

**Summary of the Seminar**  
**on**  
*Altering Rural Landscapes:*  
*Structures, Institutions and Households*

**(sponsored by ICSSR & Ford Foundation)**

**Date: July 12- 13, 2012**

**Venue: Annamalai University, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu**

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**Programme Summary:**

The Network for Rural and Agrarian Studies held its second national seminar at Annamalai University, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu. The seminar was organized by Dr. Richa Kumar of the Department of Humanities, IIT, Delhi and the local organizers were Prof. Ramagopal, faculty and students of the Department of Economics, Annamalai University. The theme was “Altering Rural Landscapes: Structures, Institutions and Households” and the seminar was inaugurated by Prof. M. Ramanathan, Vice Chancellor of Annamalai University, on the evening of July 11, 2012.

About 42 participants attended the workshop and 18 papers were presented by social scientists from various disciplines. The broad topics covered in the workshop were land issues in rural India, household food security and nutrition, social and gender aspects of altered landscapes, emerging policy context of new market initiatives, non-farm employment and migration, and technologies, institutions and social change in studying SRI. Each session was followed by in depth discussions and analyses. Apart from the presentation of scientific papers, a group of farmers from Tamil Nadu shared their experiences and concerns about agrarian and rural changes. During the concluding session the programme was reviewed and ideas for the next workshop were outlined. The workshop concluded on the evening of July 14, 2012. The valedictory function was inaugurated by Prof. Namasivayam, Head, Department of Economics, Annamalai University.

## **Summary of the Sessions**

### **Day 1: July 12, 2012**

#### **Session I: Land Issues in Rural India: The Context**

**Chair: Dr. Rammanohar Reddy, Economic and Political Weekly**

The 'Land Question', that informed politics and academic concerns in India until the 1980s has for various reasons, become an unfashionable concern. In recent years, particularly in the last decade, this lack of academic attention has been accompanied by the emergence of new forms of politics around land in a context of deepening agrarian crises, rapid transformations of rural landscapes and rise of new uses of land. Importantly, 'cheap land' has emerged as critical to market-led growth strategies, pushing governments to actively intervene in land acquisition for private capital adding new dimensions to the processes of dispossession and accumulation by such processes. These changes, needless to say, demand renewed attention to the issue of land access and distribution in India and to the implications of the new land politics for both the landless and the landed poor. This session sought to address some of these issues by bringing together papers that explore the implications of ongoing land-related economic processes and the theoretical challenges that they raise.

#### **Paper 1: Land Question in a tribal context**

**Dr. P.S. Vijayashankar, Samaj Pragati Sahyog, Madhya Pradesh.**

The starting point for Vijayashankar's presentation was a decline in interest in land relations, rural credit and labour markets. Based on his longstanding work as an activist-academic among tribals in rural Madhya Pradesh, he called for an urgent rethink on the land question in the context of tribal livelihoods, faced as they are with poor state support for their livelihoods and a growing interest in their land from corporates and mining capital. He reiterated the need to take on board the fact that most tribals in India are in constant interaction with non-tribals and hence their relationship to land and accompanying livelihoods has to be seen in relation to such interactions. Compounding their problems is the nature of the access and quality of land they live in. They are mostly rainfed, hilly, forested, upland and dryland areas where agriculture is fraught with an increasing set of risks but are identified to be resource rich, replete with forest and mineral wealth. One major issue in its use for cultivation is that of land productivity. Apart from this, the land-man ratio has been steadily falling, leading to holdings getting

smaller. The landlessness amongst tribal population is less as compared to other groups, at about 7 per cent but increasing. Due to market forces and the way in which credit and commodity markets function, alienation of tribal lands has increased. Loans are often given only to those who can pledge their land. Declining land holding size has also rendered cultivation increasingly unviable. The factors that have enabled them to survive are ground water tapping, diversification to cash crops such as soyabean, and MGNREGS. Access to common property for grazing, timber and non-timber forest produce is another issue in tribal areas. Grazing lands where tribals have use-rights has also been steadily reducing. While some of the factors that push tribals into poverty may overlap with that of the rural poor in general, the magnitude of their dispossession from their lands in the name of ‘development’ is striking. A report has shown that there are about 60 million people that have been displaced in development projects, 40 per cent of who are tribals.

Attempts by corporates to acquire tribals’ land with the aid of state agencies are rife. But there are clear spatial limits to political mobilization and resistance among the tribals. They are spatially dispersed and find it hard to use electoral politics for their claim-making. In general, the investments in tribal areas are biased against the tribals. In this context, Vijayashankar highlighted the key features of the new land acquisition bill and the possibilities it opens up for tribals. Conceding that the bill continues to define ‘public purpose’ in a manner that aids corporate capital, he however pointed out that by bringing in land acquisition, rehabilitation and resettlement into the same bill, it atleast attempts to address acquisition and rehabilitation simultaneously. Another positive aspect of the bill is the terms of compensation. Not only does it provide for better compensation including provisions for their long term livelihood compared to the earlier Act, it also proposes to be more inclusive by bringing on board the landless as well. Finally, it also brings under its ambit, corporate acquisition of land for rehabilitation and resettlement.

