

VILLAGE SWARAJ FROM THE IDEA OF MAHATMA GANDHIJI

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Abstract

In the present era of globalization, one cannot be kept in isolation. There are number of linkages. The small places that is remote /rural areas of the country are linked with region / state /nation and with the world. Thus the concept of 'Global Village' by Marshall McLuhan(1960) was intended to account for new cultural situation and the world had become one place. And in this line of changing situation in our country the village panchyat play a key role. Gandhiji wanted to share political power in the Indian state's villages. To describe how he had described true democracy, the word 'Swaraj' can be quoted. This democracy is based on freedom. He dreamed of the village republic during the tenure of Independent India. He said, "Panchayat Raj represents true of democracy realized. In matters of social reconstruction, no amount of administrative innovation is a substitute for intelligent public participation. Agencies skillfully devised by the Welfare State may founder on the rocks of public apathy and ignorance. After the independence Gandhi's concept of Swaraj was not included in the Indian constitution. Political, social and industrial organizations of India are generally "top down" instead of "bottom up". Gandhi focused that villages should be organized in the form of countless oceanic cycles for political and industrial life. There has been a shift of emphasis in our thinking about the Panchayati Raj. After independence, in the 1950s, the policy makers and intellectuals thought off panchayati Raj as a necessary step towards 'Development Administration' and the 'Process of Nation Building'.

Key Words: Gandhi, Gram Swaraj, Nation Building, Panchayatiraj, Problem and Prospects, New Panchayatiraj System

Introduction:

In the present era of globalization, one cannot be kept in isolation. There are number of linkages. The small places that is remote /rural areas of the country are linked with region / state /nation and with the world. Thus, the concept of 'Global Village' by Marshall McLuhan (1960) was intended to account for new cultural situation and the world had become one place. And in this line of changing situation in our country the village panchyat play a key role. The mainstay of our country is agriculture which are fostered in village /rural areas. Mahatma Gandhi strongly believed in democracy grassroots. Gandhiji was an ideal, multi-faceted personality. He was a religious saint, a politician, a patriot and a nationalist, and an economist and a great freedom

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fighter. He was one of the most profound and original thinkers of the modern era. He had expressed his views in most cases of his life and what he said is still significant. Very few great men have displayed such a versatile life and character as Mahatma Gandhi. No aspect of human life has been left untouched by him. To quote Late Prime Minister Nehru, “to him life was an integrated whole, a closely woven garments of many colours.” He supported the decentralized regime for the formation of a nation of the poor and at the same time to exclude state interference in regular public life. Gandhiji wanted to see villagers as “Ling gardens of Eden” from “Clung heap”. (*Gandhi, M.K*) He announced that the hard work of the villagers for the development of rural areas. The people of the village should be aware of “miracles, nonviolence, truth, pride, and intellectualness, lack of access, physical labour, wealth control, fearlessness and equal respect for all religions.” (*Gandhi, M.K 1962*)

Gandhiji wanted to share political power in the Indian state’s villages. To describe how he had described true democracy, the word ‘Swaraj’ can be quoted. This democracy is based on freedom. He dreamed of the village republic during the tenure of Independent India. He said, “Panchayat Raj represents true of democracy realized. He would regard the humblest and the lowest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land.” (*Gandhi, M.K, Vol 68*) Gandhiji firmly believed that rural economy was dependent on the villagers.

Gandhiji’s idea of Gram Swaraj was replaced into Gram Panchayat. In ‘Harijan’ he wrote, “The farmers, the cattle breeders and the artisans are the main pillars of social and economic life of India.” (*Roy Rameshroy, 1984*). For this reason, despite his disliking in advertisements, Gandhiji’s weekly gave adequate space to proliferate any new-fangled things which would help to boost the rural economy. Gandhiji saw Khadi as the base for rural affluence. He made full uses of his tabloids to popularize Khadi among the Indian people. Gandhi promoted Panchayat Raj as the foundation of India’s political system. It would have been a decentralised form of Government where each village would be responsible for its own affairs. The term for such a vision was Gram Swaraj (“village –self –Government”). He preferred the term ‘Swaraj’ to describe what he called true democracy. This democracy based upon freedom. Individual freedom in Gandhi’s view could be maintained only in autonomous, self-reliant communities

