

ROLE OF VCDC IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KOKRAJHAR DEVELOPMENT BLOCK (TITAGURI, ASSAM)

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Introduction:

India is a land of villages. More than half of India's total population live in rural areas. Indian rural has suffered enduring destitute since ages. The development of villages in India have been an uphill task since the problems are multi-faceted in nature whose degree varies from place to place having very vast areas to be covered with very large in quantities. Development in India had been a complex phenomenon having its implication over various aspect of socio-economic and political life of the people. Of late the urge for rapid development in the third world countries, especially the development of rural areas have occupied the top priorities in the planning at all levels- national, state and local.

So far as rural development is concerned the subject gained widespread appeal in recent years. This is largely a result of the way issues regarding development themselves began to be perceived. The growing of new paradigm in development theory, during post World War era had subsided the traditional concept of development. The development theorist were dissatisfied with the way traditional concept of development emphasised growth and ignored the issues of distributive justice and other dimension of development. The interest in rural development is partly an offshoot of such disenchantment and also on account of growing realisation of importance of rural development in facilitating the process of overall development.

The notion of rural development had been conceived in diverse way by the researchers. Whatever, may be the differences is in conceptualising the notion of rural development, the essence remain largely identical as it is primarily concern with poverty alleviation and distributive justice oriented economic transformation in rural areas. Its main objectives are- a) To improve the living standards of rural population by providing basic needs like food, shelter, clothing, employment and education, b) To increase productivity in rural areas and reduce poverty, c) To involve rural people in development process through their participation in decision making at local government bodies and d) To ensure distributive justice, equalisation of opportunities in the societies.

Lele has (1975) defined rural development as an improvement in the living standard of the masses of low-income population residing in rural areas and making the process of self-sustaining. According to Mishra and Sharma (1979), "rural development is not merely development of rural areas but also the development of quality of life of the rural masses into self-reliant and self-sustaining modern communities, so that each component of rural lives changes in a desired direction."

Indian background of rural development gives an integral account of development. Rural development in India had been looked through broad sense as “Integrated development”. It encompasses the concept of all round development of rural area and the people living there, through the optimum utilisation of local resources-physical and human resources. It encompasses the improvement in all domains of human life i.e. social, economic, political, and cultural. The field of Rural Development is vast since it is concern with attaining the objective of all round development. Rural Development in India had been a prime concern since Independence. From, it's first five years plan and throughout the planning years it has been holding the top priority in all level of planning.

Considering, the demand for rural development the utility of local self government as capable of transforming rural areas was desirably setup. Local self government is the key institution which can play a transforming role in the rural areas. In this direction the study intends to investigate the role of VCDC in Rural Development under Kokrajhar Development Block, Titaguri.

Briefing of VCDC:

Prior to embark on the positions of VCDC as a local self government, it is desirable to know about BTAD. Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) was created under Sixth Schedule of the constitution by an amendment Act 44 of 2003. The tripartite agreement between the Govt. of India, Govt. of Assam and the Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT) led to sign the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) dated 10.02.2003 resulting the creation of BTAD. BTAD covers a geographical area of 8790 sq.km spread over four districts viz, Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa Udalguri. It was set up with objectives-

- i) To fulfil the economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and preservation of land rights, socio cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos.
- ii) To speed up the infrastructure development in BTC area.

Prior to the Autonomous District and Autonomous Council was created, Panchayat system had existed throughout plain areas of Assam. The Panchayat System ceased to operate in BTAD since 2003, with effect of the Sixth Schedule Constitution.

The Memorandum of Settlement clearly laid down that in complies with Art. 322 of the constitution, “Panchayati Raj system in the event ceases to be in force in the Council area and the powers of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in such matters shall be vested with the Council.” Again, Paragraph-2 of Sixth Schedule constitution while enunciating the powers of the Governor to make Constitution for District Councils and Regional Councils in sub-paragraph (6) have clearly stated that the District Council may after its first constitution with the approval of the Governor can make rules in the matters relating to the formation of subordinate local Councils or Boards and their procedure and the conduct of their business. As a matter of fact, since, Panchayat Raj system is not applicable in BTAD; in response to the need of local level government to carry out development functions at the base, it has set up two tier institution in lieu of Panchayats which function in the line of Anchalik Panchayat and Village Panchayat called TCLCC and VCDC respectively.

Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) itself is a decentralised mechanism which in the apex operates at District level, while Territorial Constituency level Coordination Committee (TCLCC) and Village Council Development Committee (VCDC), were created at the subordinate level with former operating at Block level parallel to Anchalik Panchayat and later at Village level parallel to Village Panchayat. Thus, VCDC is a local government body arranged in BTAD at base. It is a grassroots level government in BTAD as an alternative arrangement for Village Panchayat.

VCDC as a local government mechanism is responsible for implementing the developmental programmes at grass root. VCDC at base has been functioning since 2006, three years later of the inception of BTC in 2003. As per government record Memo. No. BTC/RD (VCDC) dated 04/2006/19, guideline issued for both VCDC and TCLCC under Panchayat & Rural Development Department, BTC, can be formally considered as the base year of their inception. Since then it has been functioning as an ad hoc local government institution in place of Panchayat. Because of no statutory provision for local or village level government BTC has met severe criticism and allegations from time to time. Meanwhile, to legalise VCDC as a statutory local government body, BTC had passed the legislation called the “Bodoland Council Village Bill” on 18 July 2012. Though, it has already been approved by the Government of Assam however, it is yet to receive approval of the Governor.

Composition of VCDC:

It is a known fact that VCDC Chairman and other members are not elected through electoral process. They are nominated by the Council government from within the supporter of ruling political party. The VCDC Chairman and other members are nominated by BTC authority for five years term. The members can hold the post as long as they enjoy the mercy or the confidence of the BTC authority unless terminated on the ground of serious public allegations. VCDC ideally prefers to form consisting of 14 officially nominated members including a Chairperson (One); 2 (two) women members; 1 (One) SC member (1 reserved where SC population is least) however, as per condition members from SC community may be increased; 3 (three) farmer members; 1 (One) BPL members; 1 (One) Social Worker and 5 (five) general members. These, officially nominated members are assisted by the government employee designated as Member Secretary, whose designation is Junior Engineer (JE). The JE basically assist them in preparation and formulation of plans and policies in matter relating to estimation of projects related to government schemes means to be floored for development of rural areas.

Though, there is no prescribed criterion or norms about the numbers of population it requires to constitute a VCDC, but ideally maximum numbers of VCDC is having a population of around 3000 to 7000, with few VCDC covering large areas exceeding more than ten to fourteen thousand population. There are also VCDC with a few numbers of villages with either less than or just over thousand population.

Powers and Functions of VCDC:

VCDC is equivalent to the Village Panchayat. This may entertain one that VCDC enjoys equal power to Village Panchayat. In reality VCDC exercise weak autonomy in case of taxation and licensing. It is not commissioned to levy taxes. Its licensing authority is limited to issue NOC (No Objection Certificate) only. It doesn't enjoy free hand to permit for setting up big and medium establishment within its areas. Such, limitation makes VCDC financially non viable. This nature of VCDC makes it too much dependent solely on government grants and the mercy of Council government.

Despite of it, VCDC as a village level development committee have a crucial role to play in implementing the government schemes in the villages. It is entrusted with great responsibility to uplift socio-economic conditions and promote political empowerment among rural people through their involvement in the governing process. VCDC is authorised with many public responsibility including planning, organising, selecting and monitoring the developmental schemes and implement it at grass root level.

In contrast VCDC and its members are often alleged of abusing their powers, responsibilities and duties. In this context, the objectives of the study were set to find out the positions of VCDC in three main aspects – i)

role of VCDC in socio-economic development ii) role of VCDC in political empowerment and iii) Assessment on the achievements and failure of VCDC in Rural Development.

