



Beyond Productivity and Populism: Reimagining India's Agricultural and Rural Policies

Concept Note

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Concerns over the state of rural India, especially agriculture as central to our food cultures and a key source of livelihood and economy, have grown to become a litmus test for political strategies. Yet, the diversity of voices and views indicate no clarity on future directions or the possibilities of resolving the myriad problems that have beset rural India. It can also be seen that some of the existing and proposed policies are intensifying the problems and conflicts instead of ameliorating them. Recognising the complexity of the challenges facing rural and agrarian India and the inadequacy of proposed solutions, the Network of Rural and Agrarian Studies (NRAS) seeks to tease out the perspectives and players that undergird dominant policies and paradigms, recognise the inter-linkages between the various domains (rural-urban, agro-industrial, farm-non-farm), and identify strategies that can lead to alternative ideas, approaches and pathways in making rural India a democratic and liveable space.

Viewed primarily from a modernist and developmental angle, India's **diverse agricultures** have been subject to restructuring and content alteration that has focused primarily on enhancing productivity. Starting in the 1960s and largely driven by the needs and priorities of the developmental state, the Green Revolution (GR) paradigm has got established, with its exclusive focus on a few crops and higher production per unit of land. Expansion of irrigation has been the kingpin of this strategy. The dominance of the productivity trope in the GR paradigm, invoked through the spectre of famines and food insecurity, has meant the loss of agro-ecological diversity, a detailed and sophisticated body of agronomic knowledge and practices associated with each diverse agrarian region, and the marginalisation of many crops, crop varieties and practices. As the wide array of agricultural and agrarian systems has been incorporated into the dominant monoculture model championed in the GR paradigm, it has led to the agro-industrial model as the

principal mode of doing agriculture in India. By enhancing the role of external inputs in agriculture, this model has rendered agriculture a highly risky venture.

Compounding the inherent economic and ecological fragility of the monoculture model are climate change and widespread depletion of natural resources, which have made agriculture a losing proposition. The natural resource base in rural India (land, water and forests) is under severe stress. This year, once again, India is facing one of its worst **droughts**. About 42% of India's land area is facing drought, 6% of it facing extreme drought, according to data from the Drought Early Warning System (DEWS), a real-time drought monitoring platform. States like AP-Telangana, Bihar, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Rajasthan (home to 500 million people, almost 40% of the country's population) are the worst affected. Even after several decades of independence, we still do not have a proper drought-mitigation strategy in place.

These long term developments in agriculture have been reinforced and enhanced in the past few years by changes in the **non-farm sector of the rural economy**, giving rise to unprecedented rural distress. It is now known that the non-farm sector is increasingly defining household dynamics in rural India, as employment in agriculture is stagnant or declining. In 2012-13, for example, income from cultivation and livestock together accounted for only about 60% of the total income of agricultural households, the remaining 40% coming from wage work and other non-farm sources (Dalwai Committee Report, 2017).

There has been a distinct slowdown in the growth momentum of the non-farm sector as well in recent years giving rise to the **huge problem of rural unemployment**. By all available evidence, it seems that unemployment has been at its peak in 2017-18. "Leaked findings" from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) indicated that the rate of unemployment could be as high as 6.1%, though it is yet to be officially confirmed. Declining employment elasticity in agriculture has contributed to under-employment and also the declining incomes of agricultural labour. Unemployment of such staggering proportions is bound to have several ramifications for rural Indian society. Growth of rural wage rates have been abysmally low (below 1%) between 2015 and 2017. Another, but closely related, aspect of unemployment is the significant withdrawal of women workers from the labour force. This decline is linked to the vanishing opportunities for work in agriculture. In the construction sector, the largest employer after agriculture, there has been a significant slowdown in job creation.

Rural distress has several manifestations, rising numbers of **suicides** being one of them. **Pervasive under-nutrition** among women and children, at levels higher than that of other poor countries of the world, is indicative of a serious policy failure. Recent results from National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4, 2015-16) show that 52% of pregnant women in rural India are anemic and nearly 40% children are underweight (NFHS-4, India Factsheet). The **growing disease burden** and **rising healthcare costs** have seriously impacted the vulnerable and marginalized sections in rural areas. India has one of the most privatised healthcare systems in the world, with 80% of the health expenditure being

financed through out-of-pocket expenses by households. Needless to say, rural India suffers the most from this. All these have combined to manifest in forms of extreme rural distress, forcing out-migration, abandonment of agriculture and creating a large and restive youth population. Worse still, flows of finance, people, resources, technologies and waste are reshaping the rural-urban relationship with serious ecological, health and social implications. If these pressing problems are to be addressed, then we need to re-imagine and seek new perspectives and pathways in which the rural, and agriculture within it, can be made into viable livelihoods and life-worlds.

Much rural distress can be traced back to policies that have shaped incentives, opportunities and resource use in the rural economy. Therefore, it is critical to identify and understand these policies - how rural policies have been made, how policy goals, instruments and mechanisms have been chosen, and who has been included or excluded from the process. At the same time, we must also recognise that policy making processes and operationalization of policies are highly complex and the results are often unpredictable. We have examples in real life of several alternative models that have **questioned and opposed the dominant paradigm** in many ways. Many of these are still at the margin and need to be scaled up. But we have instances of scaled up initiatives as well, which make use of the silences and gaps in existing policies and practices.

For example, the anarchic nature of our water regime, especially in relation to groundwater, is being widely recognized, leading to formulation of new policies. Employment generation by state action is now recognized as a right under MGNREGA. Decentralized procurement and public distribution of foodgrains have opened up possibilities of supporting hitherto neglected crops like millets and pulses. As the ongoing struggles around the Forest Rights Act and rights of ownership and use of plant varieties by farming communities show, there are ways in which the existing law itself can be used for pushing alternative policy approaches. These examples show that policies can be incrementally changed and moved in socially desired directions. And that gives us the hope that by concerted action and building strong alliances of people, rural policies can indeed be modified and made people-friendly. But, clearly, this is not possible without a continuous struggle.