**Paper 2: Micro- Processes of Land Acquisition**

**Dr.M.Vijayabaskar, Madras Institute of Developmental Studies, Chennai**

Vijayabaskar’s presentation addressed issues arising out of market based processes of land acquisition. In the wake of protests across the country against forceful acquisition of land by the state machinery, the state through its new LA bill has tried to give a greater role for the market in land alienation by asking

private actors to acquire 80 percent of the land they require directly from the farmers. This is an interesting development as the state's intervention in land acquisition has been found to be critical given the 'institutional deficits' in land market functioning. Highlighting the various 'deficiencies', like absence of well-defined property rights or titles, and co-existence of multiple rights on certain lands, and the continuing fragmentation of land holdings, the presentation highlighted the 'costs' that private actors incur in acquiring land. However, such powerful actors can take advantage of such institutional lack to manipulate and accumulate at the expense of the less powerful farmers especially where market mechanisms are given a greater role in land acquisition. Based on his fieldwork on land acquisition for Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in Tamil Nadu , he highlighted how intermediaries ranging from national level real estate players to local real estate agents and other local intermediaries such as a Panchayat President or a relatively large landowning farmer are drawn into this process, enabling them to reap considerable rents. For example, the intermediaries acquire land on behalf of the SEZ developer without revealing to the sellers the real purpose of acquisition. The Panchayat president gets farmers together and manages to acquire the land. Thereafter there is a land transfer from real estate agent to an SEZ developer, who then may provide jobs for a few people in the process of developing the SEZ. Though an offer of jobs is made there is no legal validity because the SEZ developers are not the ones who are setting up the factories. Discussing some of the other problems with the Bill, he pointed that going by past history, there are definite possibilities of private buyers buying land in sizes less than hundred acres in order to avoid compensation.

**Paper 3: Financialization of Land**

**Nirmal Roy, Madras Institute of Developmental Studies, Chennai**

Continuing the theme of new regimes of value around land, Nirmal Roy in his presentation, sought to lay out the economic implications of financialisation of land markets. There is an increasing trend of holding land as a speculative asset rather than as a productive asset in India fuelling considerable increases in land prices. Given that more than 90 per cent of wealth-owning households in developing economies hold wealth in the form of land, the rise of real estate activity and the entry of large corporate players into the market can effect income and asset distribution. Based on data on land price trends in Kerala, he demonstrated that land has become a financial asset that moves in tandem with other financial variables. Work has shown that land markets in developing countries are very thin. When

financialization happens in a context like India where land markets are thin, markets tend to become very volatile, leading to speculative activity, and to subsequent cycles of boom and stagnation. What does this mean for use of land as a means of production? There is a clear move away from its use in agriculture as evident from the recent increase in urbanization in Kerala. There is also a worsening of land inequality. While the government has stepped in to regulate land market practices, its effectiveness also depends on the nature of interaction between formal and non-formal institutions.

**Paper 4: Limits to Absolute Power: Eminent Domain and the Right to Land in India**  
**Preeti Sampat, Research Scholar, City University of New York**

Preeti Sampat's paper engaged with the dialectics of the powers of eminent domain vested with the state. There are limits to absolute power. Thus the state cannot have the power to override, for example, Panchayati Raj, environmental assessments and public protest. The power of eminent domain has two facets, one in acquisition for land reforms and acquisition for private capital. Depending on the law within which eminent domain is expressed, it may take either of these forms. The principle that eminent domain flows from is the principle of state sovereignty, that arose in a colonial context and has expanded its scope from the international arena (as a state's right to self-determination without foreign interference) consistently to become sovereignty of the state over citizens, notably, citizens on the political, social and economic margins. She argues that in the interest of constitutionalism, democracy and equitable development it is critical to redress the sovereign power of eminent domain; that countering eminent domain requires giving primacy to legislation and principles that strengthen decentralized decision-making and the contextualized reinstatement of the right to property with effective ceilings. The paper discussed these questions in the light of the history of use of eminent domain in India where it has been used more for displacing large numbers (60 million according to some estimates) from their land rather than for a more egalitarian redistribution through land reforms.

**Paper 5: Land and the Structure of Productive Power: Institutions of Rural Transformations in India**

**Dr. Rajeswari Raina, NISTADS, Delhi**

As land is invested with multiple meanings and values arising from its different uses, Rajeswari Raina argued for renewed efforts to bring land back in as a major factor of production distinct from other kinds of capital in economic analysis. There are several ways in which we think about land, its uses and forms. There are development models that we take for granted. In rural India, there are three trends occurring simultaneously; increase in land costs, emergence of new land uses, and lack of non-farm opportunities. Land prices are increasing in urban, peri-urban and rural areas, without an increase in agricultural productivity and the rise of absentee landlordism. Thus it leads us to ask the questions – is land a capital input as other capital inputs? Or is land a fictitious commodity as Polanyi said? Bringing the uniqueness of land as a resource and its conflicting uses is imperative in a context where conflicts over land and natural resources are turning out to be the most widespread in low income economies.

The discussion session chaired by Dr. Seema Purushottom brought out a few more issues and the complexities involved in use, access and distribution of land. The importance of common lands to agricultural productivity, and the need to ensure use rights of farmers over these lands was stressed. How are all these to be maintained, managed and distributed? Engaging with these questions is critical to revitalising the rural. In a context when where economic development is increasingly being measured by a complex set of indicators, it may not be inappropriate to include such indicators as well in measuring economic progress. It was pointed out that we must also focus on what exactly we mean when we use the word market. The notion of market is very specific. It may not be right to equate land markets and its institutions with other market institutions. Further, land cannot be understood only as a factor of production, it is in fact the basis of social life. Also, the declining preference for farming among a sizeable section of farmers in the country does not imply a lack of preference for land. Simultaneously, preference for land cannot be equated with a desire to work on land.

## **Session II: Household Food Security and Nutrition: Issues and Concerns**

**Chair: Prof: E. Selvarajan, Annamalai University, Chidambaram**

Despite the high growth rates in income in recent years, India continues to register one of the highest rates of malnutrition, particularly among children. More than 47% of children show signs of malnutrition and the country is also home to the largest number of underweight children. While one can intuitively see the relationship between food insecurity, a stagnant agricultural sector and policy institutions governing distribution, the complex linkages between them across regions and social groups are less obvious. What are the sources of policy failures in this context? Do policy interventions produce systemic biases against specific regions/actors? Moving away from the land question, the next session addressed some of these issues, drawing attention to the welfare implications of declining returns to agriculture for rural households, the processes structuring food insecurity among the rural poor and the role of policy interventions in this direction.

