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RESEARCH ARTICLE

RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHEASTERN INDIA: A NEED FOR PARADIGM SHIFT

Antiarbum Ranglong

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Abstract

Rural development in India's northeast primarily indicates the developmental issues and aspects of the hilly tribes. The socio economic profile of the tribes reflected a slow pace of development compared to the rest of India. The questions, therefore, arise regarding the causes and the challenges faced by the government in administering developmental programmes among the rural tribes in northeastern India. The question also arises whether the same approach to development being introduced and implemented elsewhere in India is applicable in rural India's northeast. The paper attempted to examine and analyse the developmental paradigm and the need to revisit the entire approach of rural development in northeastern India.

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Introduction:-

Human society has undergone continuous change since the dawn of civilisation. The persistent change has shown significant progress with constant ongoing exercise. The connotation of the term development largely relies on the perception of the people. People's perception is again grounded on their orientation, experiences, and expectations. The approach to rural development is a process of change and development for improving the quality of rural social life. It can be defined as the improvement of the well-being of rural people, entitling them to all the benefits of life, thereby promoting social progress. It is a policy designed to enhance the socio-economic conditions of impoverished rural populations in a society. It involves providing a platform and opportunity for the uplift of the underprivileged section of society seeking livelihood in the rural villages. The process is complex and is not confined to only fighting poverty through welfare programmes.

It focuses on shifting the milieu, enabling the poor rural populations to generate more income and participate in the maintenance of local infrastructure. A suitable policy would reduce the level of poverty in the rural areas. In India, rural communities have benefited very little from the country's growth and development. After six decades of India's independence, agricultural growth remains weak, farmers remain trapped in poverty, and rural communities lack basic facilities such as schools and health centres. In the case of northeastern India, the situation is grim, and the problems of rural development are directly linked to the study of the issues faced by rural tribes. The majority of tribes in northeastern India live in areas where access to basic amenities is lacking. This makes the life of rural Northeastern India very challenging. Programmes and strategies, such as the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) initiated by the Indian Government in 1978, and later the Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) in 1999, and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) for rural development, had little impact on rural Northeastern India.

Northeastern India covers an area of 2.62 lakh sq.km and accounts for 7.9 per cent of the total geographical area in the country. With a total population of 39 million (as of 2001), it accounts for 3.8 percent of India's total population. Northeastern India has always been perceived as a remote and isolated region.

Approaches to Rural Development:

The approach to rural development can be studied from various dimensions. Jha (2025), in his work ‘Various Approaches to Rural Development Planning in India,’ discussed five approaches: (a) Community development approach; (b) Area development approach; (c) Integrated rural development approach; (d) Participatory development approach, and (e) Sectoral development approach. In the community development approach, the rural population is actively involved in planning and implementation of schemes and projects. In the area development approach, focus is given to the development-specific geographical locality with distinct potential. In the integrated rural development approach, an attempt is made to integrate the programmes and policies under a single unit. The participatory development approach envisages the active participation of all the local stakeholders. The sectoral development approach focuses on the development of a specific sector, prioritising the needs of locals.

Most of the other approaches to rural development are in one way or another connected with the five approaches mentioned above. For further understanding of the approaches of rural development, the five approaches of Jha(2025) will be summarised into three: (a) Welfare Approach; (b) Participatory Approach/Development Approach, and (c) Empowerment Approach.

Welfare Approach:

This approach discusses the nature of free assistance provided by the state or an organisation to those in need, who lack the financial resources to sustain themselves as a family. That is, the provision of free aid and assistance to help the poor and those in need. This strategy/ approach has been one of the oldest methods for development. The practice of this approach provided relief, addressing the immediate needs only for a specific duration. It is found that this approach has created essential resources to provide free welfare services, especially during emergencies such as natural disasters and floods. Practised in isolation, it does not provide sustainable development in the long run.

Participatory Approach/Development Approach:

The emphasis is on people’s participation. The common people need active participation in all activities, right from the beginning till the end. There is a need to say no to any provision of free service. It enhances the rural population through the concept of self-help groups and other local institutions and support systems. The approach is more concerned with addressing the fundamental needs of the rural population within their own social setting. The primary responsibility of the administration is to facilitate the self-help efforts of the rural population by supplying the necessary infrastructure that is not readily available within the local limits. The active participation in the management and control of the welfare project is the core indicator of this approach.

Empowerment Approach:

This approach provides the target community with an equal opportunity and stake in the development process. It gives due importance to exploring people’s participation in partnership with people. The central functioning of the Empowerment Approach is ‘going to the people with a proposal to provide them with support to solve their issues and problems.’ ‘Teach them how to fish instead of giving them fish to eat.’ The focus is on people, their expressed needs, their resources, as well as their knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This is based on the conviction that rural people can solve their problems by themselves. But people need to be stimulated and motivated, and the community needs to be mobilised. For long-term sustainability of the intervention, the practice of “institutionalisation” was initiated. It is the process of evolving an informal group at the community level to the level of an institution wherein it has its own structure, functioning, rules and regulations, governing body, and linkages, and it does not need the help of an outside agency. “We will support you in your effort,” instead of saying “please support us by participating in our program,” is the main theme of the empowerment approach. Government and other development agencies should initiate building the capacity of the people to undertake various developmental agendas and activities.

