CHAPTER 10
FROM INSTITUTIONS TO SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONERS - II:
IRMA

In the last Chapter, we have looked into the academic and field activities of the scholar-practitioners of rural development in the specific context of NIRD. The NIRD belongs to that category of institutions that are promoted, supported and governed by the state. It matters little whether these are departments of the government or registered as autonomous societies. In marked contrast to the NIRD, the IRMA seems to have been completely autonomous from the state. As an institution, its relation with the state has been of a ‘purely client-service provider type’ (see Shah 2000). In this chapter, our focus is on the scholar-practitioners working at the IRMA. Our endeavour here is to unravel the IRMA’s institutional mandate (its mission and vision) in relation to the professional activities of scholar-practitioners working there. We try to underscore the distinctive attributes of ‘scholar-practitioners of rural management’ while delineating the IRMA’s institutional trajectory of growth and development. Towards the end of this chapter, we attempt a comparative assessment of the NIRD and the IRMA in a comparative framework.

IRMA and the Burden of Rural Producers’ Co-operatives

Given its institutional trajectory as a rural management institute actively promoted by the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), the IRMA has had an oblique relationship with the state (see Chapter 8). Although it has received state support in many ways, the state has been a remote, and largely insignificant, presence in its affairs. As Dr. Chaudhary, one of the faculty members, explains:
The relationship between the state and the rural development institutions needs to be clarified. Unlike many state agencies IRMA is autonomous. However, in an extended sense, it is also a state institution. Since the Act under which it is registered is a state act and has not been created by IRMA. It would be better to look at IRMA for purposes of comparison with government institutes like NIRD.

However, the IRMA did not have to justify itself in the eyes of the state as such owing to a variety of reasons: it did not depend on the state for funds; it had to address the concerns of a previously well-demarcated constituency, that is, rural producers' co-operatives; and more importantly, it rode on the success and glory of its promoter, the NDDB. For all practical purposes, it has derived its institutional sustenance from the NDDB, and has historically located itself in the larger ideological framework of its sponsor. No wonder, it has continued to carry the burden of rural producers' co-operatives till this day. Indeed, it has been difficult to shed its birthmarks even for an institution of the IRMA's reputation, as we will see below.

The peculiar history of IRMA as an institution is amply reflected in the academic background and work experiences of its faculty members. In terms of numbers, its faculty strength has never crossed the upper limit of thirty. Very often it has been in the range of twenty-twenty-five. At the time of our fieldwork, the faculty strength stood at twenty-one. Though small in number, faculty members come from a highly diversified background. There are management graduates as well as agricultural scientists. There are mechanical and chemical engineers as well as economists and commerce/finance graduates. We have erstwhile bank officers as faculty. Then there are sociologists and psychologists. Interestingly, 90 percent of the IRMA faculty have had prior work experience in other institutes/universities and agricultural and corporate sectors. Even those who have joined the IRMA as their first work assignment had parallel job offers elsewhere. That is, they opted to
work at the IRMA. In other others, elements of deliberate choice have informed our scholar-practitioners’ decision to work at the IRMA, and not elsewhere, as evidenced by their interviews.

Roughly half of the present faculty opted for the IRMA as their work destination as they thought that working there would help them consolidate their previous research interests. Their assessment of the IRMA’s vision and mission matched with the type of research work they had earlier accomplished. They wanted to pursue their careers in those fields and found the IRMA to be a congenial place for that. For example, Dr. Shailendra, after having worked on the impact of regional rural banks on poverty alleviation for his Ph.D. degree at the Institute of Social and Economic Change (ISEC), Bangalore, preferred the IRMA to the University of Mysore. Similarly, Dr. Singh, having done research on contract farming at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Thiruvananthapuram, chose the IRMA over a teaching job in the University of Delhi. Thus, continuity of research interests seems to be an important factor for the faculty’s decision to join the IRMA. At least, this has been the case with most of the newly recruited faculty members.