**Paper 1: “The proof of the pudding is not in the eating: Well-being, access to food and resistance in Madhya Pradesh”**

**R. Venkat Ramanujam & Sharachchandra Lele, ATREE( Presentation made by Venkat)**

Based on their ongoing research project on co-operative *tendu* leaf procurement and marketing system in Madhya Pradesh, the paper delineated the process of how government procedures of procurement, processes of implementation and interpretations of tribal subjectivities contributed to the reproduction of exploitative structures and undermined the food security of tribal households. It is common knowledge that Madhya Pradesh among the major states in the country ranks quite low in health indicators. The IMR is 70, while the average for India is 57. The percentage of malnourished children is 60 percent while the average for India is 42.percent. 42 percent of women are undernourished(on the basis of BMI) which makes it the state with the third highest percentage of undernourished women(after Bihar and Chattisgarh). Drawing upon fieldwork undertaken in the adivasi-dominated belts with large populations of Baiga, Gond, Korkus, the paper documents the growing unviability of subsistence agriculture. Their produce lasts for no longer than 4 to 6 months, forcing them to move towards a heavy dependence on non-timber forest produce (NTFP) to meet their subsistence needs for the rest of the year as well as to

meet their new consumption demand. The PDS and the NREGA also play a vital role in meeting the food shortfall. The shortfall has also pushed them into short-distance migration, completely undermining the labels used by the bureaucracy to describe the tribals such as being ‘well-fed’ and ‘spoilt’.

Mapping the processes through which value realized through *tendu* leaf sale is distributed between the state and the tribals, the paper points to the role of political organization of the tribals in enhancing their share as well as in ensuring better functioning of social security schemes like the PDS and NREGS. The *tendu* leaf is a high-value, high-volume nationalised NTFP. The “industry” produced a turnover of Rs. 367 crores in 2009-10 alone. Though ostensibly decentralised and democratic, the Forest Department continues to exert considerable control over the entire process. The leaf-pluckers are wage labourers and not owners of the leaf. They have no control over ‘collection wage’ or sale price. In some places where people are organised, they have more control. For instance, in Jodiyamau, some residents are activists of Shramik Adivasi Sangathan. There was a demand for handing over powers of *tendu* leaf collection and marketing backed by a Gram Sabha resolution to this effect. There is a pressure on the state to ensure the smooth functioning of NREGS, PDS. They demand it as an entitlement rather than largesse. They demand their rights as citizens of the country, rather than as adivasis. Thus, though well-being and nutrition are functions of institutional arrangements there is scope for improvements in such functioning to enable them to become beneficial.

**Paper 2: Revival of the Public Distribution System and Implications for Cash Transfers**  
**Dr. Reetika Khera, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi**

India’s PDS has been at the forefront of debates on how best to reform it in the context of poor nutritional status indicators, huge subsidies that sustain it, and the leakages. In terms of reform, there has been talk of replacing the PDS with cash transfers as the latter is seen to address the problem of leakages even as it can serve to sustain or improve food security. Reetika Khera, based on official data on changes in offtake in PDS in recent years and fieldwork in some of the poorer regions in the country argues in her paper that the obituaries for the PDS are premature. The PDS can be gauged on several metrics including coverage of the PDS, leakages from the PDS, implicit subsidy to households,



reduction in exclusion errors and nutritional effects of the PDS. There is evidence of strong revival of the PDS at least on some of these.

In terms of coverage, the percentage of all rural households (not just with ration cards) with no purchase from the PDS has declined from 73% in 2004-2005 to 55% in 2009-10, particularly in poorer states like Chattisgarh (from 75% to 32%), Jharkand (94% to 73%) and Orissa (from 78% to 46%). The paper then went on to measure 'diversion' of PDS grains by comparing the offtake by the FCI, with data on household purchases from the NSS. Data from 2004-2005, and 2009-2010, shows that the 'diversion ratio' has come down between the two time points. e.g., in Orissa, it has come down from 75% to 30%; in Chhattisgarh from 50% to 10%. The paper develops measures for "implicit subsidy" given by the government via the PDS by subtracting the PDS price of grain from the market price of PDS and multiplying it by the number of kgs provided by the PDS. While the national implicit subsidy has gone up between the two time points, there are variations across states with Tamil Nadu's implicit subsidies being much more as compared to states like Rajasthan. The next obvious step is to measure the impact of the increased implicit subsidy on poverty reduction. Using poverty head count ratio (percentage of population that fall under the poverty line) and poverty gap index (the mean of how far below the poverty line people are) for the year 2009-10, she points to a decline in poverty, particularly in states like Chattisgarh where PDS has been effective in recent years.

To further substantiate the case for strengthening PDS, the paper draws upon a survey of 1200 BPL households across nine states in June 2011. In response to a question on whether they would prefer cash or food, in those states that the PDS functioned better, respondents were more likely to prefer food over cash. It is only in states like Bihar where the reach of PDS is poor that the majority of the respondents (54%) preferred cash over food. The reasons why people showed a strong preference for food over cash were varied. Some are wary about the amount not being indexed to inflation, and the local shopkeepers colluding and indulging in monopoly pricing. Others complained about access to banks and unhelpful bank officials based on their bitter experiences with cash payment in the case of NREGA and pension schemes. Women are also concerned about the money being diverted to non-food items by their spouses. Questioning the idea of replacing the PDS with cash transfers under such conditions, the paper goes on to indicate further measures to strengthen the PDS like expansion, increase in implicit subsidy, decentralisation and procurement of coarse cereals. In such a context, the idea of cash transfers today especially in rural areas is questionable.

