

Problems and Prospects of Rural Development through Panchayat System: A Study with Special Reference to Barpeta District of Assam

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Abstract

India's bureaucracy never works without greasing its palm. It is our experience that an overwhelming part of our development money goes to the purse of bureaucrats. The same applies to our leadership also. The rural leadership is more than shrewd. It knows the art of grabbing money. In such a situation, what will be the fate of development in the villages of India is anybody's guess. Moreover, people are not in a position to elect right type of people to the Panchayat institutions. Very often, people of doubtful integrity dominate these institutions. Factionalism and narrow loyalties of the people spoil the objectives of local institution. Sometimes, these institutions cannot function because of factionalism. This paper aims to discuss the development of Panchayat system and its importance in rural development with suggestive measures.

Key -Words: Bureaucracy, Development, Panchayat, Gram Sabha, Swaraj, Decentralization.

Introduction

Panchayat is a democratic self-ruled institution of a village, which Gandhiji rightly called the base of the real democracy or village swaraj. Gandhiji's main aim was to open the door of the filings of swaraj even for the last one of under-privileged and deprived persons of the society, which can be possible only through the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). People's active co-operation and participation in the planning and implementation processes is vital for the success of rural development programmes which can be realized through PRIs.

The recent statistics say that India still remains overwhelmingly rural, with nearly 69% of its population still residing in villages; out of the total of 1210.2 million populations in India, the size of rural population is 833.1 million which forms 68.84% of our total population and at the same time as per the latest census data, during last decade, the total number of villages in India has increased from 6,38,588 (2001 census) to 6,40,867 (2011 census); an increase of 2,279 villages. Moreover, a recent report by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHDI) states that 8 Indian states have more poor than 26 poorest African Nations combined which total to more than 410 million poor in the poorest African countries. So, it is the need of the hour that the Government should make every possible effort to gain success in rural development through proper institutions like PRIs.

PRIs have got a constitutional status as local structure and financial autonomy to perform a significant role in the sphere of rural development. Introduction of Zilla Parishad at district level with certain autonomy has brought a new dimension to the Panchayat Raj System, whereas the introduction of Gram Sabha enabled the People at the bottom level to participate in the process of functioning of the PRIs. Against the allegations about the lack of adequate financial support, the Amendment Act of 1992 had made the provision of District Planning Committee to generate necessary finance for the working of the PRIs.

Objectives of the Study

The following are the main objectives of the study:

1. To find out the active measures in the performance of PRI's for rural development.
2. To analyse the relevance of Gandhiji's ideas on village swaraj in the present context of rural development through Panchayat System.
3. To discuss briefly the development of Panchayat Raj System.
4. To analyse the needs of people's participation in Panchayat Raj System for rural development.
5. To analyse the needs and possibilities of PRIs in rural development in Barpeta District.
6. To analyse the means and methods through which the Panchayat System can help in rural development.

Review of Research and Development in the Subject

A lot of research has been done on Panchayati Raj and rural development in different period both by the government as well as by individual scholars. Looking back on the history of research, it seems that still much micro study specifically looking into the operation and performance of Panchayati Raj Institutions and desired rural development will be of much significance and application as it is expected to shed light on several new facts having a bearing on policy issues.

Areas of the Study

The study will be confined to the area of the development of Panchayati Raj Institutions with reference to Barpeta District of Assam, though it has derived from the Acts and Constitutional Amendments of the Government of India. Barpeta District is the main area of my study where rural development is very poor and Panchayati Raj System has been functioning there.

The specific role of three tiers Panchayat Institutions is becoming an important part of administrative set up. Subjects entrusted to Panchayat and development programmes can be the main thing in the role of Panchayat in rural development.

Method of the Study

I would like to adopt the following methodology to make the study logical, and fruitful completion.

1. Collection of relevant data for the study from primary and secondary sources.
2. Research tools such as interview schedule and participant observation have been used.
3. Household survey has been done to address issues of both components of the study.
4. Study of the data collected from published books, journals, periodicals, reports, action plans, official documents, brochures and official records, etc.
5. Data has been collected from the various offices like Zilla Parishad Office, Anchalik Panchayat Offices, Research Institutions and different Libraries.

