

Changing Contours of Rural India: Dynamics of Socio-Economic Transformation

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Abstract

“India lives in its villages,” a statement attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, shows the significance of rural India. It also reflected in the statistics of the Census (2011), it says almost 69% of the Indian population lives in the rural areas as there are more than six lakhs villages across India having diversity such as languages, food culture, attire, community system, agriculture etc., Rural India has been undergoing significant transformation in recent decades, especially in post-independence, reflecting profound changes in its economic structure, social structure, and development trajectory at large. This Review article examines the changing contours of rural India by analyzing the impact of key socio-economic processes, including globalization, the strengthening of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), land reforms, the green revolution, social reforms, migration, urbanization, educational attainment, and technological advancements. The study explores transformations in social institutions, including changes in family structures and the economy, and how changes in the caste system are unfolding as these factors influence community life. These processes have contributed to increased agricultural productivity, improved income opportunities, and greater grassroots political participation. They have also posed challenges, such as agrarian distress, uneven regional development, and the breakdown of community life. By integrating existing literature, the article underscores the complex and uneven nature of rural transformation in India. Further, it highlights government initiatives helping rural areas combat the challenges they face. Moreover, there are some case studies that can serve as ideal villages, as Mahatma Gandhi dreamed of such a village, such as Hiware Bazar and Ralegan Siddhi in Maharashtra. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the emerging realities of rural India amid rapid socio-economic changes.

Keywords: Rural India, Social Change, Economic Change, Globalization, Urbanization, Social Reforms

1. INTRODUCTION

India is known for its diverse rural and urban community life. Despite rapid urbanization and industrial expansion, the majority of the Indian population lives in rural areas. According to the census (2011), that is around 69% of the total population. It spread across more than six lakh villages. It must be remembered that Indian society is not monolithic. It is diverse in many respects; the villages differ in terms of population size, social composition, economic practices, and languages. Historically, rural India has been characterized by a predominantly agrarian economy, where agriculture served as the main source of livelihood and shaped the overall organization of social life. The village functioned as a relatively self-sufficient unit (Sir Charles Metcalfe, 1830), sustained by interdependent occupational groups structured along caste lines, that is, the Jajmani System. This is peculiar to the Indian rural society. Social relations

were governed by traditional institutions such as caste, kinship, and community norms, which provided stability and continuity over generations. The joint family system's collective decision-making practices further reinforced the cohesive nature of rural society. However, this stable social structure of Indian society is neither static nor immune to change, as it continually evolves due to internal and external factors. The contours of rural India began to undergo significant transformation during the colonial period, which introduced new land revenue systems such as the Zamindari System, Ryotwari System, and Mahalwari System; Commercialization of agriculture and integration into global markets. These changes disrupted traditional agrarian relations and led to new forms of inequality and dependency. After independence, the Indian state undertook various measures to restructure rural society and promote equality, as highlighted in the preamble of the Indian Constitution. Land reforms were promoted through the Bhoodan (land gift) and Gramdan (village gift) movements, launched by Acharya Vinoba Bhave to address the issues of unequal land distribution. Furthermore, the Green Revolution was introduced in the 1960s and 1970s to increase agricultural productivity. Subsequently, ensuring food security along with reducing poverty. In the post-liberalization period particularly since the 1990s, the pace and the nature of the rural transformation have intensified. Processes such as globalization, economic liberalization and technological advancement have deepened the integration of rural areas with broader economic systems. The expansion of infrastructure, communication technologies, and market networks has facilitated greater mobility of labor, goods, and information. Migration has emerged as a key livelihood strategy, enabling rural households to diversify income sources. At the same time, the growth of non-farm employment and rural entrepreneurship has reduced the exclusive dependence on agriculture, leading to a more diversified rural economy. Alongside economic changes, rural India has undergone significant social transformation. Traditional institutions such as caste and family are undergoing gradual changes. Caste continues to influence social and economic relations but its rigidity has been challenged by various factors such as education, state policies, and public awareness. Similarly, due to migration and changing aspirations, the joint family is evolving into a nuclear family. Gender roles are also evolving, with greater participation of women in education, the labor force, and decision-making processes. These changes reflect a broader shift towards individualism and new forms of social identity in rural areas. Institutional developments have played a crucial role in shaping rural transformation. The constitutional recognition of decentralized governance through the 73rd Amendment Act has strengthened Panchayati Raj Institutions, enhancing grassroots participation and Local-Self Governance. Various government initiatives such as VB-G RAM G Act (Previously known as MGNREGA), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana and so on aiming at rural development, employment generation and poverty alleviation have further contributed to improving living conditions and expanding opportunities in rural areas. At the same time, technological interventions such as digital connectivity and mobile communication have transformed access to information, thereby reshaping everyday life in villages. Despite these positive developments, the transformation of rural India remains uneven; agrarian distress, declining profitability of agriculture, and environmental degradation continue to affect rural livelihoods. The processes such as migration and market integration have in some cases weakened traditional community bonds and increased socio-economic inequalities.