**Paper 3: Community Food Sovereignty: Need for Altered Perspectives**  
**Dr. PV Satheesh, Deccan Development Society, Hyderabad**

Deccan Development Society (DDS) has been a grassroots organization working among rural poor women in over 75 villages in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Over time, based on their experience of working in the area to promote local livelihoods, they have been able to document, mobilise and enhance traditional practices of conserving natural resources and food access. This has enabled DDS to emerge as a strong critique of policy trends in the domain of agricultural promotion and as a key spokesperson for exploring alternative routes to food security among vulnerable and marginalized social groups. Rooted in the work done by DDS, Satheesh called for a revival of the millet economy in the country. Millets are not only known for their better nutritional and health values, but more importantly sustain the marginal and small farmers in rainfed areas who account for the bulk of the rural poor. His contention was that the promotion of both production and consumption of millets through a reorientation of the priorities for funding of agriculture can go a long way in addressing rural poverty and also ensuring food sovereignty. He went on to contest the nature of expertise that informed policy making that completely ignores the knowledge of communities that have been built up through decades of working on marginal and rainfed lands.

**Discussant: Prof. Amita Baviskar, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi**

### **Session III: Altered Landscapes: Social and Gender Aspects**

Chair: Prof. J. Jeyaranjan, Institute for Development Alternatives, Chennai

#### **Paper 1: Framing the Altering Rural Landscapes**

**Prof. AR Vasavi, Independent Scholar, Bangalore**

Vasavi started her talk with a mention of the visible changes in rural landscapes over the past two decades. Shifts in the land use patterns with an emphasis on commercial cultivation, the expansion of government programmes such as that of elementary schools, the integration of rural land markets into the national real estate grids, and the omnipresent telecommunication towers are some of these visible shifts. In addition to these, during the last five years there are two important changes which provide for a contrast in the rural landscape. Visible in belts of commercial cultivation of crops there is both an intensification of cultivation and an increasing financialization of agriculture. Matching these is the near industrialization of agriculture where both food and nonfood crops are being cultivated through commercial inputs and new methods of cultivation. Sowing, weeding, harvesting etc are done by machines. This was particularly relevant for boom crops such as cotton, ginger, turmeric, banana etc. In contrast to this, were abandoned lands or land which was no longer cultivated.

These extreme pictures of altering landscapes; intense and commercial cultivation Vs that of abandoned land, provide the need for reflecting on the nature of social change in rural India. and enable us to raise many questions. Drawing on the work by the late Kalyan Sanyal, she described this as an example of 'endogenous dualism' which is becoming visible in rural and agrarian India. Some of the trends that such landscapes represent include the growing social differentiation among the land owners, small and marginal cultivators. Even as richer landowners opt for commercialization and financialisation of cultivation, the marginal owners are opting to either abandon or lease out their land. Matching such variations in cultivation strategies is the rise of a new rural service economy (consisting of drivers, repair persons, shopkeepers, agri-input traders, dealers, agents etc) which is replacing the older agrarian service economy which consisted of persons such as blacksmiths, carpenters, basket makers etc. In addition, the new regime of rights being disseminated by the government (right to education, food, employment etc) is also matched by a regime of illegality, wherein the new rules and regulations are thwarted. Such shifts in the political-economy of rural areas is also visible in the changes in the ritual

practices; for example, land is no longer the site of worship and village festivals have gained a new social currency. There is therefore a need for more studies to understand and represent these trends which have significance for the sociological reality of rural India.

**Paper 2: Social Dimensions of Land Relations in Karnataka**  
**Dr. H,D Prasanth, Kannada University, Hampi**

Continuing the theme of changing rural landscapes, Prashanth mapped the changes in the local economy and social life in a set of villages in North-east Karnataka. With the rise of mining activity in the region, the experience of this shift that occurred in two villages of Bellary district since the mid-1990s were highlighted. Until 1996, agriculture was the main livelihood in both the villages, with most households having access to land holdings and engaging in agriculture. With the spread of illegal iron ore mining in the district, farmers began to be involved in mining activities in their own land even as agricultural workers moved to work in the larger private mines. Erstwhile farmers with one acre of land could earn more than Rs. 1 to 2 lakhs within a span of 1-3months. They also continued to invest this surplus back into mining activity given the possibility of huge profits. They purchased tipper lorries, tillers, tractors and even bulldozers with loans from private financiers. This also translated into consolidation of local political power around mining interests. Anganavadis, public schools, primary health centres, agricultural office and other institutional staff stopped functioning as public institutions. Instead, most people went to private schools and private hospitals. Cattle and sheep became redundant and were sold. The land used for agriculture became huge mining sites.

In 2004-2005, the village youth began 'charitable' activities as per the instruction from local leaders especially the Reddy brothers. Such activities were primarily related to temple activities and to conducting mass marriages. The youth served as informants, collecting information on mines, the level and quantity of production, transportation , etc. Soon, through various strategies, the private miners started taking over the lands of some of the villagers and mining them directly. With the ban on mining by the Supreme Court, the villagers began to return to agriculture, but given the poor returns and low wages, particularly for women, the conditions are very difficult. Compared to the 300 hundred rupees a day they could earn by working in the mines, they get only Rs. 30 rupees a day. But this is not the story of Bellary alone. Many villages in Karnataka adjacent to the mining sites are facing this problem. These

places face severe crisis in education, health, social justice etc. Similarly some other predominantly agricultural villages near the SEZ areas are also facing such crises.

