

THE CONTEXT FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

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Summary

Permanent human settlement became possible due to a shift in the economy from food gathering to food producing. Changes in rural societies have been especially prominent since the industrial revolution. Different types of rural societies with varied cultures, levels of development, and economic life emerged gradually in different parts of the globe throughout history, depending on the local ecology and natural resources and also due to subsequent technological development. In fact, although agriculture is the main economy in rural areas, not all the people are always involved in agriculture and they could survive by following various other occupations or supporting the primary economy. It may be added here that although rural people are more homogeneous in nature, there do exist considerable variations in terms of level of development, economy, and sociocultural tradition, not only among different countries in the world, but also in the context of a particular country. Rural society is homogeneous, but it is also very varied and therefore the policy for rural development must articulate with such a varied context. There exists a large population in rural areas who are not agriculturists. They either directly or indirectly support agriculture and, again, a large number also follow very different occupations not related to cultivation. Thus, while evolving a policy and plan for rural development, one will have to address varied and complex socioeconomic and political contexts. Besides, with better communication facilities and increasing globalization, many rural areas are now more exposed to the outside world

and its influences, and are already part of the global economy. Naturally, rural development policy will also have to consider these issues.

A new development paradigm is also needed that puts people at the center of development, considers economic growth as a means and not an end, protects the life opportunities of future generations as well as the present one, and respects the natural systems on which all life depends. Growth does not necessarily mean development. Unless and until there is growth with justice, where people have equal share and access to resources, there can not be true development. It is well known that the green revolution has increased crop production, but it is also responsible for the concentration of holdings and increasing inequality. Proper development strategy may evolve with experience and experiment where traditional wisdom can contribute much. Technology is required but not the domination of technology over its creator.

1. The Emergence of Rural Life

The first settled life in the form of a village community developed during the late Stone Age or Neolithic period with the emergence of a food-producing economy, with the domestication of plants (agriculture) and animals. During the Neolithic period, a food-producing economy advanced greatly, producing a surplus of goods, productivity increase, and occupational specialization. Accordingly, this phase of human civilization is often called the Neolithic revolution. Again, with these surpluses, trade and commerce multiplied. These developments led to urbanization as trade and commerce centers emerged.

2. The Characteristics of Rural Communities

The rural society characterized by village communities, and the urban society characterized by towns and cities have a number of contrasting features. The rural community is predominated by a natural environment having a direct relationship to the size of the community, with a general low density of population. Within rural society, the population is more homogeneous with less sociological differentiation. Rural societies tend to exhibit low territorial and social-strata mobilities, and the relationships among rural inhabitants are through direct and primary contacts. Their social relationships tend to be personal and relatively durable over time. In fact, some of these characteristics can be better understood on a comparative basis, in contrast to urban society.

As one moves along a spectrum from rural to urban, one notes that the population becomes more heterogeneous, with more social differentiation and stratification, as well as more conspicuous social and territorial mobility. Although the general features of a rural society mentioned above are applicable to most rural settings everywhere, one must also examine the given historical context and general socioeconomic development of a particular setting or a specific country in order to investigate fully the variables involved in rural-urban development.

In addition to social indicators, demographic indicators also distinguish rural society from urban society. In general, demographers tend to classify a settlement with a

population greater than 5000 as urban. In terms of occupations, settlements where more than 75% of the population depends on agriculture are considered to be rural.

A village is a small permanent collection of homesteads, and the village represents a rural society. The development of the village is intimately connected with agricultural production.

Permanent human settlement became possible due to a shift of the economy from food gathering to food producing. The village began to emerge along with a basic change in people's lifestyle, namely from nomadic food gathering to the settled way of attaining subsistence. With the introduction of the plow, irrigation techniques, and other technological innovations in agriculture, it became possible to produce enough food to maintain a permanent human settlement. This transformation, from food gathering to food producing, was a landmark in human civilization, as it initiated a higher phase of social formation and maintenance.

The emergence of the plow, agriculture, food production, and settled life had far-reaching consequences and was responsible for a rapid development of human civilization. As people obtained surplus above subsistence level, many other activities beyond food production were developed. Not all settlers were involved in the main economic and agricultural pursuits and food could be stored for the future or for an emergency. It also brought about significant changes in the social organization. It not only supported ownership over natural resources, particularly land, but it promoted exchange, trade, and commerce. Thus the village was the first settled life and human habitation, and gradually emerged with the development of agriculture as bigger settlements, towns, or urban society.

Historians note that villages underwent varied structural changes throughout the pre-modern period. From organizations based on kinship or clan ties, there was a transformation to territorial ties, civil society with distinct multi-class social structure, and the resultant institution of the state. Changes in rural societies have been especially prominent since the industrial revolution, as villages have undergone rapid and fundamental transformations.

Depending on the local ecology and natural resources, and also due to subsequent technological development, different types of rural societies with varied cultures, levels of development, and economic life gradually emerged in different parts of the globe. Although agriculture is the main economy in rural areas, not all the people are always involved in agriculture and could survive by following various other occupations or supporting the primary economy.

