form an important part of the industrialisation process in post-independence India in some way or the other. However, this did not happen in any meaningful manner.

In the Gandhian scheme of things, which envisaged "village self-sufficiency," the rural artisan was accorded an important place. Under the leadership of Gandhi and J.C. Kumarappa, artisans were the focus of programmes seeking to upgrade their techniques and trade under the All-India Village Industries Association (AIVIA) set up in 1946, which later became the Khadi & Village Industries Commission (KVIC) and Boards that continue to play roles of some significance in rural and small-scale industrialisation, and also receive substantial government financial and policy assistance to this day. With the passing away of Kumarappa, and with the parallel process of conventional industrialisation underway, the KVI sector entered a new and retrograde phase of a "rapidly bureaucratising rather than innovating"¹¹ structure, which soon became a niche sector that was over-dependent on government support and subsidies.

Meanwhile, many hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of artisans continued to leave their traditional occupations that were increasingly becoming obsolete and take to agricultural labour, or seek alternative employment in their villages, or join the ranks of the large unorganised sector of miscellaneous employment.

Raw hides of cattle began to increasingly be drawn to the industrial tanneries in Chennai, Kolkata, Agra or Jalandhar, prodded by government policy that first prohibited



export of raw hides, then semi-finished leathers and finally finished leathers, boosting indigenous Leather industry in the organized sector which however marginalized rural leather artisans. Pottery went into steep decline in the face of competition from plastics and aluminium products. Blacksmithy maintained a precarious hold due to locale-specific needs while mass manufactured agricultural tools and implements flooded the market. Raw material sources such as clay, bamboo, and timber were becoming increasingly scarce due to heightened developmental activities and shrinking of rural commons.¹² The KVI sector could not arrest or even address this trend due to its stultified notion of the individual artisan working only with hand tools, which could at best be upgraded incrementally. The KVI co-operatives mainly provided common facilities where individual artisans continued to work as individual producers. These co-ops were unable to avail of new technologies or division of labour to raise productivity or scale-up. In any case, in the face of its own self-imposed limitations, the KVI definition of “village industries” was itself changed over time: they no longer needed to be rural, or based on traditional artisans, and could be entrepreneurial units rather than co-operatives.

Rural poverty, the new post-colonial process of de-industrialisation of the countryside, declining agricultural employment and the persistent absence of RNFS employment in rural areas, continued to pose problems for development planners. From the Vth 5-year Plan (1974- 79) onwards, welfare schemes of the Central Government such as the Minimum Needs Programme, Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), various Rural Employment Programmes and some Area Development Programmes were initiated. These and other schemes were given a major push in the VI th Plan (1980-85) which, for the first time, had poverty alleviation as a specific and major objective, and under which IRDP that later morphed into the Sampoorna Gram Swarozgar Yojana (or SGSY) was given a further push and TRYSEM (Training of Youth for Rural Employment), Rural Labour Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP), the forerunner of the now famous MGNREGA, DWCRA (Development of Women & Children in Rural Areas) and other schemes were launched and supported in a big way.

It has always been problematic to assess the success or otherwise of these programmes. However, if one judges by known outcomes

i.e., levels of rural poverty and employment, one may broadly conclude that all the employment generation programmes, whether of self-employment or wage-employment, the rural unemployment/ underemployment scenario has not changed much as a result of these schemes.

The last concurrent evaluation of the IRDP in 1993 concluded that the scheme had managed to provide only a small incremental income, and that only around 15.96% of the beneficiaries had been enabled to cross the then poverty line,[13] a small enough margin to raise questions about whether and when these beneficiaries may yet again slip behind it. IRDP too was structurally hampered by low capitalisation, limitations of individual functioning and equipment in what may be termed the “cobbler under a tree” model, and an overly bureaucratised system that lent itself to rent-seeking.

TRYSEM provided training, with pre-conceived ideas of what beneficiaries could do to earn new or additional incomes. Many government schemes went the same way, and many NGOs too were supported to conduct training programmes, with a tacit but unverified assumption that training would automatically translate into employment generation, which, more often than not, it did not. Gradually, the scheme was modified to enable group enterprises with self-help groups (SHGs). However, the SHGs usually not being from the same trade or vocation rendered the enterprise aspect weak or even ineffective, and SHGs essentially became mainly mutual lending groups in an expanding micro-finance ecosystem, which ran into problems of its own.

