

RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN ASSAM



Nikunja Lata Dutta
Manjula Dowerah Bhuyan

ABOUT THE BOOK

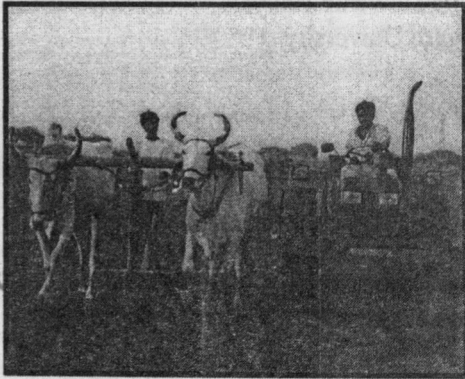
The book entitled Rural Development in Assam is a collection of selected papers presented and submitted in the National Seminar cum Workshop on "Rural Development in Assam: Problems and Prospects" held in Dibrugarh University, Assam on 16-17 September, 2003, sponsored by Dibrugarh University, Oil India Limited, Duliajan and District Rural Development Agency, Dibrugarh. The volume comprises twenty two papers and nine abstracts contributed by experienced academicians, researchers and administrators from different disciplines. Broadly, the book covers various aspects of Rural Development which includes Rural Bureaucracy, People's Participation, Panchyati Raj, Non-Governmental Organisations, Self Help Groups, Empowerment of Women, Rural Health Services and Rural Technology. It is expected that the Students, Research Scholars, Development Administrators, Policy Makers and Social Scientists will be highly benefited from this publication.

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The present volume is an anthology of papers presented at the National Seminar cum workshop on 'Rural Development in Assam : Problems and Prospects' held in Dibrugarh University, Assam in September 2003.

Editors :

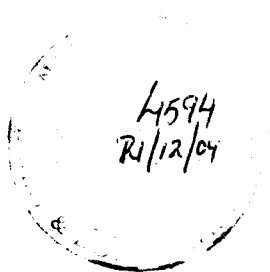
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RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA : SOME RANDOM THOUGHTS

S. Kaushik

Rural Development in India has been essentially viewed as equivalent and confined to the poverty alleviation programme. In turn poverty alleviation is treated as solely an economic problem, removed from other historical, sociological and political dimensions.

The word rural development has also acquired a stereotyped meaning thanks to the artificial division and distribution of functions among the departments in the Central Government. Education, health and other areas do not get discussed under rural development, as much as employment, income generation and area development. Even agriculture is talked less about. Unless rural development is approached comprehensively and holistically, no efforts can lead to the lessening of poverty and increase in standard of living. Education and health, particularly of women and girl children are ignored.

Despite much writings and preachings, the attitude of rural development functionaries and district level officials, and even the politicians (who treat them like demi gods when seeking votes), view the rural population as illiterate, backward, orthodox and as beneficiaries. Their attitude is one of they themselves being omniscient and omnipotent, with a remedy for every malady that the individual and the village has. There is neither an empathetic nor a clinical approach. There is very little scope for the rural poor (or even not so poor) to speak up their views or to respond meaningfully.

For quite a few decades the intellectuals and social activists are advocating a participatory approach involving the targetted persons actively in the conceptualisation, formulation, implementation and monitoring of projects. But this has remained on paper. Even the progressive, democratic and modern social activists who carry a lot

of idealism, do not seem to measure up to the task while performing their roles. The condescending attitude of the urban to the rural, of the higher castes to others, and the higher class among all of them, refuses to die away, even if the social workers and activists are well intentioned.

The participation of people in the rural areas are sought, at the most, in the implementation and monitoring stage. The PRA (Participatory Research Appraisal) method of evaluation is a mere sop or a half hearted attempt. It still does not make it participation.

The most important aspect of participation is in decision making. Articulation of local needs, conceptualization of the approach to meet these needs, formulation of methods to fulfil them and correcting all these midterm to make them efficacious will form the salient features of this decision making.

The concept of participation would also mean the involvement of women S.C. and S.T. Such a participation in rural development, had until recently, meant only a share for women as beneficiaries in poverty alleviation projects and IRDP programmes. It further restricted the women beneficiaries to a limit of 33 percent and introduced concepts like female headed families which was more confusing than helping the women earners. Not merely were the administrators not able to understand or identify the female headed families, the women themselves did not feel or believe that they were 'heading' the families. They were more "shouldering" the responsibilities without the power or rights, which still belonged to the males in the patriarchal families. No wonder the administrators could not identify 33 percent women for benefiting from their schemes.

Further the low value attached to the female work and earnings, and consequently their place in the social status was reflected in the low skilled programmes and assets that were offered. With the promise of such a low return for their hard labour (part of their triple or multiple burden), the women could have neither emerged from poverty nor gained in status either in the family or in the community. Still ironically and mistakenly it was called women in development approach. To

what extent are the rural people in general, women and poor in particular involved in these operations in the moot point.

