

RURAL TRANSFORMATION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA



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Contents

1. Introduction
H. C. Gautam
M. P. Bezbaruah 1

SECTION I

Strategy for Rural Development

2. Participation of the poor in Rural Development Programmes - A Key Success Factor
Subhrangshu Sekhar Sarkar 11
3. Transforming The Rural Sphere and Quality of Rural Life: Issue of Employment and Employability in Rural Non-farm Sector
Joydeep Baruah 25
4. Capacity building for Youths on Employment Opportunities in the Rural Sector
K. Ahmed 44
5. Rural Transformation in North Eastern States of India : Progress, Problems and Prospects
Shankar Chatterjee 71
6. Towards a better export marketing linkages from NE region
Sunil Kr. Saikia 93
7. Strategies of Development for the Hill Tribes of N. E. India
C. K. Biswas 100

8. Rural Transformation through youth
employment generation in North East
Sriparna B Baruah 111
9. Implications of Prime Minister Rozgar
Yojana (PMRY) Scheme for Rural
Transformation : A Case Study
R. K. Raul
J. U. Ahmed 128
10. Strategies for Economic upliftment of
Tribal Yak Herdmen with the Help of
Yak Products' Process Technologies
D. K. Sharma
M. Bhattacharya 141
11. Rural Economic Development Through
Village Pottery Industry :
A Case Study of Manipur
N. Tejmani Singh
S. Rita Devi 151
12. Trade & Marketing of Non-Timber Forest
Products in North East India: Some Issues
on Rural Development
U. K. Sahoo
R. K. P. G. Singha 159
13. Rural Economic Upliftment
by Increasing Milk Production in Local Cows
through TAR-IVLP in Boithabhanga Village
of Sonitpur District, Assam
Krishi Vigyan Kendra,
Tezpur 174

SECTION II

Addressing Infrastructure Gaps

14. Revitalizing Teaching-Research-Extension
Nexus of Higher Education for Rural
Transformation
Bhagaban Subudhi 181
15. Ensuring Socio Economic Development through
Rural Electrification: Trends and Prospects in North
East India
Debajit Palit 193
16. Irrigation Development in Assam
Jay Nigam 214

SECTION III

Role of Socio-Economic Institutions

17. Adequacy of Existing Institutions for Rural
Development
Anuradha Dutta 243
18. Status of PRI's in Development
Administration of Assam
Niru Hazarika 252
19. Enabling NGO Mindset for Rural
Transformation
Papori Baruah 261
20. Rural Development and Institutional Set Up
in the Hills - A Case Study of Khasi Hills
B. Datta Ray 273
21. Credit Support for Rural Employment
Generation in NE Region - Role of
Financial Institutions
K. V. Nagaraju 278

22. Role of Self-Help Groups in Rural Development :
A Case Study in two Development Blocks
Jagadish Ch. Sarma
Bijan Kr. Kunda 307
23. Micro Financing and Empowerment of Poor
in Meghalaya : The Need for Learning from
the Experience
Ambika Prasad Pati 319

SECTION IV

Market Forces, Globalisation and Rural Development :

24. Globalization and North-East Region :
Self-Empowerment of the Rural Poor for
Survival and Progress
J. B. Ganguly 335

PARTICIPATION OF THE POOR IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES - A KEY SUCCESS FACTOR

Subhrangshu Sekhar Sarkar

1. Introduction

Few countries in the world can rival India either in its sheer size or in the diversity of its cultural traditions. India's ancient cultural roots and living democratic tradition have played to forge a nation that increasingly plays a leading role in Asian and World affairs. India is a federation of 28 states. The North Eastern region of India comprises of 8 of such states, Assam being the largest among them.

