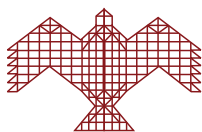


# AGRARIAN AND RURAL STUDIES: Trends, Texts, Pedagogies and Collaborations

Report of the Conference-Cum-Consultation

October 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010

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Padmini Swaminathan



NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES  
Bangalore, India

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The objectives of the seminar-cum-consultation were to identify trends and complexities in rural India, assess the state of research, teaching, and the availability of reading materials in various academic institutions, and explore the possibility of initiating a national-level network to study rural and agrarian issues.

Contemporary trends and conditions in rural areas include growing regional differentiation, complexities in agricultural practices and agrarian social structures, the dual presence of capital growth and widespread dispossession, increasing governmentality, and diversification of livelihoods. Given these trends there is an urgent need for scholarship to generate new perspectives and methodologies to understand these conditions and to contribute to policy making.

- ❑ A review of graduate and doctoral programmes in various universities and institutions indicates a decline in the study and research engagements on issues pertinent to rural and agrarian life. In some cases, there is a shift to courses in rural management, entrepreneurship, and marketing, while no new programmes in comprehensive agrarian and rural studies have been established in the past two decades. The challenge is to consider ways in which research and teaching can also feed into policy, and therefore this should have a bearing on the orientation of pedagogies, texts, and research practices related to rural and agrarian studies. Hence, there is an urgent need to review the existing programmes, facilitate new courses/programmes, and generate bodies of literature in English and Indian languages so as to enhance reach and understanding of rural and agrarian trends.
- ❑ Concern was also expressed about the role and onus of the State to review and address widespread institutional failures related to agricultural research and development. The neglect of State Agricultural Universities, repetitive and ritualistic research in ICAR, problems associated with the increasing presence of global and corporate research agendas, privatization of agricultural research and extension etc., are issues that need to be addressed urgently. More decentralized and participatory research that can scaffold and safeguard the interests, knowledges, and rights of people need to be developed and recognized.

- ❑ Policy engagements at both the central and state levels need to be able to respond to the multiple challenges and conditions of emergency that are manifesting in various parts of rural India. These conditions and trends include the following: the fatigue of the Green Revolution and the need to seek alternative and plural agricultural practices; addressing the problems of resource depletion including the loss of biodiversity and water availability; state-based populist policies that defy rational utilization and conservation of resources; the spread of market-led, instead of state-led, agricultural development, de-agriculturalisation including abandonment of agriculture as a livelihood; the growth of interlinked credit-crop transactions along with an increase in rural indebtedness etc.
- ❑ Social science scholarship has also reached a theoretical impasse and new theories and perspectives are required to understand contemporary complexities where capital, state, market, labour, and established social structures articulate to manifest regional variations and trends. The emergence of a 'rural informal sector', growth of an increasing body of 'landed labourers', the 'persistence of the peasantry', new forms of civil society based development agendas, and 'contract farming' etc., complicate the structuring of rural India. How & which theories can factor all these trends and provide frameworks for understanding regional and national differences would be important.
- ❑ Variations in the implementation of decentralized governance (PRIs) and the varied social movements (that go beyond agrarian movements), have implications for emergent power structures and their linkages to national political trends. In addition, the impact of 'competitive populism' in some states and the creation of new 'welfare regimes', most evident in rural areas, and their significance for both development and democratic practices need to be factored in.
- ❑ The forms of agrarian distress are multiple and varied across the nation and go beyond that of the decade-long records of suicides by farmers. Such conditions are linked to the spread of new risks (technology, market, knowledge) in addition to the long existing ones of climate and capital). Forms of 'immiserating growth' (where market based production practices hold), declining capabilities of marginal agricultural households etc., are also forms of distress manifesting across the nation.
- ❑ There is need to recognize the multiple forms of violence in rural areas that have resulted from the tensions and conflict between forces of the State and forces against the state (as exemplified in the current conditions in central and North-East India); forced industrialization (as in Singur and Nandigram); declining sex ratio and missing girls; intensification of inter-caste conflicts and the growing politicization of rural society.

- ❑ The non-recognition of women's work in rural and agricultural contexts and the failure to ensure their legal rights to land continue to be matters of concern. This despite the fact that there is a growing feminization of agriculture and an inter-linked feminization of poverty.
- ❑ The post 2005 intensification of governmentality (via programmes such as NREG, NRHM, Bharat Nirman etc) is significant and methodologies and perspectives to review and analyse them are required. Review mechanisms and local accountability structures and processes for such programmes need urgent attention.
- ❑ Across the nation there are a wide variety of labour regimes, including emergent forms that integrate established social norms and new market logics. Far from a complete shift to wage labour there are now regimes that include; the continued hold of bonded and other forms of labour retention and exploitation to the emergence of new individual and group based work rates; contract labour; and piece rates payment, migrant labour, and the new demand for labour based on an 'economy of haste'. All of these have significance not only for production processes and costs of agricultural produce but are also linked to altering power structures and relations in rural areas.
- ❑ Given widespread environmental and ecological degradation there is need for more research, studies and support for programmes that can scaffold local knowledge systems, including production practices in dryland regions, pastoral belts, coastal regions, and upland areas. Issues of climate change and global warming, loss of biodiversity, and food security, need urgent attention.

The seminar concluded by endorsing the urgent need for scholars and institutions to engage with issues pertinent to rural and agrarian India and to forge inter-institutional partnerships and collaborations. The participants decided to form a group which could first be sustained through an e-group to share materials and ideas. Plans were made to organize another seminar in 2011 at a rural university or institution and to disseminate the report of this seminar to a wider group.

## Introduction

Based on observations of a decline in standards of academic, policy-making, media reportage, and informed discussions on the conditions and trends in rural and agrarian issues, a two-day seminar-cum-consultation was organized at NIAS by **A.R. Vasavi** of the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore and **Padmini Swaminathan** of Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, with support from the **Ford Foundation, New Delhi**. The focus of the seminar-cum-consultation was not only to identify the trends and complexities in rural India but also to assess the state of research, teaching, and the availability of reading materials in various academic institutions, and to explore the possibility of initiating a national-level network to study rural and agrarian issues.

**A.R. Vasavi** (Social Anthropologist and Professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore) summarized the objectives and orientation of the seminar-cum-consultation. She regretted the fact that funds were not forthcoming from government sources for such a meeting, and pointed out that this reinforced the fact that it has become difficult to access financial support for integrated studies on rural and agrarian issues.

Although 'rural' life is a reality for a majority of Indians, there is a tendency in several circles to see the 'rural as redundant'. Such a perspective has led to predicting the inevitable decline of agricultural and allied rural economies and to anticipating the 'grand transformation' to an urban and global economy. The purpose of this seminar-cum-consultation was not only to address such official and policy attitudes but also to engage with several related issues pertaining to future research, teaching and the development of texts and materials for the study of rural and agrarian India.

Several trends in rural India and their complexities and contradictions warrant such an engagement. Among these trends is the growing differentiation between regions, with sharp contradictions between them. Two extremes of such regional differences are seen in the conditions of the remote Adivasi/tribal regions and the regions of Punjab and Kerala both of which are now integrated into the global circuits of capital and labour, albeit in sharply contradictory forms. In addition to such differentiation there is the incorporation of the hinterlands into the expanding natural resource extraction industry, corporatisation of retail food trade and the food industry, and integration of rural land into the global real estate grid. As capital expands into hinterlands marked by underdevelopment and deprivation, it is aided and abetted by the deployment of the State machinery to support natural resource extraction and the displacement of local populations. As a result, the nation witnesses various forms of violence by agencies of the State, corporate groups and anti-state actors. Caught within this triangulation of power and violence is a large body of people for whom the structures and processes of democracy have become even more distant.

In addition, there are other forms of distress which include not only suicide by agriculturists but also the spread and increase of malnutrition, dispossession and circular migration, resulting in rapid capability decline, feminization of agriculture and the emergence of new forms of servitude. State attempts to address some of these forms of dispossession have led to the development and deployment of welfare programmes such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee programme (NREG). The impact of this and other programmes on the life conditions of rural people, and on rural social and economic structures and orders, is yet to be fully studied and understood. The ability of such programmes to re-order the entrenched forms of structures such as caste, which coincide with class privilege and resources, is unclear, and in-depth research and follow-up are required at multiple sites. Given these complex trends, it may be important to indicate that in addition to the ‘agrarian question’ that largely pertained to the role of capital in transforming agriculture and to emergent class relations, other key factors and ‘questions’ that pertain to conditions of labour, environment, gender, caste, globalization, new production regimes, and technology also need to be taken into account.

