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Title

**EDUCATION MANAGEMENT FOR ADVANCING
RURAL INDIA**

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Abstract:

The paper reviews the state of education management for Advancing Rural India. Using the setting up of some specialized Institutes of Rural Management Education as a pivot, the paper examines the difficulties in establishing specialized management schools, the design of the curriculum and the management of the expectations of both the students who come in and the recruiters. It then identifies the problems in running rural management programmes particularly the dilemma between explicit value orientation towards the betterment of the poor and the value neutral optimization approach of conventional management education.

The paper then examines the paradigm shift that has happened in the marketplace for rural managers, and concludes with some further questions on how the future of rural management education can be addressed. If we want to be a developed country, we have to look deeper into the strategic approach of education advancement in rural area also.

Keywords: Rural Graduates, Job Opportunities in Rural Market, Rural Education Phenomenon, Specialized Management School, Optimized Educational Approach & Advancement of Rural based Education.

Introduction: Background of Education Management:

As we look back at the institutions offering academic inputs in the rural space, we find that there are several programmes that address the needs of development. The pioneering of them all is the Tata Institute of Social Sciences [TISS] which has had a programme on social work and has sent several committed students to the field. Several universities have had social work as a part of the Masters programme. Most of these programmes provided the students with skills that were “developmental” in nature. These programmes were oriented more towards the social sciences. While they had their own intrinsic merits, most of these disregarded markets. The programmes were oriented towards addressing the failure of the state in delivering development programmes and helped create newer and more effective alternatives of addressing the issues of poverty and social deprivations.

There was another aspect for which formal education was not available for a long time. This pertained to the issue of market failures. The developmental interventions led by NGOs were powerful, but what drove such programmes? The answer, possibly, was to be found in the internal commitment of the people working in the field. We could see that, three decades ago, we had a large number of institutions that were emerging in response to market failures. Co-operatives addressed market failures in an effective and commercially viable manner. However co-operatives were complex organizations. Such organizations needed people with special skills and could understand the world of commerce. There was a cleavage between the type of management graduates the country was producing and the needs of the sector addressing market failures.

It was at this time that education in rural management as a formal discipline was thought about. The Institute of Rural Management [IRMA] that was set up in 1979 was a pioneering effort in this direction. When IRMA was set up, there were a handful of institutions of repute offering any type of management education. Academic institutions help shape the attitudes and behaviour of business leaders through business education, research, management development programs, training, and other pervasive, but less tangible, activities, such as the spread and advocacy of new values and ideas. Through these means, academic institutions have the potential to generate a wave of positive change, thereby helping to ensure a world where both enterprises and societies can flourish.

Optimisation versus Value: The Core Design:

If we reflect on the difference between mainstream business schools and rural management, the distinguishing feature is in the field orientation. A rural management graduate would have stayed in a village for anywhere between 4-12 weeks. This stay is not undertaken as a tourist and is well structured. The dilemma of rural management education is between explicit value orientation towards the betterment of the poor and the value neutral optimization approach of conventional management education. While the class room segment actually takes the optimization approach, the field segment actually sets the context for value orientation.

We have to remember that the field component is undertaken by adults, keen to apply the formal knowledge of management for solving problems. As the class curriculum reinforces the big picture, it is expected that a larger perspective would be developed, even if the problems identified in the villages and organizations are local.

Another aspect that provided legitimacy to rural management education was placements. When rural management started in early 80s a job for a graduate or even a post graduate was difficult. The mainstream management programmes really did not worry too much about where the graduates were placed. Institutes that offered rural management went to great lengths to ensure that most of its graduates worked in the rural “sector”. This was instrumental in establishing the identity of rural management in the market. This identity was distinct from the others who came from other disciplines and in several places seen with awe or disdain. .Nevertheless, it was clear that the rural management graduates were different when they went to rural areas, and they were even different when they went to commercial institutions that use mainstream management graduates.

Market Growth for the Rural Management Graduates

Here, I bring in another aspect that provided a boost to professionalizing rural management education. This was partially achieved by PRADAN [Professional Assistance for Development Action]. The PRADAN idea was to be a base unit for professionals to try a career in development. It was promoted by a group of likeminded professionals wanting to make a difference in diverse sectors, and at the same time have a platform to share their ideas, frustrations and joy. A large number of rural management graduates were able to continue working in the development sector, thanks to the back up support that was given by PRADAN. The contribution of PRADAN in fusing people of diverse backgrounds and retaining them within the development cannot be under-estimated. The relevance of the starting of formal education in rural management should be seen in the perspective of the other happenings in the rural sector then.