Depending on the circumstances, a developmental agency can adopt more than one approach to effectively address the developmental issue. Some agencies are using these approaches simultaneously. For instance, at one end, they are involved in service delivery on a no-charge basis, which is a part of the Welfare Approach, while on the other hand, they are investing a lot of resources in capacity building of the community, which is more towards the empowerment approach.

Government Programmes and Approaches to Development:

In India's Five-Year Plan, priorities have been given to issues related to rural development. Accordingly, in the first Five-Year Plan (1951-1956), preference was given to the Community Development Programme (CDP), alongside the agricultural sector, with a focus on nation-building. But due importance was given to the expansion of heavy industries in the second Five-Year Plan. As a result, under the constraint of limited resources, the production of food items was affected considerably. It was apparent that an alternative strategy had to be explored if the country intended to ensure self-sufficiency in agricultural production to face the mounting pressure of the Indian population. India experienced food scarcity in 1957-1958, and to address the crisis, a new programme called the Intensive Agriculture District Programme (IADP) was implemented in 1960-1961. The basic objectives were to achieve rapid increases in agricultural production through the use of complementary inputs and services at the farm level. In 1966, several programs, including the Intensive Agricultural Area Programme (IAAP), the High-Yielding Varieties Programme (HYVP), and the Intensive Cattle Development Programme (ICDP), were introduced to further efficient management of community resources.

Due to the failures of those programmes in the 1960s in making any significant impact on the problem of poverty, the strategies adopted in rural alleviation programmes were examined afresh. As a consequence, some special policies under Special Group and Area Specific Programmes like the Small Farmer Development Agency (SFDA), Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labourers (MFAL) Schemes, Drone Prone Area Programme (DPAP), Tribal Area Development Programme (TADP), etc., were introduced in the 1970s for the economically weaker sections in rural society. They were aimed at addressing the crisis of poverty by helping the weaker sections to increase their incomes through generating self-employment and wage-paid employment. To supplement the income-increasing effect of those programmes, a programme to provide civic amenities and community facilities was launched in the Fifth Plan. This programme was known as the Minimum Needs Programme (MNP). In 1978-1979, the Integrated Rural Development Programmes (IRDP) were again launched. It has been the single largest anti-poverty programme in the country.

In addition to the earlier mentioned schemes and programmes adopted by the government of India for improving the rural populations, there are certain other programmes like Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), launched in 1989; Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS), launched in 1993; National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), launched in 1995; Food for Work Programme, launched in 2000-2001, and Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), launched in 2001, etc. In the Ninth Five-Year Plan, rural poverty alleviation programmes were restored, and there was a new shift towards the efficient management of those rural programmes. In the tenth plan, self-employment and wage employment generated programmes were introduced to the rural population with greater potency. Recently, the government has started the policy of rural financing through the formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Assistance is given in the form of a subsidy by the government and term credit by the financial institutions for income-generating activities.

It can be seen that the government of India has adopted several programmes for the rural poor. The government has employed all three approaches – Welfare Approach, Participatory Approach, and, to some extent, Empowerment Approach. But comparatively speaking, the government has, on a large scale, adopted the welfare approach. Minimum Needs Programme, Applied Nutrition Programme, Mid-Day Meal Programme, Rural Housing, etc, are some of the Welfare programmes. India's Operation Flood and strategies that come under Special Groups and Area Specific Programmes, which were launched in the 1970s, are an example of the Participatory Approach. Integrated Rural Development Programme can be put in both the Participatory and Empowerment Approaches.

Rural Northeastern India and Government Programmes:

In spite of multiple programmes and policies launched by the Indian government for rural development, it has had very little impact on rural northeastern India. Many programmes that might be very effective for the mainstream Indian do not work on an equal footing in the context of northeastern India. The rural tribals in northeastern India have their own distinct cultures, traditions, customs, etc. This brings into question the suitable strategies or approaches for rural development. The northeastern tribals should develop along the line of their own genius. Presumably, the people should be developed on their own, managing their own affairs, regulating their own society, utilising their own resources without fear and with their own sense of dignity.