One third of the faculty members privileged their sense of commitment to a vaguely defined rural sector as a factor for their decision to work at the IRMA. Dr. Panda gave up three prestigious job offers, including a foreign posting, to join the IRMA. Hailing from a remote village in coastal Orissa, he has completed his studies thanks to government scholarships. He feels obliged to give back to the society something in return. Working in the rural sector seems to him the interim way of doing that. His ultimate aim is to set up an IRMA type institution in a backward area to train villagers in rural development in the vernacular language.
Similarly, Dr. Hiremath left his teaching job of fourteen years at the Kentucky University (USA) to join the IRMA. He explains it in terms of his vague commitment to the idea of the rural, though initially he did not have much orientation towards rural management.

Some of the other faculty members have gone there because they found the IRMA to be an unconventional institute, and therefore, challenging and satisfying, whereas others found in the IRMA a unique opportunity to move from their current jobs which were largely non-academic in nature. The latter always had an academic bent of mind even when they were engrossed in non-academic jobs. The IRMA was the ultimate destination of their academic quest in the areas of their interest. We came across only two faculty members who provided us ‘personal’ explanations for their being at the IRMA: in one case the unwillingness to move out of Gujarat was the prime reason, while in the other case there were problems at the earlier work place (a university in north India).

The foregoing shows that the IRMA has a highly dedicated faculty who identify with the institutional mandate and ethos. Nonetheless, the IRMA has witnessed a high degree of faculty turnover over the last two decades or so. Dr. Sharma explains this:

A high degree of faculty turnover need not be seen as linked to the Institution’s flaws, or the lack of job satisfaction, or the lack of scope of career advancements/promotions within the Institute. There is enough scope for promotion at IRMA. Every five years cases of promotions are taken up. In fact, IRMA is already ‘top-heavy’ as there are more professors than associate professors, and you will hardly find an assistant professor. People go elsewhere out of personal reasons. Since Anand is a small place they want to move to some big place for the sake of their children’s education. Some of them, however, get better options and leave IRMA for these greener pastures.

On the whole, the faculty members have quite favourable disposition towards the IRMA as an institute. Dr. Vaswani feels that the IRMA has largely
succeeded in its avowed mission of imparting empathy towards the village people to its graduates thanks to its focus on the village fieldwork. It has also filled up the long-existing gap between the development practice and the academic training and research. Though his Ph. D. is from an agriculture university, he holds the opinion that ‘IRMA does something which conventional agriculture universities could not do despite its plethora of extension programmes ... the latter remained academic’. He, however, does not hide his slight discomfort with the IRMA’s ideological bias against corporate marketing. Being a marketing man, having successfully launched the brand image of KRIBHCO in Rajasthan, and being engaged in teaching courses on agribusiness, marketing and brand promotion, his discomfort is understandable. He is convinced that some amount of industrial exposure is necessary for academic excellence. He further feels that the efforts that have gone into the rural producers’ co-operative sector have not brought about proportionate gains, more so after the withdrawal of the Operation Flood. For him, political processes are responsible for the ills of the co-operative sector. Thus, the IRMA should move beyond the confines of the co-operative sector and also include agribusiness corporate practices in its purview.

Dr. Singh disagrees. He feels that the IRMA’s ideological biases are justified and it should continue not to take any consultation from the corporate sector even if it means a huge loss of money. However, he concurs with Dr. Vaswani by saying that the ‘provision of exposure to rural environment is the greatest asset of IRMA’. In fact, the entire faculty shares an undiluted admiration for the IRMA. In the words of Dr. Gandhi, ‘IRMA is exceptional as an institute devoted exclusively to rural management while in other cases rural management is incidental.’ Dr. Biswas vouchsafes that the IRMA has had significant success in
many respects. In his view, 'IRMA has not only been a pioneer in the field or rural management and has single-handedly created rural management as an academic field but has also inspired many other rural management institutes across the length and breadth of the country'. For Dr. Surekha, 'conventional academics will not do here, though that is there. Those faculty members who do not reconcile with IRMA's expectations and rhythms of change get marginalized and sooner or later leave it'. Dr. Saxena recounted how Dr. Verghese Kurien was not even ready for getting the All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) accreditation for the Postgraduate Programme in Rural Management (PRM) degree, so much for its being unconventional. Dr. Sen who has recently joined the IRMA finds it highly successful in terms of its PRM output, though with varying degrees of success in terms of policy impact. He philosophises, 'after all, the government is a big rock. It is very difficult to move this rock. What can one IRMA do?' Dr. Hiremath views the IRMA as a unique institution. Even Dr. Vallabh, otherwise a critic of IRMA's mission, concedes, 'come what may a minimum standard will always be maintained here thanks to the peer group pressure'.

