

Pastoralism and Gandhi's Village-ism

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Abstract

The binary distinction between urban and rural should be replaced by a spectrum from theoretically 100% rural to increasingly urban. Government policies should encourage 'moderately' rather than 'extremely' urban settlements. School children should be taught vegetable gardening and household waste disposal methods and how to solve problems via give-and-take panchayat-type chats.

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It is an honor for me to give this talk.

In it I will offer six suggestions for consideration by policy makers and administrators in India.

Whenever I use the word 'pastoral', I will have in mind agricultural villages.

When I use the suffix, '-ism', I will mean to imply that some idea or set of ideas has been given more weight than it merits under the given circumstances.

1

My first suggestion is that the binary distinction between rural and urban settlements should be replaced with a notion of a *spectrum* extending from ‘100% rural’ (at one theoretical extreme), via gradually more and more ‘urban’ (according to a certain rule of thumb), to the ‘least rural’ and therefore ‘most urban’ settlement in the set under consideration.

The rule of thumb I have in mind is a ratio between two amounts of money: **(1)** the estimated annual cost of producing agriculturally – wherever the production takes place – the food that is consumed in the settlement, and **(2)** the cost of packaging and transporting and selling (or otherwise distributing) the food to the consumers in the settlement, and of properly disposing of the waste. A theoretically ‘100% rural’ settlement would be one where all the food that is consumed there is grown and gathered within walking distance and so none of it has had to be packaged, transported at monetary cost, etc., and, no money has to be spent on disposing properly of the waste.

FOOTNOTE: I could have described a rule of thumb based on a ratio between two rates of flow of 'available energy' rather than of money. In physics, the term 'available energy' means energy available to make things move faster or slower than they're already moving (or in a different direction), and/or available to heat things up (which is a matter of making molecules move faster in a higgledy-piggledy way). Two units of measurement for it are 'joules' and 'calories'. 100 joules is the amount needed, from an electric current, to get a 100-watt bulb to shine for one second; it is nearly the same amount of available energy as 25 calories in your diet. (So, a calorie amounts to approximately 4 joules.) Radiation from the sun is a vast example of available energy that we get without paying for it. Available energy that we pay money for is called 'consumable' energy. (I call it 'purchasable'.) A one-word term for available energy is 'exergy'. In 'exergy-economic' analysis, assessments of the costs of transporting food, packaging it, etc., are done in terms of joules – and in this way one could, for instance, predict whether, under certain conditions of infrastructure as to how the nation produces its consumable energy, it wouldn't have to import fuel in order to feed its people. However, few economists know how to make exergy-economic analyses, whereas the current costs in rupees of transporting food to various settlements, packaging it, etc. can be estimated on the basis of statistics already available to government in India. That's why my proposed rule of thumb is a ratio between two rates of flow (per year) of money, rather than a ratio between two rates of flow of exergy.

Although I am only a guest in India and not a citizen, I would venture to suggest that India's government could, in designing its economic programs, make good use of the notion of a theoretical spectrum (for human settlements) such as I have described. Government has, already, a lot of 'different-strokes-for-different-folks' policies. Assessing quantitatively to what extent each settlement is 'urban' could prove useful for refining the design of such policies. Programs for alleviating destitution could be designed in such a way as to incentivize villagers to migrate to nearby small towns rather than to mega-cities far away, and could incentivize some of the people in mega-cities to shift to small towns near the villages where their families live. The net effect would be to reduce the share of the nation's costs spent on travel and transportation instead of on productive activities. I am mindful of E.F. Schumacher's precept (in his renowned book, *Small is Beautiful*, 1971) that food and fuel are the primary factors in a modern economy. Schumacher noted that Gandhian economists encourage short hauls but discourage long ones (using up lots of fuel).