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that offer opportunities to the people for fullest participation ([http://www.mk gandhi.org/ebks/village-swaraj .pdf.](http://www.mk gandhi.org/ebks/village-swaraj.pdf))

Villages have always been the basic units of administration in India since the ancient times. Panchayati Raj is a system and process of good governance. The gram sabha can become the keystone of the whole Panchayat Raj institutional set-up, thereby the Indian democratic system. In India, the Panchayati Raj generally refers to the system of local self-Government which was introduced by a constitutional amendment in 1992, it is based upon the traditional Panchayat system of south Asia. Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayati Raj as the foundation of India's Political system, as a decentralized form of Government in which each village would be responsible for its own affairs. The term of such a vision was 'Gram Swaraj'.

This paper focuses on problems and prospects of Village Swaraj and Panchayati Raj after Independence.

Community Development

In matters of social reconstruction, no amount of administrative innovation is a substitute for intelligent public participation. Agencies skillfully devised by the Welfare State may founder on the rocks of public apathy and ignorance. Our experience in India has shown how elaborate schemes for rural upliftment have gone awry because this essential element was missing in them. Such schemes can progress for some time under able and wise administrators, but they do not strike root in the rural areas. As soon as a change in administration takes place, the schemes fall from favor and whatever good they did is almost completely wiped out.

Yet every rural community has a natural interest in its own well-being. Centuries of inertia and oppression have deadened this sense in the Indian country-side, but unless it can be re-kindled administrative measures of reform will attain only limited success. If a method can be found which will release the springs of enterprise in the rural areas, their prosperity would come naturally and by their own effort. The State would, of course, be there to make available advice and assistance for the asking. But the programme of re-construction should be formulated by the rural community and implemented under that community's leadership. A United Nations publication has defined Community Development as 'the process by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social

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and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the Nation and to enable them to contribute to national progress'. Its method consists in assisting people to develop themselves on their own capacity and resources.

The Indian programme of Community Development was launched for the first time on October 2, 1952, Mahatma Gandhi's birthday. Its roots can be traced to the traditional Indian concept of community life which Mahatma Gandhi did so much to revive. Indian society has from time immemorial been based on rural community rule. The central authority usually exercised only a very limited control on the Indian masses. Their lives were shaped inside the village by the village council. The spirit of self-reliance and self-rule which characterized the old Indian villages is sought to be re-captured through the C.D. programme. At the same time, the village community has to be won over to the new modes of life which modern science and technology can offer. It is in this combination of voluntary effort and technical skill, of popular participation and technical assistance, that we find the essence of the programme.

Isolated efforts to encourage this pattern of development had been made even before Independence. Special mention may be made of the pilot projects of Gorakhpur and Etawah which received technical assistance from a few United States experts. But the adoption of Community Development as the basic method (or even the basic philosophy) of rural reconstruction had to wait till a national government took over. The Planning Commission gave their blessings to this method in the First Five Year Plan and agreed to increase its scope in the Second. Today the N.E.S. and the C.D. programmes are looked upon as complements of each other. The N.E.S. supplies the co-ordinated administrative team, while the C.D. programme is intended to supply the popular participation and the local resources without which administrative measures generally end in dismal failure. Since their inception both the programmes have undergone changes in the light of experience. That the scope of the C.D. programme is very wide will be clear from the following list of the main lines of activity of a community project given in the First Five Year Plan.

- (i) Agriculture and related matters: This include land reclamation, supply of seeds and fertilizers, promotion of improved agricultural techniques, improvement of livestock, and the encouragement of the growth of a healthy, co-operative movement.

