Ideas Old and New in Rural Development
Looking Back in Time

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The Indian village came to be studied by thinkers of different ages—from Karl Marx and Henry Maine to Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar. After Independence concerted efforts were made to raise the standard of life of these communities but the results were mixed. The success of the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGREGA), enacted in 2005 raises an intriguing question as to why such an act was not considered earlier given the extent of India’s rural poverty. To answer this question one has to go back to the ideas of rural development prevailing during the independence era. This article critiques the ideas of the 1952 community development programme which was an exemplar of the Indian approach to rural development. A host of similar rural development programmes continued to set the agenda for a largely infructuous policy of poverty alleviation till the 2005 MGREG Act. This Act has been a small beacon of hope for alleviating rural poverty and provides an alternate philosophy to rural development.

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INTRODUCTION

The ancientness of the Indian village and the unique character of its community life had intrigued thinkers ranging from Karl Marx to Henry Maine. While Marx was critical of these communities in its capacity to respond to changes, Charles Metcalf, the then Governor General of India, idealised them by portraying them as self-sufficient little republics in his famous minute of 1830. Maine’s Village Communities in the East and the West (1871) had deeply influenced Mahatma Gandhi. During the struggle for Independence Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi differed on according a constitutional status to the village community. Finally, the draft Constitution discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit.
Immediately after India became a republic, the government, made a concerted effort to reconstruct these ancient villages and raise the standard of life of its inhabitants. The results were mixed. The production of food grains increased but rural poverty did not reduce and there was no substantial change in its social composition. In popular usage the expression ‘rural development’ is used to broadly describe and analyse these efforts of directed social change. This article will use the expression in the same sense.

The MGREGA (enacted on September 7, 2005 as The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) represents a complete break from all the earlier schemes of poverty alleviation routinely announced in the Five-Year plans. It is the idea of a constitutionally mandated right to work provision which makes the MGREGA different from the earlier programmes. Media reports indicate that the MGREGA, in spite of the shortcomings usually associated with state efforts, could create jobs in the countryside. This modicum of success has caught the popular imagination of the nation and today MGREGA is a significant theme in the discourses on development. Perhaps it has also contributed to the Congress party’s tally going up by 61 seats in the 15th Lok Sabha.

THE PROBLEM: THE SUCCESS OF THE GREEN REVOLUTION VERSUS THE FAILURE TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY

Why did it take six long decades for such an idea to take shape in a country where a majority in the villages are poor? The long hiatus becomes even more inexplicable because Maharashtra had successfully pioneered a constitutionally mandated employment guarantee scheme three decades ago. The Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Act was enacted in 1977 and brought into force from 26th January 1979. That the rural poor do not form a constituency of the mainstream politics is a clear indication of this neglect.

At a rough count the Government of India (GoI) has launched 24 schemes of rural development. Thirteen among them were directly aimed at alleviating poverty, a few focused on increasing crop productivity, while others had composite objectives. The three schemes—the Intensive Agricultural Development Programme (1960-61); the Intensive Agriculture Area Programme (1963) and the High–Yielding Variety Programme (1964–1965)—that aimed at crop productivity were the most successful. This efficacious implementation of the schemes led to the ‘green revolution’. Swaminathan (2009), attributed the success of these programmes, to
“a symphony approach with four major components—technology, which is the prime mover of change; services, which can take the technology to all the farmers whether small or large; public policies relating to the price of inputs and outputs; and above all, farmers’ enthusiasm promoted by the mass media”.

One wonders as to why the governing institutions failed in alleviating poverty but succeeded brilliantly in ushering in the green revolution? This paradox can best be explained by examining the ideas of rural development which had captured the minds of the policy makers during the era of independence. The exemplar of the Indian approach to rural development was the first nation-wide programme of the newly formed Republic of India known as the ‘community development’ (CD) programme. This article traces the origins of the idea of CD, examines its evolution as the country’s premier programme of rural development and comments on its end within a few years of its launching.