Methodology:

Based on the set objectives of the present study the researcher has applied mainly three methods- i) document reviews ii) questionnaire method; it mainly consist of both close ended and open ended questions for the respondents. iii) Focus/Targeted Group Discussion; it was mainly carried out with the VCDC members and other resource persons and activists.

Role of VCDC in Rural Development in Special Reference to Kokrajhar Development Block, Titaguri:

Kokrajhar District is the Head Quarter of BTAD. It has eleven Development Blocks namely: Kokrajhar, Dotoma, Debitola, Chapar-Salkocha, Mahamaya, Bilisipara, Golokganj, Gossaigaon and Kuchugaon Development Block. The study area is limited only to the Kokrajhar Development Block, Titaguri. It is located in the heart of Kokrajhar District, in a distance of around 5 kms from kokrajhar town. It comprises of 6 TCLCC, 36 VCDC and 225 numbers of villages. The geographical area of Block is 107804.26 hector covering 1078.04 sq. Km of forest areas. It has a total number of 44250 households with total populations of 219761, among which 51% is male and 49% is female as per 2011 census. The Block constitutes with 69% ST (P) population as against 5% SC and 26% others out of total populations.

1. Critical Evaluation on the role of VCDC in Socio-Economic Development:

Keeping in mind the popular hypothesis that, local-self government not only empower the people politically but socially and economically as well. Based on this hypothesis the study was conducted in six VCDC viz. Debargaon, Kalugaon-Subaijhar, Karigaon Serfang, Simbargaon, Tinali-Chariali and Titaguri to assess the role of VCDC in Socio-Economic development of rural areas. In this direction, a quantitative study was conducted to measure this popular hypothesis through respondent's perspective.

The study revealed that every villages under VCDC investigated have a high number of BPL households. It constitutes as high as 63%, in majority as against 37% APL households. In present days, the level of high consumptions and affording of a modern means of luxury or comfort like car, automobiles, bikes, LPG, TV etc. are considered to be a determinant of economic growth and progress. The household affording such facilities are somewhat considered to be a family with descent economic background. In this connection, the financial conditions of the household under the respective VCDC were evaluated based on their monthly income. The study found that the lowest income group earning below three thousands constitute considerably high with 17% whereas the category with higher income group earning above fifteen thousand form barely 11%. The lower middle-income group constitute 36% in index. Those categories from lowest income group and lower-middle income group are living in poor conditions. While, the household with middle-income group shares 24% and 12% respectively who are either lower division employee or a small traders. These categories of household have a modest economic background. Their economic misery had its impact in their social life as well.

Like most of the traditional villages, the larger households in the villages are peasants and daily wager. The daily wagers and most of the marginal farmers are landless household i.e. household with no cultivation land.

Marginal farmers constitute 29%; against 42% of tenant cultivators. Agricultural products and other allied products constitute rural economy. Their main source of earning is cultivation. They are mainly engaged in paddy cultivation; some with crop farming and other allied activities like livestock farming and so on. The farmer's possession of cultivation land is very small and most of them are engaged in tenant cultivation. Due to their small land holding for cultivation these farmers cultivate on lease from the share croppers. The raised of economic conditions of the marginal farmers and the development of rural as a whole largely depends on the increase in the productivity of the agricultural products. And, the increase in productivity of agricultural production depends on the proper irrigation system, application of modern means of agricultural tools like tractor, pumping sets and the use of high yielding seeds and so on. VCDC as a government body of village level has been expected to play a pioneering role in the likes of land development, developing proper irrigation system, providing high yielding seeds, organise skill training on scientific farming and so on. However, the irrigation facilities in the areas are poor. And, only a handful of farmers are facilitated with modern tools like tractor and pumping sets for cultivation and rest of the majority with 85% still use traditional method of cultivation. As a result the agricultural productions still remain poor. It is quite clear from the above evaluation that the role of VCDC in developing the irrigation facilities and facilitating the necessity requisites like modern tools, capital support, technical support and skill training to the farmers has been very marginal and barely productive.

