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National Institute of Rural Development: A Study of an 'Epistemic Community'

Manish Kumar Thakur

This paper attempts to understand the structure and functioning of the National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD), Hyderabad in the context of the changing relationship between the social scientists and the statist enterprise of rural development. The paper does not intend merely to chronicle the range of activities that the NIRD has so far undertaken or is presently engaged in. Rather, the focus is on its role as a mediating agency between the state and a plethora of rural development policies, programmes and projects introduced since independence.

The National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD), Hyderabad has been devoted to the theory and practice of rural development. In this paper,¹ though, our interest lies in its being a mediatory institution between the state and the village, both conceptually and empirically. We believe that an empirical exploration of the institutional setting of NIRD can give us an understanding of how its institutional discourse on the 'village'/'rural' informs the statist construction of the village in the context of rural development. Conversely, we can also see if the statist agenda informs its discourse, which it faithfully disseminates to a wider audience.

The NIRD has access to the state by virtue of its personnel who perform various interrelated roles as experts, scholars, social scientists, or consultants. At the same time, its distinctive self-image as a rural development knowledge institution² heavily relies on its ostensible applied research orientation. Unlike universities and other research institutes, the generation of knowledge at the NIRD has policy implications. Consequently, it has continually to renew its claims as a storehouse of academic experts and professional social scientists by highlighting and marketing the professional training and academic/research backgrounds of its personnel. Expectedly, it serves as a bridge between the state and the professional world of social sciences.

For our purposes, what is important is that the NIRD provides a context where its personnel frequently draw upon the various discourses

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concerning the village in their routine professional activities. Most of these personnel have social science backgrounds, and their scholarly orientations and academic training mediate their everyday negotiation of institutional expectations concerning policy-oriented applied research. This means that an examination of the activities of NIRD is replete with insights relating to the mechanisms through which discourses on the village crystallise at the level of such institutions.

On another plane, we can ascertain if the NIRD merely imparts a rational and scientific legitimacy to the statist agenda: Is it concerned with rendering political as apparently non-political, couched in the technical language of policy sciences? Probably, the NIRD endows specific political interests with universal legitimacy through the deployment of rational categories and technical language. Its privileged position within the state/society as a 'premier institute of rural development' has the potential to make the politics of rural development appear essentially technical, natural, objective, scientific and routinised. In any case, the NIRD embodies an institutional structure where politicians, bureaucrats, social scientists, academics, field level development functionaries, and workers in voluntary organisations and the NGOs interact with one another. It was, in fact, created with the specific mandate of bridging the gulf between the world of the villagers and the world of the officials, and to break the traditional norms of bureaucracy and replace them with new values through the mediation of social sciences (see Dube 1964: 225).

The Scope, Data and Methodology

In the first section of this paper, we present a brief institutional profile of the NIRD, to situate its mediatory role in the overall matrix of rural development. This institutional profile is primarily based on published materials, such as annual reports, review committee reports, souvenirs, memoranda of association, fliers, booklets and leaflets, and other sundry brochures. The idea is to fathom the extent to which the NIRD has been responsive to the demands placed on it by the state, and to find out the influence that it has exerted on the state in planning and policy formulation for rural development.

In the second section of this paper, we focus on the scholar-practitioners working in the NIRD, to elaborate the relationship between the social scientists and the enterprise of rural development. We believe that our focus on the scholar-practitioners of rural development, apart from yielding valuable primary data, has many other payoffs. It helps us understand the nature and extent of scholar-practitioners' internalisation

of the institutional motto. After having interacted with them, we are better placed to judge whether their location in an institution of rural development is solely guided by career prospects and constraints. We gain entry into their professional world by listening to their statements. We come to know about the way they justify their existence as social scientists in such an institution, and what they do and do not do. The scholar-practitioners' perceptions and experiences of their location and role performance in the institutional setting not only add value and richness to our secondary data about the NIRD, but also show us how social scientific discourses have shaped, or have been constitutive of rural development interventions and state practices.

By moving within the institutional framework of the NIRD, we may identify its boundaries as an 'epistemic community'. An 'epistemic community', as defined by Alberto Arce and Norman Long (1992: 244), consists of persons sharing the same sources and types of knowledge. Since most scholar-practitioners in the NIRD are trained social scientists, the structure and contents of their communication networks within the institution are bound to generate insights regarding the changing contours of the relationship between the state and the social scientific community. Not only the social sciences have derived their expansionist impetus by virtue of state support, but also the state has drawn on social sciences and the academy in its quest for legitimacy.

Our discussion in the second section is primarily based on the data generated through focused interviews with a select group of scholar-practitioners. The researcher, with the help of an interview guide, conducted these interviews through intermittent field visits of varying duration, which were spread over a period of eight months (February-September 2003), at the NIRD. The interviews with the scholar-practitioners revolved around four main themes/issues. To set the tone of the discussion, we first concentrated on their academic background. The idea was to see if their professional training and expertise qualify them in any special way for the type of work that the NIRD undertakes.

Second, we wanted to know the scholar-practitioners' engagement with the 'village'/'rural': How have they tried to resolve, in their professional career, the diverse meanings of the 'village'/'rural'? Or have they taken it as given? If so, what has been the source of this givenness? One source of this givenness could have been the institutional consensus. We wanted to probe this issue by delving into their orientations towards the institutional consensus on the 'village'/'rural'.

Third, we wanted to examine the scholar-practitioners' self-assessment of their roles as development professionals: How would they locate

themselves as trained social scientists/academics in the development enterprise? Of necessity, this would also bring in the issue of locating institutions like the NIRD in relation to the national-level rural development policies and programmes. The idea was to discern the receptivity to the findings of social scientific research by the state.

Lastly, we touched upon the scholar-practitioners' awareness of and disposition towards the emerging critiques of development in social scientific literature. Our aim was not to see if they are familiar with recent trends or the frontier areas in their respective disciplines. Rather, we wanted to find out if their social scientific training has enabled them to take a critical stance vis-à-vis the theories and practices of rural development: Have they been able to transcend the diagnostic or evaluative research that their institutions pride on? Or have they been mired in the technicalities of research assignments to such an extent that their training in social science disciplines remains incidental or without much significance?

