

## What ails rural Rajasthan

After Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, farmers from Rajasthan came out on the streets demanding loan waiver and implementation of the Swaminathan Committee report. Protesting against government policies and demanding their share in the country's development, which they argue have been denied to them, the farmers have shown unity across caste and class lines. However, it is not merely the farm-related economic anxieties that explain this massive farmer's mobilisation. These movements have to be contextualised in the evolution of the present model of development and the way it has reshaped societies.

Much like Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, where the farmers' agitations were located in the economically better-performing districts, the epicentre of the farmers' movements in Rajasthan were districts that have seen a qualitative change in the rural economy and society in the past three decades - Sikar and Sri Ganganagar. One can see shops selling branded items and luxury cars on the roads in Sri Ganganagar. There are similar shops in Sikar as well. Today, Sikar looks very different from what it was 10 years ago.

The district has seen the emergence of a strong private education sector in the last three decades which has given a boost to its economy. Sikar's proximity to Jaipur has also resulted in the emergence of a new middle class which has urban aspirations. Government data shows that in 2009 there were around 94 colleges in Sikar which increased to 124 in 2013. Coaching centres have also mushroomed in the district.

Traditionally, Sikar has been amongst the few districts in Rajasthan (also Jhunjhunu and Churu) which have a large number of educated people. Despite economic hardships, dependence on rain-fed agriculture and a lack of alternative income resources in the rural areas, the district has a relatively high literacy rate of 70 per cent. Two-and-a-half decades ago, the educated youth was an active participant in the organised sector. However, since 1991, the state has gradually withdrawn from providing jobs in general and in the education, health and engineering sector in particular.

Sikar's educated youth got accommodated in the private education industry in the region due to growth in engineering, medical and other private enterprises. However, with the state's withdrawal from various employment generating avenues and the gradual decline in employment opportunities in the private sector - a regular feature of Rajasthan's political economy in the past few years - the youth have no other option but to go back and work on their farms. They also look for employment opportunities in the informal education sector.

Sri Ganganagar and the nearby district, Hanumangarh, has also witnessed significant rural-agrarian change in the past three decades. The two districts are beneficiaries of the Green Revolution with irrigation water from the Ganga Singh Canal and [Indira Gandhi](#) Canal available to them. In the initial years, the region benefitted from using new agricultural technology. A new wealthy agrarian class emerged, which has invested heavily in an urbanised life style and also in the education of their male children. The cropping pattern in the region has also shifted towards cash crops like mustard and cotton (Sri Ganganagar contributes 18 per cent of Rajasthan's cotton production). A gradual increase in the cost of farm inputs has led to a rise in the cost of agricultural production.

Increasing access to education and high income levels in the two districts has led to consumerism among the rural youth. This economic change was, however, not accompanied by changes in social and cultural values. The youth became urbanised but have retained their rural cultural essence. The older values of rural community prestige have been clubbed with the urban values of

extravagant marriages, heavy spending on rituals or religious activities, wealth accumulation and, above all, an individualised life.

This gap between the social and economic spheres is clearly visible in Sri Ganganagar and Hanumangarh districts. Despite a high per capita income, Sri Ganganagar has a very poor sex ratio. A large part of the farmers' income in these districts goes in dowry or in rituals related to birth and death or in organising satsangs and jagrans. The Dera Saccha Sauda enjoys a lot of support in the two districts. In the last few years, expenditure on education and health has increased in the districts. The areas are also victims of a health crisis created by the overuse of chemicals in the production of food items, including vegetables and fruits.

The emergence of an expensive yet non-productive lifestyle on the one hand, and the state's withdrawal from the job market on the other, has created a severe socio-economic crisis. There are a large number of educated yet unemployed youth in all these districts. In their bid to bridge the gap between social aspirations and economic realities, they fall into a debt trap. Falling farm incomes, lack of jobs and absence of alternative sources of income on one hand, and increasing expenditure on health and education on the other, has destroyed the rural economy in these newly emerging zones of prosperity.

Demonetisation delivered the final blow to the economy and society of these regions. The rural-agrarian cash economy which used to provide some income to the youth in the countryside collapsed after demonetisation. The state has tried to preserve traditional ethos and cultural traditions, rather than promote scientific temper amongst the younger generation. The situation was thus rife for a psychological outburst.

The state's policy towards rural development has been ad-hoc and devoid of a long-term vision of sustainable development. The Sikar, Sri Ganganagar and Hanumangarh models, despite their differences, have produced a generation of people who have expectations but lack the opportunities to fulfil them. Farmers are the worst victims of this unguided and unplanned process of change. In the changing nature of the rural structure, they have been left with no option but to agitate and demand short-term relief from the state.

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