Since nearly three-fourths of India's population live in the rural areas, the development of rural areas and improvement of the conditions of the rural poor have been the focus of development planning since its inception. Rural development implies both the economic betterment of people as well as greater social transformation. Since her Independence India has been a welfare state. The primary objective of all governmental endeavors have been the welfare of its millions. Elimination of poverty, ignorance, diseases and inequality of opportunities and providing a better and higher quality of life were the basic premises upon which all the plans and blueprints of development were built. The policies and programmes have been designed with the aim of alleviation of rural poverty that has been one of the primary objectives of planned development in India. Employment generation and asset creation have been the focus of Government of India's strategy for eradicating poverty. Though the Eighth Plan recognized the importance of people's initiatives and participation, the Ninth Plan has gone further in unambiguously putting people's participation at the forefront of the development process. The Ninth Plan seeks to strengthen people-oriented planning processes where the people at large, particularly the poor, can fully participate.

An important element in development is that the people of the country must be major participant in the process that brings about

changes in structures. Participation in the process of development implies participation in the enjoyment of the benefits of development as well as in the production of those benefits. People's participation in development implies, people's contribution to development efforts, collective decision making and sharing of the fruits of development. In this context, Amartya Sen explains, "millions of people living in rich and poor countries are still unfree, they are denied elementary freedom and remain imprisoned in one way or another by economic poverty, social deprivation, political tyranny or cultural authoritarianism". The main purpose of development is to "remove the sources of unfreedom and to expand the real freedom that people enjoy". Development presupposes a concern for human values.

In order to provide the rural people with better prospects for economic development, increased participation of people in the rural development programmes, decentralization of planning, better enforcement of land reforms and greater access to credit are envisaged. Initially main thrust for development was laid on agriculture industry, communication, education, health and allied sectors but later on it was realized that accelerated development can be provided only if governmental efforts are adequately supplemented by direct and indirect involvement of people at the grass root level.

2. Rural Development in Developing Countries

A review of rural development programs in some developing countries indicates a long history of program failures even though there are also many cases where the programs have succeeded in making significant social changes. The questions are then, why do some rural development programs in developing countries fail? An why are some others successful? What are the factors associated with these successes and failures?

2.1 Why Do Rural Development Programs Fail ?

The question of development program failure has been discussed comprehensively by many writers such as Chambers (1983), Harrison et.al (1995), Burkey (1993), Madeley (1991), Esman and Uphoff (1984), Hammer (1994), and Egger (1995). Based on their experiences working for rural development in Asian (Pakistan , Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Thailand and India) as well as African countries (Uganda, Mali, Ethiopia) several common problems have been

identified by these writers as the major causes for rural development programs failure, namely :

- ❖ Targeting and top-down approaches
- ❖ Neglect of local values and outsiders bias:
- ❖ Lack of people's participation
- ❖ Partial and disintegrative approaches; and
- ❖ Investment illusion

2.2 Why Rural Development Programs Succeed ?

Although there are many cases of rural development program failure, some programs achieved their objectives successfully. Based on a wide range of experiences, it has been identified that there are small essential factors associated with the successful achievement of development objectives. The most important factor is 'participation' of the poor or the local people. Therefore, it is understandable that several writers raised this concept of development with specific terms such as Participative Action Management - PAM model (Chamala, 1995), 'Putting People First' (Cernea, 1991), 'Participatory Rural Development' (Burkey, 1993), 'Experiment With Democracy' (Rouse, 1994), 'Farmer First' (Oakley 1994).

In terms of the management point of view, participation in rural development programs has to be involved throughout the planning process (identification of situation, problems, solution, the best solution, plan of action) implementation, evaluation of the program, and sharing in the fruit of development (Liebercier and Scheneider, 1995). High levels of people participation in rural development programs, especially in decision making, will lead to high motivation and commitment to program implementation.