After having discussed the life history of NIRD and our understanding of the professional world of scholar-practitioners of rural development, in the concluding section, we present a general assessment of the NIRD as a form of institutional intervention in the overall context of state-led rural development.

I

Origin, Metamorphosis, and Culmination

The Origin: CISRCD

The NIRD had its genesis in the Central Institute of Study and Research in Community Development (CISRCD), Mussoorie, which was established under the auspices of the Department of Rural Development, Ministry of Community Development and Cooperation, Government of India. The CISRCD started functioning from 9 June 1958 at Radha Bhavan, Mussoorie. As its nomenclature makes it clear, the CISRCD had two wings: Study and Research.

The establishment of CISRCD was a response to the burgeoning needs of the Community Development Programme (CDP) then being implemented in the country. It was premised upon the belief that 'it is not only machinery that becomes obsolete; one has to guard against obsolescence of the mind'.³ In a vast country like India, the CDP necessitated a tremendous organisation of men and materials. The idea was to keep the field-level functionaries aware of the growing needs of

the society as defined by the CDP, and train them in those methods and techniques deemed appropriate for achieving its desired objectives.

There was widespread perception that the programme of training so far followed did not embrace aspects related to the demands of CDP. Also, the then prevailing patterns and mode of administrative training did not involve all the key personnel engaged in, or otherwise directly or indirectly connected with, the CDP. For the orientation of the administrative and technical officers above the Block level, reliance had so far been placed exclusively on the organisation of periodic seminars. This kind of training was obviously inadequate. The need for setting up a Central Institute, which could apply itself to the task of giving a higher-level training to the key personnel—administrative as well as technical—of the state and central governments and non-officials in the philosophy and objectives of community development, was, therefore, keenly felt. The training organised by this Institute was proposed to be wider in scope so as to cover the economic, social and political goals that were set in relation to the CDP. It was supposed to inculcate in the administrators/officials the ethos of group-methods of work and to expose them to ‘the sociological aspects of the programme’. It was against this backdrop of thinking that the central committee overseeing the CDP, under the chairmanship of the then Prime Minister, the late Jawaharlal Nehru, approved the idea of establishing a Central Institute of Study and Research in Community Development (CISRCD) (see NIRD 1958-59: 1-19).⁴

The Metamorphosis: NICD

In April 1962, the Central Institute of Study and Research in Community Development metamorphosed into the National Institute of Community Development (NICD). This coincided with the incorporation of the Institute for Instruction on Community Development, Rajpur (Dehradun), which was earlier known as the Trainers’ Training Institute. In 1964, the NICD moved to the city of Hyderabad. On 1 November 1965, the NICD shed its formal governmental character and became an autonomous registered body, though continuing to work in close association with the central and state governments.

In the first few years of its establishment, though the NICD operated as part of the Ministry of Community Development and Cooperation, there were vigorous discussions concerning its autonomy: ‘The Central Institute is growing, it is fundamental to its growth that it must grow in freedom. It must breathe the spirit of freedom, freedom to think, freedom

to search and investigate, freedom to argue and expound, freedom to doubt and even to deny' (NIRD 1960-61: 2). An introspective mood was evident as the NICD took stock of its functioning and chronicled its research experience. This critical fervour can be seen in a set of questions that the Institute posed to itself:

But what are the ingredients of creative research? Attracting outstanding research scholars? Productive academic atmosphere? Freedom and cooperation between researchers of different disciplines? What is the *sine qua non* of nucleating size before an institution can sustain self-generating growth? What flexibility in structure, in financing and in recruitment is conducive to accomplishment? How much 'outside' assistance can one absorb without losing its character or integrity? (NIRD 1965-66: 24).

These questions seemed to have been resolved for the time being, as the NICD was made autonomous, from 1 November 1965, in pursuance of the decision of the Government of India. The acquisition of autonomy by the Institute resulted in minor restructuring of its governance as well.

However, the issue of the autonomy of NICD, which seemed to have been resolved in 1965, opened again. It was felt that even on matters of minor nature it was required to seek the approval of the Government of India. This undue interference by the Government was held responsible for the delay in administrative matters and the resultant uncertainty that adversely affected the effective functioning of the Institute. Almost after a decade of its having become formally autonomous, the Institute approached the then Minister of Rural Development, Shri Jagjivan Ram, on 11 January 1975, for the grant of institutional freedom similar to the Indian Institute of Public Administration, Delhi. The demand for freedom was linked to the expected improvement in the functioning of the Institute. It was argued that, if the Institute acquires substantive administrative freedom, it could function with ease and confidence.

The Culmination: NIRD

In 1977, the National Institute of Community Development became the National Institute of Rural Development. As its Annual Report for 1977-78 puts it,

The General Council of the Institute at its meeting held on 20 September 1977 observed that in view of the fact that the Institute's activities were expected to have a much wider range concerning the whole field of rural development, it was proper that its name also should be indicative of its

objectives, and therefore, decided that it be changed to NIRD. The change has been effected accordingly (NIRD 1977-78: 2).

Although the Institute has been biased in favour of practical application of the various methods of rural development dealt within its research and training programmes, and has been focusing on the task of enriching and enlightening the field-level functionaries involved in rural development, by 1993 its self-image underwent a tremendous change. It began envisaging itself as the 'think tank' for the Ministry of Rural Development. Its hosting of the Joint Parliamentary Committee meeting on the 72nd Constitution Amendment Bill and the wide appreciation of its academic contribution to the said Bill seem to have greatly enhanced its self-confidence as an Institute of rural development. Subsequently, it was asked to draft a model bill to serve as a frame of reference for the preparation of the State Panchayati Raj bills. This further enhanced its reputation as a policy-making institute. The NIRD was asked to evolve model guidelines for transferring powers and functions to the Panchayati Raj institutions in respect of the twenty-nine items listed under the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution. It was also called upon to prepare an action plan for the training of more than 3.1 million Panchayati Raj functionaries in different states (see NIRD 1995-96: 1).

This self-image of NIRD as a 'think tank', owing to its having been entrusted with the aforementioned tasks of policy formulation, finds articulation in the changing rhetoric of its annual reports and other published brochures since the early 1990s. For example, the Annual Report for 1994-1995 describes the NIRD 'as one of the foremost institutes of rural development in Asia'. It claims to have endeavoured all along to provide inputs to translate into action the significance of rural development in national socioeconomic transformation. Furthermore, 'as a premier organisation of the Ministry, it assists in policy formulation and choice of options in rural development'. More important, it now fancies itself as striving towards energising the process of democratic decentralisation in rural areas.

