

Panchayati Raj Institutions of Assam and Sustainable Development: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: The term sustainable development refers the continuous development efforts for meeting the human development goals by sustaining the ability of natural system to provide natural resources and ecosystem services upon which the society depends. It refers a state where living conditions and resource use continue to meet human needs without destabilizing the natural systems. The attainment of sustainable development may be possible through effective local government system. Since the local governments are more aware with local resources along with local needs and aspirations, therefore they should prepare, execute and monitor the development plans to attain the objective of sustainable development. To achieve the sustainability, local governments must be accountable, transparent and cooperative and the system should also be sustainable.

After the 73rd amendment of the Constitution of India, 1993, Assam Government has introduced three tiers Panchayati Raj System through the enactment of the 'Assam Panchayat Act, 1994'. Assam Government has already transferred a lot of development functions to the Zila Parishad, Anchalik Panchayat and Gaon Panchayat to meet the objective inclusive growth and sustainable development. There are certain development subjects like elementary education, adult and non-formal education, primary health care, drinking water, sanitation, women and child development, civic services, optimum use of natural resources etc where substantial involvements of local governments are essential from the viewpoint of ensuring the efficient service delivery as well as sustainable rural development. But to achieve the objective of sustainable rural development, decentralization steps of the Panchayati Raj Institutions must be effective. Under this background this paper makes an attempt to make a critical analysis of the Panchayati Raj System of Assam in the light of sustainable development.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions, Effectiveness, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION:

The term sustainable development refers the continuous development efforts for meeting the human development goals by sustaining the ability of natural system to provide natural resources and ecosystem services upon which the society depends. It refers a state where living conditions and resource use continue to meet human needs without destabilizing the natural systems. The attainment of sustainable development may

be possible through effective local government system. Since the local governments are more aware with local resources along with local needs and aspirations, therefore they should prepare, execute and monitor the development plans to attain the objective of sustainable development. To achieve the sustainability, local governments must be accountable, transparent and cooperative and the system should also be sustainable.

After the 73rd amendment of the Constitution of India, 1993, Assam Government has introduced three tiers Panchayati Raj System through the enactment of the 'Assam Panchayat Act, 1994'. Assam Government has already transferred a lot of development functions to the Zila Parishad, Anchalik Panchayat and Gaon Panchayat to meet the objective inclusive growth and sustainable development. There are certain development subjects where substantial involvements of local governments are essential from the viewpoint of ensuring the efficient service delivery and there should be peoples' control over programmes for their development and welfare. Most important subjects are- elementary education, adult and non-formal education, primary health care, drinking water, sanitation, women and child development, civic services, optimum use of natural resources etc. The local governments have to assume substantial responsibilities in respect of optimum, but sustainable utilization of natural resources. To attain the objective of inclusive growth and sustainable development, the eleventh schedule of the Constitution of India has already transferred 29 numbers of developmental functions. But unfortunately, the local governments have not been able to meet the local entitlements of public goods and services and to achieve inclusive growth and social justice. To achieve the objective of sustainable rural development, decentralization steps of the Panchayati Raj Institutions must be effective. Under this background this paper makes an attempt to make a critical analysis of the Panchayati Raj System of Assam in the light of sustainable development.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To study the accountability of the rural local governments of Assam.
2. To study the sustainability of the rural local government system of Assam.
3. To study the constraints of rural local government for ensuring sustainable development.
4. To highlight some strategies for sustainable development.

ACCOUNTABILITY:

For achieving sustainable development, the local governments must ensure accountability. The accountability of local governments to common people, depends upon the questions like whether they are looking after public interest? Do the ordinary masses get involved and participate? The accountability of Panchayats in Assam can be viewed from the scenario of Gaon Sabha. The Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 makes the provision of involvement of people in the various stages of planning and implementation of several developmental programmes through the Gaon Sabha. But in Assam, especially in the Gaon Panchayats, the meetings of Gaon Sabha are not seen to be held regularly. Local people get less scope to express their needs

and aspirations and to prepare development plans. Rather they have to accept the development plans prepared by the state or central governments or by bureaucrats. Generally, the rural people are not aware of the fund released by the state or central governments for different development and welfare schemes. The accountability of the departments' officers and Gaon Panchayats' representatives should be ensured through the Gaon Sabha by the social audit and supervision. But there is hardly any scope to discuss these aspects in Gaon Sabha. Again, there is a conflict regarding the functioning, powers and procedures of the Gaon Sabha in Assam. For instance, (i) though as per the law, the minimum number of Gaon Sabha meetings in a year has to be two but unfortunately, this minimum has been interpreted as a maximum. (ii) Provision doing away with the need for quorum for adjournment of meetings of the Gaon Sabha has reinforced the tendency to view the Gaon Sabha meetings as a mere formality; (iii) Again, as per the law, the Gaon Sabha meeting could recommend and suggest, consider annual accounts, administrative reports, audit notes, etc. These suggestions and recommendations of the Gaon Sabhas could be ignored by the Gaon Panchayat

SUSTAINABILITY:

The basic objective of the 73rd amendment of the Indian Constitution is to achieve democratic decentralization in every sphere of socio-economic activity so that sustainable development can be ensured through the PRIs. But there are certain provisions and contradictions in the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution which adversely affect the sustainability of these institutions.

