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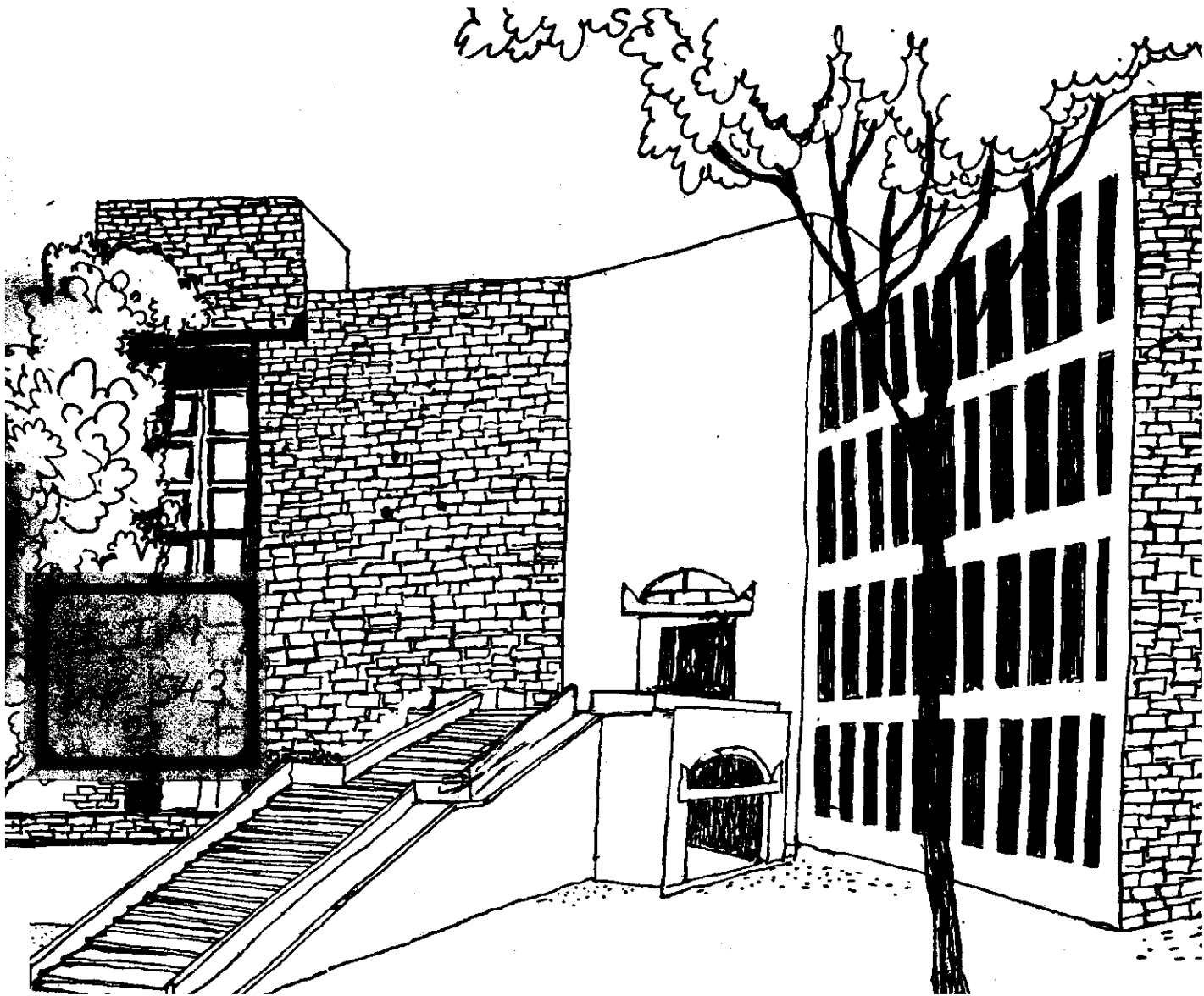
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ISSUES FOR RESEARCH ON RURAL
DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

By

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Issues for Research on Rural Development in South Asia

Abstract

There has been tremendous upsurge in writings on rural development during last decade. Incidentally the economic policies followed during this period in various countries of South Asia have intensified the contradictions in developmental field. The major thrust of public interventions has been not to resolve these contradictions, instead to contain them or dilute their implications which might destabilise the social structure. Academists have contributed to this situation but pursuing answers to the social problems defined in the same paradigm in high planners have done so.