II

The Umbilical Chord: The Ministry and the NIRD

One of our central concerns has been to find out how an institution like the NIRD has been mediating between the state and the village. In the case of NIRD, the state invariably means the Ministry of Rural Development (now called the Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment). In our

conversations with the scholar-practitioners, the Ministry as a *leitmotif* figured quite prominently. No one ever felt the need to qualify the term 'Ministry'. By virtue of their internalisation of the institutional ethos, they assumed that their interlocutors would know what they meant by the Ministry. The Ministry for them was not merely a trope, but had a very substantial presence affecting their routine professional engagements. As for the authority structure at the NIRD, the office of the Director General (DG) embodies the powers of the Ministry *qua* the state. As, Dr Srivastava,⁵ the senior most faculty member due to retire soon, says:

The Ministry is supreme even though the NIRD is theoretically autonomous. In effective terms, NIRD is largely Ministry-driven. The DG is the undisputed boss: he assigns research tasks to individual faculty members, places newly recruited members in different centres [departments] and asks them to develop expertise in the areas understaffed at the Institute. In real sense, the faculty notwithstanding various committees such as academic planning committees, research committees constituted of senior faculty members do not enjoy much autonomy.

Effectively speaking, the DG exercises more powers than generally vested in any executive head of a research organisation. The DG's powers, in great measure, emanate from his being a senior Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer. This has, wittingly or unwittingly, created a deep resentment against the bureaucratic supremacy among the votaries of academic autonomy at the NIRD. As Dr Fernandes put it bluntly, 'NIRD is theoretically autonomous though the word of mouth of an Under Secretary in the Ministry or a career bureaucrat will have more weightage than the senior most faculty member.'

Many other faculty members expressed similar sentiments. Dr Ramchandran, a faculty member having worked at the NIRD for more than 25 years, puts this in perspective:

NIRD has both excellent infrastructure and excellent faculty. The only stumbling block is the all-pervasive red-tapism. The faculty have to undergo a lot of bureaucratic hassles; they, in fact, have to do things which should have ideally been done by the administration and the support staff. For example, training programmes drain out their intellectual energy as they have to perform many administrative chores associated with such programmes. This practically means that they get less time for research. [...] NIRD's autonomy exists only on paper. It does whatever the Ministry asks it to do. And, that is why these two IAS officers are posted here as the

DG and DDG. The Registrar and Director of Administration is also very often an IAS officer.

A powerful, though subterranean, current against the disproportionate powers and privileges of the DG runs through the institutional veins of NIRD. The tussle concerning the relative supremacy of the bureaucrats of the Ministry vis-à-vis the academics working at the NIRD is an old issue. It has haunted the Institute ever since its inception. According to Dr Jena, who has seen the NIRD grow for over last three decades,

In the 1970s, the faculty strength was less. The infrastructure was quite poor compared with contemporary standards but the quality of research was appreciably high. The faculty in terms of research enjoyed more autonomy. The Ministry would not interfere much as they did not have many programmes. Autonomy was highly valued and guarded against erosion. Now even the professors behave as if they were bureaucrats. Autonomy has considerably eroded. Criticality and independence of mind are no longer valued and appreciated. They will try to sabotage your career chances if you become fiercely independent; they can say that your training programmes are not effective.

Even now, despite the NIRD having been made an autonomous organisation of the Ministry way back in 1965, the issue refuses to die down. Dr Madhvi, a newly recruited faculty member, echoes this sentiment when she says:

NIRD is a hierarchical bureaucratic organisation. Till recently [2002], you had designations like Directors, Deputy Directors and Assistant Directors. Administration, represented by the DG, the DDG and the Registrar [all IAS officers], decides who should be doing what research, which centre will be assigned what areas of research, or what policy component. It also assigns individual faculty to respective centres, that too not always on the basis of training or background of the recruits concerned. Whether a particular centre [within the Institute] is understaffed is an important consideration in the placement of the newly recruited faculty members.

The fact that, apart from the DG, two other top-ranking administrative posts—that of the Deputy Director General, and the Registrar and Director of Administration—also belong to the IAS, further aggravates the resentment against the bureaucratic control. In these three IAS officers all administrative power is vested. Moreover, they are the ones who have direct interface with the Ministry. Often, they come to the

NIRD on deputation from the Ministry. That is why, they are seen more as members of the rural development bureaucracy than as academic leaders. Many faculty members feel that their presence at the Institute has led to the devaluation of social scientific research. According to these scholar-practitioners, the rural development bureaucracy has no respect for social scientists. Dr Sagar caustically remarked, 'Bureaucrats are the best policy makers, social scientists and development professionals!'

There was a time, however, when reputed social scientists like S.C. Dube used to head the Institute. One gets a feeling that, had the administrators come from the ranks of the academics themselves, the widely prevalent resentment against the steady erosion of institutional autonomy would have been less acute. In fact, many scholar-practitioners regaled the author with stories of fierce independence and courage of conviction showed by some former faculty members. Dr Gowda narrated how Professor Lalit K. Sen would never refrain from locking horns with the then DG even when it cost him an extension of service at the Institute.

Similarly, Dr Shivaraman delighted in narrating many anecdotes about Professor Sheshadri of the Centre for Panchayati Raj. Like Professor Sen, Professor Sheshadri's quest for academic autonomy made him cut short his career at the NIRD and go to a university. According to the institutional folklore, he got furious with the then DG when he was asked to sign an indent for the use of Institute's vehicle. Dr Kumar added, 'some of these professors were intellectual giants. They would find it below their dignity to cosy up to the DG or the DDG. Sadly enough, these days our Directors [professors] themselves behave as mini-versions of the DG.'