If studies and teaching must factor in these issues and trends, how can teaching, research and texts be facilitated in the varied educational institutions? How can policy endeavours factor in these complex trends? To overcome the increasing silence and distance of academia from these issues and trends, a new and engaged body of research, which can also feed into policy directives and ideas, is needed. This conference sought to address the theoretical perspectives required to understand the complexities of contemporary rural and agrarian India and forge collaborations between academics and policy-makers, and between institutions and groups, so that a body of students and researchers can engage with these issues, and develop a pool of knowledge on all the current trends.

A.R. Vasavi also summarized a broad review of current academic (research and teaching) programmes in the country that focus on rural and agrarian studies or research. The primarily net-based survey (and therefore not exhaustive or comprehensive) covered courses and programmes at the graduate and post-graduate levels in seven different types of institutions and was conducted at NIAS<sup>1</sup>.

## **Review of Agrarian and Rural Studies Programmes**

Overall, the review confirms the impression that courses, programmes and research on rural and agrarian issues have been on the decline. The ICSSR institutions (26 in various parts of the country) appear to be the most engaged. Most of them offer research programmes in rural and agrarian issues with a significant proportion of doctoral dissertations focusing on rural and

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was carried out by reviewing programmes offered by national institutions, central and state universities, deemed universities, private universities, and NGOs. Rachel Matthew assisted in conducting the review at NIAS.



agrarian issues. However, since the ICSSR institutions are primarily research institutions, no substantial programmes/courses in agrarian studies or rural studies have been developed in recent years. A thorough review of the content, orientation and overall standards of teaching-learning and the body of research in these institutes is long-overdue. The contributions of these institutions to state and central policy-making needs to be assessed and future engagements in the development of state and central annual plans, vision documents etc., needs to be encouraged.

The introduction of the MBA in rural marketing at the G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, illustrates the trend towards initiating market-oriented teaching and research programmes. Of the 51 national-level institutions covered by the review, seven offered post-graduate diplomas or degrees in rural management and/or administration. The fact that none of the 29 Agricultural Universities covered by the survey offered courses in social sciences to agricultural students, including those undertaking doctoral work at these universities, shows a glaring neglect and absence of integration of social and political studies of rural and agrarian issues. Universities in 17 states (a total of 158, both central and state) were also reviewed. Of these, only 40 universities offered Master's courses in rural sociology or rural development. Of the recently established private universities, of which 17 were reviewed, only six offered a Master's in either rural management or marketing. Among the private universities, only Manipal University had a Master's in Rural Development and none of the others had regular courses or programmes in either rural studies or with a focus on agrarian issues. For the past fifteen years, some NGOs have been offering courses (short-term and diploma courses) in rural development. Seven large NGOs offer such courses, including certificate courses open to the larger public. There is a large potential for improving knowledge, databases and training in the State Institutes for Rural Development [SIRD], which are functional in most states. Given their mandate of training elected representatives and administrators, many of the SIRDs offer 'training' in rural development, decentralized administration and planning, watershed and agricultural development, impact assessment and gender awareness. No review of the content, orientation and impact of the SIRDs was undertaken but the possibility of future collaboration between SIRDs, research institutes, and educational institutions can be considered.

Presentations at the various sessions also highlighted the decline in the number of courses, programmes, student enrollment and body of research on rural and agrarian issues. This reinforces the need to arrest this decline and introduce the study of rural and agrarian issues in all the disciplines and the new multidisciplinary programmes.

## **State of Research on Rural Issues: Challenges in National Institutions**

**R. S. Deshpande** (Director, ISEC, Bangalore) elaborated on the changes in the study and teaching of economics and agricultural economics in research institutions. A key concern is the growing compartmentalization of the disciplines with a lack of interlinkages between them. There is a

trend of mathematisation or quantification of the disciplines, which then ignore the qualitative understanding of real rural issues. The trend is to publish papers with quantitative analyses (particularly in international journals]) because these are recognized in academia or are necessary for gaining admission into national and international institutions. The lack of good textbooks or subject-specific reference books for teaching at the post-graduate level compounds the problem.

The history of research on rural issues shows that in the 1960s, the focus was on debates relating to the mode of production, drought, food security, lack of reform, etc. Since the 1970s was the period of the Green Revolution, and several agricultural researchers got a chance to visit US universities, the standard research methodology was guided by mathematics and linear programming. This started the decline in understanding rural problems. Later, in the 1990s, environment, trade and macro- modeling became the focus of research on agriculture. It was at this time that the Rural Development department of Bangalore University was closed. Currently the major challenges in rural development studies are at the level of pedagogies, relevant and adequate books studies.

Reflecting on the engagement of the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), New Delhi, with rural issues, **Mary John** (Director, CWDS) provided an interesting account of the nature of the interface between women's studies and rural studies. According to Mary John, the first striking fact is that the very birth of women's studies in India in the 1970s crystallized in direct ways around a very specific subject – rural women, or more precisely, rural, poor women. First generation women's studies' scholars like Neera Desai or Vina Mazumdar, for instance, focussed on the discovery of new knowledges pertaining to rural poor women and the need for more such knowledge production through the establishment of research in women's studies. This kind of framework needs to be understood both in contrast to the priorities of the pre-independence women's movement, which is now criticised for its urban and elite bias, as well as within the context of the 1970s,– years of economic and political ferment – which witnessed a widespread reclaiming of rural struggles and issues by a newly politicized intelligentsia. Mary John remarked on the fact that women's studies as a new field of study and research was established as early as 1974, *before* the establishment of women's organizations and the larger re-emergence of women's movements in the late 1970s and 1980s. While autonomous women's groups certainly took up urban issues, such as dowry murders, obscenity in films and so on, rural women became an early priority for research, and especially for action-research. The establishment of the Centre for Women's Development Studies in 1980, for instance, reflected this prioritization.

A number of fresh issues centre on rural women and households (including the adverse sex ratio, health and nutrition) and are linked to two other issues, viz women's work and women's rights to land. The first brought into the limelight the flexible nature of housework and the extraordinary range of work women routinely undertake in agriculture—the care of livestock,

fuel and fodder collection – most of which remained unrecognized and without value. Major efforts were subsequently launched to improve the enumeration of such work within the Census and NSS, and to encourage political mobilization around work and unequal wages. The second issue concerns the lack of access to land and land rights – an issue that figured in movements as early as the Bodh Gaya Struggle among landless labourers in U.P. The connection between land rights, asset creation for women and sustainable livelihoods was the basis for the pioneering action-research project established by CWDS in Bankura district of West Bengal as early as 1981, which grew into a large federation of mostly tribal women in the region. Perhaps the most salient point to be made in this context is that these foundational and early demands raised within women's studies around the lack of status and rights for women are still largely unresolved issues that have to be highlighted repeatedly. More recently the efforts by the Group of Feminist Economists (established to help engender the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan) to have the government address basic issues relating to the non-recognition of women's work and their lack of rights in relation to property and resources, had to be rehearsed with members of the Planning Commission!

Furthermore, Mary John wondered whether the overall concern of this consultation, viz the decline in rural and agrarian studies in recent decades, is related not just to changing priorities in political economy and the rise of globalization (including a new focus on the urban), but also to trends such as the feminization of agriculture. Given the out-migration of upper castes and rural elites to urban spaces and the increased dependency on women's labour for sustaining agriculture and rural livelihoods in many parts of the country, the question that arises is to what extent could the change in composition of those dependent on rural economies, and particularly of those on agriculture, account for shifts in perceptions, ideologies and actual trends concerning the place of the rural in the larger scheme of things?