**Discussant: Prof. Wandana Sonalkar,  
Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad**

Prof. Wandana initiated the discussion by pointing out that the changes occurring in the rural landscapes can be best characterized as dualization; intensification of commerce on one hand and agriculture becoming non-viable on the other and throwing out a lot of people out of agriculture. She also observed that Dalits have not only been left out of land reforms, they are also increasingly dispossessed even of the small landholdings they had earlier. The OBCs have lost their traditional livelihoods and have to find other alternatives. These processes are gendered as well, with men joining the growing ranks of migrant labour and women staying back in the villages with the children. Mining example gave a dramatic picture of what happens when new commercial activity comes in a new place. She also observed that changing rural landscapes result in violence against women too, which has not been discussed much. Tensions arising out of land ownership and common lands have also increased.

Questions about the relevance of older concerns like agrarian relations in the current phase of sweeping changes in the rural were raised and discussed. What do we lose when we discuss land, water, crop, caste and gender relations in isolation from changes in the overall agrarian order? How do we understand the changes happening on the ground in relation to the classic modernization narratives accompanying developmentalism? What is the nature of agency in socio-economic transformations in the countryside? Such deliberations contributed to the theme of the session.

#### **Session IV: Farmers Voices**

The venue of the workshop was chosen primarily because of its rural location. The Annamalai University is situated in the Cauvery deltaic region that has been referred to as the rice bowl of the state generating considerable surpluses in the past. In recent years, farming in the region has suffered due to a variety of factors. A key mandate of the workshop was to bring in the voices of the agriculturists themselves so as understand the crises observed at the macro-level as lived realities for the farmers. Drawn from a variety of political affiliations and farmers' organisations, farmers from the neighbouring areas spoke about the array of problems they confront in their efforts to live with dignity through farming. Drawing upon their personal experience, they portrayed in graphic detail the impossibility of anticipating stable incomes from agriculture. The continued tensions between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka on the sharing of river waters and the inability of the government to resolve the problem was cited as a major issue. Some of them highlighted the increasing vagaries in climate and rainfall patterns that have completely undermined their ability to harvest an additional crop in recent years. Others pointed to the government failure to take on board the rising production costs in fixing prices. To some of the farmers, NREGA has also meant difficulty in accessing labour at lower wages at a time when all other costs are rising.

**Day 2: July 13, 2012**

**Session V: Emerging Policy Context of New Market Initiatives in Rural India**

**Chair: Prof. Amita Baviskar, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi**

**Paper 1: Contract Farming Policy in India: Reflections Based on a Synthesis of Field Studies from Tamil Nadu**

**Dr. Sudha Narayanan, IGIDR, Mumbai**

In response to declining growth in the agricultural sector and the agrarian crises manifested in mounting levels of rural indebtedness and farmers' suicides in parts of India, the government has brought back the revival of the agricultural sector as a key agenda in its last two 5 year plans. However, the mode of intervention since the onset of the reform process has been markedly different. While the early phase of development planning sought to address questions of efficiency and equity in rural India through restructuring land and labour relations and through public investments, planning in the current phase places greater emphasis on markets and private investments as key mechanisms for revival. The implications of the new set of initiatives is however not clear, particularly for individual farmer households. This session assembled a set of papers addressing such concerns.

Contract farming has gained visibility in recent years both in policy-making and as a route for private corporate capital to enter into the agricultural sector, emerging as one of the most important changes in the farmer-firm interface. Based on fieldwork undertaken in the state of Tamil Nadu where agricultural sector has witnessed a rapid decline over the last decade, Sudha Narayanan mapped the expected outcomes of contract farming based on transaction cost theory against actual outcomes for farmers and firms. Contract farming enhances efficiency through savings in transaction costs and contributes to reduced risk for farmers by incorporating risk sharing mechanisms between the firms and the farmers. It can also address the problem of missing markets. For example, access to modern inputs can be ensured through supplies by the contracting firm. These arguments have found their way into the National Agricultural Policy (2000) that called private sector participation through contract farming and land leasing arrangements to allow

accelerated technology transfer, capital inflow, and assured market for crop production. This has been articulated in many other policy documents that followed.

She observed that the aforementioned theoretical arguments do not necessarily transfer to the fields. Expansion of contract farming has been primarily in the north, west and southern states, with a wide variety of crops cultivated under contract farming, particularly high value and niche crops like nutraceutical, medicinal crops, horticultural and non-traditional crops. Even when sorghum is raised in contract farming, it is used as biofuel than sorghum as grains. Yet, uptake is not to the extent anticipated by the government. Mortality rates of schemes are also very high. There are also concerns about labor outcomes, environmental consequences and social differentiation through exclusion and concerns over food security as the new cash crops replace the food crops.

The paper pointed out that exclusions are to begin with spatial issues as firms prefer certain agro-climatic zones, and next, even within the same geographical area, not all farmers participate uniformly. The heterogeneity of contracting commodities decides the selection. For example, the farmers with irrigation facilities may be given preference. She also argues that welfare gains are variable and transitory. It is different across commodities, and also across farmers. She however concedes the agency of the farmers in negotiating the terms of contract and the crops chosen. Farmers are not bothered about the high returns alone. They are attentive to entire distribution of returns, not just mean distribution. If the risk anticipated is going to be catastrophic, they prefer not to contract at all. In terms of addressing the issue of farmers' risk, she argues that contract farming is not insurance but akin to a new technology. It may insure some risks but could be associated with other risks. In addition to such outcomes, there are also institutional weaknesses regarding enforcement. Pervasive breach of contract by both farmers (17%) and firms (10%) affects the relationship. Some firms depend on the relationship with farmers more than on formal contracting, but it requires creation of certain non-formal networks that cannot be easily scaled up. This has introduced a system of re-intermediation with firms now outsourcing their relationship maintenance. The benefits of dis-intermediation are there not quite visible, as there are new intermediaries or agents in the form of agricultural graduates or diploma holders, instead of local vendors. She also pointed out the possibility of contract farming leading to long-term soil degradation, risks of which are borne by farmers as firms can move on to newer regions.