This is not to say that all the scholar-practitioners resent the presence of IAS officers amidst them. Some of them not only approved of their being there, but also spoke in celebratory terms about how an IAS officer as the head of the Institute was an asset in disguise. Dr Murthy was candid in this regard: 'You see our DG is very often a secretary-level IAS officer. That is why, even the rural development secretary listens to his advice. If the DG is convinced of some programmes and projects then it is very unlikely that the Ministry will shoot it down.' They were particularly appreciative of the influence and 'weight' that their DG carries in the corridors of power in Delhi. The 'weight' of the DG necessarily facilitates speedy processing of research projects and consultancy assignments. Most important, it ensures the

smooth flow of funds to the NIRD from the Ministry. Dr Bhaskar euphorically remarked:

NIRD provides right kind of research environment and requisite resources. Through the good offices of DG, who is a secretary level IAS officer, you can clinch major research projects not only from the Ministry but also from various other multilateral international organisations like ADB, World Bank, WHO, UNDP etc. Similarly, the DG can influence agencies like NABARD and many other development-related ministries to approach NIRD for consultancy projects or research studies.

Dr Karunakaran found nothing wrong either in the Ministry's interference or the DG's overarching powers. For him, 'NIRD is the eye of the Ministry. But for the Ministry, NIRD would not have attained the status of the centre for excellence in rural development.' Interestingly, Dr Karunakaran's is not the lone voice. Many scholar-practitioners take special pride in theirs being a 'Ministry-sponsored Institute'. They not only derive benefits from the NIRD's special proximity with the state, but also prefer designations of Directors, Deputy Directors and Assistant Directors to Professors, Associate Professors and Assistant Professors. Naturally, they are the ones who would not complain about the loss of academic autonomy.

Some other faculty members, though in a minority, were largely indifferent to the issue of institutional autonomy for the NIRD. They did not think that bureaucratic interference should be made out as an issue at all. Dr Rao seemed to be the representative voice of this group: 'After all, NIRD is a government institute... So, unlike NGOs or the universities, it does not have the freedom to say no to the Ministry.' Dr Malthi dismissed the issue of the loss of academic autonomy by saying that 'though IAS officers are there, senior faculty members take all the major policy decisions'.

Based on their responses concerning the relationship between the Ministry and the NIRD, we can classify our scholar-practitioners into three categories: the ones who feel that the autonomy of the NIRD is a sham, notwithstanding its formal autonomous status as an organisation; the ones who see virtue in its not being really autonomous; and the ones who are indifferent to the issue of autonomy. Those belonging to the first category have complaints not only against bureaucrats wielding enormous powers over the Institute, but also against the members of their own rank, whom they see as active collaborators with the bureaucratic establishment. In this sense, their criticisms are both outwardly and inwardly directed. Those in the second category candidly admit the

benefits of NIRD's proximity with the rural development bureaucracy. In fact, some of them have made high-profile careers in the field of rural development, thanks to their location in the NIRD. For those in the last category, working at the NIRD is as good as working in any government department. They seem to be particularly happy that the facilities at the NIRD are a hundred times better than at conventional government research organisations or universities.

Thus, we find that, although most scholar-practitioners come from conventional social science disciplines, having spent considerable time at the universities (both as students/researchers and/or teachers/research workers) before coming to the NIRD, they do not share the same orientations towards the role of the state in social science research. In fact, our scholar-practitioners' institutional role as rural development professionals overshadows their self-image as trained social scientists. When we wanted to know their views about the possible meanings of the term 'rural', or how certain assumptions about the 'village' are embodied in rural development policies and programmes, most of them found such questions irrelevant, at times even meaningless, to the type of work they were expected to do or were engaged in. Most of them evaded the issue by taking refuge under the distinctive institutional mandate of NIRD. Dr Chandran, a sociologist by training, said unequivocally:

We do not do much theoretical work like universities. For us, training is the main focus. Very often, we work within the mandate [given to us] of the NIRD. Also, we include in our research agenda the ongoing concerns of the Ministry [of Rural Development]. Infrequently, research ideas reflecting particular researcher's areas of interest are also concretised as research proposals, and supported by the Institute. It is here that one can pursue one's own individual theoretical interests. On the whole, we concentrate more on applied kind of research.

Dr Prasanna, a senior social anthropologist, found such questions outdated. He firmly placed these questions in the domain of village studies, and added, 'the days of village studies are gone; now sociology is yielding to political science which has captured the village in a big way in the name of Panchayati Raj institutions and decentralisation'. Dr Reddy remarked:

In Andhra Pradesh revenue villages and the Panchayati Raj villages are almost the same. So, there is no real confusion as to the boundaries of a village. In this sense, what constitutes a village does not really pose itself as a real issue before those engaged in rural development research.

The complete normalisation of the village as a substantialised entity in rural development provided the essential thread in most of the responses that we got from our scholar-practitioners. From their response it was clear that, although most policies, plans, and programmes of rural development rely on certain conceptualisations (social scientific or commonsensical) of the village, the village itself is absent from their deliberations. Most of them agreed that an implicit model of the village certainly informs the strategy of rural development. However, they were clueless about how this takes place and in what ways notions about the village are instrumental in shaping rural development programmes.

Interestingly, not only explanations of rural development rely heavily on a stereotypical construction of the village, abstracted from the huge corpus of disparate social scientific literature, but also the local-level implementation of rural development programmes revolves around the village. This probably explains why the village as a concept has become so natural a part of the discourses of rural development and village studies. In any case, conceptualisations of the village, or the aspects of its construction as a natural entity for rural development, remained below the threshold of reflexivity for most of our scholar-practitioners.

Most of them had plenty to say on both why the village is the way it is, that is, underdeveloped or undeveloped, and how it can be developed. However, they had not much to share on what is that 'village' which is underdeveloped. Also, most of them looked at rural development as a technocratic solution to the national problem of poverty. Very few of them looked at development as the outcome of strategic political choices. Dr Vidyabhusan, though an economist by training, was acutely aware of the political dimensions of rural development. For him, 'politics is central to rural development. Much of the rural development programmes, in fact, can be seen as responses to the political pressures brought about by the bottom rungs of the social ladder.' Dr Sadasivan added another dimension to rural development. In his opinion, 'lobbies are central to rural development, both national and international lobbies'. Dr Sankaran amplified this by saying, 'globalisation has changed the meaning of rural development. Rural development has not remained the same over the years. When you talk of the politics of rural development, you cannot afford to ignore the impact of globalisation.'

