

Concept Note

‘Agrarian Transition’ and Rural-Urban Linkages in India in the Twenty-first Century

The rise of new ruralities and the hollowing out of the rural has been a recurrent theme in recent sociological accounts of rural transformation in India (Gupta 2005; Vasavi 2009; Jodhka 2012). Such accounts essentially refer to the declining role of agriculture in the livelihoods of those residing in rural areas, and consequent implications for the changing social and economic relations in villages. The modern rural non-farm economy that was seen to be primarily driven by surplus investments from agriculture is less likely to be driven by such impulses at present. The changing production patterns in agricultural production in most parts of the country over the last two decades suggests that the sources of dynamism of the non-farm economy and resulting livelihood diversification may have to be located outside the rural. Micro-level studies of changing village economies, too, point to the role of urban linkages in transforming rural livelihoods (Himanshu, Jha and Rodgers 2015).

Importantly, rural-urban distinctions that mark the literature on development dynamics have increasingly been critiqued in the wake of persistent evidence of the links between the two. Such differences as pointed out by Hnatkovskay and Lahiri (2013) have narrowed down. Developments in transport and communication allow for a convergence of labour markets to an extent as revealed by wage data trends. Such infrastructural improvements have also contributed to the phenomenon of the 'commuting worker' that clearly transcends rural-urban distinctions and constitutes a life space that is simultaneously urban and rural. Such mobilities are also made possible by a growing ruralization of formal manufacturing sector activity in the country over the last 15 years. Manufacturing sector output has increasingly come from rural areas during this period as formal manufacturing moved to rural areas to take advantage of lower land costs, and possibly lower costs of labour and environmental compliance, in some cases. With the burgeoning of services, particularly in countries like India, rural-urban links need to be also understood in terms of the growth in services – producer, consumer, trade and financial.

Even more significant but a less understood phenomenon has been that of the self-employed in the rural informal economy, outside the domain of agriculture, and the factors driving it. While modernizing accounts would expect a decline in the numbers of self-employed with the dismantling of protectionist policies like reservation for the small-scale sector, and reduction of a range of tax concessions to traditional industries, studies point to the persistence of this form of production well into this decade albeit with poor returns. While a substantial share of self-employment is distress induced, there is still inadequate understanding of the links that such production forms with the 'modern' economy or with the rural/agrarian economy.

On a different register, in India, anti-caste social movements see the urban as the site of freedom, offering various forms of mobility and liberation from 'pre-modern' rural time-spaces ridden with caste and gender hierarchies where work only serves to reproduce identities. However, studies point out that all is not well with the urban. Rising joblessness in the urban due to the phenomenon of 'urbanization without industrialization' has been on a scale large enough to hint at the rise of a 'planet of slums' (Davis 2004). If the urban present and future are as bleak as portrayed and/or anticipated in such studies, what is the scope for the politics of social transformation and mobilization? If neoliberal market reforms render urban spaces more exclusionary, the need to look at means to render the rural more liveable by developing appropriate rural-urban linkages becomes compelling.

Further, although one recognizes the 'hollowing out' of the rural with shifts from agricultural to non-agricultural employment in certain parts of rural India, the implications of this shift in relation to changes in the urban are not clear. While, in traditional developmental accounts, this transition is symptomatic of a structural transformation of the economy, distress-induced displacement may indicate an altogether different set of processes at work. Even as returns from agriculture are declining, agricultural growth has been marked by a growing capitalisation and commodification of input markets. While demand for capital-intensive inputs such as fertilisers, pesticides, mechanised inputs and bought seeds have intensified, land and even water is increasingly being commodified leading to partly new and more intensified forms of capital accumulation within agriculture. Such capital accumulation is likely to be concentrated more among non-rural actors suggesting the emergence of new kinds of accumulation linkages between the rural and the urban. Rural land markets, too, are being activated by actors without economic interests in agriculture in many parts of the country. Such processes of

commodification open up new questions of ecological degradation and sustaining traditional rural livelihoods.

