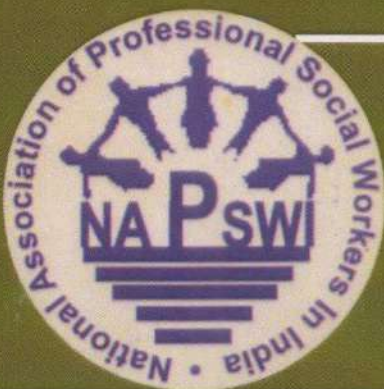


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Employment Guarantee, Panchayat and Rural Development

B. Pradhan*

Abstract

Rural development is a holistic concept emphasizing both natural and human resource development in an integrated manner. It aims at increasing the opportunities of rural people in health, knowledge, skill development, income, participation in decision making; creating a conducive environment in reducing social and economic inequalities and conflicts; and bringing all present and potential natural resources to most optimal use, conservation and development. Since, independence, rural development has, however, come to be considered synonymous with poverty alleviation. In other words, the term rural development connotes overall development of rural areas with a view to improve the quality of life of rural people. This paper is based on a secondary based data and review of rural development programme. It examines the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in rural development programmes. The review has been done against the background of the Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992, and Uttar Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 both of which aim to rural development by strengthening the Panchayati Raj System.

Key Words: Employment Guarantee, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Rural Development and Local Self Governance

Introduction

In the pre-independence days, rural development was primarily a task of voluntary organizations set up by eminent persons with selfless commitments for the rural people. Rabindranath Tagore's Scheme of *Rural Reconstruction*, the *Martandam Experiment* by Spencer Hatch, the *Gurgaon Experiment* by F.L. Brayne, and the *Rural Reconstruction Programme* in Baroda, first initiated by Maharaja Sayaji and later developed by T. Prakasam, the *Etawah Project* by Albert Mayer, the *Nilokheri Experiment* by S. K. Dey are worth mentioning. Mahatma Gandhi initiated different programmes for rural

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reconstruction as a part of India's independence movement. After independence, agriculture and rural development have been accorded a high priority in India's five year plans. Thus, in the era of planned development, the concept of rural development has been defined to bring about economic and social change in the rural areas, especially for the benefit of poorer and weaker sections.

The Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, passed in 1992 by the Central government, came into force on April 24, 1993 which was meant to provide constitutional sanction to establish "democracy at the grassroots as it is at the state level or national level". Panchayati Raj system is a three-tier system in the state with elected bodies at the Village, Block and District levels. It is a constructional mechanism spread across the country. It ensures greater participation of people and more effective implementation of rural development programmes. There will be a Gram Panchayat for a village or group of villages, Block Panchayat (or Panchayat Samiti/Kshetra Panchayat) at Block level and the Zila Panchayat (or Zila Parishad) at the district level. India has a history of Panchayati Raj starting from self-sufficient and self-governing village communities that survived the rise and fall of empires in the past to the modern legalised institutions of governance at the third tier provided with Constitutional support. In pursuance of this, States have initiated action to devolve administrative and financial powers and resources to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to enable them to discharge their Constitutional role. It is expected that once the process of devolution is effectively operationalised, resources from the Central and State Governments meant for programmes falling within the jurisdiction of the PRIs would directly get allocated to them.

The Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Govt. of India, which is the nodal Ministry for implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, has also, so far, not discharged its role in setting up institutional mechanisms for bridging the wide gap that exists today. Though some steps have been taken by the MoRD to goad the State Governments to strengthen and deepen the process of democratic decentralization, it has not yielded the desired results. Most of the Central Ministries have not yet internalised the PRIs role in the delivery of services handled by the Ministry. According to MoRD, rural development implies both the economic betterment of people as well as greater social transformation. In order to provide aspirations of the local people, Panchayati Raj Institutions have been involved in the programme implementation and these institutions constitute the core of decentralized development of planning and its implementations. The Ministry is also vigorously pursuing with the State Governments for expeditious devolution of requisite administrative and financial powers to PRIs as envisaged under 73rd Amendment Act of the Constitution of India.

Still about 70 percent of India's population lives in rural areas. There are about 6,38,365 villages in the country as against about 300 cities and 5,161 towns. Of the 121 crore Indians, 83.3 crore live in rural areas while 37.7 crore stay in urban areas, as per the Census 2011. The National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) survey report says that there are 720 million consumers across the villages in rural India. Hence, the development of the nation largely depends upon the development of the rural population. Majority of the rural population is dependent upon agriculture for their subsistence. Uttar Pradesh, with a population of 19.95 crore as per 2011 Census, is the most populous State of the country. UP covers 2,40,928 sq. km and accounts for 7.3 percent of total area of the country which makes it the fifth largest State in the country. Uttar Pradesh has 71 districts 820 development Blocks, 107452 villages, 51976 Gram Panchayats and 8135 Nyay Panchayats.