In the 1990s, especially with the onset of globalization, rural women became institutionally visible in significantly new ways. One term in particular gained prominence at that point in time, namely the so-called 'empowerment' of women. In relation to the market –and this has been remarked upon by many – the formation of Self-Help Groups became the single most significant intervention for women, as a solution to the problems of lack of livelihoods and asset creation. In the realm of governance, the re-emergence of Panchayats and the one-third reservation of seats for women (most recently increased to 50%) has been the other significant phenomenon. How must these be assessed? One of the problems with the term 'empowerment' and its use in these institutional contexts is its narrow, if not reductive, deployment. 'Empowered women' in the dominant agendas of the state and international agencies become the safety net for poverty alleviation and developmental strategies, precisely in the rural areas beset by stagnation if not crisis. It is therefore absolutely essential that the role of SHGs be analysed not in isolation from larger processes but in full conjunction with them. What role do SHGs play in the current political economy? Where do the Panchayats stand within the shifting world of

political structures, development and governance agendas? To what extent are ‘women’ still recipients of welfarism rather than active subjects in their own right? Mary John concluded her note by hoping that in thinking through the shifting trajectories of the rural and the agrarian, the critical lens of gender studies can play a role in enabling a better understanding of both; what is happening in rural areas and what can be done to change it.

Located in a CSIR institution, and with long experience of researching issues in agriculture from a science and technology perspective, Rajeswari Raina (Professor, National Institute for Science, Technology, and Development Studies (NISTADS, New Delhi) provided a comprehensive account of the nature of the multiple and widespread institutional failures. These were manifested in the neglect of State Agricultural Universities, repetitive and ritualistic research in ICAR, etc., and the resulting crises which have afflicted agricultural science and technology. Raina’s presentation posed two key questions: one, the role of the State in rural/agrarian research and knowledge systems, and two, the role of the civil society. The latter was posed in order to examine how this space could be expanded, strengthened and empowered (with local political and expert legitimizations). Further, Raina observed that while thousands of alternatives – ways of knowing and practicing agriculture, linking with rural economic-ecological-political systems—are being tried in the civic space, the ‘national institutes’ or organizations of research, teaching and extension, credit, input supply, public procurement etc., are firmly rooted in the conventional socio-technological paradigm (mainly, monoculture cereal cropping systems based on irrigation-chemicals and public subsidies/support).

Of the three critical components of agriculture – physical, chemical and biological – the industrial appropriation and substitution of the physical and chemical components is almost complete. But, it is the biological component that can enable further industrial control and appropriation of agriculture. It consists of all the inputs, services and systems understood by and provided by rural populations and local decentralized knowledge systems. The Bt gene only helps control destruction by specified actors; it offers no additional advantage to the crop or soil and water systems, nutrition or any other service that agriculture provides. But these are not issues addressed by the national institutes that study agricultural/rural issues. The labour and knowledge displaced from agrarian production/distribution systems by this industrial appropriation is not analysed by academia (irrespective of their ideological proclivity- left, right or centre). Rajeswari Raina emphasized that it is worrisome that this displacement and denigration of local traditional knowledge, gendered insights and skills, rights and cultural values, has been encouraged by default by the very gatekeepers of the agricultural science and technology establishment.

Today, the state does not seem to be receptive to or facilitative of the changes needed in mainstream agricultural science and technology (eg enable experiments, verify existing alternatives, support informed public opinion). Why is that so? To understand, we must go back briefly to the history of the green revolution, not to question the high-yielding varieties (HYVs)

or the chemicals, but to explore the rules and norms that were created during that period, which have now become fossilized and not amenable to change. The ‘package of practices’ is one such archaeological artifact still produced annually with ritual pomp by agricultural research, ostensibly to train extension officers on the specific varieties, nutrients, management requirements, etc., of specific crops. This norm of linear technology transfer is at the core of the pedagogy of agriculture and is also the primary driver of the inability to learn and change. The ‘policy-makers’ unwillingness to engage with these core concerns and the dominant ‘agenda-setting’ role played by the state and national and international expertise (formal S&T) in agriculture are two stumbling blocks.

The current emphasis on privatizing everything – (including failed public sector units) extends to agricultural research and development (R &D) also. But private R&D has no interest in servicing 86% of India’s farms (marginal and small holdings, over 60% of them in drylands, mountain and coastal ecosystems, and living off crop-livestock systems or fisheries or tree crops) which receive hardly any research support in the form of funds and personnel, even from the public sector). We are dealing with national organizations that may never be able to even comprehend the magnitude and complexity of the problem. Are these national institutes, created to ensure national food security, doing their job? If not, is there a need to think about regional food security and sovereignty based on regional knowledge and support systems, and therefore forge partnerships with relevant actors in the civic space? These are a few of the several uncomfortable questions that Raina’s presentation raised.

Presentations by Gladwin Joseph (Director, ATREE, Bangalore) and P. V. Satheesh (Director, DDS, Andhra Pradesh) provided insights into concerns linked to the larger environmental and conservation issues and to the ways in which non-governmental organizations are seeking to address them. **Dr. Gladwin Joseph**, (Director, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Bangalore) outlined his organization’s approach towards tackling the agrarian question in India. ATREE’s research falls primarily in the areas of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. The organization increasingly recognizes the need for an interdisciplinary approach to the issue and has been making efforts towards this by building a faculty drawn from both the natural and social sciences, pioneering a doctoral programme with strong emphasis on the interlinkages between the social and ecological systems, and engaging with communities through its six ‘Community Based Conservation Centres’ (CCCs) spread across four states in the country. The key question that researchers at ATREE have been trying to address is to enable and reconcile inter-connected scales – improved yields and biodiversity; food security and food sovereignty; incomes and ecological services. Research and outreach activities in the CCCs currently span a range of questions that include: climate change and farmers perceptions, ways of adaptation, changes in pastoral livelihoods, watershed services to farmers, ecological linkage to social distress and policy drivers, comparing local and distant benefits from indigenous and introduced agroforestry systems, and reconciling scientific and

economic advantages in indigenous farming practices. From these diverse study locations, it emerges that improved traditional methods based on ‘demand-based research’ efforts can score better in most selected criteria compared to both the presently common intensive and low yielding casual farming. Future research at ATREE will focus on the following: 1. Developing inclusive, nuanced, integrated and robust field-driven methods. 2. Matching scales in research and policy processes 3. The inclusion of the least empowered social groups such as women, the poorest (marginal/landless). 4. Addressing the dichotomous choice questions: between ‘debt vs hunger’ or between ‘scaling up or leaving agriculture’. The key challenge here is to ensure a rigorous and realistic adoption of ‘social-ecological systems’ approach towards applying scientific and technical know-how for ecosystems. Keeping in mind the global and country level drivers (policies, trade, climate change) and understanding local socio-political dynamics (class, caste, gender equity and culture) are challenges that ATREE is preparing to face. As for pedagogical engagement in this direction, ATREE is developing two new graduate level courses. The first of these (around the theme of global change, agrarian studies and food security) examines how biophysical and socioeconomic changes are altering the structure and function of human-environment systems on a global scale, and how this change together with the transformation of food systems have led to specific outcomes for agriculture, biodiversity, and rural livelihoods in rural south India. This change will be investigated from multiple perspectives, and across scales, in attempting to arrive at a holistic understanding of drivers, processes, and outcomes of change. A second, related course will focus more closely on locally appropriate agroforestry systems in the backdrop of global social, economic and climatic changes.

**P. V. Satheesh** (Director, Deccan Development Society, Andhra Pradesh) highlighted the need for rural research to have a ‘worm’s eye view’. In the face of an increasing trend towards corporatisation of rural development which is primarily ‘macho’ and mainstream, there is an urgent need for research to sustain people’s knowledge systems. Participatory research can support the sovereignty of people and also sustain a community charter on climate-related crises. Assessment tools are required which can scaffold the livelihoods of millions instead of seeking to displace them and the knowledge systems that are integral to them.

## Teaching, Texts and Research in State Universities

This session was aimed at taking stock of the state of teaching and research relating to agrarian and rural issues in institutes of higher education in the country.

**N. Ramagopal** (Professor of Economics, Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu) described the state of economics courses and research at the Annamalai University, which is situated in a rural area and caters primarily to students from rural areas. When the University was established, the Faculty of Agriculture had eight departments under it and also a centre for rural development. During 1963-1990, MA, M.Lit, and M.Phil theses had focused on agricultural issues and had



generated a rich body of material on local agricultural economics. Students conducted research on various rural and agrarian topics such as productivity, labour absorption, technology adoption in agriculture, status of women in agriculture, drought, poverty, non-farm employment, rural development, risk management in agriculture, etc. There was an absence of corporate interest and much of the research was funded by the state government with some additional inputs from Reading University, UK. An example of the excellent quality and relevance of some of this research can be found in work such as that by Selvarajan, who had developed 86 indicators to assess rural development.