In this context, the concept of changing contours provides a useful lense to understand the evolving nature of rural India. It captures not only the visible changes in economic and social structures but also the underlying processes that drive these transformations. The present review article seeks to examine these changing contours by analysing the impact of key socio-economic processes including globalization,

migration, urbanization, technological advancement and institutional reforms. By synthesizing existing literatures the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how rural India is being reshaped in the contemporary period. Furthermore, the paper attempts to identify emerging challenges and policy implications associated with rural transformation. It also draws attention to successful example of rural development such as villages like Hiware Bazar and Ralegan Siddhi in Maharashtra which demonstrate the potential for sustainable and community driven change. Through this analysis, the study contributes to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of rural India, emphasizing the need for inclusive and context sensitive approaches to development in an era of rapid socio-economic change.

2. UNDERSTANDING RURAL SOCIETY

2.1 Various Perspectives

1. **Orientalist-** Views Indian villages through the lens of ancient texts, traditions and cultural values. This perspectives was developed mainly by western scholars. According to this approach villages are seen as self-sufficient, stable and enduring units of Indian civilization. Therefore they are often described as “little republics” (Sir Charles Metcalfe, 1830). Henry Maine, William Jones, G.S.Ghurye these were the main proponents of the orientalist approach.
2. **Nationalist Perspectives-** This perspective emerged during the struggle against colonial rule. This perspective emphasized the strength, resilience and moral foundation of village life, viewing villages as the core on Indian civilization. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were the main proponents of this perspective. Gandhi believed that villages should be the foundation on India’s development, promoting decentralized governance (Gram Swaraj), local production and sustainable living. Similarly, Jawaharlal Nehru acknowledged the importance villages but held a more modernist view, emphasizing the need for industrialization and scientific development to uplift rural India.
3. **Subaltern Perspectives-** Focuses on the experiences, voices of marginalized groups in rural society such as peasants, landless labours, lower castes, tribal communities, and women. For Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, traditional Indian villages represent the oppressive Hindu social order. His opinion about the nature of Indian villages which are completely contradictory to that of Nehru and Gandhi. During his Constitutional Assembly speech he described villages as “a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism”.
4. **Field View-** refers to the understanding of the rural society based on empirical observation and fieldwork, rather than relying only on texts or idealized description. Famous sociologist such as M.N. Srinivas, S.C. Dube, and Andre Beteille spent their time in villages to understand rural society.
5. **Marxist Perspective-** Villages as sites of conflict, inequality, and power struggle rooted in the ownership and control of land and resources. Marxist thinkers focus on agrarian movements and peasant struggle as expressions of resistance against exploitation. A key proponent of this perspective is A.R.Desai.

2.2 Characteristics of Traditional Indian rural society:

Rural in India can be best understood by the examining its key structural and cultural characteristics, which distinguish it from urban society. These characteristics reflect both the traditional foundation of the rural life and the ongoing processes of change shaping contemporary villages. “The distinguishing economic, social and political characteristics of rural society are derived from its relationship to the land, from which most of its inhabitants make their living. The diet and the living conditions of rural areas are closely related to their land products and therefore tend to be regional and to be affected primarily by natural calamities,

such as famine. Rural politico-social classes are those related to the control of land as contrasted with the greater orientation of the urban political social system about personal and movable property, material display and down the scale from landlessness to the position of a landlord. A conflict of classes and human groups. Vertical social mobility in rural society is connected with movements up may develop within the society on the basis of landownership: small landowners against large, tenants against landlords, hired labourers against owners of estates.” (C.C. Zimmerman, 1948).