Clearly all these schemes provided some financial and other support but, being essentially sub-optimal, they did not result in sustainable employment or additional income generation opportunities. MNREGA remained the one stellar success, sticking to its original simple welfare aim of providing some wage labour to rural unemployed and under-employed persons. While it has proved to be very useful, especially in times of crisis, one big question remains, as to what kind of assets are being created through these works, a methodology that worked very well in China in the early decades after the revolution there. However, that calls for a fuller discussion outside the scope of this brief.





A NEW APPROACH: TECHNOLOGY AS THE MISSING FACTOR

By the late 1970s and the early 1980s, India witnessed an efflorescence of voluntary action in different fields, with the State becoming increasingly willing to work with these NGOs,¹⁴ especially in welfare and development programmes for the rural and other poor and underprivileged sections. Among these were several pioneering groups, led by committed scientists and engineers often having left successful professional careers to enter the voluntary sector, and who wanted to bring science and technology (S&T) to bear on mainly rural developmental efforts. These NGOs worked in non-formal education, science education in schools, innovative technologies to reduce drudgery or improve quality of life, and new or improved technologies for income and employment generation.

In parallel, efforts to harness S&T for rural development were also on-going and intensifying within the government, including through new policy initiatives. Starting with the Karimnagar experiment, where various technologies developed by different national laboratories were sought to be applied in a compact cluster of villages, leading to a larger push for taking technologies from “lab to land,” each of the 40-odd labs under the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) were mandated to apply a part of their financial and human resources towards this end, with the aim of generating a new impetus to the rural economy and job or income creation there. While gallant efforts were made by some labs in particular, such as the Central Leather Research Institute, Chennai, other labs showed mixed results, chiefly due to structural inability to undertake work in rural areas over prolonged periods. Similar efforts were also being made at some premier universities such as the Centre for Advancement of S&T for Rural Areas (ASTRA) at Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, the Centre for Technology Application for Rural Areas (C-TARA) at IIT Mumbai and the Centre for Rural Development and Appropriate Technology (CRD&AT) at IIT Delhi.

All these efforts were broadly in tune with the “Appropriate Technology” or “Intermediate Technology” movement around the world at that time, but with significant differences in rural innovation and institutional approaches

At the policy level in India, these endeavours converged significantly in a corner of the government system in a programme nucleated at the Department of Science & Technology (DST) in collaboration with the CSIR system of National Laboratories and S&T-capable NGOs that threw up novel systems of rural innovation introducing new or improved technologies to generate jobs or additional incomes, improve habitat or reduce drudgery especially for women in rural areas. A new methodology and institutional framework were introduced towards these goals, replacing the top-down “lab to land” approach, which frequently did not interrogate the appropriateness of the technologies proposed to be introduced and whether they actually met the needs and requirements of users.

Many S&T-capable NGOs joined in this endeavour, several with supplementary or independent funding from international donors.

A central idea born out of a collaborative effort involving S&T policy-makers, knowledge or technology generating research institutions and universities, and S&T-capable NGOs was that technologies and systems need to be generated “from below” by

S&T-capable NGOs working with full participation of user groups in rural areas, with technical support from S&T institutions and support from the government, in this case DST. Further, the operational aim was to generate, field-test and demonstrate new and sustainable models for rural livelihoods.

It was felt this could be enabled by working on the missing factor in all previous endeavours, namely, technology. It was found that, in most cases, requisite technologies were not available off the shelf, since technologies tended to be designed for conventional larger industries, and needed to be de-scaled, adapted or even re-designed for the purpose.¹⁵

Of immediate relevance for this Brief, several of these endeavours specifically focused on rural industrialisation or pro-poor rural enterprises in the rural manufacturing sector, to tackle the problems identified in historical attempts and policy initiatives as discussed above.

Main elements of the new approach may be summarised as follows:

- new/improved technologies and models for rural enterprises · qualitative shift from individual/household production to collective or “industrial” networked forms of production (hub-and-spoke models) ·
- value-addition to rural produce as close to source of raw materials as feasible (thus local employment, income and value generation adding to the local rural economy instead of simply selling raw produce outside the area) ·
- making quality and competitive finished or intermediate products ·
- upgrading or introducing new skills to traditional artisans or other rural workers as “carriers” of the new technologies ·
- maximising access to nearby or local rural/urban markets

These have shown excellent results in different sectors all over the country and have amply demonstrated their viability, sustainability and replicability as recognised by many agencies in India and abroad.

Unfortunately, they still remain merely demonstration projects, and have not been mainstreamed into the major government rural development or employment programmes, revealing gaps in the policy ecosystem of the government and posing challenges for the task of taking them forward, as discussed in the subsequent sections.



