

Calcutta Notebook

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DEVELOP TOWNS, NOT villages. Rural Development Minister Jairam Ramesh has called for increased allocation for the construction of rural roads. This is welcome. However, a distinction should be made between the provision of 'productive' services like electricity and roads and 'residential' services like schools, buses and hospitals. The government must invest much more in electricity and roads in villages because these are essential for agriculture. It may be better to concentrate schools, busses and hospitals in the towns and encourage farmers to live here so that they get the best of both worlds—schools in the town and road to the field.

Modern technology has changed the complexion of Indian agriculture. A large number of villages were formed in the past because cultivation was undertaken by draught animals. Villages were located at distances that were convenient for the animals. Villages are located at a distance of about 2 kilometres in the plains of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The bullock would have to walk about one kilometre each way to the field. Walking longer distances would reduce the energies available for ploughing the field. Villages are located at a distance of about 4-5 kilometres in the desert areas of Rajasthan. The camel can cover longer distances easily thus villages were located at greater distances. On the other hand, people live in the middle of their fields in the hilly tribal areas throughout the country. The animals would waste too much of their energies in climbing the hills to reach the fields. It would be clear that the location and size of the village depends upon the nature of power used for cultivation of the fields.

Tractor has changed the scenario beyond belief. It is now possible for a farmer to travel up to ten or fifteen kilometres; from his home, do the cultivation and return home. The necessity of making small villages at short distances has therefore been removed at the very root. Only about ten percent of all agricultural cultivation is being done by draught animals now. There is no reason now for the people to live in small villages located at short distances. They can easily live in small towns located ten or fifteen kilometres apart and undertake cultivation of their fields from there.

One can see this transformation taking place in West Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. Farmers have built large houses on the roadside. These houses have a huge gateway for the tractor and trolley to enter the courtyard. The milch animals are kept here. The family lives here. The farmers leave in the morning on their tractors with a tiffin box. They return in the evening. It is now possible for cultivation to be undertaken from these towns.

The question is whether to continue to sustain the small villages in this changed circumstance? There are many advantages of living in small towns. The supply of piped drinking water is possible only in towns. This writer's village in Rajasthan has a population of 15,000.

The people in the village are having no difficulty in getting drinking water despite a severe drought. The government has established a tube well which continues to draw water from the ground and supply to the homes. But people in small surrounding villages are suffering. Such water supply schemes have not been installed there. It frequently does not work where it has been installed. These people have to transport drinking water through water tankers. The government is not able to supply piped drinking water to these small villages. Long pipes have to be laid for reaching a small population. There is greater leakage. More power is consumed in pumping the water. The maintenance cost of long pipe lines is higher. The government has no alternative but to use its limited resources in first supplying water to towns and cities.

Roads and bus services too are more accessible from towns. It is possible for students to take a bus to the college located 20 or 30 kilometers away. It is possible to carry the sick and the expecting mothers to the hospitals because jeeps can reach their homes. ANMs reach the villages but once a month whereas doctors are available twenty four hours in the towns.

Electricity supply is more regular. Long lines of power supply are prone to faults. It is simply not possible to establish an oil expeller or a mini rice mill or even an atta chakki in a village for this reason. The studies of the students are also affected. The hardship on women is greater. They have to clean the lanterns every day. Entertainment facilities like cable TV and video parlours or cinema are unavailable.

The simple fact is that it is much cheaper to provide all these civic facilities if the people are living in towns than in the villages. One government engineer estimated that the cost of supplying drinking water to the village is about ten times that of the city. The same would hold true for the roads, power, hospitals and other services. It is simply more efficient and convenient to live in the towns. It has always been so. But previously it was not possible to live in the towns because the animals had to walk to the fields. Small villages were, therefore, an unpleasant compulsion. This limitation has now been broken asunder by the tractor.

The choice before the country is to spend its scarce public money in reaching these services to distant villages or to improve quality of these services in the towns? Effort to save the village will lead to the killing of the village as well as the town. The industries that could have opened in the towns will actually move to the city. The pro-village unreal stance of the government is actually leading to the growth of the city.

The alternative is to abandon the villages and provide good quality services to the towns. The people may migrate from the village to the towns but they would not have to go any further. They would get roads, power and entertainment in the towns.

Jairam Ramesh should focus on providing roads and electricity to the villages. For other services like school, hospital, cable TV, temple and mosque and library he should concentrate in the towns. The society should encourage farmers to live in towns and go to the fields in the villages for work. This will lead to improvement in their standard of living. Spreading resources thin between town and villages will kill both. □□□