Speaking in a chronological sense, the ‘Grow More Food’ campaign launched in 1943 in selected geographical areas predated the CD programme. The campaign had set a target of 45 lakh tons of additional food production, but could produce only 34 lakh tons at the end of the programme in 1951–52. This under achievement was attributed to the campaign’s sole focus on food production and a lesson was drawn that a more composite programme needs to be undertaken for rural development. Subsequently, this lesson came to influence the CD programme.

**Beginnings of the CD Programme in India**

The CD programme was inaugurated on Gandhiji’s birthday (2nd October) in 1952. Coincidentally, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 was renamed as the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act on 2nd October 2009 to commemorate the 140th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. Each unit under implementation consisted of several blocks comprising 100 villages with an area of 390 to 500 sq. km and a population ranging from 60,000 to 70,000. Each block was further divided into groups of five villages with each group being the field of operation for a village level worker. Each block underwent three successive phases of development. The first phase (one-year) focused on agriculture. Non-agricultural activities were undertaken during the second phase (five years). The final phase (five years), was ostensibly meant for the completion of the activities undertaken during the earlier phases. Within 11 years each
block was to be established as the administrative unit for planning and development. Only after the publication of the Balwantrai Mehta Report, was it realised, “that community development has to be a long term approach to the task of rural reconstruction” (Mukherjee, 1967).

In all, 1200 blocks were taken up for development with 700 blocks coming under CD and 500 under National Extension Service (NES). While the differences between the two seemed rather unclear, the extension was generally seen as the agency through which the programmes would be implemented. The idea of extension was borrowed from the USA, just as the idea of agricultural universities have been modelled on the Land Grant Colleges of the USA, which combine the functions of research with education and extension.

Two individuals merit special attention for transforming the nebulous idea of CD into a programme of rural development in India. V.T. Krishmachari, Dewan of Baroda, in his administration report of that state in 1933-34 expressed “the need to change the outlook of the agriculturist as the main aim of the rural extension service”. He reiterated this as Chairman of the Indian Fiscal Commission in 1949-50, and also in 1952, as Chairman of the Grow More Food (GMF) Enquiry Committee, “which provided the most immediate factor responsible for the inauguration of Community Development Programme in India”. The report came to the conclusion that agricultural improvement cannot be detached from social aspects. S.K. Dey made an outstanding contribution in implementing the CD programme. He worked as the Community Projects Administrator and then as a full-fledged Minister of Community Development and Cooperation at the Centre (Lal, 1963). Of greater significance is the support received from Prime Minister Nehru, who while delivering the inaugural speech at the Development Commissioner’s Conference in May 1952 said:

“Community Development projects are of vital importance not so much for the material achievements that they would bring about, but much more so, because they seem to build up the community and the individual and to make the latter the builder of his own village centers and of India in the larger sense” (Chaturvedi, 1987:71).

India’s CD programme had:

“from its inception and continued to have till the very end the vigorous leadership and support of Prime Minister Nehru...It was Pandit Nehru’s clear vision and profound understanding of community development and the vital role that he wanted it to play, and believed it could play in the kind of development and progress of India that was his dream, that could never allow his faith in
community development to be dimmed even for a moment, no matter how sharp and sustained was the criticism against it” (Mukherjee, 1967).

A small authority called the Community Projects Administration (CPA) located in the Planning Commission administered the CD programme. As the idea caught on, the CPA was enlarged and made into a full-fledged Ministry of Community Development in September 1956. Subsequently, the subjects of ‘panchayat’ and ‘cooperation’ were added in 1958 and the Ministry of Community Development and Cooperation emerged. This period marks the crowning point of the CD programme. It was never to be attained again.

