



EMERGING ROLE OF GRAM PANCHAYATS IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Rajiv Kumar

**Assistant Professor of Public Administration,
Govt. College for Girls Palwal, Kurukshetra, (Haryana).**

ABSTRACT :

Poverty is a social phenomenon in which a section of society is unable to fulfil even its basic necessities of life. In wider connotation the term poverty does not include merely those who are unemployed and poor but it also includes those earning very little due to low wages or low productivity. Gillin and Gillin put it as "A condition in which a person either because of inadequate income or unwise expenditure does not maintain a scale of living high enough to provide for physical and mental efficiency and to enable him and his natural dependents to function usefully according to the standard of society which is a member."¹



KEYWORDS : Poverty , social phenomenon , multi-dimensional , nakedness.

INTRODUCTION:

In real sense, it is a multi-dimensional and complex phenomena consisting of the issues of social, political and economic inequalities. Gandhi said that the poverty is the curse of God. It deprives you of everything: food, clothing, shelter, your self-respect, your humanity, even your soul. In poverty you suffer not only hunger, nakedness, the cruelty of cold and heat, the blind fury of nature's wild elements, you also suffer from humiliation, loss of human dignity.²

CONCEPT AND DEFINITION

Poverty is a situation that gives rise to a feeling of a discrepancy between what one has and what one "should have." What one should have is an internal construct, hence each person's feeling and experience of poverty is individual and unique. But the feeling of 'powerless' and 'resourcelessness' is possessed by all poor people. The origin of the concept of poverty can be traced back to the writing of ancient religious thinkers, moralists and scriptures of the theological states. They viewed poverty as an act of God — a curse on the sinners for their vices.³ Nineteenth century sociologists (Charles Booth and Sieeborn Rowntree) who made epoch making surveys of the poor in London and in New York cities views poverty in terms of want and deprivation.⁴ Modern socialist and social workers view it as a stratification.⁵ To them poverty is a wider issue of inequality — social, political and economic. But economist accustomed as they are to stress more on economic aspects — view poverty as an economic phenomenon — insufficient of income or command over resources to meet socially accepted minimum needs or the income less than a particular per cent of the per capital income or norms.⁶

Poverty lies vary between climates, cultures and social and economic environment. The poverty line for the USA is at a substantially higher income than that of Bangladesh. The US Bureau of the

Census published figures showing that 15 per cent of American live below the official poverty line. Clearly these people are much better than the majority of Bangladesh.

In simple term, the poverty is a situation of hunger, starvation, malnutrition, inadequate housing, water supply, sanitary facilities, in turn resulting poor living conditions disease, distress and final death.⁷

The Expert Group (1993) on Poverty defined poverty as deprivation in basic needs such as education, health and shelter as also other basic amenities such as drinking water. In 1996, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) put forth the concept of capability poverty was defined as deprivation in education, health and child nutrition. Human Poverty Index (1997) included indicators of literacy deprivation, health and public provisioning of social sector service and child nutrition. While there is some merit in employing an integrated method to measure poverty that includes both income as well as non- income measure of deprivation. It is also useful at this stage of development of the concept to keep it separate from income Thus, poverty is a state of absence of need satisfaction which may arise from poverty⁸ of wants and state to form products of power grabbing by a small group.

EXTENT OF POVERTY

About 70 per cent of India's population lives in villages. The incidence of poverty is much higher in villages — roughly 173 million poor in the rural areas. They comprise the landless labours, small and marginal farmers, artisans, fishermen and those belonging to the scheduled castes and backward classes. They either do not have assets or have low productivity assets and are mostly unskilled labourer who do not get full time job. Thus, in the rural areas, poverty is associated with inadequacy and low productivity of agriculture land.

