

Towards the Goal of Aatmanirbhar Gaon



‘Aatmanirbhar Gaon’ is a movement of the people. The success of a people-centric programme can only be expected by engaging with the communities. Under the ‘Unnat Bharat Abhiyan’, the task of providing knowledge and technology support involving higher education institutions was taken up by subject experts with the objective of improving livelihoods. The realisation of ‘Aatmanirbhar Gaon’ requires conviction that the revolution of prosperity in India is possible only when villages lead the movement.

Prof. (Dr.) Virendra Kumar Paul

The enriching heritage of India defines its identity. Material and non-material cultures are the true reflection of the heritage; the unity in diversity is the strength. And the harmonious coexistence of cultural diversity within the notion of India is its magnificence. India is blessed to have this unique character, which is still preserved and practised in the villages. If this is so, then the essence of India lies in its villages. And, instant rejection of contrary views is an instinct of the Indians. Obviously, connecting with villages is beyond a simple emotional affinity, and tangible values associated with it must be the reason enough for the continuity of this essence of India to exist. Sir Charles Metcalfe referred to Indian village communities as ‘little republics’ in possession of everything for their needs and desires, but they were

not isolated from the rest of the world. He further goes on to attribute happiness, enjoyment, freedom, and independence of Indian people to the village communities. The essence of India was underlined by Gandhiji as ‘We are inheritors of a rural civilisation’. Thus, the significance of village is far greater than the physical entities, such as the built environment and the land associated with it. At the dawn of independence in 1947, over 85% of the Indian population lived in villages and derived their livelihoods from the agrarian economy. Needless to say, self-sufficiency was at the core of this structure.

Gandhiji was emphatic on the significance of villages in the development of independent India and supported the idea of supplementary industry for the villages. The

Gandhian view centres on self-sufficient communities and the balance between man and nature. Thus, the self-sufficient village as an economic unit is an obvious catalyst for environmental sustainability. In the context of contemporary environmental crises, the 'Aatmanirbhar Gaon' is the undeniable solution.

Paradox of Urbanisation vis-à-vis Village Existence

Rapid urbanisation has led to an existential crisis for the villages. According to an estimate, in 2021, one-third of the Indian population lived in cities, and the growth is unabated. Urban areas are known to be engines of economic prosperity, but the development model based on urbanisation will have a declining dividend unless it consumes more rural space. The paradox is that insatiable consumption will lead to prosperity in GDP terms, but what happens to the environment if the villages perish? The notion of a self-reliant city is still a conjecture, as the model for catering to the magnitude of demand of resources, including vegetables, poultry, and other natural products, is still a rather hypothetical one. To heal the devastation of the environment caused by urbanisation by its internal mechanisms is not even a conjecture yet. Self-reliance builds on the principle of the adequacy of a habitation to at least meet its necessities of goods and maintain environmental suitability within its own footprint of existence, including the associated communities. The autonomy so achieved is a sense of pride, leading to social cohesion. Unfortunately, globalisation and consequent urbanisation may have realised this limitation rather late, even if it has.

The concept of self-reliance may not find solid ground in urban cities, as the newer generations are finding the 'big city life' increasingly intriguing and attractive. With the hope of better career opportunities and an optimism for growth, the youth of the villages are rapidly migrating to the urban centres. While it may be true for some, most end up living a life of drudgery and sustaining themselves at the threshold of existence. The realisation of the value of village life, in such cases, comes at a time when migrating back may not be an easy decision.

On the other hand, a village as a unit of human existence has all the potentialities to qualify as a 'self-sufficient, self-reliant' entity. The paradox is that the inevitability of urbanisation at some point of

development in the past overlooked the relevance of the village as an important unit. As we experience degradation of the urban environment and loss of quality of life due to pressure on resources and social structures, there is a growing realisation that villages are the only valid option for human existence. Who can forget the days of Covid-19 pandemic, when mass exodus to native villages was the only hope for survival and existence? In a few days, the hitherto engines of economic growth had no resilience to cater to the material needs of people or provide emotional support in the face of a life-threatening virus. And villages indeed rendered the necessary care to their people and we saw the environment bounce back to its pristine glory in a short time. At the time of the crisis, the Prime Minister called upon the nation to work towards 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' supplemented by the 'Aatmanirbhar Gaon' resolution. Thus, the Covid experience is an opportunity to build conviction to reign urbanisation to the saviour, the village as an Aatmanirbhar Gaon.

Challenge of Reigning Urbanisation


Counter-urbanisation, or deurbanisation, is defined as a 'demographic and social process whereby people move from urban areas to rural areas'. The concept of counter-urbanisation builds itself on the reality of deprivation of facilities, amenities, and quality of life in especially inner-city areas. Thus, overpopulation is one of the causes of what is referred to as 'shrinking cities'.

The underlying reason is the capacity of an individual to counter deprivation in terms of affordability. Considering the population of India will reach 170 crore by 2050, the dependence on the limited area available for food grains in Aatmanirbhar Bharat would necessitate exponential productivity of agro-based activities. Therefore, the postulation that entrepreneurial opportunities in villages will reign in urbanisation is a reasonable hypothesis. The flip side of this hypothesis is that the creation of enterprising human capital in villages will reign in migration from rural to urban areas. In either case, the outcome is the same, i.e., strengthening the village entities, consequently leading to a sustainable environment, and living with the pride of cultural heritage.