Outside the domain of production, neoliberal reforms have further undermined the quality of rural public services like healthcare and education, paving way for the entry of private actors providing such services. The quality of provisioning of both healthcare and education in rural India is seen by its citizens to have fallen further in relation to the urban, further aggravating the rural-urban divide with regard to public support for the social basis for reproduction.

Importantly, the diffusion of information, communication and transportation technologies, and intensified labour mobilities enable forging of large-scale mobilisations that transcend the rural-urban divide and intersect with electoral politics in ways that we are only beginning to comprehend. Unpacking the dynamics of the multiple linkages between the rural and the urban, and implications for sustaining rural-based livelihoods is therefore critical.

This phenomenon of rural-urban linkages can also be seen in the context of the changing character of political mobilization by political parties, state policy intervention and the nature of the ruling political elite. However, unlike the economic and sociological aspects of rural-agrarian change, these questions have largely remained unexplored. Barring few studies which came up during late 1970s and 80s or in the late 1990s, and explained the political character of this shift, not much has been said about this issue. The new ruling elite, also known as a product of the phenomenon of 'rurban politics', has been playing a dominant role in determining agrarian politics on the one hand and success and failures of development and welfare plans on the other. Rurban is a phenomenon where the features of rural and urban politics converge. It is difficult to explain the political behavior of this new elite simply from their spatial location. Spatially these elites may live in rural areas or in small towns, which appear to be urban spaces in terms of availability of goods and services, but in their social character, they are closer to rural society. Changes in this spatial character has also changed the elite strategies of political mobilization and negotiations. The political agenda of the 'rurban' elite is different from the rural elite of the 1970s or 80s when the focus was on preserving the rural and posing it vis-à-vis the urban. Instead, now the demands are either for urban like amenities or for modern facilities. Besides, instead of preserving the land, the notion of compensation has become a determining feature of rural politics. One major reason behind this is to have cash and to lead an urban live lifestyle.

The proposed workshop seeks to invite papers and deliberate on the multiple sets of linkages between the rural and the urban, and explore the multiple strands of 'rural-agrarian transformation' that this entails. This is the fifth national conference of the Network of Rural and Agrarian Studies (NRAS) that was started in 2010 with the twin goals of promoting research on rural and agrarian issues in India and providing pedagogical support for teachers and researchers on these topics. The NRAS holds these conferences in non-metros to enable scholars from rural and peri-urban regions in India to participate. After holding earlier workshops at Chidambaram (Tamil Nadu), Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh), and Allahabad (Uttar Pradesh), this national conference is to be held at Bhubaneswar (Orissa). The Nabakrushna Choudhury Institute for Social Sciences has very kindly consented to host the conference.

Sub-Themes and Sessions

a) Understanding 'Rural' Labour: Movement, Mobility, and Diversity

Increase in nominal wages in agriculture has been attributed in certain quarters to the possibility of the Indian economy reaching the Lewisian transition point, whereas others have challenged this formulation. There is also debate regarding the impact of NREGA implementation on the shifts in the labour market. Importantly, the outcomes of the integration of rural and urban labour markets, particularly between the construction sector and the rural economy are unclear. What are the drivers of rural non-farm employment? To what extent are they linked to agricultural growth? What are the changes happening to the agricultural labour market? How are they shaped by new labour market linkages being forged between the rural and urban? How are the axes of segmentation of the labour market (in terms of say caste and/ or gender) changing?

b) Transforming Land: Fragmentation, Consolidation and Commodification

Fragmentation of land holdings into unviable units in most parts of the country is seen as one important factor contributing to the ongoing crisis in agriculture. Simultaneously, there is micro-level evidence of rural land markets facilitating participation of new urban actors in rural land markets, leading to high land prices and consolidation of land holdings under the latter's control. What are the factors driving this new demand for rural land? What are the macro-economic shifts incentivising this process? Are we witnessing new forms of land concentration on the one hand and dispossession on the other? How do the rising prices for agricultural land intersect with sustained agricultural development? How are land use changes altered by this process? What are the implications for rural ecological systems?

