CHAPTER- VI

PEASANTRY AND STRATIFICATION IN RUSSIA: EMERGING TRENDS

The hand of Adam Smith, which has already clutched the Russian peasant by his throat, will soon squeeze the life out of him.1

The structural changes experienced by the post-Soviet Russian society radically altered its internal class and political economic relations. The fundamental intention of the advocates of new neo-liberal policy packages was to destroy all the remnants of the Soviet past and to create a new class of private property owners to lay the foundations for the liberal market economy in Russia. The new ruling elite who emerged out of the former Soviet party-bureaucratic apparatus along with the active economic as well as the ideological supports of the advanced capitalist states acted as the facilitators and guardians of the new market regime in Russia. Agrarian reform measures initiated by the new ruling class in Russia intended to provide a radical shift from the Soviet-era agrarian institutions and social organisations to a fully market-based private property regime in the rural Russia. Around thirty percent of the Russian population are rural dwellers and within this population majority of them were attached to the collective and state farms in the Soviet era. As discussed elsewhere, throughout the soviet period, private property in land was legally banned. Although the Soviet regime permitted small household plots of land to the rural and urban dwellers, ownership rights were never handed over to the cultivators of the land. The radical agrarian reforms initiated by the new Russian state with direct assistance from World Bank experts was intended to reverse the changes that took place in the Russian countryside in the Soviet period. There exists a large volume of critical literature which analyses the immediate effects of the agrarian reform in the otherwise egalitarian social relations in the countryside.

---

1 The disastrous changes brought about by the neo-liberal agrarian transition in Russia and the way in which it had resulted in the direct marginalisation of vast masses of the peasant producers with explicit from this statement made by an unnamed member of Russia's council of the federation (cited in Loffe 2005).
The basic intention of the present chapter is to map the social changes taking place in the Russian countryside after the introduction of the neo-liberal reforms and how it contributed to the increasing social differentiation and marginalisation in the rural areas. It also tries to contextualise the changes in the life systems of the agrarian population by reviewing the role of agrarian social institutions in the day-to-day life of rural dwellers. Contrary to the presumption of the advocators of the neo-liberal market discipline in the country, collective agriculture produced a specific form of social relation in the countryside and not providing an alternative mechanism to replace the social functions it carried out in the rural areas had severe implication in the rural areas. The entire activities of the rural population were in one way or the other linked to the rural institutions of the Soviet period. It was not merely an arrangement of the agricultural production organisation, but it manifested over nearly six decades of its existence to a spinal cord of the life of the Russian villages.

The sudden withdrawal of state assistance to the collective and state farms along with the demise of the network of supportive institutions led to a massive internal crisis. As a result of the new policy changes, most of the farms were brought to a pattern re-organisation in accordance with the neo-liberal reforms. In such a context, the chapter focuses on how the reform measures affected the agrarian class formations, especially the process of the internal differentiation in the Russian villages. The developments accelerated multiple changes in the countryside. Most of these developments, contrary to the intention of the reform advocates, brought forth a scenario which the agrarian population had never encountered or experienced since the collectivisation of the Soviet agriculture in the early 1930s. One of the distinctive characteristics of the Soviet agrarian regime was that it provided a space for the process of intra-class and inter-class social mobility throughout the Soviet period. This fact is explicitly clear from the percentage changes in the rural population, from roughly seventy five percent or more in

---

2 In fact this does not mean that all these literatures share common theoretical or methodological frameworks, rather, they reach in more or less similar conclusions from divergent perspectives and hypothesis that the structural characteristics such as the kind of social organisations prevailed in the Russian countryside along with the inherent limitations of the neo-liberal policy restricted the spontaneous development and transition to rural capitalism as the propagators of the neo-liberal reform policy expected.
the eve of the Bolshevik\textsuperscript{3} takeover to the twenty five percent or slightly even less on the
eve of the disintegration of the Soviet system. In such a conjuncture, the present chapter
attempts to examine the socio-economic changes taking place in the countryside and
how it manifested in the socio-economic and cultural lives of the rural population.

Nature and Characteristics of the De-Collectivisation Reforms in the Rural Areas

The fundamental intention of the new reform measures initiated by the post-Soviet
regime in Russia was to restructure and to privatise the agrarian production
arrangements existing in the Soviet period. In tune with the general privatisation
measures implemented by the Russian state in other sectors of the economy, the major
feature of agrarian reform was to hand over the ownership right of the collective and
state farms to the employees and workers of the concerned farms. In the absence of the
private property in land in the Soviet period, the neo-liberal practitioners presumed that
providing ownership rights to the rural population attached to the collective farms would
build a social foundation for the agrarian bourgeoisie in the countryside. Accordingly,
the Russian state massively withdrew the diverse forms of assistance provided to the
collective farms. The nature of relationships existing between the members of the
collective and state farms and their management were formalised in such a way that all
social requirements of farm members were fulfilled by the farms concerned. Collective
farms were also formally linked to the large network of agro-industrial complexes that
were situated in proximity to the collective farms. The attachment to the farms
necessarily provided free access to the educational and health facilities to the rural
population. Due to this, when reform processes were initiated in the collective farms, a
majority of the rural population refrained from the new opportunities provided by the
new policy to split away from the farms. As discussed in the previous chapter, a wide
range of policy measures were initiated by the Russian state to restructure collective
farms. This provided the members of the collective farms and other interested
population a set of options to participate in the privatisation programmes\textsuperscript{4} (Medvedev

\textsuperscript{3} On the eve of the First World War, according to the data provided by the contemporary review published
from Oxford University, around seventy five percentage of the Russian population were agrarian dwellers
and Tsarist Russia was considered as one of the most peasant-dominated societies in the world.

\textsuperscript{4} The most common form of privatisation measure was to sell vouchers to the interested citizens.
Agencies responsible for the privatisation policies issued vouchers carrying a wide range of values to the
Russian citizens. Most of the literatures on the privatisation programme implemented in Russia reveal that
despite the claims of the fair treatments practised by the reform agencies, in most of the cases, the former
party elites and former elite in the Soviet bureaucratic hierarchy along with the leading elites in the new
political dispensation personally attained a large quantity of vouchers and brought most of the large
industries and other such concerns for very low prices. See for details Gowan (1992).
2001; Kagarlitsky 1993; Clarke 1996; Chenoy 1998). Despite the restructuring of the collective farm on market lines, its primacy hardly diminished in the rural areas. On the continuing importance of the collective farms, one critical observer commented, “the collectivised farm was not expected to survive market reforms. In the absence of government subsidies, and with their land base accessible to the employees who also had the freedom of labour allocation, the collective farms were supposed to collapse, giving way to family farms. This speculation failed to recognise the embeddedness of the collective farm in the social system. State subsidies were not the only factor in the re-production of the collectives, it also benefited from the structure of the existing infrastructure, its role as the primary rural employer, and co-dependence on the home gardens of its employees. With state supports removed, the importance of these other factors became obvious. It was not a simple thing to sweep away the 70 years of Soviet institutional development and replace it with market capitalism” (Small 2007: 45).

Even though for the first time in country’s recent memory, the rural population was given the voluntary choice to decide on what form of socio-economic relations they wished to uphold. Contrary to the expectations of the neo-liberal advocates, in the rural areas, majority of the agrarian dwellers expressed their interest in continuing to be attached to the collective farms. Most of the rural dwellers continued to remain in the collective farms that provided the minimum security from the clutches of absolute poverty in the time of acute socio-economic collapse of the Russian society. In most of the cases, the house hold consumption requirements of the rural population were attained from the small house hold works in the collective farms to attain sums of hard currency necessary for the solo-economic existence. Normally, the rural population engaged in diverse forms of informal activities to escape from the socio-economic marginalisation generally experienced by the majority of the Russian population after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In the absence of any local institutions to support the individual farming, the complete break-up of the collective farms was suicidal for the majority of the rural population. Apart from working in the collective farms, the access to farms provided the rural population the possibility of utilising the large farm fields to the fodder and other requirements of the animals in the household. Some scholars reveal that in contemporary times, the number of domesticated animals possessed one of the major criteria to determine the extent of stratification in the society (Wegren et al. 1994). The extensive field studies carried out by the above authors
demonstrate that households with a number of domesticated animals have the chance of being relatively better-off than the household possessing hardly any animals. Likewise, a large number of the agrarian dwellers are engaged in traditional handicraft production as extra activities to sustain the living standard they acquired in the Soviet period.

Apart from the radical agrarian changes initiated by the Russian state, the neo-liberal development strategy also brought forward a new form and imagination to the Russian population in general and the agrarian dwellers in particular. In many respects, the alternative modernity constructed in the rural areas by the Soviet state in response to the capitalist modernity allowed the penetration of the capitalist relations of productions and its corresponding intuitional hierarchies. The collectivisation of the Soviet agriculture through the creation of collective and the state farms was initially considered as a critical challenge to the capitalist civilisation. However, the way in which it emerged in the turbulent 1930s and its concrete manifestation over the years reveal that it hardly provided a meaningful alternative to the capitalist form of agrarian production.

Due to the common intellectual origin, the capitalist modernity and its alternative socialist modernity treated industrialisation and the urbanisation of the rural areas as reliable options to move away from the traditional ways of life and imagination. Agrarian spaces were constructed in such a way that the new generation of youth would move away from the traditional minds set and grow up with a new form of imagination based on the rational and efficient organisation of human labour and the land. Although the Soviet state negated all forms of private ownership in land, the way in which agrarian industrialisation was projected demonstrate that the moving away from the socio-cultural practices of past was perceived as the primary requirement of the socialist modernisation process. Having said this, one cannot neglect the fact that due to the socialisation of the means of production and the absence of private property in contrast to the capitalist mode of production, accumulating profit by extracting surplus from the workers was never the motivating force of the Soviet system. However, the neo-liberal agrarian reforms visualised a new form of rural imaginary by which the fragments self-oriented rational individual producer is considered as an icon in the era of capitalistic transition. In such a context, the forthcoming section focuses on the changes taking place in the land relations after the initiation of the agrarian reforms.
One of the fundamental premises of the neo-liberal reform was to bring about radical changes in the land relations and thereby a sudden break in agrarian power relations by creating a new ownership regime in the countryside. In consonance with this assumption, the reform policies intended to eradicate the remnants of the Soviet structures and practices in the countryside by dismantling the collectivised farms. In order to materialise that goal, the disbanding of the collective farm was considered as the basic pre-requisite. Land reforms in the post-Soviet context were intended to serve three main goals: to create the legal foundations to ensure private property rights; to accelerate the process of land privatisation and distribution of land from the state to individuals; and to speed up the process of developing a land market for facilitating the transfer of land to the most efficient and productive users and that might ultimately lead to an increase in productivity (Wegren 2003). In October 1993, a presidential decree legalised the buying and selling of agricultural land facilitating the development of a rudimentary land market. This decree regulated rural land transactions until July 2002 when a law on agricultural land turnover was passed and signed which came into force from January 2003 (Wegren 2002, 2003). This legislation contributed to the formation of the rural land market. The 1993 decree and subsequent legislation in 2003 permitted the citizens to buy, sell, lease, bequeath or inherit agricultural land and agricultural land shares. After the introduction of the new policies, several million of land was transformed in the rural areas.

The dominant pattern of changes in land relations in the initial years were the leasing of land from the local municipal authorities. There emerged two forms of rural land markets: namely, municipal market and private market. According to Wegren, the municipal market involves either leasing or purchasing land from raion or municipal administrations which possess land funds for sale or lease. These raion-level land farms were established during the early phase of the reform, when large state and collective farms were required to designate back to the local government a certain portion of their land through lease, but it was possible to purchase then as well. The 2002 law on the turnover of agricultural land gives the local governments the right of first refusal to purchase privately owned land (Wegren 2003). The private land market mainly refers to the land sale taking place between individuals. On average, 20,000 land purchases took place in the rural and urban areas between 1998 to 2002.
In the meantime, private land market emerged as the second most common land market. The land transactions which took place in the last one decade show a qualitative rise in land purchases every passing year compared to the previous year. Land transaction taking place between individuals in various regions of the country reveal that irrespective of low income status of the rural population in relation to the urban dwellers. In 2000, the total land transitions reached around 42 percent of the total transaction in Russia which outnumbered the transactions which took place in the urban areas in the same period. With regard to private land transactions between individuals, the new policy provided an opportunity for the members of collective farms (managers, farm specialist and the workers) the legal right to the land of the collective farms in which they were incorporated. The restructuring of the collective farms was designed in such a way that the all forms of vertical and horizontal linkage existing between the farms were disbanded. It provided opportunities for different stake holders in the farm to claim their share of land from the farm and the reform policies permitted the concerned worker or other officials in the farm to transfer the land rights to the persons they wished. The concrete manifestations of the reform programmes practised in the rural areas reveal that in most cases, large numbers of manual workers were reluctant to split away from the parental farm to which they were attached. It also demonstrates that on many other occasions, workers and other officials rather than splitting away from the collective farms were prepared to lease back to the farm with the intention that they could remain with the collective farms. Due to the effective local institutional arrangements to monitor the reform measures implemented in the countryside, in many places the farm managers capitalised on the deficiencies of the programmes and accumulated a tract of productive fertile land. A large chunk of literature on the agrarian reform reveals that in many regions, farm managers handed-over the worst non-fertile barren land in remote areas to the workers who were interested in splitting away from the farms (Wegren 1998, 2004). Russian land statistics classify farms into three types: the agricultural enterprises, better known as Agro-Industrial Complexes (AIC) that are the former collective and state farms, land utilised by the citizens and private farms. Land utilised by the citizens is again subsided into household farms, collective and individual gardens and collective and individual kitchen gardens (Chandra 2002).

