

National Seminar on 'Revitalizing the Rural: Rethinking Rural and Agricultural Policies' (27-29 September, 2016)

Concept Note

At a time of intense and expedited globalization of India's economy and the on-going multiple forms of distress in rural India, there is an urgent need to engage with these conditions and formulate new policies. While some attention has been paid to the on-going rural distress, manifested primarily in suicides by agriculturists, rural India is also experiencing a series of 49 contradictions. These include the growth of small pockets of commercially successful agricultural belts as against vast impoverished regions. The Green Revolution has increased productivity of cereals but it has taken its toll in terms of loss of agricultural bio-diversity, erosion of natural resources especially the soil, and chemicalisation of food which has only further endangered the food security of the people. As capital and market have expanded to mark the rural economy, there is the spread of 'welfare governmentality' in the form of the rural employment guarantee programme and the rights to food and basic education. The expanding real estate industry and extractive industries, while creating a few crorepatris, are altering the rural landscape and pushing vast numbers of the population into conditions of destitution. Several issues such as that of land access, use, rights (especially among Dalits, Adivasis and women) and the spread of destructive and unsustainable forms of land use need attention. Global warming and climate change are impacting agricultural productivity and practices and the search for resilient and sustainable forms of natural resource management and agricultural models must be expedited.

Since existing policies and non-policy programmes seem to benefit large and capital-based agriculture, policies that focus on, and cater to, the needs of the majority, the small and marginal agriculturists must be considered seriously. Policy decisions must be made democratic and transparent without vested commercial/financial interests holding sway. There is an urgent need to promote new production, marketing, distributing, and administrative structures that can enable cultivators and rural set-ups to be economically viable.

Attendant with the retrogression of agriculture have been a range of policies and programmes that have increasingly privatised public institutions such education and health. Expenditures on these alone account for growing indebtedness and for people to fall into poverty. Reclaiming these institutions as effective, functioning and public institutions will address a range of problems and enhance the individual and household/family capabilities of a large proportion of rural people.

In seeking to integrate the rural and agricultural, the approach is to address not only economic but also social and institutional issues that impact everyday life in rural India. Issues such as food security, seed sovereignty, income generation, and ecological sustainability require attention. A range of new technologies and bio-technologies (such as GM seeds) are poised to be deployed by corporate sectors and yet their dangers for the bio-diversity of the continent and the social and economic implications of such commercialised inputs are not adequately debated and reviewed. The rise of a new rural service economy indicates that there are ways in which new agro-based industries can be promoted to make the rural a site of sustainable production and residence. New and alternative agricultural policies are required to stem the tide of out-migration, the abandonment of land, and the overall de-agrarianisation that has set-in in the nation.

Several small and viable models of alternative agricultural and rural livelihood and governance are currently functioning in various parts of India. The cases of community-supported nonpesticide agriculture in Andhra Pradesh , organic agriculture in Sikkim, zero-budget agriculture in 50 various parts of South India, farmers/producers marketing organizations, integrated agriculture in parts of Gujarat are some cases. There are also a large number of farmer-led innovations in sustainable agriculture that demonstrate the potential of these alternatives on the ground. Learning from some of these and the possibility of integrating ideas from these cases for scaling up can be considered.

Given the above issues and challenges, the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla, organized a two and half days seminar during 27-29 September 2016.

A national seminar was organized on 'Revitalising the Rural: Rethinking Rural and Agricultural Policies' during 27-29 September 2016 at IIAS. Professor A.R. Vasavi, Apt. G- 327, Bridage Coortyard, HMT, Bengaluru and Dr. Pradeep Nayak, Fellow, IIAS were the Conveners of the seminar. The welcome address was given by Professor Chetan Singh, Director, IIAS. Professor A.R. Vasavi and Dr. Pradeep Nayak, Conveners of the seminar gave introductory remarks.

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