- 1. Economic Life in Rural India-** Rural economies have traditionally been seen as being woven around agriculture. Even those who did not own any land or were not directly engaged in its cultivation tended to be employed in occupations allied to agriculture. (Jodhka, 2023). Rural society is based predominantly on agriculture. (A.R. Desai, 1969). Traditionally, rural economies were largely subsistence-oriented, characterized by small-scale production, limited market interaction, and dependence on local resources. The village functioned as a relatively self-sufficient unit, with various occupational groups such as artisans, weavers and service providers contributing to the local economy that is nothing but Jajmani system. From a sociological perspective, scholars such as William H. Wiser and Oscar Lewis studied the Jajmani system as a key features of traditional rural organization. They emphasized its role in maintaining social cohesion and economic stability. Further Jajmani system represents an important aspects of traditional rural economy, illustrating how economic life was closely associated with social structure.
- 2. Caste- based Social Structure-** The caste system is one of the most significant institutions shaping the social structure of rural India. It is a hierarchical and hereditary system that organizes society into distinct social groups each with specific roles, privileges and restrictions. “In India, caste largely determine the function, the status, the available opportunities as well as the handicaps for an individual. Caste differences even determine the differences in modes of domestic and social life, types of houses and cultural patterns of the people which are found in the rural areas.” (A.R. Desai, 1969). G.S. Ghurye, one of the pioneers of Indian sociology in his book “Caste and Race in India”, identified six features of the caste system- 1) Segmental Division of Society 2) Hierarchy 3) Restrictions on Food and Social Intercourse 4) Civil and Religious Disabilities and Privileges 5) Lack of Unrestricted Choice of Occupation 6) Restrictions on Marriage. Furthermore Louise Dumont in his book “Homo-hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications” highlighted concept of “Purity and Pollution” while explaining the caste system. Jajmani system is also based on caste based hierarchy itself.
- 3. Family, Marriage and Kinship System-** “Among the institutions that compose rural society, the family is the most important. It has been its very foundation. It plays a decisive role in the material and cultural life of the rural aggregate and in moulding the psychological characteristics of the rural individual as well as the collectivity.” (A.R. Desai, 1969). Traditionally, rural India has been characterized by the dominance of the joint family system. Irawati Karve in her book “Kinship Organization in India (1953)” pointed out that the joint family system is not uniform across India. There are significant regional variations in kinship patterns, inheritance rules, and residence systems. For example North India largely follows patrilineal descent, Dharwad system of Joint family found in certain parts of the South India. Whereas there are some examples of Matrilineal in the northeast India. I.P. Desai his book “Some Aspects of Family in Mahuva (1964)” argued that a joint family should not be defined only by co-residence. Instead, he emphasized functional jointness meaning share property, income and responsibilities. When it’s come to marriages “Marriage is generally used as a form for a social institution. As such it maybe defines as relation of one or more men to one or more women

which is recognised by custom or law and involves certain rights and duties both in the case of parties entering the union and in the case of the children born of it” (Edward Westermarck, 1891). Historically marriage has been found to exist as a social institution in a wide variety of forms across human society. It is not merely a personal relationship between two individuals but a sacred and social union that connects families, lineages, and communities. Generally, marriages in India is link with the caste system. Also marriages are governed by the rule of endogamy, while individuals marry within their own caste or sub-caste. At the same time, exogamy rules such as prohibition of marriage within the same gotra or close kin, are strictly followed in many communities. Irawati karve in her work “Kinship Organization in India (1953)” emphasizes on regional variations in marriage patterns across India. For example in North Indian Kinship system they follow strict exogamy rules whereas in South India cousin marriages are prevalent.

- 4. Political structure in Traditional Rural India-** The traditional political structure in rural India was largely informal, community-based, and rooted in social hierarchy, operating long before the introduction of modern democratic institutions. At the core of this structure was the village as self-regulating unit, where most matters were managed internally though village councils (caste councils). Caste councils were composed of respectable elders and influential members of the community. These councils functioned as the primary decision-making bodies, handling issues such as dispute resolution, maintenance of social order, allocation of resources, and enforcement of customary laws. The concept of the “Dominant Caste” as explained by M.N. Srinivas, helps in understanding how certain groups exercised political power due to their numerical strength, economic dominance, and social status.

3. FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR RURAL TRANSFORMATION IN INDIA

The transformation of rural India is the result of multiple factors operating across economic, social, political and technological domains. These factors have collectively reshaped the traditional structure of rural society, leading to significant changes in social and economic relations and patterns of development within the community.

3.1 Migration- Migration has emerged as a major factor in rural transformation. The movement of the people from rural to urban areas in search of better employment opportunities has led to changes in demographic composition, labour availability and household structure. On the other hand remittances sent by migrants have become an important source income for rural household. It is helping to alleviating poverty from the rural India.

3.2 Globalization and Economic Liberalization- These processes have integrated rural economies with national and global markets, influencing production and consumption patterns and employment opportunities at large. Globalization has fundamentally transformed the nature of modern society, shifting the primary concerns from traditional class-based conflicts to new global risks (Ulrich Beck, 2009). Globalization has also contributed to the diversification of rural livelihoods. With the expansion of non-farm sectors such as manufacturing, services, and small-scale industries, rural households are no longer solely dependent on agriculture. It also impacted social and cultural aspects of rural life.

