



CHANGING STRUCTURE OF RURAL ECONOMY OF INDIA IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

*Today, rural development is more crucial than ever before in the nation's evolutionary journey. It serves as a strategic approach aimed at fostering enhanced productivity, greater socio-economic equity, and stability in both social and economic realms this paper : **CHANGING STRUCTURE OF RURAL ECONOMY OF INDIA IMPLICATIONS** ” deals with Rural Economy, Rural Labour , Rural Economy growth & Development.*

Key Words: Rural development, **Rural Economy, Youth management & Rural Schemes**

Introduction

Agriculture-centric economy: Rural economy massively relies on agriculture (more than 50% of the population directly or indirectly depend upon agriculture), which is dependent on unpredictable monsoon and prone to droughts and floods. This leads to low and erratic income for farmers and agricultural workers. These evidences show that urban economy overtook rural economy in terms of output but urban employment is less than half of the rural employment. This has serious implications such as wide disparity in worker productivity between rural and urban areas.

Rural development encompasses efforts aimed at enhancing the quality of life and economic prosperity of individuals residing in sparsely populated areas. Traditionally, it focused on maximizing the utilization of land-intensive natural resources like agriculture and forestry. However, with increasing urbanization and shifts in global production networks, the landscape of rural areas has evolved.

Despite these changes, rural development remains pivotal for overall national progress. A significant portion of the population, more than two-thirds in many countries, relies on agriculture for sustenance, with a considerable segment living below the poverty line. Hence, it is imperative for governments to implement measures that uplift living standards in rural regions.



Key areas requiring focused attention and innovative initiatives include education, public health, sanitation, women's empowerment, infrastructure development (such as electricity and irrigation), support for agricultural extension and research, access to credit, and the creation of employment opportunities. These efforts are essential for fostering sustainable growth and improving the socio-economic fabric of rural communities.

Rural development holds paramount significance, not only for the vast population residing in rural areas but also for the overall economic growth and stability of the nation.

Today, rural development is more crucial than ever before in the nation's evolutionary journey. It serves as a strategic approach aimed at fostering enhanced productivity, greater socio-economic equity, and stability in both social and economic realms.

The primary objective is to alleviate the prevailing food insecurity affecting approximately 70 percent of the rural populace, ensuring adequate access to nutritious and wholesome food.

Furthermore, secondary objectives encompass ensuring access to essential amenities such as clothing, footwear, clean housing, healthcare services, environmental sustainability, recreational facilities, education, transportation, and communication networks.

The government's objectives outlined in the sixth five-year plan for rural development include:

- Enhancing productivity and incomes of rural inhabitants.
- Ensuring the creation of more employment opportunities, rapidly and sustainably.
- Eradicating unemployment and significantly reducing underemployment.
- Elevating the standard of living for marginalized populations.
- Providing fundamental necessities such as primary education, healthcare, clean drinking water, and rural infrastructure like roads.

The changing structure of the rural economy in India has several implications:

Diversification of Livelihoods: As initiatives like the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM) and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) promote skill development and employment generation, there's a shift towards diversified livelihood options. This can reduce dependency on traditional agricultural activities and provide rural households with alternative sources of income.

Empowerment of Rural Women: Programs focusing on women's empowerment, such as SHG initiatives, have significant implications. They not only enhance women's economic status but also lead to their greater participation in decision-making processes at the household and community levels. This empowerment can catalyze broader social and economic changes in rural societies.



Improvement in Housing and Infrastructure: Schemes like Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana – Gramin (PMAY-G) and Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) contribute to improving rural infrastructure and living standards. Access to better housing and transportation networks can enhance overall quality of life and facilitate economic activities in rural areas.

Enhanced Access to Water and Sanitation: Initiatives such as the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) and Swachh Bharat Mission (G) aim to provide clean water and sanitation facilities to rural households. Improved access to these basic amenities not only improves health outcomes but also contributes to productivity gains and overall well-being.