Private farms came into existence in the Russian countryside in the late Soviet period, but acquired momentum in the post-1991 periods by influencing the pattern of
land distribution. While the overall area contracted by 13 million hectares (mha), or over 6 percent during 1992-1999, land with the AIC fell by 18 mha, or over 10 percent. On the contrary, the ISP and PF expanded by 3.4 and 7.0 mha respectively over the same period, and the corresponding percentage shares in the total land rose by 2.0 and 4.0 respectively (Ibid). Reform programmes enormously benefitted a narrow section of the rural population due to the capacity to manipulate the process in favour of their emerging class interests. In the rural areas, many field studies conducted by the Wegren et al. demonstrate that those having higher income in the countryside also have large land holdings. However, the numerical strength of this group is very small (Wegren et al. 2004). Their survey findings also show that in the Russian countryside, majority of the population have land which range from 0.6 hectares to 1.0 hectares. This is, according to these scholars, due to the financial and demographic constrains imposed by the reform process. Most of the people with small holdings of land were either the retired employees or unemployed youth whose number substantially increased in the post-Soviet period. The poorest sections of the agrarian dwellers are reluctant to acquire more land for personal cultivation and they rather prefer to acquire more livestock for day-to-day survival. On the contrary, the emerging rich in the rural areas attempt to acquire more land for the expansion of their farm activities.

One of the major conclusions drawn from the above observation is that in the post-Soviet countryside, the vast majority of the population was engaged in multiple ways to sustain the social status acquired in the past to prevent absolute poverty re-emerging in the transitional period. Due to this fact, they prefer more livestock and other small scale business activities to neutralise the effects of the above process. For them, holding land for cultivation requires necessary capital and other resources which are highly unevenly distributed in the post Soviet rural space. It is also necessitated by the absence of the local financial institutions such as banks and other non-banking financial intermediaries to provide the necessary monetary assistance to the needy population. According to Stephen Wegren, one of the leading contributors of the post-Soviet agrarian transformation, one of the achievements of the de-collectivisation in Russia, in spite of its several havoc effects on the rural population, was the elimination of the state monopoly in ownership of agricultural land which laid the foundations for a land market to emerge (Wegren 2003). The topography of the Russian land space itself imposes many constraints on individual farming. To overcome this, requires multiple levels of supportive mechanisms in the rural areas. Except the black earth regions of the
European Russia and the steppe meadows in central Russia, the majority of the cultivatable land in Russia is average or below average in terms of fertility of the soil and the climatic conditions.

**Impact of Agrarian Reforms on Agricultural Production**

Reform measures introduced in the agrarian scene had a profound influence on the pattern of agricultural production prevailing in the Soviet period. It not only resulted in the massive decline in the quantity of agricultural commodities produced in the country, but also contributed to the decline in the agriculture contribution to the GDP in the country. Almost all crops produced in the country have undergone massive decline in production in the post-reform period. In the past many years, the Soviet Union which was net exporter of the grains has been dragged to such a level that, it imports a substantial quantity of the grains for domestic consumption from foreign countries.

Due to the withdrawal of the assistance and various subsidies provided by the different public agencies attached to the state, Russian agriculture encounters a severe financial crisis. As a result, most of the restructured collective farms as well as the nascent forms of individualised agriculture have been unable to replace the damaged farm infrastructure as well as the other tools. In 2002, 85000 new domestic combine harvesters were purchased by the Russian farms in the same period around 200,000 old combine harvesters were completely disbanded from the farms. Lack of new public investment in the agricultural sector was explicitly clear from the following figures. Between 1965 to 1985, the agricultural sector received 28 percent of the total investment in the Soviet economy. On the contrary, in 2001, agriculture just received 2.7 percent of the total investment in the Russian economy (Ioffe 2005).

In 1992, a new law was introduced in accordance with the neo-liberal doctrine which permitted the urbanites to buy rural farm land that was prohibited in the Soviet period\(^5\) (Ioffe 2001). Agrarian transformation taking place in the post-Soviet period informs that in different remote regions of the country, especially in the extreme north, millions of hectares of farm land were abandoned by the people who attained this land through the privatisation programme, mainly due to the lack of necessary monetary

\(^5\) During the Soviet period, all forms of private ownership in the land were legally banned. However both the rural and the urban population were provided a plot of household plot or known as kitchen garden for the consumption of the family. Many studies on the household plot informed that it had produced a substantial quantity of the domestic vegetable production in the Socialist period. In fact, it remains as the main source of the extra income to household in the pre-1990 period. Although the size of the household plot varied from region to region in the Soviet Union, the average size of the plot was 0.25 hectares\(^2\).
capital and other resources to cultivate in the land. According to an estimate by authentic sources, from 20,000,000 to 30,000,000 hectares of arable land have already been abandoned in the post-Soviet period. Some of the observers of the agrarian changes add that the above estimates were probably an understatement and the real loss of land might have been much higher than the figures mentioned above (Loffe 2005). Thus, the downsizing the size of the land, quantity of the agricultural output along with massive negligence of the rural issues by the new generation of the ruling elites as well as the media are common phenomena in post-Soviet Russia. Irrespective of the discriminatory policies followed by the restructured collective farms vis-s-vis the newly created private farms by the neo-liberal advocates in the state, the former still remained the largest agricultural producer in the country. In the contemporary Russian countryside the household plots remain as the major contributors of the household consumption requirements and have been contributing the more than half of the commodities like potatoes. In order to overcome the hardships imposed by the systemic transition since 1990, most of the Russian population including a large chunk of the urban dwellers have begun cultivation in the household plots (which is the continuation of the Soviet period) which were possessed by the most rural and urban households alike.

There exist three types of farms in the Russian countryside. In the Soviet times, the collective farms constituted the dominant mode of agrarian production. The household plot which was permitted in the pre-reform period irrespective of its small size contributed a substantial quantity of the goods required for the food basket. Private commercial farming that emerged in the reform era as the ideal mode of alternative to the publically regulated collective agriculture still remain in marginal positions in terms of the size of the land and the quantity of the goods produced. According to a 2001 estimates, household farms contributed around 57 percent of the agricultural goods produced in the country. Former collective farms transformed into the collective private entity of the workers and other officials attached to it contributed around 445 of the agricultural commodities in the country and the contribution of the nascent private farms was slightly less than five percent. Officially restructured collective farms remain the major holders of land in the countryside despite the neo-liberal reforms. It controls around 81.9 percent of the total farm land in Russia. The corresponding percentage of the land held by the household plot is 11.3 and the registered private farms in the country control around 6.8 percent of the farm land (Ibid).
Main Characteristics of Private Farming in the Countryside

Private farming in the country was visualised by the reformers as the chosen alternative to the publically-controlled agrarian production of the Socialist period. The new ruling elites in Russia along with their neo-liberal advisers in the Western financial institutions were unanimous in their view that once the agrarian relations prevailed in the Soviet period was disbanded, there would spontaneously emerge a new group of agrarian actors based on the private ownership in land. However, the wishful thoughts of the neo-liberal advocators were far from materialised. This being the contemporary scenario, the pattern of changes taking place in the Russian economy in general and the countryside in particular demonstrate that country is slowly but steadily moving towards the capitalist form of agrarian production sooner than later. The rampant privatisation measures followed by the Yeltsin regime were reviewed by his chosen successor Vladimir Putin in spite of his firm commitments to the overall reform process. The massive decline of the agricultural crops along with the acute social crisis encountered by the Russian society in general and the rural dwellers in particular, forced the Putin regime to initiate measures to strengthen the restructured collective farms to revive food production in the country. As mentioned in the previous part, the state of private commercial farming in Russia is still in its infant stage. In terms of the total crops production in the country, it is placed in the distant third position. The land size of the household plots has undergone profound changes with the introduction of reform measures. In the Soviet period, household plots of land were allotted to both urban and the rural households, but the size of the land determined by the authorities slightly vary from region to region in the country. In the post-Soviet space, radical changes took place in the management of the household plot wherein both urban and the rural families started cultivation in the plot of land they possessed. The reform policies also abolished the size limits prevailing in the Soviet period. Thus, the resurgence of the cultivation in household plots was more due to the acute socio-economic crisis of the Russian society.

The Nature and Character of the Linkages between Collective Farms and the Emerging Private Farms in the Country

The household plots and private commercial farms are treated as the most viable alternative to the collectivised agriculture existing in the Russian countryside. However, in the past one and half decades of its existence, the new form of individualised farming
in the county demonstrated that rather remaining as the binary opposites, the collective farm in many ways acted as a facilitator and medium of linkage between goods produced by the individual producers and the market. Most of the literature on the post-Soviet agrarian transition emphasised the role of restructured collective farms in surviving the individual farming, especially in the case of household plot cultivation which contributes more than half of the total agricultural production in the country. Due to the unevolved basic infrastructure facilities which include various local institutional arrangements to plan the monitoring and facilitating role to the individualised farms, collective farms on many occasions are fulfilling that role. Most of the workers in the collective farm using the facilities of the former, such as vehicles, tractors and other farm instruments to cultivate in the household plot without fee or with very nominal fee. Collective farms also provide seeds, animals, fertilizer and this allows its members to take away hay and grass from farm premises to feed the livestock of peasants.

In the Soviet period, collective farm was not merely an agricultural production arrangement as mentioned in the previous part, it also remained and acted as the medium of articulation of the all forms of social activities in the countryside. In other words, with many limitations of the collective farms, it still remains the avenue for the rural dwellers for various forms of entertainments which in usual practices were only available to the urban dwellers. The social facilities provided by the collective farm in the pre-1990 period benefited all social groups in the society. On the contrary, in recent times, many writings speak about the increasing exclusion of the lower social classes and other marginalised groups from the opportunities to social entertainment in the countryside. Likewise, in accordance with the overall neo-liberal transition to capitalism taking place in the Russian society, even all forms of human desires and activities become marketised commodities available to the people who have the purchasing power to avenue those facilities.

As a corollary of these changes in the Russian countryside, all forms of entertainment activities were brought under the market regime and as a result, most of the rural population are unable to utilise it due to their socio-economic conditions. Some of the restructured collective farm still continued some of the social provisions and cultural activities to its members even now. Contrary to the reductionist view of self interest maximising optimal peasants and firms, the way in which the restructured collective farms and the household agricultural surviving in the post-Soviet era reveal
that the institutional and cultural legacies of the past have a substantial role in the formation of attitudes and behaviour of the people rather than the pure economic logic as expected by the reformers. Wegren et al. are of the view that most of the rural people are interested in remaining in the restructured collective farm mainly due to the dependence of the household agriculture on the former. Until and unless alternative mechanisms to fulfil the role performed by the larger farms are put in place, any further restructuring of the collective agriculture would threaten the very existence and the success of the household agriculture itself (Wegren et al. 2004). The next section tries to examine the contribution to the total agricultural production and the employment opportunities in the privatised farm in the country.

The Contribution of the Private Farm to the Total Agricultural Production in Russia

Some of the authors on the agrarian transition have expressed serious doubts about the authenticity of the figure that household productions contribute 57 percent of the total agricultural production in the country found as by the 2001 agricultural statistics. According to these literatures, in the most probable case, it is an inflated figure and a chunk of the goods produced by the household plot as reported, might have in fact been produced in the collective farms. In diametric contrast to the Soviet period when there existed a tendency to under-report and under-value the role played by the informal agricultural, like-wise in the post-reform period emerged a tendency to under-value the contribution of the collectivised agriculture. This suspicion is due to the fact that in the post-reform period, household agriculture was exempted from taxes and on the contrary, restructured collective agriculture was brought under the preview of the corporate taxes. In order to get tax evasion a large chunk of the goods produced by the collective agriculture might have been calculated as produced by the household plot (Ioffe 2005). Efendiev and Bolotina, believed “that the officially recorded percentage of the household farming in the gross agricultural output is exaggerated at least 1.5 times” (Cited in Ioffe 2005: 181). Some of the household agriculture also has commercial concerns and in order to get the tax protection available to the household plot, it still maintains its brand name.

There exists inadequate data on how much land, labour and capital is used by the household agriculture. In the Soviet times, the income from the household plot
constituted only a quarter of the total family income. On the contrary, the income from the former was one of the most crucial factors that protected a large chunk of the rural dwellers from the clutches of absolute poverty and in 1995, household production contributed around 60 percent of the household income which include a significant portion (35 percent) of its monitory income (Wegren et al. 2004: 473). The average size of the private farm increased from 43 to 58 hectares during 1993-2001. Nirmal Chandra, in a recent piece by quoting Wegren quotes on some authentic sources describe that the optimal private farm size at 50-100 hectare; and the World Bank survey of 1996 that found many large farms of several hundred hectares each in Kirov and Orel oblasti; these were multi-family units–some would call them a form of collective enterprise–and hired permanent labourers (Chandra 2002: 193).