Several other major factors related to the success of rural development programs in some other developing countries are :

- ❖ Awareness of local values
- ❖ Integrated or system approach
- ❖ Human resource development
- ❖ Based on actual situation
- ❖ Decentralization of power

In addition to these, Madeley (1990) pointed out other principle of successful development projects, such as the participative approach

and the use of indigenous knowledge. Lauer (1993) also summarised several similar principles for rural development effectiveness, such as the self-help principle, bottom-up approach, development requiring full-time management, comprehensive approach, participation of a broad range of community interests, part of a larger network, and rural development programs not controlled by outsider agencies.

3. Participation - Its Interpretations

Participation is a contemporary catchword in development studies, particularly in the field of social development. The increasing recognition of total dependence upon a professionally dominated style of intervention resulted in the emergence of new approaches like, bottom up development, putting people first, and putting the last first (Oakley et.al 1991). Whatever the merits of the approaches, they all essentially demand a shift in the style of development intervention. Popularized by the United Nations and other international bodies, participation replaced the earlier versions of formalized community development of the 1950s which fell largely into the hands of more affluent people, bypassing the rural poor (Hulme and Turner, 1990).

Although there is wide agreement on the importance of 'participation' to achieve the objectives of development, there is less unanimity on the nature and content of the 'participation' process. The term 'participation' has been interpreted in different ways by the social scientists and international organizations. These interpretations represent recognizably different forms of participation and the general thrust of most development projects could be located within one statement or other. From this wide range of interpretations, Oakley provides a useful classification of different interpretations.

1. Participation as Contribution

This is the dominant interpretation of participation in development project in Third World countries. Participation is seen as voluntary, or other form of contribution by rural people to the programmes and projects. According to Oakley, there are number of ways whereby these contributions are forthcoming and managed but, whatever the guise under which they are presented, they form the core of the participatory element in the project.

2. Participation as Organization

There has been a strong argument that organization is the fundamental instrument to ensure participation of the rural poor in development. The organization which will serve as the vehicle for participation, either such organization are externally conceived and introduced like cooperatives, farmers associations etc. or else they emerge and take structure themselves as a result of the process of participation.

3. Participation as Empowerment

A more recent interpretation equates participation with achieving power, in terms of access to, and control of the resources necessary to protect livelihood. It emphasized that participation means empowering the rural poor in terms of access and control of resources. Oakley interprets it as the development of skills and abilities to enable rural poor to manage better, have a say in, or negotiate with existing delivery system.

4. Non Participation as a Barrier for Development

The result of five decades of planning is hardening of people's belief that development programme can be done only by Government. People have slowly but completely withdrawn themselves from the process of development. People consider development programmes as governmental programmes. People have become dependent upon governmental activities only. This mindset has resulted in non-participation of people in the process of development. People of a block cannot bring out a list of families living below poverty line in their block. Even this requires to be prepared by a Gram Sevak who might not be residing in that village.

The implementation of programme suffers for want of timely release of funds. The beneficiaries suffer due to wrong identification of families below poverty line as the identification is done in routine manner. None is bothered if the PDS dealer does not open shop daily, does not exhibit the stock position and keeps the shop closed for months. The entire delivery system has become corroded. Delay in release of funds from apex secretariat level to block level has fed corruption and unaccountability in implementation of programmes of development.

5. The Arguments for Participation in Development

The proponents of participation have put forward a number of substantive arguments for the inclusion of participation as an essential ingredient in planning and management of development projects. Uphoff (1985) have argued in favour of participation in development projects. The following are important general arguments in favour of participation:

- (a) Efficiency : Participation implies, a greater chance that resources available for development projects will be used more efficiently. There is a general support for efficiency because resources are mobilized and utilized to best advantage.
- (b) Effectiveness : Participation will make projects more effective as instruments of rural development.
- (c) Self Reliance: Self reliance refers to the positive effects on rural poor of participating in development projects.
- (d) Coverage: Participation will bring more people under the direct influence of the development activities.
- (e) Sustainability: Sustainability refers to continuity and sees participation as fundamental to developing a self sustaining momentum of development.
- (f) Equity: Equity can also be broadly accepted since participation allows rural poor access to resources and fairer distribution of opportunities.