3.3 Urbanization- One of the most significant impact of urbanization on rural areas is the development of rural-urban linkages. Improved transportation, communication and infrastructure have connected villages to nearby cities. It increases exposure to urban lifestyle and education subsequently changing aspirations of rural folks. It also has created lots employment opportunities for rural people therefore people can redefine their life.

3.4 Social Reforms- Social reforms includes acts such Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, Right to Education Act, 2009, Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006. Along with introduction of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. These reforms have played a crucial role in shaping the transformation of rural India by challenging traditional structures and promoting greater equality, justice and social mobility.

3.5 Agricultural related Factors- Agricultural transformation in rural India has been significantly influenced by two major processes such as Green Revolution and Land Reforms. Both have played a crucial role in reshaping agrarian structures, productivity patterns, and rural socio-economic relations.

3.6 Technological Advancement- Technological advancement have emerged as a crucial driver of rural transformation in India. It is significantly influencing economic activities, social relations, and patterns of development. In social sphere technology has influences education, awareness and social interaction.

4. CHANGING ECONOMIC CONTOURS OF RURAL INDIA

4.1 Agrarian Change- The economic structure of rural India has been undergoing a significant transformation, moving away from a traditionally agrarian and subsistence-based system towards a more diversified and market-oriented economy. “In the economic sphere, the village experienced a steady transformation during the British period. It slowly began to produce for the Indian and foreign market and, not, as before, for meeting the needs of the village population” (A.R. Desai, 1969). “The colonial policies completely changed the local economic environment. Land became both scarce and transferable” (S. Jodhka, 2023). In the post-independence period due to the development initiatives, technological advancements economic life at rural India has been experiencing major alteration.

One of the earliest efforts to transform the rural economy was through land reforms. It has aimed at abolishing intermediaries, regulating tenancy, and redistributing land to the poor to reduce inequality. Legislations were also passed to facilitate consolidation of land holding, which enabled the farmers to swap their scattered plots of land to bring them together in one place (S. Jodhka, 2023). Although the success of these reforms varied across regions, they played a crucial role in weakening feudal structure and improving access to land for cultivations.

The Green Revolution marked a major turning point in the transformation of India’s rural economy during the post-independence period. It involved the use of high- yielding variety (HYV) seeds, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation, and mechanization leading to a substantial increase in agricultural productivity, particularly in crops like wheat and rice. The Green Revolution was to be technological solution to enhance productivity of land and remove persistent food scarcity (S. Jodhka, 2023). While also stimulating rural economic growth and the expansion of agro-based industries. However, the benefits of the Green Revolution were unevenly distributed, largely concentrated in regions such as Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh.

4.2 Non-Agrarian Livelihood Change- Traditionally, rural employment was largely confined to agriculture; however, factors such as declining farm profitability, small and fragmented landholdings, population pressure and seasonal unemployment have pushed rural folks to seek alternative sources of income. As a result non-farm employment has expanded significantly including activities such as construction work, small-scale manufacturing, trade, transport, handicrafts, and services sector jobs. The growth of rural infrastructure, connectivity, and markets have further facilitated this transition. Self Help Groups play a significant role in promoting economic empowerment, particularly among rural women. By facilitating access to credits, they enable members to engage in income generating activities such as small

businesses. Along with this VB-G RAM G Act (Previously known as MGNREGA) guarantees 120 days of wage employment to rural households. Similarly, The Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) focuses on skill development and vocational training, enabling rural youth to access employment opportunities in both rural and urban sectors.

5. CHANGING SOCIAL CONTOURS OF RURAL INDIA

The social fabric of rural India has undergone significant transformation in recent decades under the impact of economic growth, globalization, and modernization. Traditionally, rural society was characterized by rigid social structures, strong community bonds and deeply rooted institutions such as caste, family and kinship. However, these traditional features are gradually transforming, giving rise to new social dynamics. The constitution of Indian Union has assumed as its postulate the individual citizen and not caste as the unit of Indian society (A.R. Desai, 1969).