Irrespective of the structural and cultural constraints, the process of land concentration and penetration of capitalist mode of large commercial farms are gradually making its presence in the Russian countryside. The Russian statistical organisation carried out a first major survey of around 28,000 farms which constituted around 15.2 per cent of the total farms in the country, during July-August 2000. The data from the survey demonstrate that the average size was 55 ha, the distribution was highly skewed. The top group with over 70 ha, each accounted 17.5 percent of all farms and 70.2 percent of the area, and had a group of average of 222 ha. The next group constituted over one quarter of all farms but owned just 4 percent of the area, the average area being 5.1 ha. While analysing the above data Nirmal Kumar Chandra observes: “under the Russian conditions – an extremely cold climate, low soil fertility, and an exceedingly high seed out rate-a 5 hectare farm is grossly inadequate for a family’s survival, unless other sources of income are available” (Chandra 2002: 193-94). While looking at the survey findings one, could find that more than 75 percent of the farms emerged in the initial years of the privatisation i.e. before 1995 and thereafter it moved gradually. It also reveals that more than 60 percent of the farms are engaged in grain production and the second most widely practised were dairying and meat farming. Most of the farm activities were carried out by the peasant themselves. Family labour worked in those farms on an average 143 man days and hired labour was employed for around 44 days. The survey also reveals the state of the farms infrastructure possessed by the private farm in the country. Due to the lack of the proper financial assistance, a quarter of the farms underutilise their land. It also prevented a majority of farms from
purchasing new farm instruments and other such infrastructure (Ibid). In Russia, according to the last censuses taken in the Soviet period, around 10.6 families were living in the rural areas. Within this population, people working in the agricultural-related activities constitute less than one half of the rural labour force.

The Impact of Agrarian Reforms on the Rural Social Structure

The neo-liberal agrarian reforms implemented in Russia in the past one and half decades have led to profound changes in the countryside. The reform process has undergone up and down in its speed and momentum since its initiation in the early 1990s. In a recent piece, one of the leading authorities on the post-Soviet agrarian transition, Stephen Wegren, divided the reform period into two phases in relation to the role performed by the Russian state. In the first period, the era of state withdrawal began with the introduction of the reform policies in the early 1990s. The main characteristics of this period were the unquestionable dominance of the laissez-faire and the neo-liberal conception of the passive state. The second phase is called the period of bringing the state back-in, began in 1998. The major characteristics of the still continuing second phase is the continuity with the period of state withdrawal in some policy realms, while in other policy arenas, the role of the state has become markedly more interventionist (Wegren 2007: 498). But in spite of the continuity and departure in the agrarian policy priorities of the Russian state, the kind of social chaos and dilemmas encountered by the countryside has no parallel to the most controversial phase of the forceful collectivisation of the Soviet agriculture in the early 1930s. As discussed elsewhere in the previous section, the havoc impact of the neo-liberal model of development was widely debated and reported among the academic and policy circles alike. One hardly identifies any such parallels in the recent history of countries anywhere in the world as experienced by the Russian society after the introduction of the economic shock therapy. It is all the more pathetic because whereas in Russia the new programme was projected and popularised by its advocates as the most viable alternative to rectify and transform the society into an advanced capitalist society as visible in the West without undermining the socio-economic standard enjoyed by the Soviet population.

The advocates of the new policy promised the Russian population that introducing the neo-liberal model of economic restructuring along with the introduction of the liberal democratic institutions and its practices would enable and thereby manifest
the country to the similar status of the Western capitalist societies within a short span of
time. However, the wishful thought of the reform advocates were falsified by the way in
which reform programme unfolded in the country. Instead of transforming Russian
society to the level of the material development of the advanced capitalist societies, the
reform process actually pushed back the country to the state of pre-industrial societies
(Gowan 1992; Medvedev 2001; Chenoy 1998, 2001; Kagartsky 1998; Stiglitz 2002;
Kotz and Weir 2007). Even hardcore supporters of the reform programme in its early
stage such as Stiglitz and many others openly challenged the fundamental premises of
the shock therapy model and exposed its inherent limitations. Even though the social
consequences of the reform programme and its havoc effects on the economy affected
all sections of the Russian population, it also enormously benefited narrow segments of
the former party elites and the people closely associated with the reform programme.
Massive privatisation of the large scale industrial concerns along with the resultant
virtual collapse of industrial production accelerated the complete collapse of the
economy and high inflation led the value of Russian currency falling to the level of the
currencies of the most under-developed countries of Africa. In the eve of the collapse of
the Soviet Union, around 73 percent of the Russian population were urban dwellers.
Among the urban population except the youngsters and the people of old age, most of
the population as engaged in the secondary or the service sector of the Soviet centrally­
planned economy.

As a result of the massive industrialisation and increasing urbanisation, most of
the urban dwellers attained a living standard similar to the middle classes of the
advanced capitalist societies in spite of many constrains in the articulation of consumer
choices from the market as capitalist economy offered. In spite of such relative
limitation and much such inefficiency, if one judges with the criterion of capitalist
economy, almost all the basic socio-economic requirements of the Soviet population
were fulfilled by the socialist state. In contrast to the living standards and social
amenities enjoyed by the urban industrial working class in the Soviet society, the rural
dwellers were in many ways treated and experienced low preference vis-a-vis their
urban counterparts. Nonetheless the collectivisation and the resultant mechanisation of
the Soviet agriculture profoundly transformed the Soviet countryside. It accelerated the
process of class mobility and a substantial majority of the Soviet urban dwellers were
moved from the countryside after the collectivisation of the agriculture. Similar to the
urban dwellers a substantial majority of the rural dwellers were attached to collective and state farms in the Soviet period. Soviet rural dwellers were also provided with small household plots to cultivate for their personal consumption. The state of the social life attained by the rural dwellers was clear from the fact that the period between 1970 to 1989, there was hardly any unemployment in rural Russia (Chandra 2001). In spite of the relative preference given to the urban industrial working class, the Soviet regime initiated policy measures which fundamentally transformed the countryside. As a result, agrarian dwellers attained a material living standard that was hardly enjoyed by their counterparts in other countries. As already discussed elsewhere in the previous chapter, irrespective the existence of the diverse forms of social divisions and differentiation emanating from the class and occupational state in the Soviet countryside, it never manifested to the level of direct exploitation of one privileged social group over the marginalised groups as is happening in the capitalist societies. Agricultural production in the country experienced severe problems in the last decade of the Soviet state and it was the replica of the overall stagnation encountered by the Socialist-planned economy since the mid-1970s. However, the nature of the crisis and social dislocations brought by the reform policies in a way led to the erosion of whatever social progress was attained in the early period. In such a context, the next section examines in detail its multiple implications on the rural population and the nature of its effects on the rural social structure.

The Main Factors Determining Rural Social Stratification

Changes in political economic relations along with the changes in the internal social dynamics of the different social classes and strata are the main factors behind the radical social transition in any society in a given time. The political economic relations in any society are determined by the nature and character of the dominant social formation and the state of its development. Social formation consists of the modes of production and the corresponding social, institutional and ideological relations in a given society.

The nature and character of the state and its development models and priorities are in turn, to a large extent, determined by its equation with the dominant social formation in the concerned society. In a fundamental departure from all the hitherto prevailing social formations; the capitalist social formation integrated the entire globe under the capitalist world market thereby integrating unknown regions and countries
under the logic of the capitalist mode of production. Regional socio-cultural and historical specificities of every society have their own roles in the operation and functioning of the capitalist market and mode of production in different parts of the world. In similar way, the pre-capitalist social formation such as feudal and peasant formations which still prevail in most of the Third World as dominant modes of production along with the capitalist mode and in the advanced capitalist counties still remain in many forms. However, capitalist ideology and values associated with it, for the first time, united the diverse regions and countries under the common form of social production and homogenised institutional state apparatus across countries.

In spite of the marvellous contributions and material achievements of capitalist production, it has also generated a kind of exploitation and alienation of human being in at level never practised by any other social formation in the past with institutional sanctity and legitimacy. The fundamental characteristic of the capitalist production are that the direct producers have no control over means of production or their own labour power. It is controlled by the capitalist who owns the means of production in capitalist society. The fundamental motivating force of the capitalist is the maximisation of profit which in turn led to further accumulation of capital. In short, the fundamental social characteristics of the capitalist mode of production are the direct exploitation of the original producers and the alienation of the labour from himself and his surroundings.

The Soviet social formation that emerged as the critical alternative to the capitalist mode of production which visualised a form of social production aimed at the production of the use value of the population rather than exchange value as in the capitalist society. As result, the ownership of the means of production were nationalised and brought under the social control and the production priorities were determined by the requirements of the population. As a result, the determining roles of the exchange value in capitalist production process were just reversed and use value of the concerned goods determined the quantity of its production rather than profit as in the case of exchange value. The priorities of social production and the allocation of resources between different sectors of the economy were determined and regulated by the central planning mechanism. As result of the changes in mode of production and social priorities, the Soviet society within a short span of time, transformed from one of the most populated societies into an advanced industrial country without direct exploitation of producers.
Looking from the vantage point of liberal ideology and practices, the Soviet state had negated many forms of individual rights and freedom to its populations. Likewise, in the early years of the industrialisation and collectivisation, a large number of populations experienced the oppressive face of the Soviet state. In contrast to the emergence of the Soviet social formation which evolved out of the decades of militant fight by all sections of the Russian population against the Tsarist monarchy, the post-Soviet transition was in turn imposed by the new ruling elites in Russia without much demand for such radical changes from below. Some of the scholars of the systemic changes in the Soviet Union considered that the co-option of large number of the party and bureaucratic elites from the Soviet system to advance their class interests was the main reason for the disintegration of the socialist system (Kotz and Weir 2007; Medvedev 2001; Kagarlitsky 1999). In contrast to capitalist development in the present day capitalist societies in the West and elsewhere in the Third World, capitalist social formation evolved as the dominant social formation marked by the active supportive and regulative role of the state in the initial stage of its development. By introducing the neo-liberal pattern of development, the new ruling elites in Russia hoped to transform themselves into a capitalist class by looting the valuable assets and resources through the privatisation programme. In short, the neo-liberal capitalist development in Russia departed from the text book view of capitalist development by engaging in the productive activities and thereby accumulating profits by exploiting the direct producers. In contrast to it, the economic shock therapy model attempted to overtake that path by manipulating the state apparatus and getting the ownership of the most of public assets of the Soviet period. This process resulted in the marginalisation of large segments of the Russian population. The new form of neo-liberal capitalist development manifested into the countryside by the restructuring of the state and collective farms and complete withdrawal of the state assistance to them. By dismantling each of the supportive instruments of collective farms and by liberalising agricultural prices, the agrarian countryside was connected to the global agro-industrial market. Most of the rural dwellers who were depending on the collective farms for their livelihood and social life and hoped to maintain their social status attained in the Soviet period were forced to look for the alternative avenues to escape from the clutches of absolute poverty.
Access to the Infrastructure of the Collective Farms

Even though the former collective and state farms were restructured in conformity with the neo-liberal agrarian reforms, most of the rural population are still dependent on larger farms for their multiple needs. Due to the massive unemployment, widening absolute and relative poverty in rural areas and various form of social exclusions and the marginalisation, the collective farms in many respects retained the role it played in the Soviet period by providing necessary assistance and social services to its locality. In various regions of the country, some of the collective farms restructured as profit-oriented enterprises had completely withdrawn various forms of social services and subsidies provided to their workers in accordance with the reform programme were forced to re-introduce some of the social provisions due to the massive demands by the workers in the farms. In fact, all forms of the formal structures and practices prevailing in the Soviet period were abolished by the reform programme and as a result, a majority of the people in the countryside lost the kind of regularity and rhythm emerged over the years in their day-to-day social life.

In such a scenario, most of the people are trying to cope with the adverse effects of changes by increasingly relying on farms for various requirements of their household cultivation to various social needs such as schools, hospitals and many other forms of family and community needs (Chandra 2001). Those ordinary people who have already withdrawn from farm by taking their share of land face many obstacles to sustain their cultivation in the absence of alternative form of social and economic networks to overcome the acute crisis encounter by them. Access to a collective farms grain, combined fodder and transportation to deliver them from field or a collective farm warehouse to one’s household farm is most instrumental in the latter’s productivity. Thus, the collective farm manager and team leaders who routinely have such access, usually have more productive household operations (Efendiev and Bolotina cited in Ioffe 2005: 197). In other words, those people who were enormously enriched by the agrarian reforms and the resultant introduction of private farming are also the leading beneficiaries of the continuing operations of the collective farms.

The Possession of the Livestock and Animal Husbandry

Deeply-rooted structural contradictions and socio-economic exclusions and the resultant marginalisation of vast majority of the rural population in differing degrees are common
phenomena of Russian countryside in the post-reform era. Throughout the last century, the Russian countryside experienced a different form of social dislocation and structural break from the past agricultural and social practices. However, the kind of vertical and horizontal crisis presently faced by them hardly matches the similar such encounters in the past. Many literatures on the early Soviet period inform us that during the hard period of War Communism and the early phase of the forceful collectivisation, many peasants who were unwilling to give up their land and livestock, slaughtered their animals in order to prevent the confiscation by the state authorities (Bettelheim 1978, 1980; Lewin 1967; Carr 1983; Shanin 1972). Mainly two groups of the people tried to expand the possession of livestock. They were the marginalised peasants and agricultural workers and the newly-emerged rich private farming strata in the countryside.

However, the factors motivating them to prefer livestock were due to diametrically opposite reasons. Russian society in general and countryside in particular had witnessed the erosion and vanishing of various formal structures and practices prevailing in the past. The sharp decline in the use of money as the agent and medium of economic transaction between various rural actors and resultant occurrence of widespread informal practices in multiple ways had detrimental effects on the standards of living of the people in the countryside. This practice is motivated by the calculations that possessing livestock and poultry would enable the rural population to earn some liquid money that was one of the most demanded things in context of the emergence of widespread barter transaction of goods in kind in the rural areas. Possession of liquid cash provides the necessary capacity to fulfil the essential monetary needs. The second factor which influenced the population to opt for livestock instead of land was the huge increases in price of the meat and related items was one of the dominant components of the Russian food basket. One of the reasons for the huge imports of grain in the Soviet period was reported mainly to feed the livestock’s in the country. In the post-reform phase, all the import restrictions were removed and as a result, the prices of the imported meats and other such items sky-rocketed. Most of the people in the countryside possessing livestock increasingly rely on the collective farms for satisfying the diverse requirements of their cattle.