Reduction of Indoor Air Pollution: The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, by providing LPG connections to rural households, helps in reducing indoor air pollution caused by traditional cooking methods. This has positive implications for health, particularly for women and children, and can lead to overall improvements in productivity and well-being.

Infrastructure Development and Electrification: Schemes like SAUBHAGYA and Deendayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana (DDUGJY) contribute to rural electrification and infrastructure development. Access to electricity and improved infrastructure can stimulate economic growth, facilitate education and healthcare services, and enhance overall connectivity with urban centers.

Economic Growth and Resilience: The diversification of livelihoods, coupled with improvements in infrastructure and access to basic amenities, can contribute to overall economic growth and resilience in rural areas. This can help in reducing poverty, inequality, and vulnerability to external shocks, thereby fostering sustainable development.

Distress migration of youth from rural India to cities due to lack of livelihood opportunities and rising climate impacts is deeply worrying for Indian economy. Although the present government announced several measures such as rural housing, toilets and better road network for rural development, they have failed to yield overall progress in rural sector. Besides, impetus to budget allocations for rural livelihood mission and employment guarantee schemes has not shown promising results.

Constant downside in the rate of economic growth, business investments and employment indicate an inherent flaw in the country's development framework. The rural infrastructure calls for a redesign so that it boosts rural economy through integrated planning of fostering small businesses, job creation, expanding irrigation network, agriculture and allied sectors. The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic further exposes the dangers of lopsided development where a major part of the country lives under the shadow of shining urban India that has taken an unsustainable path to prosper. India needs a deeper analysis of what is going wrong and where.



India in the year 2020 is still struggling to find answer to the same old question that arose way back in 1947 when the country attained Independence – “What development model should we choose to put India on the rails of economic growth?” While Gandhi insisted that Gram Swaraj (or village self-rule) was the only way we could strengthen our nation and its economy from within, Nehru saw modern science and technology as the panacea for uplifting Indians from abject poverty that was staring at our face at that point in time. Seven decades later, when the country is grappling with an unprecedented blow of novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the confusion between choosing self-reliant rural India or growth propelling urban India surfaces more clearly. Images of millions of migrants walking back to their villages at the time of crisis puts a big question mark on the development trajectory that India has taken. Big cities could not promise them protection from this crisis of survival and these migrants looked towards their own homeland for seeking refuge.

India's development pathway – a retrospective view

Looking back at the unfolding of consecutive Five-Year Plans ever since the commissioning of a planning institution by India's first prime minister Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru in 1950-51, one can see how the lawmakers designed the trajectory of development of an India that was struggling to feed its people, explore and exploit its natural resources like land, water, minerals and energy, and make the country self-reliant. Infrastructure development was always at the centre of our growth story, be it irrigation, transportation, communication and industry. Agriculture was 'modernised' with heavy inputs of research, developing new high yielding varieties, thrust on growing wheat, paddy and oilseeds, use of technology for agriculture and food processing for making India self-reliant in food. Similarly, large dams were built, irrigation channels were laid to provide water to dry lands too. While all this was happening in the rural hinterland, a new industrial India was also taking shape with cities and townships being developed around industry and mining centres. Import duties were raised on capital goods and more emphasis was laid on manufacturing our own goods in order to create a circular economy that stays within the country. The defence sector was getting strengthened, especially when the country faced wars on its north frontiers. 'Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan' (hail the soldier, hail the farmer) was the slogan central to development and self-reliance until Rajiv Gandhi, the sixth prime minister of India from 1984 to 1989, led the Sixth Plan and brought industrialisation, information technology and rapid transportation to the core of development.

With the policy thrust more on seeing cities as propellers of growth, infrastructure development became more urban and gradually rural India turned into a source from where cities could attract human resource. Thus, a country that was largely agrarian with approximately 85 per cent people engaged in agriculture at the time of Independence, India started transforming itself into an industrial economy where rural youth became job seekers in labour market.