Though, 28% of the household feels that their economic condition in recent years has improved but the majority of them belong to the service holders. On the other end a considerably high with 15% feels that their economic condition is degrading instead. Again, the economic disparity in this region is quite high in compare to state and national index. And because of such economic disparity the standard of living of rural people still remain vitally unsolved issues despite of visibly improvement in the numbers of good housing under various government housing programmes. Thus, in connection to socio-economic development of the rural areas the role of VCDC remains underdog. More especially with a very weak autonomy and limited funds in hand VCDC can do very little to develop the rural areas. And, as such the improvement of economic conditions of the poor villagers appears an uphill task for the VCDC. Due to poverty their social development is also severely affected by the problems like poor living standard, proper educations, poor health and hygiene, fulfilment of basic needs and so on.

2. Critical Evaluation on the role of VCDC in Political Empowerment:

VCDC being a local government assume vital role in educating people politically. As a local government institution it has a great responsibility to empower the local people by ensuring their active political participation at base. It is their supreme responsibility to involve the common people in the decision making process of the government at local level.

VCDC is a local self government mechanism. It is a decentralised government organ operating at the bottom level. In a democracy decentralisation of authority and the functional devolution is highly demanded not only for the involvement of the local people in government decision making but also for ensuring wider mass participation for the success of democracy. In a democracy electoral process is considered to be crucial and one of the foremost vital instrument towards empowering people politically. However, it is a known fact that the members of VCDC are not elected through electoral process. The members are selected from amongst the supporters of the ruling political parties. In such case VCDC as a local self government body is a setback for

the democracy. However, the council government in this matter has passed the Bill called “Bodoland Council Village Bill” in 2012 which is yet to be approved by the government.

In the study the overwhelming majority with 81% sought their favour for elections. On the other a small section of people favoured the selections of members from amongst the best qualified person. Another, sections believed that holding too much election is waste of money and there is always a risk of sheer violence between the parties and opponents. Further, to have a clear mandate of people over the “political empowerment” a direct objective question was asked to the respondent in which 71% give their mandate in favour of the role of VCDC in promoting political empowerment among common people. However, 19% has turn down the role of VCDC in promoting political empowerment. In case of representation of the marginalised groups, women and other caste in the VCDC members there is a provision for the reservation for women members and for the other castes members. Most of the VCDC has at the least 2-3 members women in VCDC and for other caste at the least one seat is reserved.

Going by the people’s mandate only 37% thinks that women are properly represented in VCDC. It is praiseworthy that Deargaon VCDC and Simargaon VCDC have a women chairperson along with 3 and 2 others women members respectively. On the other end, the majority of the 47% think that women are not getting due share in the VCDC body. Again, the participation level of common people is quite low even though the figures show 66% of mass participation. The participation of women is even lower measuring only 61% in index. In case of representation of other castes people (SC/OBC) the majority of 57% thinks their representation in VCDC body is undermined. The success of democracy not only depends on the high rate of mass participation but also it requires active participation of well informed and educated citizens. In this concern the villages have very less literacy rate and well informed persons which is a setback for democracy.

Again, the transparency and accountability is the determinant of not only the strong and matured democracy but also it reflects the level of urge for democratic principles among citizens as well as it reflects the level of consciousness among citizens about their government. In connection to accountability and transparency VCDC suffers a huge deficit. Since, the majority of respective 58% and 71% believed that VCDC is not accountable to the people nor it is transparent. This nature has made the common people looked VCDC with wicked eye i.e. distrust in VCDC. Besides, VCDC doesn’t convene Gram Sabha regularly within the period of 6 months. Majority have to say that VCDC rarely convene Gram Sabha. Despite, the majority of people have accepted the role of VCDC in empowering the people politically although, the level of mass participation in the affairs of VCDC is not convincing. The political empowerment of the people in real sense could be claimed only when the common people can dictate and control over their government and make them transparent and accountable towards public. Nevertheless, in this matter VCDC is not total failure; rather, it is partly successful and partly failure.