EXPERIENCE THUS FAR

Work has been underway on the above lines since the early 1980s, and replicable technologies and enterprise models have shown themselves to be sustainable.

Some examples may be briefly described to illustrate the new models.

Leather tanning which has mostly become extinct throughout India, with artisans only collecting raw hides from naturally dying cattle, has been revived in parts of the country through an upgraded vegetable tanning process developed by CLRI, Chennai, and adapted to the local context. Leather workers, earlier working individually, have been networked in a collective enterprise with a nodal or 'mother' tanning unit where full-time workers are supplied with flayed and cured hides from several decentralised village-clusters or 'satellite' units, together covering roughly a block or about 25 km radius. According to thickness and quality, some leathers are veg-tanned like for soles



or country footwear, and some others are tanned to a semi-finished wet- blue stage, finished at industrial units, and brought back. All leathers are supplied to product- making units. Such a network may typically involve 150-200 leather workers, many of whom have returned to their areas from out-migration and new occupations elsewhere. Many younger generation workers who were earlier averse to following traditional occupations, including women, are taking up product-making, which is seen as dignified 'factory'-type work.

Extraction and utilization of the vast quantities available of a wide variety of Non-Edible Oil (NEO) seeds from around 26 mostly wild or forest-based varieties of trees is possible, but is not being done systematically. Only small quantities of these NEO seeds are collected in scattered locations with local villagers getting non-remunerative, low labour costs while organised industry extracts and uses the oils to make soaps, lubricants, varnish and high-value oils from some varieties. A novel technology package comprising a variable Decorticator to separate the shell from the oil-bearing kernels of 19 different NEO seeds, and a standard expeller with filter press was developed. Satellite units at cluster-of-village level separate the kernels and supply them to a 'mother' unit that extracts the oil and sells them to nearby industrial units. Such networks have been set up both in and outside forest areas for oil from seeds such as karanja, mahua, neem, rubber seed, etc., as also high-value oils from plants like wild apricot and jojoba.

The above technologies, and many of those listed below, were developed through support of the Department of Science & Technology, Government of India under its Science & Society programme.

Similar rural enterprise models and appropriate new or upgraded technologies have been developed and demonstrated in many sectors such as (indicative):



- Leather
 - Tanning (Veg-Tanning, Wet-blue tanning)
 - Fallen Carcass Utilisation (completely new technology)
 - Product-making
- Pottery (upgraded medium-temperature glazed red clay pottery) "
- Non-edible oils (26 varieties) "
- Fruit & vegetable processing: year-round FSSAI compliant "
- Millet products
- All-natural Bio-degradable Soap Products from plant materials
- Construction technologies
- Fish aggregation devices
- Fish seed hatcheries
- Low-cost tissue culture techniques
- Low-cost nursery techniques
- Wild bee honey: eco-sensitive collection and processing
- Mahua flower processing and products
- Meat processing and products
- Bamboo products with equipment/machinery



As may be seen, efforts in all the above mentioned sectors are to create local S&T- enabled rural enterprises that not only establish supply chains from village to consumer, but also and importantly a value-chain wherein maximum possible value-addition accrues within the rural areas itself and adds to the local economy by way of production, trade, maintenance and repair, and other services. In many of the above instances, whereas earlier the raw material sent outside often represented only 10% or less of the value of the final product, the new rural enterprises have enabled 40% of value-addition in rural economies.

Another important element of the above approach is that it has a built-in mechanism in the form of the S&T-capable NGOs for continuous upgradation of technologies and product profiles. In today's fast-changing market scenario, it is essential to ensure that

innovations introduced today do not become obsolete within a few years but are part of a process of continued improvement and innovation.

An additional aspect to be leveraged is the growing rural economy. Studies have shown that in many years of the previous two decades, the rural economy has grown substantially, often at higher rates than urban markets. There is a substantial potential in rural markets with consumers broadening their purchasing preferences, processed and packaged products gaining increased acceptance and people becoming more open to new products. Even in crowded markets like processed fruit products, it has been found that ample demand exists for local products, especially those with local flavours or other qualities. This is both an opportunity and a challenge for rural enterprises, which have to face greater competition in all market segments.

The on-line channels must also be more actively pursued through careful marketing strategies.

The objective in most cases is to eventually have enterprises managed by the workers themselves. This has not always been possible as of now due to a variety of reasons. Some networks and units have been formed and are now run by SHGs, SHG Federations or Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs). In other cases, the network is managed by the concerned NGO with participatory management along with the workers in societies, non-profit Article 8 Companies, or in some cases, they are run by individual entrepreneurs. In general, co-operatives are not popular in the North and the East of the country and there is general apprehension of government interference. Groups in Kerala have embraced the co-operative structure given the long history of co-operatives run by progressive movements in the state. This aspect needs more work in the future.