Even the NGOs (few in number who work actually in rural development and stay put there) have become an agent implementer of government schemes. By their designation and mandate, the NGOs should be working as parallel streams to government and more like social activists and social workers, rather than as those who carry out the government schemes, according to government objectives and procedures which are full of bureaucratic notions and red tapism. If so, what are the local level officials and administration for? The society is thereby deprived of contribution and role of NGOs as originators and practitioners of alternate concepts and processes in developmental models with initiative and innovation. Even those like the Tilonia Project of Aruna and Bunker Roy, SEWA of Ahmedabad and others in different fields like education, health, environment, scientific methods, self employment, credit, marketing, etc have not been replicated. To many it is easier to receive grants on the government schemes and implement them with all their gaps than be innovative and struggle. The role and participation of NGOs in decision making has also been, thus, lacking. The 'rural development' has thus gone on merrily as per the government thinking and planning, on the bureaucratic and policy making model, rather than as a holistic one.

The reasons for all these follies in our programmes is the faulty conceptualisation based on imaginary demands and needs of the poor and women, rather than due to what is called in women's studies as the theory of practical needs versus strategic needs. Often the poor and the women are accused of not being able to see beyond their nose, of fulfilling the immediate and basic needs of the family. It is not so much the women, but the policy makers (mainly the administrators and NGO Social workers) who cannot see beyond their short sighted vision of women, nurturing and nourishing but subordinated and sacrificing. If women and the poor only were involved at the planning and formulating stage, their long term and visionary perspectives would have been elicited and a set of more practical and positive policies would have emerged.

The non-participation of the beneficiaries in decision making at the rural grass root level, and the non-replication of the innovative experiments by quite a few NGOs, has led to India adopting the single model system. All the states have mostly followed the centralised model of rural development concepts, strategies and programmes, with little or no modifications. Their own additions by way of new ideas and schemes in consonance with the local realities and demands have been marginal, if any. Possibly this is because the officers at the top in the state administration are from all India services and centrally appointed and their training is all India and not local. It would have worked well if they succeed to bring to bear their local / regional experiences on the national policies and programmes, rather than the reverse. But right now it is a one way process.

The lack of participation, particularly of the women and S.C. has not merely led to not so effective policies and their implementation, but it has also led to the de empowerment of the participants too. Thus it has run contrary to the objectives of rural development itself.

It is because of this, the women's movement now, and the S.C. movement some fifty years ago, demanded participation in decision making and leadership role. Like in the case of S.C.'s reservation in 1951, the women's movement in the late eighties and nineties very much advocated greater participation of women.

This reasoning and the demand had finally led to the Constitution, under its recent 73rd and 74th Amendments providing for the mandatory provisions for the participation of women, S.C. and S.T. in the deliberations of local government. By reserving at least one third seats for of the above categories as members and chairpersons the Amendments have made sure that the women and the weaker sections are allowed to participate in the decision making process. Euphemistically called 'political empowerment', one hopes it allows the women, S.C. and S.T. members of the Panchayats at all the three levels to participate in the 'district planning' for the wards, blocs and districts. In a few states like Rajasthan and Haryana the governments have even stipulated regular monthly ward meetings and Gram Sabha meetings on definite dates in the year.

There is also the question of how many states have constituted the District Planning Committees, and how exactly they are functioning. If they begin to be successful and operational, much can be achieved by way of decentralised, participatory and grass root planning and governance. These meetings will provide the opportunities, but how and whether the women, S.C. and S.T. participate in the same voice their concerns, is another issue altogether. One will have to learn from the People's Planning Campaign of Kerala to raise the awareness of rural people, help them to formulate their demands and compel the state to adopt the decentralised planning model as a fundamental concept.

Equally important will be the need for agricultural reforms, particularly land reforms. No effort associated with rural development can succeed unless it is linked to the land and land reform measures. Neighbouring West Bengal should inspire the Assam Government to learn and initiate.

As an overwhelmingly agriculture dominated area, (with 87.28 percent population living in the rural side) Assam is heavily dependent on rains; but also suffer every year, without fail, from the natural calamities of flood and ruin to crops. But like most of the underdeveloped states in India, the development of rural side in Assam has remained delinked from the industrialised urban sector with their tea plantation, tea industry, oil industry.

The Assamese people are also not able to benefit much from the new Panchayati Raj experiment, mainly because of the delay in the elections and commencing of the new processes. The lack of appreciable member of voluntary organisations in the countryside and the disturbed political scenerio have also been responsible for the poor implementation of rural development schemes.

As some of the indicators will show in Assam 40 percent of rural population live below poverty line. It ranks 14 in the Human Development Index; the HDI of its rural areas is worse at 26. By way of Gender disparity, it ranks 30, with a value of 0.575. It has a high maternal mortality rate of 401, with almost 10 percent of child death rate, 76.5 infant mortality rate. Life expectancy is still low with 55.6

for females and 56.1 for males, fifth highest in India after the Bimaru states. This is despite the female literacy rate being comparatively higher at 56 percent. The rural female literacy is, of course, less at 52.25 percent.

Ultimately then, one needs to approach rural development not as an administrative issue or a bureaucratic concern. It has to be a holistic one which, horizontally, links the various development inputs and action, but also vertically attempts a social engineering and economic restructuring. It will thus be a political action, backed by political will and administrative commitment.

It is also a political imperative. With more and more migration taking place from rural to urban areas, India stands in danger of excessive urbanisation, and slumming of the cities, leading to explosive social scenario, accompanied by depletion of the rural areas and natural resources.

Will our political leader and administrators steeped in selfenrichment be able to do this? Will the new idea of the Prime Minister on PURA (provision of urban facilities in rural areas) be able to achieve this? Will our Panchayats emerge as their own destiny makers and builders of new India?