Open market, structural reforms and urban infrastructure becomes the key to attain high GDP leaving rural India to fend for itself



Post Gulf War, India faced a major financial crisis that occurred in the late 1980s so much so that the country was in deep debt and was forced to pledge its gold reserve to International Monetary Fund (IMF). As a result, in 1991, IMF and the World Bank compelled India to adopt the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) that had begun in the mid-1980s and unfolded itself later in its myriad forms. India became a member of WTO and entered the global market seeking investments to 'uplift' its sinking economy. The famous liberalisation-privatisation-globalisation (LPG), phenomenon was set in under the iconic leadership of the then prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and his finance minister Manmohan Singh, and the country started readying itself for receiving foreign direct investments (FDIs).

In 1993, 74th Constitutional Amendment[i] Act was brought in the Nagarpalika Act 1993, which mandated major urban reforms, giving power to municipal bodies for local self-governance, handing over the responsibility of local area development to the local governments and also pushing municipalities to raise their own funds and perform in the best interests of people.

The greatest vehicle to bring this urban overhaul was the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). Launched in the year 2005 in select 65 cities, JNNURM had two submissions – Urban Infrastructure and Governance (UIG) and Basic Services for Urban Poor (BSUP). The motive was very clear: Cities must improve their infrastructure and living conditions of poor in cities should be improved by providing them basic services. Therefore, the major reforms brought in to expedite the processes under JNNURM were – Financial Management Reforms, E-Governance Reforms and Pro-Poor Reforms.

The landscape of India's urban centres was thrown open to 100 per cent FDI in infrastructure development. The Urban Land Ceiling Act was repealed, public private partnership (PPP) mode of working was initiated and urban India was declared as 'engine of growth' for the country. Amidst this hullabaloo, rural India was left to fend for itself.

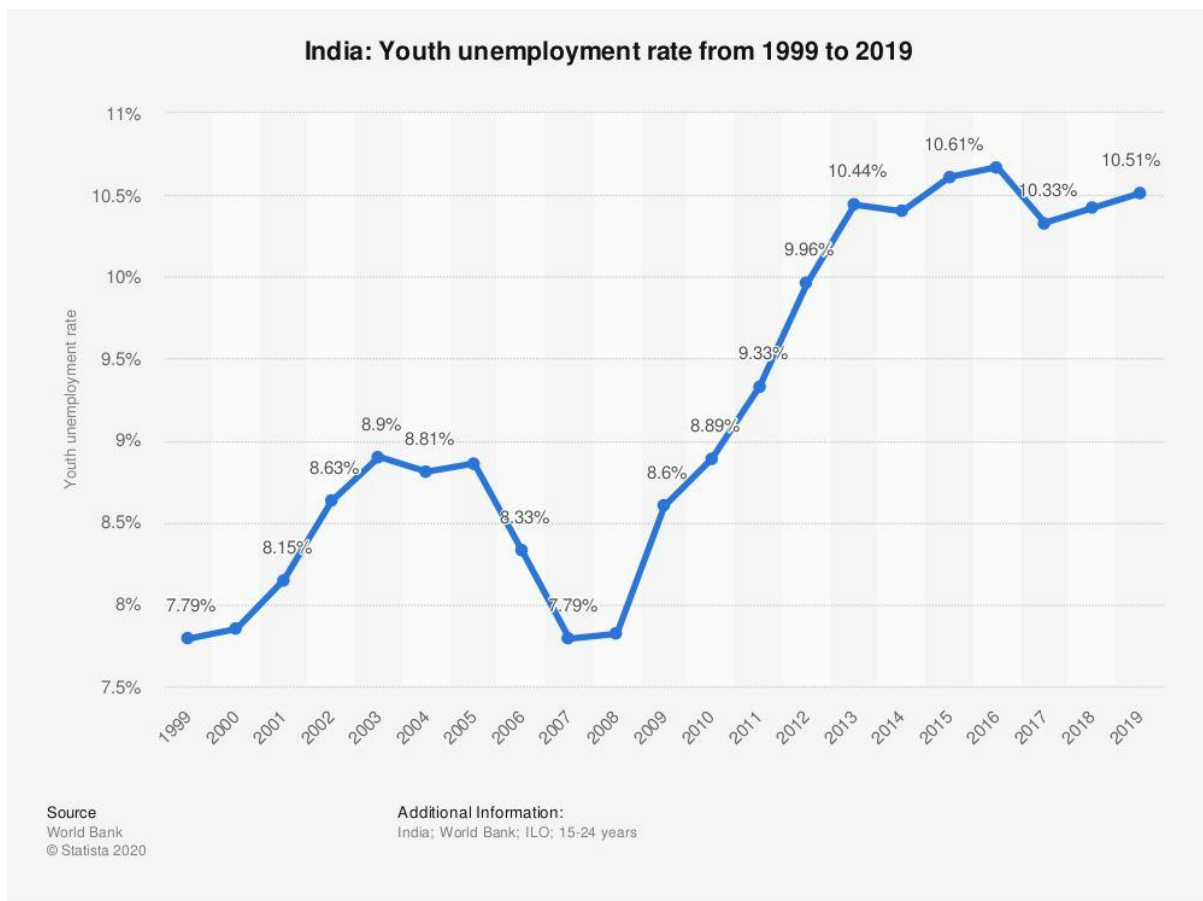
Interestingly, in the same year, in fact much before 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, another amendment – 73rd Amendment of the Constitution – was brought in by the government to push the famous big reform for devolution of power for rural governance by bringing in the role of panchayati raj institutions (PRIs). With this, the then ruling party, Congress, could realise the dream of Gandhiji's Gram Swaraj. Gandhi always advocated for seeing villages as mini republics where people were the decision makers and implementers of holistic development. Could the villages really become so is a debatable question, though. What is clearly visible is that rural India became a land bank for an ever-expanding urban India. All the roads to development towards villages were only to bring migrants as cheap labourers and infrastructure merely serving for industrial and information technology (IT) development.