Development of PRIs

In achieving developmental tasks, very often new rules have to be framed or old ones modified to suit the changed condition of the society. PRIs as a system have existed in India since long. Its form may have varied, but its spirit has always been a part of our socio- cultural ethos. In the medieval periods, it was Gram Sabha functioning through its executive committee viz. Panchayat, a rural institution able to govern and sustain small communities of people. During the British period it becomes the Instrument of the ruling elite, designed to plan the interests of

British Government. After Independence, it was in 1959 that the Panchayati Raj took its present shape. The ardent originated by this new form of PRIs, however, did not last long. Conflicting interests at various levels darkened the concept as well as its practice. After decades of debate, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 sketched the task of rejuvenating the PRIs in the country. This Amendment proposed to add a separate IX th part and XI th schedule in the Constitution for regular election and adequate representation of the S.C., S.T. and women in the PRIs. However, Assam had the Panchayat Act of 1959, 1972(Amendment), 1986 and 1994. The Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 is regarded as an important step towards the Panchayat System of Assam which is adopted in accordance with 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 introduced a three tiered Panchayat System viz. Zilla Parishad, Anchalik Panchayat and Gaon Panchayat. All these institutions, at their respective levels, perform certain functions to bring about Socio-economic development in rural areas.

Principles of Functioning of the PRIs

In an exercise of democratic decentralization, the PRIs are based on the following principles:

- There should be a three tier structure from village to district level with an organic link among the operations from the lower to the higher levels
- There should be a genuine devolution of power and responsibility to the institutions.
- Adequate financial supports should be made to the institutions to perform their responsibilities appropriately.
- All rural development programmes should be channelled through these institutions.

The above principles can be materialized if adequate powers and functions are delegated to the PRIs. Unfortunately, the interventions and contributions expected of the states have not been coming forth the way they should have.

Significance of Rural Development

Rural development is a strategy to enable a specific group of people, poor rural women and men. It involves the development of the agricultural and allied activities of social facilities. Rural development has an immense significance in the social, economic and political sphere. Rural Development can eradicate innumerable rural problems such as traditional agricultural practices, superstitions about social change, unawareness to get the opportunities of Government schemes, etc. Utilisation of resources can also be possible through rural development. Rural development can uplift the national income, employment and source of livelihood, food and fodder, industrial development, internal trade and transport, capital formation and investment, etc. Moreover, rural development can give political stability to the nation.

The Panchayati Raj Institutions must necessarily be responsible to plan, implement and review all the anti poverty programs and development schemes. According to UNDP data 2010, an estimated 37.2% of Indians live below the country's national poverty line. The 2011 Global Hunger Index (GHI) report ranked India 45th amongst leading countries with hunger situation. Keep in mind the situation if pay attention to the views and thoughts of the rural poor and encourage the people to participate and speak in the Gram Shabha meeting and work alliedly, the system will be useful and desired result will be possible.

Importance of the Subjects Entrusted to the Panchayats in Assam

According to the Assam Panchayat Act 1994, the Panchayats are entrusted 29 subjects which are mentioned in 30 main headings of the Act and which are very important for rural development. Agriculture; animal husbandry; fisheries; social and farm forestry; khadi, village and cottage industries; rural housing; drinking water; roads, culverts, bridges, ferries, and other means of communication; rural electrification; non-conventional energy sources; primary and

non-formal education; libraries; cultural activities; markets; rural sanitation; public health and family welfare; welfare of the weaker sections; Public Distribution System, etc. are the main subjects of the subjects entrusted to the Panchayats. Undoubtedly, these subjects strengthen the Panchayat System to get the desired aim.

Programmes and Schemes of Rural Development

Within the problem ridden rural society the Government has been implementing certain programmes and schemes which have been contributing towards rural development wherein panchayat system has a pivotal role. Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar yojana, sampoorna grameen rojgar yojana, Indira Awaas yojana, Pradhan Mantri Gramodaya yojana, Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak yojana, Integrated Wastelands Development Projects, National Old Pension Scheme, National Rural Health Mission, Mid Day Meal Scheme, Annapurna Scheme, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, etc. are the main programmes and schemes of rural development in Assam as well as in Barpeta District which are being implemented by the state government with the help of Panchayati Raj System. Therefore, it becomes clear that only Panchayat system as being self-ruled institution, can properly utilize the fund of the scheme without mediator's consumption to get the rural development.