The reality is that the advances in telecommunication technology have connected rural communities for remote working at a lower cost. New-age employment opportunities do not necessitate migration. The concept of rural sourcing evolves from a lower cost of service or production for the corporate and an economically superior option for the employee in spite of lower wages due to the lower cost of living. Thus, one can see the light of optimism in the existence of villages in the evolving paradigm of urbanisation. However, it needs to be supplemented with enablers in terms of other urban attractions such as amenities and social infrastructure. The recent revolution in access to infrastructure such as electricity, water, and connectivity in Indian villages in the recent past has already laid the foundation for the realisation of Aatmanirbhar Gaon within a reasonable time frame.

The Village as an Institution

The earliest references to village can be traced to the Vedic period, which evolved in scale, type of occupation, and having its own administrative structure. Broadly, three aspects of a village can be identified. The first is related to intangible aspects of identity, such as people, their social order, their culture, and their belief systems. The second one can be related to occupational interdependency and sustenance through the resources that nature offers. Survival and sustenance necessitated trade and mutual benefit to the other village units based on their entrepreneurial capacities. The third aspect can be related to amenities and social infrastructure such as water tanks, temples with prayer halls, and community spaces. Thus, the village worked as an institution,



Illuminating Lives in Every Village


Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana

Launched in December 2014

All inhabited un-electrified villages across the country* electrified by 2018

Total of 18,374 villages electrified under DDUGJY

***as per Census 2011**



strengthening each of the three aspects. Different classes, castes, trade activities, and competencies had a symbiotic relationship with the centrality of sustainability, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance of the village as an Institution. This resulted in identity, social bonding, and pride evolving over time. The context of modern times has undergone a transformation, and the need is to rejuvenate the institutions of Indian villages on the same aspects that are equally relevant in contemporary times.

Proactive Interventions for Revival of Village-Institution

Entrepreneurship development is a fundamental intervention for livelihoods. It is not sufficient to limit existential self-sufficiency, but also to meet the aspirational needs of quality of life in modern times. This requires the orientation of research and development through scientific and technological interventions towards rural needs. As an initiative of Government of India under 'Unnat Bharat Abhiyan', the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, through its various laboratories in the country, 53 technologies have been completely commercialised, and many others are at various stages of being commercialised. While the technologies begin to be rolled out, research in agro-produce-based supply chain will anchor the economic base at the village level. 'Unnat Bharat Abhiyan', with a network of about 3000 higher education institutions, is engaged with about 15000 villages across India. The social dimension of this

village-centric initiative is to utilise vast locally available resources and empower weaker sections of society. The focus of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research on technologies for rural livelihoods is an indication of resource commitment for long-term outcomes, as the gestation period of research and development can be more than 5 years, although in this case, most technologies had a gestation period of less than one year. This is an encouraging experience of the positive outcomes of scientific and technological interventions.

The approach to the development of physical infrastructure and built environments in villages is distinctly different from the urban development paradigm. The architects, engineers, and planners are not specifically trained to deal with rural stakeholders. The development of competencies by such professionals would be critical to retaining the basic structure of a 'village' and supporting its institutional character. It is observed that most villages fall prey to an unorganised growth pattern and graduate into an urban setting. This requires early and proactive interventions wherein social infrastructure, safeguarding land for agro-based activities, and the allocation of space for entrepreneurial activities, such as process units, are in tandem with the physical growth of the village. Rurbanisation is a globally accepted area of specialisation. The Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, under the Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission (SPMRM), envisioned 'Development of a cluster of villages that preserve and nurture the essence of rural community life with a focus on equity and inclusiveness without compromising with the facilities perceived to be essentially urban in nature, thus creating a cluster of 'Rurban Villages''. This initiative to channelise the physical growth of villages would be a significant milestone towards the realisation of 'Aatmanirbhar Gaon'.

Another challenge would be to develop competencies in villages to meet the demand of emerging opportunities in rural India. Considering the diversity of nature of villages in India, it is imperative that the professional education and skilling initiatives break free from the shackles of stereotypes curricula and evolve with hands-on experience.

Engaging Communities for Instilling Conviction

'Aatmanirbhar Gaon' is a movement of the people. The success of a people-centric programme can only be

expected by engaging with the communities. The current inertia set in by migration out of villages can only be stalled by instilling a sense of confidence amongst the people. In this regard, it is important to factor in the drag due to apprehensions. The role of non-governmental organisations and higher education institutions in handholding is critical, as they often possess superior community engagement capabilities. Besides, they are also resilient enough to adapt to a variety of operational needs. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India empowers village-level institutions through the Panchayati Raj System. It is time to transition the responsibility towards village development leading to self-sufficient entities, by tapering off direct Government involvement at the village governance level. Training and knowledge sharing would continue to be the responsibility of the Government. Villages exist in a highly fragile ecosystem of nature. Entrepreneurial activities can be expected to conflict with the complex natural settings. While village folk knowledge has been intrinsically superior, modern science, technological, and management knowledge must carry forward various activities. Village development is a complex phenomenon, more so because of a lack of experience in contemporary times. It is important for the village communities to be revived to take ownership of the reviving village as an institution.

Under the 'Unnat Bharat Abhiyan', the task of providing knowledge and technology support involving higher education institutions was taken up by subject experts with the objective of improving livelihoods. This helped in providing resource support from academic institutions to rural areas and, at the same time, helped in building institutional capacity in the higher education system. Village adoption was an innovative approach used for experiential learning and community engagement.

Enabling the Development of Aatmanirbhar Gaon

The realisation of 'Aatmanirbhar Gaon' requires conviction that the revolution of prosperity in India is possible only when villages lead the movement. According to Gandhiji, 'The cities are capable of taking care of themselves. It is the village we must turn to'. As Gandhi ji cautioned, 'If the village perishes, India will perish too. It will be no more India's will'; it is time to focus on the villages. Thus, the policies and the actions should be based on the principle that 'Development of India is development of Aatmanirbhar Gaon'. □