

# The adverse integration of rural India

A . R . V A S A V I

BETWEEN the two waves of Covid-19 stretched between 2020-21, the vulnerability of rural citizens to multiple disadvantages laid bare the fault lines of the nation's society, economy and polity. The travails initiated by fear, migration, loss of employment, and the illness related to Covid-19 saw the bulk of rural citizens rendered into sacrificial subjects.

The experiences of many of them make for a register of the travesty of democracy, the erosion of human rights, and the onset of a callous culture. Rural migrants as urban workers, once the backbone of the rural remittance economy, lost jobs and recognized the precarity and lack of rights in their workplace. Sex workers returned to villages to face shame and ostracism, and newly independent women garment workers returned to become vassals again in their homes. Errand boys and drivers from the new gig economy found themselves shuttered out of work and burdened with the debts of their vehicles and smartphones.

Migrant workers walked home in arduous journeys that claimed several lives. And most returned migrants found themselves unfit and unable to

make a living or live a rural life in a place that was once their home. And, perhaps, most telling of the depreciated lives of rural citizens is the fact that food scarcity hit those very people who toiled to make the nation food secure.

For each of these returnees – the displaced, the unemployed, the ill and their families – the failure of the state and society to protect them against the fallout of the Covid situation reinforced their marginalized position in the nation's economy and the 'adverse integration' of their rural worlds, its production, labour and resources into the larger political economy. As 'adverse' the integration, the most disadvantaged caste/adivasi, class, and gender groups are expropriated of their labour value, resources, knowledge and skills. While the market and capital absorbs their labour and skills, the remuneration is not commensurate with what is expropriated.

That rural migrants had, during the Covid lockdown, to turn to the rural and to their own provenances, villages and homes to sustain them during the emergency, encapsulated the extent to which integration is adverse. The rural has over the years become yoked to

the national in ways that are politically manipulated, economically exploited and socially disregarded. Its 'adverse integration' is to be assessed in ways and degrees in which at the individual and collective level, based on their caste/class position the rural has been made subordinate to the larger and exploitative system. Its knowledge systems and skills are unrecognized, its labour and resources undervalued, and its caste-fractured social fabric retained to serve varied political interests.

Once the foundation of the civilizational identity of India, the rural and its agrarian bases are now seen as a handicap to a nation that has ambitions of being a mono-religious nation and a global superpower. The bases for this are laid in the varied domains, programmes, and schemes in which the rural and the agrarian are located and related.

What most programmes for the rural and agricultural domains overlook is the extent to which there has been an inversion in our understanding of rural India. While the real structural deficits of Indian rural society and agriculture (which is primarily its skewed landownership based on caste) have been largely retained, its potential (the heterogeneous agricultural practices that were evolved to suit varied ecological conditions and which had inbuilt ecological sustainability) and its complex and sophisticated knowledge systems have been dismantled and rendered obsolete.

Matching this inversion, there has been an imposition of models that are ecologically, economically and socially inappropriate (but which suit political expediences) and an increasing integration into the dominant capital-technology-market systems.

In its contemporary condition, rural India is constituted and marked

by a four-fold structure that it reproduces in not only complex but also in contradictory and complex conditions. These structures include: a skewed agrarian structure that is largely defined by the coinciding of caste and class with a significant proportion of people who are small and marginal holders; a political system that appeases the rural populace in populist terms and fails to address the multiple challenges and inequities; an economic system that adversely integrates the rural into a dominant apparatus of capital-technology-market, rendering a majority of small and marginal cultivators into conditions of precarious and debt-ridden existence; and a deeply depleted natural resource base that is now exacerbated with climate change emergencies.

Recent policy recommendations indicate a non-recognition of the above specificities of India's rural and agrarian structures and a disengagement from its structural, complex and contradictory problems. Shifting from the policies of the early post-colonial phase in which some attempts were made to address structural deficits (eg. land reforms), there has since the 1990s been a shift to facilitating economic neo-liberal policies for rural India. Following decades (1990s to 2010s) of shifts in policy orientation, there have more recently been an additional emphases on enabling private investment and extractive policies for rural areas.

For example, the Niti Aayog, in its 'Strategy for New India at 75' recommends under its 'farmer' sector the following: an increase in productivity; the abolishing of the APMC and in its place the introduction of contract farming and land leasing; 'precision agriculture'; export-oriented agriculture; financial inclusion, paperless banking and digital platforms. The Niti Aayog also declares a mission,

'Explore in India', to encourage mineral exploration. Identifying 115 disadvantaged districts as 'aspirational districts', the Niti Aayog recommends a range of interventions which will transform these districts into high production zones.