The proponents of 'participation' have suggested that since previous top-down strategies of rural development have failed to make any substantial impact upon rural poverty, there is a case for reversing the direction and approaching the development move from the bottom up.

They further argued that rural poor should actively participate in development in order to contribute countervailing force to those elite groups who otherwise capture development resources and activities.

6. Obstacles to Participation

Although participation has been recognized and identified as an important ingredient to the success of development projects, it has been realized that it is susceptible to a range of obstacles. A number of studies have come up with the problems of the practice of

participation, or more fundamentally, serious obstacles which can frustrate attempts at a participatory development. Oakley and Marsden (1984) identify these obstacles as Structural, Operational/Administrative and Cultural/Social.

1. *Structural Obstacles* : Structural Obstacles can be attributed to the political environment, within which development intervention has been attempted. A centralized political system, legal system, and prevailing ideology do not encourage citizen comments and State maintains the direction and decision making in the affairs of the country.

2. *Operational/Administrative Obstacles*: These obstacles are commonly attributed to over centralized planning, inadequate delivery mechanism, lack of local coordination, inappropriateness of project technology, irrelevant project content, lack of effective local structures and so on. These obstacles refer not only to participation, but also to a large extent, are the maladies of many rural development projects.

3. *Cultural and Social Obstacles*: A number of studies have shown that the rural poor may have a 'culture of dependence' and 'culture of silence', which is historically ingrained. The most frequent and powerful social obstacle to the participation of the rural poor in development projects is a mentality of dependence, which is deeply ingrained in their lives. The rural poor have become accustomed to leaving the decisions and initiative to the local elite. Their lack of leadership and organizational skills and inexperience of running projects or organizations means that the rural poor are seen as failing to take advantage of opportunities to participate in project design and implementation.

7. Participation Through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)

Though Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 incorporating three-tier system according to 73rd Constitution Amendment was enacted in the state in the year 1994 but no election of three-tier Panchayat Raj Institute could be held till January 2002 when the first time three-tier Panchayat election was held in the State. Except in Autonomous Council area, in the other parts of the state three-tier PRI now have been put into place. Govt. of Assam issued instruction to transfer the responsibilities of 29 subjects to build the capacity of PRI so that

community can take informed decision regarding selection of viable technological options.

Thus, Panchayat Raj Institutions have now become functional in Assam. Its success depends upon its attempt to bring more and more people to participate in formulation and execution of development programmes.

Change in mindset of people can be accomplished through Panchayati Raj functionaries. PRIs only can make the administrative System function for the welfare of the people. No additional infrastructure of fund is required in this task. For teachers to teach, doctors to attend the Primary Health Centre and BDO to execute development plan, no additional fund is required, because these paid units of administration already exist. The requirement is of a master who pays salary. Perhaps Panchayat Raj functionaries would meet this requirement. However it is essential that these functionaries are properly trained. They should be motivated towards the necessity of helping economic growth of the State through process of development.

The Government of India is vigorously pursuing with the State Governments for expeditious devolution of requisite administrative and financial powers to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI's) as envisaged under 73rd Amendment Act of the Constitution of India. The Government's strategy for community development is strengthening of PRIs so that they can effectively implement programmes for poverty alleviation.

