

# Facing the future of development

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## Farmers' protests interrogate the reigning development model. Alternatives do exist

The recent spate of peasant protests across wide swathes of the country points sharply to the unjust folly and sheer unviability of the path of **development** that India has embraced, especially in the reform era since the late 1980s. Even, say, a modest food critic in metropolitan India collects an immodest annual pay package which can easily go into seven figures. Such compensation is not even a dream for any small or marginal food-grower in the country, someone who works much harder and who is immeasurably more significant for the food security of India. It is such daylight disparity between the lives of villagers and city-dwellers which constitutes the background to an increasingly simmering discontent amongst the poor in India's villages and cities. Last month's farmers' protest in Mumbai is one of many where the simmer boils over to more overt expressions. Many asymmetries As a recent petition to the National Green Tribunal makes plain, the same brutal asymmetry is evident when one notices the difference in access to water between rural-agricultural and cricket-crazy metropolitan India. And similar stories can be told when it comes to other requirements of agriculture, from electricity to fair prices for produce and inputs to loans and loan waivers. Food supplies are so taken for granted that agriculture is simply absent from the everyday cognitive radar of metropolitan policy-elites. A recent study showed that agriculture takes up less than 5% of coverage in mainstream media. Farming as an occupation is seen as a thing of the past, as if India — never mind the more than 700 million people still directly dependent on it — is meant to follow blindly in the footsteps of the industrialised world. Time will prove that this is an impossible, irrational dream suffering profoundly from what philosophers call a 'fallacy of composition'. Far from everyone, not even a majority of the present rural population of India can be offered employment in non-agricultural economic activities, even if this was considered desirable. Unless the present plank of developmental policies is set aside in favour of a radically different approach, deprivation from basic needs will continue for hundreds of millions of people, as will gross inequalities. The respective fortunes of the small, marginal farmers as much as those of metropolitan elites seem to have been pre-calibrated by the path of 'development' India has embraced since the reform era began in 1991, if not since 1947 itself. Let us honestly think through the assumptions of such a vision as our political, commercial and policy-elites continue to impose on the country, quite regardless of the dispensation in office in New Delhi. The vision is imitative. It assumes that India is pre-destined to follow the path of industrialisation that the Western world and East Asia have taken. The once-implicit and now explicitly stated goal is to ensure that only a tiny fraction of India's work force remains in agriculture. The numbers challenge How likely is this? In a generation, India's population is likely to be around 1.6 billion. Even if just two-thirds of this population is to find its livelihood outside the villages (a modest version of every Finance Minister's dream), 1 billion people will be living in cities, compared to the present 400 million. This would mean that some 200 million more jobs will have to be created in the next quarter century, at the rate of 8 million new jobs every year. In recent years of the reform era, the net rate of job generation in the organised sector, relying on the government's own data, is under 0.5 million per year. Pertinent here is the fact that this is the era of disruptive robotisation across all industries: governments boast of jobs that get created, not of jobs lost to automation. The reigning vision also implies that our cities will be able to provide the enormous infrastructure — of clean air and water, sanitation and power, roads and communication, housing and social security — for some 600 million more people! How will 1.6 billion people be fed? In the countryside, if villagers (especially young ones) have been successfully dissuaded from agriculture, it will constitute a historic epistemic break from India's long past: a whole generation of young Indians would have grown up without any knowledge of manual agriculture. This has far-reaching implications. It casually assumes that agriculture would be virtually fully mechanised, as in the 'developed' world. Running agricultural machinery would require huge energy resources. Even if only half the energy is drawn from fossil fuels, it would make crushing demands on the world's remaining oil and coal reserves, in a cruelly scarce era. Where will these fossil fuels come from? A large proportion will have to be imported with increasingly scarce foreign exchange reserves — provided energy-surplus countries are still willing to sell these fuels. It could be argued that India will import food. It is worth keeping in view that India has had only two years of trade surplus during the last four decades. One must also reckon with the prospect of bartering away the foundations of our food security. Even if India finds the foreign exchange, will there be countries left which will be in a position to supply food for, possibly, over half a billion people? Is there an agro-ecological substitute for the Indo-Gangetic plains on Earth? Finally, one would have to consider the fact that such a fossil-fuel-driven agriculture would make extraordinary demands on climate space precisely at a time when the latter will be shrinking every month. Let's introspect In light of such an alarming outlook, those currently in the corridors of political power need to take a long, hard look at the path they are asking the country to walk. A minority of Indians enjoy First World affluence, while the rest are sold the dream that they too can reach there, in the hope that they will not protest the unjust deprivations they suffer — 1% of India's rich own as much wealth as 70% of its population, and the gap is steadily rising. As a very large chunk of the 70% who are collateral damage of accelerated 'development', farmers have lost not only the viability of their livelihoods, but much self-respect, committing suicides in the hundreds of thousands over the last few decades. The growing protests of farmers around the country is not just a claim for dignity. Even more portentously, it calls into question the paradigmatic rationality of the reigning development model. Alternatives do exist, practised and conceived of at hundreds of sites in India: from the achievement of complete food security by Dalit women farmers of Deccan Development Society and small peasants of Timbaktu Collective in Andhra-Telangana (both in dryland conditions), to the generation of decent livelihoods through crafts, small-scale manufacturing, community-based tourism, traditional health services by Jharcraft, Kudumbashree, Maati, Khamir, SRUJAN, Qasab, and others. These initiatives have stayed or even reversed rural-urban

migration, created rural prosperity, attempted gender and caste justice, without trashing the environment.

First published by *The Hindu* Contact [the author](#)