Without trying to *plan* the economy in such a way as render “a district of average size, having roughly a population of ten lakhs, as nearly self-sufficient as possible in respect of consumer goods which supply daily needs” (this was a goal of Gandhian economic thinking on the eve of Independence), government could design its subventions and taxes and charity programs in such a way as to have a somewhat similar effect, yet with no need for national Five-Year-Plan-type goals in that regard. I think that a plan designed and undertaken within a village can be adjusted, as need be, by lots of small talk among people who have the benefit of adequate first-hand observations as to how it’s working out, whereas a grand scheme outlined (sometimes perforce in deliberately vague compromise language) by a national planning committee is likely to be more cumbersome.

(Later I will say more about how I think economic alternatives ought to be discussed and argued about, and I’ll harp on the importance of teaching children some good give-and-take ways of discussing group plans.)

(This lecture will often harp on steering away from extremes. For instance: a '100% rural' or '99% rural' settlement, even though it may appeal to some people as a charming notion, is not really, in my opinion, a kind which government ought to spend its tax revenues to maintain in that condition; and likewise for excessively congested cities.)

2



One way to mitigate somewhat the excessive dependence of giant cities on imported food would be for the inhabitants to render themselves slightly less 'urban' (according to my rule of thumb) by growing some veggies in pots (as represented by the first image shown here) or on little bits of land here and there in the city. Government should encourage this with plenty of propaganda.



It was not a feature of Gandhi's ashrams in India, nor of the way in which the 'garden-city' concept has been developed in many parts of the world (as illustrated here by the second image). A more recently devised architectural concept, that of the '*bosco verticale*' (see the picture on on the next page; the term can be translated as 'vertical forest'), is



like the 'garden-city' concept inasmuch as **(1)** it doesn't reduce the city's abject dependence on transported foods and **(2)** it has to be implemented by paid labor and lavish use of expensive equipment, and thus entails an accumulation of big debts (whereas growing veggies in pots or on little bits of land here & there in the city would entail no major costs).

Students in urban schools should be taught the theory and practice of mini-gardening and should be encouraged to do it, so that when they grow up, they might perhaps do better in this respect than most of their parents have done. In a town or city, the likely consequence of, say, a home-grown cabbage or tomato is that one less such item has to be transported from a distant village for marketing.

3

Rural agricultural productivity in India is hampered, efficiency-wise, by the vast number of small and scattered holdings. The average farm size in India is now only 1 hectare (whereas the equivalent figure for, say, the UK is more than 85, and for the USA nearly 180); and, that hectare – or the smaller amount in the case of the hundreds of millions of smaller-than-average holdings – is often not in a single piece but is scattered into bits here and there in the land surrounding the village.

FOOTNOTE: In Western culture, there has been, historically, a tendency for ownership of real estate to pass to the eldest son (or sometimes to the eldest child regardless of gender), rather than having it divided equally among the legitimate offspring of the deceased owner; and so, the younger sons of wealthy land-holders might typically become clergymen or academics or soldiers (for instance the knights seeking their fortunes in the Crusades; most of them were younger sons). But in India, the caste system obliged younger sons to try to make their living the same way their fathers did; and the phenomenon of ‘scattered holdings’ has been, historically, due to efforts to ensure fair distribution of relatively fertile and relatively less fertile land to brothers sharing an inheritance.

It might be feasible for government to mitigate this problem of inefficiently scattered small holdings by offering *guaranteed partial basic income* to poor landholders residing in very rural settlements who put their holdings under communal village management.

There may be some doubt as to how well JAM – 'Jandhan-Aadhaar-Mobil' – has served the destitute among India's citizens, but I can envisage that it might do well in this respect and that this could render feasible the idea of government guaranteeing various amounts of basic income (on a fortnightly basis – and tentatively, i.e. for withdrawal during, say, the next three weeks only, not for saving up) – to various citizens according to various criteria.

Some economists and politicians have argued that 21st-century digital technology will help to create just as substantial a flow of opportunities for paid employment as it helps to destroy. I think, on the contrary, that it will enable a smaller portion of the citizenry than now to produce all the commodities for which there's a market, and hence that there will be a growth, in India's vast 'precariat', of the number of citizens who would be unable, without a government-guaranteed partial basic income, to rise above destitution and attain a decent level of moderate poverty.