It is not that all scholar-practitioners with whom we interacted found these questions outmoded. However, most of them did feel that the NIRD is not the right place to pursue such 'arcane' questions. A

university department of sociology and/or social anthropology would be the right place to do that. Dr Subramaniam, an economist, suggested:

It is difficult to read between the lines so far as rural development programmes are concerned. Still, more difficult is to get an idea of the village by working out the assumptions of such programmes... [T]he issue of what constitutes a village is quite complex. For example, in Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh, there are *falias*, and not villages which are separated socially and physically.

Some of them rightly pointed out that the notions of the village have not remained static since the heyday of the village monographs. According to Dr Naidu, the notions about the village have been guided by the 'spirit of the age'. There was a time when social anthropological studies trumpeted the unity and communitarian cohesiveness of the village. The post-colonial nation-state tried to give this idea a further push by launching massive community development programmes. Even today certain stereotyped ideas about the village have been translated into utopian experiments. Taking the case of Tamil Nadu, Dr Krishnan argued:

Though social justice villages in Tamil Nadu have been projected as model villages, they have not really succeeded. In contemporary policy environment, social cohesiveness is less important. There has been a shift in the orientation of rural development since the days of the CDP. These days programmes are more group-oriented. Indeed, target-group programmes are the mainstay of rural development planning and policy-making.

Ambiguities surrounding the idea of the village come to the fore in any discussion of rural development. We found that most of our scholar-practitioners (other than those who were sociologists/social anthropologists by training) preferred to talk of rural development than the village as such. But then, we found that there were as many views of rural development as there were scholar-practitioners. Dr Janardan, while acknowledging that rural development is a nebulous term, attempted to delimit its scope by saying that 'rural development refers to those programmes which are identified by the Ministry as such. Rural development is a blanket category and its scope is vast. However, we, at the NIRD, concern with only target-groups oriented programmes, that too mostly diagnostic or evaluation studies.' Dr Sinha virtually echoed the current official definition of rural development when he said, 'those

programmes which are meant for the rural poor are rural development programmes'.

Ambiguities about rural development have implications for the type of research work that a faculty member can undertake at the NIRD. Dr Bhatt, a commerce graduate, was bitter that he could not undertake research on Tirpur textile industries in Tamil Nadu as the Institute, in its wisdom, decided that the said research did not fall within the purview of rural development. However, in another instance, he succeeded in convincing the Institute as to how a research project on Kolhapur footwear industry justifiably qualified as rural development research. He attributed his success on this front to the enormous amount of lobbying with the DG and the Research Planning Committee.

Not only research assignments but also the training programmes have to be justified as falling within the scope of rural development. This has posed problems to some faculty members having no real interest in rural development. However, once they joined the Institute they had to justify their professional existence on the basis of their contributions to rural development training and research. Most of such scholar-practitioners, however, internalised the institutional ethos and developed their areas of interest under the broad category of rural development. In many cases, they did not have much option to do that even. The DG decided their areas of interest and assigned them to the departments of his choice. For example, Dr Latika, a newly recruited faculty member having worked on the issue of displacement for her PhD in sociology of development, was attached to the Centre for Human Resources Development (CHRD) and was asked to undertake research concerning primary education, health, water and sanitation. Obviously, there is a lack of continuity between her prior research interest/experience and her current assignment. However, she did not complain, as she felt that the Institute has assigned her to an area that is understaffed.

In the same Centre we had Dr Banerjee, another senior scholar-practitioner, who has successfully evaded the 'burden' of rural development in his professional life. Trained as an anthropologist, his interests were mainly in medical anthropology. After having joined the NIRD, he started adding 'rural' as a prefix to his training programmes in the area of health. A certain amount of lobbying with the DG and the senior faculty members ensured that he did not have to deviate much from his earlier research interests in his career. Similarly, some other faculty members having an interest in sociology of education have been managing to stick to their original research interest by adding 'rural' to

their training programmes in the area of education. There are similar cases where particular faculty members have used the ambiguities surrounding rural development and have circumvented the institutional mandate to carry on with their areas of interest through lobbying with the DG and convincing him that the particular areas do fall within the ambit of rural development.

By contrast, we met Dr Dinakaran who saw no conflict between his earlier training/interest in psychology and his current location in a rural development institute. He has successfully organised training programmes on topics such as 'Attitudes and Behaviours of Primary Stakeholders in Rural Development', 'Gender Disparities and Attitudes and Behaviours of the Rural Society towards Girl Child'. There are many scholar-practitioners, like Dr Dinakaran, who do not see any problem in adjusting to their new research assignments. As Dr Tirthankar, a sociologist, said it laughingly, 'we can go and work in any kind of development-related institute as social component is required everywhere. So, where is the problem?'

A close look at the academic background/research training of the scholar-practitioners reveals that most of them did not have prior exposure in the area of rural development. True, after having joined the NIRD, most of them did successfully cultivate an interest in this area. However, there are some centres, for example, Centre for the Panchayati Raj (CPR) and Centre for Social Development (CSD), where one could find a good deal of continuity between scholar-practitioners' earlier research experience and their professional engagements at the Institute. No wonder, these centres are rated as the best within the NIRD.

Dr Rangachari of the CPR, who has done his Ph.D. from Kashi Vidyapeeth, Benares on the topic of emerging leadership in the rural areas, saw a positive relationship between one's prior research exposure to the area of rural studies and her/his potential for excellence at the NIRD. Dr Nachane (of the same Centre) opined, 'it helps in adjustment if there is some continuity between the faculty's earlier research interests and the assignments that he gets at the institute'. He told us how most of his colleagues, though political scientists, had done a considerable amount of research concerning rural political processes, voting behaviour in rural areas, and the villager's responses to the Panchayati Raj elections. Not surprisingly, his Centre has made valuable contributions to policy-making concerning democratic decentralisation and popular participation in water resources management. However, he placed the issue in a larger perspective:

NIRD has good facilities, but it all depends on individual's interests, drive and motivation. If someone has come here by accident, merely for the sake of a job, then naturally s/he is not going to excel. Some 10-15 percent of the faculty belong to this category. But that is true of any organisation. You go for a job because you have to run the family and not because you are interested in the job.

