

TRANSFORMING THE VILLAGE: NEW RURBAN STRATEGY BASED ON GANDHIAN APPROACH

Dr. Dhurjati Mukherjee

There is very little point in just going for high GDP growth with heavy mechanization and industrialization without any direct effect on the masses. Development has to be balanced in such a way that both industrialization – specially labour intensive small and micro industries – and agriculture move side by side so that the total effect is sustainable and beneficial for the common people.

The completion of three years in office by the government signifies a marked change in planning by allocation of more resources to different projects and schemes aimed at transforming the rural sector. While some of the schemes are new, some have been totally changed to make these more focused to attend to social infrastructure needs of the villages. The neglect of the rural sector has been a big challenge before the government and bringing about the desired change would definitely be a monumental task in the coming years.

The new Rurban approach obviously needs reforms but it may be pointed out that in most countries, including India, the opening of bank accounts of the villagers has enabled to pass on their benefits to their respective bank accounts. The responsibility of uplifting the conditions of the rural mass cannot be ignored, specially in a country like India where over 60-65 per cent population lives in rural areas – for whom, such welfare schemes are of paramount importance.

Development as understood today is a comprehensive concept distinct from mere economic growth. Thus, development may be understood as an intentional self guided process of transformation and management of socio-economic structures, directed at ensuring to all people to lead a full and rewarding life by providing them with an affordable livelihood and by continuously improving their well-being.

The well known French Economist, Francois Perroux, who had come out with innovative views stated that the financial and economic policies of the Third World took insufficient account of the originality, culture, and concrete situations of the countries concerned, and were too quantitative, too Western in concept, and too centered on the interests of the rich industrialized countries.

According to him, development meant: “the combinations of mental and social changes of the people which enables them to increase, cumulatively and permanently, their total real production”. He counselled the people of the Third World to build upon their cultures, their social organizations and their resources so as to better the internal coherence of their economic and reduce the effects of domination by the West.

Similarly, Nobel Laureate, Prof. Amartya Sen, (2001) foresaw development as the removal of the sources of unfreedom and expansion of the real freedoms that people enjoy. In fact, the combination of economic development, social justice and human rights are intrinsically linked and would lead to the real development of the people.

Development & Right to Livelihood :

According to social scientists concerned with Third World countries, development is a social process that leads to constructive and critical consideration of the following:

- (i) the external and internal factors that affect the economic evolution of a country;



- (ii) the distributive system of goods and services; and
- (iii) the system of relationships among the agents of economic life which incorporates self-esteem, sustenance, freedom and well-being.

Development in this respect necessarily presupposes a concern for human life and value. And this has been called 'Sustainable Development' a strategy that is inclusive and reaches the lowest segments of society and "improve people's quality of life within the carrying capacity of the Earth's life support system". One may also mention here the Copenhagen Declaration that urged governments to accelerate the process of development through allocation of increased resources and create "an economic, political, social, cultural and legal environment that will enable people to achieve social development".

However, in our country even now, the government has yet to involve the voluntary organizations in a big way at the grass-root level though the NGOs and CBOs are cost effective and have expertise due to their almost regular interaction with the village folk.

Government Schemes:

The expansion and scope of the now famous Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), has possibly been the most significant attempt to build social infrastructure and also ensure employment to the rural poor in tune with the new philosophy of development. It is now spread almost all over the country and, in some states, the results are quite satisfactory.

Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana (SAGY) :

Launched on the birth anniversary of Jay Prakash Narayan, is also a step in the same direction aimed "at instilling certain values in the village and its people such as fostering mutual cooperation, self help and self reliance, enabling the poorest and the person in the village to come out of poverty and achieve well being, preserving and promoting local cultural heritage etc." The Yojana is aimed at translating the vision of Mahatma Gandhi into reality, that is, transforming the rural sector keeping in view the present lack of balanced development plaguing the countryside.



