

**POVERTY ALLEVIATION
IN
SILCHAR DEVELOPMENT BLOCK OF SOUTH ASSAM: A CASE STUDY**

Purusottam Nayak*

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a social phenomenon in which a section of the society is unable to fulfill its basic necessities of life. It implies a severe lack of material and cultural goods, which impedes the normal development of individuals to the point of compromising their personal dignity. When a substantial segment of society is deprived of the minimum level of living and continues at a bare subsistence level, the society is said to be plagued with mass poverty.

To measure the extent of poverty and the number of poor in India professional economists have been using the concept of *poverty line*. Poverty has been defined as that level of income/expenditure which is sufficient for keeping a family at the subsistence level of existence, measured in terms of basic nutritional requirements. It has been taken as 2400 calories per person per day in rural areas. The equivalent of calorie requirement for subsistence for one year was worked out to be an annual income of Rs.180 per capita in rural areas at 1960-61 prices. Due to change in price index this figure has been revised from time to time. In the VIIIth Five Year Plan (FYP) the poverty line was fixed at Rs.183.33 per capita monthly income for the State of Assam. This was again revised to Rs.280.85 per capita monthly expenditure in the IXth FYP.

The main objective of identification of poor people is to remove their poverty. Removal of poverty has been the central concern of planning in India since IV Five Year Plan. To achieve this various beneficiaries oriented programmes like Small Farmers Development Agency (SFDA), Community Area Development (CAD), Drought Prone Areas Development (DPAP) etc have been launched from time to time to benefit the poor, relatively less privileged classes and backward areas through creation of assets and development of skills of the poor. Although integrated programme for rural development was introduced for the first time in 1976 for the 20 selected districts in India, it took a different shape when the on-going programmes of SFDA,

* The author is Reader, Department of Economics, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India.

CAD and DPAP were integrated into a new programme called Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) in 1978 when 2300 development Blocks were brought under the cover of this programme. Up to 1978-79 IRDP was a central sector with 100 percent assistance by the Central Government. During 1979-80 it was made a centrally sponsored scheme in which funding was shared 50:50 basis between the Centre and the States. IRDP was then extended to all the Blocks in the country with effect from 2nd October 1980 and it continued to be a major instrument of poverty alleviation in the rural areas till April 1999 when *Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana* (SGSY) was launched by replacing IRDP with a modified strategy and new look but with the old concept of IRDP.

In its long twenty years of life IRDP took in its fold at least 500 lakhs of families and absorbed nearly 20,000 crores of rupees. To evaluate the impact of this programme a number of studies have been undertaken by various research workers and government and non-government institutions across the States in India including the State of Assam. However, not a single has been undertaken in South Assam. Therefore, it was felt necessary to undertake a study in the Silchar Development Block of South Assam to bridge this gap. The present paper is based on the findings of the said work.

SURVEY OF LITERATURE

A survey of literature was made on the studies conducted by various research workers in the States of Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. The impacts of IRDP on these States are manifold. While some authors have found the programme to be effective (D.S. Dhillon, R.K. Mahajan, M. Swaminathan, A.K. Agarwal, A. Goswami and J.K. Gogoi, P.C. Goswami, K. Shankar, K. Bhuyan, etc) others have got different results (J. Dréze, N. Rath, M. Swaminathan, A.K. Agarwal, A. Goswami and J.K. Gogoi, P.C. Goswami, K. Shankar, K. Bhuyan, etc).

The survey of literature reveals that the procedure followed for the selection of beneficiaries in North Eastern States, Bihar, Gujarat, U.P, Punjab and Kerala are not correct (Dréze, Hirway, Mahajan, Goswami and Gogoi, Das). In these States monitoring and follow up action and supervision of the programme are totally absent. The Hindi-belt States have failed miserably in achieving the targets mainly due to wrong selection of beneficiaries (J. Dréze). Implementation of IRDP in Assam has been found to be unsatisfactory in terms of family