Table 1
Percentage and Number of Poor

Year	Poverty Ratio (%)			No. of Poor (in millions)		
	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
1973-74	56.4	49.0	52.7	261.3	60.0	321.3
1977-78	53.1	45.2	49.3	264.3	64.6	328.9
1983-84	45.7	40.8	43.25	252.0	70.9	322.9
1987-88	39.1	38.2	38.65	231.9	75.3	307.1
1993-94	37.3	32.4	34.85	244.0	76.3	320.3
1999-00	27.1	23.6	25.35	173.2	67.1	260.3
2007*	21.1	15.1	18.1	170.5	49.6	240.3
2011-12	26%	13.7%	19.85	216.5	81	297.5

Source: Five Year Plan, Planning Commission, New Delhi.

With the sustained efforts of government interventions the proportion of population below the poverty line has been brought down from 52.7% in 1973-74 to 34.85% in 1993-94 and further to 26% in 1999-2000. The rural poverty during this period has also been brought down from 56.4% in 1973-74 to 37.3% in 1993-94 and 27.1% in 1999-2000. The latest estimate by planning Commission (2011-2012) shows that more than 297.5 million people continue to live below the poverty line (BPL) which is about 29% of the country's population. There is still high concentration of the poor in the rural areas. Out of the total, 216.5 million poor live in the rural areas which is about 72.7% of the total poor in the country. Such a vast size of the rural population below the poverty line does have its telling effects on the country and its economy.

CAUSES OF RURAL POVERTY

The following causes of poverty in rural areas are:

- (i) Inadequate and ineffective implementation of anti-poverty programmes;

- (ii) Spending a large percentage of earning on social ceremonies like marriage, death feast, etc. and people being unwilling to break the expensive customs;
- (iii) Inter-caste conflicts and rivalries;
- (iv) Corruption in selection of beneficiaries and implementation of programmes;
- (v) Low level of education. The general literacy level of the rural areas in the country is low while for females it is very low;
- (vi) Low agricultural productivity resulting from dependence on traditional methods of cultivation and inadequate knowledge of modern skills;
- (vii) Non-availability of irrigational facilities and erratic rainfall in several states;
- (viii) Low percentage of population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits;
- (ix) Absence of dynamic community leadership;
- (x) Non-availability of electricity for agriculture as well as industrial use in most of the village;
- (xi) Non-involvement and lack of awareness among the beneficiaries.

POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMMES

Several programmes were introduced to bring about socio-economic transformation in the rural areas. The programmes include Community Development Programme, National Extension Services, Khadi and Village Industries, Multi-Purpose Tribal Development Blocks, Intensive Agricultural Development Programme, Applied Nutrition Programme, High Yielding Variety Programme, Farmers' Training Programme, Well Construction Programme, Rural Works Programme; Composite Programme for Women and Pre-School Going Children, Crash Scheme for Rural Employment, Pilot Project Tribal Development Programme, Drought Prone Area Development Programme, Special Livestock Production Programme, Whole Village Development Programme, Integrated Rural Development Programme, Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment, Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas, National Rural Employment Programme, Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme, Indira Awaas Yojna, Rural Sanitation Programme, Jawahar Rozgar Yojna, Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojna, etc. No doubt the rural population has taken benefits of these programmes but the weaker sections of rural society are still at the cross-roads because the programmes of rural development could not get remarkable success in solving the problem of poverty.⁹

PRESENT STATUS OF ANTI-POVERTY PROGRAMMES

A new scheme called Sampoorn Gramin Rojgar Yojana (SGRY) was launched to provide wage employment alongwith food security during the middle of 2001-2002. Under the scheme, it is proposed to provide food grains as part of wages at the rate of 5 Kg. per person per manday. It is envisaged that every year 100 crores mandays of employment, will be generated. To implement the SGRY, involvement of Panchayati Raj Institutions has been ensured. The Self-Employment Programmes such as IRDP, TRYSEM, DWCRA, SITRA, GKY and MWS were merged in a single programme, which is now renamed as Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana. This new programme is conceived as a holistic programme of micro enterprises covering all aspects of self-employment namely organising rural people into self-help groups, capacity building, planning, identification of activities cluster, infrastructure development, technology, credit and marketing. Both the programmes i.e. SGRY and SGSY are more focused now. Since SGRY, now being fully implemented by the Panchayat Raj Institutions under SGSY, viable and feasible projects would be selected in that area and Swarozgar would be provided with adequate funds to take up viable projects. Group approach would be able to help the economically viable and bigger projects, which can provide them sustainable assets.