The Dalwai Committee Report furthers many of these recommendations including the shifting from farm to non-farm occupations, increasing irrigated agriculture under the '*harkhet kopani*' slogan, and then in passing (perhaps seeking legitimacy and acceptance from varied circles) recommends 'agro-ecology as a basis for agriculture', the 'trusteeship approach' to rural development, and organic farming and conservation agriculture. The impact of corporate interests and the bypassing of democratic norms in agricultural policies/programmes have become more evident, and the attempts to integrate India into the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (which was effectively thwarted by sound movements against it) and the recent note by the Reserve Bank of India on rural credit which was influenced by the Bank of China and the Gates Foundation, are only the more recent examples.

Several vision documents and agricultural mission statements by the various states also reflect these sentiments, reposing their faith in technology-led, market and capital-oriented agriculture. For integration into the market and larger capitalist system (with inadequate budgetary allocations, poor administrative and accountability systems, and an exposure to varied risks in which rural citizens receive no guarantees or protection), means a further erosion of rural citizens' rights, agency, incomes and abilities.

Despite data and evidence of the significant negative fallouts of the Green Revolution, there has been no attempt to critically review the model or to reverse the negative impacts. Instead, privileging ideas about the urgency of high productivity for a large population and raising spectres of famines, chemical and industrial models of agriculture are not only promoted but posed as inevitable and best suited for the country. As a result, agriculture has been increasingly commercialized, making external inputs and technology dependency the primary route for increasingly integrating even the smallest producers into a capitalist market circuit. The result is evident at multiple levels and the most vulnerable section of the rural population, the small and marginal cultivators, bear the burden of this 'destructive productivity'.

The ecological impact of such a dominant model of agriculture has rendered it to become an extractive industry and much of this is evident in the extent to which soil, water, biodiversity, and seeds are in a precarious conditions of depletion. Eroding the long-evolved plural agricultures of various agro-climatic regions, the Green Revolution or commercial agriculture has trapped many agriculturists into a cycle of indebtedness. Is it any wonder that more than three lakh agriculturists have committed suicide over the past three decades? The situation and the cases of such large numbers of agriculturists becoming victims indicate the deep psychological, social and economic erosion that they bear from such 'adverse integration' into the dominant agricultural model.

The overall impact of such 'adverse integration' has meant an increasing differentiation of rural society with varied significance for

each of the different classes. Access to capital, market, and technology has leveraged large landholders to combine agricultural incomes with entrepreneurial, business, and political capital. The result is that many large landowners are now regional political satraps who see the rural as primarily a vote bank and are no longer vested fully in the economic and ecological sustainability of the region.

While increases in real wages have improved the lot of the landless, it is the small and marginal cultivators who are entrapped into the circuits of indebtedness, precarity and high-risk agriculture that the new models of capital-technology and external inputs agriculture enforces. The resulting retrogression in agriculture has meant that small cultivators especially seek to be out of agriculture and their strategies consist of the choice of either leasing out their land to large cultivators (thereby reversing the gains that land reforms in some states and regions had initiated), selling their land, or even abandoning cultivation (which accounts for the growing proportion of cultivable land that is rendered fallow or are in conditions of disuse). Worse still, large numbers of the disaffected abandon the rural only to become part of a 'footloose' labour pool in which their precarity is reinforced at multiple levels.

Compounding the negative impact of dominant agricultural systems that have rendered agriculture a losing proposition and in which large numbers of rural citizens, especially the younger generation, seek to be out of agriculture, and in which there is both land loss and land abandonment, is the 'adverse integration' of the rural into the expansive real estate and speculative urbanism of the larger economy. While villages in the peripheries of metropolises are being

absorbed into the poorly planned expansion of urban areas, even distant lands are being appropriated for new investors and for non-agricultural purposes such as recreational farms, resorts and the entertainment industries.

The legitimization and expansion of the extractive economy into the rural hinterland has exacerbated the intensity of resource exploitation. The lack of adequate safeguards and monitoring processes have meant that a rapacious economy has bled large tracts of once ecologically rich belts into sites of deep ecological devastation and enhanced social and political tensions. While rivers are dammed to provide water and electricity to distant regions, the local regions are left bereft of these natural resources and in supplying these to other areas there is the further delocalization of natural resource management. This largely accounts for the fact that in many villages that are supplied drinking water, local wells, tanks and lakes are in a state of disuse.

The increasing privatization of the key service sectors of health and education has destabilized public and government institutions and also yoked rural citizens into seeking private health services and education opportunities at exorbitant costs. Expenditure for health and education compounds the debt burdens of many rural households and also accounts for the outflow of hard-earned savings into the larger metropolitan and private economies.

The lack of adequate health facilities and services in rural areas was brought home sharply during the onset of the second wave (2021) of the Covid-19 pandemic. Scenes of desperate health seeking in private hospitals have often meant further indebtedness and or sale of scarce assets. Worse still, the large number of deaths in the rural areas (exact

numbers are yet to be ascertained) is testimony to the fact that providing health service to rural areas is low on the state agenda.

