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Sustainable Development and Panchayat Raj Institutions: a Case Study of Hailakandi District of Assam

Dr. Suchitra Das

Asst. Professor, Dept. of Economics, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam

Abstract

After walking a long way with the means and ways of achieving growth and development it is realized that mere increasing GNP or high HDI is not an end of development. The most important issue is how to achieve sustainable development. Accordingly worldwide each and every country is coming with different strategies and policies of how to achieve the growth and development without sacrificing the needs of the future generations.

Recently, the United Nations (UN) Summit on Sustainable Development 17 sustainable development goals with 169 targets and 304 indicators were taken into consideration to achieve sustainable development. Amongst these goals one goal was to remove poverty. Now in Indian context and more particularly in Assam poverty is a great problem. The very first day of Indian planning, poverty removal was its prime importance and now with the targeted SDGs, poverty removal as the means to achieve sustainable development has got a new dimension. In this regard Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India and in Assam particularly, can play a crucial role to remove poverty and achieve sustainable development through ensured community participation. The present paper studies the involvement of PRIs of Hailakandi district of Assam in sustainable development. Satisfaction level of people about the functioning of PRIs in poverty removal is studied. It is found that 43.71 percent of rural people were not at all satisfied with the poverty removal functions of the PRIs. Thus, to reduce poverty and attain sustainable development special effort has to make in the rural areas.

Key words: Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goals, PRIs, Poverty.

Introduction: The term ‘sustainable development’ has become the most important issue of economic development. Worldwide each and every country is coming with different strategies and policies to achieve growth and development without sacrificing the needs of the future generations. Sustainable development results in all sphere positive impact on the society whether it is economic, social or natural. When there is sustainable development it leads to a use of eco- friendly technologies for the existing industries which has the blame of harming the environment by producing pollutant, uneven use of natural resources etc. Sustainable development thus, ensures non negligence of environmental constraints, as well

does not destroy natural resources. By protecting the needs and rights, sustainable development ensures enjoying the same quality of life by sharing of resources of all living creatures of the earth. It has thus become common target of all the countries to set such a framework which sustains the environment and at the same time uplifts the socio and economic standard.

The term 'sustainable development' was popularized by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in its 1987 report entitled 'Our Common Future'. Since then several definitions are given to define 'Sustainable Development'. However, the most commonly used definition is given by WCED which says development is sustainable where it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Thus, to have sustainable development always a balance should be made in between improvement of lifestyle that is uplifting of human wellbeing and preserving natural resources or more widely to say the ecosystem. As stated by WCED 'Environment and development are not separate challenges. Development cannot subsist on a deteriorating environmental resource base; the environment cannot be protected when growth leaves out of account the costs of environmental destruction. These problems cannot be treated separately by fragmented institutions and policies. They are linked in a complex system of cause and effect'. Thus sustainable development is interlinked in between social, economic, political as well ecological heads. This interlinks will led to sustainable economic development.

However, in different conferences since 1980's different strategies and goals were set up to achieve sustainable development. Recently, in September 2015, the United Nations (UN) Summit on Sustainable Development adopted the new global goals for sustainable development. United Nations General Assembly adopted the agenda of "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" comprising of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 targets and 304 indicators. India being a signatory of this conference focused to take strategies to attain sustainable development. Accordingly, the Government of Assam also recognized the importance of SDGs. As stated by Government of Assam Panchayat and Rural Development, the 17 SDGs, 169 targets and 304 indicators represent the consensus of the global community on things to be done by different Governments in the interest of the well-being of the entire world and humanity. Keeping the above in view, the Government of Assam has decided to implement the SDGs in the State with effect from 1st January, 2016, and to launch an initiative titled "Assam - 2030 in light of SDGs" from that date.

In this respect it necessitates to study the role played by Panchayat Raj Institutions in achieving sustainable development.

Background of the study: Hailakandi with an area of 1327 sq.km is a district in the southern part of Assam. Of the three districts of Barak valley, Hailakandi has got inter-state border with Mizoram on its south, Karimganj district on its west and in north-eastern side it has Cachar district. Hailakandi is situated between longitude 92° 25' and 92° 46' east and

between 24° 8' and 24° 53' north latitude. Of the three districts of Barak Valley, Hailakandi is the smallest district.

Largest number of population of Hailakandi i.e. 92.69 percent resides in the rural areas and their main occupation is agriculture and allied activities. Rice accounted for nearly 80 percent of the gross cultivated area .But this practice is seasonal, in other times they mainly depend on other occupations such as day labour. District has very weak economic and social infrastructure.

The unemployment problem in the district is very acute due to high density of population, lack of economic opportunities and shortage of industries in the region.

With largest rural areas Hailakandi has local rural self-government or Panchayat Raj institution (PRIs) constituting of 1 Zillah Parishad, 5 Anchalik Parishads with 62 Gaon Panchayat.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To study the role played by PRIs in sustainable development.

Methodology and data base: As found there were 17 SDGs goals, goal 1 that is to 'end poverty in all forms everywhere' is taken into consideration to study the role of PRIs in sustainable development. The study is based on secondary and primary Data. The secondary data is collected from published books, journals, official websites and internet sources. For collection of primary data sample survey is done. Out of 62 Gaon Panchayat in Hailakandi district purposively three GP is selected and 10 percent of the villagers and all elected members of the GP are interviewed. For this a standard questionnaire is prepared and using suitable statistical tool data are analysed.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review: As it is known to us that India is a country with nearly 70 percent of which is covered by rural areas. Thus most of the population is residing in the rural areas. Again the picture of rural areas as we all know have less accessibility in economic, social and political outreach. Poverty, economic inequality, social inequality, less accessibility of education, health, hygiene etc are the common feature of the rural areas. Now when we say sustainable development in Indian context the most targeted area is the rural areas. Without taking into consideration of the rural areas we cannot fulfill the very target of sustainable development.