**Paper 2: Market Initiatives in Rural India (?)**

**Prof. Kamal Nayan Kabra, Institute of Social Sciences, Delhi**

A nationally renowned expert on commodity futures and chairman of what has been referred to since as the Kabra committee, Prof. Kabra reiterated the risks involved in penetration of financial technologies into the domain of agriculture. His primary contention was that the gains of such financialisation seldom accrue to the farmers with traders and financial actors cornering the bulk of the gains. On the other hand, the increase in price and market volatility on account of futures trading leads to enhanced risks for farmers and the accompanying losses are primarily borne by the farmers. In this context, he pointed out that the opening up of the agricultural sector to futures trading hardly brings in the benefits anticipated by policy makers.

Initiating the discussion, Mekhala Krishnamurthy commented that we need to situate the phenomena of contract farming and futures trading in the larger political economy of agricultural marketing. How contract farming is interacting with other channels of marketing for instance needs to be discussed.

## **Session VI: Non-farm Employment and Migration**

**Chair: Prof. Kamal Nayan Kabra, Institute of Social Sciences, Delhi**

**Paper 1: Rural Non-Farm Employment in Tamil Nadu: Recent Trends**

**Prof. J. Jeyaranjan, Institute for Development Alternatives, Chennai**

While the lowering of agriculture's share in GDP is to be expected with the economy's diversification, the fact that this diversification has not been backed by adequate avenues for people relying on agriculture to move to remunerative non-agricultural employment has been a worrying factor. Further, recent increases in the nation-wide phenomenon of distress-induced migration poses important questions about new forms of migration, livelihood options outside agriculture in both rural and urban areas. This session focused on some of these aspects in two states, Bihar that has emerged as one of the largest 'sending states' (of migrant labour) and Tamil Nadu as a receiving state, as it has witnessed considerable movement of labour out of agriculture even as it attracts large number of immigrants from other states.

Jeyaranjan analysed the recent trends in rural non-farm employment of Tamil Nadu, one of the most diversified economies in India with regard to agriculture and employment based on a study conducted in twelve villages in four districts chosen based on the presence of low and high rural non-farm employment (RNFE) characteristics. Half of the households surveyed for the study were selected from agricultural households and half from the non-agricultural households. The survey revealed that only 27 percent of the rural households are deriving their livelihood from agriculture. There were however variations across caste in terms of dependence on agriculture. The OC (other caste) households are the most diversified and the SC (scheduled caste) least diversified revealing the continued dependence of low caste households on agricultural employment despite economic diversification in the state.

Segmentation could also be observed in terms of gender and age. Female participation in non-farm agricultural employment continues to be low. Coming into the age structure he observed that younger generation increasingly participated in non-farm employment whereas the older population were more dependent on agricultural employment. Another interesting dimension is the source of non-farm employment. Construction activities (28%) and others (38%) constituted the major sectors. Given the

fact that the 'others' category accounted for a major share of NFE, he called for the need to unpack this category. Also 42 % sought work within the village whereas 52 % went out for seeking employment. Among those who went out for work, about 40 % travelled a distance of less than 5 kms for employment. He concluded by providing a few pointers to the quality of non-farm employment. About 83 % of the people engaged in casual labour work for about 8 hours per day for almost 9-12 months in a year. While a majority got daily wages, the average monthly remuneration is only around Rs 4000.

**Paper 2: Outmigration from Rural Bihar- Some Results from an Empirical Study**  
**Amrita Dutta, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi**

In the next presentation, Ms Amrita Dutta provided a rich and complex portrayal of the outmigration scenario from rural Bihar. Her study was based on Institute of Human Development's (IHD) village level and household level surveys conducted in 7 districts and 36 villages of Bihar. Looking at the factors inducing outmigration, the paper first focussed on the changing landownership and class structure of rural Bihar. Interestingly, landlessness has risen to 52 % in 2011 from 48% in 1998 with the bulk of landlessness occurring among the poorer sections of all caste groups. Class wise, it was the agricultural labour and small peasants that became more landless in this period. Next, the paper dealt with various aspects of migration. The majority of the migrants are men and about 67 % migrants were agricultural labourers and most of them migrated for longer term duration. A larger share migrated to urban areas especially outside Bihar such as Delhi NC Region (25%), Punjab (21%), Maharashtra and Bengal. Occupation wise, it was shown that while the non-migrant workers relied primarily on agricultural employment and fishery, the migrants' employment was more diversified. In terms of income, the paper highlighted the considerable income difference between migrant households and non-migrating households due to remittances. In the case of non-migrating households agriculture contributed about 51% of the income and interestingly an additional 30% came from government spending. Migrating households get 52 % of their income from remittances. Finally, Amrita highlighted the contribution of migration to Bihar's socio-economic transformation through its influence in undermining semi-feudal agrarian relations as well as in poverty reduction. However, she expressed reservations about the immense pressure on land as a livelihood and the possibility of migration enabling more sustainable livelihood strategies.

The discussion on these papers focussed on how these micro-level trends can be interpreted to reflect larger processes at work. The papers clearly bring out the importance of labour mobilities, growing integration of labour markets and differentiation of wages. While both the papers based their analyses on their respective regional economies with distinct trajectories, the role of government interventions on household welfare holds good for both the regions. The need to relate patterns of agricultural production and agro-climatic zones to both the quantity and quality of non-farm employment was emphasised. Questions were raised regarding the temporality of migration and its implications for household welfare, the 'hollowing out' of the village hypothesis, quality of NSSO Data, the role of MNREGA, implications of construction sector becoming a major source of non-farm employment, and nature of local investment in rural non-farm sector. It was also pointed out that government provisioning of food has not only contributed to food security but has importantly served to undermine the traditional patronage relations that upper caste landed castes could wield on the lower castes. This has paved way for fundamental transformation in the social relations in the countryside. The session also illuminated the importance of detailed micro-level village studies in answering such questions.