I have tried to dispute this tendency in rural development research by identifying few key areas in which dominant research paradigm needed to be radically altered. These areas are as follows:

- a) Rogesian vice in literature on technology generation and diffusion.
- b) Standardised design of institutions and organizations to serve dissimilar ecological concepts.
- c) Excessive reliance on credit as instrument of mobilising technological change without in any way modifying the package.
- d) Neglect of small farming and landless household in dry regions which failed to attract market forces, bureaucracy, academic and political attention, all alike.
- e) Growth centre bias in investment policies which like other policies rested on the assumption of trickle down.
- f) Training methodologies which were highly alienated from the real life problem context (as illustrated by excessive emphasis on PERT/CPM and
- g) Recent revival of international concern towards so called 'wastelands' and their privatization. Some other areas that need attention are: What should be the structure of district collectorate for 2000 AD, role of collector and non-official bodies in local level planning. A greater debate is needed on this subject to redefine priorities in research and action.

ISSUES FOR RESEARCH ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH ASIA*

Disputing answers that are the problem.

Why have I phrased the pursuit negatively? Does it imply that providing new ~~answers~~ ~~to old problems~~ of poverty and unemployment is less important than disputing old answers to old problems.

My answer is the following:

While there is no dearth of writings on the subject of rural development, unfortunately the paradigmatic positions of most writers generate answers that lie rather in close range.

Phenomenological roots of most of the interventions that have been formally attempted in different countries in this part of the world can also not be traced to a very wide variety of world views. Then what is the implication of in-breeding in social science pursuits?

It is generation of highly segmented, narrow and often inadequate definition of the problem which can lend itself to analysis within the 'specialists' culture of various disciplines

Inter-disciplinary research does not follow by stapling the sectoral perceptions of different experts on a problem. It

* I have included in this note some of the concerns that I feel have remained generally neglected. The issues not listed do not become irrelevant or less important though the same might not be necessarily convergent with my explicit bias towards dry regions.

does not follow by putting many specialists together either. It essentially requires organic fusion at meta level between key conceptual frameworks used in different disciplines.

But how will it take place.

My answer to this question is three-fold:

- a. By disputing answers which defy modification of the problem. It will shift responsibility of impoverishment from the victims and implementers of the answers to the designers of the answers.
- b. By creating niche for new questions to be raised which relate more organically with the 'realm of relevance' of poor.

Many of the issues vital for this section of society are assumed away in most of the strategies, e.g., the problem of access is defined as an issue to be resolved by claimants of resources through organisation, networking or protest etc. It is not assumed that access differential is inherent in the manner in which institutions are designed, eligibility rules defined and queuing is allowed.*

- c. By conceptually weaving the complex fibre of poor household's adjustment mechanisms with institutional, technological, market and ecological risks organically, embedded in it.

* I had discussed this issue with late Mr. Bernard Schaffer who felt that emphasis on access was important to make public systems more open and sensitive to the problems of poor.

How does one operationalize the search of right and relevant questions?

I will first illustrate the phenomena of 'answers being the problem' by listing some of the popular assumptions underlying various developmental theories, the relationship between policy making, designing instruments of implementation and highly heterogeneous ecological and economic setting of the rural poor would be briefly traced next. Lastly I will explain the method in my madness (or is there a madness in my method). I will argue that extraordinary sterility in methodological innovations had contributed significantly towards reducing the role that social science can potentially play in design of policies that help the poor more. Analysing post facts, 'what went wrong where and why' has earned a not very creative image for the social scientists.