Two major events, each independent of the other, soon came to eclipse the CD programme. The first event, an outcome of the failure of the CD programme, was the establishment of Panchayati Raj in all the major provinces of India between 1959 and 1962. These representative structures and the social forces controlling them soon came to set the agenda for rural development. The second event, also in a sense an outcome of the failure of the CD programme was the collapse of food grain production. The shortages became so severe in the 1960s that India had to import 10 million tones of wheat with the nation living on a ship-to-mouth existence. In this crisis, all attention was drawn to agriculture and by 1966 an enlarged Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Community Development and Cooperation emerged. These events, supervening in nature, not only marked the end of the CD programme, but also brought into public discourse the questionable assumptions of the planners of the CD programme. What were these assumptions?

It was assumed that the Collector, the Block Development Officer and the Gram Sevak could effectively implement programmes in their respective district, block and village solely depending on their bureaucratic structure. The efficacy of a programme first begins to be known in the district, but its real test is when it goes beyond the block and reaches the myriad villages. Significantly, at these levels the planners had not envisaged a mechanism for ensuring people’s participation. The ushering in of Panchayati Raj soon rectified this institutional weakness. The second assumption—drawn largely from an idealised past—was the belief that the Indian village was a homogenous community with common needs and interests. In practice, this led to an omnibus approach that ignored the differences between the absentee landlord and a landless labourer. With the failure of the CD programme, a broad range of
programmes emerged to meet the varying needs of a heterogeneous village community.

A Critique of the CD Programme in India

Within two years of the launching of the CD programme, the Programme Evaluation Cell (PEC) of the Planning Commission indicated that the programme was failing. Not only had the rural gentry cornered the benefits but also the programme had completely failed to revitalise the village communities, an objective which was central to CD. To examine the question further, the National Development Council constituted a ‘Committee on Plan Projects’ which appointed a study team in 1956 under the chairmanship of senior legislator Balwantrai Mehta. The Mehta Committee submitted its report in 1957. It reiterated what the PEC had said and attributed the failure of the CD programme to the centralisation of power within bureaucratic structures. As a remedy, it recommended the decentralisation of power from the bureaucracy to the people through Panchayati Raj institutions. The National Development Council endorsed this in 1958. Rajasthan was the first state (October 2, 1959) to inaugurate Panchayati Raj and with this a modern governing structure comprising two distinct but complementary entities were institutionalised in the district, block and village. One was the bureaucratic structure and the other was a representative structure based on adult franchise.

With the ushering in of Panchayati Raj, a modern form of a governing structure was in place, but the task of adding social content to this framework still remained. Contradictory perspectives emerged when answers to this question was sought and this is most clearly articulated in the Mayer-Thorner debate. Mayer, an American town planner and a soldier, who had come to India in 1944, set up a project in 64 villages of Mahewa block in Etawah district in Uttar Pradesh in 1947. Dube says that, “it served as a model for the community projects started later in 1952. The concept of a multi-purpose village level worker, a new pattern of administrative organisation of the individual development blocks, and the development of some effective methods of approach are some of the contributions of Etawah to community development in India” (Madan, 1964). The enthusiasm of the newly awakened nationalist spirit led Pandit Nehru and Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant to support Albert Mayer with the government of Uttar Pradesh financially supporting the project.
The Mayer-Thorner debate was sparked off by the publication of ‘Pilot Project: India’ by Albert Mayer. Daniel Thorner was an American born economist who brought peasants into the study of Indian history for the first time. Thorner gave a, “rather uncharitable review of Mayer’s views”. The debate carried on when Mayer commented on Thorner’s criticism. Thorner questioned Mayer’s assumption that a cooperative approach—the essence of CD and a belief central to Mayer—is possible with severe “structural and status disparities”. Effective cooperative action is based on three things: contiguity in location, identical occupation and a near equality in position. Thorner’s is an, “exclusive appeal for the last, Mayer pays homage to the first two”. Dwellings in the village lie close to each other and most of the villagers are occupied in agriculture and allied activities. These two factors create a set of common needs and if the CD administration provides timely advice, aid and supplies then cooperative action is possible. Thorner took a contrary position and felt that, “the resistance offered by the ‘depressor’ arising from the largely land-based inequality in the village would be more powerful” (Lal, 1963).