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- (ii) Irrigation: Minor irrigation works in the form of tanks, wells, tube-wells and small canals are to be undertaken and extended to at least half the agricultural land in the region.
- (iii) Communications: The object will be to develop the road system in the countryside, so that no village is at a distance of more than half a mile from a main road. The feeder roads leading to the village are to be constructed by voluntary labour.
- (iv) Education: The main emphasis in the programme should be on primary and secondary education, mostly of the 'basic' type. Technical and social education are also to be provided.
- (v) Health: The aim is to set up 3 primary health units in each Development Block and a secondary health unit for every 3 Blocks. (A Community Project usually consists of 3 Development Blocks).
- (vi) Supplementary employment: This is to be secured through the establishment of small and cottage industries in the rural areas.
- (vii) Housing: The programme should include demonstration of improved designs for rural housing, opening of parks and playgrounds and assistance in the supply of building materials.
- (viii) Social Welfare: Community Centres for entertainment and recreation, sports and fairs should be organised in the areas.
- (ix) Training: An integral part of the programme is the training of personnel for the Development Blocks. Village-level workers, supervisors and the extension workers will receive training in specially established centres. They in their turn will impart training to farmers and village leaders.

From almost the very beginning, the C.D. and N.E.S. programmes have been subjected to systematic evaluation. A Programme Evaluation Organisation was set up, with financial support from the Ford Foundation of America, to carry on the important work of finding out which part of the programme was proving effective and which not. The annual Evaluation Reports issued by this Organisation have proved useful both to the administrators of the programme and to the general public. The Organisation has also issued from time-to-time Bench Mark Survey Reports

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on various social and economic aspects of rural life.

The C.D. programme in India has in addition been subjected to periodic review by foreign experts like Dr. Carl C. Taylor and Mr. M.L. Wilson and by a number of Study Teams inside the country. The following points in criticism of this programme have been made in one or other of these reviews:

- (i) The programme has not succeeded in effecting much improvement in agricultural practices. The yield of food crops in the C.D. areas does not show any marked improvement.
- (ii) The benefits of the programme have been distributed very unevenly. Usually the large farmers have benefited most from the various schemes under the programme and the 'underprivileged' classes have remained almost where they were.
- (iii) The programme has not succeeded in introducing new industries in the countryside as a measure for providing supplementary employment. Even when industrial programmes have been taken up, newer and more productive techniques have hardly been encouraged.
- (iv) Progress in the field of adult literacy has been slow and the activity has not been sustained. The programme of Social Education lacks any definite objective and is often ineptly handled.
- (v) The programme has failed to realise the 'saving potential' in the village by neglecting to utilise surplus man-power for the construction of useful capital works. An Evaluation Mission sponsored by the United Nations suggested a compulsory levy of labour in the rural areas to accelerate this part of the programme.
- (vi) Finally, the programme has not succeeded in deflating the importance of government agencies by putting the responsibility for implementing it on local leaders and institutions. In fact, the Development Departments in the States which administer this programme have failed to rise above departmentalism and to co-ordinate the work of all the departments concerned with development work. Representative bodies like the Block Advisory Committees have not been able to exercise much authority in matters connected with the implementation of the programme.

Vision of Indian villages and authority and its implication

Swaraj is a sacred word, a Vedic word, which means self-discipline, and all the deficiencies that often mean “freedom”. Swaraj was obtained by empowering the people to empower them in the sense of controlling the authority. According to Gandhi, “my idea of Gram Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbour for its own vital wants and yet interdependent for many in which dependence is necessity.” (*Gandhi M.K,1962*). Gandhi’s gram Swaraj worked for providing full employment of the citizen for people-centric, decentralized, simple village economy and for obtaining necessary autonomy for food, clothing etc. Other requirements of life were his dream. He believed that through the participation of the people, democracy can only be guaranteed through village Swaraj. He also believed that everyone must work enough to meet the necessary requirements. This model can be achieved only when the means of production is in control of people to meet the basic needs of life.

In his time of writings (1942) each village should be basically self-reliant, making provision for all necessities of life, food, clothing, clean water, sanitation, housing, education and so on, including Government and self-defence, and all socially useful amenities required by a community. That latter might include a theatre and public hall, for example. For India as a whole, full independence would mean that every village would be a republic with full powers. Then now, these were revolutionary ideas.