On the other hand, the newly-emerged commercial farmers were the leading beneficiaries of the agrarian reforms, and they also preferred to expand the possession of
livestock by utilising the opportunities offered to them by the new developments. In fact, those social groups who possessed large tracts of private farms also emerged as the leading actors in various sectors of the rural economy (Wegren 2003). The rural society was witnessing profound changes in conformity with the dominant socio economic structures and practices prevailing in Russia and elsewhere. This, in turn, contributed to the unprecedented social divisions and marginalisation in the countryside. At such a juncture, people who are socially and economically well placed would capitalise their interests and others would be marginalised. In order to reduce the adverse effects of the re-structuring of the rural socio-economic relations, most of the country folk engaged in multiple activities. Engagements in non-agricultural field have a significant impact on the living conditions of the rural people which will be examined in the following part.

Non-Agricultural Incomes

Much has been described and written about the crucial role of non-agricultural income in the survival of the vast masses of country folk in the post-reform era. Even though income generated from the agricultural activities have sharply declined in the past decades across rural Russia, despite the rapid penetration of household plot cultivation in both urban and rural areas. One of the most remarkable aspects of the post Soviet social scenario is that, the vast majority of the population in the rural and urban areas are unable to earn livelihood from a single source of income. As a result, a large number of informal activities emerged across Russia. In the Soviet times, the agrarian population was able to fulfil their economic and social requirements from salaries and many other social provisions received from the collective and state farms. The income they earned from the farming activities in the personal household plot were in fact surplus money that was used for attaining higher living standards. In rural Russia, substantial sections of the dwellers practised diverse forms of handicrafts and other such non-agricultural labour for centuries. Even though it was a general characteristic of pre-capitalist societies across the globe, the factors which differentiated Russia from such societies was that due to the geographic and climatic conditions which restrained from doing any farming activities almost six months in a year. Due to this reason, in contrast to any other pre-capitalist societies, a majority of Russian population was engaged in some form of non-agricultural income-generating activities (Ioffe 2005; Field 1968; Bassin 1993; Lynch 2002). Due to the wide de-monetarisation and de-industrialisation
in the aftermath of the economic shock therapy, people were opting for multiple activities in the same time to cope with the structural crisis encountered by them.

By closely observing the coping strategies of selected Moscow households in the post Soviet period, Marianna Pavlovskaya characterised such social phenomenon as shift “from multiple identities to multiple economies” (Pavlovskaya 2004: 334). Even a substantial portion of the urban household were forced to engage the diverse forms of labour to overcome the widespread social deprivation experienced by the Russian society in general. In the rural areas, the state of general deprivation was even harder than the urban areas. This is mainly due to the severe sectoral imbalances which emerged in favour of the industrial commodities in the reform period. In other words, the price scissors emerged in the neo-liberal period resulted in a sharp decline of the real value of the agricultural goods in relation to the capital goods. Along with the adverse terms of trade faced by the primary goods, the massive de-monetarisation of the economic transaction profoundly altered the hitherto prevailing social practices in the rural areas. As a result, most of the rural households were forced to engage in some form of non-agricultural business activities in order to reduce the kind of deprivation faced by them. Most of the non-agricultural business activities in the rural areas were in the informal sector. One of the characteristic features of the reform era was the informalisation of the formal sector due to the demonetisation in the society. In contrast to the usual business activities aimed at making profit, the wide range of new petty business which emerged in the rural Russia was a survival strategy of the silenced majority whose access to socio-economic resources were severely curtailed by the dominant neo-liberal paradigm of development.

One of the most ironic developments in the period was the emergence of multiple levels of social networks both in rural and urban areas to overcome the structural crisis imposed by the new development. This network included the formation of close ties between families, friends, household farms, and between restructured collective farms and its employees. Ioffe, one of the close observers of the emerging pattern of rural survival strategies termed it as “a community for collective survival, a

6 The study quoted in the text with many similar studies on the post-Socialist social transition revealed that the neo-liberal preposition with the removal of all restriction on free activities of the individuals would naturally lead to the formalisation of diverse forms of informal network prevailed in the Soviet period. In fact, the neo-liberal experience in Russia and elsewhere in the Central and Eastern Europe reveals that contrary to their premises, such practices have widely spread to all sections of the people in the society.
production cooperative and a private business” (Ioffe 2001: 53). The kind of continuity and changes experienced by the rural population in Russia was clearly explicit from the following figure provided by the above author (Ioffe 2001: 54).

**Figure I: Continuity and Change in Rural Russia**

**CHANGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From a Dominant Socio-Economic Pattern to an Open Space:</th>
<th>Collective Farming:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Form Collective Survival</td>
<td>Still a Corner Stone of Russian Agriculture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CONTINUITY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-Operative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A) Stability of internal governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B) Regimentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(C) Dependence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(D) Overwhelming significance of agriculture in the Countryside</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Private Business</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A) Adjustment of status, Shareholding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B) Variety of selling options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(C) Level and mechanism of support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(D) Rural unemployment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Emergence of private farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Surge in subsidiary farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Competition with imports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Emergence of land market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Reversal of rural migration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) Reduction of investment in Infrastructure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Source: Ioffe 2001: 55                                  |

This is ironic mainly because the neo-liberal paradigm visualises and intends to create a class of self-interested rational-economic and social actors who would act as the custodian of Russia’s capitalist transition. In fact, a sizable proportion of the rural
population in Russia was socially and economically not prepared for the kind of changes brought out by the systemic changes. Thus, Grigory Ioffe concludes that, “Russia’s rural population, which is largely unfit for the kind of innovation opened by the reforms. The sudden imposition of the market forces left this population divided, antagonised and largely pauperised to the extreme” (Ioffe 2001: 201). In short, the promises and imagination offered by the neo-liberal market regime to the majority of the Russian population far from materialised and pushed them to the margins of society. This being the general feature of rural Russia in the present period also, the next section focuses on the role of local institutions in the survival strategies of the agrarian population.

The Role of Local Institutions in the Day-to-Day Life of Agrarian Dwellers

One of the major limitations of economic reforms in Russia and the reason for its pathetic outcome was its failure to create network of public institutions in rural areas to monitor and assist the systemic changes taking place in the countryside. In fact, it was against the very premises of the economic shock therapy practised in the country which intended to dismantle all forms of formal institutional structures and practices which existed in the Soviet society. The neo-liberal perspective envisages that all forms of institutional interference were the unwarranted constraints on the self-rectifying capacity of the market forces and which prevented the reformers from initiating the formation of an alternative public institutions in the countryside. Neo-liberal market regime effectively dismantled all forms of social provisions and regulative role carried out by the Russian state, before eradicating the different forms of subsidiary public agencies functioning in the countryside.

In the initial phase of reforms, its exponents promised the population that with the introduction of the market regime and liberal democratic practices resulted in the wreaking of the centralised power of the Russian state and thus in turn strengthened various regional governments in the country and through this process, genuine decentralised democracy would emerge in Russia. It also promised that the introduction of the market regime and liberal democracy would resolve the extreme form of homogenisation programme practised by the party state by ignoring the multiple levels of diversities existing in the Russian society. However, the way in which market regime unfolded in the country not only ignores its promises, but also effectively undermines various forms of social and economic infrastructure existing in the countryside. In fact,
till the very introduction of the neo-liberal agrarian reform in Russia, the collective and state farms and various agencies attached to the farms in its vicinity have been regulated by a whole range of agrarian social life. Local units of the communist party also performed a crucial role in the socio-economic activities of the rural population.

Many commentators of the rural social policy of Soviet state pointed out that the collectivisation of agriculture and the resultant homogenisation of the Soviet countryside forcefully suppress various forms of social, cultural and farming practices existing for centuries in the rural areas (Shubin 2007; Mitrany 1958; Lewin 1967; Shanin 1983; Chayanov 1967). In an era marked by social chaos and dislocations, rural dwellers lost almost everything they acquired in the time of the previous socialist regime. At the same time, the agrarian population also witnessed the restructuring of the collective and state farms into co-operative entities. By the equal transfer of the land shares of collective and state farms to its members, reformers promised that the ordinary farm: employees would be its leading beneficiaries. However, its real implementation reveals that rather than benefitting from the agrarian restructuring, the farm workers were most adversely affected by the programme (Wegren 2003, 2004, 2007). The major reason for the passive response of the peasants to the land privatisation measures were due to the adequate institutional mechanism in the rural areas to provide diverse needs of the private farms.

The complete withdrawal of the state from the many-fold assistance provided to the farms along with the general de-monetarisation of the economy curtailed the capacity to purchase new farm machinery and to invest in other such infrastructure needs. In such a scenario, the only option to avail some form of institutional support to continue with the restructured collective and state farms. Due to the lack of access of modern farm infrastructure, the newly-formed marginal and medium private farms were relying on farm animals instead of tractors. In the countryside, there exists hardly any banking or other such financial institutions to provide the economic and other monetary support to the farmers. In fact, the only available institutional mechanisms in the countryside were the restructured farms and other informal networks like family ties, neighbourhood collective, etc. In the recent period, Russian state and its various regional offshoots marginally reversed the earlier approach and revived some of the assistance it provided to the larger farms. Household plot cultivation and other emerging individualised farms also received a certain degree of tax concession and financial
assistance from the federal and regional governments. Those people who lacked any accesses to any such local institutional networks were severely dealt within the crisis. The following section will discuss the main characteristics of the new social policy of the Russian state.

**Defining Characteristics of the New Social Policy of the Russian State**

The post-Soviet Russian state fundamentally altered the social policy followed by its predecessors in the early 1990s. With the introduction of the neo-liberal model of capitalist development, the Russian state had effectively handed over the role it performed in the past to the mercy of the market forces. Neo-liberal doctrine vehemently opposes all forms of unproductive investment in the economy. According to the neo-liberal conception of the state, its role is restricted to the task of facilitator of private initiatives and the role of night watchman, by preserving law and order in the society. An authority on post-Soviet agrarian transition had identifies two major shifts in the perception of the state in this regard. “First, the state stopped trying to regulate rural social life, and various freedoms (such as to leave a collective farm) were granted. Second, the state stopped trying to fulfil the goals in social policy that had been envisioned and adopted in previous programs” (Wegren 2007: 510). As a result, the Russian state has completely disbanded from all forms of social obligations and a wide range of mandatory responsibilities it owed to its citizens to dictate the market forces. In 1992, in conformity with the neo-liberal agrarian reform, policy decisions were made to curtail drastically the level of capital investment into rural areas, so much so that by the end of the decade, capital investment into agriculture were less than three percent of all investments in the economy.

As a move towards that direction, in 1993, it was decided that financial responsibility for rural social infrastructure would be shifted from the federal budget to municipal budgets, to regional budgets, or to large farms themselves. In fact, due to their financial bankruptcy, the regional and municipal authorities were incapable of fulfilling the role carried over to it by the federal government. In spite of restructuring it into corporate entities, federal government also designated in 1994 that the agricultural enterprises would be the main source of capital provider for the rural construction works (Ibid: 511). It created over burden for the farms that were already facing severe financial constraints to even renew their damaged farm infrastructure. It already owed huge debt
arrears to regional and federal governments. The virtual step down of the state forms the social provisions such as health care and education had profound effects in the rural areas, which had generated new forms of internal stratification in the countryside. The following sections will examine then in detail.

Emerging Patterns of Health and the Educational Stratification in the Countryside

Health care is one of the most adversely-affected fields in the post-Soviet transition. In many other realms of social life, the reform programme benefited at least a handful of people in the upper layers of society and brought forth certain practices hitherto alien to the Russian public space. The scenario is diametrically opposite when one evaluates the changes that has taken place in public health sector in the country. All aspects of people’s health in the post-reform era were marked by massive degradation. In the past-socialist period, the country was known for its achievement in medical research and increasing attention to the preventive aspects of medicine which effectively eradicated all forms of epidemics and protected the Soviet citizens from diverse forms of illness. The practices of universal health provisions entitled the citizens irrespective of class, regional and ethnic differences to essential free medical care. The kind of universal health coverage it provided to the population resulted in attainment of high life expectancy of the Soviet citizens. Some of the literature on Soviet health policy reveals that, irrespective of the universal coverage and overall improvement in the health status of the population, there exist discriminatory practices in favour of the urban areas. The state of rural health infrastructure such as equipments and medicines and the availability of well-trained doctors were abysmally low compared to the urban centres (Wegren 2007: 510). One of the immediate effects of the changes in the health sector was the massive decline in life expectancy of the Russian population. The average life expectancy of the population witnessed a massive decline from 72 in the early 1990s to 59 at the end of decade. The rural hospitals and other such primary health centres were dysfunctional due to the lack of infrastructure and trained medical professionals.

Commenting on the effects of the state withdrawal from health care, Stephen Wegren remarks:

during state withdrawal, when the state stopped regulating social life and removed itself from responsibility for services, rural health care became significantly worse, as hundreds of rural hospitals closed, and even those that remained open often experienced critical shortages in most basic medicine and supplies. The number of rural hospitals decreased by 33 per cent and those which remained open often did not have the elementary medical supplies such as aspirin.
By the end of 1996, the construction rate of rural hospitals was one sixth of its 1990 level, and the number of new hospital beds was one-fifth of the 1990 level. The result was a surge in the rural death rate beginning in 1992, which for the first time since World War II exceeded the rural birth rate and continued for more than a decade (Wegren 2007: 510-11).

