

Alleviation of Rural Poverty Through Sustainable Management of Natural Resources

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Abstract

As India has the largest population of poor people, community development has assumed high priority. The initial programme aimed at upliftment of the rural poor, covered agriculture, animal husbandry, roads, health, education, housing, employment, social and cultural activities. However, food security being the main cause of concern, agriculture received significant attention.

In 1957, a three-tier-system of rural local Government, called 'Panchayati Raj' (Rule by Local Councils) was established. These were Gram Panchayat (Village level), Panchayat Samiti (Block level) and Zilla Parishad (District level). The aim was to decentralise the process of decision making and encourage people's participation. As the programme could not fulfill the expectations of the rural poor, the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) was introduced in 1979, with specific focus on the weaker sections of the society. By mid eighties, the Government was able to meet the minimum needs of the poor, which included elementary education, health, water supply, roads, electrification, housing and nutrition.

In 1987, the Planning Commission decided to consider block as the basic unit for development planning. The task of planning at the district level was entrusted to the District Planning and Development Council which had wider representation of the society. Panchayati Raj reforms were introduced through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment to facilitate planning at the micro-level and to strengthen the Gram Sabha (village assembly).

The Government of India has also been encouraging voluntary action to mobilise the rural people. Several initiatives of the non-government organisations in the last two decades have had significant impact on the development. NGOs such as BAIF Development Research Foundation are promoting sustainable livelihood through dairy husbandry, water resource management, wastelands development and various income generation activities in several states.

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Background

After 53 years of independence and a population of one billion, India is the largest democracy in the world. To sustain this democracy and freedom, it is necessary to ensure economic empowerment and better quality of life for all the citizens. Unfortunately, the annual per capita Gross National Product of USD 370 in India is one of the lowest as compared to USD 860 in China, USD 2450 in Asia, USD 5170 in the world and over USD 20,000 in the developed countries. Despite significant advancement in industrial development, Indian economy is dependent on agrobased activities. Over 65% of the population living in rural areas are primarily dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. A majority of these families spend over 90% of their earnings on basic needs such as food, fuel and health care. Over 35% of the rural families being poor, tackling their problems is the national priority to ensure social justice and better quality of life.

Problems of the Poor

Poverty in India is judged by the income generated by the family. A family of 4-5 members need at least Rs. 11,000 (USD 275) per annum, to meet their minimum basic needs. Those who cannot earn this income are classified as poor. Unemployment and underemployment are the major causes of rural poverty. The other factors are small land holdings, harsh agro-climatic conditions, poor infrastructure and limited opportunities for rural industrial development, poor health care, illiteracy, social suppression, addiction to alcohol and exploitation by vested interests.

Land is the major resource in India, which provides livelihood to the rural population. According to a survey conducted in 1991-92, about 11.25% of the rural families are landless and among the land holders, over 69.35% own less than 1 ha (marginal farmers) and 21.25% own between 1 and 2 ha (small farmers). Water is another critical resource required to enhance the agricultural production. Out of the total arable area of 169 million ha, only 28% area is under irrigation and the rest is dependent on rains, where hardly one crop can be grown in a year. About 40% of the cropping area is located in low rainfall regions where the employment opportunity is hardly for 40 to 50 days in a year and crops generally fail twice in five years. Decline in many traditional occupations and poor institutional infrastructures have further reduced job opportunities. Thus about 90% of the rural population, who are deprived of adequate land holding have to look for other means of livelihood for their survival.

Rural Scenario in India

Out of a billion population, over 65% people are presently living in villages and about 35-40% families, who earn less than US\$ 275 per annum are classified as poor. Presently, about 25% of the villages do not have assured source of drinking water for about 4-5 months during the year and about 70-75% of the water does not meet the standard prescribed by WHO. Poor quality drinking water is adversely affecting the health and diarrhea is an important cause of infant mortality.

Traditional Indian communities being male dominated, women have been suppressed till recently. While the average literacy rate in rural areas is around 50-65%, it is as low as 20-25% among women in backward areas. Education of girls was felt to be unnecessary in the past and this has seriously affected their quality of life. Illiteracy has also suppressed their development due to lack of

communication with the outside world. They are slow in adopting new practices, which are essential with the changing times. Apart from lack of communication, social taboo has also hindered their progress. Several vested interests, both local and outsiders have exploited this situation. The rich landlords did not want any infrastructure development, which would benefit the poor, because of the fear that they would not get cheap labour to work on their farms. The local moneylenders did not want alternate financial institutions to provide cheaper credit needed by the poor. The traditional healers canvassed against modern medicine under the garb of religion and divine power. Thus, the poor continued to live in the clutches of the powerful, accepting it as their destiny. They avoided confrontation and preferred to live a voiceless and suppressed life. Tolerating the worst and hoping for better days has been their way of life.

Agriculture is the major source of livelihood but most of the illiterate farmers have not been successful in cultivating their land economically. Most of them treated agriculture as a family tradition following age old practices and they adopted new changes only after observing the success of their neighbours. Over 12-15% of the rural families are landless and among the land holders, 69% are marginal farmers with less than 1 ha holding (17% of the total land) and about 21% are small farmers with 1-2 ha holdings (34% of the land). Thus about 90% families own less than 51% lands, with a per capita holding of 0.19 ha. Out of the 147 million ha agricultural lands, about 60 million ha are located in arid zones, which are mostly owned by the poor families. As the chances of crop failure on these lands is very high, the farmers generally do not invest in external inputs like improved seeds, fertilisers and plant protection measures and end up with poor crop yields, even during normal years.

People's Initiatives for Progress

Farmers in several states have established cooperatives for processing sugarcane, oil-seeds, milk, fruits and vegetables. With professional management and application of modern technologies, these organisations have brought economic stability and eliminated exploitation by intermediary traders. Encouragement is being given to strengthen such organisations throughout the country.

Under a nationwide programme for water resource development, involvement of NGOs as facilitators and formation of water users' organisations have been encouraged to prepare the micro-level plan and implement the project directly. This programme has made a significant impact on the supply of drinking water and greater awareness is being created on the need to conserve water and energy resources. There is scope for promoting such people's organisations in other fields as well to develop necessary infrastructure required to enhance economic prosperity. Considering the need for promoting people's initiatives and local organisations, Self Help Groups, comprising of poor families have been promoted under the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002), through the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana (SGSY) in 1999. SHGs consisting of 10-20 members belonging to backward socio-economic status encourage the participants to meet regularly to collect their savings and disburse it as loan to needy members. During this process, they also discuss their problems and find suitable solutions. Finally, it is the people's initiative which can sustain the development. The government has the will to support people's movement and this is the only ray of hope for sustainable development of the rural poor in India.

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