8. Participation by Women Empowerment

The greatest challenge for the next millennium will be in converting despair into hope which are to be found in the areas of population, ecology, economics and gender equality. One of the reasons why women continue to remain at the periphery of their societies, particularly in developing countries, is that issues related to them continue to be integrated into existing male-biased development frameworks. The empowerment of rural women is crucial for the development of North East India. Bringing women into the mainstream of development is a major concern for the Government of India. Therefore, the programmes for poverty alleviation have a women's component to ensure flow of adequate funds to this section. The Constitutional (73rd) Amendment, Act 1992 provides for reservation of selective posts for women. The Constitution has placed enormous

responsibility on the Panchayats to formulate and execute various programmes of economic development and social justice, and a number of Centrally Sponsored Schemes are being implemented through Panchayats. Thus, women Members and Chairpersons of Panchayats, who are basically new entrants in Panchayats, have to acquire the required skill and be given appropriate orientation to assume their rightful roles as leaders and decision makers. To impart training for elected representatives of PRIs is primarily the responsibility of the State Governments/Union Territory Administrations. Ministry of Rural Development also extends some financial assistance to the States/UTs with a view to improve the quality of training programmes and to catalyze capacity building initiatives for the PRI elected members and functionaries.

It is also our firm belief that women can be effective social change agents and only they can resolve issues affecting them. True development cannot quite be brought about in a society where women's issues are singled out as "women's issues" alone.

9. Participation by Groups

Groups may have a role in encouraging people's participation in rural development programs. Liebercier and Schneider (1995) highlight that groups have been widely used as vehicles of community participation, especially in the decision making process. Once the group allows its members to participate in the group decision making process, there would be high members' commitment and responsibility toward the group programs implementation and evaluation.

Groups can be defined differently by different people. However there is a common aspect of groups that are included in all definitions. The most acceptable meaning of group is that of a collective of people who are working together for common goal. Based on this definition there are at least three main characteristics of a group, namely, that it is a collective of people, that the members should interact and that the members share the same goals.

In regard to the adoption and diffusion of new technology (interchangeable with innovation) groups occupy a very strategic position. Once the group decides to adopt the new technology, the next step of decision making is related to the implementation of the technology. How large is the area to be cultivated for the implementation on new technology, how many inputs the group needs,

and who should be involved. These kinds of decisions are also regarded as the strategic roles of group.

The next strategic role of groups is related to the delivery of services and goods. In most of developing countries, agricultural extension for rural development have utilised 'farmer groups' to transfer information and agricultural inputs (such as fertiliser , pesticides) to the group members and to the rest of farming community as well. This role of the group makes the delivery process more effective because it is easier to manage, especially by the government and non-governmental organisations.

A group may be able to bring about changes in peoples behaviour including knowledge, attitudes and skills. Hawkins et.al (1982) show the comparison between group (interpersonal communication) and mass media methods in several aspects including behavioural changes. They argue that group methods are very effective in changing peoples behaviour in term of knowledge, attitudes and skills. Through the group, every member will have a chance to learn new information and new experiences. Furthermore, effective discussion, clear arguments and justification developed during group discussion may create a considerable change in members' attitudes. In addition, the group members may work together to improve their skills which in turn may lead to innovation adoption.

The explanation of group's roles in changing people's behaviour then should be viewed in light of the methods used by the group to create change. Therefore, it can be assumed that effective actualisation of groups' roles will be dependent on the type of activities undertaken by the group to change their members' behaviour. Behavioral changes might not be limited to members of the group, but also may occur in the wider community as well. If the groups are considered as the medium of communication, the maximum roles of group in behavioural changes will be achieved when the group is successful in changing the behaviour of the whole rural community.

10. Rural Transformation through Peoples' Participation

The starvation and distress of the bulk of rural population have become an age old history of human civilization. With the improved industrialization and economic growth, i.e. Gross National Product, the problem of unemployment, under-employment is aggravating

day to day. Consequently, the growing rate of sufferings and misery of rural masses is deteriorating their standard of living.

Several studies have been conducted to assess the role of government policies in regard to rural transformation of rural development. All these studies have highlighted the importance of rural transformation in order to bring back a strong rural base in our country and devised a number of policies to tackle the rural problem.

Transformations are imperative when the existing system is corrupt and loses its power for progress, such that, it douses its whole society into self-mockery and decline. And during such times, the masses look for someone to rise who would have vision and extricate them from the impending anarchy and liberate them from the vitiated system.