So far as northeastern India is concerned, the government is generally employing the strategies that are within the framework of the welfare approach. This ultimately leads to excessive dependency on the government and, in the

long run, does not lead to development. Due to the unsuitable geographical location of the rural villages in northeastern India for administering rural developmental programmes, most of them are not successful. It is also to be understood that strategies related to self-employment programmes, capacity building programmes, or IRDP are not expected to succeed in India's rural northeast as long as they are market-oriented and entrepreneur-oriented. A person or family living in a village of only 50-60 households, in remote areas, will not be able to run self-employment jobs with the acquired related skills. Again, a rural tribal is not competent to compete with a non-tribal to run self-employment jobs in the urban areas. The northeastern tribe, in general, is not yet accustomed to taking entrepreneurial jobs since it was not practised among them from time immemorial.

The government's policy of rural financing through the formation of SHGs and assistance given in the form of subsidy by the government and term credit by the financial institutions for income-generating activities is also having less impact in minimising poverty in rural northeastern India. The policy of the revolving fund is also not working well. For instance, it is found in Tripura that rural SHGs, after two or three gradations, could not further progress due to a lack of planning. This led to heavy debt for many SHGs. Term credit from a financial institution, taken by many rural people in northeastern India, further increased their debt. With no scope of income-generating sources in the village, except agriculture, the rural people could not refund the loan taken, and it became the first and the last.

New paradigm for Rural Northeastern India:

As mentioned earlier, the study of the problems of rural development in northeastern India is directly linked to the study of rural tribals. Rural tribals in northeastern India have very little contact with mainstream Indian life and cultures. They have their own way of life, cultures, traditions, and system of administration. To date, banks and financial institutions have minimally penetrated the remote rural areas in northeastern India. They are living in hilly terrain where multiple cropping is not possible. They are mainly based on jhum cultivation. Every year, they shift from one plot of land to another. There is no sustainable development in that method.

At this juncture, a new strategy is required to be designed for the rural tribals. From jhum/shifting cultivation, rural northeastern India should be encouraged to shift into long-term settled agriculture, or in other words, a sustainable agricultural method. Recently, the government of Tripura has made an intensive programme in rural Tripura through rubber plantations. There is enough land in the hilly areas for agricultural purposes. Some examples can be cited in Tripura, with permanent sources of income through long-term agricultural methods. Among the North Tripura tribals, the Mizos, the Darlong (Kuki Community), and the Ranglong community have good income sources through the cultivation of oranges, pineapples, and aracanuts, respectively. The rural people in northeastern India can be motivated to abandon shifting cultivation by empowering them to opt for long-term agriculture. This will surely improve their economy in the long run, and the method is also sustainable as compared to the former. As they are accustomed to shifting cultivation, they will easily adapt to new methods aligned with the same pattern and nature of work. It is suggested that term credit, microfinance, and other development programmes should be directed only to the agricultural sector, at least, for the time being.

The government's duty is to arrange an organised/regulated market for the production of rural farmers. The marketing problem is a common trend, and rural farmers have become discouraged. This is one weakness of the entire northeastern region of India. Instances can be cited from Tripura. The aracanut growers among the Ranglong tribes in North Tripura, under Dharmanagar Sub-Division, would not be able to dispose of their production if Assam traders do not buy from them. A road band in Assam on the local market day of that area would considerably reduce the local market price. It is the duty of the government to manage the marketing regulations.

Conclusion:-

Rural people in northeastern India are generally hardworking. But the methods of their work do not align with the changing national economy. They must be trained, mobilised, and empowered to keep pace with the changing economy. Instead of launching a special programme for rural development in northeastern India, they should be given freedom to manage their own local development efforts. However, in India, it is found that the concept of decentralising power and responsibilities is advocated only in principle, but is weak in its actuality. It is due to the institutional mechanism that does not allow the free transfer of finances allocated to the rural democratic institutions to initiate and plan according to their priorities.

The argument that village-level democratic institutions lack the necessary knowledge and expertise to manage certain technical aspects associated with the functioning of the decentralised administration may be logical from one perspective. But the benefits to the rural population are potentially substantial and require closer scrutiny. Rural areas tend to benefit through administrative arrangements, focusing on the capacity-building of the rural institutions to administer their local affairs. The mechanism will lead to the empowerment of rural populations for the development of the schemes and programmes.

The challenges faced in the delivery process of basic welfare services and amenities to village-level populations in northeastern India continue to hinder the developmental initiatives. The pervasiveness of rural poverty stood as a barrier not only to the government but also to civil society organisations and other private agencies. It is high time to re-examine why there have been repeated failures of various rural development schemes and programmes. The people involved in the entire process need to reconsider the factors responsible for undermining expected outcomes. An appropriate framework of participation with more decentralisation would render a mechanism for community empowerment.

To sum up, northeastern India lacks developed infrastructure and proper marketing facilities. There is also a lack of motivation for undertaking entrepreneurship. All these factors, combined with insurgencies, hindered the development of Northeastern India. The central government seem to be uninterested in providing important developmental setups like factories and industries. The private sector is yet to build its foundation. Thus, there is an extensive dependency on the central government, which is the policy of the latter to maintain its supremacy in the region.

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