The Idea of CD and its Beginnings

Desai (1979) not only found the compound word CD a novel appellation but also found it noteworthy that, “the sponsors of this movement could not find an appropriate term in any of the states of India to symbolise this vast process”. The Mehta committee had pointed out that the Indian notion of a community differed sharply from the notion that was assumed by the CD programme. In the Indian conception, the sense of a community extends much beyond the geographical boundary of a village because of the larger caste ties and loyalties. In contrast, the CD programme by taking the village as the basic unit of implementation, was asserting in principle, that the development of a village was restricted to individuals living within its boundaries only. This modern conception of territory defining a community diverged sharply from the notion of a community prevailing in the Indian ethos.

From where did the idea of CD emerge? The report of the Secretary of State’s Advisory Committee on Education (1944) titled Mass Education in African Society is, “taken as a starting point in the evolution of community development as an arm of government policy”. Mass education implied non-formal education particularly for people out of school. It was based on the idea that, “the realisation of citizenship begins in a small unit where
common loyalty and common interests are expressed in daily activities”. Focusing on the whole community, it should lead to controlling, “the economic and social changes which are taking place among them”. It, “was injection from outside: once stimulated the community was supposed to do the rest for itself” (Colonial Office, 1966). Subsequently, the term mass education was abandoned. A mention is made of the political overtones that arose with the word ‘mass’ and also of the misconceptions that arose in the native languages of Africa when the word education was translated.

In 1948 the Cambridge Summer Conference on African Administration recommended that the term ‘Community Development’ should be adopted and also defined it as: “a movement designed to promote better living for the whole community with the active participation, and if possible on the initiative of community…”. This was endorsed by the Ashbridge Conference on Social Development in 1954 which preferred a shorter version of the Cambridge definition (Colonial Office, 1966). In short, what had begun, as efforts of the British Colonial Administration to control the forces of militant nationalism that emerged in Africa after the Second World War, came to rest in India as our foremost programme of rural development.

**Evolution of the CD Programme in India**

Though the theory of CD came from Britain, the impetus to its practice in India came from elsewhere. The financing of the operations under the Community Projects Scheme has been made secure under the Indo-American Technical Co-Operation Fund. The USA has contributed 50 million dollars to the fund and the Government of India has agreed to contribute an equal amount, taking the total to 100 million dollars (approximately Rupees 500 million). The amount will be expended on the supporting projects such as the acquisition and distribution of fertilizers, iron and steel, project for ground water irrigation. Here, one must mention the grant of Rupees 23,030.00 made by the Ford Foundation. Under this grant, 15 pilot projects and 25 extension training centers have been established. It is too early yet to indicate the achievements made by the Community Projects (Thirumalai, 1978).

These pilot projects were inaugurated in different states on Albert Mayer’s Etawah model of a ‘block’ of 60 to 100 villages, the block being divided into circles on five to six villages under the Gram Sevak.
CONCLUSIONS: LOOKING BACK IN TIME

Many ideas and practices—some from the pre-independence era—had contributed to the Indian approach to rural development. The failure of the ‘Grow More Food’ campaign; the contributions of V.T. Krishmachari and S.K. Dey; and the demonstration projects of individuals like Albert Mayer are some of them but they all are mere factors of proximity in explaining how the first national rural development programme got launched. This narrative neither explains how all these independent factors coalesced at the given point of time nor explicates the central idea connecting all these strands. In the literature on CD there is a constant reference to the attractions of the: 

Communist system of economic planning which does show rapid rise in industrial production…. So there is the great need to build up democracy and secure progress simultaneously and to promote the faith in community development. It will be easier to promote this faith in the rural people than in the elite leadership of the country…. They have more patience and gratitude than we imagine. Little improvements mean more to them than we may believe and are a promise of more to come for which they are willing to wait for a reasonable period of time. This is my impression formed after meeting hundreds of their leaders, in many parts of the country. (Mukherjee, 1967:63)

The fear of communism taking roots in the countryside led the planners to look upon CD as a practical step to provide immediate relief to peasants through an increase in production, while the complex task of reforms in agrarian relations could be deferred. The ideas of communism had to be combated with alternative ideas, and, in this CD fell far short of the mark.

