



It will take a cillage: Covid-19 crisis can help us rework relationship between city and village

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Developing a “cillage” ecosystem would need a rooted and integrated approach to holistic education and research, technology development and management, as well as technology-enabled rural livelihood enhancement.



A migrant family at a shelter home in Colonelganj town of Gonda district in Uttar Pradesh. (Express photo by Vishal Srivastav)

Witnessing the reverse migration of daily wage earners in large numbers despite the lockdown to contain the [coronavirus](#) has been distressing. Many even resorted to walking back to their hometowns, hundreds of kilometres away, as their survival in cities, with no jobs in hand, became untenable. In contrast, some in tune with knowledge-era technologies have been able to continue working, many from their homes. While the lockdown necessarily means a livelihood crisis of unprecedented magnitude, particularly for daily wage earners, it's time to think whether a return to normalcy should mean back to business as usual or to seek a new normal.

The tendency to migrate to urban areas has been a natural consequence of better opportunities that got created there – in contrast to life in rural areas becoming increasingly unsustainable. While there may be several drivers of this situation, the industrial-era dynamics that led to centralisation in support of mass production or massive scale up was clearly a major one. This, in turn, also led to concentration of higher education/capacity building processes to urban centres where there was job growth, quite to the detriment of the much larger rural domain where significant wisdom did exist. The education and training environment became myopic, essentially

meeting the manning requirements to run systems created by others – with little confidence in creating one’s own systems to address needs independent of others.

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While many countries which created new systems and technologies in the industrial era climbed up the power ladder, India’s importance grew primarily because of her demographic dividend and the large market that her people constituted. Rural India suffered severe neglect in the process, probably as a result of poor job opportunities there and education having lost its role as an enabler of local development. The Anand dairy revolution and sugar co-operatives were exceptions driven by a few visionaries where livelihood enhancement needs inspired development, which in turn pulled in education – in whatever form it could be leveraged – to rural areas. Slowly, the country is learning to create systems and technologies to address her needs. However, the exercise is, by and large, urban-centric.

We are now in the knowledge era. And knowledge-era technologies, in contrast to industrial-era technologies, promote democratisation (social media, for example) and facilitate decentralisation (work from home). It should thus be possible for an adequately educated and trained youth residing in a rural domain to support a significant part of the manufacturing and service needs of urban areas, just as an urban youth can support a significant part of the knowledge and application needs in rural areas. With technologies like additive manufacture, internet of things, and artificial intelligence, well-trained people can address needs in both urban and rural areas from wherever they are. I am aware of an Indian group addressing the troubleshooting, plant modification and technical documentation needs of plants abroad, sitting in India. Thus, the knowledge era should, in principle, become a significant income leveller between the urban and rural domains, with a large rise in the overall national income. As we embrace the knowledge era and focus on capacity

building of rural youth, the opportunities in rural areas should, in principle, become higher than those in urban areas since the rural segment can now benefit from all three (agriculture, manufacturing and services) sectors of the economy.

In the knowledge era, with emphasis on capability and capacity building of rural youth in terms of holistic education, appropriate technology and enhanced livelihood, there is a possibility for a more balanced distribution of income as well as population. This would, however, need knowledge bridges to be built between cities and villages, and the creation of an ecosystem which has been conceptualised as a “cillage” – a synergistic combination of city and village. One can safely surmise that bridging the knowledge gap between a city and a village would also bridge the income gap between the two, and lead to a faster bridging of the gap between the average individual income in India and that in industrially advanced countries. Democratisation promoted by knowledge technologies, if properly leveraged, can in principle reduce disparities, which, unfortunately, are on the rise today.

Realising this dream would naturally require a lot of preparation and time. Developing a “cillage” ecosystem would need a rooted and integrated approach to holistic education and research, technology development and management, as well as technology-enabled rural livelihood enhancement. It would take a while for the rural youth to become empowered enough to convert the challenges into opportunities in rural areas. The emergence of a new-age society is an inevitability. How soon the rural domain can embrace it and how concurrently, comprehensively that can happen, is the real challenge: That will decide whether India will gain in the knowledge era or lag as it did in the industrial era.

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Can the migration of daily wage earners from cities to villages due to the COVID crisis hasten this transition? The process could also be

seen as the migration of a set of experiences and skills to villages. Can we look at this as a potential two-way bridge for a new relationship between cities and villages in which not all need to return to cities, but can rather meet the needs of cities as well as villages by remaining in villages. Several initiatives will be needed to realise such a possibility.

Facilitating a number of new skills, technologies and support systems that can further leverage current capabilities of these people for starting a new enterprise would be important. Immediate arrangements to facilitate their livelihood, and leveraging their present capabilities could help retain at least some of these people in villages. It could trigger a faster movement towards an inevitable long-term equilibrium. Going forward, we should take knowledge activities to a higher level so that the products and services created by these people become more competitive. Looking at disruptive technologies for exploiting local opportunities should follow.

The disruption caused by the [COVID-19](#) crisis, particularly in the context of loss of livelihoods at the base of the socio-economic pyramid, is bound to have a deep impact. It will need every effort to return to normal. Given that the new normal would, in any case, be quite different, the right course would be to channelise the stimulus caused by this crisis towards accelerating the shift to a new normal. This will not only help a more dispersed population, but will also reduce disparities and lead to faster growth of the economy.

The writer is former chairman of the Department of Atomic Energy

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