## **Session VII: Studying SRI: Technologies, institutions and Social Change**

**Chair: Prof. C. Shambu Prasad, XIM, Bhubaneswar**

Though technological solutions for reviving/revitalizing agriculture has a longer history, the gains in productivity gained through Green revolution technologies are now being questioned. Large scale negative externalities such as soil degradation and declining water tables, and cost escalation due to overdependence on fertilisers and pesticides are now seen to have undermined such a technological path thereby forcing private and public actors to explore alternate technical solutions. This session brought together a few papers that critically examined various aspects of the diffusion of a new technology 'System of Rice Intensification' (SRI), for cultivation of rice in rain-fed areas— though each of the papers reviewed specific aspects of this new technology use. The session also paid respects to the memory of Ms. Pushpalata, who was a member of the SRI research team at XIM, Bhubaneswar, and had passed away recently.

**Paper 1: Techno-gender Issues in Changing Rural landscape: Insights from System of Rice Intensification in Odisha**

**Ms. Sabarmatee, Research Scholar, Wageningen University, Netherlands**

The papers are once again drawn from a large collaborative project that examines various aspects of SRI implementation across 47 villages in 10 districts under five agro-climatic zones in the country. Sabarmatee's paper focused on gender aspects of implementation of SRI in a district in Orissa (not sure). In the Preparatory Phase, only women are involved in areas where SRI is done by women's groups. Women are however not involved in extension services; their role and capabilities tend to be underestimated. Only by *de fault* do women become *de facto* extension agents, after they have worked with SRI. In the cultivation phase, men now participate in weeding and planting which was earlier exclusively women's work. But these are still perceived as women's tasks and men are not hired for these works. However, overall the new system means less drudgery because of the introduction of more efficient methods. Women report better health even as men have to work more because of increased land preparation tasks. Since gender roles are now changed, men have less time to go and work elsewhere.

Women however have more time to work in their own fields or as agriculture labourers, or collect Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). But poor women may lose access to work because of reduced labour demand. Emerging confusion about wage relations needs more attention. It also brings up the issue of who owns the tools. Women's use of tool is a very new phenomenon and not completely devoid of social resistance. Her paper hints at the possibility of a re-ordering of gender relations with the introduction of a new techno-institutional regime.

**Paper 2: The Shaping and Reshaping of Farming Practices: The Case Study of System of Rice Intensification in Uttarakhand**

**Mr. Debashish Sen, Research Scholar, Wageningen University**

Sen elaborated how a different socio-economic and agro-climatic context can lead to different outcomes with regard to use of SRI using the case of Uttarakhand, where farming is traditionally done on mountain slopes, with a mix of forestry and animal husbandry. Multiple crops are grown in small land holdings, with a dominance of women farmers and use of organic manure and hand tools. However, there has been a gradual shift to monocropping of paddy and wheat. By pointing out how these factors shaped the use of SRI, particularly by mapping the evolution of new practices that combined elements of traditional practices with new practices introduced with SRI techniques, the paper argues a case for shaping of technological practices by social relations rather than by formal managerial institutions.

**Paper 3: Contesting Crop Sciences: A Study on Understanding the Contexts of Alternative Knowledge Claims and Institutional Responses**

**Dr. C. Raghava Reddy**

**Centre for Knowledge, Culture and innovation Studies, Hyderabad**

This paper sought to identify the politics of trajectory of development of crop sciences in India that does not acknowledge or take on board alternate or people's practices and knowledge. Growth of crop sciences in India-ICAR (1929)-was premised on a greater role for scientists, specialized knowledge, and formal research institutions overseeing shifts in agricultural practices towards monocropping, irrigation-intensive unsustainable agriculture. With scientific establishment recognizing the limits of GR-I, now policy establishment is proposing a new biotechnology based alternative GR2 privileging private

corporate participation. But there are other alternatives like SRI and non-pesticide (NPM) based organic farming that emanate from outside this establishment and are now slowly diffusing across certain regions in the country. The question that he sought to address in this paper is: Why are these initiatives not coming out of formal agricultural research institutions? His contention is that scientific knowledge continues to be trapped in an entrenched epistemology that is positivist and hence devoid of reflexivity. SRI has been developed through close collaboration between farmers and non-scientists involved in development, with few trappings of 'modern science'. He argued that SRI allows for 'cognitive justice' despite the fact that it is a technology that has been imported into the country through a range of non-governmental actors.

**Mr. Sivasubramaniam (Presenting the late Pushpalatha's work):**

The last paper examined SRI and the politics around claims of its diffusion in Tamil Nadu. The presentation began with the question why did SRI spread so widely in Tamil Nadu unlike most other innovations which tend to be limited? Following the state government's claim that 25 lakh acres of paddy will be covered under the SRI, Pushpalatha focused on 10 villages each in two districts where paddy cultivation is dominant. It was found that the spread of SRI on the ground was limited as compared to the government's claims. In fact it was not even five percent of the projected area. The paper therefore contends that the government's claim is faulty and is driven by a need among government departments to show 'progress'. The paper then went on to address the factors undermining the diffusion of SRI in Tamil Nadu. A key argument that the paper makes is that SRI requires a degree of training and in places where farming is based on hired labour, there is little training provided and hence no incentive for farmers to adopt SRI.