Thus, among the scholar-practitioners at the IRMA we find not only a high degree of identification with the Institute but also an admiration for its being unique and unconventional. In this sense, they seem to have internalised the institutional ethos to a great extent. There were only few voices expressing reservations about the IRMA's mandate and mission. Clearly, they seem to be in minority and internally divided. On the one hand, there are some who would like the IRMA to be eclectic in its approach and orientation towards the rural sector and be receptive to the corporate sector as well. On the other hand, there are dissenting voices on the other extreme, arguing for a certain re-positioning of the IRMA as a
policy advocacy institution. Dr. Vallabh's is the representative voice here. He avers:

You can look at the institutional growth of IRMA in roughly three phases: 1979-1987, 1987-1995 and 1995-. In the first phase, the principal task was to ensure the supply of trained managerial manpower with rural orientation, so the exclusive focus was on the consolidation of the PRM. The PRM was quite a bit of challenge for the IRMA as the intellectual calibre of the faculty was not of high order. Most of them were too steeped in management principles and they would try to pass general management principles in the name of rural management. It was much later when IRMA faculty became more diversified in terms of academic and work background that the Institute really took off. In the second phase consultancy and research went up. Also, IRMA positioned itself as the intellectual resource centre for the co-operative sector. It is in the third phase that IRMA seems to have missed the bus.

He has been highly critical of the IRMA's past and present mission. His 'third phase' refers to the current policy regime of liberalisation. He feels that the IRMA is more relevant now than ever, particularly in the context of the policy climate created by globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation. He adds:

It [IRMA] should have taken a more pro-active advocacy role on policy issues which, unfortunately, it has not done except in a few cases. What is the purpose of incessant teaching and research at an institute like this unless you feel that your endeavours are getting translated into policy objectives? It [IRMA] has to renew its vision and mission. This will not happen as long as IRMA remains confined to the old grooves of thinking and doing. IRMA has a great responsibility to lobby for the rural sector, as the latter does not have the counterparts of FICCI and ASSOCHAM. Moreover, most of the NGOs, including the ones working in the rural sector, work under an environment that is defined by macro-policy factors. Obviously, mere managerial tinkering will not do. There is an urgent need to go for a wholehearted support for change in the policy environment for the rural sector.

Other faculty members admit that liberalisation could be seen as a turning point in the institutional history of IRMA as the old equations between the state, the corporate-industrial sector and the co-operatives are bound to change. But there is no consensus about how to cope with this new challenge at the level of the Institute. Dr. Vallabh’s other colleagues do not share his enthusiasm and zeal. Dr. Panda, for example, feels otherwise:

IRMA has already opened up and is no longer confined to the co-operative sector. IRMA is aware that there is a need to inform general management institutes with
a rural orientation. And, this cannot be achieved unless IRMA extends its influence far and wide. Also, IRMA has started doing consultancy research for the government agencies and ministries. It has already started acting as a policy pressure group. Recently, on the issue of Co-operative Companies Act IRMA had not merely taken a categorical stand but had invited and involved many like-minded leaders such as George Fernandes, Mohan Dharia and L.C. Jain so as to create a favourable public opinion in the favour of its policy stand.

Dr. Vaidyanathan outrightly dismissed Dr. Vallabh’s critique. He defended the IRMA for all that it stands by saying that 15-20 percent of any organisation will be the dissenting voice. In his words, ‘IRMA has a great future, and over the years, its mission and vision have widened enough to accommodate equitable and sustainable rural development. Also, one has to remember that IRMA works through organisations, and is not an NGO’. Dr. Biswas seems to share this view. According to him, ‘it has to be borne in mind that IRMA is not given to the idea of action research or activism in the rural sector. It has a clear-cut mandate to work through rural-producers’ controlled organisation in order to achieve rural development’. In the same vein, Dr. Nagpal does not look at the IRMA as an advocacy institution.