The fact that it took quite some time before more institutions started offering rural management education is an indication that there was no natural market for rural management graduates. This had to be created. Therefore running a rural management programme was seen more as an

obligation than as a mechanism for generating revenues to the educational institutions such as IIMs.

Problems in running Rural Management Programmes:

Today we have several institutions offering rural management education. As we can see, apart from some institutions like Tata Dhan Academy, VAMNICOM, MANAGE and IIRM which have a focus on rural management, in most other places it is offered in addition to an existing mainstream programme, or as a specialization stream along with business management programmes. There are some problems with this design. While it is possible to leverage on the mainstream management faculty to teach the programmes, invariably the rural management programmes are treated as poor cousins of the main programmes and do not get the strategic attention that they deserve. It is also difficult to filter out students who might be genuinely interested in taking up rural management as a career. Thus one is always operating in a market where one is not sure if the graduate is actually oriented to serve the segment s/he is meant for or whether there would be a leakage.

When IRMA was set up, Dr. Kurien had indicated that he would be happy even if 5% of the graduates actually worked with cooperatives and NGOs. The strike rate of the institutes like IRMA and IIFM has generally been much more than that number, but still there is disappointment. The dilemma is whether an institution offering such specialized programmes should be bothered about the type of placements that the graduates take up or just focus on delivering a good education and leave the rest to the market forces. This dilemma is not easy to overcome.

Another issue that faces these institutes is the level and the range of electives that could be offered to the students. Most often this gets dictated by employability of the graduates and the interests of the faculty members. Faculty representing management disciplines find the environment in these institutes restrictive and tend to leave for mainstream assignments. Thus the bouquet of electives to be offered in such institutes is always a mixed bag with a lot of mismatch between the expectations of the students, the aspirations of the faculty and the ability that bridges these.

The main issues from the above problems are as follows:

- Inappropriate design of rural management programme, not offered as a separate stream.
- Dilemma is still there in the mind of the students that whether to take rural management education as a career for their final placements.
- Faculty is also unable to focus on rural management studies due to restriction of main stream environment.

Is there a Market for Rural Management Graduates?

This is an important question to be answered, and the answer seems to be yes. However, we need to extend this question further to find out where the current rural management graduates are being employed. We find the newer graduates in banks, food businesses, agri-businesses, insurance companies and retail chains. Demand for these graduates seems to exist. Two most important segments are opening up for rural management graduates - the **agri-business sector**, and **private sector banking**.

The agri-business sector has two sub-elements to it –

- Being sourcing of materials from the rural areas
- Selling to them.

With the entry of players like Big Bazaar, Reliance, Bharti and Subhiksha, there was a demand for managers who possibly understood the food business better. It is also important to note that around this time the graduates of mainstream management institutions had reduced their engagement with these businesses as they migrated to the overseas placement market opening up. From the 80s when glamorous B-School jobs were in FMCG or advertising, we moved to a situation where marketing as a function itself was not glamorous enough for mainstream graduates.

The current movement is towards financial service businesses – particularly investment banks. Rural Management graduates started filling up the gap that was being left by mainstream business schools. As retail chains have a strong linkage with the foods business, rural management graduates naturally seemed to fit the bill. Let us now examine the growth of financial services [banking, insurance and microfinance] and see what it did to the rural manager. The growth of opportunities in rural banking is to be seen with a mixed perspective.

Background of Rural Market in India:

The Indian economic growth story is now spreading itself to India's rural areas. The rural consumer market, which grew 25 per cent in 2008, is expected to reach US\$ 425 billion in 2010-11 with 720-790 million customers. The demand for personal care products grew faster in rural areas than urban areas during the period January-May 2010 (Nielsen). Several Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) companies such as Godrej Consumer Products, Dabur, Marico and Hindustan Unilever (HUL) have increased their hiring in rural India and small towns in order to establish a local connect and increase visibility. The rural retail market is currently estimated at US\$ 112 billion, or around 40 per cent of the US\$ 280 billion Indian retail market. Several automobile companies are coming up in rural markets with new innovative strategies to tap the huge rural market. The Indian rural Healthcare market is expected to expand at a pace of 44% by 2015, totalling its worth to USD 8.8 bn. The Indian rural Telecommunication Industry is expected to account for more than 65% of the entire telecom subscribers in India. Giving the state of rural market and aim for 10% growth rate, there will be an increase in demand for professionals who understand rural needs and can manage the affairs of rural marketing. The demand for professionally trained Rural Marketing Managers comes mainly from corporate sector and development organizations. No consumer goods company today affords to forget that the rural market is a very big part of the Indian consumer market.