SAMPOORAN GRAMIN ROJGAR YOJANA

Sampuran Gramin Rojgar Yojana is implemented under the supervision of Gram Panchayat. It is decided by the panchayat as to what work should be undertaken. The panchayat prepares its annual action plan which is approved by the higher tiers. The plan so prepared has to be approved by the

concerned gram sabha. After seeking permission of the Gram Sabha, Gram Panchayats may select any of the works and can incur expenditure within prescribed limits of amounts.

It has been observed that most of the gram panchayats neither prepare annual plan covering SGRY nor get it approved from the Gram Sabhas. The meetings of the Gram Sabha are mere formality. It has also been observed that some of the sarpanches get the works under the scheme completed by his/her own labour. Hence no employment is generated. Moreover, the food grains as are supplied to workers! labourers are also found to be of low standard because the quality food grains are sold in the open market instead of supplying them to the real labourers/workers.

SWARANJAYNTI GRAM SWAROJGAR YOJANA AND GRAM PANCHAYATS

The Swaranjaynti Gram Swarozgar Yojana is also implemented with the help of the Gram Panchayats. According to the guidelines issued by Govt. of India, Ministry of Rural Development, New Delhi the individual Swarozgaris are to be selected in the Gram Sabha. It may be that the Gram Sabha held at Panchayat headquarters may not have the participation of all BPL families. It is expected that the Sarpanches should visit each of the habitations in the panchayats. According to a schedule drawn-up for this purpose and duly publicized. Because sarpanch is from amongst a 3 member team the other two being BDO's or his representatives and the bankers. The process of identification of the potential Swarozgaris has to be done carefully. The list of Swarozgaris who are sanctioned the role by the banks would be placed before the Gram Sabha. It is the responsibilities of the Gram Panchayats to provide from its funds under Samparan Gramin Swarozgar Yojana and any other programmes, the common infrastructure necessary for the key activities, The Gram Panchayats has to actively monitor the performance of Swarozgaris in particular whether they are repaying the loan regularly.

The role of Gram Panchayats in the implementation of SGSY is also not so commendable generally identification and selection of Swarozgaris is not done according to the prescribed norms. The list prepared are not placed before the Gram Sabha and also not got approved from the respective Gram Sabhas. Once the loan is given or financial assistance is given the gram panchayats do not take keen interest in providing needed infrastructure. No body bother about the recovery of loans given by the Bankers under the SGSY schemes.

NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEED

It aims to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do skilled manual work.

The act was first proposed in 1991 by P.V. Narasimha Rao. In 2006, it was finally accepted in the parliament and commenced implementation in 625 districts of India.

The MGNREGA was initiated with the objective of "enhancing livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year, to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. Another aim of MGNREGA is to create durable assets (such as roads, canals, ponds, wells) employment is to be provided within 5km of an applicant's residence, and minimum wages are to be paid. If work is not provided within 15 days of applying applicants are entitled to an unemployment allowance. MGNREGA is to be implemented mainly in Gram Panchayats. The involvement of contractors is banned. Labour incentive task like creating infrastructure for water harvesting, drought relief & flood control are preferred.

Apart from providing economic security and creating rural assets, MGNREGA can help in protecting the environment empowering rural women, reducing rural – urban migration and fostering social equity among others.

INDIRA AWAAS YOJANA

Under the Indira Awaas Yojana cash amount is given to the selected families. The identification and selection of beneficiary families rest with both the gram panchayat and the gram sabha. General supervision is also the responsibility of the gram panchayat. The gram panchayats can guide and

motivate them properly but like other programmes/ schemes, the gram panchayats do not shoulder the responsibilities with dedication and sincerity. Those persons, who have close linkages with the sarpanch or the dominating members of gram panchayats always manipulate the benefits.