Some of the diseases and epidemics which had been completely eradicated from society in the Soviet period gradually recurred in the recent period due to the general deterioration of the health and living conditions of the vast majority of country folk. The deprivation in the material conditions and the resultant mental stress, especially among the unemployed youth contributed to the sharp rise in the alcoholic consumption in rural Russia. As result, a large segment of the rural males in early adulthood face various forms of liver and heart-related diseases. The access to speciality and super-speciality medical care are beyond the imagination of the majority of rural people. In fact, this is the general characteristic which evolved due to the functioning of market forces wherein the necessary criteria to avail those services provided by it is the purchasing power of one’s pocket. Those who lack purchasing power are just ignored and excluded by the market. In the case of the present day Russia, especially in the countryside, apart from weak economic status of the majority of population, the widespread de-monetarisation of the economic transaction made the situation more complex. Likewise, due to the ironic outcome of neo-liberal transition in the rural areas, the market forces are hardly able to create necessary service providers to those people who have the economic capacity to avail it.

Similarly, the educational status attained by the vast majority of the rural population in the Soviet period radically altered in the reform period. With the step down of the state from the social sectors, the educational sector witnessed huge financial and resource crunch. Many rural schools were closed or abandoned due to lack of infrastructure and the acute socio-economic crisis in the society. In fact, socio-economic transition taking place in the countryside witnessed the virtual reversal of what had happened in the early phase of the Soviet period. On the eve of the formation of the socialist state, the Russian countryside was highly hierarchal and experienced extreme forms of internal differentiations among seventy percent of the peasant population. The educational and social standards were even comparable to any other society in the Third World. The fundamental changes initiated by the socialist regime through altering the hitherto prevailing political economic relations along with the socialist modernisation programmes profoundly changed internal class and occupational composition of the Soviet society. The socialist regime considered universal education as the basic
requirement for the modernisation of the society. As a result, thousands of schools and vocational training centres were opened across country to equip and transform the rural youth into modernised human beings. Free elementary and higher education provided by the party state enabled a huge chunk of rural population to transcend the work performed by their parents.

The collectivisation of the Soviet agriculture along with the industrialisation and introduction of modern education (and its preference for the vocational and technical aspects) contributed to the widespread intra-class and inter-class social mobility in the Soviet period. This process was just reversed by the new changes. Due to the withdrawal of the state from the institutional and financial assistance, most of the highly developed educational network and technical training centres were closed or converted into other uses. The social groups which were most severely affected by the present degeneration of the educational facilities in the rural areas were those born after the Soviet period and those who were born in the last years of the socialist system and had begun their formal schooling in the post-Soviet period. Present youngsters and people below forty were the most unlucky people in the rural areas because of the socio-economic deprivation and the virtual collapse of the educational infrastructure in the countryside and were deprived of the kind of formal education received by their parents and grandparents. These kinds of absolute decline in the access of social infrastructure used by the previous generation to the present one, such as the case of the rural youth were rarest of the rare phenomenon which has hardly any parallel in the recent times. The most profound long-term implications of the process were the privatisation of the social services. In the present juncture, rural Russia experiences the process of marginalisation and social exclusion which affected the population asymmetrically. Majority of the people who are experiencing this process in differing degree would be severely affected by the privatisation of the social services. As and when this process reached its maturity and normalcy, the majority of them would be deprived of its services due to their weak socio-economic conditions and this in turn further accelerated the process of internal differentiation in the countryside.

The Widening Price Scissors and the Nature of the Emerging Spatial Stratification in Russia

The systemic transition in the post-Soviet Russia not only resulted in the marginalisation and dislocations of different segments of both rural and urban dwellers, but also
germinated a new form of urban rural differentiation in the country. The introduction of the neo-liberal market regime into the countryside in multiple ways accelerated the process of internal social differentiation within the rural space and between rural and urban areas. One of the major factors which pushed this new development was the recurrence of price scissors between industrial and primary goods. Thus, liberalisation of the national economy witnessed severe stagnation in the production of industrial commodities. It was further worsened by the massive privatisation of all the industrial concerns and resultant sharp decline and even closure of the most industrial entities. This, in turn, resulted in the virtual absence of any new investment in the industrial sector and huge hike in prices of those essential commodities badly needed by the agricultural sector. The price scissors literally means the "price disparity between agricultural products and agricultural inputs such as fuel and other machineries used in the agricultural sector" (Ioffe 2005: 182). (Likewise, the price hike of the farm input, the trend witnessed the case of other industrial goods.) On the contrary, agricultural prices remained more or less stagnant and as a result, disparity between the prices of primary goods and industrial commodities adversely moved against the former. This in turn, led to the decline in the real value of the agricultural goods.

The nature and extent of price scissors which emerged in the rural areas were explicitly revealed by Grigory Ioffe who cites Nikolai Kharitonov (one of the most influential political figure in the countryside) and the latter describes the bleak scenario encountered by the rural dwellers in the reform era. The period was marked by the phenomenal rise of the prices of the farm inputs, for instance the consistent upward moves of prices of diesel fuel which was priced 45, 00 rubles per-tonne in 2001 moved to 7,000 roubles in 2002 and a year later it reached 10,000 roubles. On the contrary, farm output witnessed relative stability of prices in the same period. The price of one tonne of wheat varied between 1,200-1,600 ranges in the same period (Kharitonov cited in Ioffe 2005: 182). Yaroslav Shvyryaev, who was an MP of Russian parliament opines: "from 1993 to 2003 the prices of wheat doubled but the price of diesel fuel increased 9.6 times and of petrol 8.2 times" (Cited in Ibid: 182). According to Aleksei Gordeev, Russian Minister of Agriculture, the total revenue of Russia’s collective farms in 2002 was 20 times less than in 2001 despite the fact that in 2001, the actual productivity was
higher in 2000\(^7\) (Ibid: 182). As a result of the virtual collapse of the rural economy, the monetary income in the countryside experienced great erosion compared with other branches of the economy during the 1990s. Stephen Wegren pointed out that: "at the beginning of the 1990s agricultural monthly incomes ranks roughly in the middle when compared with other occupations in the economy. By mid-decade agricultural income had fallen in rankings more than any other branch and showed the lowest monthly average compare with other branches of the national economy. In 1990 average monthly monetary income for agricultural workers were very close to national average and to that for industrial workers in particular; in 2000 average monthly monetary incomes for agricultural workers were 40 percent of the national average for all workers and only 32.5 percent of the average for industrial branches. The result was the significant rise in the poor households. Based on the 2001 survey, 74 percent of the households lived on less than the officially defined minimum subsistence level in the third quarter of 2001" (Wegren 2003: 493).

In the Soviet period, the state consciously introduced many initiatives in the rural areas to reduce the gap between urban and rural areas in the country. Wage differentials between urban and rural areas widened many fold in the post-reform era. In the Soviet period, an even wage in Moscow were hardly higher than elsewhere, but in 2003, mean average money incomes in Moscow was higher than those in most neighbouring regions. Of course there is considerable income inequality within the city of Moscow, but there emerges considerable wage disparities for the same work in provincial towns and the capital city. Skilled manual workers were earning with overtime, up to 25,000 rubles per month, at least in the manual sector (White 2007: 904). The income gap between urban and rural areas and between workers of same areas widened at such a level that by the end of the 1990s, the average monthly per capita income for an agricultural worker had fallen to 35-40 percent of an urban dweller. The agricultural worker became among the lowest-paid occupation in the national

\(^7\) In fact, at a time the price scissors adversely affected the countryside, the WTO insisted to the national government that the further increase in the domestic prices of fuel as prerequisite for the country's entry into the world body. From their demand, it was explicitly clear that the kind of influence and dominance of the neo-classical orthodoxy in the policy formulation of the World Trade Organisation. This is the general feature of neo-classical economics and wherever it was implemented, the concerned country was forced to liberalise prices thereby removing various restrictions imposed into the free functioning of the market forces. Most of the Afro-Asian and Latin American countries, marked by massive social disparity in income and access to resources and widespread poverty and resultant marginalisation were the order of the day were the first victims of this market fundamentalism before it forward green pastures in post-Soviet Russia.
The kind of spatial stratification generated by the neo-liberal agrarian regime in the countryside was in consonance with the similar transitions witnessed by many other countries where it was implemented earlier. The major characteristics of the new changes were the increasing fragmentations of the countryside on spatial lines. Those areas which had close proximity with the large cities became centres of new process and those areas placed far away from the up-coming centres became the peripheries of the new developments. This process was also shaped by factors such as population density, road and transportation facilities, soil fertility geographical location and other such infrastructure and social networks (Ioffe:2005). Those people who were placed in the lower end of society by the dominant structures and practices would be precisely the largest victims of this new cleavages and would be dragged to the margins of the spatial stratification sooner than later. The next section would examine the role and impact of the external agencies in the social practices and values of the agrarian people.

Continuity and Changes in the Social Imageries in Rural Russia

In many ways the Russian countryside was marked by lot of specificities which distinguished it from other societies. Due to Russia’s late entry into capitalist modernity compared to most of the European societies, the countryside continued to remain as the centre of national imagination and identity formations. Feudal social formations prevailed in Russia in many respects differed from its West European counterparts. The most significant characteristics of the Russian countryside were its communal ownership of land. Russian village commune known as “Mir” was the source of the country’s strength and imaginations. In Russia, the village commune was the main reference point for most of the social movements which emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries. Due to its communal form of production and absence of private property in land, certain forms of egalitarian social relations prevailed in the countryside irrespective of feudal and religious hierarchies. These egalitarian dimensions of the communal production even invited the attention of Karl Marx, who in his late life had given keen attention to the village commune existing in Russia (Shanin 1983).

Some of the fierce debates witnessed in the Russian society in the late 19th and 20th centuries between the advocates of commune tradition and the Marxian inspired advocates of emancipatory modernity mainly revolved around the merits and limitations.
of communal practices and imageries. Main characteristics of the Narodinik rural imageries was centred around the village commune, peasants and their socio-cultural life in the commune and the myth and legend related to nature and its cyclical changes in the countryside. They considered that the soul of the Russian society laid in the village communes. On the contrary, the advocate of emancipatory project promised a kind of modernity that brought about a new set of imageries and icons alien to the peasant society. After the consolidation of the Soviet power in the late 1920s onwards, it attempted to create these new rural imageries which reached its culmination in the collectivisation of Soviet agriculture in the 1930s. The new rural imageries brought forth by the Soviet Working class state were, in many ways a significant departure from the hitherto prevailed beliefs and imaginations about the countryside. The centre of the new Soviet rural imageries was the industrial proletariat and his material and cultural life in the factory and outside. The immense potential of the modern technology and mechanised heavy industrial production in the state owned factories and the kind of shop-floor relations emerged there profoundly changed the imagination of the people.

Modern socialist imageries propagated by the Soviet state were intended to attain two goals. The existing rural imageries and beliefs completely ignored the historical origin of those beliefs and it tried to provide a some kind of naturality to everything existing in the countryside. However, the new imageries propagated by the Soviet state effectively undermined the peasant essentialism and natural determinism inherent in the imageries and beliefs of the village commune. In fact, the imageries and icons brought by the party-state undermined various forms of constraint arbitrarily imposed by the past practices and revealed the potential of the human being to overcome the structural and material conditions through their labour power. The second goal of the new Soviet imageries was to propagate the social aspects of material production and the centrality of human labour in the production process. The point I am trying to make here is that the labour power of the human beings were materialised when he/she performed their labour power in a social settings and it is, in turn, the product of the past labour of the labourer and in other words, human labour is the social labour and the nature and character of the labour power carried out by the labourer is determined by the nature of the society. In short, labour performed by the individual is a social labour and it cannot have an existence without a collective. By these imageries the Soviet state tried to counter the imageries propagated by the capitalist societies.
The immense potential of the people to transform their conditions through collective labour undermined the individual-inspired changes preached by the capitalist imageries. The new social imageries brought by the state along with its material realisation profoundly transformed the Soviet population and kind of agro-industrial complex attached to the collective and state farms undermined the traditional conception of the rural. Due to massive influence of new rural imageries, one of the major aspirations of the co-operative collective farm workers and other rural dwellers were to become a state farm worker which entitled them to the status of an industrial proletariat. The image of an industrial proletariat who was disciplined and conscious about his duties and responsible to Socialist state was the icon most commonly propagated by the party state.

The introduction of neo-liberal agrarian reforms generated a new set of imageries and icons in conformity with the free-market ideology. New rural imageries propagated by the neo-liberal doctrine revolved around two major pillars of the capitalist society i.e. the self interest maximising rational individuals and the self-rectifying free market. One of the dominant features of the capitalist imageries was to ignore the structural feature of the concerned society which has a detrimental impact on the population. Varieties of imageries used by the contemporary capitalist societies, tried to project the behavioural aspects of the individuals as crucial factor deciding the fortunes of one's in a market economy. It considered the education as the most viable medium to initiate behavioural changes in an individual. Capitalist imageries also presume that the shift from the traditional pattern of social production and other such practices were essential conditions for the free-functioning of capitalist market economy. In fact, due to the virtual dominance of capitalist mode of production across the globe along with the emergence of liberal democracy as the most viable and ideal form of institutional arrangement, contributed to a situation by which imageries of capitalist social formation were considered as natural and normal phenomenon in the society. The kind of the hegemony and dominance attained by the capitalist social formation enabled it to propagate its various imageries through mass-media and educational institutions across globe. One of the capitalist prepositions is that the rational individuals would maximise his interest if he receives perfect information about various options in the market which negates the structural asymmetries prevailing in the contemporary capitalist societies. Another common capitalist imaginary is that,
capitalist market provides equal opportunity to every individual and often most of them were excluded from acquiring it due to the individual’s behavioural characteristics such as lack of hard work and inefficiency rather than the structural characteristics of the capitalist societies such as the ownership of the means of production by the capitalist and the exploitation, alienation and resultant marginalisation of the labourers in the capitalist production process.

