

What would a thriving rural space look like?

Author - Shashank Kalra, Published on - 9.7.2018

I consider myself really fortunate to have travelled to many parts of the country - deep travel and in some cases immersion. Our team at Youth Alliance just returned from Kanpur Dehat (rural) after having facilitated the 9th immersive journey of Gramya Manthan for 28 young people from all over the country.

Let me give a quick context of the region - located in the heart of India's largest (population-wise) state, about 20 kms off India's oldest highway (Grand Trunk Road built in 1500s) and about 20 kms off India's largest river (Ganga), the three villages - Kharagpur, Palia and Ganga Din Nevada are Hindu-dominated, caste-divided, mostly agriculture and animal husbandry dependent. Electricity and toilets have just made mere beginnings. Two of them do not have electricity at all. We have been utterly grateful for the people in these villages, to have given us so much love, acceptance and forgave us for our unconscious mistakes.



Participants from 14 states came to Kanpur Dehat for 9th Gramya Manthan

Since 2012 when we began doing Gramya Manthan - my own ability to see has been growing, understanding of the interconnections has evolved slowly letting go of the biases. In this note, I don't intend to talk about the popular narratives but bring forth some of the subtler issues. These aren't rural issues but are all pervasive.

We all have such a vivid vision of a thriving urban space but what would a thriving rural space look like?

This was one of the key questions, I went with in this Gramya Manthan. An insight lie in October 1945, when the country was at the cusp of independence and her leaders chose the direction of her being - Nehruji and Gandhiji had an important correspondence. [Linked here the letters](#), Gandhiji spoke of creating an economy and society that is centred around the village while Nehruji preferred to go along the modern flow and considered industrial urbanisation as the only way forward for India - to keep pace with the world. We can guess which path the country chose.

Since independence or even before when nationalistic fervour made its way into the Indian mind - we haven't had a vision of a thriving rural space. But what's happening in this generation particularly is a cause of concern. I shall try and put forth my understanding on it in the following paragraphs. The perspectives drawn are pervasive to Indian society at large as I see it today, but particular examples are from the villages.

Linear Thinking

As part of Service Learning, a part of Gramya Manthan's cohort focussed on restoring a pond in Kharagpur. To my shock the younger folks (under 30) in the village did not understand the under-the-surface ecology of the pond. To them, it was a mere tank of water that gets filled with rain and can be used for irrigation and drinking purposes of cattle. It wasn't obvious to them that the more important role of the pond was to recharge underground reservoirs and if the water stays longer more will percolate. And it would in turn affect hand-pump water, cropping soil and so on.

To my mind, Systems' Thinking comes much more naturally in a village set-up than in a city.

Leftover food served to cattle, cow dung used as manure to produce more food - are common instances of systems' thinking. But as the state / market takes over agriculture, pests and insects are beginning to be seen as enemies to be killed with chemical power. The understanding of interconnections between different crops is being lost too.

Elders in the village lived systems' thinking emphatically through all their decisions and behaviours. And unfortunately, it isn't being passed on to the next generation.



One of the ponds in village, Kharagpur.

[Colonised Mind](#)

It is a usual sight to find young men well-dressed in jeans and t-shirt in the villages we went to. And several other villages I have been to. They no longer wish to be in dhoti, baniyan or pyjamas. While I am no nationalist to tell which dress is more Indian - why its mentioned here is because the temperature there was about 45 degrees celsius. And jeans by no means can be a comfortable clothing for that weather. What makes us see jeans as a better clothing than a dhoti / pyjama?

This is one small example of the colonised mind. It is reflected in the politics of languages at all levels in our country - why English is seen as superior to Indian languages. If you meet insiders in the police, it is almost obvious that one's worth is not judged by the salary one gets from the department because it is assumed that he will make several times of his salary through bribes and other means. Are these remains of colonial culture? It may not be completely wrong to say that post independence colonialism continued in our country with different bosses.

Our education is in crisis at multiple levels. I am not referring to the education system here. More and more its becoming true that upbringing of today's children is not being undertaken by parents or schools but by marketing divisions of the corporations. They decide what habits children will make, what will they break, what they shall eat or wear. Before they are 3, they have spectacular camera (selfie) consciousness. This is another kind of colonialism.

In the rural areas too, internet has penetrated deep enough thanks to Reliance's Jio. While I can't argue against the benefits of internet - the fact remains pornography has penetrated deeper than we think.

India is seen as the biggest upcoming market, since 69% of India is rural - by logic rural is also an emerging market. Corporations chose to trash their products in rural ecosystems without taking responsibility of the waste it generates for the village ecosystem.

It isn't uncommon to find people in small towns buying Namaste India/Amul/Ananda Dairy/Nandini milk packets while their close neighbour may have their own cows/buffaloes. Colonised mind comes in a sweet package of perceived convenience.

Dismantled Community

One of the profoundest changes that has happened in the past 30 years or so has been nuclearisation of families. In Ganga Din Nevada, you would not find any young men, almost all of them are away to Kanpur or Delhi, even Mumbai for work. With some of them, their immediate families have gone with them leaving behind elderly parents in the village. Sometimes wives and children stay back.

While in villages people still gather around timelessly, unlike in the cities. And delicacies cooked in the house are for the neighbours too. Or garbage from one home is put in front of another too. But its changing fast, this generation doesn't recognise these ties. They have bigger dreams. They wish to amass more wealth and replace social ties with economic ones. People who aren't able to do it, end up drinking taadi (local alcohol) from 7 in the morning. Farming is no longer respectful and even less financially rewarding. Government job is top of the hierarchy.

In pursuit of state-led and industry-led development we have completely disregarded community. In one of the conversations with a grandmother, I learnt that the ponds were maintained for hundreds of years because every year before monsoons, people in the village took soil from them to build their mud-houses. There was enough for all and the whole exercise was done in a cooperative way. Extracting mud from the pond, cleaned it. As pakka (cemented) houses made their way owing to Indira Awas Yojana first, pond soil was no longer needed. Ponds kept getting silted and some of them now are beginning to become garbage fills. Without community, one can't imagine a healthy ecology.

Linear thinking, colonised minds and dismantled communities have brought our society at an intersection of multiple crises - endangered environmental balance, unprecedented inequity and spiritual poverty.

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These are interconnected complex realities and hasty jumping to conclusions may be the last thing to do. One of the things that we have found useful are journeys. Geographic journeys that enable journeys of the mind. Going out of the four walls to let walls of the minds melt. Gramya Manthan is one such journey.

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