ROLE OF GRAM PANCHAYAT IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Introduction of Panchayati Raj was hailed as one of the most important political innovations in independent India. It was also considered as a revolutionary step. Panchayati Raj is a system of local self-government where in the people take upon themselves the responsibility for development. It is also a system of institutional arrangement for achieving rural development through people's initiative and participation. Panchayati Raj involves a three-tier structure of democratic institutions at district, block and village levels, namely, zila parishad, panchayat samiti and village panchayat respectively. These institutions are considered as training ground or democracy and political education. These institutions were established in 1959 based on the philosophy of decentralisation and gram swaraj. The Gram Panchayat has to play a crucial role in poverty alleviation. Such functions are generally undertaken by the gram panchayats i.e., identification and selection of beneficiaries; to monitor and evaluate programme with reference to the objectives of the programmes; to review the progress of anti-poverty programmes; coordination with other agencies involved in poverty alleviation; gram panchayats create awareness amongst the people; and gram panchayats identifying poor groups, interacting with target groups, implementing programmes, providing important inputs in policy formulation, enhancing cost effectiveness and channelising the funds to target groups etc.

EVALUATION OF THE ANTI-POVERTY PROGRAMMES

Various studies carried out by experts and academicians have shown that no programmes could not bring impressive improvement in the socio-economic conditions of the poor. A large mass of rural areas remain languishing without basic needs.¹⁰ Flaws in the way of programmes are:

- (1) It has been found that panchayats are biased in identification and selection of beneficiaries. The village sarpanches dominate the process of identification of selection of beneficiaries. Selection is not made in the meeting of the Gram Sabha.
- (2) The success of any schemes programmes largely depends upon the level of awareness amongst the people. It has been noticed that the people in general and beneficiaries are not aware of all the poverty alleviation programmes schemes. No efforts has been made on the part of panchayats to make the people aware.
- (3) Generally village panchayats are expected to utilize locally available material for various works undertaken by them to alleviate poverty. However, the surveys have revealed that the use of locally available material was not very appreciable to eradicate poverty.
- (4) Monitoring is a device which helps to know as to whether we are going to achieve the objective or not. In this regard, it has been observed that monitoring of poverty alleviation programmes is not being conducted by the panchayats.
- (5) Evaluation means an assessment of the performance and impact of a programmes as has already been launched. It concerned with basic aspects of a programmes like relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and impact. But it is interesting to note that on the part of panchayats no evaluation of anti-poverty programmes schemes has been done.
- (6) Policies are guided by the ideologies for convenience of politicians and bureaucrats rather than by the compulsions of the ground realities and requirement of the rural people.
- (7) Since every programme is launched often with an eye to the next election, the programmes is carried out in a piecemeal fashion and even withers away after sometime.
- (8) The programmes are designed in such a way that they are in fact foisted on the rural economy without taking into account their unique vocation of pattern and local requirements.
- (9) The programmes focus more on agricultural sector. Rural industrialisation seems to be getting nowhere near the attention that it deserves.

- (10) There is no coordination among various programmes. After the merger of various employment programmes into Jawahar Rozgar Yojna and Swaranjayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojna, the government is now able to pass on the fund to the panchayat in time.
- (11) The officials associated with these programmes do not appear to have much faith in the goals set by the government, with the result they lack commitment to the roles assigned to them. As such, they take least pains either in creating the necessary awareness among the people for the success of these programmes or in getting their cooperation and confidence.
- (12) Despite the fact that the government has given top priority to agricultural production and productivity, removal of social and economic disparities and reduction in income inequalities, the fruits of these schemes have not reached the poorest in all parts of the country.

SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE THE ROLE OF GRAM PANCHAYATS IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Panchayats have a multi-dimensional nodal role in alleviation of poverty in the rural area. Major suggestions regarding role of panchayats in the eradication of poverty are:

- 1) Role of Gram Panchayats in poverty alleviation should not be under-estimated. Panchayats played a crucial role in supplementing and complimenting efforts of the government organisations by way of identifying poor groups, interacting with target groups, implementing programmes, providing important inputs in policy formulation, enhancing cost effectiveness and channeling funds to target group.
- 2) Proper planning is necessary for the achievements of basic objectives of an organisation. Proper planning is an essential step towards coordination or achievement of objective. But in reality it has been found that no planning by the panchayats for implementation and evaluation of poverty programmes and schemes in the villages.
- 3) Panchayat can play crucial role in the recovery of loan which is provided under different schemes and programmes. But in actual no interest shows by the panchayat in recovery of loan, If they show some interest in recovery of loan from beneficiaries it can perform very well.
- 4) There is a need to provide greater autonomy to the panchayats in order to facilitate them to design and implement rural development programmes more meaningfully. It should be able to bear the responsibility in case of non-performance and even raise taxes to meet part of the development expenses.
- 5) Gram Panchayat should build the capacity of the poor through better targeting, selection of activities, through people's participation, creating awareness and desired infrastructure.
- 6) Training of the members of the PRIs should be made mandatory. Training should be provided immediately after assuming charge and more emphasis should be laid on clarifying the anti-poverty programmes and their role, in-depth knowledge if it acquired by the members of the gram panchayat, they can contribute in the effective implementation of such programmes.
- 7) Gram Panchayat should prepare need based long-term planning for alleviation of poverty in the village and accordingly action plan. Programmes projects should be prepared and implemented depending upon the resources availability by themselves.
- 8) Gram Panchayats should also be made an effective forum, for selection of right type of scheme for right persons. There should be adequate efforts to educate, enlighten the poor about anti-poverty programmes. The anti-poverty programmes should also be linked with local conditions and requirement.
- 9) Instead of centralised tendency decentralised approach under which anti-poverty projects should be prepared at the village level in accordance with the local needs and availability of marketing. This will really give new direction to the programmes schemes formulated for the weaker sections of our rural society.
- 10) Panchayats should facilitate people's participations in various development programmes and government should give incentives to such panchayats which actively perform such type of role.
- 11) Panchayats should be actively involved in the process of identification and selection of beneficiaries and poverty alleviation programmes. Programmes and schemes should be

- implemented under the direct supervision of panchayats for effective accomplishment of objective.
- 12) To increase efficiency, relevance, effectiveness of anti-poverty programmes schemes it is essential that it should be monitored and evaluated properly and timely by the panchayats with regular interval.
 - 13) 73rd Amendment Act should be implemented in its letter and spirit. If the constitutional provisions are not observed by any State government, action should be taken. The existing provisions of right to recall sarpanch/ panch should be simplified.
 - 14) Panchayat should also tap local resources of taxation for enhancing its revenue and such finance should be extended to help or benefit the poorest among the poor.
 - 15) Panchayats should be given adequate powers for implementation and enforcement of anti-poverty programmes. Judicial power should also given to panchayat engaged in various works.
 - 16) Where there is no land revenue of panchayats, sufficient funds should be provided by the State government for implementing the rural development and anti-poverty programmes. Panchayats should also develop their own income resources for eradication of poverty.
 - 17) Panchayats now totally dependent on state central government aid sponsored programmes to alleviate poverty. The Panchayat should also be given freedom to devise their own poverty alleviation programmes within their jurisdiction keeping in view the best suited to the local conditions and requirements.
 - 18) External administrative political interference should not be allowed to play with the autonomy of the panchayats in making selection of the beneficiaries to implement the anti-poverty programmes.
 - 19) Panchayats should carry out a review of the work at periodic intervals. In case of any short-coming they should be brought to the notice of administration for appropriate action. Administration should give weightage to the recommendations of the panchayats.

To conclude we can say that several programmes were introduced to bring about socio-economic transformation in the rural areas as programmes could not bring impressive improvement in the eradication of poverty. This is due to inadequate and ineffective implementation and lack of participation and lack of awareness among the beneficiaries. A large number of mass in rural areas remain lacking without basic needs. If systematic and concerted efforts are made by the gram panchayats to alleviate poverty in rural areas it will really help in tackling the problem.

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