The new neo-liberal imaginary intended to replace the imageries that were emerged in the Soviet period. Agrarian reforms brought out numerous imageries which were praising the virtues of individual rights, commercial farming and multiple ranges of consumer choices provided by the free-market, etc. were widely popularised in the countryside. The new social imageries in the rural areas advised the country folk to dissociate from the restructured collective and state farms and to abandon the varieties of social practices they followed which had emerged in the Soviet era. In the initial phase of the reform, neo-liberal imageries were projected as the most viable and least painful alternative to the inefficient, undemocratic and monolithic practices existing in the Soviet society. In the present juncture, two diametrically opposite tendencies are shaping the social practices of the people. The first tendency, preaching the ‘quality and spirit of individual responsibilities and values attached to it’ and the second one upholding the ‘still continuing spirit of mutual dependence and the quest for communal life’ (Joffe 2005). However, the painful social crisis generated by the neo-liberal agrarian reform in the countryside has contributed to the progressive decline in the number of people who are sympathetic to the new social imageries in the countryside.

Main Characteristics of the New Moral and Ethical Values In the Countryside

Systemic transition in the post-Soviet Russia fundamentally altered the moral and ethical values of the population. Rural population in Russia were most severely affected by the neo-liberal changes taking place in the agrarian social relations. In the Soviet period, many people had argued that the extreme form of control and restrictions imposed by the state against the multiple desires and needs of the population necessitated the emergence of number of illegal informal activities in the society. In the initial days of the reform programme, the neo-liberal theorists consistently claimed that the disbanding of different forms of restrictions prevailing in the command economy era would result in the formalisation of informal economic activities existing in the Soviet
While the new policy effectively undermined the moral and ethical practices which had evolved in the Soviet period, it has yet to provide any alternative moral and ethical values in the society. In fact, the nature and character of the moral and ethical values practices of the population to a large extent depends on the internal social dynamics of the concerned society and the socio-economic standard of living of the various classes of people in the society.

In the case of post-Soviet Russia, the systemic changes undergone by the society created a situation by which majority of the population were extremely marginalised and dislocated. The social scenario in the Russian countryside were more complex wherein the implementation of the reform programme resulted in the virtual collapse of social infrastructure and complete withdrawal of social provisions provided by the state apparatus which dragged the countryside into social anarchy and chaos more severe than in the past. Due to such pathetic social scenario, a substantial chunk of the population opted for all forms activities branded by the society as ethically and morally undesirable and unwelcome. In recent years, a survey conducted by two Russian sociologists in certain selected oblasti revealed that around fifty percent of the respondents consider theft from collective farms or other such public premises as legitimate and do not find anything wrong with it. The same number of respondent accepts that they themselves have stolen. Around ten percent of the respondents revealed that they hardly steal anything because there was nothing valuable existing to steal anymore. The severity of such practices were explicitly clear from the following facts provided by Mikhailov, the Governor of Pskov oblast, who reveals that “in the summer of 2000 villagers of his region repeatedly pulled down electric wires to sell as non-ferrous scrap metal in order to buy alcohol. As a result, dozens of villages stayed without electricity for weeks between April and June 2000”. And he also informed that “around 800 people perished while dismantling those wires” (Mikhailov cited in Joffe 2005: 192). In fact, during the Soviet era, the state had imposed many constraints on the desires and choices of the people. (On the contrary, when everything was privatised and capitalist market were offered to the Russian population with consumer goods and other entertainment avenues which ever attained in the past). However, it also generated multiple ways of social polarisation and marginalisation in the countryside. As a result, the marvellous consumer choices offered by the market was restricted to upper layer of the social ladder and in the countryside a substantial majority still remain as workers in
the restructured farms. Thus, the double burden faced by the rural poor, such as the exclusion from exercising their choice due to the lack of purchasing power and the socio-economic marginalisation due to structural changes, forced and compelled many of them to alter their moral and ethical convictions.

Rural Women and the Emerging Patterns of Gender Stratification

The introduction of the free-market economic policies in Russia profoundly transformed the socio-economic status of women in the Socialist period. Since women were placed at the margins of the family and other social hierarchies, the systemic changes and subsequent chaos and polarisation in society further undermined their social status. The neo-liberal paradigm of development systematically undermined the socio-economic infrastructure existing in the rural areas which had severe impact on those social groups who were placed in the lower ladder of rural social hierarchy.

In the Soviet times, women had attained a kind of social dignity, pride and respect similar to their counterpart in the advanced capitalist societies. In professions such as teaching, health care, clerical services and many other job in the service sector, Soviet women far-outnumbered their men counterparts. However, the social dignity and empowerment they acquired in the past were rapidly eroded by the changes taken place in the Russian society. Due to the widespread socio-economic collapse and marginalisation in the rural society, women and other social groups who constitute weakest link of the social hierarchies such as agricultural labourers experienced a sharp decline in their incomes. Rural Russia also witnessed the re-emergence of widespread wage differences and other gender based exclusions in the post-reform period. Cutting across occupations, the rural women were earning substantially lesser than their male counterpart for the same jobs. As a result, Stephen Wegren pointed out that in a household husband working as farm manger and wife as a farm worker earn substantially larger wage income than a household with wife working as farm manager and husband working as a farm worker (Wegren 2003). With the introduction of neo-liberal market regime in the countryside, there also emerged a tendency of giving preference to people from the privileged gender than females even if the latter were equally or in certain cases more skilled than their male competitive. These forms of recent gender discriminations were not per se the creation of the market forces, rather the kind of structural contradictions generated by it in the rural sphere provided the
The emergence of wide-spread informal activities in rural areas in many ways resulted in the erosion of some of the basic rights women had earned in the past. The major characteristics of the neo-liberal labour regimes as shown by many recent studies on shop-floor labour relations in the informal sectors across countries and specifically in China reveal that very often the basic needs were not allowed to perform during the work time. In fact, women constitute substantial portion of the labour force in the informal sector. In the Russian countryside, women from agricultural worker household or other such low paid occupation are forced to perform double labour due to their pathetic social conditions and poverty. As a result, women are working in the farms as wage labour and at the same time spending their leisure time in the household plot, apart from performing the usual household duties. In other words, most of the women in the agricultural labourer household also experience class dimensions of gender stratification. One of the other recent developments which adversely influence women are the changing gender composition of families due to the sharp decline in the life expectancy of the people along with the marginalisation and chaos in the society which resulted in a substantial rise of households with single head and most often it would be women. Likewise, due to the increasing consumption of alcohol among the men of early adulthood along with the acute socio-economic marginalisation resulted in the noted decline of the male population especially the age between twenty-five and to forty five. This, in turn, doubled the burden of women. Substantial percentage of the rural men, especially youth and people in the early adulthood are suffering from various kinds of body alignments mainly due to the excessive alcohol consumption. As a result, nearly forty percent of the households especially households headed by people below forty five are single woman-headed. Thus, a substantial chunk of the Russian women, especially in the rural areas work single-handedly to generate income for their families. In short, the neo-liberal transition taking places in the Russian countryside have created various forms of gender-related stratification. Women who are placed at the lowest edge of the social hierarchy witnessed class dimensions of gender stratifications. How the structural crisis altered the demographic profile of the rural population will be discussed in the following sections.

**Migration and Its Impact on the Demographic Composition in Rural Russia**

One of the major factors that crucially determine the nature of the rural social structure is the process of demographic changes taking place in the countryside. "The demise of
the command economy and the resultant systemic changes leads to the emergence of substantially greater income inequalities, including spatial inequalities both between and within regions which prompt migration from poor to rich regions. However the post communism also perpetuates many soviet practices, especially informal ones spawned by unplanned attributes of the planned economy and often rooted in pre-revolutionary Russian culture” (White 2007: 887). The population outflow and inflow in rural Russia is not a recent phenomenon. Throughout the Soviet period, there was a steady flow of rural population migration to the upcoming urban centres. Grigory Ioffe cited Anatoly Vishenovskyi who pointed out that “of those urbanites who were sixty over in the 1990, only 15 per cent were urbanites by birth; of those in their forties about 40 per cent were born in urban areas; and only among those population cohorts aged twenty-two or younger are more than half lifelong urbanites. However latter group constitutes for only 37 per cent of the Russia’s urban population” (Ioffe 2001: 48). The rural migration into the urban centres begins with the collectivisation programme and it continued throughout the Soviet period with varying momentum. Throughout that period, the strength of the agrarian population experienced steady decline.

The late Soviet period, especially during Brezhnev era, marked by steady improvements in rural wages and living conditions slightly changed the motivation of the rural migrants. The early post-Soviet years witnessed decline in the migration from rural areas to the urban centres. According to Zayonchkovskaya, “this was because towns witnessed economic stagnation and declining living standard. Life was expensive, jobs were scarce, and educational institutions lost its former prestige. Moreover, villagers hoped to be given the right to own their land, encourage them to stay put” (Zayonchkovskaya cited in White 2007: 894). However, in contrast to the initial expectations of the people, agricultural wages plummeted far below industrial equivalents; rural to urban migration retained its momentum prevailed in the late Soviet era (Ibid). In fact, between 1991 and 1998, the Russian population decreased from 148.5 million to 146.7 million (1.8 million people), while the rural population grew from 38.7 million to 39.7 million (an increase of 913,000 people). At the same time, the rural share of the total Russian population increased from 26.1 per cent to almost 27 per cent. However, between 1995 and 1998, the rural population again started to decline. In two years, it lost more than 310,000 people and the rural proportion of the total population declined very slightly by about 0.03 percent (Sharkov 2001: 64).

For the first time in many consecutive decades, the rural population witnessed a net increase in its strength in 1992. The major reason for the net increase of the
population was the return in-migration of the substantial chunk of the people were ethnic Russians from former republics of Soviet Union and migrants from the stagnated urban centres within Russia. Some of the rural in migrants were people from the rural areas of the former Soviet republics. A certain segment of the rural in-migrants were people who were working in the urban centres, but the sharp rise in urban living cost along with lack of cheap accommodation forced them to temporary move to villages in proximity with the urban centres with the hope to move back to the city as and when the situation improved. In other words, since 1990, rural to urban migration decreased considerably and the migration pattern witnessed short reverse trends in-between 1992-1993, when the urban to rural migration outnumber the conventional pattern of migration. Another factor which contributed to the increase in rural population was the administrative reclassification made by the state. It was a common practice since Soviet period to make periodic administrative reclassification by which small towns in the provincial Russia merged to the larger villages nearby. Since 1991 to 19987 overall around 797,940 people changed their status as urban dwellers due to the administrative reclassification (Sharkov 2001). The nature of in-migration of people from various regions of former Soviet republic and the diverse places within Russia are given in the table below:

**Table 6: Distribution of Rural Migration Flows, 1989-1995 (thousands)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Immigration from urban areas outside Russia</th>
<th>Immigration from rural areas outside Russia</th>
<th>Emigration from rural areas Russia to outside Russia</th>
<th>Urban to rural migration within Russia</th>
<th>Net rural migration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>157.6</td>
<td>143.0</td>
<td>89.6</td>
<td>-483.9</td>
<td>-272.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>198.9</td>
<td>145.5</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>-339.2</td>
<td>-72.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>158.2</td>
<td>103.1</td>
<td>181.5</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>57.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>258.8</td>
<td>113.5</td>
<td>173.7</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>289.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>247.5</td>
<td>110.1</td>
<td>132.3</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>264.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>262.9</td>
<td>145.3</td>
<td>93.1</td>
<td>-42.7</td>
<td>272.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>190.5</td>
<td>105.8</td>
<td>99.3</td>
<td>-108.8</td>
<td>96.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>142.0</td>
<td>79.6</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>-106.4</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>141.4</td>
<td>79.6</td>
<td>64.4</td>
<td>-100.2</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Dmitry Sharkov in Engelmann and Pavlakovic (ed.) 2001:72; complied by Dmitry Sharkov based on the Goskomstat's official publications

However, since 1994, the migration trend regained earlier patterns. Stephen Wegren identifies three set of reasons for the continuing out-migration from the rural areas to the urban centres. The factors he identifies with the first set consist of features
which shape the labour condition in the countryside that includes low wages, abundance
of manual labour and lack of shift work. The second group includes cultural service
conditions which include the low quality of service sector, geographical isolation of the
villages and the lack of anonymity in private life. Factors placed in the third group were
macro-behavioural aspect of society in nature such as change in social psychology,
especially when people were attracted by the urban social imageries (Wegren1994: 283-

Structural characteristics of the society have significant influence in shaping the
people’s desire for migrating to places far away from their homeland to find better
avenues of life. Mainly migration processes have had a dual impact on the rural society
in Russia. Firstly, the age and other population characteristics of the rural out-migrants
have profound impacts on the internal social dynamics of the countryside. Rural
educated youths and other such people who have technical and vocational training
constitute the major component of the rural out-migration. The state of the rural
economy and lack of the social infrastructure in the countryside to provide better
income earning employment forced much of the rural youth to opt for migration in the
urban spaces.

