

The Technology of Cultural Change in Rural India

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In the last decade sharp changes in the technologies of consumption, production and governance have fundamentally altered the culture of rural life in India. This should lead us to rethink the opportunities and risks faced by villagers. The common tropes of rainfall risk and restrictive inequality traps (World Development Report, 2006) need to be supplemented with a better grasp of how these interact with uncertain global processes. Access to information and capital may come to matter more than access to land in determining inequality, which would fundamentally alter the culture of Indian agriculture.

It is commonly believed, in development circles, that social and cultural change in rural India has been slow. Some scholars have even gone to the extent of blaming an unchanging, caste-centered, “Hindu Equilibrium” for placing an atavistic hold on human innovation and entrepreneurial ability (Lal, 1989). More reasonably, a rich body of work by anthropologists and economists has argued that social relationships – whether in the form of family and kinship networks, or inter-linkages between landlords and tenants create particular forms of information asymmetries and contracts that result in poverty traps (Dasgupta, 1993). In particular, much of the development economics literature in the last two decades has studied how peasant households are subject to such pervasive risk that they devote their lives to mitigating that risk by nurturing social networks to the extent that social mobility is crowded out (e.g. Munshi and Rosenzweig 2005). Other work has examined how history’s long arm fundamentally affects institutions that have a bearing on agricultural productivity (e.g. Banerjee and Iyer, 2006).

While this literature has contributed substantially to our understanding of the institutional determinants of agricultural development, it would be incorrect to infer from this that culture is a constraint, that it is static, or that history is destiny. Historians have shown, for instance, that rural Indian society and the structure of caste in particular, has seen considerable periods of change over the course of centuries (Bayly, 1999). These changes have been induced by external invasions, shifts in political power, and technological change – particularly with the green revolution. Furthermore, in the last decade, there has been a radical shift in technology that has sharply increased the link between villages and globalizing processes of consumption, production, and governance (Appadurai, 1996). These have structurally transformed rural life by gradually de-linking its dependence upon traditional economic and social structures.

Perhaps the most important change in the technology of consumption is that, starting in the early 1990’s, the scope of rural access to television and communications expanded sharply, with a marked reduction in cost. This has increased the market-penetration of advertising in India and many other rural areas of the world. Consequently, rural viewers now have their preferences shaped by the same forces as urban consumers. Inequalities in wealth and status are now signaled and expressed via these new consumption patterns,

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and human aspirations are shaped by life on the screen more than any time before. This has implications for a variety of different things – most obviously the demand for consumer goods. Aware of this potential, multi-national firms are successfully adapting their wares for rural markets (Prahalad, 2006), and rural India has seen a huge surge in the demand for consumer durables (Rao and Natarajan, 1996).

Technologies of production have also changed a great deal. In addition to innovations in agricultural technology, changes in trade regimes and inter-connectivity because of improved communication and transportation have transformed the landscape of agricultural markets. The internet has enabled farmers to have direct access to information on international commodity prices and markets (<http://www.echoupal.com>). Global climate change has led to greater uncertainties in water use. At the same time, villagers are increasingly less dependent on agriculture for their livelihood – partly because urban and international migration has become an important source of rural income, and partly because of the increased prominence of the non-farm sector which has sharply increased options outside agriculture (Lanjouw and Shariff, 2004).

This reduction in rural isolation has had the general effect of raising consumer aspirations, while demonstrating the vastly increased options for mobility and risk diversification both within and outside rural life. Strategies for mobility are thus increasingly centered on breaking out of rural areas, or on taking on greater risks in adopting new agricultural technologies such as genetically modified seeds. At one level this can have a positive impact –with an increase in entrepreneurial initiative and the potential for raised incomes. But it also results in what can be called an aspirations gap – people tend to have ambitions that exceed their capabilities. This can lead to poorly thought out investments in new businesses or new technologies resulting in a sharply increased risk of failure. Similarly the increase in education aspirations can have the healthy effect of raising the demand for schooling for both boys and girls. But it can also lead to a disequilibrium between demand and supply – small farmers make large sacrifices to get their children a higher education only to see them join the ranks of the unemployed, and to return to live with their parents. Pathologies such as depression and alcoholism are often the result.

Globalization, in other words, has opened up opportunities, but it has also left rural residents with risks that are not well understood and are thus more uncertain. Opening up access to global markets leaves farmers more vulnerable to downturns in international markets, and more subject to the strategic manipulation of multi-national enterprises in accessing new technologies. One consequence is the recent rash of suicides among rural Indian farmers (Deshpande 2002). This uncertainty can lead to a churning in the social structure; those individuals and groups that are better able to comprehend global opportunities will compete better than those who are more insular. And the differential access to global knowledge does not necessarily correlate with traditional social hierarchies. The geographic reach of low caste networks can, for instance, be greater than those of high-caste networks (Luke and Munshi, 2005). Technologies of globalization, thus, have the potential to break traditional inequality traps, but also possibly replace them with new ones.