Thus, Panchayats are vested with the power to develop the rural areas. The Balwant Raj Meheta Committee remarked that Panchayat Raj would act as the representatives of the village and ensure the development of the village as well as participation of villages in development activities. The 73rd amendment Act (1992) is a stricken landmark in the transition of political power to the grass-root democracy in our country, Decentralization of power have led to the local bodies to take active participation in all socio economic and political decisions. PRIs provide the opportunity to the rural masses to involve themselves from grass-root level to achieve all the national challenges.

This clearly shows that before the World communities, as represented by UN bodies, became aware of the new disturbing trends and started thinking about the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—2000, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—2016-30 where local bodies may play an important role, in India PRIs were already earmarked for the devolution of 29 subjects—having in fact the rudiments of all the SDGs goals (Mohanty, Bidyut 2017). Thus to go with sustainable development, it is the urgent need of participation of each and every one or more precisely to say community participation. In this regard Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) can play a crucial role to achieve sustainable development. PRIs constitute the active involvement of larger section of the society mainly the rural India.

In the present study out of 17 goals of SDGs, goal one that is poverty eradication is taken into consideration. Strategically this particular goal is in practice from a long time in India which is also included in SDGs in recent times. For end of poverty, several poverty eradication programme is started in India as well as in Assam too. Employment generating scheme are going on to combat the poverty and ensure employment. MNREGA is such a programme which is giving assurance of sure income in rural areas. The jobless in rural areas are also having a secured income through this programme that we all know. Apart of that Indira Avash Yojana, sanitation, drinking water facilities, mid-day meal health schemes etc are in practice in the rural areas.

Now the question is how far all these have led successfully to remove poverty since last six decades. Thus, SDGs is launched in 2016 rethinking of we cannot have a sustainable earth by keeping some one out of the mainstream. Thus all have to walk together. None should be left behind or we can say the recent sustainable development looks for inclusion of present and future generation.

Analysis of Data: To have a peep on the functioning of PRIs in the first goal of SDGs as well as of our country some of the villagers of the sample area were questioned about how far are they satisfied with the functioning of PRIs in giving houses to BPL, sanitation and job cards, selecting ASHA for health service, monitoring the existing health centre, work done under MNREGA and water supply facilities. To measure the satisfaction 0 is used for not satisfied, 1 for moderately satisfied and 2 for complete satisfied. From the study it was found that the villagers are less satisfied with the functioning of the PRIs. From the following table it can be seen that 43.71 percent of the poor villagers are not at all satisfied with the allocation and monitoring functioning of PRIs. Under the heads of providing sanitation facilities, monitoring the health and making the provision of safe drinking water facilities, the villagers have very less satisfaction with the PRIs. It was found that 40 percent of the villagers were not at all satisfied by the way sanitation facilities were provided. Making the provision of safe drinking by the PRI could not even cover all the families of the sample villages. It was found that 58 percent of the families were not easily assessed to safe drinking water facilities. However, provision of providing job cards to the villagers ensuring 100 days of employment was very satisfactory. As 51 percent of the families were completely satisfied and 10 percent were moderately satisfied with this function of the PRIs.

But interestingly it was found in the study that just distribution of the card was enough for the PRIs as they failed to monitor or execute in real sense the main function of MNREGA that is to monitor different works done under this scheme. Nearly 59 percent of the villagers were not at all satisfied with the functioning of the PRIs regarding monitoring the works done under the MNREGA scheme. Most of the BPL families who had job cards did not participated in any work done in the villages or some of them had the card but did not get any work done where they could participate. While in selecting of ASHA, the local health workers nearly 60 percent of the villagers are satisfied with the PRIs (refer table 1).

Table 1: Satisfaction level of villagers regarding Allocation and Monitoring Functions of PRIs (in percentage)

Heads	Not satisfied	Moderately satisfied	Completely satisfied
1. Allocating houses	35	30	35
2. Sanitation Facilities	40	42	18
3. Distribution of Job cards	39	10	51
4. Selecting ASHA	20	20	60
5. Monitoring Health Centre	55	26	19
6. Monitoring works under MNREGA	59	20	21
7. Provision of Drinking Water supply	58	32	10
Total	43.71	25.72	30.57
Source : Sample survey			

When interviewed the elected members of the PRIs in the sample area it was found that no proper records are maintained in the GPs. All of them do not attend regularly the Gaon Sabha. The presentation of the people is also less. As stated by the elected members of PRIs that, it is very difficult for them to satisfy the needs of the people. It was also found that most of the elected members also do not have any perfect idea about the term sustainable development. Very less effort was seen to improvise the agricultural pattern even in the villages. It was surprising to see that the villagers purchase green vegetables and fishes coming from outside. Production from local fields was negligible. Most of the villagers go to urban areas in search of jobs. They find it difficult to maintain their life by the means available in the rural areas. When found what type of jobs they do in the urban areas it was found mostly they do day labour activity like pulling rickshaw, driving auto, house painting, housemaid, day labour etc. and thus putting the extra pressure in urban dwelling. The concept of self-help groups (SHGs) are also found in the villages but the members of the SGHs are working in very difficult condition with lack of finance, market etc. Thus, even in the villages there is scope to generate means to sustain but due to lack of information, education and sincere effort of all either the PRIs or the citizens they fail to grasp it.

Thus, in the **conclusion** it can be said that to reduce poverty and attain sustainable development special effort has to make in the rural areas. Avenues have to be opened so that the villages can become self-sufficient to sustain. Active participation of PRIs and thus

the community participation can reduce poverty, and thus follow the path of sustainable development.

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