Likewise, the virtual collapse of the economy in the aftermath of the agrarian
reforms directly contributed to the emergence of vast masses of unemployed people in
the rural areas irrespective of ages which also paved the way for increasing out-
migration from the countryside. Secondly, rural migration paves the way for increased
flow of monetary income from the urban centres to the rural areas through the
remittances the migrants send back to their families. Most of the rural out-migrants
continue to support their families and regularly travel back to their native places.
However, the precise impacts on the rural economy from the remittances sent by the
rural-out migrants have not been established. The major adverse effects of the rural out-
migration were the shrinkage of social and human capital in the countryside (Sharkov
2001; Wegren 1995; White 2007). In fact, most of the educated youth who move to the
urban industrial centres sooner than later to be internalised by the imageries of urban
industrial life. The following table reveals the nature of rural out-migration trend from
early 1960s to late 1990s.
Table 7: Components of Rural Population Change in Russia, 1961-1997, in Thousands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total change</th>
<th>Natural increase</th>
<th>Net migration</th>
<th>reclassification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1961-65</td>
<td>-2176</td>
<td>3483</td>
<td>-4202</td>
<td>-1457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966-70</td>
<td>-4200</td>
<td>1555</td>
<td>-5171</td>
<td>-584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971-75</td>
<td>-4668</td>
<td>998</td>
<td>-5073</td>
<td>-594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976-80</td>
<td>-2343</td>
<td>719</td>
<td>-2591</td>
<td>-471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-85</td>
<td>-1591</td>
<td>788</td>
<td>-1836</td>
<td>-542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>-272</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>-392</td>
<td>-123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>-199</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>-391</td>
<td>-41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>-208</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>-331</td>
<td>-57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>-208</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>-275</td>
<td>-78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>-58</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>-72</td>
<td>-73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>-33</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>-184</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>-227</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>-113</td>
<td>-219</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>-147</td>
<td>-239</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>-133</td>
<td>-233</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


However, in the recent year some of the regional governments in the Russian Federation have initiated many measures to reduce the rural out-flow of population into the urban areas. While commenting on the increasing irregularities in the population in-migration and out-migration in the countryside, Valeri Patsiokovskii observed:

in many rural households adult children, both sons and daughters, who have left school or graduated from a technical college or university, and have never worked, identify themselves as unemployed ... Obviously this does not stop them helping their parents on the small holding. But they do not want to be self-employed ... As ever, they were attached by regular employment and the bright lights of the city, i.e. a way of life very different from the cares of farming. Most of them view their situation as very temporary indeed. However, in reality many are destined to become the first generation of new self-sufficient small-scale peasant farmers (Valeri Patsiokovskii cited in White 2007: 900).

The other major trends which decisively shape the social structure in the countryside are the process of increasing population-based spatial stratification in the rural areas. Moreover, due to the stagnation of rural economy compared to urban areas, people are increasingly moving to areas spatially situated in proximity to the big industrial centres. In fact, until and unless the rural economy is substantially recovers
from the present crisis and uncertainty, the process of population out-migration would continue with varying intensity and momentum.

Nature and Characteristics of Informal Activity in the Countryside

The scholars identified with the broad liberal ideological persuasions raised severe criticisms against the Soviet system for its lack of respect for individual initiative and aspirations which they considered as the fundamental motivating force of development and progress in modern society. Throughout the Soviet period, party-state imposed several restrictions on the individual initiatives. Thus, they treated the lack of individual freedom in the Soviet society as the major reason for the widespread informal activities in the economy. In the absence of the private property and the market mechanism to regulate the forces of demand and supply as happened in the market economies, the Soviet population were dragged to various forms of informal activities outside the purview of the organised sector to satisfy their needs as pointed out by the liberal critics of the planned economy. Some of the Western literature on the Soviet period stated that in the fifties and sixties, informal agriculture outnumbered the organised sector in terms of the quantity of the goods produced in the country especially in the case of foodstuff. For the convenience of analysis and evaluations, most of the studies by the public agencies and scholars focussed on the organised social and economic activities in the society. Most often the informal social and economic activities happening daily in the society were hardly analysed or documented unless it received some form of public attention that emanated from perception that it was a possible threat to the formal practices of the organised sector (Pavlovskaya 2004).

Contrary to the predictions of the free-market expert, post-Soviet systemic changes and departures rather than legalising the informal activities prevailing in the countryside led the mushroom growth of informal activities in the society. In fact, neoliberal transition also paved the way for the informalisation of the formal economic activities existing in the Socialist period. The kind of profound impact it generated in the rural society were such a range that all forms of hitherto social practices and formal social networks between the different agrarian actors were redundant and unable to provide the roles it performed in the past, mainly due to the dissolution of the structural foundation of it by the reform programmes. Various segments of the rural population were forced to engage in diverse forms of informal work mainly through the social
network they possessed such as extended family ties, friends, neighbourhood ties, renewing the link with the rural out-migrants in the urban areas and through the ties with the restructured collective and state farms (Pavlovskaya 2004; Wegren 1995, 2003, 2004; Clarke 1998, 2000, 2004; Ioffe 2001, 2005; Small 2007). Dominant characteristics of the emergent informal economy in the rural areas were wide-spread demonetisation of the economic transactions in the formal sectors like restructured and collective and state farms and employees and workers often received their wage in the forms of goods in kind rather than in monetary form. In the countryside, in most cases currency was virtually replaced by the new form of barter transactions of goods in kind between various actors of the rural economy. Day-to-day economic transactions in the countryside such as between farms, households to households, farms to household and economic exchange between various social agencies in rural areas, etc. virtually manifested into exchange of goods in kind. Often workers in the restructured farms waited for months to receive their wages and on many occasions, they received their arrears in the form of goods in kinds.

The ironic dimension of these developments was that neo-liberal agrarian reform was implemented in the countryside with the intention of transferring all forms of rural transaction of goods and services under the purview of market forces. In fact, the basic goal of the restructuring of the state and collective farms into cooperate entities was aimed at removing all forms of barriers and various inefficiencies prevailing in the countryside which created various forms of market imperfection and thereby curtailed the autonomous functioning of the market mechanisms. It considered all forms of intervention by the state in the rural economy such as through direct subsidies, financial assistance, assistance for farms for purchasing various farm infrastructures, and various social provisions provided by the state and other public agencies as obstacles to the free functioning of the market forces.

However, the concrete manifestations of the market mechanism in the countryside demonstrate that rather than expanding the purview of market, the new changes contributed to the virtual disappearance commodity and labour market in the countryside (Clarke 1995, 2004). Most of the people in the rural areas were forced to engage in various form of work in the informal sectors in order to just prevent their household from the clutches of absolute poverty and social deprivation for the substantial majority of the rural dwellers were unable to maintain their families with the
income they earned from their work in the formal sector. As a result, multiple forms of informal economic activities emerged in the countryside. In short, Russia is undergoing the process of structural transition from Socialist command economy to full-fledged market economy and the changes generated by these processes completely undermined the dominance of the formal economic practices prevailing in the countryside. At such a juncture, access to multiple levels of social network and diverse forms of informal activities, to a certain extent, prevent large chunks of the rural dwellers from chronic poverty and marginalisation in the rural areas. The forthcoming section examines the nature and pattern of emerging social stratification in the countryside.

Response of the Rural Population to the Neo-liberal Reforms: Is it Resistance or Adaptation?

The introduction of the neo-liberal agrarian reforms in Russia generated multiple forms of tendencies and practices in the countryside. In one respect, the new development model initiated in the countryside to a significant level attained its goal. The fundamental intentions of the neo-liberal reformers were to undermine the primacy and centrality of the Soviet era collective and state farms in the social life of the rural population in the countryside. In fact, the way in which free-market regime was implemented in the countryside, reveals that the new programme were designed with the sole intention of destroying and eradicating all forms of institutional structures and practices which prevailed in the agrarian areas of Soviet era.

Even though the reform advocates propagated to the rural dwellers that the disappearance of the Soviet-era institutions and social organisation of production would necessarily lead to the free-market form and social arrangements similar to the advanced capitalist countries, it hardly materialised in Russia. Moreover, neo-liberal theorists argued that the virtual step-down of the state from the rural scene along with the removal of various forms of restrictions and constraints imposed by the previous regime would lead to massive popular appeal and support for the market regime among the rural dwellers. Agrarian reformers in Russia attempted to bring all forms of social life in the countryside under the logic of the free-market without even creating the necessary social infrastructure for the autonomous functioning of the market mechanism (Ioffe 2005; Wegren 2004, 2007; Clarke 1998, 2004). By implementing free-market regime into the agrarian sector, the neo-liberal theorists intended to eradicate and wipe out the
social imageries of the collective social life prevailing in the Soviet countryside from the mindset of agrarian dwellers. Moreover, they visualised that the neo-liberal inspired structural and social changes in the countryside would sprout the seeds for the entrepreneurial skills and quest for individual initiatives among the country folk and this, in turn, paved the way for the emergence of a large group of commercial farmers in the countryside. While analysing the neo-liberal agrarian regime in Russia, Lee-Ann Small remarks:

recommendations for immediate shock therapy through rapid privatisation of land and industry appear to have been loosely based on neo-classical economic reasoning, whereby the inefficiencies of the Soviet system could be resolved by setting free the invisible hand of the market. Agricultural employees were expected to crave land ownership and the freedom to run their own business and see the results of their own labour, with the result that they would work more efficiently than they had on state owned operations. Little thought was given to the historical preconditions for the market development, the length of time over which the social, political and economic infrastructure to support commercial agriculture had developed in the West or for that matter, the infrastructure supporting collective agriculture in Soviet regions. In any case agrarian theorists have long recognised that agriculture has not historically behaved like other industries in terms of capital penetration (Small 2007: 31).

However, the concrete manifestations of the neo-liberal agrarian regime revealed that it miserably failed in many respects in creating a viable alternative to the kind of economic and social relations existing in the Russian rural sphere. Most of the literature on the post-Soviet agrarian transition in Russia viewed the process from the structural functionalist framework by separating the transition into different compartments and thereby ignoring the power and capacity of the dominant social forces and ideology in crucially influencing moulding the nature and response of the structure and agency in the countryside (Wegren 2003, 2004; O’Brien, Patsiorkovski and Wegren 2004). Many of these studies also provided undue emphasis to the behavioural response of rural people as the crucial determining element in shaping the direction and possible outcome of the reforms.

The questions of the ‘peasant resistance’ and ‘peasant adaptation’ were one of the major themes in the agrarian studies which received widespread scholarly responses. Eric Wolf, a leading exponent of the peasant resistance, argues that peasants in various militant ways act against the penetration of dominant practices into the countryside. The middle strata of the peasants would be most severely influenced by the incursions of commercialisation and market relations into the rural areas. The middle strata of the peasants would closely link to the traditional practices and the penetration of the
practices associated with market would deprive them of traditional social ties (Wolf 1969). James Scott has come out with a variety of interpretations on the peasant resistance. Scott argues that the violation of the peasant moral economy by the externally-induced changes would force them to rebel against it. In his later work, he further clubs varieties of practices regularly followed by peasants as the everyday form of resistance to preserve their interest (Scott 1976,1985). Discussing the relevance of peasant resistance in the post-Soviet context, Wegren remarks that “short of revolution, however, our understanding of ‘resistance’ that flows from the moral economy model is diluted because it becomes a catch-all concept to describe every kind of peasant action. Resistances seen in this light, fails to distinguish socio-economic identity, motivations for resistance or the politics of those who are resisting. For instance, resistance flowing from the moral economy fails to distinguish between labourers at the subsistence level who are exploited and commercial farmers who lobby for lower input prices and higher purchase prices” (Wegren 2004: 373). There were many occasions in the past when peasants militantly resisted against the diverse form exploitation and land alienation encountered by them. Similarly, on numerous occasions in the past and in recent times dominant social practices and market regimes have pushed them further and further to the margin of the society and instead of resisting it, peasants have opted for multiple new avenues to overcome such crisis.

As far as the question of peasant resistance to neo-liberal changes in the post-Soviet Russia is concerned, commentators have differing opinions. People who advocate the existence of various forms of peasant resistance in the rural Russia, according to Wegren, seems to confuse a lack of adaptation with resistance. Lack of adaptation is a choice for inaction and may result from calculations about a hostile economic environment or because the household suffers from a variety of disadvantages in human or productive capital (Wegren 2004: 375). The leading exponents of the peasant resistance approach were Grigory Ioffe and Tatyana Nefedova who proposed the thesis of the ‘cultural continuity’. The cultural continuity thesis argues that Russian countryside practised egalitarian and communal forms of production and land ownership for centuries and therefore it was against the cultural practices of the peasants this was major reason for the peasant for resisting the introduction of the market regime into the countryside. However, those who were critics of the peasant resistance approach argue
that the notion of peasant resistance and cultural continuity were based on ahistorical premises.

The historical evidence reveals that in the past, on many occasions, peasants undertook collective action to obtain land or to defend their land plots. In the early decades of the 20th century, the Stolypin Agrarian Reforms introduced by the Tsarist regime was aimed at creating a strata of private, farmers in the country. Even in the Soviet era, on many occasions, peasants demanded the ownership rights over land (Wegren 2004). Carol Leonard who supports the thesis of peasant resistance provides three reasons which were indications of the peasants' rebellious approach towards reform. He considers lack of de-collectivisation, the increase in barter transaction and an increase in farm debt as evidence for rural resistance (Leonard 2000). In fact, these factors, to a large extent, are shaped by the broad macro socio-economic factors and the crisis of the rural social and economic infrastructure than the direct conscious action by the rebellious peasants.