Not many NGOs are comfortable with forming and running enterprises, having been long accustomed to providing training or providing contract- or extension-type services to government organisations or development agencies. This is a structural weakness of the NGO ecosystem in India and urgent measures are required to overcome this barrier.

Marketing has been a long-standing weakness of NGOs. But marketing is an integral and vital part of social enterprises, and must be built-in to the enterprise model, along with market- oriented products, packaging, price points, targetted market segments and branding.

Clearly, while an excellent beginning has been made with solid foundations, there is much more work to be done to scale up this effort both horizontally and vertically.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Advocacy is required at different levels—at the level of government policy; among NGOs and the wider civil society, especially progressive movements; among crucial stakeholder groups such as farmers' and agricultural workers' organisations and trade unions; and among the wider public. The following are suggested.

GOVERNMENT/POLICY MAKERS

- Adopt, support and bring S&T-based and other innovative rural enterprises to the mainstream of rural development programmes and employment generation programmes.
- Support research and field demonstration programmes more vigorously to develop and field-test more such technologies and rural enterprise models.
- Financial institutions and development agencies must ensure that credit and other support mechanisms are less rigidly structured so that enterprises can be realistically shaped to local conditions rather than top-down imposed structures, and credit can be availed in a manner similar to SMEs.
- While acknowledging that the beneficiaries of such enterprises are mostly asset-less or asset-poor, suitable allowance ought to be made in credit conditions and collateral.

NGOS /CIVIL SOCIETY/SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

- More NGOs must be encouraged to enter the field of social enterprises, especially rural enterprises
- Support ought to be extended for capacity-building towards this end.
- Catalyse linkages between appropriate CSR and other social-enterprise funding sources for rural enterprises.
- Support networking with S&T institutions, financial institutions and developmental agencies to promote overall objectives.



- Support networking with international agencies to promote sharing of ideas and experiences, and possible collaborative programmes, with other developing countries, and also to catalyse additional support from government.

FARMERS, AGRICULTURAL WORKERS, TRADE UNIONS

- Since most of the target rural population would be artisans, marginal farmers, landless agricultural labour, it is vital to promote stronger linkages and/or even affiliation of these rural enterprises with progressive organisations of farmers, agricultural workers; this would add new and powerful dimensions and public reach to farmers' organisations.
- Trade unions, youth and women's organisations are also natural allies.

THE PUBLIC

- There is wide support among progressive sections, especially among the youth, in Europe, the West and elsewhere for alternative lifestyles, for local products as against products of global value-chains, and for products made by artisans, producers' cooperatives, etc; advocacy can help build support for such a trend in India where there is likely a pent-up support for such products and pro-poor social enterprises.
- Promote the setting up of co-operative stores (or similar retail outlets) selling social enterprise products. " Promote special stalls or corners in supermarket chains and malls for sale of such products. " Promote linkages with international fair trade organisations and movements.
- Many of these organisations did not like this term and preferred to call themselves Voluntary Organisations, which, they felt, better conveyed the spirit in which they worked. Nevertheless, we shall use the term NGOs here for conve

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Focus on the Global South is an Asia-based regional think tank that conducts research and policy analysis on the political economy of trade and development, democracy and people's alternatives. It works in national, regional and international coalitions with peoples' movements and civil society organisations and has offices in New Delhi, Manila, Phnom Penh and Bangkok



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All India People's Science Network

All India People's Science Network (AIPSN)

The All India Peoples Science Network (AIPSN) is a network of over 40 peoples science organisations from across India. The AIPSN works at the interface of science with society on issues such as science and technology policy, self reliance, education, health and pharmaceuticals, rural technology, scientific temper or science and reason, and environment, with special emphasis on issues related to gender and social justice. It uses diverse communication strategies in its work such as publications, briefing notes, slide shows, video films, public meetings, songs and street theatre

One of the saddest episodes of the COVID catastrophe in India was that of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers who found themselves stranded, abandoned, and compelled to make their way back to their villages after an ill planned national lockdown. Once the lockdown was lifted, with little income in rural areas, they returned to the cities where they had earlier worked, but now faced lower employment security, incomes and benefits. This timely paper focuses attention on the rural economy and its inability to provide adequate employment. Can we imagine a future where the process of rural-out migration is reversed? If so, what kinds of jobs can be created in rural areas and which sectors have the potential to enable this?