Role of Panchayati Raj in Village Administration and its Relationship with DRDA and District Administration in Barpeta

The present district of Barpeta falls at the north bank of the river Brahmaputra under lower Brahmaputra valley zone at a distance of 150 kms in western part from state headquarter Guwahati. Total geographical area of the district is 3245 square kms. The river Brahmaputra flows from the east to the west across the southern part of the district. The main tributaries that flow through the district are Beki, Manah, Pohumara, Kaldia, Palla, Nakhanda, Bhelengi and so on.

Barpeta District, headed by a deputy commissioner, has two sub-divisions— Barpeta and Bajali. Barpeta Sub-Division is divided into six revenue circles while Bajali Sub-Division has three revenue circles. Further, Barpeta Sub-Division has total 10 Rural Development Blocks and Bajali Sub-Division has two Rural Development Blocks. The total number of Gaon Panchayats in the district is 150.

The present population of the district is 16,93,190 (census 2011) with a density of population 521 per sq. km. witnessing quite a sluggish process of urbanization, the overwhelming majority of people in Barpeta live in the villages. 92.30 % of the total population in the district is rural. Agriculture is the mainstay of a large majority of the population wherein more than 50% of the total working force is engaged in the district.

Panchayati Raj Institutions have an important role in village administration within the purview of the subjects entrusted to it. Panchayats have their committee system, secretaries, officers to maintain village administration. Panchayats have a good relationship with district administration. Deputy Commissioner as a head of the district administration, performs all the functions with the help of Panchayat System. The Block Development Officer is the captain of the team of extension officers at the block level and as a chief executive officer of Panchayat Samiti, he executes the proposals of the Samiti.

The District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) has traditionally been the principal organ at the district level to oversee the implementation of different anti poverty programmes. The chairman, Zilla Parishad would be the chairman of the Governing Body of the DRDA. The DRDA shall also have an executive committee. DRDA receives the schemes from Zilla Parishad, Anchalik Panchayat and Gaon Panchayats, and sends back the schemes to implement after getting approval of the G.B. of DRDA with fund and policy directions. This being a centrally sponsored

scheme, it is funded on a sharing basis between the centre and the states in the proportion of 75:25. Allocation of funds to the districts is based on the ceiling prescribed in the guidelines depending upon the number of Blocks in the district. DRDA disburses the funds to Development Blocks, Gaon Panchayats and Zilla Parishad on population basis.

Results, Discussion and Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Panchayati Raj Institutions are not as free as these were in the past and these are altogether differently motivated, but at the same time it cannot be denied that these are the only institutions which can go a long way in the difficult task of rural development. It is primarily due to two reasons, (i) because the members of the Panchayat are very close to people of the village, and (ii) the area of the village being small, the members of the Panchayat know the real problems of the people and have deep knowledge of what is truth and what has been made to appear. Due to personal knowledge and limited proximity it is really the role and responsibility of the Panchayat to help in the complex task of rural development.

It is generally believed that the success of Panchayati Raj System should be measured on some basis; namely whether the bodies of the system have helped in extra and intro agricultural production, growth of rural industry, co-operative system, literacy programmes, public health and social welfare, public distribution system and management of community assets, roads and other communication, drinking water, rural electrification and in optimum utilisation of available resources. It should also be seen that these bodies have helped in raising economically weaker sections of society, in organising voluntary organisations and developing harmony between the public servants and elected representatives. If viewed from these angles one is bound to say that the working of these institutions is effective.

Though the introduction of the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 is regarded as a bold attempt towards the decentralisation of the process of governance in Assam, there were certain loopholes in the Act itself and there were certain complexities in the functioning of the PRIs. Main defects of the system are – problem of duplicacy and overleaping, existence of similar institutions, nexus between politician- bureaucrats and local elite, lack of proper consciousness, informal political direction from top level of the party leaders etc. The institution of the system is not working as smoothly as it should have been and a critical analysis is bound to lead to the conclusion that if some of the defects in the system are removed, these institutions bound to contribute much more in rural development in Assam as well as in Barpeta District. If earnest efforts are made with a sense of devotion and zeal the image of rural Assam can change through the Panchayati Raj System.

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