After the independence Gandhi’s concept of Swaraj was not included in the Indian constitution. Political, social and industrial organizations of India are generally “top down” instead of “bottom up”. Gandhi focused that villages should be organized in the form of countless oceanic cycles for political and industrial life. Here raised a philosophical gulf /gap between Gandhiji and Pandit Nehru. To Gandhi true independence for India meant a comprehensive transformation of Indian society and polity, but for Nehru, it meant no more than the political independence of India from Britain. Nehru was acknowledged as Gandhi’s political successor, but he was an orthodox democratic socialist. Nehru wanted to make India a modern, industrialized and democratic socialist nation. He believed centralized, large-scale, heavy industry were essential if India wants to develop, increase its wealth and become a modern state. It is perhaps not that Nehru did not agree with Gandhi’s concept of Gram Swaraj. Nehru

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sympathized and agreed with some elements of Gandhi's programme, such as abolition of untouchability, but Gram Swaraj was never near in his agenda.

Moitree Bhattacharaya speaks about Gandhi's Gram Swaraj, "Individuals are in harmony with the groups. The majority and minority have no relevance here. Everyone thinks about community and not for himself or his party." (*Bhattacharaya Moitree, 2002*). It is important that everyone here is a community or give and participate as part of the decision-making process. Gram Swaraj should be understood in the context of the two-dimensional deviation of truth and non-violence.

For development of rural areas Gandhiji advocated hard work of villagers. People in the village should be aware of "Eleven Views" namely non-violence, truth, non-stealing, celibacy, non-possession, manual labour, control of palate, fearlessness and equal respect to all religions.

Role of Panchayati Raj in rural Development

The fundamental concept of Gram Swaraj is that every village should be its own republic. Gandhi proposed to work from bottom upwards. He said Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a Republic or Panchayat having full powers. Gandhiji wanted the village panchayats to function differently in all the ways in the welfare of the villagers. The Panchayats of his viewpoint made a good deal of democracy.

The Gandhian ideas of Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj system can become vehicles for ushering in the much needed social and political change by including all the stakeholders in the process of decision making and public policy formulation. As Gandhi said, "Panchayat Raj represents true democracy realized. We would regard the humblest and the lowest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land." (*Joshi R.P Narain, G.S 2002*). So concerted, systematic and sustained endeavours are needed on the part of those for whom Gram Swaraj remains a cherished dream for the empowerment of people and for a participatory democracy.

The main objective of Panchayati Raj Institution (PRIs) is to provide good governance to people by bringing government at their doorsteps and ensuring rural people's participation in Indian political system. Panchayati raj is a strong platform of political participation and no doubt,

this has created the political awareness of the people of all sections including the marginalized and the socially excluded groups.

During the non-cooperation movement, the Panchayat adopted the system more prominently, because it offered an alternative to the English judicial system. It represented the positive aspect of the court boycotting programme. Unlike British courts in India, these panchayats used to act as arbitrators for quick disposal of the parties. As a result, during the Non-Cooperation Movement, thousands of panchayats were established throughout the country and Gandhiji said, “So I will strongly advise the Panchayats to carry out the very useful work of providing cheap, quick and effective justice to the people. (*Vyas HM, 2015*).

Gandhi insisted that panchayats may be a very effective tool for the development of the village. Panchayat is expected to attend (a) The education of boys and girls in its village, (b) Its sanitation, (c) Its medical needs, (d) the upkeep and cleanliness of village wells or ponds, (e) The uplift of and the daily wants of the so-called untouchables.

(<http://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/village-swaraj.pdf>).

Article 243(G) of the Indian constitution provides adequate power, authority, and responsibilities to PRIs regarding empowerment for the participation of plans for economic development and social justice. The implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to the matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule. According to this article there is an adequate scope of expression of the aspirations of rural people in the National Plan in a realistic way but in practice they are always busy with the schematic fund and could not take generously their decisions about the local level planning.