Separately, a discussion is provided on the tentative plans of my enquiry which essentially will generate dialogues amongst technologists (crop, livestock, craft specialists etc.), social scientists (Sociologists, anthropologists and political economists) and managers (the policy makers, implementing bureaucracy and the formal monitors, evaluators etc.). In a limited manner, so arrived understanding about the rural poverty and developmental alternatives in different parts of South Asia could be subjected to scrutiny of poor through peasant-labour action-workshops at grass root level for further validation and venture.

• Answers that are the problem.

I am very briefly listing some of the oft repeated solutions to the problems of rural development*. The lack of debate and doubt about these solutions, I contend is itself a serious problem.

• Technological evolution and diffusion: Rogorian Voice.

Here are three major issues in this regard.

One : the predominant faith of administrators and researchers in 'diffusion of innovation' model implying differences in the adoption behaviours as related to innate entrepreneurial qualities of some farmers called 'early adopters' as distinct from backwardness of 'Laggards'.

Second : the process of technology generation despite farming systems approach, farmer's involvement in trials etc., continues to be conceptualised in single resource market framework.

I have not yet defined this term. It may however be added that if development is a process of widening of decision-making options of an individual, the rural development (RD) must be considered an effort in that direction. It must be kept in mind that widening options of the one section is not independent of widening or constriction of options of others. Also decision making options of a rural household cannot be analysed in a single market framework. Options in one market (like credit, product, labour etc.) are influenced by the constraints or opportunities in another market.

Third : different classes of the farmers are considered equally risk averse and differences in adoption are generally traced to varying access to credit, imperfect information, risk bearing capacity etc.

The fact that there are specific institutional and economic constraints to which a variety of a crop or breed of a livestock is enabled to respond through systematic genetic programmes is underplayed. Also ignored is the issue that an ideo-type is essentially a political manifesto of a breeder. If breeders are not as sensitive to the implications of various choices made while combining gene pool as one would expect, it is largely because social science has not permeated the mystique of genetics. How long should social analyst complain about the intended and un-intended effects of a technology when the real contribution by them should be taking place at the stage of utopia/ideotype building itself.*

There are social forces that received impetus from technological choices as against others that are inhibited in the process. There are interests which are articulated at the higher level as against others which are not lobbied for.

The socio-ecological context in which a problem is defined and answer achieved is very seldom made explicit despite the

*This implies that social scientists should be able to contribute at Ex-Ante stage in the technology generation process by influencing the determination of breeding objectives.

possibility of doing so. By externalising a problem from the domain of a particular discipline, the designer of technology can take safe recourse of being helpless. The social scientists by seeking explanation of these problems in an inadequate causal frame work legitimise such exclusions/or externalization.

Problem of institutional relations in agriculture getting influenced by technological choices is also resolved by focussing the attention narrowly. Policy planners are not educated as to how could they define problem of development in disaggregated and precise manner. Wrong signals results in the process.

Breeding for synchrony in cereals is a classic example. This breeding objective was imported into South Asia without working out the attendant implications for labour-capital relations.

2. Technological choices and Institutional design.

Very often the lessons learnt in one ecological setting are blindly replicated to other settings. In irrigated regions, market forces are strong and thus demand based organisations can work inspite of bureaucracy. In dry regions with inherently high risks, the organisation are expected to be supply based. The replication of success, is a popular device in developmental jargon without adequately explaining the casual model of success and role of management strategies in the same as distinct from the contri-

tion of ecological endowment. Further, the state-of-art or theory of developmental organizations, is in infancy. The neglect of ecological variables in western organizational theories (be these the contingency, strategic-choice or structural functional or even action-science radical perspectives) can be understood in view of the fact that market has subsumed the ecological context emerging from natural resource endowment in those societies.

In developing agrarian societies, such a neglect is difficult to appreciate. The result is that most problems of implementation from organizational theory perspective are defined by using intra-organizational variables, even if the variance explained was hardly 10% to 20% of the total variance.