In assessing a 5-year 'basic-income pilot project' initiated in rural Madhya Pradesh in 2010 by SEWA and UNICEF, it was found, in a follow-up study afterwards, that charitable receipt (for 5 years) of a flow of income amounting to about 1/3rd of the official 'poverty-line' level of income had had the following results: • increase in gainful employment, especially on small farms; • increased spending, by small and subsistence farmers, on agricultural inputs, resulting in better agricultural yield and improved food security; • improved nutrition (and thus a significant reduction in the numbers of malnourished female children in the villages where the cash grants were given); • reduced incidence of illness, and more regular medical treatment and implementation of medical prescriptions when people did get sick; • better school-attendance and greater household expenditure on schooling of the family's children; • significant increases in savings, and reductions in indebtedness; and • no increase in alcohol consumption. (Video reports can be accessed by googling '[sewa basic income video](#)'.)

Such might be one kind of benefit of government offering guaranteed partial basic income to small rural landholders who put their holdings under cooperative communal management by the entire village via panchayat raj or the like.

Another kind of benefit, if the village's managing is done on a share-and-share-alike basis, could be more efficient use of such factors of agricultural production as (1) work, since the farmers would presumably, if the work were organized cooperatively, spend less time trekking between different tiny plots of land, and (2) freshwater resources from underground, since the tendency for each farmer to spend money on digging a deeper well than his neighbors have yet dug could be replaced by scientific consideration of such facts as how long the local aquifer(s) are likely to last if they aren't replenishable.

Gandhians have said that communally-pooled ownership of the fields surrounding each village would be a good idea; but it hasn't been done very much here in India – and meanwhile, the eventual failure of the USSR was probably due, to a substantial extent, to ineptness in its authoritarian agricultural reforms along such lines. A fine old Swedish proverb, *'Tredje gången gillt'*, is translated as 'Third time lucky.' India needs and might conceivably achieve 'second time wiser'. India's wisdom could lie in government offering the positive incentive of guaranteed partial basic income, rather than counting on a brave but unrealistic psychological notion such as that of the USSR's vaunted *'new Soviet man'*.



4

Proper waste-management is an urgent 21st-century ecological-economics concern. And, urban waste disposal entails inevitably a vast amount of mechanization, since vast amounts of concentrated waste have to be carried away to more or less distant places. Dumping all the solid and/or liquid stuff in the local river or lake is becoming for many cities a dangerous way to get it out of sight. A far better way would be to have enough people engaged in intelligent and attentive ‘hands-on’, local waste-disposal work to enable the damage ecology-wise of mechanization to be brought under control or even reversed.

FOOTNOTE: I believe that a basic principle re: machines of all kinds is that someone has to keep checking to see whether what’s happening is OK. Even if the machine is just a wheelbarrow, someone should see whether the wheel is turning and whether the stuff in the barrow is falling out. The more complex the machine, the more need for intelligent monitoring.

One approach to the problem of urban waste disposal – strong application of governmental authority – is evident in a successful recent effort, in Shanghai, to get household rubbish sorted so that most of it can be usefully recycled. Rules promulgated in 2019 obliged households to sort their waste into four categories, to be sent accordingly to recycling centers, incineration

furnaces, hazardous-waste facilities or else landfills. (There are analogous obligatory systems in some German cities. The enforcement is stronger in China.) Household rubbish is to be brought to designated places in Shanghai at certain hours of the day and sorted under the supervision of trained volunteers (30,000 of them when the system was initiated). The citizens' duties include learning somewhat complicated rules for sorting. Chicken bones are classified as 'wet' but pork bones as 'dry'; cell-phone batteries are 'hazardous', but older batteries are 'dry'. (Youngsters came up with a guide: If a pig can eat it, it's 'wet'; if a pig cannot, it's 'dry'; if a pig might die from eating it, it's 'hazardous'; if you could sell it and buy a pig with the money, it's 'recyclable'.) A Chinese academic has described the system as a kind of 'eco-dictatorship' and as 'a strange but somehow effective mode of governance'. The mayor said in 2020 that 90% of the city's residential quarters had 'achieved the stipulated standards' and that the average daily amount of recyclables collected had increased more than fourfold, the amount of hazardous waste fivefold, and the amount of good kitchen waste by nearly 90%, and so the percentage of the rubbish that had to be sent to landfills had been reduced from more than 40 to 20. The system is being improved and spread to cities all over China.