Opportunities Knocking

With a rural management degree in your kitty, you can work in NGOs, co-operatives, banks (NABARD, ICICI, UTI), insurance companies (ICICI LOMBARD, LIC), retail giants (Future Group, Reliance Retail, Godrej Agrovat, Bharti, RPG), join MNCs or rural consultancies (ITC e-choupal; The SCS group; Grossman & Associates). You can also join research agencies, which include the UN and its subsidiaries.

List of NGOs that hire rural management graduates include Action for Food production (AFPRO); Association for Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development (AVARD); Aga Khan Rural Support programme (AKRSP); BAIF; CHIRAG; Development Alternatives and Ecotech Services (ETS). (Indicative Listing)

The Dilemma of Rural Management Education

The role of any educational programme is to provide education and not to act as a placement agency. However, every school engaged in management education keeps in touch with markets. The challenge before institutions is to manage the delicate balance between making the programme attractive enough so that good, bright candidates apply, and at the same time live with the convictions and the basic mission for which they were set up.

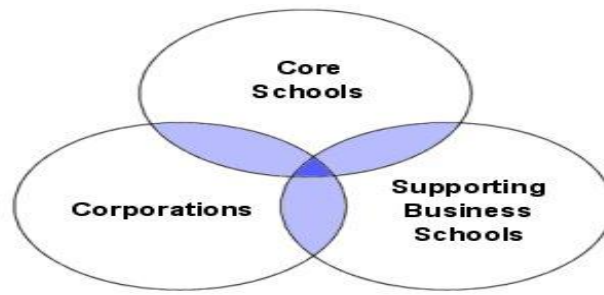


Figure: Connection of Business Schools with the Placements.

In an open market situation this is increasingly difficult. Several institutions might be in the comfort zone that the placements with the commercial, service and the donor sector are doing well and think there is no reason to panic. This itself may be a cause for worry. After all, as we get more and more globalised and integrate into the market system, the marginalized will be left behind, because they do not fall into the efficiencies of economies of scale. Therefore it is essential that this segment of the market gets rational well reasoned and sometimes value neutral manpower.

During the early days of rural management education, the question that was constantly asked was how much of it is “Rural” and how much “management”. This was a happy dilemma. Rural management is well understood. But the dilemma has moved to the markets. What would dictate the curriculum in such institutes? When I talk about curriculum I am not only talking about what they deliver in the class rooms, but go beyond to see what we deliver through our choice of organizations and settings. It is here that a possible intervention could be made. The ultimate placement is a prerogative of the graduate and the organisation that is placing him or her.

Suggestions:-

A good education programme is not about placing students. It is about providing the best education and trust the judgment of the graduates in the type of jobs they pick up. The institutes are dealing with adults who have taken a call to study rural management. They can take a call on how their careers will get shaped. Therefore any rural management programme should focus on the content. However, we cannot ignore the reality of the market place. Ultimately all the students come to the institutes in quest of education not as an end, but as a means towards a job of their choice. The Institutions should realise the need of today scenario and the need of students also in desirable rural sector. Main focus of rural management institutes should be based upon practical work approach in field for rural advancement.

The split between rural management and development studies is more evident than ever. In rural management, it is evident that the slant is more towards commerce and not as an effective intervention mechanism that stabilizes and corrects the imperfections of the market. We possibly have no answers for these issues now. However it is worth asking questions of ourselves so that we have some direction in which we intend to move.

Conclusion:-

If today, we were to re-look at the choices ahead of a graduate, we find that s/he deals with a diverse set of pulls and pressures. S/he may be willing to be convinced to move away from mainstream business management towards rural management. But having paid a substantial fee – s/he would be under pressure to take up an assignment that will pay enough to lead a decent life as well as service the fee. The graduates possibly do not have the luxury of experimentation, checking options and making an informed choice.

I think the rural management institutions may have to relook at the design of their programmes keeping in view both the aspirations of the students, and the reality of market place. It is fair to assume that there are a good number of capable people willing to make the adjustments to make such career choices. Can institutes channelize these aspirations constructively? If so, how do we recognize and nurture them? How do we ensure that these national assets do not get frittered

away? How do we ensure a public accountability to these institutions though legally they might not be bound to be accountable? We possibly need to engage with these questions even more.

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