The expansion of financial networks into the rural hinterland is linked not only to the increasing commercialization of agriculture and its interlinked markets where agencies combine sales of agri-inputs with credit/debit links to agricultural clients, but also to a range of financial networks. Over the past decade, recognizing the success of micro-finance networks, run primarily by women's self-help groups, financiers and investors have made deep inroads into the debt circuits of rural India. More than enabling 'economic empowerment', the new micro-finance lenders are laughing their way to higher profits built on the backs of hard-working women and their savings.

Additionally, new techno-financial regimes seek to integrate the rural into larger administrative and financial structures but do not assure either transparency, efficiency or accountability. Instead, as the implementation of Aadhaar, demonetization, and the GST (General Sales Tax) regime indicate, the new financial technologies and bureaucratic management impose new strategies of management and tracking measures in which the rural population can be controlled and subjugated. As several studies have highlighted, these are the new mechanisms of surveillance and subordination that have only made life more onerous and cumbersome for a majority of rural citizens.

The failure to address entrenched social and economic inequities and distortions of rural India and its agrarian systems is compounded by the political response to such trends. Far from formulating policies that could

effectively address the myriad and interlinked problems, the state has deployed programmes which do not emanate from any significant policy framework and are instead piecemeal, ad hoc programmes that seek to alleviate the problems primarily faced by large farmers or dominant landed caste groups. The resulting populist programmes such as free electricity for irrigation, a moratorium on loans, and minimum support prices for a few crops have all been garnered primarily by the landed elite and have not resulted in the resolution of key structural problems.

At another level, the state's attempt to address extant rural distress and the political system's attempt to appease voters has resulted in the deployment of 'welfare governmentality' (most specifically the MNREGA) which as the late Kalyan Sanyal described, is an attempt by the state to balance its preferential policies that enable capitalist 'accumulation by dispossession'.

The growth of such 'welfare governmentality' via a large number of provisioning programmes (such as food through the public distribution system, anganwadis, midday meals, housing schemes etc) combines with electoral populism such as the distribution of consumer goods (TVs, fans etc), and more recently the disbursement of money just prior to elections has led to the growth of a class of middle men or political entrepreneurs who act as mediators in enabling people to access these goods.

The impact of this has been twofold. At one level, it has led to increasing tensions and conflict in rural societies as is evident in the rise of violence related to 'cut money' in the case of West Bengal. At another level, the appeasement of the rural as electorates has created a culture of supplication to elected representatives. Instead of

holding elected members accountable, people seek both personal and group (for castes/tribes) favours from them and defy the possibility of political mobilization across class and regional lines.

Where there have been mobilizations and movements, the poor political clout of rural citizens and especially as agriculturists mean that their demands are largely overlooked or thwarted. The fact that Ekta Parishad's mobilization for land rights, the demonstration by Tamil Nadu's farmers in Delhi, the 'Long March' in Maharashtra and the demonstrations in Delhi in 2018, and the current impasse faced by farmers since their 'Delhi Chalo' movement indicate how insouciant and indifferent the state is in addressing the structural and foundational problems of agriculture.

The three agricultural acts summarize the attempt to further adversely integrate rural and agricultural India into a corporate economy. Formulated without consultations with agriculturists, bypassing parliamentary procedures, and imposed during the time of Covid-related restrictions on public participation, the passage of the three acts encapsulates the attempt to force an 'adverse integration' of the agrarian economy into the private and corporate-led new agri-business assemblages. Upholding corporate interests ensures that agriculture will be rendered into a commodity market, with no state regulation or oversight, and a vast majority will become workers without rights.

Despite the exceptional mobilization work initiated by the agriculturists of Punjab and its subsequent spread that has morphed into a movement for agrarian rights and restoration of democracy, the clout of corporate interests overshadows any

political response that agriculturists can command over the state.

What such adverse integration indicates is that the citizenship of rural residents has been severely compromised and democratic deficits that mark their lives also constitute the very fabric of the political system. The absence of political accountability, the strengthening of patronage democracy in which political representatives are also enveloped within the neo-liberal economy mean that the rural and agrarian has become only a site of political manipulation and economic expropriation.

In identifying these challenges and seeking to formulate new policies and programmes, it would be pertinent to call for a fundamental shift in conceptualizing the rural and agricultural economies and to recognize the foundational rights and needs of marginalized citizens (small and marginal landholders, the adivasis, forest-dwellers, landless workers, the fishing community, the pastoralists, plantation workers etc).

The definitions and assessments of what have until now been identified as indices of 'development', 'empowerment' and 'democracy' need to shift. Instead of being associated with markers of mainstream lifestyles, financial access, and electoral participation respectively, the meanings and impact of these categories must enable a realization of decent and appropriate living for all. Tying this to policies that help the flourishing of the ecological and cultural diversity of people that enable localized administration and management, will be key.

In sum, the new orientation for policies for rural and agrarian India must eschew the adverse integration of ruralities of India into a political and economic apparatus that is expropriating, distortive, depleting and disabling of rural citizens and resources.