I doubt that such substantial improvements in waste-disposal can be achieved by market incentives. I am mindful of a contradiction between Gandhi's 'bread labor' precept (which was about physical work and not at all about labor in the market-economist's sense of the term) and the modern notion that ever more mechanized and automated 'labor-saving' devices are the top desiderata in human life. I admit that excessively intense physical work has been characteristic of *some* Gandhian economic undertakings, but I think Gandhi was perfectly sensible to insist that 'sanitary service must be done intelligently' in his ashrams (and in fact it *was* done intelligently, and no one was paid an anna to do it). The required intelligence, i.e. for sorting things according to given criteria, is of a kind which children between the ages of, say, 8 and 12, enjoy exercising. Even younger children like to sort things according to simple criteria like color; and they love to play with dirt. Some governmentally encouraged rejuvenation of our capacities along such lines would be helpful for mitigating some of the devastation caused by capitalism and urbanism. Students in urban schools (and in rural ones if need be) should be taught, in theory and practice, rudiments of waste-disposal methods suited carefully to India's 21st-century environmental conditions.

In the next part of this talk, I will use the phrase 'sentimental pastoralism' to mean glorification of rural life by urban people who are going to remain basically urban. (They might take a vacation in the countryside, but 'bad weather' would, for them, be along the lines of 'raining on my picnic', whereas 'bad weather' would for a rural person mean reduction of crop yield.)

And I will always use suffix '-ism' with a pejorative meaning: i.e., that some idea or set of ideas has been given more weight than it merits under the given circumstances.

Some Gandhians feel – and I agree – that non-industrialized agriculture and its products can be so good, and some of the products of industrialism and some of its ‘negative externalities’ are so bad, that humankind must now shift away from the precept that capitalists’ thorough control of industry and agriculture is beneficial to society.

FOOTNOTE: In ‘neoclassical’ market-economic theorizing, the word ‘externalities’ is a term for the effects of economic activities on people who aren’t party to the contractual arrangements for those activities. (A quick example is that if I pay a marching band to play music for my wedding, the effect of the music on people who happen to be passing by is ‘positive’ if they enjoy the music, but ‘negative’ if it annoys them. Climate change is one of many disastrously looming negative externalities nowadays of capitalistically managed industrialism.)

It seems to me, however, that Gandhi is vulnerable to an accusation of sentimental pastoralism. Although his manner of day-to-day living at Tolstoy Farm and later at Sabarmati Ashram and at Sevagram was in some ways closer in spirit to ‘rural’ than to ‘urban’, he flourished financially for quite a long time, in Africa, in a booming gold-rush city (Johannesburg); in India he would often reside in Bombay or with friends in New Delhi; and he

never lived in a typical Indian village for any length of time. And yet, knowing as he did that the people of India were mostly in its villages, he would, as a 'man of the people', glorify the culture of Indian villages. It is a paradox.

I could describe apropos some differences of opinion between Gandhi and his fellow urbanites Ambedkar* and Nehru. But that would deter me from finding my way to the point which I would like to get at in this part of my talk: Although I want to link up Gandhi's sentimental pastoralism with a utopian streak in his thinking, I also want to say that there was, nonetheless, great value in his championing of panchayat-raj type village governance.

Please bear with me as I steer through a complicated argument to reach a suggestion as to how schoolchildren should be taught to discuss problems in a down-to-earth, give-and-take, coöperative way.

**My Account of the Historic Dialogue between Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar* is accessible at <https://mgmu.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/an-account-of-the-historic-dialogue-between-mahatma-gandhi-and-babasaheb-ambedkar.pdf> .