coverage, fund utilization and repayment of loans (Goswami and Gogoi, Bhuyan etc). In Assam and Manipur the self-employed ventures set up by the TRYSEM trainees with the IRDP assistance has been remarkable in comparison to other North Eastern States; and Assam in this regard is on the top of the list (D.D. Mal). There has been a wide gap between the actual allocation and release of fund by the government in the States of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (Agarwal, A.K.). In contrast to these there has been fair selection of beneficiaries and satisfactory allocation and distribution of loans in West Bengal (J. Dréze and Swaminathan, M.). In the State of Gujarat there has been strict adherence to the rules, less evidence of systematic corruption and a greater involvement of women and Scheduled Castes. However, the kind of biases that existed in Uttar Pradesh also existed in Gujarat, For instance, not a single land-less household has been benefited even though a substantial number of households existed in the study area (J. Dréze). Punjab has witnessed an increasing average income of both the land-less and landholder beneficiaries. But the increased income has not been sufficient to push the poor beneficiaries well above the poverty line. The programme has also marginal impact on the reduction of income-inequality among the poor beneficiaries (Mahajan, R.K.). According to Swaminathan there has been differential increase in income on different schemes under IRDP in West Bengal. Among these schemes some of which have yielded good return are fisheries, poultry farming, betel-vine cultivation, welding, and carpentry, weaving and making of hurricane lanterns. The schemes, which have generated minimum income are goat rearing, rice processing, mat (*chatai*) making, and making of bamboo baskets. Some of the schemes which generated relatively higher income in Tamil Nadu are sheep rearing and loan for purchasing bullock-and-cart against the lower generating income scheme such as milch cattle. But the increase in income in these cases has been found to be low and insufficient to bridge the gap between the actual earnings and the poverty line for most of the households (Swaminathan, M.). There has been moderate increase in income and employment in Andhra Pradesh. The percentage increase in income and employment and the ratio of increased income and employment to investment have been found to be high in service sector and low in agricultural sector (Ali, S.).

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Data were collected from 46 beneficiaries under IRDP assistance from two villages belonging to two Gaon Panchayats under Silchar Development Block in the Cachar District of South Assam. Kanakpur and Bhajantipur are the two randomly selected developed and

underdeveloped Gaon Panchayats respectively out of a total of 13 Gaon Panchayats in Silchar Development Block of which four Gaon Panchayats are developed and four are underdeveloped and the remaining five are neither developed nor underdeveloped on the basis characteristics such as the presence/absence of *pucca* motorable road, drinking water facility, electricity, school, non-farm workers, rural artisans, literacy and employability in urban areas. The most developed village, Kanakpur Part-II was purposively chosen out of two villages under Kanakpur Gaon Panchayat. The most underdeveloped village out of six villages under Bhajantipur Gaon Panchayat was also purposively chosen as the sample village. At the last stage 23 beneficiaries from each of the selected villages were interviewed for collecting necessary data. The data so collected were pertaining to the beneficiaries selected for IRDP assistance for the years 1994, 1995 and 1996 under the VIIIth FYP period and for the years 1997 and 1998 under the IXth FYP period.

RESULTS

The study reveals that out of a total of 46 beneficiaries selected for the purpose of analysis 34 beneficiaries belonged to the period of assistance provided in the VIIIth FYP and the rest 12 in the IXth FYP (Table 1). In both the plan periods it is observed that the government functionaries have grossly violated the IRDP guidelines while identifying the poor people for providing assistance. In the VIIth FYP surprisingly only 13 poor people have been selected as against a total selection of 34 beneficiaries. Thus 61.8 percent of the selected beneficiaries are found to be non-poor during VIIIth FYP as against 41.7 percent in the IXth FYP. Village-wise data also reveal that selection of non-poor is more than that of the poor in the developed village. It has been estimated that 75 percent of the selected beneficiaries are non-poor in the developed village during the VIIth FYP as against 71.4 percent in the IXth FYP. But the situation is quite different in the underdeveloped village. In the VIIIth FYP equal importance has been given to both the poor and non-poor in the selection of beneficiaries. But in the VIIIth FYP cent percent of the beneficiaries selected in the underdeveloped village are from the poor lot. Thus there has been less violation of IRDP guidelines in the IXth FYP in comparison to VIIIth FYP and no violation in the underdeveloped village in the IXth FYP.

Analysis of data pertaining to non-poor beneficiaries' further reveal that one of the beneficiaries is a teacher in an English medium school in Silchar town. Another beneficiary is the wife of a rich person in the developed village who was President of the Gaon Panchayat.

Double-assistance has also been given in case of two rich families. Unemployed people have been highly neglected. Among the 46 beneficiaries only four have been observed to be unemployed before getting assistance. These are some of the facts and figures which suggest biases in the selection of beneficiaries for providing IRDP assistance.