The relationship, between natural resource endowment defining a specific ecological niche and the mix of economic enterprise that different classes of rural households are engaged in, is ignored. My contention is that ecology defines the range of economic enterprises that can be technically sustained in a given region*

* In precise analytical terms, what it implies is that if we factor analyse the natural resource endowment of different villages in a district, the factor containing variables like irrigation, mechanization, buffaloes etc., would be independent of the factor having sheep goat as resources variables, i.e., these two are the non-overlapping niches by and large. Also see my papers on 'Socio-ecology of land use planning in semi-arid regions' W.P. No. 525, 1984. 'Agenda for Future research in Dry Regions : Socio-ecological perspective' 1984 and 'Future Research Concerns in Dry Farming Regions : a self-critical review' (a note based on my own studies at CMA, 1981-84) etc.

The soils, wind, temperature, rainfall etc., put together define broadly the possibility of rearing different livestock species or growing different crops. The scale at which different classes operate depends upon:

- a. the risk bearing capacity
- b. previous losses or gain in technology (i.e., experience of recent past)
- c. accumulated losses or gains
- d. future expectations
- e. access to different institutions
- f. the existing resources endowment etc.

The risk bearing capacity is partly derived from the Mean-Variance nature of technology.

		Mean production/income	
		High	Low
Variance in production/income.	High	HVLM	HVLM
	Low	LVHM	LVLM

The vulnerability of different classes of farmers, depending upon the specific technological sub-sets in which they operate, influences the future choices.

To what extent the theorem, that the big and small farmers are generally equally risk averse in particularly dry region is valid? Whether one needs to develop different combinations of technologies as distinct from same technology at different scales or different degree of insurance cover? Whether packaged technology

is the answer or we need such a non-composite technology which can be rearranged into different mean-variance combinations?

Whether same design of delivery system will suit regions of low population density associated with semi- and risky ecology as compared to the region having high population density, irrigation and other infrastructure?

If problem is not that of simple scale, then how do we conceptualise differences in the problem of differently endowed regions?

3. Credit as technological mobiliser

Financial intermediation in last few decades has been considered as an uniform answer to problems of stagnant capital generation and accumulation potential. The myths are:

- i. The same credit policy can serve the interest of farmers in different contexts at different scales. It is ironic that while formal credit intervention began with Deccan riots in 1840s subsequent to Unprecedented drought* there has not been any specific policy bias favouring drought prone regions so far.
- ii. The rate of return is a sufficient guarantee for viability and recovery.

* The lodgers of moneylenders were taken out of their houses and burnt on streets by the people exploited by moneylenders. Then British government began formal intervention in credit market almost after this event.

The subtle relations between capital penetration, technological change/surplus generation which in absence of further technological change makes capital available for investment in conspicuous consumption, construction and land market etc., have not been analysed adequately. Land market is often considered frozen despite the fact that in last decade after several World Bank lines of credit, the surplus accumulation has considerably influenced land market. The problem of mounting default and positive correlation between default and best endowed least-risky regions (and in them big farmer) requires political-economy of institutional decay to be analysed properly. The nexus between trade-credit-technology has remained an under studied subject. There are several other issues with regard to credit policy particularly for slow growing draught-prone regions summarised separately that need analysis*. Conventional answers of increasing quantities to the problem of generating new designs are bound to fail. Quantities cannot generate design, they can merely make the existing pattern manifest.

4. Monitoring generates design

A change not monitored is a change not desired. Very often, the grandiose plans are monitored through age old indicators having no correspondence with the tasks to be done and results to be

* See my paper "Credit Arrangements for Drought prone regions : Policy prescriptions and planners reactions", IIM Working Paper No.478.

achieved. Lest it be understood as a simple management problem of designing suitable MIS, let me add that variables not monitored are often neglected deliberately. The standardised monitoring instruments (usually involving budget-exhaustion as the universal indicator of success) have their own internal logic. If banks have to achieve a particular credit/deposit ratio in rural regions with specific share for a sector, it is inherent in the process of monitoring that they should concentrate resources on capital intensive higher-unit outlay oriented portfolio.