In the 1990s the trend shifted from agricultural economics to agri-business studies. Most of the research on agricultural economics focused on resource economics. The enrollment rates for agriculture and rural studies witnessed a steady fall. Currently, agricultural economics and rural development are no longer core subjects. Environmental economics, stock market economics and industrial economics became popular among students because of their high job potential. Initially most of the students were from the rural areas. They had lived and experienced rural life and had a passion for rural studies and did research on topics that were close to their lives. The University also promoted various rural research projects as a means of collecting high quality data for developing a data bank for the future use of researchers, government and policy-makers. More recently, the MBA in agri-business management has become a popular course and the focus is on the job market. As per AICTE schemes faculty are also forced to attain MBA degrees to teach the MBA courses. This results in the decline of research on rural economics and agricultural economics.

**H. D. Prasanth** (Reader, Kannada University, Karnataka), spoke about the tensions between development studies, the conditions of rural areas and the requirements of people. Since most academic theories are from the West, addressing issues of rural development has become problematic. Many faculty members repose faith in certain theories in the belief that these can bring about equality in the village but they are not able to address the issues of social injustice and gender bias that exist in villages. With 'modernisation theory' as the lead theory, academia has been unable to develop and draw on perspectives that can be relevant to our Indian rural societies. What accounts for this? Is it that rural development studies are urban or elite-oriented or is it the failure to understand the reality of rural problems? The development of agriculture and rural society is now considered to be synonymous with the introduction of capital-intensive and modern agricultural methods. As a result, the understanding of social issues such as the role of caste, religion and social strategies has declined. The change in power relations and the impact of the introduction of panchayathi raj and more recently NREGA have become relevant to rural studies but have not received adequate attention. A major issue regarding text and pedagogy is that most of the literature relevant to rural settings is in English and are not easily accessible to many students. It is essential to translate all the major literature relevant to rural society and to foster local literature and writings.

**Wandana Sonalkar** (Department of Economics, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Maharashtra) stated that the discussions at the consultation brought home to her the fact that there has been no centre for focused research on agrarian and rural studies in Maharashtra for almost two decades. There was a time when the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune, played this role, and its history goes back to the Servants of India Society and the central figure of D.R. Gadgil. The existence of such a centre is important for teaching and research in the state universities. Thus, during the 1970s and 1980s, courses on Agricultural Economics as well as on Rural Development and the Co-operative Movement were taught in the Department of Economics, and they were popular with students from rural backgrounds. Researchers from the Gokhale Institute also played a leading role in the Maharashtra *Arthashastra Parishad*, a forum for writing and publishing research papers on economics in Marathi. However, a negligible number of books on the subject were produced in the Marathi during this period. In fact the language of these texts was often more difficult to understand than the essays in English. Yet, research students could relate to an ongoing body of research relevant to their own state and in their own language. But several changes have, since then, altered the teaching and orientation of economics. Over a period of time, the paper on cooperation was dropped from the syllabus and ‘Rural Development’ came to be seen as a ‘soft option’. Agricultural Economics continued to draw students, but senior teachers left the teaching to juniors. Research by Ph.D. students in this area tended to be repetitive.

Over time, the composition of the student body in Ambedkar Marathwada University has changed. More students from remote regions and from Dalit or OBC families, with primarily rural and agricultural backgrounds, are enrolling in the University. As these students gain in confidence and become more articulate, there is a clearly expressed hunger for reading material that is accessible and relevant to their world. There is also an anxiety about employment as teaching appears to be the only option. In the last few years, Sonalkar observed, her department has addressed these concerns through interdisciplinary programmes rather than through regular post-graduate departments. For example, seminars and conferences organized by the Women’s Studies Centre have drawn a wide and enthusiastic response. Students have been asked to conduct small field studies on rural society as part of the certificate course in Women’s Studies. Other similar centres have invited research students to make presentations at workshops in the presence of resource persons familiar with the social and economic issues in the state. Sonalkar and her colleagues are now taking part in a project which aims to involve teachers and researchers from rural and non-upper-caste backgrounds in developing original teaching materials in Marathi in the social sciences.

Sonalkar maintains that while the advantage of this university is that it provides a milieu in which first-generation students in higher education can feel comfortable, students nevertheless need to be guided to a point from which they can rediscover the confidence to use academic tools to understand their world—which is agrarian and rural. Training in research skills and exposure to academic debates on contemporary issues immediately needed.



## Emergent Issues in the study of Rural India

A concern that the workshop sought to address was related to the waning interest in the study of issues relating to agriculture, agrarian structures and rural transformation, despite the fact that agriculture and the rural economy and society continue to be major segments in India. Reflecting on this disenchantment, **Narasimha Reddy** (Economist, formerly with the Department of Economics, University of Hyderabad) wondered whether the inability of grand theories to explain the 'persistence of peasantry' in developing economies, coupled with the non-availability (as yet) of alternative, overarching theoretical frameworks to comprehend the diversity that characterizes present-day agrarian economies of countries such as India, may have led to this situation where scholarship is now largely confined to explaining only certain aspects of change in rural areas. In his two-part address, Reddy dwelt on the overall scenario before moving on to describe the change that a particular institutional initiative has brought about in the rural areas of Andhra Pradesh.

According to Reddy, the agrarian question or the issue of agrarian transformation received considerable attention in Marxist literature. Lenin and Kautsky were pioneers in explaining the development of capitalist agriculture through the transformation of early feudal agrarian relations into capitalist relations. There was consensus on the different paths of transformation towards capitalist agriculture. In India there was wide-ranging research and debate in the 1950s and 1960s, and extending into 1970s, on the nature and direction of development of agrarian relations. But these tapered off without a broad consensus as there was little evidence to suggest that peasant agriculture in India would transform through proletarianisation and that a sizeable proportion of agriculture would come under capitalist farming. The classical Lewisian framework (which postulated that predominantly agricultural and underdeveloped countries, characterized by unlimited supply of labour would transform towards capitalist development through shift of labour from agriculture to the fast developing modern industrial and other non-agricultural activities), also turned out to be nowhere near the reality of agrarian change in countries like India. Both Marxian and non-Marxian theories of agrarian or rural transformation were based on the historical experience of capitalist development of developed countries. But the presently developing countries, most of which have emerged from a colonial past, do not seem to reflect any such path dependency.

The disenchantment with the grand theories of agrarian transformation brought about a shift in focus from 'vanishing peasantries' to 'persistence of peasantry'. The Marxist approach explained it in terms of persistence of 'petty commodity production' even as the periphery integrated with the fast globalizing capital. The Bernsteinian perspective of transformation at the periphery was premised upon a revolutionary break. The failure of grand theories to explain the transformation of peasant societies revived interest in Chayanov's explanation of intergenerational survival of peasant society which persisted in spite of self-exploitative conditions. The resolution in terms

of 'cooperatisation' of peasant farms again does not seem to happen because of the socio-cultural conditions that prevail. The other streams of non-Marxian explanations are, for example, of the type offered by Theodor Shanin, according to whom socio-cultural factors subject peasantry to multidimensional subjugation by powerful outsiders. The resolutions out of these conditions are again left open as situation-specific cases which need to be studied and interpreted.

The decline in interest in teaching and research in agrarian studies and rural transformation may be due to several factors. But the decline of the relevance of grand theories and the lack of a credible framework for engaging with the agrarian question is an important aspect. Under these conditions, the revival of interest in agrarian and rural studies could begin from the other end, viz. in understanding conditions in rural areas, the state of the peasantry and their ways of coping with the processes of globalization into which they are fast integrating, and the nature of emerging institutional changes. There have been a number of changes in the rural areas of which we could discern strands such as institutional initiatives, collective action, etc, which are as diverse as India itself. But none of them are 'big' or 'grand' enough to draw wider attention. But understanding these changes in their various dimensions becomes a necessary condition for unraveling the direction of change in agrarian and rural societies.

Narasimha Reddy went on to describe the nature of one type of institutional stirring in Andhra Pradesh. The SHG (self-help groups) movement started in Andhra Pradesh, in a modest way, at the behest of the UNDP-sponsored South Asia Poverty Alleviation Project (SAPAP), in a few villages of three districts, viz Mahaboobnagar, Anantapur and Kurnool, in 1994-95. In June 2000 it was extended to six districts as a comprehensive District Poverty Initiatives Project (APDPIP). In its second phase, beginning June 2002, it was extended to 16 districts, and finally, in 2004, it was extended to all the 22 rural districts of Andhra Pradesh. The main anchor institutions in all these phases were women's SHGs and the responsibility for mobilizing women, helping them form SHGs, providing training towards improving capacity and helping them form a federal structure has been taken up by the State through the Society for Eliminating (of) Rural Poverty (SERP), of which the Chief Minister of the state is the Chairman, and a senior civil servant is the Chief Executive Officer. The SERP operates a SHG-based poverty alleviation programme under the banner Indira Kranthi Patham (IKP), which in its earlier incarnation was known as 'Velugu' (meaning 'light').