Analysis of data presented in Table 2 and Table 3 reveal show that there has been a great success in the task of lifting the poor into non-poor group. In the sample villages out of 46 beneficiaries 20 were poor when they got assistance of which 17 have crossed poverty line thereby showing a success of 85 percent (Table 3). In the VIIIth FYP period, only 2.9 percent of the poor beneficiaries could not be brought above poverty line as against 16.7 percent in the IXth FYP period (Table 2). Comparison of Table 1 and Table 2 reveal that beneficiaries belonging to the poor group have been drastically reduced in the VIIIth FYP from 38.2 percent in the pre-assistance period to 2.9 percent in the post-assistance period. In other words, the percentage of non-poor has been increased from 61.8 to 97.1 during the same period. Similarly in the IXth FYP beneficiaries in the group of poor have been reduced from 58.3 percent to 16.7 percent and the non-poor have been increased from 41.7 percent to 83.3 percent. In the VIIIth FYP, 92.3 percent of the poor beneficiaries have crossed poverty line as against 42.5 percent in the IXth FYP. When 75 percent of the poor beneficiaries have crossed poverty line in the developed village during the VIIIth FYP, the corresponding figure has been 50 percent in the same village in the IXth FYP. Similarly when all the poor beneficiaries have crossed poverty line in the underdeveloped village during VIIIth FYP period only 80 percent in the same village has crossed poverty line during IXth FYP period. Thus IRDP has been more successful during the VIIIth FYP period in bringing poor above poverty line in comparison to IXth FYP period.

CONCLUSION

The success or failure of any rural development programme largely depends on how best it is organised and implemented. If it is put in the hands of corrupt and inefficient officials, it ends up in a dismal failure. IRDP in this respect has been a failure in those places where it has been wrongly implemented; otherwise it has achieved a tremendous progress in lifting the poor above the poverty line. The performance of IRDP is exemplary in the Silchar Development Block in respect of poverty alleviation as it has been able to lift 85 percent of the beneficiaries who were poor above the poverty line. Simultaneously the programme has been a great failure in the sense that majority (56 percent) of the beneficiaries belonged to non-poor group due to

biasness in the selection of beneficiaries on the part of the government officials. Thus the need of the hour is a band of dedicated workers at the village level and sincere and efficient leadership at the political level and social level which might be able to imbibe a spirit of dedication to ensure voluntary co-operation and proper implementation of the programme.

Table 1
DISTRIBUTION OF BENEFICIARIES BEFORE GETTING IRDP ASSISTANCE

Status of Beneficiary	Number and Percentage of Beneficiaries during					
	VIII th FYP			IX th FYP		
	Developed Village	Undeveloped Village	Total	Developed Village	Undeveloped Village	Total
Poor	4 (25.0)	9 (50.0)	13 (38.2)	2 (28.6)	5 (100.0)	7 (58.3)
Non-Poor	12 (75.0)	9 (50.0)	21 (61.8)	5 (71.4)	0 (0.0)	5 (41.7)
Total	16 (100.0)	18 (100.0)	34 (100.0)	7 (100.0)	5 (100.0)	12 (100.0)

Table 2
DISTRIBUTION OF BENEFICIARIES AFTER GETTING IRDP ASSISTANCE

Status of Beneficiary	Number and Percentage of Beneficiaries during					
	VIII th FYP			IX th FYP		
	Developed Village	Undeveloped Village	Total	Developed Village	Undeveloped Village	Total
Poor	1 (6.3)	0 (0.0)	1 (2.9)	1 (14.3)	1 (20.0)	2 (16.7)
Non-Poor	15 (93.7)	18 (100.0)	33 (97.1)	6 (85.7)	4 (80.0)	10 (83.3)
Total	16 (100.0)	18 (100.0)	34 (100.0)	7 (100.0)	5 (100.0)	12 (100.0)

Table 3
NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF POOR BENEFICIARIES CROSSED POVERTY LINE

Item	Beneficiaries Crossed Poverty Line during						
	VIII th FYP			VIII th FYP			Grand Total
	Developed Village	Undeveloped Village	Total	Developed Village	Undeveloped Village	Total	
Number	3	9	12	1	4	5	17
Percentage	75.0	100.0	92.3	50.0	80.0	42.5	85.0

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