

# Time to rethink rural management

DR RAHUL GHAI

The Covid-19 pandemic and its economic impact have sharply brought to the forefront of public health as a policy-making challenge. While the sight of lakhs of migrant workers walking miles to reach their native villages, glaringly revealed the disruption of our urban economy, rural India has suffered far worse. The massive reverse migration has also created an intense need to create new growth pathways in rural India.

Post Covid times have poised India to rethink its model of metro city-centric economic development. This is an opportune time to recalibrate rural-urban dynamics and interdependencies. Essentially this means that the economic and cultural contribution of rural settlements, small and medium-sized towns should be understood and factored in planning inclusive and sustainable human development in India. There is bound to be an increase in demand for rural management/development studies professionals shortly. For students contemplating studying management or development studies, a course in rural management might be an intelligent and socially conscious choice at this juncture.

As economic activities expand to newer areas and new settlements come up, the age-old boundaries between urban and rural have melted away with rural economic clusters being the new normal. As the epidemic further spurs localisation of industries and employment with the digitisation of businesses and remote working as the new norm, the definition of rural management itself has changed.

The resilience of the rural economy will outlast coronavirus pandemic

No doubt, coronavirus has brought about a sudden halt and exposed the fault lines in India's economic growth story. Rural India that houses 69% of India's population constituting more than 800 million people is suddenly experiencing a further overburdening of its already dissipating agricultural economy. However, a series of expenditure-based initiatives announced by the government for the rural economy such as raising of

MNREGA allocations as well as recent Garib Kalyan Rozgar Abhiyan with a focus on rural housing, roads, plantations, drinking water, toilets, mandis, and cattle sheds, etc. are bound to have a multiplier effect on investment, employment generation and consumption. A renewed impetus on food processing, livestock, fisheries, dairy, warehousing, and logistics and non-agricultural pursuits such as light manufacturing, retail, construction, and financial services, rural India can glide into a promising future. A report has recently forecast that the reverse migration can catalyze housing demand in tier II & III cities after Covid-19, creating new employment opportunities for millions.

The Covid-19 crisis has propelled us to a policy future where diversification of the rural economy, improvement of health and education indices of the rural population, and creation of new employment opportunities in villages will be center of India's development focus.

About 3 million NGOs are operating mainly in rural India. A cohort of new entrepreneurs moves from big IT cities to set up agritech-based start-ups in tier II and III towns. Big multinationals outsourcing their processes to smaller towns has reshaped the job landscape. Of a staggering 6.3 crore MSMEs manufacturing over 6,000 products, more than 50% operate in rural India. Add to this the massive government machinery that works in rural India. As Central and state governments, apart from multilateral organisations, would increasingly conduct feasibility/impact studies of schemes in rural areas, there will be a need for a vast number of rural development and management professionals.

Rural Management education governs the study of managing and optimising agricultural resources effectively. It also includes planning and executing rural development programs, promoting rural livelihoods, and engineering diverse livelihood opportunities outside agriculture for the rural population. The impact of Covid-19 will have long term implications on the rural economy.

*(The writer is the Dean of SDS, IIMR University)*