SERP is implementing IKP targeting all villages and all rural poor households. IKP places special emphasis on reaching the 2.6 million poorest and most vulnerable households and prioritizes women-centered development. IKP builds on the systematic efforts made in Andhra Pradesh over the last 18 years to encourage rural women to form affinity-based SHGs for collective action. It is the single largest grassroots women's empowerment program in South Asia. IKP has organized 1,06,75,321 women into 9,49,066 SHGs in 36,391 Village Organizations (VOs) in 1,099 Mandal Samakhyas (MSs) in 22 Zilla Samakhyas (ZSs). IKP is financed by the World

Bank, the Government of Andhra Pradesh and the rural communities, and this investment has leveraged significantly more resources from other public programs and from commercial banks. Over 90% of the rural poor households in the state belong to an SHG, and today, IKP is present in every village of Andhra Pradesh.

The SHG movement started as a form of social mobilization of women with a thrust on promotion of thrift and, later, as a way to provision credit for income-generating activities. Over the years the SHGs under the IKP have acquired capacity to initiate diverse activities that make a difference to living and livelihood. Presently the SHG involvement under IKP extends to as many as 18 different activities ranging from access to bank-linked credit including total financial inclusion, to income-generating activities like dairy development, community-managed sustainable agriculture, marketing of agricultural and minor forest produce, food security, health and nutrition, community-based insurance and pension schemes, etc. As Reddy emphasized, the wealth of information relating to the SHG movement in Andhra Pradesh does not by itself provide or enable a comprehensive understanding of agrarian issues/changes in Andhra Pradesh.

In a different vein, **Padmini Swaminathan** (Economist and Professor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai), raised questions relating to how economists understand and teach 'economic development', wherein agriculture in particular and the rural way of life in general are neither considered 'modern' nor as holding a future either for individuals or for the country. For instance, the manifesto of the 2006 state elections of West Bengal quoted in Dia Da Costa's book, *Development Dramas: Reimagining Rural Political Action in Eastern India* [read West Bengal] [Routledge, 2010], captures very succinctly not just the official but a fairly pervasive and entrenched understanding of all things 'rural'. "Agriculture is our foundation, industry our future", said Buddadeb Bhattacharya, among other things, leading Da Costa to observe that "Development thinking and Marxism tend to share the chief minister's disdainful vision of peasants and rural culture as base, history and legacy, but not future" [2010: 4].

At the height of the protests in Singur against the establishment of a car factory by the Tata group, a professor of economics wrote: "West Bengal's comparative advantage must lie with industry and services and not with agriculture... Since land is anything but abundant in West Bengal, efficiency requires that the state imports agricultural goods from the rest of India selling in return services and industrial goods" [A. Sarkar quoted in Dia Da Costa, 2010]. These views, again pervasive, construct agriculture and industry as a zero-sum game where the development of one can only be constructed by displacing extant livelihoods and modernizing the other.

When organizations and individual citizens protest the dispossession of rural livelihoods and meanings, their aim is not to suggest that West Bengal and/or for that matter, any other part of rural India, does not need capital investment, development or rural employment. Numerous

citizens across India want a future beyond the fields. What is being contested is the manner in which development planning and processes of rule dispossess and negate the value of rural social life and livelihood, thus rendering these existing meanings and practices of life and livelihood politically unthinkable and economically unviable.

Most development economists, as well as official commissions charged with the responsibility of addressing poverty, interpret structural transformation as modernization and measure structural transformation through the proportion of population that has moved out of agriculture into non-agriculture. While the NCEUS (National Commission on Employment in the Unorganised Sector) recognizes that movement into non-farm employment need not necessarily result in the worker/household gaining security, its discussion and emphasis thereafter is in finding pathways to address the theme of the increasing and continuing disorganization of labour. Why has prosperity eluded the agricultural labouring class even in states that proclaim their land reform policies to be successful? Why has agriculture become economically unviable as an occupation? Why is the pursuit of agriculture as a profession not associated with ‘modernization’? Why does it remain poorly researched – does the latter have anything to do with the compartmentalized nature of knowledge production (within and across disciplines)? At the level of policy we have ever so many schemes to address particular kinds of problems and particular classes of people, never mind if they work at cross purposes with each other, or even if they add to the problem (for example, free electricity contributing to ground water depletion) rather than working towards a solution.

Despite sixty odd years of ‘planned development’—one that was and is firmly premised on a trajectory of getting people out of the ‘primary’ (agricultural) sector into secondary and tertiary sectors—considerable numbers still remain in the primary sector, whose contribution to the national income has been consistently declining. The rural locale of this sector is also characterized by substantial numbers of people/households with poor resources in terms of education, skills, and assured sources of income. Given a mindset that is convinced about the futility of agriculture and lacking fall back options, neither research nor intervention is equipped to think through and come up with alternatives to such ways of thinking and functioning.

**P S. Vijay Shankar** (of Samaj Pragati Sahayog, Madhya Pradesh) provided an elaborate account of the nature of disparities between urban and rural India in terms of population, literacy levels and basic facilities such as water, sanitation, etc. The ‘rural’ within each state and across states is diverse, and the static picture provided by statistics does not capture the changes being experienced and taking place continually in rural areas. Vijay Shankar grouped these ‘forces of change’ into six categories: Commodities and Commodity Markets; Occupations; Technologies; Institutions; Role of State and Social Movements. Vijay Shankar described the nature of change occurring in each of these categories, and emphasized the need to capture and study this change so that informed policies can emerge, and also the need for such insights and information to

re-enter our teaching and research. For example, the emergence of new and cross-border markets for commodities not only propels Indian farmers squarely into the international arena but also impinges on their ability to satisfy their nutritional requirements. Similarly, on the occupational front, the scenario is far more complex and diverse than what conventional statistics is able to capture, given the emergence of what Vijay Shankar calls a 'rural informal sector' and the growth of an increasing body of 'landed labourers' among whom destitution rather than dispossession is the new emerging reality. Vijay Shankar also emphasized the fact that the State's role needs to be viewed as a contested terrain rather than merely dismissing it as an instrument in the hands of propertied classes.

## Regional Trends in Distress Conditions

While agriculture in particular and rural economy in general is experiencing 'distress' across the country, the nature of this distress and the combination of factors contributing to it remain poorly articulated. This session was aimed at comprehending rural and agrarian distress at a more disaggregated level. The session provided illuminating accounts from Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, and Orissa.

**Vamsi Vakulabaranam** (Faculty, Department of Economics, University of Hyderabad) presented a summary of some of his studies pertaining to distress in Andhra Pradesh. He focused on three dimensions of agrarian distress: (a) Slowdown in the yield rates due to fatigue of the Green Revolution (GR) technologies, especially after the 1990s; (b) Withdrawal of the State since the 1990s and its effect on GR-supported agriculture dependent on strong state support; (c) Political economic explanations for why the state has withdrawn from agriculture.

In his presentation Vakulabaranam elaborated on the last two aspects of increased agrarian distress. The state has withdrawn from multiple arenas pertaining to agriculture. At the same time, trade liberalization tended to import a world-wide agricultural recession into India in the 1990s. Instead of improving the terms of trade in agriculture as was expected by the advocates of agricultural trade liberalization (like Anne Krueger), this resulted in a decline in the terms of trade for agriculture, especially in the arena of non-foodgrain crops. At the same time, withdrawal of the state has basically meant that input costs have tended to rise. This has caused a 'double squeeze' on farmers, resulting in increased distress.

Within this broad context, Vakulabaranam's focus was mainly on the weakening of the institutional credit arena and its implications. He looked at broad macro data as well as field-level data from three villages of Telangana. Using macro-level data, Vakulabaranam was able to identify two paradoxes. The first paradox is that although Telangana witnessed significant growth in agricultural output (more than 4% per annum) between the 1970s and the 2000s, the agricultural population witnessed some gains in their income and consumption only up to the 1980s. In the 1990s there

was a sharp decline in their consumption. Vakulabaranam calls this ‘Immiserizing Growth’. The second paradox is that Telangana farmers reacted to improved price signals in the non-foodgrain crops in the 1970s and 1980s and increased the area under these crops as well as output. However, after the early 1990s, the relative prices of these crops began to decline. But farmers continued to increase the cultivation of these crops. Vakulabaranam terms this ‘Anomalous Supply Response’.