According to the scheme, every MP would adopt a Village Panchayat to be developed through government schemes and local initiative. While Lok Sabha members can adopt a panchayat within their constituency, Rajya Sabha members can adopt any within the state they represent. There are 2,65,000 Gram Panchayats in the country. Primarily, the goal is to develop three adarsh grams by March 2019 of which, one would be achieved by 2016. Thereafter, five such grams – one per year – would be selected and developed by the year 2024, as per an official note.

The selected panchayats have started getting priority for developing infrastructure under existing schemes like the National Health Mission, NREGS, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, ICDS and also the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. The plan envisaged a model village with schools that have computers and toilets, health facilities for complete immunization, gym and yoga centres, drinking water, household toilets for all and facilities for solid and liquid waste management.

The scheme is being implemented through a village development plan that would be prepared for every identified gram panchayat with special focus on enabling every poor household to come out of poverty. Such an integrated plan was a long felt need and would go a long way on making the village self-reliant and self sufficient, as visualized by Mahatma Gandhi long back. There is also a necessity of supply of renewable energy and modernization and diversification of micro, cottage and village-based industries. This has become imperative at this point of time for the country to make rapid strides on the path of social and economic development.

The enormity of the challenge cannot be denied as around 50 per cent of the six lakh villages have very poor social and physical infrastructural facilities. The SAGY has been the right beginning and it remains to be seen how many villages could be adopted and whether there is proper planning before the execution of the schemes for integrated development. One needs to be optimistic as after a long time, the government has thought of an integrated plan of village development.

Another significant work of rural rejuvenation has been the start of the nationwide 'Skills India Mission' by the Prime Minister (in mid-July) to promote entrepreneurship and equip 500 million Indians with skills by the year 2022 is, no doubt, an ambitious programme. The National Policy for Skill Development & Entrepreneurship 2015 – part of the Mission – is aimed at empowering those left out of the mainstream education system by incentivizing skill training through financial rewards to candidates who successfully complete approved training programmes. This has the potential of opening up avenues of employment on a big scale and partly tackling the problem of unemployment and underemployment existing mainly in the rural areas.

It may also be pertinent to mention here that a process of IT related facilities to make the rural people financially and socially secure has been started through public-private participation since 2007. The Common Service Centres (CSCS), which have been opened by various companies offer a single window, one-stop solution to the various needs of the citizen's to bring government, business and education services to rural India through an expanding network of village level franchise partners. The present programmes of SAGY and Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana have been successful, to a great extent, to carry forward the work if these CSCs and benefit the rural populace in a big way so that the concept of PURA is fulfilled in both letter and spirit.

In the realm of financial inclusion, the PMJDY has helped the poor and the economically weaker sections from being exploited by unscrupulous moneylenders. As is widely regarded, this Yojana lies at the core of the development philosophy of 'Sab Ka Sath, Sab Ka Vikas' and is possibly the biggest

financial inclusion initiative undertaken in India compared to anywhere in the world.

Last but not the least, the decision ensures to construct 2.95 crore houses in rural areas under its ambitious 'Housing for All' by 2022 scheme. The government is expected to spend nearly Rs 81,975 crore over construction of the one crore houses in the first three years of the *Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana-Gramin* under which, it will provide financial assistance of Rs 1.20 lakh to those living in plain areas and Rs 1.30 lakh to those in "hilly and difficult" areas. One may mention here that the government had promised in its election manifesto to provide a 'pucca' house for every family by the 75th anniversary of independence.

It is understood that an amount of Rs 81,975 crore will be needed to construct one crore houses between 2016-17 and 2018-19 out of which, Rs 68,000 crore will be provided by budgetary provisions while the rest Rs 21,975 crore will come from borrowing through National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) to be amortised through budgetary allocations after 2022.

Change in Planning Strategy:

The urban bias in Indian planning has to be reversed with focus being on the growth of rural and semi-urban areas and strengthening the local economy. But unfortunately, the rural sector has not got the necessary attention and rural infrastructure, in most cases is still quite poor. Whether it is roads or power, though some achievements have been manifested in the last decade, a lot remains to be done.

