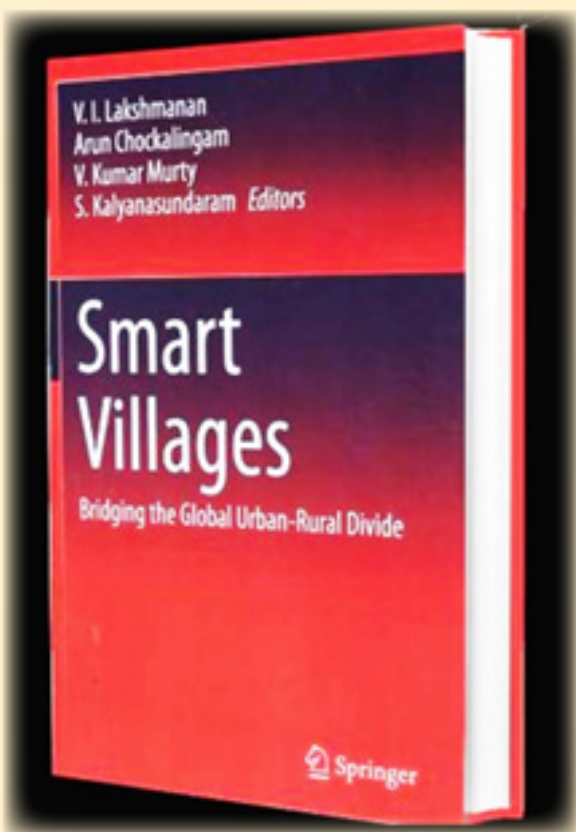


BRIDGING THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE - WITH TECHNOLOGY

Anand Parthasarathy



IN the 31 August 1947 issue of *Harijan*, the weekly journal he edited, Mahatma Gandhi wrote: “It is in the villages of India, that India lives”. That sentiment underpins every chapter of this book that serves as a wake-up call for planners and administrators, reminding them that no plan that envisages the technology-driven upliftment of India’s people is complete, that does not have her 6.5 lakh villages in the epicentre of its thinking.

This reminder is particularly relevant in an environment where ‘Smart City’ has become a strident new mantra, with states encouraged to compete for central funding; where

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annual rankings push competing cities to ask: “Mirror, mirror on the wall, which is the smartest city of them all?”

The joint editors of this book are Indian academics and technocrats who happen to be living and working in Canada – and are driven by a common passion for a concept first mooted by India’s technocrat-President, the late Dr APJ Abdul Kalam: PURA, short for ‘Providing Urban Amenities to Rural Areas’.

In evangelising PURA during and after his Presidential tenure, Dr Kalam won adherents all over the world, most notably in Canada and parts of sub-Saharan Africa. In India, the government has embraced aspects of PURA and subsumed it in national schemes like the Syama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission (SPMRM) which was launched by the Prime Minister in 2016. The coinage, ‘Rurban’, crystallises the idea – morphing urban facilities into rural locales.

The book is a well-structured collection of some 30-plus chapters, written by the four editors – and an international panel of invitees who have had rich planning and implementation experience in rural development. It is divided into three sections, the first defines the task and ensures that technology never drowns local culture and tradition; the second builds a framework for ‘smartening’ villages: skill development, financing, socio-economic factors...the last and arguably the most valuable reading is a collection of case studies – Indian and International, where PURA principles have been put into practice.

Kamai, davai, padhai

In Kalam’s vision, 6 lakh villages could be served by some 6000-7000 PURA clusters, providing four types of connectivity – physical, electronic, knowledge and economic. But unlike urban Smart Cities, this does not involve mega infrastructure projects like mass transportation, but rather leverages local resources and promotes healthcare, employment and equity. This was succinctly summarised by ‘Mentor on Road’, an initiative for US-based persons of Indian Origin to adopt an Indian village and transform it into a smart village in 1000



days. The mission was accomplished when the village became one that delivered *kamai* (earning), *davai* (health) and *padhai* (education) to its residents.

An advanced nation like Canada, too, has pockets of disparity, centred around its indigenous population – the book highlights how PURA played out to success in two small towns – Sioux Lookout in North-East Ontario and Cochrane in North-East Ontario, the latter a renowned Polar bear habitat.

In Africa, Botswana and Mauritius have been notably successful in bootstrapping their economies by a sharp focus on their rural reaches. In Botswana, the rich resource was diamonds, in Mauritius it was sugarcane.

Indian case studies

A significant portion of the book highlights Indian case studies, and these include a sort of reverse osmosis of PURA: a joint initiative of Eureka Forbes and a Canadian partner, Process Research Ortech, to treat surface water from the Mahanadi river in Orissa, to provide safe drinking water to Kanitlo village in Nayagarg district, harnessing solar and biomass energy sources.

While lauding government initiatives like Ayushman Bharat and PM Jana Arogya Yojana, the book highlights individual excellence in outreaches like the Centre for Sustainable Development, Health and Wellness in SAS Nagar Punjab. Dr V. Ponraj, who served as President Kalam's Director for Technology Interfaces, recalls a telemedicine project in Thonugal village near Madurai, Tamil Nadu, centred around a mobile diagnostic clinic, that Kalam had the satisfaction of inaugurating in person.

The Sona educational group in Salem and Vee Technologies Bangalore together with their charitable foundations have been working for decades to uplift dozens of villages around Salem. Taking learnings from the M.S. Swaminathan Foundation, Hewlett Packard's iCommunity, the e-government initiative Gyandoot and the IIT Bombay-driven n-Logue rural communications project, started with Kandarkulamanickam village as its base and worked

to create smart village clusters in spreading circles. The main thrust was on women empowerment – and a chapter by Chocko Valliappa and Nirmallesh Kumar provides rich details of what they offered to women: a vegetable dehydrating plant for local produce, recycling solid waste to produce paper products, turning slag from a local steel mill into paver blocks, used to top up roads, as well as trades harnessing local skills like artisanal silver work.

Smart village for the differently-abled

For this reviewer, the most moving chapter was the one authored by a trio from Toronto — Dinesh Krishna, Sulo Krishnamurthy and S. Kalyanasundaram, where they describe a unique smart village for the differently-abled, and the organisation that made it possible, Amar Seva Sangam (ASSA) based in Ayikodi, Tamil Nadu. For four decades, starting in 1981, the first International Year of the Disabled, ASSA has enlarged the scope of what makes for a smart city, always with a focus on the physically challenged: from special schools with accessibility tools like ramps, grab bars and special toilets; a daycare centre for children with mental challenges, an ASSA IT Centre, for wheelchair-bound and other physically challenged students.

In an important wrap-up, Arun Chockalingam assesses the implications of the COVID pandemic and the psychosocial issues it has triggered; how rural dwellers are being affected; how governance is being addressed by different countries...it is an important and sensitive coda to a volume rich in resources and motivation, in concept and example, for all those who believe with Gandhiji – and Kalam – that we prosper only if our villages prosper; that we are only as smart as the last village in India.

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