

Poverty Alleviation Programmes

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SUMMARY

The poverty Alleviation program in India can be categorized based on whether it is targeted either for rural areas or urban areas in the country. Most of the programs are designed to target rural poverty as the prevalence of poverty is high in rural areas. Also targeting poverty is a great challenge in rural areas due to various geographic and infrastructure limitations.

INTRODUCTION

On an occasion like this, when we are seriously in search of new idea or a concept which, if we could translate into action, substantially reduce unemployment and deprivation of the dispossessed masses in the rural areas, one many legitimately seek to find out the ethical and the ideological roots of our polity.

Long ago, Mahatma Gandhi wrote about the vision of India, for which he started working. He stated, "I shall work for an India in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country, in whose making they have an effective voice, India in which there shall be no high-class and no low-class of people, an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony. There can be no room in such an India for the curse of untouchability, for the course of intoxicating drinks and drungs Women who will enjoy the same rights as men.... This is the India of my dreams".

Out of a caste-ridden and economically fractured society, Gandhiji had a dream of creating a new India which would be caste-less and class-less and where man will not exploit man to amss private wealth. He advised his followers who initially came from upper classes, "to get off the backs of the peasants and workers" through whose exploitation they thrived. He asked them, "to get rid of the system that produces the poverty and misery of the masses". He sent his young followers out on a voyage to discover India. Speaking on the stunning impact of this journey of discovery, young Jawaharla wrote, "the effect on us was different but equally far reaching, for we saw, for the first time as s it were, the villager in the intimacy of his mud-hut and with the dark shadow of hunger always pursuing him. We learnt our Indian economics more from these visits than from books and learned discourses". The unhappy dispossessed millions haunted the Mahatma and he declared his ambition to 'wipe every tear from every eye'. The entire nationalist movement, the struggle for freedom, the sacrifice that our national leaders and millions of unknown freedom fighter made was to wipe that drop of tear from every eye. That is the political heritage we have inherited. That is the economic pledge that we have to redeem. That is the ethical base of our secular, socialist and democratic polity that has been built up since the Independence.

Programmes:

The Sixth Plan was quite distinct from the plans that preceded it in its bolderss to admit the failure of the planning process to redeem that pledge of the Mahatma. It broke away from the traditional path to make a direct attack on poverty. As Mrs Gandhi stated, "Planning is more than the putting togetherof a number of Central and State Government projects. It is a direction. And this the Sixth Plan provides". With an audacious candour, the Sixth Plan asserted "so far it has not been possible to make a dent on poverty on account of the inadequate rate of growth of the economy, uneven distribution of income and consumption as well as high rate of growth of population. The reduction in poverty should, therefore, receive the highest priority in our development strategy".

The most important instrument devised for achieving the goal in the rural areas is the Integrated Rural Development Programme. Popularly known as IRDP, the scheme was launched in all the 5,000 odd development blocksof the country on 2 October 1980. Each block was given the Sixth Plan target of providing productive assets, relevant to the local resources and felt needs, to 3,000 families living below the poverty line with preference being given to the poorest households, and at least 30% of the households covered annually to

be Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In financial terms the Sixth Plan target was Rs 1,500 crores of subsidy and Rs 3,000 crores of institutional credit.

On the quantitative side the programme has made good progress, 1656 million families were provided assets of which 6.45 million were from SC/ST households. The total budgetary expenditure on the programme was Rs 1,661.39 crores and the term credit mobilized was to the tune of Rs 3,100.35 crores. All these were in excess of the targets fixed. On the qualitative side there have, however, been some weaknesses. Though the per household investment increased from Rs 1,642 to Rs 3,344 between the first and last year of the Sixth Plan, this has not been enough to provide adequate return on investment particularly, to those families belonging to the lowest strata so that they could cross the poverty line. During his recent tour across the country. Prime Minister, Shri Rajiv Gandhi noticed some deficiencies. He found that beneficiaries did not always include poorest of the poor. He heard complaints about delays in the disbursement of subsidies and beneficiaries not getting the full amount. Often the productive assets supplied were not suited to local conditions.