At present, there are about 3 million elected representatives at all levels of the panchayat one-third of which are women. These members represent more than 2.4 lakh Gram Panchayats, about 6,000 intermediate level tiers and more than 500 district panchayats. Already the Constitution is amended to make the representation of women 50 percent. Spread over the length and breadth of the country, the new panchayats cover about 96 percent of India's more than 6.4 lakh villages and nearly 99.6 percent of rural population. This is the largest experiment in decentralisation of governance in the history of humanity.

Rural Development

Development of rural areas has been at the core of planning process in the country and also in the State. Rural Development is a broad, inclusive term which takes in its consideration socioeconomic and political development of the rural areas. It includes measures to strengthen the democratic structure of society through the Panchayati Raj Institutions as well as measures to improve the rural infrastructure, improve income of rural households and delivery systems pertaining to education, health and safety mechanisms. Poverty alleviation is a key component of rural development. Government of India has taken many initiatives for rural development. For this purpose, it has setup the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD).

The Department of Rural Development implements schemes for generation of self-employment and wage employment, provision of housing and minor irrigation assets to rural poor, social assistance to the destitute and Rural Roads etc. Apart from this, the Department provides the support services and other quality inputs such as assistance for strengthening of District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) Administration, Panchayati Raj Institutions

(PRIs), training & research, human resource development, development of voluntary action etc. for the proper implementation of the programmes.

The 2011 Census estimates that 83.3 crore people, about 69 percent of the country's total population of 121 crore, continue to live in rural India. A major challenge thus arises is, how to feed India's growing population with rising incomes with the given land and water resources. The expansion of income opportunities in the farm sector and progressive absorption of people into non-agricultural activity have been identified as the most appropriate solutions to this challenge. For achieving rural development, the present government has been injecting resources at a massive scale to the rural and farm sector. Presently, seven major flagship programmes are being implemented to develop rural areas. They are: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP) and Total Sanitation Campaign (TSP), Integrated Watershed Development Programme (IWDP), Pradhan Mantri Grameen Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) and rural electrification, including separation of agricultural feeders and Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana (RGGVY). All these programmes are essentially meant for creating gainful employment opportunities and to improve the quality of lives of rural masses.

Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)

Ideally speaking, panchayats should be implementing programmes. However, even if they are not doing so currently, they can play a key role in monitoring the implementation of these programmes through certain simple and easy to install systems. First, panchayats at all levels can be considered as units for data collection and aggregation in respect of developmental schemes. Ideally, the planning and implementation of every rural infrastructure scheme ought to be monitored at the village panchayat level, with appropriate aggregation of information at the intermediate and district panchayat levels. This will necessitate the creation of a database of village panchayats, giving details of the villages and habitations that come within the jurisdiction of each panchayat, thus enabling all such schemes to be monitored over standard geographical areas conforming to the jurisdiction of the rural local bodies concerned. Once village to panchayat correlation data is available, data in respect of the planning and implementation of such schemes can be re-arranged and maintained on the internet.

It must be ensured that perspective and annual plans in respect of each scheme are prepared by the panchayats concerned. All monitoring formats for such schemes prescribed by the Ministries concerned can be consolidated into a simple standardized monthly 'return' that would be universally applied for monitoring purposes at each panchayat level from the village panchayat

upwards. Currently, performance of panchayats is being aggregated at the District level for the purpose of monitoring. Districts are considered the basic units for the furnishing of utilization certificates. This tends to average out performance of individual panchayats, so that the best performing panchayats have to wait till the district has reached the threshold prescribed before receiving the next instalment of funds. In order to encourage well performing panchayats by ensuring smooth fund flows directed towards prompt implementation, it is proposed that progressively, monitoring will be taken down to each panchayat level. In the first instance, the intermediate panchayat can be adopted as the basic unit for monitoring of progress, submission of utilization certificates and release of funds (like the Nirmal Gram Puraskar). Panchayats will need to be fully involved in the monitoring

process by development of yardsticks for monitoring through discussion at the panchayat level, introducing a system of peer reviews, consolidation of data relevant to a particular indicator and comparing it with the best possible status, as well as the minimum actual level of achievement in the intermediate panchayat area, adoption of a system of ranking between panchayats aimed at providing a development database of the area and preparation of a model citizens charter covering all the flagship schemes and circulation for adoption by all panchayats. It is also necessary to prepare databases of independent quality assessments covering implementation of such schemes.

