

Rural planning: comparing India and Canada

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Rural communities help fuel economies of many countries and in some cases the national character. Most importantly, they carry the weight of feeding the world. But their issues and challenges do not get the attention they deserve. Rural economies, large and small, all over the world are dealing with the same issues – pressures of urbanization, international trade, environmental stress, and out-migration.

This study compares rural areas in two countries, one is developing and the other is developed, namely, India and Canada, respectively. The Canadian focus is on one province i.e. Alberta as the situation varies considerably from province to province.

Despite varying levels of urbanization, rural communities remain critical to the economic, social and environmental fabric of both countries. Interesting sets of similarities and differences that we find can help us understand the rural communities better and potentially derive some helpful lessons and policy solutions.

One important common thread between the two countries is a strong governance system in their respective rural areas. India's 74th Constitutional Amendment created a *Panchayat Raj* system, which is a strong system of governance in which *gram panchayats* (village councils) are the basic unit of local administration. Canada's rural governance has two tier system of local government: one is upper tier regional government which consists of several municipalities including rural areas in between, grouped together under a single regional administrative and political structure. The other is rural local government that is responsible for physical and social services, housing, taxation and other local economic development. The most common form of rural municipality in the province of Alberta is a municipal district, also known as counties in other parts of Canada.

Rural areas in both countries are facing an increasing threat of loss of farmland to non-agricultural use. Both countries offer tremendous amount of agricultural

subsidies and social and employment schemes to give farmers an edge and to cope with natural and other forms of adversities. Both countries have a serious problem of migration out of their rural areas. Lastly, economies of both rural areas are changing and are changing rapidly.

Concomitantly, there are some stark differences between rural India and rural Canada. While Canadian rural areas have aging and declining population, India's youngest population lives in rural area, in some parts where densities exceed urban density threshold, labelled as *ruralopolises* (Qadeer, 2000, 2004) and *Urural* (Agrawal, forthcoming). These are the same areas which suffer from abject poverty (according to Reserve bank of India, about 26% live below poverty line, almost double than that of urban area).

Canada's rural areas is relatively affluent (albeit less than urban areas according to Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2011) and has seen strong employment growth, particularly in Alberta. Average farm size in India is about 2 acre while this average in Canada is about 400 times than that of India i.e. 778 acres. In Alberta, the farm size is much larger, about 1166 acres. Many farmers in India have less than an acre of land, just enough for subsistence farming, while many others work as landless agricultural labourer. In recent years, many controversial special enterprise zones have consumed large tracts of predominantly agricultural and typically multi-cropped land in India.

Rural areas in India lack even basic infrastructure like water, sewage and drainage or services such as access to a doctor or nurse, higher education and training facilities. Rural Canada faces similar challenges but perhaps not the levels we see in India. Canadian rural areas, especially in Alberta, have witnessed the introduction of incompatible land uses like mobile homes, new country-style homes, small airports, pipelines and extraction of natural resources like mining, gravel quarries and so on.

This presentation will focus on the aforementioned comparisons including demographics, land use changes, rural amenities, migration and climate change.

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