There are numerous examples of developmental programmes (many of which are internationally acclaimed) where no precise monitoring indicators were used which could assure the policy planners that the avowed purposes of the programme were being met.

5. The Dry household economy is damned:

There is a conspicuous neglect of problems of pastoralist and dry farmer-cum-craftsman-cum labourer. There are many reasons.

- a. Ph.D students in Universities are often encouraged to take up such problems of research of which results are assured. The

analysis of M.Sc. and Ph.D thesis titles will reveal the prevalence of strong bias against the problems of small dry farmers and even more significantly the pastoralist.

- b. While most dry marginal farmers are operating in several resource markets including livestock, crop, craft, labour, the research programmes, (national and international) are almost always sectoral or even restricted to few crops/or crop mixtures. Crop-livestock craft and labour is one of the most neglected link.*
- c. The official strategy on dry land agriculture development has accorded strategic importance to IADP approach supplemented by farm machinery like tractors. The implication is that resources get concentrated in non-drought prone pockets of drought prone regions. (Extensive empirical work involving villagewise credit mapping in this

* The inter-disciplinary studies are easier said than done. Many of those who publicly argue for such studies frown upon attempts by their colleagues to work on problem which they thought, lay in their territory of expertise. Contempt for truly inter-disciplinary research in academic establishments appeared to be very high. Post-graduate students pursuing their degrees were the first victim of territorilization of disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries.

context done by me has provided conclusive evidence). And pity is that this distortion is by design.

- d. While there is very dominant lobby that believes in trickle-down, it is strange that direct poverty alleviating programmes are allocated equal resources in all the districts irrespective of extent and nature of poverty. If growth can take care of poverty, it must do so in at least high growth regions and perhaps above programme could be given greater emphasis in regions where sources of growth are scarce. Now policies are attempting the opposite (see background notes for VII F.Y.P)

6. Growth Centre Bias

Reification is bane of most social sciences but it is most conspicuous in Regional Planning literature. 'Growth Centres' are expected to trickle-around growth impulses in the hinterland. Despite exhaustive evidence to the contrary, planners continue to use growth centre oriented parameters for allocating resources along hierarchy of settlements. While detailed arguments against this theory are presented elsewhere (Transformation of sectors into 'Access' Space-1979) it may suffice to state a few of the

very conspicuous aberrations. Growth Centres do not spin off effects, actions of some people situated in growth centres lead to certain effects on other sections of society located both in growth centres and around the hinterland. The direct investments or deployment of value additions in newer activities generated demand for certain specific types of skills and resources. Very often the correspondence or lack of it between this demand and the nature of existing supply of skills and resources in a given region is underplayed. Thus the expected multiplier effects were highly magnified.

7. Training to solve problems of yesterday

There is a very strong bias in training programmes to use techniques, concepts and tools relevant for problems of yesterdays. The extraordinary emphasis on teaching PERT/CPM without modification illustrates how, many times the contextual relevance is ignored. While network analysis is useful, the methods capable of dealing with variance of a few days or weeks are patently unsuited in conditions where range will extend to months. Also, when all the resources are not under a single control, how could techniques assuming such control be relevant for inter-organizational settings.

Likewise the enormous energies spent on training developmental planners in IRR/NPV are also misplaced. Techniques suitable for ranking shelf of projects are obviously unsuited for analysing projects where a shelf did not exist. The undue emphasis on internal viability often subdues the emphasis which might be given to ecological, cultural and political-economic context of project design and implementation.