Panchayati Raj Department is an important department for the rural development. The main objective of this department is to strengthen the Panchayati Raj System in the state according to the 73rd amendment of Indian constitution. So that panchayats can realize the dream of rural administration and rural development with complete coordination and transparency.

1. Financial aid to Gram Panchayats
2. Rural Cleanliness Programmes.
3. Responsibilities of the Panchayats-(Transparency in work, rural administration & development).
4. Responsibilities of public towards Panchayat.
5. Decentralization Programme.
6. Control over the Gram Panchayats
7. Arrangement of Panchayat Help-line.
8. Drinking water supply, cleaning and maintenance facilities.
9. Maintenance of public lamp posts, roads, drainage system, cleanliness programmes, primary schools and maintenance of other public assets.

10. Construction of Panchayat Bhawans for meeting halls and for the residence of secretary of Gram Panchayat.
11. Construction of GraminKisan Bazaar and Livestock Markets.
12. Construction of underground water drainage system for the objective of environmental cleanliness.

MNREGA and PRIs: Some Reflection about Rural Development Programme

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) enacted in September, 2005, was implemented from February 2, 2006 in 200 identified districts of the country in the form of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) with the stated objective to provide 100 days of guaranteed wage employment to each rural household opting for it. The coverage was increased to 330 districts with the addition of 130 new districts in 2007-08. MNREGA is a law whereby any adult who applies for employment in rural areas has to be given work on local public works within 15 days. If employment is not given, an unemployment allowance has to be paid. The employment guarantee is subject to a limit of 100 days per household per year. The main objective of MNREGA is to protect rural households from poverty and hunger. MNREGA can also serve other objectives: generating productive assets, protecting the environment, empowering women, reducing rural-urban migration, and fostering social equity, among others. Thus, MNREGA is not just an employment scheme: it is a tool of economic and social change in rural areas.

The allocation for MNREGA in the Eleventh Plan (at current price) is tentatively provided at Rs. 100,000 crore. However, MNREGA being a demand driven programme and the government is legally bound to provide employment mandated under the act, the allocation is only indicative. A study by GBPSSI (2009) highlighted that only 7.4 percent households were provided 100 days employment while 68 percent expenditure was reported in wage employment. The overwhelming participation of socially excluded communities in MNREGA was reported to be Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and women.

MNREGA is perhaps, an opportunity for rural India as it guarantees one of the crucial rights, right to work envisaged in the Article 41 of the Indian Constitution. The national rural employment guarantee act has the potential to provide a "big push" in India's region of distress. Panchayats are having central (Principal authority) role in the implementation and monitoring of the Schemes under MNREGA. Under the provisions of the MNREGA, eligible households apply to the Gram Panchayat which, after due verification, issues the job card. Each district has to prepare a shelf of projects, which is done on the basis of priority assigned by the Gram Sabha. At least 50% of the works

is restricting Panchayats from effective participation in the MNREGA. Lack of technical skills, low awareness of the provisions of the scheme, lack of clarity on their roles and responsibilities are some of the problems putting off the Panchayats from active functioning. The Act defines Panchayats as the prime authorities in management of the MNREGA. The limited role of Panchayats in management of the scheme is a critical issue in effective implementation of MNREGA. Due to lack of functionaries, they have become paralysed and are not able to perform their roles and responsibilities. Deployment of full time professionals dedicated to MNREGA at all levels, but most importantly at block level is vital.

Conclusion

Consequent to the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, political decentralisation has taken place in almost all the States where elections have been held. However, progress on fiscal and functional decentralisation has been mixed. There are States which have taken steps to devolve funds, functions and functionaries to the PRIs. The process of devolution is at different levels of operationalisation across States. Surprisingly, the States of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh who have had little experience of decentralisation have made the most fundamental changes in this regard. Further, it is imperative that the PRIs have resources to match the responsibilities placed on them. While State Finance Commissions have submitted their recommendations, very few States have taken the necessary steps to ensure fiscal viability of the PRIs. Yet, one can be hopeful that the experience of some States and some PRIs within States would provide the necessary impetus for greater devolution in other parts of the country. Strict monitoring of their performance by PRIs against specific outcomes should be ensured. Greater convergence is required across Departments and programmes with MNREGA so that sustainable livelihoods can be created. Some of these principles, such as answerability to PRIs, stakeholder participation and social audit, are inherent in the MNREGA architecture. But they are yet to be effectively put into place.

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