The history of the village, in time and space, reveals such diverse village types as the Saxon village, the German *Mask*, the Russian *mir*, the self-sufficient Indian *gram*, and finally the modern village, which is an integral part of national and international economic systems. Again, depending on the political system of the state concerned, different types of economy and ownership patterns came into being, such as the collectivized agricultural economy in the former Soviet Union, and cooperatives of collective farms in Vietnam.

3. The Classification of Rural Societies

Social scientists have classified villages or rural society in a number of ways. Thus there can be (a) migratory agricultural villages where people stay in a particular village for a few months depending on the period of cultivation, or (b) semi permanent agricultural villages where people stay for generations, even centuries. Again on the basis of settlement and location of cultivable land, the villages can be (a) nucleated, where the residential houses are located in clusters surrounded by agricultural land or (b) dispersed villages where cultivators live separately on their farmlands. It is obvious that social life differs greatly between the first type, of nucleated villages where people live in close proximity, and the second type, of dispersed villages where people have less social contact or interaction.

On the basis of social differentiation, stratification, and land ownership, villages can be classified into (a) villages composed of peasant joint owners, (b) peasant joint tenants, (c) peasants including some tenants and laborers, (d) tenants, (e) employees of a big private landowner, and (f) laborers and employees of the state, church, public landowner, etc.

4. Types of Agricultural Activities

Economic production is a basic human activity and the mode of production (productive forces and social relations of production) plays a crucial role in shaping the social structure, the psychology, and worldview of people. Land is the basic means of production in the countryside and the level of production and the way in which the products are distributed among the different strata of the society determines the level of the material prosperity of the society as a whole and of the various socioeconomic groups within it. Again, agricultural patterns also mold the institutional set-up of the society concerned as well as the cultural life of the people. Thus, agriculture can be undertaken to meet one's own need or subsistence type, or it can produce for the market to meet the needs of people outside, even at a global level. Agriculture can also be developed and planned in such a way that it not only eliminates the competitive market, intervening between producers and consumers, but also helps to transform agriculture. Planned agriculture with planned industry can change the economy in such a way that proper use of natural, technical, and human resources will be possible, increasing the wealth of the community and improving the quality of life and standard of living.

Historically, a number of factors are responsible for the transformation of subsistence agriculture into a market economy. In South Asia, for example, before colonial rule the economy was basically subsistence in nature. However, with the change in the land tenure system, in order to pay tax at different levels and to meet various demands with the penetration of a market economy, subsistence agriculture increasingly ceased to produce for the village population alone and gradually started to produce for the national and subsequently the world market, becoming part of the cash economy.

It is interesting to note that while technique determines the techno-economic division of labor, it does not produce the same property relation. Thus, the plow is the main tool used in agriculture in slave and feudal societies as well as in modern underdeveloped or

developing capitalist societies such as India, Myanmar, and Indo-China. Again, the tractor and fertilizer were used in agriculture within the framework of such diametrically opposite types of land relations as capitalist U.S.A. and the communist former Soviet Union. Interestingly, when agriculture is carried on with the same plow, one may find such varied socioeconomic groups as serfs and barons, zaminders (big landlords) and tenants, peasants, and laborers. When the tractor and modern agricultural implements are used, one may find wage laborers, capitalist landowners, agriculturists, and laborers even working in state-owned collective farms.

5. Political Struggles and Land Ownership

In the past, there were many struggles in rural areas, mostly centering on existing land relations. During the French Revolution, the serfs wanted to abolish feudal land relations and become free peasant proprietors. The success of the communists in China is largely explained by their solution of land problems. In fact, the question of land relations has been the crucial question in all developing and less developed countries all over the world today. Because of a shortage of land, land-hungry agriculturists all over the world struggled to have real access to and command over the main natural resource—the land.

The problem of the standard of living of the rural population has been examined by a number of social scientists, including Zimmerman, Sorokin, Kirpatrick, and Sims. All have noted that the standard of living in rural areas is generally lower than that in urban areas because of the lower income in rural areas. In fact, the standard of living of farmers comes closer to that of the lower strata of the city population. Income, no doubt, is the basis for class formation, but class norms and values are also dictated by tradition.

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Biographical Sketch

Professor Buddhadeb Chaudhuri presently holds the first and the only Dr. Ambedkar Chair Professorship in Anthropology since 1995 attached to the Department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta, the oldest Anthropology Department in India. Earlier assignments include Professor, Center for South and South East Asian Studies, Calcutta University; Reader, University of North Bengal; Lecturer, University of Kalyani, West Bengal, India; Senior Fellow, Indian Council of Social Science Research; Visiting Fellow, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla. Has also been associated with Helsinki University as Visiting Fellow, and Warsaw University as Visiting Professor. Publications include around 50 articles in national and international journals and edited books, a number of book reviews, occasional papers and 15 books published in India and abroad. Has conducted fieldwork in different parts of India, and field research in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Philippines, and Malaysia. Has visited Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, China, Japan, Poland, Italy, Finland, Yugoslavia, Sweden, USA, Canada, and Mexico. Has completed around 25 research projects for sources such as UGC, ICSSR, IDPAD, Government of India, Asian Community Health Action Network (Hong Kong), ACFOD (Bangkok), ARF (Bangkok), Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, and the Swiss Red Cross related to rural development, forest and environment, indigenous people, traditional knowledge and

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