The great Indian divide

The sharp increase in rural urban disparities in India after decades of planned development is alarming. For planning itself was conceived as an instrument to narrow down such disparities.

A farmer of Kartal village in Mehdibad district of Andhra Pradesh. The small and landless peasants are in dire straits owing to, among other things, a prolonged drought.

The data collected from the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) shows that the average per capita expenditure on food is Rs.3,469 in rural India during 1999-2000 compared to Rs.4,082 in urban India. In 1997-98, the expenditure was Rs.3,437 in rural and Rs.4,025 in urban India.

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per cent to 0.8 per cent during the period between 1990-91 and 2000-01, the per capita expenditure for urban poor increased from Rs.11 to Rs.28 during the same period. But for the rural poor, the per capita expenditure is just one-eighth of this.

In a post-colonial capitalist country like India, uneven rural-urban development or rural-urban disparity is not unusual. ... to bring it to an end, it is possible to reduce the disparity to a tolerable level. It may be recalled that Gandhiji emphasised on rural growth and pleaded for village swaraj. He wanted the engine of India’s development to start rolling down from the villages. But it became clear from the discussions in the Constituent Assembly that it would not happen. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar ... policy”. Nehru felt that villages were culturally backward and it was not possible to make them modern. Urban bias was clearly reflected in the attitude of the policymakers. This seems to be continuing unabated.

In the Human Development Index prepared by the Planning Commission, there is a significant divide. The value for rural areas is 0.82 while for urban areas it is as high as 0.91. The index is a composite of indicators capturing attainment in three dimensions of human development namely, economic, educational and health. The index is the average of the Human Poverty Index, Human Development Index and Human Capital Index.

Given the situation, what can be done to reduce the level of disparity in a doable level is a matter that calls for serious consideration. There is no doubt that India’s rural economy cannot grow without agricultural development. Capitalist agricultural productivity is constrained by the system itself. Effective land reform coupled with non-land input support to the beneficiaries can result in an increase in agricultural productivity.

Victims of the 2001 Kutch earthquake in Chennai. The poor are invariably the worst victims of natural calamities.

Apart from taking steps to increase human development facilities to the village such as health and education, and develop appropriate infrastructure such as roads and marketing facilities, there is the need for generating employment, which can improve the living conditions of villagers. We need to adopt a long-term policy, keeping in mind the requirements of the rural and urban sector. A close look at the development plan exercises leads us to demonstrate that all policies promote the policy processes.

In the rural areas there are many resources lying unused. It is time to exploit these and make proper use of them. The application of Information Technology can be of great help in identifying what is lying unused or underutilised.

In West Bengal, it is a long time since rural and peripheral areas, which suffer from a considerable level of backwardness, have been given the required attention. Apart from the government, the people themselves have been active in bringing about development in their area. The people have formed cooperatives and have developed their own infrastructure. They have been able to generate employment and improve the economic condition of the village.

Kerala has taken the lead in bringing the people’s campaign into the development process. Kerala has declared the village as the basic unit of development. Rural-urban disparity is at least in Kerala. There is a rural-urban continuum, rather than a divide. The people’s campaign has been effective in making major improvements in the villages. The key to this success is that these steps were taken at the state level and not at the central level. The people’s campaign has definitely helped to make further improvements in the situation. This is a lesson for other states.

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The author is Convenor, Professor of Public Administration, Calcutta University and Secretary, Institute of Local Governance and Urban Studies and Dean, Institute of Forestry and Rural Development, Government of West Bengal.