5.1 Changing Nature of the Caste System in Rural India- M.N. Srivinas in his book “Caste in Modern India and Other Essays (1962)” explained processes like Westernization and Sanskritization in context of changing dynamics of caste system. The role of the caste in economic life has also changed considerably. While earlier occupations were closely tied to caste (Jajmani system), but the expansion of non-farm employment and market oriented activities has reduced this linkages. One of the major factors contributing to this change is the expansion of education and skill development. Rules regarding caste eating and drinking are gradually relaxing. Also social contact between people of different castes is increasing. When it's come to the marriages there is gradual shift from rigid caste endogamy to greater social openness and individual choice. Inter-caste marriages are increasing leading to reduce social boundaries. Sometimes traditional attitudes continue to coexist with emerging modern values.

5.2 Changing Nature of Family, Marriage and Kinship in Rural India- Social change in India is clearly reflected in the evolving patterns of family, marriage and kinship. Once rooted in customs and traditions, these institutions are now adapting to new realities shaped by education, mobility, and technological advancement. Rural areas traditionally dominated by joint families but now witnessing a shift towards nuclear families due to factors like out-migration, declining dependence on agriculture, and search for better employment opportunities. Increased access to education and exposure to urban lifestyles have encouraged individual aspirations and reduced the authority of elders in family decisions. Joint family property tends to be disrupted since its individual adult members begin to demand its partitioning (A.R. Desai, 1969). Marriage in rural India is also undergoing noticeable transformation while retaining many traditional features. Although arranged marriages continue to dominate but there is gradual increase in individual choices (love marriage), especially among younger generation influenced by education and exposure to urban values. The age of marriage is rising as people prioritize education and employment before settling down. Inter-caste marriages are slowly becoming more visible though there are some resistance among the rural folks, generally among older generations.

5.3 Changing Political life in Rural India- Earlier political life of rural India was dominated by traditional elites such as landlords and upper castes, rural politics is now becoming more participatory and democratic. The traditional power of the feudal patriarch began to decline (S. Jodhka, 2023). The introduction of decentralized governance through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) has increased political awareness and participation among ordinary villagers. Marginalized groups including Women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes, are gaining representation due to reservation policies, leading to more inclusive political processes. Electoral competition has intensified, and people are becoming more aware

of their rights and developmental needs. At the same time factors such as caste dynamics, local power struggles, and the influence of money and muscle power continue to shape rural politics.

6. ISSUES IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF RURAL INDIA

The transformation of rural India is a complex and multidimensional process shaped by the forces of economic development, social changes, and political reforms. It has associated with some challenges which are affecting rural development at large.

6.1 Economic Challenges- Rural India faces several economic challenges that hinder its development and transformation. Agrarian distress remain a major concern along with small and fragmented landholdings, low agricultural productivity also heavy dependence on unpredictable monsoon. Feminization of agriculture is also one of the major issue in the rural India as generally male members migrated to cities to seek other employment opportunities. When it's comes to the land holding there are still uneven land distribution exist , showing failure of the land reforms, that was initiated just after the independence. Unemployment are widespread, particularly among rural youth due lack of stable and diversified job opportunities.

6.2 Social Challenges- Caste-based discrimination remains deeply rooted, limiting social mobility and equal access to resources for marginalized communities. Gender inequality is another major issue, with women often having restricted access to education, employment, and decision-making, along with persistence of practices like early marriage. Low level of literacy and awareness contribute to the continuation of traditional beliefs, superstitions, and resistance to change.

6.3 Political Challenges- Despite the introduction of decentralized governance through Panchayati Raj Institutions, political power in many villages continues to be influenced by dominant local elites based on caste, and economic status. Caste-based politics often shapes voting behaviour and leadership selection, limiting the emergence of merit-based representation. Corruption and misuse of power in the implementation of government schemes hinder effective development. There are incidences of Pati-Sarpanch, highlighting the gap between formal political equality and actual empowerment. This phenomenon has emerged especially after the reservation of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

7. CONCLUSION

The changing contours of rural India reflect a dynamic process of socio-economic transformation shaped by development initiatives, globalization, and social reforms. While rural society is witnessing improvements in infrastructure, education, livelihoods, and political awareness, it continues to face challenges such as inequality, agrarian distress, and social disparities. There are some successful models in Maharashtra, such as Hiware Bazar and Ralegan Siddhi, showing that sustainable rural development is achievable through community participation, effective leadership, and integrated approaches to resource management. These case studies highlight the importance of local governance, collective action, and environmental conservation in transforming rural economies and improving the quality of life. In addition, various government initiatives such as VB-G RAM G Act (Previously known as MGNREGA), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana have playing crucial role in developing rural India. Overall, the transformation of rural India is a continuous and evolving process that blends traditional

strengths with modern innovation, aiming towards greater inclusivity and resonating with the vision of Mahatma Gandhi, who sought empowered village communities as the foundation of national development.

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