What comes out clearly is that the IRMA faculty have been quite vocal and articulate about the Institute’s mandate. They have not shied away from voicing their appreciation, concerns and criticisms on this count. Till recently, the IRMA used to organise a faculty retreat at tourist places where faculty members would be invited and encouraged to speak their mind about the Institute itself. Their critical gaze has often fallen at the very foundations on which the IRMA stood. Not surprisingly, the IRMA’s independent positions on various issues, at times, have caused embarrassment to the NDDB, its mentor. In the year 2002, the IRMA did not hesitate to hold a workshop on the proposed buying of shares in the state sector by the NDDB, even when there was a raging controversy surrounding the issue as
Dr. Kurien [the former Chairman of the NDDB] and Dr. Patel [the current Chairperson] were on the opposite sides of the debate.

Another issue that really divides the faculty opinion at the IRMA is the assessment of the contributions of its graduates (that is, those passing out the flagship PRM course). Some faculty members believe that the IRMA graduates do not necessarily go to the co-operative sector. Many of them join corporate organisations. Even when they enter the rural sector they get placed at the mid-executive level and get cut-off from the field jobs. Seen thus, the IRMA graduates render the amount of institutional investment in the PRM course infructuous. On the other hand, there are many who believe that creating a reservoir of trained manpower in a field where it was urgently needed is the greatest contribution of the PRM course. In their opinion, the IRMA graduates are all over the country, and wherever they go they carry the distinctive ethos of the Institute. Also, the criticism that they have no field interface is not valid. The faculty concern about the PRM course seems to be justified, as, over the years, lot of energy and investment have gone into stabilising the course.

When it came to the idea of the village or what they understand by rural, we got a bewildering variety of definitions of the rural \textit{qua} rural development. According to Dr. Vaswani, rural development should include all aspects dealing with agricultural development. The definition itself reflects his basic training as an agronomist, who had begun his career as a member of the now-defunct agriculture research service. Some other faculty members also believed that rural meant agriculture and allied activities Dr. Shailendra confessed that he had always wondered at the ambiguity of the \textit{rural} part of ‘rural finance’, a course that he had been teaching for the PRM graduates. He offered the following:
By rural I mean a pro-poor orientation. If you ask me what IRMA means by the term rural then I would say that for IRMA rural is the sum total of all the producers' co-operatives located in the administratively defined rural areas. You know the ideological bias of IRMA: here the village means only the rural producers' village, nothing else. In any case, so far as development is concerned a distinctively rural focus is required simply because a large number of poor stay in rural areas. In this sense, IRMA's thrust towards pro-poor and sustainable rural development is justified. Though it remains difficult to draw the boundaries between the rural and the urban: how would you look at the SEWA Bank: rural or urban? A difficult question, indeed!

Dr. Panda had an interesting way of distinguishing between the rural and the urban. It is the presence (or the absence) of infrastructural sophistication that, for him, would define rural: 'a slum is rural in the sense of its not having a high level of infrastructural sophistication. But, this is only partly true. Although slums have no practical access to good infrastructural facilities, the theoretical possibility of access is there. In the villages both are lacking'. For Dr. Biswas, a definition of the rural depends on the question of who owns and controls a given asset or organisation: 'if rural producers control an organisation, it is a rural organisation. But if an urban-corporate giant controls an organisation then it is not a rural organisation even when it is located in a rural area. In any case, the mere spatial location is not a criterion for defining rural'. For Dr. Gandhi, rural is non-corporate, non-industrial and non-urban, whereas, for Dr. Patil, rural means small-scale enterprises.