Vakulabaranam explains these two paradoxes through the insights gained from his field work aimed at understanding how credit markets function in Telangana. As institutional credit did not grow alongside the credit needs of farmers, they became more dependent upon moneylenders. This is how it works. Farmers usually take a loan at the beginning of their crop cycle from commission agents (or *artidars* or merchants), who get a commission on the volume of crop that is sold to them by the farmers. These agents give the farmers loans in kind by sending them to seed dealers and other input dealers. These dealers, in turn, impose a certain cropping choice on the farmers. The loan needs to be repaid by selling the same crop to the commission agents at the end of the crop cycle. The collateral in this case is the crop. Usually, non-food crop collaterals are imposed because they are easier to enforce, non-food crops are more capital intensive, and there are targets to meet from long-distance markets. As a result, farmers end up having to repay their loans in the form of non-food crop produce.

Even as non-food crop prices declined, farmers were forced to increase their cropping area and output since they had to meet their collateral requirements. When these prices were on the rise, farmers *voluntarily* increased cultivation of these crops, but as the prices declined, they were *forced* to increase cultivation of these crops (anomalous supply), giving rise to ‘forced commercialization’ in this region. At the same time, as they grew more of these crops, they ended with more produce (therefore, higher growth) and lower disposable income since non-food crops witnessed price declines (immiserization).

Between the 1980s and 2000, there was also a massive shift of elites from rural areas in Coastal Andhra, Rayalaseema and Telangana regions into urban spaces in Andhra Pradesh. This is visible in the NSSO data on wealth. This phenomenon also captures the formation of an indigenous capitalist class in Andhra Pradesh. Until the 1980s, the dominant class in AP was the rural rich. There was virtually no urban capitalist class in the state. By the 1990s, however, an urban capitalist class formed primarily from the ranks of the rural elite of the three delta regions of AP (Godavari, Krishna and Penna), was able to wield clout and significantly influence state policy. By the late 1990s, the entire development of the state was premised on the growth of a few cities, especially Hyderabad. This shifted the focus away from rural areas and that from agriculture, in particular. Policy changes in the context of agriculture were mainly focused on how to discipline the farmers and bring them to face the rigours of global markets. The above two mechanisms throw some light on the story of agrarian distress in Telangana and, to some extent, in other parts of Andhra Pradesh.



**Richa Kumar** (Science, Technology and Society Studies, School of Humanities, IIT Delhi) began by clarifying that she could not speak for the whole of Madhya Pradesh because the state is a fractious union of disparate areas with different geographies, ecologies, languages, cultural practices, and political organisation. In her opinion, it is imperative that any examination of conditions in rural areas be focused around agro-ecological zones and specific commodities that are grown there. Drawing on political state boundaries is problematic because generalisations are, then, made across a chasm of difference. Focusing on the Malwa region in the western part of the state, which consists of the Malwa plateau, (a section of the large Deccan trap that is a result of layers and layers of volcanic rock and lava melt,) Richa presented her research on the introduction in the 1970s of soyabean cultivation in this region and the transformations that have come about since then.

Soyabean is a cash crop which can be converted into value only by processing it into soyabean meal or deoiled cake (DOC) and soyabean oil. It cannot be consumed by humans or animals directly. Farmers have to sell their soyabean to processing companies in India through a chain of intermediaries, who then export the meal as cattle-feed to countries in the Middle East and South-East Asia. Thus, soyabean is a cash crop that links farmers in Malwa to global markets and global prices, and it did so, starting in the 1970s, and not in a process that began post-liberalisation in 1991. Private companies and private traders were as indispensable to its growth as government scientists and government-promoted cooperative societies. Unraveling the history of the introduction of soyabean helps question the dominant narrative of a critical shift in 1991 from a state-led to a market-led era of agricultural development. Furthermore, the introduction of soyabean cannot be read as a shift from subsistence to cash-crop cultivation because farmers in Malwa had earlier been linked to markets through cash crops like cotton, opium, sugarcane, and, primarily, wheat (special varieties like *sharbati* grown in Malwa are sent all over the country). Richa Kumar's research re-establishes the role of two important determinants of agrarian change. One is non-human actors such as the environment. She argues that soyabean took root specifically in Malwa because the crop suited the soil and rainfall conditions of the region and did not require much effort or alterations to the existing agricultural patterns. The cultivation timing of soyabean fit into the fallow window and enabled farmers to double crop the land. The second factor is the role of farmers and their kinship networks in encouraging innovation in varieties and spreading knowledge about agricultural practices. Their efforts are not recognized in narratives of the 'Yellow Revolution', (the introduction of soyabean) and this enables state and market actors to appropriate entirely the credit for introducing and promoting this crop.

The coming of soyabean was heralded as a singular, heroic, teleological narrative of economic progress. It was described as the crop that brought double cropping to Malwa, created rising incomes by linking farmers to a global cash economy, and brought monetary prosperity. But this narrative failed to recognize the role of power in distributing the monetary benefits accruing

from the ‘Yellow Revolution’. Richa Kumar presented the differentiation in its impact when viewed through the lenses of caste, class and gender.

**Gender:** Soyabean is a cash crop and its value can only be realised by selling it for cash through an intermediary in the village or taking it to the market yard, activities which are conducted almost always by men. Women do not ordinarily go to the market yard or interact with traders in the village; their husbands, brothers, sons, or other male family members do so. Even though women labour longer and harder in the soyabean fields than men, they do not have direct access to the cash resulting from the sale of the crop, except through mediation with men. The implication of this is that even though there is greater availability of cash in the village, it has not resulted in greater consumption or easing of the labour burden for women.

**Class:** Soyabean cultivation is fundamentally different from the green revolution in the way it is constituted. The growth of soyabean does not depend on irrigation. It is a rain-fed crop that can survive across a range of moisture stresses—both excess and scarce. Although fertilizers improved the yield, the crop was sturdy enough to survive in less fertile soils. Hence, even poor farmers could expect some output from the season without additional inputs and with very little farm management. Thus, the introduction of soyabean cultivation, in fact, has provided an economic cushion to poor farmers and has possibly worked against land alienation in Malwa.

**Caste:** Soyabean has given Adivasis of the hills and the plains of western Madhya Pradesh, who are amongst the most marginalised groups in India today, an alternative avenue for asserting themselves in socio-economic relationships with upper castes. An ‘economy of haste’ is created every year at the soyabean harvest time. Since this is the end of the rainy season, the chances of rain are high and machines cannot be used in wet soils. The soyabean pod has to be harvested within a week of ripening, or it opens and the seeds fall to the ground. These factors leave farmers with a very short period of time in which to complete the harvest and the increased requirement of labour results in the creation of an ‘economy of haste’. Thousands of Adivasis travel from various parts of western Madhya Pradesh to cut the soyabean in the fields of Malwa and their labour is crucial to making the soyabean economy work. Against a history of marginalization, the ‘economy of haste’ is an anomaly where adivasis are able to assertively negotiate the terms of work and relationships with potential employers (farmers) unlike other times of the year.

Despite these economic advantages, the legacy of soyabean has been the creation of an ecological crisis of massive proportions in Malwa. Extreme water scarcity has started plaguing this dryland region since the 1990s and this can be traced back to the introduction of soyabean. Soyabean was introduced in fallow lands but it also replaced water management practices in this region where the only source of water is the rain. The fantastic remuneration that came with the sale of soyabean also funded the purchase of water extraction technologies (tubewells, pumps, pipes)



to enable the cultivation of irrigated high-yielding varieties of wheat in the winter season. The soyabean-wheat technological complex has resulted in ground water mining and hardship for everyone in Malwa in the summer months.

There is also a need to conduct further research on employment possibilities for rural people beyond agriculture. In Malwa, poor adivasi labourers travel to the charcoal making fields of Gujarat or the construction sites in Special Economic Zones like Pithampur (in Madhya Pradesh). Richa's research suggests that only those who have nothing to come back to in the village end up migrating somewhat consistently and permanently. Those who have even a little bit of land prefer to avoid the pollution, health hazards, high cost of living, and loneliness associated with distress migration.