Central to such an endeavour would be **a call for rural and agricultural policy making to be made democratic and transparent**. What this would mean is to bring the voices and experiences of the marginalised majority (the landless, tenant farmers, women farmers, forest-dwellers, fisherfolk, dalits, adivasis, pastoralist groups, among others) into the policy making processes. Women and women-led collectives have to play a central role here. Further, questioning the dominant parameter of productivity that is based on external inputs, we need to emphasise the parameters of social justice, economic stability, political democracy, and ecological sustainability as we rethink policies for agriculture. This involves supporting agricultural complexes to regain their ecologically-bounded specificities, combine both local knowledge and new information and challenge the established class and caste-based social character of our agrarian structure. Coping with the climate crises would make it imperative to bring in a new set of measures of resilience

that would privilege successful adjustment/adaptations to ecological specificities, climate variability and a risky environment, over higher yield. This would involve, among other things, over-hauling the conceptual and empirical bases of policy-making in the medium and long term.

In seeking to invert the parameters of the dominant paradigm in which the rural has been conceptualised, the conventional divides between urban and rural, and industry and agriculture are also to be challenged. **Articulating new legal regimes that can safeguard the needs of the marginalised majority to conserve and use natural resources must form the bedrock of new policies.** Promoting new agricultural and rural-based agro-industry production processes and structures in line with ecological specificities will lead to strengthening the foundations of rural India's pluralism and to revitalising the democratic polity.

It is pertinent to review the evidence guidelines that these policies are based on and ask why policies persist despite clear evidence that demands changes in policy. As a network of scholars, researchers, activists, and farmers, the NRAS seeks to articulate strategies by which alternative policy perspectives can be disseminated among a range of actors/players such as elected people's representatives, gram panchayat members, policy makers, farmer organizations, civil society networks and public intellectuals. It also tries to generate and consolidate evidence in support of some of the non-conventional approaches which have shown their potential and also work out the metrics on which these approaches will be evaluated.

This rural and agrarian policy workshop attempts to address the above questions and concerns. It is organized as an open exchange in seven thematic areas with the active participation of farmers in all these sessions.

1. **Mapping Recent Trends in Rural India:** This session attempts to represent the important trends in rural India that are re-shaping it fundamentally. The significance of structures that have been retained and altered and the introduction of new ones will be assessed. Hence, we need to map these trajectories and understand their impact and implications. [NRAS Anchor: AR Vasavi]
2. **Questioning Dominant Paradigms of Agriculture and the Rural:** Mapping of new trends would simultaneously bring out the intrinsic biases and limitation of the dominant paradigm of agriculture and the rural and ways of questioning and re-constituting it. This opens up ways in which the alternatives can be framed. [NRAS Anchors: Richa Kumar and Siddharth Joshi]
3. **Transitioning to Agro-ecological Complexes and Re-imagining Production-Consumption Clusters:** The alternative approach to agricultural and rural issues would centrally involve a transition to an understanding of the agricultural and the rural as essentially part of a larger eco-system. Agro-ecology can be the field unifying production and consumption in the rural. In this session, we look at how transitioning to an agro-ecological framework can

actually happen in agriculture, food, employment, commons and the environment. The forms of transition in each of these have to be understood in their specific aspects. [NRAS Anchor: M Vijayabaskar]

4. **Conserving Natural Resources, Mainstreaming Biodiversity and Addressing Climate Change:** One of the important challenges of the new approach is to arrest and reverse the degradation of natural resources and loss of bio-diversity. A lot of policy thinking even in the dominant paradigm has gone into these issues. But where did they go wrong? What should be done to correct them? Can we articulate new policies which would enable us deal with issues like drought, climate change resilience and survival of the weakest in India's rural areas? [NRAS Anchor: Aniket Aga]
5. **Making Inclusive and Localising Policy Processes and Strategies:** The alternative, as discussed above, has to be based on an attempt to democratize policy formation and dissemination. This session looks at the challenges of democratising policy-thinking in India, particularly in agriculture, food and nutrition. Based on an agro-ecological understanding, this would also lead us to question "global and national food systems that leaves millions food insecure while contributing to obesity, that generates significant collateral environmental degradation, and that compromises the wellbeing of consumers and producers alike" (Vandermeer, Aga et.al., "Feeding the Prometheus", 2018). [NRAS Anchor: Rajeswari Raina]
6. **Catering to the Needs of the Marginalised Groups:** Democratisation of policy making would inevitably give space to the voices of the marginalized sections of the society like tenant farmers, women farmers, landless, fisherfolk, dalits, tribals etc. How much of their concerns are being heard in the current development discourse? What are the ways of making these voices effectively heard and reflected in policy? Are there instances where the grassroots pressure from these marginalised groups and their collectives have created a space for them in policy? This session will try to answer some of these questions by bringing the voices of the marginalised into the centre-stage of policy. [NRAS Anchor: PS Vijayshankar]
7. **Developing Alternative Metrics of Success and Reorganising Data and Reporting:** It is pertinent to critically review the currently accepted measures of evaluating agriculture and develop and deploy new metrics that would be suitable to the new parameters that are being proposed. [NRAS Anchor: Shalini Bhutani]
8. **Concluding Session:** [NRAS Anchor: C Shambu Prasad]. This session will focus on integrating the various views and suggestions by the panelists and will flag the key points that will constitute the report on 'alternative policies for agriculture and rural issues'. A number of farmers, policy makers and other academics will also be invited to these deliberations.