As regards the relationship between the researches done at the IRMA and the policy-making in the field of rural development, we, expectedly, had a variety of responses. Most faculty members, however, agreed that there was no established mechanism to influence policy. At most, the researches done at the Institute might contribute to the general policy climate and public opinion. According to some of them, in some ways the IRMA has been prophetic, as it has organised workshops on issues which subsequently became hot policy issues of the day. According to
Dr. Singh, ‘it does not matter much if the government takes its research inputs seriously. What is important is that researchers should adhere to the policy focus in their research’. He opined that research consultation from IRMA was sought mostly in the areas of evaluation studies, strategy building and feasibility studies. Nonetheless, the IRMA has largely been successful in influencing macro-level policies in few cases such as natural resources management. Different state governments have also directly approached the IRMA either seeking specific policy inputs in certain fields or comments on the available policies. For instance, the IRMA has played a key role in framing Perspective Vision 2020 on Agriculture for the state of Madhya Pradesh. The rural development minister from Tripura was so impressed with the performance of IRMA that he evinced interest in setting up a similar institute in his state.

But there is no guarantee that governments will take the IRMA’s research outputs seriously. It is true that over the years some central government agencies have started taking the IRMA more seriously: The Union Expenditure Commission had sent its draft report to the IRMA for critical comments. The Union Ministry of Personnel has asked the IRMA to organise training programmes for the mid-career bureaucrats in the various ministries. In the eyes of the faculty, the organisation of such training programmes provides some scope for influencing policies in the rural sector through brainstorming. Likewise, the IAS probationers have also started visiting the IRMA for periodic training. Thus, in the words of Dr. Mishra, ‘many state governments and central government agencies are warming up to IRMA as the latter is known for taking independent positions on policy issues’.

In this sense, the IRMA has come a long way from its earlier anti-state stance. Dr. Biswas justifies, ‘IRMA never had any allergy to government as such
though it has always been against the bureaucracy as a system which is essentially status-quoist. Here too, our opposition has been to undue bureaucratic control and not against individual bureaucrats. In fact, our first few Directors were IAS officers'. Even now, many faculty members argue that it is not for the government to take the initiative even in the field of rural development. It should act as a mere facilitator. They believe that the IRMA’s is a broad conceptualisation of rural development that includes not only co-operatives but also NGOs and other agencies working for the rural sector. The broadening of the IRMA’s outlook on rural development is definitely linked to the withdrawal of the Operation Flood. The latter adversely affected the salience of the NDDB-promoted co-operative sector of which the IRMA was visualised to be an intellectual beacon. Majority of the faculty members agree with this proposition. However, they see in it a golden opportunity to redefine the Institute’s mandate by focusing more on the rural poor. According to Dr. Shailendra, ‘in the particular context of liberalisation, IRMA’s pro-poor stance will have a long-term significance’.

According to the scholar-practitioners, the IRMA has, on the whole, succeeded in maintaining its innovative institutional fabric notwithstanding frequent successions of its operating leadership [the Director], and a high degree of faculty turnover. The vibrant traditions of faculty governance of the Institute, free and fair debate and discussion among the faculty, high degree of academic freedom, collaborative and interdisciplinary research work, a culture of critical appreciation and peer review, rigorous homework before the introduction and development of new programmes, such as the Doctoral Programme in Rural Management have largely been preserved. Every Director since Dr. Murthy has brought a different style, strengths and approach. However, they have invariably
reinforced the basic values that the IRMA stands for. Unlike many personality-centred institutions, the IRMA has demonstrated adequate resilience and fierce independence even when it has/had as charismatic a chairperson as Dr. Kurien. In fact, it was the far-sightedness of the founder Chairman of the its Board of Governors who insisted that the IRMA developed its own institutional identity independent of the NDDB. In fact, he never allowed any NDDB officer to be posted on deputation to IRMA. One can safely say that there is always an attempt to ensure a minimum level of quality and excellence in anything and everything that the IRMA attempts. The IRMA carefully selects its Board members from some of the most eminent personalities in the field of development. Also, it recruits its faculty members from the open market and takes particular care of their quality and competence. It gives its best to the flagship PRM course which ensures a steady and regular supply of bright young students from every nook and corner of the country to IRMA. These students play a crucial role in shaping a vibrant academic environment on the IRMA campus (see Shah 2000).