Dr Waghmare, his colleague in the Centre, did not agree with him on the issue of importance of earlier research exposure to rural studies. His training in public administration did not allow him to go for any distinctive identity for the rural. He said unresistingly that 'slums are rural Sir, rural means poor'. There were many scholar-practitioners who, like Dr Waghmare, had categorical personal opinions on what is rural, or what constitutes a village. But, when it came to reflexivity on such issues in their routine professional engagements, they would better leave it to the all-pervasive institutional wisdom of NIRD. For most of our scholar-practitioners, the burden of defining what rural development is is that of the Ministry, and the DG/DDG and the Research Programmes Committee of the Institute communicate it to them.

On the interface between social science research and the policy-making for rural development, our scholar-practitioners were more than willing to talk. Most of them had definite opinion on the types of work that they do at the NIRD, or the types of work that the NIRD is expected to do. Also, they had varied assessment of the value and significance of their work in relation to rural development. For most of them, the NIRD is mainly concerned with the training of rural development functionaries. In this sense, the self-image of our scholar-practitioners is that of rural development professionals/trainers than social scientists/researchers. Training programmes for the rural development functionaries is the mainstay of NIRD; 'course participant' is the most familiar term out there. Any stranger on the campus is taken to be a participant in one of the training programmes that run concurrently at the NIRD at any point of time. The entire institutional set-up at the NIRD is geared towards these training programmes.

The author's participation in two such training programmes offered interesting insights. Most of these training programmes have the same standard format, whatever is the theme. It should be remembered that organising such programmes is not a voluntary option for faculty members. Every faculty member has to organise at least two training programmes in a given financial year. So, faculty members are immensely preoccupied with these programmes. They have to advertise these programmes widely to ensure minimum number of participants. Under

the burden of successful organisation of training programmes, often they have to compromise on the quality of course participants. For example, although the NIRD claims that it imparts training only to district level rural development functionaries, this is not always the case, as is evident if one scrutinises the list of participants of a given training programme. Dr Vijaya justified this by saying, 'of course, secretaries from the Ministry will not come to the NIRD for training. Also, IAS officers at the district level would find it below their dignity to come here. Mostly, state government functionaries working at the district and other subsidiary levels come here for training.' She put the record straight by adding that some IAS officers, at times senior ones, also come to the NIRD to undergo training programmes.

There were few scholar-practitioners who believed that NIRD encouraged field-based empirical work not only for the sake of in-house training programmes, but also with a view to influence rural development policies directly. The NIRD's role in the Panchayati Raj legislations (73rd Constitutional Amendment) and its formulation of guidelines concerning participatory watershed management were frequently mentioned as instances of successful policy-making. In particular, the faculty members of CPR never got tired of mentioning how their then Director, Professor B. Shiviah, was invited for a breakfast meeting by the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi that culminated in the NIRD playing a vital role in drafting the Panchayati Raj legislation.

Dr Rajaraman felt that, though the NIRD does not have enough to boast so far as its impact on the policy-making at the central level is concerned, many state governments have greatly benefited from the expertise available at the Institute. He further explicated:

State has to be seen at different levels such as centre, state and the panchayati raj. It is not that state at the central level only is engaged in policy-making. State level has its own mechanisms of policy-making. So, an attempt to differentiate different levels of policy-making is crucial for any assessment of the relationship between state and the social sciences. This will also help you better appreciate the role that NIRD has played in the policy-making over the years.

Still, there were many faculty members who felt that not much of the work done here directly influences policy decisions concerning rural development. For Dr Jaychandran, 'doing policy-oriented research does not necessarily translate into any direct role in policy-making. Different policy-makers and agencies approach the NIRD for different types of inputs. It is up to them to use these inputs the way they deem fit.' On the

other hand, Dr Chaube was quite clear about the NIRD's role in policy-making: 'The Ministry gives policies. Either they ask you for inputs on a particular ongoing programme, or in the broad existing policy area you can come up with research projects that the Ministry will finance.'

Before assessing the role of NIRD in terms of its research contributions to policy-making, it is imperative to understand the types of research carried out there. Also, we would do better to know the mechanisms through which research assignments are chosen and then distributed across the faculty. On this, we could aptly quote Dr Navlakha:

There are mainly two mechanisms to assign the research tasks to particular centres/faculty member. In many cases some joint secretary in the Ministry writes to the DG, and the DG marks it to the relevant centre/faculty. We can call this 'top-down approach' of research assignments. Also, there is 'bottom-up approach' where a particular centre or the faculty member proposes certain research proposals along with other academic plans such as the number of training programmes, workshops, seminars etc. Generally, such proposals are invited once in a given financial year. The Institute's academic committee deliberates on them, and if found suitable, accords approval and financial sanction.

Dr Joshi clarified it further:

Though individual faculty members have the freedom to undertake research in their respective fields of specialisation, they should see to it that their research interests fall within the purview of the mandate of the Institute. In any case, they have to take prior approval or concurrence of the NIRD before undertaking any research assignment.

It was a repeated observation among the scholar-practitioners that the NIRD provides limited scope for individual research, though, in theory, faculty members can come up with their own research themes. Nonetheless, they have positive appreciation of the type of research that they do. Many of them underlined how the NIRD has pioneered several innovative rural development programmes. As Dr Jain remarked, 'In fact, many rural development programmes have resulted from the research studies of the NIRD faculty. One can mention programmes like Jawahar Rojgar Yojana (JRY), Swarna Jayanti Grameen Rojgar Yojna (SJGRY).' Many other faculty members stated that the government guidelines for various rural development programmes heavily draw on the NIRD research studies. Similarly, the faculty members belonging to the Centre for Rural Industries and Employment (CRIE) took credit for

designing many pilot programmes concerning wage labour. They felt that they were the leaders in arguing the case for a shift from the programmes based on assets creation to those based on wage labour in both cash and kind. Dr Venkaih's was, however, a sober voice when he qualified his colleagues' statements by saying:

Truly speaking, the Ministry does not accept all the recommendations that you might make based on your studies. You have to convince them and argue your case. At times, they accept your recommendations and suggestions *in toto*. At other times, your reports, recommendations and action points find their way to the dusty cupboards of the Ministry.

However, the NIRD faculty members were unequivocal in their belief that the researches conducted by them had been quite useful in identifying the gaps in the existing programmes, and in designing better programmes in the light of experience. According to Dr Jayanthan, many programmes, for example, the Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment, have emerged out of such rural development programmes-based research undertaken by the NIRD faculty. According to Dr Jacob, even a modest assessment of the research studies undertaken by the NIRD faculty convincingly demonstrates how they have identified major loopholes in the design and field-level implementation of rural development programmes. In fact, most of the faculty members had a penchant for narrating how her/his particular research study found out such and such gaps in the implementation of a given programme. They regale with such stories, which probably enhance their reputation as field-based experts.