3. Critical Evaluation on the Achievements & Failures of VCDC:

Taking into consideration the above assessment on the role of VCDC in socio-economic development and political empowerment of the rural people it is quite clear that VCDC is not total failure; rather it can be rightly claim to have seen both failure and modest success in rural development. While people’s mandate was taken on the role of VCDC in rural development 49% mandate came against VCDC whereas, lesser 35% mandate was exercised favouring VCDC and the rest 18% have no clue about the role of VCDC in rural development.

The blend in opinion of the people over satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the role of VCDC in rural development further affirms the story of modest success in some fields like maintaining and improving rural infrastructure and political empowerment; on the other side failure in rapid transformation of socio-economic; issues like unabated corruption, mismanagement of resources, favouritism, delaying in implementation and so on makes people distrust upon the members of the VCDC. This issue has been prime concern of VCDC and so is a hindrance to the development of rural areas.

The study has also discovered numbers of weaknesses like inefficacy of members which have more or less resulted in poor blue-print and road map for developmental activities. The limited funds also often strand the VCDC in carrying out developmental activities. Since, it is not a statutory body it is not commissioned to levy taxes or generate revenues of their own. The financially non viable nature of VCDC often limits their potential. Again, the limited autonomy of VCDC doesn't give free hand in making plans and policies for the village development. They are too much dependent on the dictation of Council government. The non democratic process of selection of members also has made it non-pro public; lucrative and aggrandized institutions for many members having their vested interest. Again, the greedy nexus between Block Development Officers and the VCDC members have hindered VCDC in effective working for the rural development. Nevertheless, the brighter sign of VCDC is that in recent years majority of people with 50% have shown the declining trend in rampant corruption. It can be expected that as VCDC grows matured and with growing education and alertness among the next generations it will become more effective to deliver a productive results.

Conclusion:

To sum up the study came with both positive and negative aspects. It has seen both success and failures in some of the core areas, it is assigned with responsibility. The study revealed that VCDC has achieved modest success in maintaining the rural infrastructure like road, culvert, school infrastructure, community assets etc. However, in the field of socio-economic development the role of VCDC has been very marginal. So far as political empowerment is concern, the popular opinion has hinted that VCDC at base is playing a vital role in promoting political empowerment among people. In the matter of achievements and failures in implementation and execution of government schemes VCDC has a modest performance. It has achieved a modest rate of convergence in various government schemes like housing, sanitation, other construction works and in organising the work force under MGNREGA. However, time and again, it has been charged with corruption, nepotism, favouritism and bias. This nature of VCDC had raised the eyeballs on many occasions of conscious public over their intentions. As a matter of fact, although, VCDC over the decade has been exercising the developmental planning, implementing and executing various development schemes under MGNREGA, IAY, PMGSY and other poverty alleviation schemes at village level yet, their efforts are often debated, doubted, and many a time discredited. Undeniably, the achievement of VCDC shows less convincing but there lies many factors too. Therefore, without considering both pros and cons of VCDC, it may be unfair to leap into conclusion just on the basis of higher deficit figures of VCDC in rural development. Moreover, it has completed just a decade of its existence. In addition, the problems like weak autonomy, financial non viable, less incentives to members, no electoral process, corruption, inefficacy of members, less accountability, less transparency etc. altogether hinder the effective working of VCDC in rural development. In such circumstances the role of VCDC in rural development has been uttered critical. Nevertheless, VCDC as a local government institution can contribute in the development of rural areas if the problems like weak autonomy, financial non-

viable, corruption and nepotism are eliminated. It can transform poor village into model village. It can be an instrument of change. It can play a vital role in transforming the fate of poverty stricken rural populations.

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