In the Seventh Five-Year Plan the strategy will be two-fold. Firstly, the gains made during the Sixth Five-Year Plan will be consolidated and those beneficiaries who could not cross the poverty line for no fault of theirs, would be provided repeat assistance. The second part of the strategy would be to provide a package of micro-schemes to the new beneficiary households. For this purpose the per household investment is expected to be substantially larger than the Sixth Plan period, the idea being that these families should cross the poverty line with one package of assistance which may be spread over time.

In this connection, I would also like to refer to the results of the 38th round of National Sample Survey held in 1983-84. The data reveal that the rural poverty ratio of 51.2% in 1977-78 has come down to 40/5 in 1983-84. This is a fairly spectacular achievement considering that in the two decades or so preceding 1977-78 the rural poverty ratio has been around 50-54%. During this earlier period our development strategy was based on the general growth and the expectation of benefits trickling down. Obviously, the policy did not have the desired impact. A conscious change in the strategy from one of general growth to a direct attack on rural poverty was called for. This changed strategy put into effect during the Sixth Plan through schemes like IRDP, NREP is the single most important factor responsible for the spectacular reduction in poverty.

The steps already initiated to recast the IRDP in the Seventh Plan include (i) a higher investment (minimum of Rs 6,000) per family including package of assistance to enable proper return on investment for new beneficiaries. (ii) supplemental dose of assistance to those families assisted during Sixth Plan who have not been able to cross the poverty line, for no fault of theirs and (iii) the approach of uniformity has been changed to one of selectivity based on poverty incidence.

The need for imparting technical and entrepreneurial skills to the youth of the poor families is being met by the programme known as "Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment, which is being implemented in all the blocks as a component of the IRDP. A question comes up for which I don't have any answer. Can a young person who had been in dependency relationship so long, develop into an entrepreneur overnight with the training that we give? An answer may be found in the figure of over 50% of the trainees not having been able to get any self employment. This points to the need for proper selection of trades having potential for self-employment, care in selecting the beneficiaries and proper after-care service of the trained persons.

The second component of the Sixth Plan strategy for alleviation of rural poverty was the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP). With the main objective of generating 1,500-2,000 million mandays of additional employment during the Plan, an allocation of Rs 1,620 crores was made for this programme. However, the funds actually made available amount to Rs 1878 crores as additional funds were provided for ensuring achievement of the physical targets in spite of rise in the unit cost of employment generation. The reports received so far show that the additional employment generated has been of the order of 1,775 million mandays.

In recognition of the special needs of the landless labour households, another wage employment programme, called the Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme' (RLEGP) was launched in the middle of 1983-84, with the objective of expanding the employment opportunities for rural landless with a view to providing employment to at least one member of every such household up to 100 days in a year. For 1984-85, which was the first full year of the programme, a plan allocation of Rs 500 crores had been accepted. However,

the Budget provision was limited to Rs 400 crores and the actual expenditure was about Rs 347 crores, resulting in generation of nearly 260 million mandays of additional employment, which shows that the programme has been well established. The total achievements under both NREP/RLEGP comes to 2,035 million mandays which is more than the Sixth Plan target for employment generation.

Another feature of the two programmes of wage employment worth mentioning is that the foodgrains are being supplied as part of the wages at subsidized rates, which are substantially lower than the rates fixed under the public distribution system. This ensures that the real income of the beneficiaries is higher than the wage rates which are fixed under the Minimum Wages Act.

Intensity and harshness of poverty is enhanced by hostile agroclimatic conditions and rapid deterioration of ecology. Area development schemes like the Drought-Prone Areas Programme and the Desert Development Programme aim at restoration of ecological balance and optimal development of land, water, livestock and human resources, through an integrated area approach. The main achievements of these programmes have been in the fields of soil and moisture conservation, minor irrigation, animal husbandry, afforestation and pasture development and sand dune stabilization.