New panchayati Raj system after Independence

In the year of 1992 the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India is a step in the right direction to meet the general level of public will. The New Panchayati Raj System aims at decentralization of governance at the grass root level and empowerment of rural men and women. Referring to the functions of Panchayat, Gandhiji emphasized administration of justice, education, village environment and uplift of the poor.

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In 1957 Balwant Rai Meheta Committee was appointed by the Government of India, to examine the working of the community development programme (1952) and National Extension Service (1953) and to suggest measures for their better working. The committee submitted its report in November 1957 and recommended the establishment of the scheme of 'democratic decentralisation', which finally came to be known as Panchayati Raj. This system was adopted by state governments during the 1950s and 60s, as laws were passed to establish panchayats in various states.

It is imperative to educate the people at large and village leaders in particular about the implications and expectations of the Panchayati Raj Act, so that necessary foundation for participatory democracy at the grass roots is well laid. The credit goes for reviving this grass root democratic institution goes to Rajiv Gandhi who introduced the 73rd Amendment to the constitution of India, which made Panchayat elections mandatory and in particular recognizing gram sabha as a basic institution of the New Panchayati Raj system. When Panchayati raj was introduced in the country in 1959 the then Prime Minister Nehru said that it was the greatest revolution in the country and the system worked well till 1964.

There are significant differences between the traditional Panchayati Raj system that imagined by Gandhi, and the system formalized in India in 1992. The new system has been given a constitutional status and by which it has become a third government in the Indian political system. This is a three-level structural system, namely, zilla panchayat, middle panchayat and gram panchayat. The new system has been acquired with the power of taking decision on twenty-nine subjects in the 11th schedule. Three-tier Panchayati Raj system has been introduced to ensure the participation of people in the democratic decentralization at the grassroots level to implement the dream of Gram Swaraj.

The 1992 Act aims to provide a three-tier systems of Panchayati Raj for all states having a population of over 2 million, to hold Panchayat elections regularly every five years, to provide seats reserved for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women; to appoint a State Finance Commission to make recommendations regarding the financial powers of the Panchayats and to constitute a District Planning Committee, to prepare a development plan draft for the district.

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The Balwantrai Mehta Committee which studied the organisation and working of Community Development Blocks in 1956-57 stressed the need for delegating the powers of planning and administering the C.D. programme to local institutions. They employed the term 'democratic decentralization' to indicate the type of change which they considered necessary. The institution at the Block level which is to assume the responsibility for all development work within its area was to be called the Panchayat Samity. Its members were to consist of the heads ('Sarpanch') of the village panchayats within the Block area and a few co-opted persons to represent women and the 'depressed' classes. The B.D.O. was to be the Chief Executive of the Panchayat Samiti and all the Extension Officers were to function under the direction of the Samiti. The Samiti was to derive its funds-from a percentage of land revenue to be assigned to it, cess on land revenue, tolls and taxes and grants made by the government. All funds spent by the government for rural development were to be channeled through the Samiti.

At the village level, the village level worker was to serve as the multipurpose Extension Agent of the village Panchayat to be elected by the entire adult population of the village. Its funds would be derived from a local property tax, water and conservancy rates and grants from the Panchayat Samiti. There was to be a multipurpose Cooperative Society ('Service Cooperative') in every village working hand in hand with the village Panchayat.

A Zilla Parishad was proposed to look after the development work of a district as a whole. The Presidents of Block Panchayat Samitis and the Members of Parliament and the State Assembly elected from that district would be its members. The Collector of the district was to be the Chairman of the Zilla Parishad and one of his officers was to act as its secretary. The Zilla Parishad was expected to coordinate the function of the Panchayat Samitis and approve the budgets of these Samitis.

These recommendations were accepted by the Government of India and the States and consequently the pattern of Community Development was transformed in the direction of 'democratic decentralization' or, what has come to be called Panchayati Raj. Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh were the first two States to change over to the Panchayati Raj, followed by a number of other States. Some States were, however, inclined to make the district, and not the block, the primary administrative unit for economic development.