**Anita Gill** (Professor of Economics, Punjabi University, Patiala) examined the theme of distress in Punjab's agriculture through a study of the nature, magnitude and consequences of continued indebtedness among the farming community of Punjab. While indebtedness per se is not the issue, it is the erosion of the capacity to repay that she has explored in some depth in her note. Contrary to the popular perception that the indebtedness of Punjab farmers is mainly due to loans taken for unproductive purposes or conspicuous consumption, Gill finds that a greater proportion of loans were taken for productive purposes. The particular aspect about indebtedness leading to distress that Gill emphasizes is the interlinking of input and output markets with the credit market. The author's study of six villages in the Patiala region brought to light the fact that cash and inputs were the mode of lending while crop was the mode of repayment. Thus, in return for loans, farmers are forced to sell their crops through commission agents, who deduct the loan amount first and then pay the meager amount left to the farmers. As Gill observes, another round of an interlinked credit-crop contract then begins, since the loan amount received by cultivators after loan deduction is insufficient even for survival, let alone meet the spiraling cost of cultivation. The inability of formal financial institutions to meet the genuine credit needs of farmers has contributed in no small measure to the excessive dependence on informal lenders. This, in turn, is responsible for the persistence of indebtedness and exploitation. Placing the agrarian crisis in Punjab in the larger context of constraints to economic growth in Punjab, Gill feels that the strategy of economic transformation adopted by policy-makers has squeezed agricultural income without shifting the work force engaged in agriculture. Thus, the continuing adverse terms of trade between agriculture and non-agriculture activities throughout the 1980s and 1990s resulted in two lakh marginal and small farmers [around 12%] being forced to abandon farming and resort to petty non-farm jobs. Gill suggested some ways out of the crisis but cautioned that as in the rest of the country, the ongoing reform process is predominantly pro-private sector and market-oriented, and does not stimulate comprehensive economic growth.

A note submitted by **Gurpreet Singh** (M.Phil Student, CDS, Tiruvananthapuram) on 'Issues and Concerns of Punjab's Agriculture' complements Anita Gill's observations. It points out that

the Green Revolution technology helped in increasing productivity of only rice and wheat, and led to a large shift in resources including re-allocating land from other crops. Also, the wheat-rice cycle demands heavy irrigation, thus causing a serious imbalance between the availability and actual consumption of irrigation supplies. The deficit was met by exploiting ground water resources through tube well pumping. The water table fell drastically. During 1973, the water table was deeper than 10 metres in only 3 percent of the cultivated land, whereas by 2004 nearly 90 percent of the holdings had even deeper water tables. Electricity consumption per acre of wheat and rice has increased phenomenally. Furthermore, wheat-rice rotation over a long period on the same fields has caused deterioration in soil health, leading to imbalances in soil nutrients, which farmers have to make good at heavy additional cost.

**Banikanta Mishra** (Faculty, Xavier Institute for Management, Bhubaneswar) provided a broad overview of some issues afflicting the rural and agrarian sectors in Odisha. The rural-urban disparity in Odisha is quite conspicuous on some fronts. It is pointed out that, based on the 2006-07 Economic Survey of Orissa, 56.2 percent of the urban population in Odisha had MPCE of Rs.775 or more (52.4% for the country), but only 4.4% of the rural population lay in this group (15.4% for India). Using more recent data, one finds that the ratio of the State's rural to urban MPCE has fallen from 60% under NSS 55th round (July 1999 to June 2000) to 43% under the NSS 63rd round (July 2006 to June 2007); for India, the average fall was much less steep, from 57% to 53%. Based on the NSS data, the state had the second highest rural and urban unemployment rate in 2004-05.

Migration has also been a serious problem. The latest UNHDR-2009 put Odisha among the top five states in the country on the basis of large-scale migration of unskilled workers, with Odisha's mining districts of Kendujhar and Mayurbhanj registering 50% migration from rural areas. That apart, the failure of the NREG Scheme in the State caused large-scale migration from Bolangir in the late 2000s, while poverty forced many tribal girls and women to leave Sundargarh district. In addition, during 2007 and 2008, almost 30,000 fishermen living in villages near the banks of the Chilika migrated to neighbouring states in search of work as they were displaced by the increasing commercialization of prawn cultivation.

The agricultural front poses great challenges. As per the Economic Survey of Orissa 2009-10 (Government of Orissa 2010), agriculture contributes less than 30% of the State's GDP, although it employs around 60% of its workforce. A detailed study of Odisha's agriculture sector along with industrial and mining sectors found that during 1993-94 and 2003-04, the average annual growth in Odisha's per capita agricultural NSDP was -1.21%, whereas it was 11.66% for the mining sector. Similarly, average annual change in the agriculture sector's share in the State's total NSDP was -1.33%, while mining gained 0.53%. A critique of this work points out that between 1993-94 and 2008-09, the moving-average growth of the agriculture sector was 1.08% while for mining it was 12.30%. Time-series analysis at the state level also reveals that, during

1993-94 and 2003-04, the change in per capita income (PCI) in Odisha was driven significantly only by agriculture NSDP; a 1% change in per capita agriculture NSDP leads to a 0.34% change in the PCI.

Several other agricultural data also highlight the need for concern. During 1993-94 and 2003-04, GCA (gross cropped area) and NIA (net irrigated area) changed by -1.20% and -4.45%, respectively. Besides, exports of agricultural and forest-based products fell by 20% per year on the average during this period, while mining exports shot up by 14%. Share of power consumption by agriculture has also fallen from 3.1% in 2000-01 to 1.3% in 2008-09 though this would have primarily affected the big farmers. That forest area diverted to non-forest use during 1993-94 and 2003-04 increased by 43% per year on the average is a corroboration of mining-led neglect of agriculture during this period. The non-utilization and diversion of central scheme funds remain a concern, especially given the dismal conditions of rural Odisha and its farmers.

## **Re-visit Studies: Methodology and Content**

This session focused on the importance of 're-visit' studies of rural and agrarian issues. While such studies had gained importance until the 1970s, the decline in interest and ability to engage in such studies is a significant loss that has left gaps in the body of literature on agrarian and rural issues. The limited attempts and efforts made by only a few institutions in the country indicate that more concerted efforts are needed.

**Alakh Sharma** (Director, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi) presented highlights of the on-going research programme on inclusive development in Bihar [2009-12] and provided an elaborate overview of the methodology being used in the research. This research forms part of a series of longitudinal studies undertaken in Bihar since 1970-71. The current research envisages re-visit studies in 36 villages in six districts of Bihar, with more detailed longitudinal investigation of 12 villages. An important feature of the methodology is the re-visit of the same households which were surveyed in 1998-2000. Three types of research tools are being used: village-level community data, household questionnaire and focus group discussions. Sharma's also shared some of the lessons learnt in the course of conducting re-visit studies. For instance, the first study [1981-83] used mostly quantitative research tools. In the re-visits, these have been complemented with qualitative research tools, leading to a rich haul of data. Information, especially on wages, tends to have a bias, depending on whether it is reported by the employer or by the labourer. Surveys on and about women tend to face unique hurdles: female respondents are often not allowed to answer, and their male family members often interfere. This can be corrected to some extent by deploying well-trained female research investigators. Re-visiting the same household is sometimes tricky. Two key problems encountered in follow-up studies are that of the splitting of households over a period of time and 'missing households'.

Some key findings based on the re-visit study of villages in Purnia district, noted by Sharma, include the fact that change is occurring at a more rapid pace than Bihar's image of stagnation suggests. The primary force is migration and other forms of communication with the outside world, but this is not the only factor. Substantial shift in agricultural practices and universal elementary education are likely to create new social conditions. Gender relations are also changing. The state is starting to look like a benefactor rather than an exploiter. At the same time, Sharma notes that local production systems are still very narrowly based; agricultural innovation is concentrated among richer farmers; pressure on land continues to increase; social change has not greatly modified the local hierarchy; there are question marks over the functioning of local political institutions; and advances in the status of women are yet to be consolidated.

**J. Jeyaranjan** (Economist, Institute for Development Studies, Chennai) provided a synoptic overview of agrarian transformation in one village [Illuppakkorai] in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu, which he has visited and studied over the past two decades. His began with a description of the overall context within which to understand change in Illuppakkorai.