The main force behind any transformation are people who pioneer any movement whether through art, culture, religion, intellectual consensus, social or political reforms, for the improvement of the society, and it can be achieved only through a mass movement. The aims and ideals of such movement can be later translated into law.

Laws are merely standards of social conduct (whether rights or duties) which adopt in accordance with changing times. These can be instruments for change, but can not be catalyst to change per se. The human endeavour to find and realize, to achieve, to improve and above all to be dynamic in his search, yields him more exhilarating results-better than the existing ones; the relation with social system is no different.

11. Experience with "User Group" in Sonitpur District of Assam

Sonitpur District is the first district in Assam to introduce the system of "User Group" for implementation of various rural development programmes. For non Individual Beneficiary Schemes (non IBS), a gram sabha is convened where a President is elected who is normally a reputed person of honesty and integrity in the locality. A Secretary is nominated who is a Government employee. Besides, ten members are elected by the Gram Sabha. Thus, a group of twelve persons is constituted to look after a specific work. In case of Individual Beneficiary Schemes (IBS), the group consists of ten beneficiaries besides President and Secretary, and in such cases

Gram Sabha is not necessary. Once the group is constituted, a joint account is opened in a bank in the name of the Group. The District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) allots funds in installments in the said bank account, which is withdrawn by the joint signature of President and Secretary. The junior engineer of the block office is entrusted with the responsibility of monitoring and certification of the work done.

This method brings about peoples' participation in implementation of rural development programmes. Moreover, it brings transparency in the system. It works as a watchdog and to a large extent, aims to control corruption and malpractice ingrained in the system. However, this method came under severe criticism from many quarters. It surpasses the block office in the release of fund and block office has a very limited role in monitoring and checking of the works. The entire success of this method depends on the honesty and integrity of the group members especially the President and Secretary. When they are dishonest and manipulative, this method fails.

12. Conclusion

Since the acid-test of the success of any scheme lies in its acceptance by the target-group, it becomes imperative on the implementing agencies to formulate schemes and projects after active consultations with, and due participation of the intended beneficiaries. The involvement of the people has to be so intense and intimate that the target-group develops psychological and emotional attachment with the proposed schemes, treating them as their own for their own benefit, and not as the ones that are to be thrust upon them by the planners and implementers. After its acceptance by the people, its implementation becomes easier and chances of its failure also become remote.

To involve the villagers in the process of implementing rural development programmes is very much important. There are professional methods to be learnt. They are known as the Participatory Rural Appraisal Techniques. These techniques help to build up rapport with the villagers and they can be used especially to establish rapport with the rural poor. The administrative machinery has to be trained from top to bottom in these techniques so that they are able to go to the villages and appreciate the rural issues as presented by the villagers and facilitate the villagers in planning for rural development. They are the best judge of their requirements. If they feel involved,

then the projects would work better. Planning cannot afford to be uniform in a country in which each village is different from the other, each block has its own special feature and each region has its own diversities. Planning should be able to appreciate the specific needs of the villagers. It should be responsive to the felt needs of the villagers, especially the poorer groups. The villagers can plan for themselves sitting with the administrative machinery that would act as a facilitator of rural transformation.

While interacting with the beneficiaries in course of implementation, the functionaries should make it a point to pick-up enterprising group leaders and arrange to impart special entrepreneurial and managerial skills to them, so that they are able to run and sustain the economic activities. This would instill confidence amongst the masses and they would learn to stand on their own feet reaping the fruits of development without dependence on governmental machinery. Beneficiaries of specific schemes need to be organised into an informal group and later, into a formal co-operative if deemed necessary. Such an organization should be made functional by inculcating entrepreneurial and managerial skills amongst its member to sustain the activities engaged in. The experiment with the concept of "user group" in Sonitpur District needs attention, and if it can be applied in true letter and spirit, it is capable of bringing a massive transformation in the rural scenario.

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