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Decentralization in the matter of Community Development is almost a logical necessity. It makes the rural community self-reliant and forces it to assess realistically its own needs and resources. Active participation in C.D. work in its turn helps to rear up democracy from the grass-roots. But the pattern of decentralization in India leaves much to be desired. Under it local agencies act almost as appendages of the official administration and lack the vigour and authority which come from independent functioning. Moreover, the introduction of elections for the constitution of these local agencies is sure to create new cleavages in rural society over and above the many social cleavages that already exist. Obviously, the successful functioning of this new decentralized pattern requires (i) the abdication of some of its powers by the administrative hierarchy, (ii) the adoption of a convention that local elections will not be fought on party lines and (iii) better education in methods of community living. These requirements are not easy to meet, at least at the moment, but that is no reason for condemning the pattern itself.

Conclusion:

The Father of nation Mahatma Gandhi has been considered a great advocate of Panchayati raj in India. He wanted to restore the village life through the panchayat organization. In his own words, “If the village perished India will perish too. It will be no more India. Her own mission in the world will get lost “. (*Arunachalam R. & Sreenivasan R, (2009)*) Again for Gandhi, the real significance of Swaraj was opportunity to shape India’s rural development in accordance with her own tradition and needs. So, he remarked: “To serve our villages is to establish Swaraj. Everything else is but an ideal dream” (*Deshpande, Nirmala, 2002*)

There has been a shift of emphasis in our thinking about the Panchayati Raj. After independence, in the 1950s, the policy makers and intellectuals thought off panchayati Raj as a necessary step towards ‘Development Administration’ and the ‘Process of Nation Building’. They thought that in the process of building the nation, the participation of the rural masses would be necessary. According to them, the movement of Community Development could not make much headway due to lack of popular participation. Hence ‘Participatory democracy’ and ‘decentralization of power’ became the two vital concepts upon which the institutions of Panchayati Raj were founded. But ‘participatory democracy’ and ‘decentralization of power’ were imagined within the then existing socio-economic and political framework. To put it in

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Prime Minister Nehru's words "To build up community life on a higher scale without breaking up the old foundations." (*Chatterjee Rakhahari 1985*)

On the one end Gandhiji favoured Village Swaraj and strengthened the village panchayat to the fullest extent and on the other end, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar opposed this idea. He believed that the village represented regressive India, a source of oppression. The model state hence had to build safeguards against such social oppression and the only way it could be done through the adoption of the parliamentary model of politics. During the drafting of the Constitution of India, Panchayati Raj Institutions were placed in the non-justifiable part of the Constitution, the Directive Principles of State Policy, as Article 40. In the four decades since the adoption of the Constitution, panchayat raj institutions have travelled from the non-justifiable part of the Constitution to one where, through a separate amendment, a whole new status has been added to its history.

The Gandhian ideal of Gram Swaraj remains an unfinished agenda even after six decades of the implementation of the Panchayat Raj on the recommendation of the Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team. The 73rd Amendment was implemented by various States in 1994. Therefore, concerted, systematic and sustained endeavours are needed on the part of those for whom Gram Swaraj remains a cherished dream for the empowerment of people and for making India a participatory democracy because people must have the feeling that they are participating in their own programmes. More important is that they should manage their development programme and it is possible only in decentralized set-up of Government where local bodies like village Panchayats can enjoy genuine and real-power of decision making and decision-implementation at the grass root level

Through the N.E.S., the C.D. programme and the new concept of Panchayati Raj, India has been trying to discover a new and more effective vehicle for the realisation of her agricultural policies. 1961-62 the Intensive Agricultural Development Programme has been introduced in a few selected districts of the country for the better co-ordination of agricultural development policies. From this arose the High-Yielding Varieties Programme on which so much faith has been pinned since 1966. It is indeed a remarkable achievement that since the agricultural season of 1966-67 the area under high-yielding seeds has gone up by nearly 12 million hectares and the

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country has overcome a most difficult period of drought and famines by ushering in what has come to be known in recent years as the 'Green Revolution'. The impact of this Revolution on the rural social structure and on levels of living in the countryside has now become an interesting subject of study.

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