A section of the scholar-practitioners felt that the findings of their research studies are not disseminated adequately. They thought only Ministry-sponsored, and that too programmes-linked, researches have had some impact on policy-making. Other research findings were kept in cold storage. Dr Goswami amplified this issue:

True, there are enough mechanisms in place for the regular interface between policy-making at the Ministry and the NIRD. Religiously, we submit copies of research highlights [annual publications of the NIRD containing some of the major research findings], recommendations of the seminars, and suggestions emanating out of the workshops held at the Institute. But not always researcher's findings find their way up ... [A]nyway, one has to keep up the belief that your research is going to add to the policy enterprise, otherwise you will get disenchanted.

At the NIRD most of the faculty members publish in the in-house journals. This calls for an explanation as to the quality of research and the academic rigour of research publications. Whether in-house journals and other publication facilities promote and encourage publication of substandard research output is a moot question. Very few faculty members wanted to comment on this issue. Dr Gangaram was forthright in accepting that this type of 'incestuous' research publication served no good, either to the scholar-practitioner or to the Institute. Dr Seth said that the DG was aware that not all the in-house publications were of high quality. He fondly expressed the hope that something would be done to ensure the quality of NIRD publications at the highest level.

In a way, the closed character of the NIRD research is also linked to the general lack of a culture of critical appreciation among the faculty members. Some of the NIRD faculty were candid on this count. They frequently complained about their colleagues who seemed to have internalised the ethos that, being employees of a 'government organisation', they would not be criticising the government. A few of them also felt that the Ministerial presence through the offices of the DG and the DDG constrained them to tone down open criticisms of the government-sponsored rural development programmes. Some of them despaired at the very thought that the Ministry would ever listen to their recommendations. Dr Khan, while talking of the SJGRY, of which he has conducted evaluation studies in Uttaranchal, had this to say:

Most of the villagers covered under the SJGRY want cash wages and not food grains, as they can buy the better quality food grains from the market at roughly the same price. But the guidelines do not allow it. Obviously, the Ministry has other considerations in mind: what will happen to the tonnes of food grains stocked in the FCI godowns if food grains as wages are dispensed with? So the programmes, very often, are guided by what the Ministry thinks is important and appropriate, and not by what the villagers want or the researchers suggest. In this case, no one dare recommend money wages as the Ministry apparently thinks that the nutrition by way of food grains is more important than the cash for the villagers.

Often the discussion about the NIRD's research contributions would return to the commonly agreed upon belief that they were crucially important inputs to the training programmes. Very few of our scholar-practitioners would place this in the larger context of a general lack of a culture of critical appreciation. For those who could feel this constraint, the explanation laid in the all-powerful, though theoretically distant and invisible, control by the Ministry. As Dr Motwani remarked, 'independ-

dent thinking has declined even though the infrastructure facilities have improved. NIRD, no doubt, has progressed a lot as an institute but to what extent it has achieved its own mission of contributing to rural development remains highly debatable.' Dr Motwani's scepticism finds its counterpart in Dr Bansal's bland assertion that 'NIRD is an excellent institution'. He further adds, 'all faculty members have PhD, and all of them are doing good work. Naturally, their work is influencing the policy-making exercises.' Dr Madhilika's is perhaps the most realistic assessment:

Critical approach towards development is completely lacking, as NIRD is a government institute. Whatever comes from the Ministry is taken as given. No questioning of the general wisdom of the Ministry is encouraged. Of course, you will have number of studies pointing gaps in the existing corpus of rural development programmes. Also, there will be equal number of studies suggesting alternative [rural development] programmes. At the very least, these studies contain ways and means of plugging loopholes in the existing programmes. After all, the ministry has to allocate a certain proportion of its budget to 'independent' research and evaluation studies of rural development policies and programmes. No doubt, NIRD faculty are the major beneficiaries as most of these studies get assigned to them.

The lack of a culture of internal debate and discussion notwithstanding, the NIRD has been a great source of distribution of academic patronage right through its initial years by way of the award of research projects and junior and senior research fellowships. Often, such patronage had been grossly misused, and the beneficiaries had come from universities and other research institutes. It was an enviable case of an overflow of funds with few in-house takers, as the Institute itself was understaffed. Now the distribution is almost intra-institutional in nature, as the growing number of the faculty has generated a greater reliance on the in-house expertise.

Over the years the NIRD has witnessed a tremendous expansion, both in terms of physical infrastructure and human power. Gone are the days when it was referred to as 'an old Tehsildar's office'. No one can dispute the fact that the NIRD has successfully consolidated itself as a national-level rural development Institute. After our initial round of interviews with the scholar-practitioners associated with the various centres of the NIRD, we gained the impression that its functionaries were a group of good people with good intentions, but with limited knowledge of what bureaucrats in the Ministry were doing. At times, we came across contradictory definitions of the objectives and contents of

their tasks. We also found the contradictory ways in which various faculty members expounded the institutional problems, or viewed the institutional mandate. Not surprisingly, some departments, sections or units did more work compared with others. This was, in fact, reflected in the self-image of such centres as CPR, CHRD, and CSD. However, few people really bothered about the meanings of the 'village'/'rural'. A recurring explanation elicited during the fieldwork was that the 'rural' was what the Ministry decided.

One does not fail to notice that the institutional logic at the NIRD was permeated by the desire to resolve rural development issues through the imposition of efficient institutional and technological support systems. What strikes one is the fact that most of the scholar-practitioners showed equally less concern about the politics of rural development, forget the semantics surrounding the idea of the village. For example, they fail to see that rural development need not always result in successful implementation of particular programmes. It could lead to the integration of the villagers into the national political system through a network of patron-client relationships, and possibly rural development policies might have been geared towards such *incorporationist* strategy. In this sense, the failure of rural development programmes could very well be because of the success of the strategy of political incorporation. Dr Batra, a political scientist by training, captured the essence of this criticism when he said:

Sadly, my colleagues at the NIRD fail to understand that an independent and competent administration in the context of rural development is not simply a product of institution-building [establishment of institutes like the NIRD], or improved training expected of NIRD, but of politics. The neglect of power and politics at the NIRD results in an almost exclusive focus on commercialisation and technology as the main sources of rural change and portrays rural development as a unilinear process leading to a determinate outcome.