In the absence of any real financial powers or specific budgets, PRIs became mere vehicles of implementing projects decided at the top, rather than planning for their specific village development in a bottom up approach that could touch lives of rural community, build assets and infrastructure relevant to village centric development. Moreover, caste equations and cultural hegemonies have also played a huge role in disallowing Gram Sabhas to perform

their mandated functions. Over a period, these last tiers of local governance have become a sheer formality losing their significance in the integrated development of rural India.

Could a 'Structurally Reformed Smart India' become the solution for development?

When India opened its markets for foreign direct investments, the hopes were sky high. Metro and other capital cities were being modernised with better transport network, industrial corridors were getting built, special economic zones (SEZs) were being created to welcome multinational companies set up their manufacturing units, and IT parks were introduced. To feed these high speed vehicles to development, the education sector also started opening up to privatisation of professional education with more and more colleges coming up to create a pool of human resource for the new found management and service sector. Employment rate zoomed up and surpassed its targets. GDP was skyrocketing and urban infrastructure, especially construction industry, was reaching new heights. However, beyond a point, this growth could not take the country anywhere. A look at the graph showing youth employment rate^[ii] narrates the story well.



This graph released by the World Bank and UN's International Labour Organisation (ILO) sums up where we are after four decades of having opened up our economy to the western model of private markets, industries and fast speed development.



After a landslide victory in the general elections in 2014, the newly elected Modi government tried to repackage urban renewal mission into a new avatar – Smart City Mission[iii]. It was supposed to be their attempt at modernising urban India that aimed at building urban infrastructure with modern technology providing smart solutions to urban population. The focus however remained technology, mechanisation and corporatising solutions. Integrating urban poor community's basic needs of social security, employment, education and health in this development model is still a missing link.