## **Concluding Session: Ideas for the next workshop**

Chair: Prof. Srijit Mishra, IGIDR, Mumbai

Prof. Amita Baviskar, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi

Dr. Rajeswari Raina, NISTADS, Delhi

Prof. A.R. Vasavi, Independent Scholar

- Dr Mathavan from Annamalai University thanked the participants and members of the Agrarian and Rural Studies network for allowing him to work as an organizer for this workshop. He welcomed everyone to the valedictory function.
- Dr. Namasivayam, the HOD from the department of Economics, Annamalai University, presided over the valedictory function. He observed that important issues have been discussed in the sessions that were held in the workshop. He thanked the sponsors and Dr Ramagopal for organising this workshop at Annamalai.

- Dr Srijith Mishra:

He commented on the last session on technology saying that technology gets adopted in curious ways. He observed that a lot of agricultural practices adopted by slaves in the USA were in fact those from West Africa since the topography of the places where the slaves came from and where they worked in the USA were similar. He said that this workshop was successful in getting people from various academic disciplines to break their silos and come together in an attempt to address various agrarian issues. He also suggested that in future, the workshop organisers can spend more effort in bringing students from various disciplines (like Economics, Sociology, Agricultural sciences, etc) and get them exposed to these critical issues.

The major learning of the workshop (through its presentations and discussions) was that we have to move away from reductionist approaches and pluralize ways to analyze issues. As an example, the adoption of alternative agricultural technology cannot be looked through a single dimension, but has to be understood and fostered based on holistic analysis (as demonstrated by the SRI related session). His final comments were that the hierarchy in the knowledge creation process has to be broken down



- Dr Amita Baviskar:

Dr Baviskar started by commenting that she was relatively new to the network and comes from an interest of looking at food and dietary aspects from a consumer's point of view. She said that social science debate during the first green revolution time focused on understanding drastic social revolutions that were anticipated. Further, it allowed for grand narratives. However, in the current context, we have to be more cautious about new interventions, schemes and political programmes. Based on the presentations in the different sessions, it was clear that most issues have regional specificities thus overriding the the grand narratives of the previous literature. Further, the canvass of issues is deep and wide and hence, there are stories of contention on many issues, which cannot be ignored and have to be looked at holistically, understanding the socio-economic-ecological issues that paint a situation of distress in agriculture. Thus, our analysis has to be linked to people's aspirations. Further, contentious issues related to land use and resources and people's right over them have to be understood.

She stressed the importance of mapping financial changes/commodity changes, resource exploitation etc from different angles, with detailed documentation rather than polemical statements. She commented that research on agrarian issues seems to focus more on the poor and marginal farmers and maybe we need to look at intermediaries, contract farmers, rich consumers as well and understand their behavior in relation to the poor farmers. We have to begin looking at new issues like climate change and the associated risks also. It is good to see people from academia, research and activism come together, and working towards policy change.

- Dr Rajeswari Raina

She asked the audience to respond on the subjects that were discussed and how the sessions were arranged. She also asked the audience to talk about issues they would like to see, issues that were missed in the programme. There were several voices of appreciation for the seminar and the fact that it was held in a rural university. Dr Selvam (Delhi) talked about involving students in such interactions actively. He said that he agrees with breaking the hierarchy of knowledge creation process.

Sham Kashyap (GRAAM, Mysore): He said that most discussions had a large community empowerment/involvement part and hence he would like to see more community engagement experiences to be discussed and shared. Further, he suggested that issues related to methodologies of adopting inter-disciplinary analysis could be discussed in future meetings.

(The Principal of Fisheries College): He said that while agriculture itself is given a holistic examination in this forum, we still need to integrate agriculture with animal husbandry, fisheries and other complimentary activities when looking at rural situations.

Dr E. Selvarajan (Annamalai University): He suggested that we could take a phased approach in enhancing the activities of the group. He was particularly interested in seeing the group engage with students to build their capacities in areas like proposal writing and networking, getting exposure to grassroots realities etc. Further, he said that the group should engage more with the government, and understand how, why and where schemes and programmes fail.

Dr Mathavan (Annamalai University): He suggested that the outcomes of the workshop (and successive ones) can be disseminated as special publications.

- Prof A R Vasavi (Bangalore):

Dr Vasavi thanked Ramagopal and all the personnel of the Economics dept for making the workshop happen and Dr Richa Kumar for putting the whole seminar together,. She gave a brief background of how the network started in 2010 at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore but had now become a network of interested scholars and was managed by persons on a voluntary bases.

Dr Rajeswari Raina, Vijay Bhaskar and Vijay Shankar will continue to be advisors for the group and Richa Kumar as secretary or coordinator. .

The group shared a common concern that, even with alarming trends and widespread agrarian distress in the country, there was a decline in academic engagement and content on the issue. Many academic programmes have been closing down and important faculties like Agricultural Extension and Agricultural Economics are metamorphosing into commercialized versions like Agricultural

Management and Agri-business. Hence, the objective of the group was to revive the declining trend and increase the number and quality of students engaged in these issues.

Dr Vasavi also talked about some of the new initiatives that can be planned by the group including more community and public representative engagement, work on public policy (looking at corporatization and privatization of policy itself), collaboration and networking, bringing inter-disciplinarity, looking at alternative approaches (in issues like technology, policy, planning). She further mentioned that although the group has members working in various geographical areas, there is less representation from North East, Bengal and Jharkand. Hence, in the next year of activities, inclusion of members from such states also should be prioritized.

She announced that the next meeting will be held in Odisha, in approximately 18 months from now.

- Dr Ramagopal (Annamalai University)

Dr Ramagopal thanked his department colleagues, his students, the university management and the sponsors for all their help and support in organising this meet. He did not expect more than 20 people but the actual participation was overwhelming and he thanked everyone for making it to Chidambaram. He specially thanked Dr Richa Kumar for taking the lead in organizing the workshop. He also thanked ICSSR (New Delhi) and the Ford Foundation (New Delhi) for providing funds for the seminar.