There can be no denying that the opportunity cost of the city dwellers is high compared to the rather modest outlays required to upgrade the standards of living of agricultural labourers and create opportunities in agro-based industry, cottage industry and the like. There have not been serious attempts at urbanizing the countryside and what is still lacking in India – and also other countries of South Asia – are deficient and inadequate health and educational facilities. Though in recent years, the rural sector has received the much needed attention and a fair share of resources, but the requirement of physical and social infrastructural development are much more.

The report of the independent International Commission of Peace and Food, chaired by Dr. M. S. Swaminathan, which argued the goal of one billion jobs was achievable in ten years through a low-cost strategy of using agriculture as an engine of growth. According to the report, about half of the jobs (45 million) would be generated on farms by: (i) raising productivity through improved management of micro-nutrients and water, (ii) expanding the total irrigated area, (iii) emphasizing on more labour-intensive commercial crops such as sugar, cotton, fruits and vegetables, sericulture and aquaculture, (iv) reclamation of wasteland for forestry and (v) increasing subsidiary incomes from animal husbandry and poultry. The multiplier effect of increased rural incomes was expected to create another 45 million rural and urban jobs in industry and services.

Though this has not been a success to the extent envisaged, several major steps have been taken since then. The government concentrated on increasing agricultural production and productivity in the Eastern and North Eastern states and allotted resources for the past few years as a result of which, the farm output went up. Moreover, cash crops were given attention as also promoting agro-based industries though not to the extent desired. The report of Dr. Swaminathan is still relevant as it suggested ways and means of tackling the mounting problem of unemployment.

Similarly, our late President, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam had talked of PURA (providing urban facilities in rural areas) which resulted in awareness generation and realization of the need for an inclusive approach to development and upgrading the living standards of the poor and the economically weaker sections of society. Both these are clearly alternative approaches of how the rural economy could be strengthened.

These aspects have also to be considered in the rural strategy for comprehensive development of the villages. The Gram Panchayats have to be strengthened and given complete charge as they are the best to formulate and execute the present village development plan, keeping in view the needs of the community. The Prime Minister has categorically pointed out there would be a bottom-to-top approach, adding that the scheme would be demand driven, not supply-driven. "The villagers will decide their development needs", PM had stated, echoing the decentralization concept of Gandhi.

The government has taken the right stand by committing itself to erase rural-urban inequities through the promotion of 'rurban' infrastructure and amenities that emphasize growing confluence of cities and the countryside. This, no doubt, is a pressing need and the Hon'ble President in his address to Parliament some time back, reiterated this aspect by stating that "The government will strive to end the rural-urban divide guided by the idea of rurban, providing urban amenities to rural by preserving the ethos of the villages".

There is no denying that the rural sector has to be rejuvenated and the disparity in incomes and facilities between cities and towns, on one hand and rural areas, on the other reduced to the extent possible. Rurban development has rightly been identified as the government's ambitious plan of improving infrastructure like roads, power along with water and sanitation in a bid to develop the villages. It is expected in the coming years, our PM would give due weightage to the rural sector where the needs are much more and both, social and physical infrastructure development is a prime need at this crucial juncture.

A proper development strategy, which does not emulate the Western model, where population is much less and resources are abundant – has already been in place and proper achieving of targets through good and efficient governance is now called for. The problems of the *aam janta* living below the poverty line and those struggling for an existence have to be given the top most priority through rejuvenation of the rural sector, which may not necessarily help in high GDP growth, but would have a grass root effect in boosting up incomes of the economically weaker sections and the poor.

There is very little point in just going for high GDP growth with heavy mechanization and industrialization without any direct effect on the masses. Development has to be balanced in such a way that both industrialization – specially labour intensive small and micro industries – and agriculture move side by side so that the total effect is sustainable and beneficial for the common people.

(The author is a social activist and Gandhian scholar writing in different newspapers and journals on socioeconomic and developmental issues for the last four decades. Email: dhurjatimukherjee54@gmail.com)