Tamil Nadu's economy has been experiencing a rapid shift in its sectoral composition. The service sector is growing at the cost of the primary sector, but despite this rapid shift, agriculture continues to be the principal occupation for the majority of the population. The salient characteristics of the agricultural sector of the state are the following: agriculture in general is on the decline; the area under crops and irrigation is decreasing; output is fluctuating around a stagnant line. There has been no increase in productivity for a long period of time and the proportion of land left fallow is on the increase. There is an intensification of water mining but there is little or no attempt to augment water resources. Existing sources are stressed due to over-exploitation but there is no move towards rational utilization and conservation of resources. A set of negative factors is weakening the agricultural sector. This includes free electricity for agriculture and new technology in drilling, pumping and operating irrigation motors. Unviable crop patterns are being followed by agriculturists in response to pricing policies adopted by the state.

The state indirectly discourages dryland agriculture by offering better prices for irrigated crops. Thus dryland agriculture is neglected, whereas unviable and unsustainable cultivation practices are encouraged. Even in irrigated agriculture, there has been no new breakthrough either in terms of new varieties or in crop husbandry. The problem is compounded further by the receding water table and the tensions over inter-state water disputes. At the farm level, widespread mechanization is happening. There is also a tightening of the labour market probably due to the rapid occupational diversification. Along with these changes, the neo-liberal policy adopted by the state has resulted in a decline in investment in agriculture (including credit and extension services).

It is within this context that the contours of change in the village economy of Iluppakkorai were situated and studied. Some important aspects of this change include the following: changes in the social composition of the village with a decline in the population of the dominant caste group; discernible demographic transition among the dominant Vellala households; changes in the work, production relations and the role played by the state have combined to bring about change in power relationships. These aspects were further elaborated:

### **Work**

The definition, period, and control over work seem to be undergoing radical shifts. Work is split into small packets. The duration of work has come down both for males and females. The number of days of work has also come down. Work is defined and executed at the discretion of the worker. As work is defined in smaller packets and is of shorter duration, the intensity of work has come down. Work is also very clearly defined. During the pre-green revolution days, the *Pannaiyal* relationship entailed the labour of the entire family of the worker over a period of one year but in reality it extended over a generation if not more. When the relationship changed to permanent labourers, the duration of the contract was one year. Then, when the daily wage labour system emerged, the contract covered one day. Currently, the duration of the contract is for the work and not for time and is akin to the piece-rate system in factory production. Extraction of unpaid work is impossible. This is the qualitative change in the nature of 'work' over this period of time.

### **Production Relations**

The contractual system of production relations that started during the mid-1980s has gained further strength and is currently the dominant form of production relations. The terms of contract are set by the workers and not by the landowners. The labour market has tightened and the number of agricultural workers is declining. Most of the younger male members of agricultural labour households do not seek work in agriculture. They seek employment in non-farm sectors in nearby towns. Consequently, the labour pool available for agriculture has shrunk and is growing old. However, it has started commanding a premium. While there is a definite decline in demand for labour due to mechanization, there is a simultaneous but greater decline in labour supply. Hence the change in the definition of 'work' and the premium for labour.

### **Debt**

Debt was an important element of the earlier forms of production relations. But currently there are changes in the debt relations between the landed and the labour households. The labour households have many sources of credit now. Earlier it was the moneylenders and later on it was the Self Help Groups. Now the micro finance institutions flood the credit market. Thus, one important link that defined production relations has been severed, and the dependence of labour households on landed ones for credit has almost disappeared. The credit and labour markets are thus de-linked. Hence, the dominance of the landed households in production relations has declined.

Another crucial link in the earlier production relations was the credit given for consumption. Even after the shift from the annual contract to daily wage system, the labour households were very often dependent on the landed households for their consumption requirements as they suffered frequent seasonal unemployment. Loyalties had to be displayed and maintained to access food credit. But the PDS rice available at Re one per kg completely freed labour households from the clutches of the landed households. Their new-found freedom was further enhanced when occupational diversification took place in households with non-agricultural sources of income. Thus, new relationships are emerging where workers can negotiate from a much stronger position.

### *Increasing Role of the State*

Another important and related aspect of change is the increasing role of the state. Important programmes and schemes that directly impact the lives of the rural people are being implemented by the State and Union Governments over the past decade. While the Union and State Governments are pursuing some neo-liberal policies, they are also implementing welfare programmes. While some programmes are targeted, others are universal. Households do combine these programmes and benefit from them. The universal public distribution system, NREGA, housing programme and old age pension schemes are impacting the lives of the poorer people and agricultural labourers in very important ways.

Along with this, the spread of SHGs and micro-credit combined with occupational diversification has resulted in a new kind of buoyancy in the lives of the landless agricultural labour households. The role of women within these households as the managers of resources has given them a position of importance and centrality in the household. They are managing to accumulate resources and invest small amounts. This has resulted in greater diversification, more freedom and better living conditions. This new-found freedom manifests itself in a different body language as well as in everyday language.

Aspiration levels have increased and multiple sources and avenues are relentlessly tapped to move up further. Whether the system will be able to meet these demands or will break and throw up a new system of organizing production is a question that requires our attention.

**M. Vijayabaskar** (Economist, MIDS, Chennai) presented a post-colloquia note which raised several pertinent questions that have to do more with how researchers map new learnings onto erstwhile(older) understandings of agrarian transformations, and the status and relevance of earlier debates relating to modes of production, peasant mobilizations and the like. Older concerns over agrarian transformation remain unresolved as new ones emerge. While not discounting the validity of new concerns, it is important to assess either the continued relevance of older concerns or the possibility that older concerns matter less in the present context. For example, stagnation in agriculture was explained in terms of social relations of production and



mode of appropriation of surplus rather than in terms of resource and environmental constraints like agro-climatic considerations, over-exploitation of ground water etc.,. Studies have also tried to show that rather than agro-climatic or environmental limits, it was the mode of appropriation of surplus that explains the variations in regional agriculture. Although it is true that Marxist explanations did not allow enough room for such factors, neglecting these explanations *in toto* is also problematic.

With reference to the terms of trade debate, it was believed that the rise of peasant mobilization since the late 1970s has helped farmers fare better vis-a-vis the non-agricultural sector. Sections of the left (inspired by modernization theories) considered that this squeezes the ability of the modern sector to save and facilitate growth. What is the status and relevance of that debate at present? Again, the favourable terms of trade towards agriculture in the 1970s were explained as a coalition between the big bourgeoisie, the landowning elite and the state. The big bourgeoisie was supposed to depend on the landlords for political mobilization and electoral success. In the wake of the overall crisis in agriculture, do such explanations have any relevance at present? While academic discussions may have moved away from a teleological understanding of this transition process, state policy-making continues to be embedded in such a modernising narrative. Supply of credit, better links to markets, are examples of the new recommendations.

## **Discussions and the way forward**

Discussions at the various sessions and at the concluding session raised the following questions: How should ruralities/the rural be defined and identified? Should the negative census definition of the rural (all that which is not urban is rural) be challenged and a new definition formulated? Given the compartmentalization of knowledge and the growing disciplinary divides, should integrated and comprehensive approaches and theories be developed to understand the new complexities and realities in rural and agrarian India? Can new paradigms that bridge the continuum between environment-agriculture-livelihoods and political orders be developed? How can research be democratized so that there is focus on the range of localities and their specificities? Should the current excessive emphasis on the market be addressed by factoring in issues of environment, equity and justice? If research and teaching must also feed into policy, what should be the orientation of pedagogies, texts and research practices related to rural and agrarian studies? How can interlinkages between academia, the state, policy and the public be facilitated? How can the vast difference between research and educational institutions (central, state, private, etc) be bridged in developing new courses and programmes for the study of rural and agrarian issues?

The group concurred that it is important to address the decline in rural and agrarian studies and to forge collaborations to address some of the problems. Towards this end it was decided to initiate collaborations and interlinks by first setting up an e-discussion group which could be

extended to others who can join the group or be invited to join. Papers, ideas, debates, and news relating to agricultural and rural issues could be shared among the members. One person from the group volunteered to anchor the e-discussion group. There is a plan to sustain the momentum of this meet by holding a follow-up meet next year (2011), preferably in a rural university or institute. The network that could be developed through these engagements would not only facilitate and strengthen academic work (research, teaching and development of material) but could also consider ways to act as a pressure group to facilitate valid and judicious policy for rural and agrarian India. The need to develop a proposal and seek funds to facilitate this further was deferred to communications to be conducted via the e-group.



# List of Participants

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