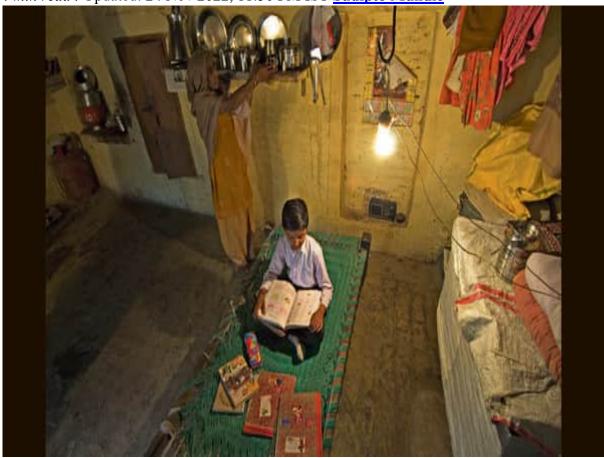# Villages at the periphery and the changing face of backwardness

4 min read . Updated: 24 Nov 2022, 11:50 PM IST **Sudipto Mundle**

Every village now has a primary school, barring one where there are too few children. (Mint)

The visible hand of the state has combined with the invisible hand of the market to transform even our most remote rural areas

I recently revisited Palamu (now a division of three districts: Palamu, Latehar and Garhwa) after 45 years to plan a re-survey of four villages I had surveyed in the late 1970s (see Sudipto Mundle, 'Backwardness and Bondage', Indian Institute of Public Administration, 1979). The villages are important not in themselves but because of what they represent. Jharkhand is one of the most backward states in the country and Palamu is the remotest, most backward region of Jharkhand, i.e., the periphery of the periphery. Comparing conditions there today with those prevailing in 1977 will enable an assessment of how things have changed, or not changed, at the bottom of the development pyramid. My initial impressions follow.

The first thing I noted is a complete transformation of the physical infrastructure, thanks to the implementation of numerous government programmes over several decades. Forty-five years ago, the access roads to these villages were either kuchcha or full of potholes, sometimes washed away by the monsoons. Now all the villages are connected to highways by excellent metalled roads. Inside the villages, mud tracks have largely been replaced by

concrete lanes. Most of the mud and thatch huts have also been replaced by houses with brick walls and tile roofs. Forty-five years ago, none of these villages had electricity. Now all homes have power connections, though with limited supply. All households also have at least one cellphone. These remote villagers are now as connected with the world as we are in the cities and this has wrought a sea change in their awareness and attitudes.

There is still very little irrigation, but all villages have tube-wells that can pump enough drinking water. This has curbed the incidence of water- borne diseases. The villages have Anganwadis, but no primary health centres. Reportedly, compounders from neighbouring villages visit twice every day. Provision of highly subsidized or free food grains through the Public Distribution System, the villagers said, is one intervention sustained over the years that has had the maximum impact on their living conditions. No one complained much about leakages, but a few persons reported problems with their ration cards.

Every village now has a primary school, barring one where there are too few children. Secondary and intermediate schools covering up to class 12 are also available within commuting distance.

Virtually all children now attend school, and, remarkably, the number of girls exceed the number of boys at all levels. The high level of school enrolment is extremely empowering, especially for girls, but we had no way of assessing learning outcomes.

Another important recent development empowering women is the spread of women's self-help credit groups (SHGs). Money lenders continue to dominate the informal credit market, but these SHGs have moderated the incidence of usurious interest rates, apart from empowering women.

The resident villagers are mostly subsistence farmers of Scheduled Tribes (STs) or Scheduled Castes (SCs). Without irrigation, only one proper crop can be raised annually. In the villages where there is irrigation, land is mostly owned by large farmers from other villages, whereas large farmers in unirrigated villages own land in neighbouring irrigated villages. There are no really large landowners in the villages we visited. The relatively large farmers, mainly belonging to upper castes and owning over 5 acres or so, do hire some labour or rent out some land for share cropping. The average wage is about ₹300 for men and ₹250 for women. The phenomenon of bonded labour has disappeared and social oppression of SC/ST families has also largely gone. This is partly on account of enforcement of laws like the Abolition of Bonded Labour Act, but also because of the fear of Naxalites, say villagers. The Naxalite movement has largely withered away but has left its mark.

The main driving factor that has really transformed economic relations, livelihoods and social consciousness in these villages is the circulatory out-migration of most male workers to Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra and Delhi-Gurgaon. Landlessness is quite high, while there is limited work for hired labour in the villages. MNREGA was a life saver during the pandemic for returning migrants who had returned to their village in hired buses, on cycles or even on foot. However, there is not much appetite for MNREGA now because work availability is uncertain and payments are delayed by two weeks or so. So male workers prefer to migrate to distant labour markets every year where there is assured availability of work, even though their wages are not much higher than in the villages. We met some of those who were home for Dussera/Diwali. They said they could make between ₹15,000 and ₹20,000 per month for eight to ten months every year, mainly as construction workers.

Post-pandemic normalcy could be a whole lot better if we all try

So that's the story. Decades of public intervention, however tardy or inefficient, in everything from the provision of food, housing, education and healthcare to roads, power and telecommunications and circulatory migration to distant labour markets across the country—i.e., the visible hand of the state combined with the invisible hand of the market—has radically transformed the lives of these villagers in one of the remotest and most backward corners of India. Poverty has not been eliminated. Most of the people we met are still very poor. But the haunting images of extreme deprivation, emaciated and hungry people in tatters I saw everywhere 45 years ago have mercifully disappeared.

These are the author's personal views.

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