But then our scholar-practitioners would throw their hands in despair saying that they had no control over the politics of rural development, meaning that such issues did not fall under the purview of what they understood by rural development. What they understood by rural development was almost a *fait accompli* for them given their location in an Institute that has abstained from severing its umbilical chord from the Ministry.

III Concluding Observations

The NIRD has historically accorded privileged reception to social sciences as evidenced in the background of its personnel. This is understandable as it was established at a time when social sciences were on the upswing and considered to be of great consequence to national planning and policy formulation. As an institute catering to the bureaucratic functionaries at different levels, the NIRD positioned social scientists as authentic guides and reliable field experts on development issues. That is to say, since the very beginning, the NIRD has attempted to create a distinctive self-image in relation to a bureaucracy that was thought to be largely oblivious of the grassroots realities given its systemic constraints. To what extent it has succeeded in this remains a moot issue. Also, the NIRD has consistently tried to distinguish itself from universities, and other 'ivory towers' of theoretical research. Being a centre of applied academic/policy research has been its unique selling point.

Furthermore, the NIRD has been very much a part of the Indian state and its ideology of rural development. It matters less that it was made an autonomous organisation under the Ministry of Rural Development within almost a decade of its inception. The Ministry is writ large on the institutional landscape of NIRD. The statist ethos runs through the NIRD's capillaries and veins. No wonder, it has always looked towards the Ministry for its institutional sustenance and guidance. In fact, the NIRD is so obsessed with the Ministry that we did not come across even a single scholar-practitioner who would talk about the NIRD in relation to other institutes in the field of rural development. Evidently, the NIRD appears to be a self-contained institution without any compulsion or urge to establish its identity in relation to other institutions in the field of rural development. We would not be off the mark to claim that this institutional attitude has largely been an outcome of the state's generous support to the NIRD.

The state has had its own reasons to prop up the NIRD. It has benefited from the NIRD in many ways. For the Ministry, the NIRD has been the favoured destination of 'independent and critical' evaluation studies of its programmes and projects. In a way, the Ministry has needed the NIRD as much as the NIRD has needed the Ministry. Nonetheless, the relationship has not been based on an equal degree of mutual reciprocity. The balance has often been tilted in favour of the Ministry.

For the NIRD, rural development has been what the Ministry of Rural Development has periodically defined it to be. In this regard, it never looked askance at the Ministry. Even when the Institute's name was changed from NICD to NIRD, there was no debate as to the import of this change in nomenclature. None of the faculty members whom we interviewed threw much light on this. They did not seem to take it as an important turning point in the institutional history of NIRD; an annual report mentions this change in nomenclature in passing while giving the dates of the meetings in which this was done!

Even today there seems to prevail a perfect institutional consensus over what constitutes rural development. What one has to bear in mind is that this institutional consensus was less an outcome of the internal deliberations than an external imposition from the Ministry. Our interviews with the scholar-practitioners testify to this observation. Although most of them happened to be social scientists, they have really not exhibited the critical faculties historically associated with the social sciences. There is another angle to this. For most of the NIRD faculty, the Institute has been no more than a work place. It is not that it was their interest in rural development that brought them to the NIRD. More often than not, they developed an interest in rural development simply because they happened to work at an institute of rural development.

As for the authority structure, the NIRD has carried the burden of bureaucratic inertia. For all practical purposes, it has functioned as a bureaucrats-led organisation. In fact, IAS directors are the norm, though for a brief period of its existence academics-directors have led it.

Most of the NIRD faculty thought of themselves as trainers and rural development professionals. They not only think of themselves as academics and scholars, but also project the self-image of policy-makers. At the NIRD one discerns a high degree of glorification of applied research. The scholar-practitioners contrasted the type of research that they do with the 'arcane theoretical research' done at the universities and other research institutes. The distinction between 'theoretical' and 'applied' research seems to be the defining feature for NIRD. One could sense certain inflation in the meaning of fieldwork or fieldwork-based research. We hardly came across any scholar-practitioner who did not regard herself/himself as a fieldworker. For our scholar-practitioners, even a day's visit to a village is adequate to call themselves fieldworkers! This is indeed very different from Malinowski's exposition of fieldwork. No student of social anthropology would fail to notice this emptying of the content of fieldwork.

At the NIRD, scholar-practitioners seem to share a strong belief in the efficacy of technical solutions to the problems of rural development. As far as the politics of rural development is concerned, given an opportunity, they would wish it away. Moreover, they seem to have a conviction that any enterprise of rural development calls for appropriately trained humanpower. In this sense, they share a distinctively professional 'top-down' approach towards rural development, despite their proclamations to the contrary. Although the NIRD never gets tired of talking about popular participation and decentralised development, it thinks its training programmes to be crucial for rural development.

In the ultimate analysis, the NIRD seems to have failed to create an 'epistemic community' of rural development professionals. Sure enough, the NIRD is only partly to be blamed for this failure, as rural development itself has been a promiscuous area of disciplinary specialisation. There have been too many stakeholders in the field of rural development to enable the NIRD to be a leader in the epistemological sense of the term. One does not know whether this failure is linked to its embeddedness in the direct regulatory framework of state.

Notes

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1. This paper is based on a chapter from my doctoral thesis in sociology submitted to Goa University.
2. Knowledge institutions refer to organisations 'usefully engaged in acquiring, creating, imparting and applying knowledge to address pressing needs of the society; and its value is determined by the quality and scale of its contribution in addressing social needs' (Shah 2000: 31).
3. This quotation of Nehru has been used as an epigraph in the first Annual Report of the Central Institute of Study and Research in Community Development (CISRCD) (1958-59).
4. Though the first Annual Report was published under the name of the CISRCD, in this paper we have put all the annual reports under the rubric of NIRD. Also, in the bibliography, there is a single entry under 'NIRD' covering all the annual reports published from 1958-59 to 2002-03.
5. To protect the privacy of the scholar-practitioners, all the names used in this paper are pseudonyms. Any resemblance to the real persons is merely incidental.

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