In India, ‘abolishing of the zamidari system’ component of land reforms was implemented somewhat effectively. However, these were not followed-up with broader agrarian reforms. There were two omissions which let semi-feudal relations prevail in the villages. In the first place, no protection was provided to the tenants and secondly, no land was distributed to the landless. Ironically, five decades after the era of CD, a militant peasant communism has taken roots in tribal India.

For the Congress party—founded in 1885 and one of the oldest political formations of the world—to take over an idea mooted by the British Colonial Office and shape it into the country’s foremost programme of rural development; and to do that just after leading the nation to freedom is truly remarkable. Influence and aid in the form of a technical package from USA helped to further the notion that growth and modernisation is possible along with piecemeal reform of the traditional agrarian structure. The die was cast way back in 1936 when Nehru said, “the agrarian problems was,
after all the major problem of India and the Congress had gradually evolved an agrarian programme, which though going far, yet accepted the present structure” (Nehru, 1997). Accepting the present structure meant not resolving the structural inequalities—of which Thorner had spoken half a century back—arising out of the traditional relations between the caste system, land ownership and the power structure. These were the contexts that shaped the CD programme in India in 1952 and laid the foundation for an infructuous policy on poverty alleviation in rural development.

The enactment of a law in 2005 for mitigating rural distress is an explicit admission that the measures aimed at alleviating poverty have failed. What were these measures? The Small Farmer Development Agency (SFDA) and the Marginal Farmer and Agricultural Labour (MFAL) agency introduced during the Fourth Five-year Plan period (1969–74) were merged into one scheme during the Fifth Five-year Plan period (1974–79). In 1979 (2nd October) these programmes (also the Command Area Development programme and the Drought-Prone Area Programme) were merged into the Integrated Rural development Programme (IRDP). In 1999, the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana was launched as the successor to IRDP.

In 1989 (1st April) the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) was launched by merging the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and the Rural Land Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP). In 1999 (1st April) the JRY was revamped as the Jawahar Gram Samriddhi Yojana (JGSY). In 2001 (25th September), the JGSY, the Food for Work Programme and the Employment Assurance Scheme were merged and a new programme emerged known as the Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY). In 2005 the SGRY metamorphosed into the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. The four decades of administrative tinkerings and experiments with appellations and programme components finally led to the very approach being abandoned, and a recourse being sought in the Constitution of the nation.

In the last two decades, the role of the state has diminished. The major contribution to economic growth is now from the private sector. To reduce poverty in villages the farm sector has to grow by at least 4 per cent. This is possible only when the state plays an active role by investing heavily in rural infrastructure, completes the unfinished agenda of land reforms and makes the small farmer economy viable by subsidising agriculture. Can the Indian state play this role? In today’s political milieu where the state is
reducing its role in many walks of life, the MGREGA provides a striking contrast because it has actually enhanced the role of the state. This reversal, albeit a small one in the role of the state, if sustained, can not only lead to a sharp reduction in the number of destitute households but also be a pointer to an alternate philosophy and approach to rural development.

NOTE
1. The influence of the idea of Community development was not confined to the government policy on rural development only. It had extended to other areas of life in India. The curriculum of many institutions imparting social work education in India continues to be heavily imbued with community development and its various forms. M.A. programmes in social work used to offer courses in ‘urban and rural community development’, ‘urban, rural and tribal community development’ or courses with similar appellation.

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