Today, India appears to be at a standstill. From P.V. Narasimha Rao-Manmohan Singh era to Modi-Shah regime, the economy has stagnated and is at the risk of going further down with barely touching GDP at 5.5 per cent in 2019-20. Youth lack modern employability and whole country is seriously looking for solutions. This is a classic case of getting stuck in a quagmire. Fast economy requires huge investments, world class infrastructure, automation, modern technologies, skilled professionals and committed buyers. Unfortunately, this modernisation could not provide employment to our youth who were in millions but without matching skills and potentials. Not surprising, large and erstwhile large-scale employers like mining industry, construction work and manufacturing were now being run on sophisticated machines that gradually removed manual labour and the jobs went from workers to trained professionals.

Agriculture and allied sectors that were the large source of employment bore the brunt of this race to achieve modernisation. Agricultural lands, especially adjoining major cities, were acquired by the governments in the name of national interest and huge land banks were created so that new era industries could be set up. Farm owners turned landless, rendering farm labourers jobless. While the former still had some cash to invest in the world that they were not aware of, the latter had nothing in their hands. As the country was moving on a fast track, large part of farming community was paying the price of this speed.

Since then, several analyses have time and again concluded that the agriculture sector that was the largest employer completely crashed and therefore India finds itself stagnant and now sinking in terms of economic growth, overall development indicators and employment.

The Modi government has been working on multiple strategies for “Doubling farmers’ income by 2022” and one of the big ticket reforms claimed by the government is the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020. However, instead of becoming a matter to celebrate, this bill is facing severe opposition from farmers and policy lobbies across the nation. The biggest critique of the new Act is that while it brings down the marketing committees set up in the previous Act, APMC Act, 2003[iv], and gives farmers the freedom to sell their produce across the nation, the new Act does not provide any regulation over minimum support price (MSP). Hindustan Times, a national newspaper has quoted[v] Kavitha Kuruganti, an activist representing Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA), highlighting the most contentious issue in the new Act: “The government is abdicating all oversight responsibility since it is not prescribing a system of registration of all traders of farmers’ produce, nor does it want to build a price

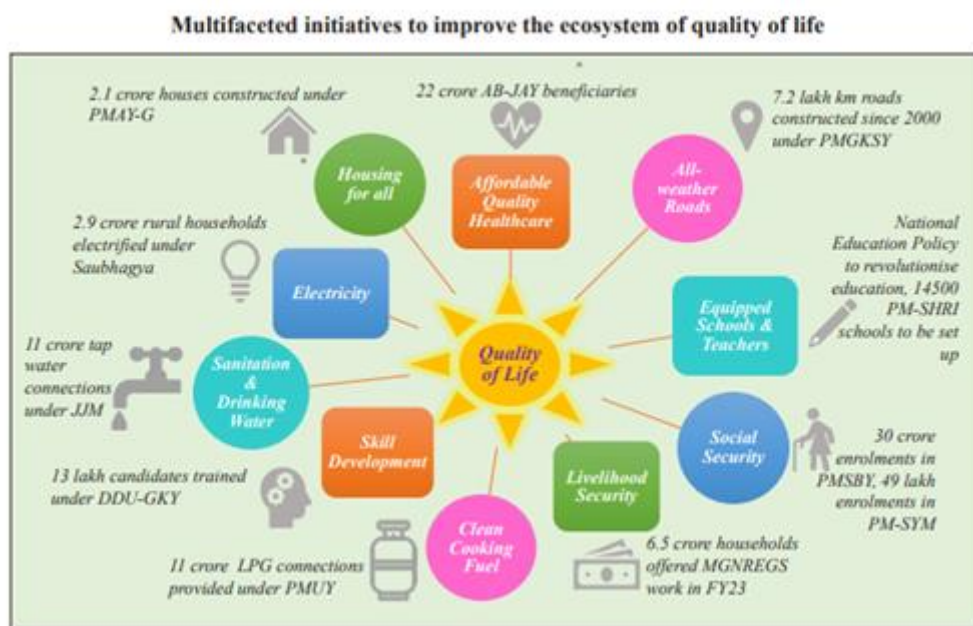
intelligence system even as it weakens the mandi (market) system. How and when will it intervene then?"