c) Financing the Farm: Debt, Informalisation and Vulnerability

Rising indebtedness of rural households has gone hand in hand with decline in the quality of public credit institutions and rise of multiple forms of formal and informal credit institutions such as micro-credit and micro-finance institutions, new forms of informal money-lending, often by non rural actors, and borrowing. Inter-locking of credit with output markets has also been observed. Decline in public investments in rural and agricultural infrastructure are being compensated for by private investments by rural households, thus, exposing themselves to financial vulnerabilities. How have new formal institutions like micro-finance firms transformed

rural credit markets? Do they allow for sustained access to credit for productive investments? How do we understand the explosion of debt among rural households? What are the ways in which inter-locking of rural markets has transformed over the last two decades?

d) New Market Arrangements: Sourcing Inputs, Responding to Demand

Increase in both resource and capital intensity of cultivation has opened new avenues for capital accumulation in the countryside. Who are the providers of new inputs especially in the wake of policy shifts favouring entry of private actors into this domain? How does this intersect with pre-existing inequalities and power dynamics in rural India? On the output side, emergence of contract farming, retail giants in food, and modifications to the APMC Act are transforming output markets. Emerging demand from the urban middle class for organic foods and new horticultural products, too, is incentivising shifts in agricultural practices. How do such shifts in output markets intersect with pre-existing rural hierarchies of caste and class? To what extent does the market led demand for ecologically sustainable agricultural practices constitutes an effective tool for a shift away from a productivist paradigm within agriculture?

e) The new rural society: Marginalization, Exclusion and Inclusions

Increasing desire to adopt the urban lifestyles and consumerist culture has greatly impacted upon the social fabric of rural India. Its increasing connectivity with the urban spaces has opened up newer possibilities of an inclusive society. On the other hand, it has also created newer social as well as economic inequalities and marginalization. Older forms of exclusions might be disappearing but they are being replaced by newer means of exclusions. The practice of untouchability may not be a very prominent practice but caste based discrimination and assertion has taken newer shapes. Objective of this session will be look into some of these social changes in the character of the rural society which can be explained within the context of increasing linkages between the rural and urban spaces.

f) Politics of the Rurban: Political Elite, Processes and Political Mobilization

How has the character of the rural elite undergone a change due to the changing spatial and socioeconomic linkages between the the rural and the urban? What impact have civil society movements had on the strategies of political mobilization in rural areas? How has caste based mobilization transformed the nature of political processes in the rural political space? The conference aims at engaging with some of these questions under this theme.

g) Ruralities in Eastern India: The workshop envisages a separate session on rural transitions and ruralities in eastern India. With nearly 62% of its workforce continuing to rely on agriculture, agriculture continues to be the mainstay for Odisha particularly for vulnerable groups such as scheduled tribes. While this may be enormously valuable in terms of sustaining agricultural practices that are not influenced by dominant green revolution technologies, they also lend themselves to certain vulnerabilities. With a long coastline, Odisha is a region that is already witnessing the impact of climate change on rural livelihoods. Further, its rich mineral and forest resources have proved to be a bane with severe ecological destruction leading to large scale dispossession, but also, mobilisations countering this process. Not highly urbanised, the state has emerged as a major source region for inter-state migration, with the factors driving them yet to be adequately explored.

h) In Conversation: Farmer Groups and Activists from Odisha: In line with past conferences, this conference too, will provide space for a dialogue between farmer groups, activists and academics on the issue of agrarian transformation and linkages between the rural and urban. Importantly, the shifts in agrarian relations, and changes in the rural society and economy have found their way into a rich body of vernacular literature and artistic engagement. The workshop therefore seeks to highlight representations of the rural in arts and literature and invites artists and creative writers to share their insights. Academic work on such representations, too, are welcome.