Scholars like Wegren are the leading advocates of the peasants' adaptation in the countryside. Being the leading contributors of the agrarian transition in post-Soviet Russia, with massive empirical data through numerous surveys conducted in various regions of the country, they suggested that rather than resisting against the privatisation policies most of the rural dwellers in varying ways cope with realities. Wegren did not completely reject the occurrence of peasant resistance in the rural areas, but said that in many cases it was not per se the resistance by the peasants, rather it was propagated as the major factor for the failure of the reform policy in the rural areas. He further argues that "Much of what is characterised as ‘peasant resistance’ stems from the frustration by policy makers, consultants, and even academics that rural Russia did not adopt wholesale the package of neo-liberal reforms that were thrust upon Russia. In short, rural dwellers and perhaps Russia as a whole did not respond as they ‘ought’ to and in the ways that were anticipated. Expected outcomes never materialised. The default explanation for this occurrence, which eschews critical analysis, lays the blame on a ‘weak state’ a strong ‘agrarian lobby’ communist opposition and resistance by the rural population. Given the hostile economic and political environment that confronted rural actors in Russia, the fact that any adaptation occurred within a single decade may be considered remarkable" (Wegren 2004: 379). Even if one agrees with the lack of the adaptive behaviour as sign of resistance from the peasants, it would have been overt,
directed at someone and demanded concrete action. “Thus, the overt violence, protest, demonstrations, petition signing, work stoppage, increased theft, and absenteeism might be considered forms of rural resistance” (Ibid: 382). Any of the above modes of protest noted any qualitative increase in its occurrence, frequency or intensity. in the neo-liberal phase and a meagre rise in some of such protest in few rural areas Russia.

However, a survey conducted by Efendiev et al. in Belgorod oblast “which possess some of the world’s best Chernozen soils. Unlike Non-Chhernozem Zone of Russia, in Belgorod, most of the villages were large and younger generations were well represented in the villages. The region is compact and has one of the best developed network of paved roads in Russia; natural gas and piped water are available in every village, although their availability in each house is subject to the household’s income constraints ...” In the oblast, “there were no pension arrears; salaried employees in the public sector were regularly paid. Also, outlet were created for household to sell surpluses of their own output, they were assisted with transport of such surpluses. However, despite decidedly more favourable external condition for rural inhabitants than in most Russian regions, only 27.8 percent of all household surveyed perceived their livelihood as tolerable ... Over half of all household barely made ends meet; they wore old clothes, and any necessary purchase beyond daily food put people’s budget under inordinate strain and required borrowing money. In-depth interviews and observations inside people’s home showed that these self-perceptions probably understated the actual level of deprivation. Of all households, those of the retired fared the worst; 16% of them lived in abject poverty, and 72 percent barely made ends meet” (Efendiev & Bolotina cited in Ioffe 2005: 194-95).

The most advanced areas of the Russian countryside experienced such level of miseries and social deprivation, that it is needless to substantiate anything further to reveal the state of the social life in the overwhelming majority of Russian villages in the post-Socialist era. Wegren concludes that “in general, during the 1990s, the Russian countryside was remarkably quiescent. One might argue that the very poorest segments of the population are too busy subsisting to have time for protest; or one might argue the rural population was to busy adapting to have time to resist” (Wegren 2004: 383). The process of rural social adaptation taking place in the countryside demonstrate that, those social group who benefit more from the new developments were also more adapted to the present scenario. On the contrary, those social group who least benefited
from reforms and who also constitute the lower margin of the rural social hierarchy, were the people least adapted to the market-oriented structural changes.

Main Characteristics of the Emerging Agrarian Capitalism in Russia

There exists a divergent view among scholars on question of the possible trajectory of agrarian capitalism in Russia. Most of the scholars are of the view that the socio-economic conditions prevailing in the countryside at the present juncture creates many constrains for the possible emergence of capitalist form of agrarian production in the country. They also conclude that unless and until there is any meaningful improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the vast masses of the country folk, there would be limited chances for creating a social consensus for the complete reversal of the present status-quo in favour of the capitalist form of agricultural production (Wegren 2003, 2004, 2007; Kitching 1998a, 1998b; Chandra 2001). In the early phase of the privatisation programme, some of the peasant workers attached to the former collective and state farm were supportive of the reform measures. However, their number considerably decreased when the reform process unfolded its real forms in the later period. A survey conducted by Bogdanovsky in the late 1990s in four selected oblasti, namely Vladir, Tambov, Moscow and Samara among the workers of the restructured collective farm revealed that only one out of ten supported the reform programme and a sizable majority of the respondents were critical of the programme and some of the respondent whose number were considerably large compared to the group who supports the programme were, undecided, whether to support or oppose the privatisation policy (Bogdanovsky in World Bank 2000). Likewise, according to Nirmal Chandra, "in a 1995 survey of farms under various forms of ownership, four out of five employees expressed a desire to keep their land in collective use. Earlier, in 1990, opinion was little more positive about the reform; 16 per cent of the employees welcomed the introduction of the private ownership of land as the legal basis for economic activities, another 36 per cent would accept it only for their subsidiary farms, private housing, etc., and 40 per cent strongly opposed private ownership of land. Thus, over the years the AIC (Agro-industrial complexes i.e. the restructured collective and state farms) employees became much more sceptical about the benefit of reform. The changes of attitude reflect their material experience. On the one hand 80 per cent felt that their living standards had declined considerably and 60 per cent observed that social services such as schools hospitals and libraries, etc in the rural areas had less accessible. At the same time 60 per
cent of the respondents faced a higher rate of employment than before. The collective farm offered help in many ways to make their subsidiary plots more productive than they could own their own” (Chandra 2001: 197-98).

Gavin Kitching made extensive field studies in rural Russia in the mid-1990s and the findings of his study informs that nearly 10 percent of the restructured collective and state farms successfully adapted to the market regime and thereby strengthened economically, but also dominated in their own regions the marketing of collectively produced grains, feed crops, and also of fruits, vegetables and livestock products from the private plots. Kitching also demonstrates that some of the newly-formed individualised private plot agriculture have also strengthened their positions and have the potential to further expand their operations. However, it still in many ways depended on the collective farms and the kind of symbiotic relation that emerged between them in many respects explain its success in a relatively short period. According to Kitching, the managers of the re-structured collective and state farms would perform the crucial role in the possible trajectories of the agrarian capitalist development in Russia (Kitching 1998a, 1998b). Kalugina, in a study for the World Bank, reveals that in each province of Russia, some of the restructured collective and state farms are functioning successfully. It had also built large commercial structures and modern agro-industrial companies. The study also predicts that then have the potential to become centres of scientific and technological progress in the countryside. However, it still constitutes less than 8 percent of the farms in the rural areas (Kalugina cited in Chandra 2002: 199-200).

However, Stephen Wegren dissociates with the conclusion made by Kitching and argues that if land concentration is an essential characteristic of the agrarian class formation, it was not taking place in the rural areas. He also pointed out that the numbers of restructured farms have remained constant in recent years and there hardly exists a possibility of dissolution of the weaker restructured farms. Wegren also raises doubts about the potential of the well-performing farms to withhold competition from larger agro-industrial actors in the global market. Although, the field survey by Wegren (Wegren 2003, 2004), demonstrated that increasing income and social differentiation taking place in the countryside, it hardly generated the kind of income differentials prevailing in the urban areas. In the countryside, the top 20 percent of the rural population received only 35 percent of money income which was in any case not a significant difference while compared to other rural societies.
Nirmal Chandra also shares the pessimism raised by the Stephen Wegren on the possible development capitalism in the countryside. According to Chandra, "first one must underline the importance of egalitarian rural income distribution as a cementing factor, binding together AIC members. Since they are all co-owners now, they can to be easily tricked or cajoled into surrendering their rights. Further, contrary to the neoliber al myth, capitalist development elsewhere has required the enormous backing of the state (financial and non-financial, direct and indirect) for the domestic capitalist class as against both other classes within the country and foreign capital. But the Russian state is incapable of fulfilling these tasks" (Chandra 2002: 200). One of the major features of the agrarian capitalist development is the emergence of a large mass of free agricultural wage labour in the rural areas. The state of the rural lab or market in rural Russia solely depends on the restructured collective and state farms which still remain the principal source of wage employment in the rural areas. Even though land market emerged in the rural areas, the proportioned rural population's participation in the land market is so highly uneven that substantial majority hardly made any attempt to participate in it due to their socio-economic marginalisation.

However, in recent years, the dominant theories of post-Socialist transitions to free-market economy and its possible trajectories received wide-range of criticisms from scholars working in different disciplinary frameworks whose commonality were that they raised fundamental question against the epistemological foundations of the modern Enlightenment values and its rationality. Moreover, these critics of the transition theories treated the conventional theories on social transition such as transition from feudalism to capitalism, or capitalism to socialism, etc. as the process of monolithic, homogeneous, pre-determined and teleological change with a certain range of precision in its process and outcomes. These scholars cutting across different social science disciplines and humanities inspired by the varieties of tendencies such as post-Structuralism, French Regulation Theory, Discourse Theory, Post Modernism, Post-Colonialism, post-Marxism and American Institutional Sociology, etc. negated values offered by the European Modernity and Enlightenment as highly reductionist, essentialist and teleological which ignored fundamental diversity in social values, structures and cultural practices prevailing across societies. These critics argued that day-to-day social practices exist across societies differed in varying ways from branding such practices as capitalist, socialist, feudal, etc.
In fact, they considered that multiple forms of practices and structures prevailed and continue to exist in the Western capitalist and in erstwhile socialist societies. Due to the hegemonic status of the Modernity and Enlightenment rationality, these conventional grand narratives only focussed on macro structures and process and virtually ignored the regional and local specificities and socio-cultural structures and practices. American economic and institutional sociologists like Victor Nee, Mark Granovetter, David Stark and many others postulate the articulation of path dependency in post-socialist societies because of the persistence of the mixed capitalist and no capitalist economic institutions and practices. “Path-dependency holds that emerging social and economic practices are rooted in past institutions and continue to modify in response to the changing context. Therefore, socialism and capitalism are not as mutually exclusive as is commonly assumed, and, most importantly, continuity between past and present institutional forms can be discerned. Although the path dependency approach focuses on institutions, it also provides insight to theorise a continuity of social hierarchies embedded within these systems, including hierarchies of class and gender” (Pavlovskaya 2004: 334).

In fact, the fundamental weakness of these new theories and approaches are that it kept silence or ignored the structural hierarchies and asymmetries prevailing in the contemporary capitalist societies across globe. The political economic foundation of these hierarchies and practices has hardly received any serious attention from these scholars. The past historical experiences of various societies in different part of the world shows and inform us that fundamentally changing the political economic foundations of the existing institutional structures and practices are the essential requirements for any meaningful social transformation thereby reducing exploitation and social asymmetries. By ignoring or reducing the pre-eminence of the capitalist mode of productions and free-market regime in shaping and transforming the desires, values and practices of people and societies across the globe, they in fact undermined any possibility for emerging as an alternative political economic agenda to the present status-quo.

Conclusion

Contrary to the prediction and expectations of the supporters of the agrarian reforms in Russia, the penetration of capitalist relation to the countryside has been slower than its
penetration into the industrial sector. This is also dictated by number of specificities existing in the Russian countryside that necessitated the presence of the collectivised farming at least in the short run to prevent further decline in the agricultural production. Moreover, the symbiotic relations that existed between a majority of the rural population and the collective and state farms in the Soviet period still continue to exist with the restructured collective farms and it continues to shape one's status in the rural social hierarchy. Most of the agrarian dwellers were unwilling to leave the farms by getting the legally sanctioned shares possessed by them because of their continuing conformity with the multiple social functions performing by the collective farms even after its restructuring into profit-oriented corporate economic entities. Even ruling elites in Russia realised after the initial enthusiasm for the market fundamentalism that without the presence of the collective farm, the very success of the family-oriented household production could not be sustained in its present form. They also realised that the mere consideration of collective farm as an agricultural-producing economic unit was unable to provide any meaningful explanations to the continuing influence of these farms in the day to day social life of the rural population. Looking from the vantage point of the neo-liberal perceptions of the 'self interest maximising rational peasants operating in the economics of scale,' would never help to grasp the multiple social functions performing by seemingly economic agencies like the collective farms in the post-Soviet Russia (Small 2007).

Even though the process and tendencies generated by the free-market regime failed in materialising its main goals, it contributed to a scenario by which increasing social and economic differentiations are taking place in the Russian countryside. The omnipotent role of the larger farms, to certain extent, reduced the expansion and penetration of the social infrastructure such as labour market, land market and local banking and non-banking financial intermediaries which are essential requirements for the development of the nascent agrarian bourgeoisie in the Russian countryside. The emergent pattern of social differentiation in the Russian countryside is in such a form that vast majority of the agricultural workers and people placed in similar socio-economic locations constitute the lower ladder of the emerging class hierarchy in the rural society. The former managers and other such professionals in the former collective and state farms and present managers of the restructured farms along with a meagre proportion of the new independent farmers constitute the upper echelons of the rural
class structure. Rural women in general and those who belong to the agricultural worker families were one of the most marginalised segments of the rural population. The emergence of massive poverty, both absolute and relative, among various segments of the rural population virtually undermined the social status they attained in the socialist period. The way in which the neo-liberal market regime was implemented in the rural society also resulted in decline and disappearances of most of the formal practices and structures prevailing in the countryside. Moreover, the spread of the multiple forms of informal activities in the Russian countryside in fact reveal the extent of the socio-economic crisis encountering the rural population. The massive withdrawal of the state from the social provisions and other such infrastructure assistance in the rural sphere, directly led to the virtual collapse of the social sectors like health care facilities and educational infrastructure in the rural areas. In short, the past one and half decades of the systemic transition process in Russia, towards the neo-liberal model of free-market regime have in multiple ways transformed the rural social structure. The virtual step-down of the state from its social obligations along with the inherent contradictions of the free-market regime has pushed the lives of the majority of rural dwellers to a state of mere subsistence.