

## THE VILLAGE IS STILL RELEVANT

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Devolution of Powers & Finances up to Local Levels and Challenges therein - Panchayats & Municipalities

The upheaval caused by the [novel coronavirus](#) should inspire a review of past choices and policies. Some of these policies had gained so much acceptance that one felt there was no point left in questioning them. Public health and education are two areas in which India took a decisive turn in the 1990s. When several States decided to stop giving permanent appointment letters to doctors and teachers in the mid-1990s, they were guided by an ideological shift at the national level towards allowing health and education to be opened up for private enterprise. This was viewed as a major policy reform, a necessary part of the bigger package of economic reforms. They were presented as a package, offering little choice for specific areas.

The new buzz was public-private partnership. It covered everything from roads to schools. The form it took made it amply clear that the state would take a back seat after issuing a set of rules for private operators while the state's own infrastructure will shrink. Soon enough, cost-effective measures became the priority in both health and education. Chronic shortage of functionaries became the norm while young persons learned to wait for years for vacancies to be announced. Working on short-term contracts, with little security or dignity, became common.

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As we begin to imagine the post-coronavirus scenario, a key question to contemplate is whether we should revisit the policies put in place during the 1990s. Some will doubtless argue that the clock cannot be put back, and that we should not waver from the path we had chosen, no matter what hardships people have to endure. Certain policies were specific to domains such as health and education. Others were more like frameworks within which policies for specific areas emerged and evolved. One such framework had to do with villages.

For a long time, a view had been gathering support that villages were no more viable as sites of public investment. A generalised logic had surfaced to justify and thereby encourage emigration from rural areas to cities. According to this logic, providing basic amenities such as running water, electricity and jobs to rural people becomes easier if they move to a city. This kind of thinking had considerable academic support. Modernisation was a dominant paradigm of social theory that saw nothing wrong in the growth of vast slums in mega-cities and depletion of working-age people in villages. Some social scientists did not mind declaring that the village as we had known it in Indian history was on its way to extinction. They argued that agriculture, the main resource of livelihood in the countryside, was no longer profitable enough to attract the young. And handicrafts too were destined to die, they said, as craftsmen and women cannot survive without state support. Only pockets of support survived the powerful wave of market-oriented economic reforms.

All such arguments and the data they were based on provided a comfortable rationale for policies that encouraged emigration of a vast section of the rural population to cities. It was something 'natural' that happens in the course of economic development in countries like ours. Students were taught that shrinking of rural livelihoods was a universal phenomenon and it was, therefore, inevitable in India.

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Acceptance of historical destiny implied that we could simply sit back and let history take its

familiar course. The only thing the welfare state might do was to mitigate the misery of the masses. As they faced the decimation of the rural people's economy, safety nets could be thrown at them to provide subsistence-level provision of food, literacy and disease control. Special measures were designed to select the 'best' among rural children and make them competitive enough to survive in the urban world that was treated as mainstream.

This general framework justified discriminatory funding in every sphere, including health and education. No serious public investment could be made in villages. Even as medical education and teacher training became increasingly privatised, the availability of qualified doctors and teachers willing to work in villages dwindled. Ideologically-inspired pursuit of economic reforms swept State after State, leaving little room for dissent or longer term thinking. A veneer of welfarism was maintained. It allowed the expansion of essential facilities of a rudimentary kind in villages. They served as sites for special schemes for the poor and provided minimalist provisions. The goal was to keep the poor alive and occupied. Privately-run facilities burgeoned, creating an ethos that boosted commercial goals in health care and schooling. Stuck between state minimalism and commercial entrepreneurship, villages lost what capacity they had for regenerating their economy or intellectual resources.

No words can compete with recent pictures that cast a delayed doubt on this policy scenario. These are pictures of urban workers marching with their families to their native villages hundreds of miles away. There is more than one way of interpreting these pictures. On one hand they encapsulate desperation and apprehension. On the other, these same pictures reveal a story that generations of policy makers and scholars have been reluctant to acknowledge. The photographs captured by the media show men, women and children walking on highways designed to provide high-speed connectivity to cities. In the absence of trains and bus, these families decided to embark on foot. With no prospect of work and income, they felt vulnerable in their shanty towns. They wanted to go home. In the city where they had lived for years, they were part of the informal economy which offers no protection against exigencies. The new urban architecture denies them visibility too. That is perhaps why no one thought about them till they emerged on the wide highways.

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The novel coronavirus has demonstrated how unsustainable this socio-economic arrangement was, apart from being ethically indefensible. It was characterised by sharp and growing regional disparities. No matter how hard we will try to rebuild the world as it was before the virus struck it, its unsustainability will not go away. It is rooted in the structural imbalance between the urban and the rural on one hand and the predominance of a skewed vision of economic growth on the other. In this vision, the village has no future other than becoming a pale copy of the urban and eventually dissolving into it.

Once upon a time, there were debates over the nature of India's rural society — on whether it was intrinsically good or bad. These debates are no longer relevant. The village is, however, still relevant, at least for the vast number of urban workers. Similarly, while the problem of defining a village in an academic sense has ceased to matter, its existential reality has asserted itself, and we need to recognise this assertion. If we do, we might agree to notice a problem in policies that do not acknowledge the right of villages to flourish as human habitations with their own distinctive future. They deserve to have new sites and forms of livelihood. They also deserve systems of health and education that are not designed as feeders to distant centres. Initiatives in this direction will make both cities and villages more sustainable and capable of coping with the kind of crisis we are currently facing.

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