However, the IRMA did not have much direct impact on policy-making. True, it has a long-continuing tradition of applied policy research; it cannot claim to have had a major success in producing any major change in its areas of work. Though, it certainly has succeeded in influencing some policy decisions concerning the rural sector. More importantly, almost all the faculty members deliberately incorporate a policy framework in their researches both individual and consultancy. But then the journey from research to policy-making is a long, time-consuming and tortuous one. Even otherwise, the IRMA faculty have one important complaint: The Institute is mostly approached at the implementation level or for impact assessment studies of programmes already under way or
completed. They would like to believe 'that is not exactly what the IRMA is meant for'.

**Conclusion: Rural Development versus Rural Management**

A comprehensive look at the institutional trajectories of NIRD and IRMA in a comparative framework reveals certain interesting insights about some of the ways in which rural development has been conceptualised in post-Independence India. The NIRD has been very much a part of the Indian state and its ideology of rural development. It matters less that it was made an autonomous organisation under the Ministry of Rural Development within almost a decade of its inception. The Ministry is writ large on the institutional landscape of NIRD. The statist ethos runs through the NIRD’s capillaries and veins. No wonder, it has always looked towards the Ministry for its institutional sustenance and guidance. In fact, the NIRD is so obsessed with the Ministry that we did not come across a single scholar-practitioner who would talk about the NIRD in relation to other institutes in the field of rural development. One empirical indicator of this could be the fact that during our fieldwork at the NIRD no one ever mentioned the IRMA in any context whatsoever. Evidently, the NIRD appears to be a self-contained institution without any compulsion or urge to establish its identity in relation to other institutions in the field of rural development. We would not be off the mark to claim that this institutional attitude has largely been an outcome of the state’s generous support to the NIRD.

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

By contrast, the IRMA has had an anti-state flavour since its inception. In fact, the state has been a post facto reality for the IRMA – quite distant and almost in the background. That is why, one may argue, that the IRMA could chart out its own understanding of rural development qua rural management. As it emerged out of a vibrant co-operative movement which argued for the curtailment of state powers in the co-operative sector, it naturally had the self-image of the promoter of members-controlled and democratically-elected rural producers’ co-operatives. Over the years, however, there has been a toning down of its anti-state position. Likewise, being a rural management institute, it has always positioned itself against the general run of management institutes which, in its opinion, have largely catered to the urban-corporate sector. Seen thus, the IRMA has attempted to carve out a new space for itself in opposition to both the state and the urban-corporate sector. Its ingenuity laid in the fact that it refused to occupy a pre-fabricated given space yielded by the state, something that the NIRD has historically done. Not surprisingly, scholar-practitioners at the IRMA often refer to the NIRD to contrast their own academic freedom and institutional autonomy with the latter’s encapsulation by the state. Though critics point out that even in the case of IRMA, the NDDB, and the type of co-operative ideology that the latter championed, had already demarcated the institutional space for the former.

For the NIRD, rural development has been what the Ministry of Rural Development has periodically defined. In this regard, it never looked askance at the Ministry. Even when the Institute’s name was changed from NICD to NIRD,
there was no debate as to the import of this change in nomenclature. None of the faculty members whom we interviewed threw much light on this. They did not seem to take it as an important turning point in the institutional history of NIRD. As a matter of fact, one of the annual reports mentions this change in nomenclature in one sentence while giving the dates of the meetings in which this was done! For all practical purposes, rural development was a *fait accompli* for the NIRD, notwithstanding its claim of being a premier organisation in the field of rural development. There was almost a perfect institutional consensus over what constituted rural development. What one has to bear in mind is that this institutional consensus was less an outcome of the internal deliberations than an external imposition from the Ministry. Our interviews with the scholar-practitioners testify to this observation. Although most of them happened to be social scientists they have really not exhibited the critical faculties historically associated with the social sciences. At the IRMA, on the other hand, most of the scholar-practitioners are not really social scientists. However, they have been demonstrating a fierce sense of academic autonomy and independent thinking on a range of issues including a critical look at the very foundations of the Institute itself.