I have argued elsewhere, (Viable projects for Unviable farmers, 1981) how the discounting techniques used in cashflow analysis of multi-enterprises budget farmer are highly deficient for simple reason that a farmer apparently did not use the same discount factor for enterprises having different a) time profile (in which to appraise investments) and b) number of runs or iteration in the given time. In other words, in case of the economic activities of which the poor farmer had greater experience and for which he took a longer time frame, the discount rate tended to be low and vice versa.

Unquestioned faith in these techniques often generates a mistaken belief in the mind of implementing and designing officials that other variables/aspects were less consequential.

In addition to above aspects, lot of reliance is placed on behavioural variables like attitudes, orientation etc. The answer often is, if only people could be little more motivated, the programmes would perform well and so on. Structural inhibitors, which demotivated many people like archaic audit system, are ignored.

8. 'Wasteland' but for whom?

There has been a greater surge of research interests in so called waste lands in recent past. The interests of some of the international aid agencies seems to be to promote privatization policy as regards common property lands. It is often ignored that quality of private waste land was not any better in semi-arid regions compared to commons. Further, it is also ignored that if commons around villages were degraded, the poor were not culprits. The livestock mix of the poor was biased towards browsers as against grazers in case of richer farmers. Since those who can own land and livestock (particularly-grazers) will be of sedentary type as distinct from the rest who will be migratory type, the excessive exploitation of common could obviously be by the people who were there in the villages most of the time. In dry regions, seasonal migrants (browser-owning herdsmen) moved away anyway.

This apart, the emergence of violence around grazing disputes in recent past together with rising prices of dry fodder (particularly in drought year when these could go up as much as that of cereals. During drought of 1979-80, I noted such a rise), the dynamics of differential access to grazing lands (private and public) needed reappraisal. In my view the next round of violence if problem continued to worsen at this rate, could as well be in semi-arid regions and not in too distant a future.

Linked with pastoral economy is the problem of craftsmen which is often ignored.

There are several other issues which it seems have been resolved by the researchers and planners alike. "Integration" of functions seems one such concept. It is ignored that if access differential operated the way it did, probability of poor getting some resources was higher when delivery lines were not integrated than the other way round.

Perhaps many of these dimensions need a detailed look with some anger and impatience guiding the search. But how should anger and impatience prevent this search to suffer from same deficiencies that have been noted with regard to other cases. Siffin had once said that rural development was

an effort to make a lion's den into a happy zoo. Are we (the academecian) then blaming governments in developing countries for not having managed this zoo well enough! If yes, then we must bury the notion of democratic approach to development. Alternatively, the composition of zoo has to undergo change: Developmental research has to essentially provide know-how for this transformation.

Post-Script

I have at times deliberately exaggerated my biases towards the problems of poor in dry regions. Why should not I: Afterall if in the developed regions, the invisible hand of market could allocate resources which were also expected to trickle down, why should not I test the intensions of development planners by asking them to concentrate attention on regions which were not likely to attract market forces in near future?

And in any case poor in dry regions neither attracted Ph.D., M.Sc. students, government academicians technologists, activists nor did they create pressure on state by way of 'law & order' problems. When they did not protest, pestor and pressurise and when they did not swell the urban slums, why should 'democratic governments' bother about them any way. Lastly, they can't even absorb too much of funds

with the given history of deprivation, experience of bureaucracy and technology and hence even international aid agencies, 'world-view' building academic institutions and other fund giving donors don't find much challenge in these regions. But for how long will these laws help in maintaining order?

Risk, resources and skills were three fulcra on which a viable alternative had to rest. Social scientist have to essentially unravel and demystify the trade-off that technologists make while embedding in technologies potentials which manifested in a particular social order. The administrators who influenced the access to resources through maintenance of some laws as against others ensured this social order in some socio-ecological contexts and not others. The markets often showed the way and public administration followed. It was not surprising therefore that academic market also allowed dissent to a limited degree. Questions, which challenged the basis of assumed consensus amongst planners, analysts and administrators about problems of developments, were ignored or suppressed. And yet, the contradiction remained that we hoped for right answers to wrong questions. Are not thus, the answers a problem'.

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