With corporates coming in as big players in food sector, the risk of farmers getting unfair share due to power imbalance is quite evident and government opting out of the system puts farmers further at the mercy of private companies.

The stir is going on, farmers are not letting this go and the nation waits to see how this stalemate gets over and in whose favour.

Responsible and responsive alternate pathway to revive rural economy

Niti Aayog in 2017, "Changing Structure of Rural Economy of India – Implications for Employment and Growth", authored by Ramesh Chand, S.K. Srivastava and Jaspal Singh mulls over the plight of agriculture as a sector in India and how the loss of jobs in this sector is a big factor in the stagnant economic situation of India. The paper highlights that contribution of the rural areas in the economy of India for the period 1970-71 to 2011-12 is seen from its share in national output and employment (Table 2.1). The rural areas engaged 84.1 per cent of the total workforce and produced 62.4 per cent of the total net domestic product (NDP) in 1970-71. Subsequently, rural share in the national income declined sharply till 1999-2000. Rural share in total employment also witnessed a decline but its pace did not match with the changes in its share in national output or income. The declining contribution of rural areas in national output without a commensurate reduction in its share in employment implies that a major portion of the overall economic growth in the country came from the capital-intensive sectors in urban areas without generating significant employment during the period under consideration





Livelihood and Skill Development:

The Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM) is among the world's largest initiatives aimed at enhancing the livelihoods of economically disadvantaged households. Emphasizing a community-driven approach, it empowers rural women through various initiatives like Self Help Groups (SHGs). Approximately 8.7 crore women from marginalized communities have been mobilized into 81 lakh SHGs, with nearly 4 lakh SHG members trained as Community Resource Persons (CRPs). Additionally, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has provided employment to 5.6 crore households, generating significant person-days of employment, leading to the creation of essential assets like animal sheds, farm ponds, and horticulture plantations. Furthermore, the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) has trained over 13 lakh candidates, with nearly 8 lakh individuals successfully placed in jobs.

Women Empowerment:

Self Help Groups (SHGs) play a pivotal role in rural development and women empowerment, exemplified by their contributions during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. With around 1.2 crore SHGs, predominantly comprising women, initiatives like the SHG Bank Linkage Project have become the world's largest microfinance endeavor. These SHGs have positively impacted women's economic, social, and political empowerment, fostering financial decision-making, asset ownership, and livelihood diversification. Rural female labor force participation has notably increased, reflecting positive trends in gender employment dynamics. Additionally, schemes like DAY-National Rural Livelihood Mission have been instrumental in enhancing women's self-esteem, personality development, and community participation.

Housing For All:

The Government's "Housing for All by 2022" initiative, implemented through the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana –Gramin (PMAY-G), aims to provide pucca houses with basic amenities to eligible houseless households in rural areas. With a target of 3 crore houses, significant progress has been made, with 2.1 crore houses completed by January 2023. Landless beneficiaries are given priority, ensuring equitable access to housing.

Water and Sanitation:

Initiatives like the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) and Mission Amrit Sarovar strive to provide tap water connections to rural households and rejuvenate water bodies. The JJM has significantly increased tap water supply to rural households, benefiting millions. Mission Amrit Sarovar has led to the construction of numerous water bodies, enhancing water holding capacity and promoting carbon sequestration. Furthermore, the Swachh Bharat Mission (G) focuses on sustaining Open Defecation Free (ODF) status in villages and implementing solid and liquid waste management systems, with notable achievements in village sanitation.

Smoke Free Rural Homes:



The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana has substantially increased LPG coverage, benefiting rural households and reducing indoor air pollution. The Ujjwala 2.0 scheme aims to further expand LPG access, particularly targeting migrant families.