A feature of sentimental pastoralism in Western culture, going back historically as far as that tradition can be traced, is the notion of a remotely ancient 'golden age'. This notion is evident in the extant writings of the ancient (to us) Greek poet Hesiod. (No dates are available for him; he seems to have been contemporary with Homer.) He held that there had been a pastoral 'golden age' long before *his* day, and that his contemporary age was merely 'iron' and thus not as good as the intermediate 'silver' and 'bronze' ages had been. Shown here is a representative fresco by Pietro da Cortona (1637; blemishes are due to damage in the wall) entitled 'The Golden Age' and depicting fruit-picking from a tree, a naked poet or musician sitting under the tree as a lady puts a laurel wreath on his head, a benign lion being petted by one of the infants, etc. Do you believe that people thousands of years ago lived like this?

The binary dichotomy between 'rural' and 'urban' is related to a dichotomy established in university-level academic sociological theorizing in 1887 (by Ferdinand Tönnies) between 'community' and 'society'. A simple hallmark of the difference between a 'community' and a 'society' is that warning your children not to take candy from strangers is a feature of life in societies only. (There are no strangers in a community; everyone knows everyone else.*)

Gandhi's championing of panchayat raj was due in part to the fact that artful rhetoric (for which he expressed, in *Hind Swaraj*, deep scorn) has been vital in the tradition of Western governing of city states and nation states, as well as in Western judicial procedures before a judge or jury. It is mainly an urban kind of art, and so we may link together with Gandhi's pastoralist advocacy of panchayat-raj governance his disdain for the kind of brilliant rhetoric which he had observed in political discourse in London (and which he himself mastered in the construction of this arguments, though not in the quality of his voice).

* All *real* communities are small. Merely '*imagined* communities' (such as all the members of your nation, of some big religious organization to which you happen to belong, of your gender, of the biological species *Homo Sapiens*, etc.) can be big.

I believe that the welfare of India could be promoted by teaching, to students at all levels of primary and secondary schooling, not only not to bully, and not only how to cope with bullies, but also how to discuss other common and mutual problems in ways that would be characteristic of a good panchayat or of a constructive meeting of all the members of a community. Such teaching should, I believe, include detailed instruction, suitable for each level of grade school, in how to identify clever but deceptive or otherwise malicious or exploitive rhetoric, and how to deflate its effectiveness. (Such teaching is urgently needed in my homeland, the USA.)

A sociologist, Elinor Ostrom, won in 2009 the Swedish Bank's 'Nobel Prize' in economics for having disproved (by field studies on how people in rural communities in many parts of the world have managed their shared natural resources such as wells, common pastures etc.) the neo-classical economists' doctrine that natural resources *collectively* managed by a community are bound to become over-exploited and destroyed (the so-called 'tragedy of the commons'). Her book *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (1990) describes 'design principles' of 'stable local common-pool resource management', including:

- clearly defined geographical boundaries (for exclusion of unentitled parties);
- rules (re: the provision and use of the commonly held resources) adapted to local conditions;
- collective-choice arrangements whereby most of the resource-users participate in the decision-making process;
- effective monitoring by monitors who are part of, or otherwise accountable to, the community;
- a scale of graduated sanctions (warnings and punishments) against resource-users who violate the community's rules;
- mechanisms of conflict resolution that are cheap and of easy access; and
- political self-determination of the community recognized by higher-level authorities.

It seems to me that such findings ought to be very widely studied and discussed in colleges and universities.

6

These suggestions of mine have been for *mitigating* some problems or for making it easier for them to be addressed in a rational and coöperative way; none of my suggestions have been for revolutionary solutions to problems. Great technological advances do occur now and then, but it seems to me that eager hopes for this and that kind of 'revolution' are often childish and can cause pitfalls and a lot of missteps, whereas an adult hope, especially in politics, is for a series of diligent reforms to be done in such a way as to yield (in time) a socially beneficial outcome.