For the last year of the Sixth Plan, the Plan allocation meant for the beneficiary-oriented and the area development programmes was around Rs 1,470 crores. In addition. The target of providing institutional credit under the IRDP was about Rs 800 crores. This is a very substantial amount of investment meant exclusively for the disadvantaged sections of our rural society and is certainly unprecedented either in India or anywhere else. However, on viewing this in the context of the number of people below the poverty line, one gets an entirely different feeling. In spite of the achievements exceeding the targets of IRDP, the number of persons below the poverty line in the rural areas has been estimated at 216 million at the beginning of the current year. The issues which emerge for consideration are: (i) whether our conceptual framework responds to our social realities; (ii) whether we need to modify our basic strategy for poverty alleviation; and (iii) whether there are any cost reduction methods for implementing the current programmes so that a larger number of persons could be brought over the poverty line with the same level of investment.

There is currently a debate among the experts on the question of the productive assets programmes versus wage employment programmes. The basic argument being adduced in favour of the wage employment programmes is that the subsidies provided to the small and marginal farmers for improvement of productive assets are unlikely to be used most effectively, as in many situations these groups find it most convenient to lease out their land and seek wage labour. Similarly, it is argued that the cottage industries are not likely to succeed on account of changing demand and supply position and new technologies coming available to the bigger industrial units.

On the other hand, the infrastructure development in the context of persisting inequalities in assets distribution, benefits the rich class more than the poor, and secondly, it is not conceivable to have massive public works programmes for all times to come, as such, the present scheme of placing the focus both on the IRDP and the employment generation programmes may have to be continued, though the exact mix of the two may vary in spatial and temporal terms.

Another question which needs to be gone into is that of institutions, organizational structures and work procedures for scientific planning and effective implementation of the programmes. As said by someone, India cannot be pushed into the 21st century with use of the 19th century administrative methods, tools and techniques. As is well-known, the participation by the beneficiaries and the village level organization is a basic condition for success of the rural development programmes. This matter has been engaging our attention for quite some time now. The state Governments have been asked, from time to time, to involve the voluntary organization in this work. We have also been trying to ensure that the panchayati raj institutions play their due role in this field. The guidelines on identification of beneficiaries under IRDP provide that the selection of beneficiaries should be finalized in a general meeting of the Gram Sabha. Only the other day or some minister had written to the chief ministers requesting them to revive the elected panchayati raj bodies and to give these institutions 'adequate administrative power and financial back up to make them vibrant instruments of popular participation in development process.' A mention may also be made that a decision has been taken, in principle,

to launch a new scheme during the current year for organizing the rural poor through raising their critical awareness to act as pressure groups to wrest, secure and defend their legitimacy and legal rights and benefits.

CONCLUSION

Lastly, I would like to draw your attention to the problem of land reforms, we have been ignoring this basic issue of rural poverty far too long. Perhaps, to our own peril. The Approach to the seventh five-Year plan states : “The core of anti-programme lies in the endowment of income generating assets on those who have little or none of those and redistributive land reforms and security tenure to the informal tenants have to be directly integrated with the anti-poverty package of programmes”. I fully endorse this statement. However, the declared ceiling surplus land is less than 2% of the cultivated area and is much below the level of estimated area on the basis of agricultural census, and other data. The Agricultural census of 1980-81 shows that the skewed distribution of land was persisting, with 2.4% of the holdings operating 22.8% of the area and, at the other end, 74.5% of the holdings accounting for only 26.3% of the area. Secondly, there are still informal and oral tenants and share croppers not on record, in many states. Their present status does not entitle them to crop loans. We have requested the state Revenue ministers recently to initiate a campaign, with the help of panchayats, voluntary agencies, organized groups of beneficiaries, etc. To bring the informal and oral tenants on record and to consider the question of moving towards a stricter definition of personal cultivation to prevent informal tenancies. They have also been requested to consider measures which will give more surplus and for distribution to landless poor, such as tackling benami transactions, application of appropriate ceiling in newly irrigated areas, inclusion of major sons within the definition of family, retrospectively, from 1971, and further lower in the case of ceiling limits. These we have done and intend doing in future. But we have an open mind. Governments, like any other organization, prefer to move along the set grooves. The possibility of an awesome and widespread maleficent effect of any improper or wrong government policy makes us cautious or wary of any radical change. The fear of the unknown often overpowers us. But today, we are genuinely in search of policy alternatives which might give us more enduring results, faster.

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