Rural Infrastructure:

The Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana has played a vital role in creating roads and bridges in rural areas, enhancing connectivity and facilitating economic development. Additionally, schemes like SAUBHAGYA and Deendayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana have successfully electrified rural households, improving access to electricity and bolstering rural infrastructure.

- **SAUBHAGYA-** Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana, was launched to achieve universal household electrification by providing electricity connections to all willing un-electrified households in rural areas and all willing poor households in urban areas in the country. The connections were given for free to economically poor households and for others, Rs 500 was charged after the release of the connection in 10 instalments. The Saubhagya scheme has been successfully completed and closed on 31st March 2022. **Deendayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana (DDUGJY)**, envisaged the creation of basic electricity infrastructure in villages/habitations, strengthening & augmentation of existing infrastructure, and metering of existing feeders/distribution transformers/consumers to improve the quality and reliability of power supply in rural areas. A total of 2.9 crore households have been electrified since the launch of the Saubhagya period in October 2017 under various schemes viz (Saubhagya, DDUGJY, etc.).

Impact of New Economic Policy on the Rural Economy

Since 1991 Indian economy has been exposed to economic liberalisation and globalisation in line with structural adjustment and stabilisation policies initiated by International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Structural adjustment policy advocated privatisation, import liberalisation and export-led growth and while stabilisation policy emphasises reduction in fiscal deficit through withdrawal of subsidies given to industry, trade and agriculture. There has been a shift in the Indian economic policy from State-oriented development strategy to market oriented development, leaving the decisions of production and distribution to the market signals (Parthasarathy 2003). The impact of the economic reforms on the rural economy has been in varied forms.

The reform measures such as the reduction in fiscal deficit, reduction of subsidies, devaluation of rupee, export orientation and reduction of agricultural credit adversely affected the rural poor especially in terms of food security, which relates with production, distribution and pricing of the food-grains. The agricultural sector was worst affected by the fiscal contraction, which invariably resulted in a disproportionate cut in capital expenditure (Teltumbde 1996). Agricultural sector is the mainstay of the rural Indian economy around which socio-economic privileges and deprivations resolve and any change in its structure is likely to have a corresponding impact on the existing pattern of the social equity. The



shrinkage of the flow of resources to the rural sector, a misconceived interest rate policy which discriminated against agriculture, a sickening rural delivery credit system, the emergence of a new banking culture nurtured by reforms, which is far from friendly to agriculture and rural development, all go against the interests of rural economy (Majumdar 2002).

The bank credit to the agriculture as a per centage of net bank credit fell consistently to 12.4 per cent in March 1995 from 17.4 per cent in March 1990. The flow of financial resources to agriculture, both in terms of longterm capital and working capital declined sizeably. It has had an adverse impact on agricultural industries and in turn on rural employment (Mundle 1993).

There has been a cut in the bank credits to the non-agricultural industries as well. In 1992, the rural workers in secondary and tertiary sectors showed a decline of 6.3 per cent and 1.3 per cent respectively from the pre-Reform level in 1989-90. Curiously, the primary sector showed a hefty increase of 10.1 per cent in the same period. In rural area nearly 50 per cent farming households have less than 1 acre land. For meeting the two ends they need supplementary work in non-agricultural sector. In absence of this work however, they end up engaging themselves with the sundry work related to their tiny farms and declare themselves as the agriculture workers. This increase in the primary sector jobs thus indicates partial unemployment of workforce. The decline in non-agricultural jobs and the overall employment are attributed to the cut in the government expenditure on various poverty alleviation programmes, during the reform period (Joshi and Little 1996: 238-239). After one full decade since the inception of the economic reforms, the grim performance of the agricultural sector made the Union government to rethink its approaches to the rural development. This is clear from the statement of the finance minister made in the parliament, "it is my firm belief that sustained and broad-based growth of agriculture is essential for alleviating poverty, generating incomes and employment, assuring food security and sustaining a buoyant domestic market for industry and services" (Union Budget 1999-2000).

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