There is another angle to this. For a large number of the NIRD faculty, the Institute has been no more than a work place. It is not that it was their interest in rural development which brought them to NIRD. More often than not, they developed an interest in rural development simply because they happened to work at an institute of rural development. By contrast, in the case of IRMA, the majority of faculty members elected to work there as they found in it a congenial place to extend and consolidate their research interests in the broad area of rural studies.
For many of them the IRMA appeared to be an unconventional institution which had the potential to provide a challenging as well as satisfying work experience. Also, unlike the NIRD, the IRMA was not merely a place where they got their first job assignment as testified to by the prior work experience of a number of faculty members. This has imparted certain vibrancy to the IRMA as an institute.

In terms of authority structure as well, the IRMA has been completely free from the burden of bureaucratic inertia. Even when it had IAS officers as directors it never felt the excessive control characteristic of a bureaucrat-led organisation. For a larger part of its existence, the IRMA has had its senior most faculty members as directors. IAS directors are a thing of the past for the IRMA. On the contrary, in the case of NIRD, IAS directors are the usual norm, though for a brief period of its existence academics-directors have led it. Also, there are two other IAS officers at the NIRD who control most of the administrative powers along with the DG. In the IRMA, most of the administrative powers are decentralised and are distributed among senior professors on the basis of rotation. Naturally, at the IRMA there were no complaints of lack of academic autonomy or constraining work environment.

Whereas most of the NIRD faculty thought of themselves as trainers and rural development professionals, the IRMA faculty had the self-image of academics/researchers. It would be appropriate to mention in this context that the IRMA does not call its PRM course a training programme. PRM, for the IRMA faculty, is a teaching programme. To the extent that the scholar-practitioners at the IRMA thought of themselves as academics, they did not have much illusion about their significance as policy-makers.
Indeed, there are certain commonalities among the scholar-practitioners at both these institutes. First, at both these places one could sense a high degree of glorification of applied research. They contrasted the type of research that they do with the ‘arcane theoretical research’ done at the universities and other research institutes. The distinction between theoretical and applied research seems to be the defining feature for both these institutes. Very often, universities and other research institutes were the significant others for both the NIRD and the IRMA: For the latter, the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) could be seen as the most important significant other given its exclusivity as rural management institute. Also, one could sense certain inflation in the meaning of fieldwork or fieldwork-based research. We hardly came across any scholar-practitioner who did not regard herself/himself as a fieldworker. For our scholar-practitioners, even a day's visit to a village is adequate to call themselves fieldworkers! This is, indeed, a far cry from Malinowski's exposition of fieldwork. No student of social anthropology would fail to notice this emptying of the content of fieldwork.

Also, at both these institutes scholar-practitioners share a strong belief in the efficacy of technical solutions to the problems of rural development. So far as the politics of rural development is concerned, given an opportunity, they would wish it away. Moreover, they seem to have a conviction that any enterprise of rural development calls for appropriately trained manpower. In this sense, they share a distinctively professional 'top-down' approach towards rural development, despite their proclamations to the contrary. Although the NIRD never gets tired of talking about popular participation and decentralised development, it thinks its training programmes to be crucial for rural development. Similarly, going by the
institutional logic of IRMA, any rural development programme is doomed unless it has the benefit of the IRMA-trained professional rural managers.

In the ultimate analysis, the NIRD seems to have failed to create an 'epistemic community' of rural development professionals. Sure enough, the NIRD is only partly to be blamed for this failure, as rural development itself has been a promiscuous area of disciplinary specialisation. There have been too many stakeholders in the field of rural development to enable the NIRD to be a leader in the epistemological sense of the term. In comparison, the IRMA seems to have moved in the direction of creating an 'epistemic community' of rural management professionals. To what extent has it succeeded in this endeavour remains a moot point.

Note

1 The IRMA, however, has no aversion to the state. For example, it seeks meaningful relationship with the state by inviting administrators to serve on its Board of Directors in their ex-officio capacity. The expectation is to benefit from the experience and knowledge of administrators, and at times, to gain informal support in accessing the state.