Policies to improve governance are also, in their way, technologies (Agrawal, 2005). They are tools devised by people who claim expert knowledge applied within a real-world context to improve the quality of life. Driven strongly by external donors, the technology of rural governance has changed radically over the last decade with externally driven attempts to empower local actors. In many countries this has involved increased decentralization in power and finance to local governments (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006). Another important effort has been the increased emphasis on participatory and community-based approaches to development which purport to give communities greater voice over policies that affect their lives but often do not deliver as promised. (Mansuri and Rao, 2004). These approaches to development have several important implications for rural societies. They have the potential to localize politics and created the space for marginal groups to gain power. They can generate an enhanced “capacity to engage” with dominant elites (Gibson and Woolcock 2005), while inculcating the “capacity to aspire” – the capability of envisioning a collective path out of destitution (Appadurai, 2004). But, on the other hand, they can also strengthen the hands of elites by putting resources under the control of local big-men without downward accountability (Abraham and Platteau 2004).

It is important to note that administrative and policy interventions that aim to improve the quality of life anywhere are never culturally neutral. This was famously demonstrated for rural India in the process by which British attempts to introduce a decennial census in India essentially created the modern caste system by hardening categories that were earlier much more fluid (Dirks, 2002). Recent work has shown that similar processes have continued in the post-independence period (Rao and Ban, 2007). Policies can have profound, unintended consequences for cultural change. For instance, the overuse of participatory approaches can create imaginary constructs of “community” that emerge simply to engage in rent-seeking from donors (Cook and Kothari, 2001), and the use of proxy means to identify poor households can be manipulated by local elites for personal and political gain (Besley, Pande, Rao 2006) and thereby change local conventions of status and charity.

In India, the most pervasive change in the technology of rural governance has been shaped by nationalist priorities and a constitutional mandate. This is the shift to panchayat governance which requires the increased devolution of finance and power to a three-tier system of democratically elected councils at the village, county and district levels. Social inequalities are explicitly countered by requiring that a third of seats in the councils, and in their presidencies, be reserved for women. In addition, the proportion of seats and presidencies for discriminated castes are required to reflect their proportion in the population. Caste reservations in panchayats have raised the likelihood of greater benefits for discriminated groups (Besley et al. 2004). Women’s reservations have brought greater authority to women in the north (Chattopadhaya and Duflo, 2004) which has more acute gender discrimination, than in the south where women and men have more common desires and goals (Ban and Rao, 2006). The impact of panchayat reform has been most advanced in Kerala state, where a deep history of social mobilization by the left aided a “People’s Campaign” that sharply increased the downward accountability

and oversight of village governments while devolving forty per cent of the state's budget to them (Chaudhuri and Heller, 2003). All this has sharply localized politics, giving marginal but numerically large castes considerable political clout, and led to shifts in the structures of traditional authority (Krishna 2002).

While agricultural growth has not always kept up with the galloping pace of the rest of the Indian economy, changes in the nature of economic, political and social life have tended to level the playing field in rural areas. Traditional inequalities have by no means disappeared, but they are becoming less salient. For instance – it is now just as likely to see an upper caste man working as a wage laborer in rural India, as it is to see a lower caste woman as the president of a village council. The social life of agriculture in many parts of India today is, consequently, increasingly becoming less about the reproduction of inequality -- with a particular caste endowed with a particular occupation, and status largely determined by land ownership, as it is about the expansion of occupational choice and the energizing but risky encounter with global connectivity. While the vulnerability of poor households has not diminished, risk now has a global dimension and old techniques of risk management are less likely to work. Rural institutions in India are undergoing rapid change, reacting to public and private interventions that have affected the technologies of consumption, production and governance. Similar changes are occurring, in different ways, in almost every other part of the world – and this necessitates a revised view of the role of culture in agriculture and development.

What should policy do in this dynamic environment? The key perhaps is to create stable institutions that help equalize access to new opportunities while protecting those who could be hurt by rapid change. Eliminating illiteracy is fundamental -- nothing matters more in accessing information, and globalization is likely to sharply increase the correlation between illiteracy and inequality. Second, investment hubs located close to rural markets would equalize access to information and capital so that talented individuals from all social groups can benefit from global opportunities. Third, local governance needs to be improved by freeing access to village budgets and records, while ensuring that public deliberation holds village governments more accountable for its actions. Fourth, a minimum level of employment should be guaranteed to ensure that the most vulnerable are protected from livelihood shocks. Variants of all these policies are currently in the process of being implemented by the Government of India but their quality is strongly affected by the local political economy and geography.

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