

# Fortifying quality life



**As there are no comprehensive studies on rural life and changes in them, across various economic groups, it is but natural that what is happening in villages since independence is not fully captured by scholars and academicians,**

**V Mukunda Das describes the scenario**



*Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar inaugurating a rural project*

**A** review of rural and urban life in India since independence highlights certain realities which need attention by policy makers, NGO's, and development managers. A convergence of the roles of policy makers, strategy formulators and managers /

functionaries who operationalise policies and programmes of various agencies and government needs to happen in future.

The present attempt is to focus on how quality of life of the poor in rural India has never been seriously studied since independence. Is poverty, a dimension transferred from generation



to generation, without much change, over years since independence? An assessment of the role that technology could have brought in enhancing the quality of life of rural poor is the focus here.

Observations and analyses based on visits to several parts of Indian villages show that the quality of life of poor could have been substantially improved through the intervention and development of technology.

### DRAWING LEVELS

The argument here is that, if India, at least in the days to come, takes initiatives in identifying the needs of the rural poor vis-a-vis improving their quality of life through the development of technology suitable to them, aspects like drudgery of rural women, health related problems etc can be reduced substantially.

Technology could take people to moon and satellites to mars. Technology like internet and mobile phones could change the mode and speed of interaction between people thousands of kilometres away within no time. This only shows that “where there is will there is a way” in technology development. For example, some

studies have found that suitable technology can substantially reduce the drudgery of poor rural women who work for more than 14 hours a day, in many rural areas. A question which comes to us is why the technological possibilities that could enhance the quality of life of the poor rural people have not been planned so far. The question is why technological institutions, governments and the ‘not-poor’ segment of Indian population could not do it. Was there any systematic and scientific effort in identifying the scope for developing technology for enhancing the quality of life of the rural poor in India? On the other hand, if one seriously analyses and evaluates, the expenditure on technology development and related research focusing on poor in rural India as a percentage of total technologies related research expenditure (R&D) in India, it can easily be seen that this percentage spend on rural poor is very low.

### DELVING INTO EXPLORATION

This highlights the need for research and development initiatives and activities vis-a-vis the life of a majority segment in rural India i.e. rural poor. It is high time that we introspect this in detail at policy levels. Technology development for various facets of life of rural poor, such as habitat, quality water, cheaper lighting facilities, hygiene / health and cheaper cooking equipments which will save the fuel wood collection time of poor women, and destruction of forest cover etc., all can get attention. Recently, we had a chance to observe that hundreds of poor people die because of tuberculosis among manual rickshaw pullers.

Observations and analyses based on visits to several parts of Indian villages show that the quality of life of poor could have been substantially improved







**It is not to say that products are not reaching rural areas. These are urban products which jell well with urban pattern of life. Even the poor villagers are forced to buy these items**

Could we not develop a rickshaw which uses less manual efforts, so far? The rural poor also need to be helped in cooking of food through some equipment which will reduce the nutrient loss. This is not to reduce the achievements in productivity gains etc. brought in through technological changes in agriculture. However, even in the primary sector, suitable technology could have saved valuable agriculture products especially in fruits and vegetables being wasted. We are yet to progress in this.

We have many IIT's and other engineering and technology R&D institutions in India. It is time that we focus on the problems of rural poor with a view to enhance their quality of life through suitable technologies. If it has not happened so far, it is only because of lack of attention of the R&D professionals and technology developers on the technological needs of rural poor for better quality of life. It may also be mentioned here that suitable technologies positively impacting the life of rural poor could have resulted in saving lots of expenditure by the rural poor on health

issues. The two major purposes for borrowing from money lenders by rural poor is for health related expenses, which are compelling in nature, and for consumption, mostly for buying minimum food requirements.

#### **ACCLIMATISING WITH REALITY**

It is not to say that products are not reaching rural areas. These are urban products which jell well with urban pattern of life. Even the poor villagers are forced to buy these items because of the lack of alternative products which are cheaper. The National Dairy Development Board once initiated a product known as "Chai Saathi" as a substitute for expensive milk, for urban slum dwellers.

Having touched upon some of the critical consequences of the lack of attention on technology development conforming to needs of rural poor, it is suggested that a new initiative be planned. This initiative should have the objective of enhancing the quality of life of rural poor through development of technology, made possible by R&D activities.

R&D and technology development through even international collaboration can be thought of. It is to be remembered that some western countries have developed technologies to tackle very serious nature created problems such as 'freezing' impacting their life. If technology can be developed to keep temperature anywhere in a big house with normal temperature when the temperature outside is -40 degrees centigrade or -50 degrees centigrade, can we, in India, put our thoughts together to identify technologies which will enhance the quality of life of the rural poor? Better late than never. ▀