The 73rd amendment of the Indian Constitution makes the provision of reservation for women and scheduled castes/scheduled tribes, but these seats are to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies. In practice, this implies that a woman or a scheduled caste/tribal elected to a Panchayat will have to bear responsibility normally for a term of five years, with no prospect of re-election. This goes against the spirit of democracy. The elected representative will work hard only when he or she aspires to return back to power. The existing provisions do not provide any incentive for the elected persons to satisfy their commitment rather he will be dominated by self interest, prejudice etc; with little concern for the community's development.

Secondly, there is no clear-cut demarcation regarding the functional and financial powers among the three tiers.

Thirdly, the schemes of Panchayats are framed by the centre and implemented by the local bodies. The institutions of self government are forced to accept because of the centers financial clout. It is certainly a deplorable situation.

CONSTRAINTS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:

Following are some of the important factors for which the PRIs have not been able to achieve the objective of sustainable rural development.

Firstly, though huge amount of fund is disbursed to the PRIs for poverty alleviation, rural welfare and rural development but the entitlements of the PRIs are barely reaching the intended beneficiaries because too large and unacceptable proportion of funds are swallowed by the overloaded bureaucratic machinery. In any case, whatever the precise figure and whatever the differences between different programmes, it is matter of deep concern that such high delivery costs are seriously depriving the rural poor of his and her entitlements.

Secondly, the study of the PRIs shows that there has been a gap between the people and their government. Rural people hardly receive information about the plans and actions of the government. They lack ways to influence policies, programmes, or resource allocations for development. Many have no effective means of participating in and shaping their future and the government officials are not always accountable to the rural communities.

Thirdly, the state government enjoys the power of intervention in all the spheres of the functions of the PRIs. If the interventions of the higher bodies are not motivated by partisan politics, there is nothing wrong in it. But in the present era of politicization of every aspect of social life, there is a tendency of the state governments to intervene at every level of rural development planning and theirs' implementation of the PRIs for political party interest. Consequently, autonomy of the PRIs may unduly suffer to the detriment of both the equity and the efficiency. The most formidable power of the state government is the power to suspend the Panchayat bodies on the charge of abuse of power, incompetence, etc. This is likely to nip in the bud any possibility of real local-self governance for the rural people.

Fourthly, though the 23 number of developmental responsibilities are transferred to the PRIs, but the financial and functional autonomy are not entrusted to the PRIs and it stands in the way of achieving the goal of democratic decentralization in the spirit of inclusive growth and social justice and sustainable rural development. This has put them at a disadvantage as far as their political autonomy is concerned. They have become completely dependent on the Central and State governments for their existence.

Unless the PRIs are functionally and financially independent, the achievement of social justice will not be possible. The PRIs must have to mobilize their own revenues from different sources in such a way and in such amount so that they can independently prepare village level developmental plans to satisfy local needs and aspirations.

STRATEGIES FOR THE PRIS FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT:

The study shows that not much can be expected from the Indian Constitutional Provisions and the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 in a polity where tendency towards centralization and reluctance to delegate real powers to the lower-level governments are evident. In this regard the famous Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen has pointed out that “the democracy is not only the goal of development, it is the primary means of development”, (Sing, A.P. 2009). It will be possible only when each individual experiences greater freedom, voice and

opportunity and each will fully use his or her creative powers to bear on solving the problems of the community. However, the objective of sustainable rural development through the PRIs should not be miracle rather it must be realized through a systematic change in the PRI mechanism.

The challenges faced by the rural Assam can never be solved by top-down, bureaucratic interventions. The critical needs of communities in health, sanitation, clean water, education, family planning and income can only be met locally - through local responsibility, accountability and action - utilizing local resources to the greatest possible extent.

To ensure the local development in real sense, the plan should be prepared from the bottom on the basis of socio-economic structure and available resources. The plan should be prepared by the Gaon Panchayats on the basis of needs and aspirations of the subalterns.

An important weakness of the PRIs is that their functional responsibilities are not commensurate with the finances. The sources of revenue are highly inelastic in nature and the yields are very negligible. Generally, the PRIs have to depend on the upper layer of the governments for financial transfers. Unless the PRIs have financial autonomy, the objective of sustainable rural development by them will remain a dream only.

Along with the financial autonomy of the PRIs, there should be functional autonomy also. The mere transfer of fund and functions to them may not fulfill the objectives of the PRIs. There should be less interventionist policy in the functions of them. According to Mani Shankar Aiyer, former Union Minister of the GOI of Panchayati Raj, “though effort is made to make the local bodies responsible for the delivery to their communities of the community’s entitlements of the public goods and services, yet outcomes are clearly and totally non-commensurate with the outlays”. He said, “Only Empowerment will lead to Entitlements, and only Empowerment and Entitlements will together lead to Enrichment - the three ‘Es’ to be achieved through the three ‘Fs’ - the evolution of Functions, Finances and Functionaries to the elected institutions of local self-government as sanctioned and sanctified by the Constitution. Short of that happening, India will prosper but Indians will not”, (Aiyar & Tiwari, 2009).

The realization of the objective of sustainable rural development can be expected from the PRIs through the expansion and application of effective e-governance system even in remote areas. It may help the rural people to accelerate their capability of utilizing their potentialities through sound knowledge and orientation.

Some major threats to the objective of sustainable development through local governance are the high level of corruption, administrative inefficiency, reluctance, etc. Corruption should be checked by evolving a system of machinery for accountability through which the common people can also raise voice. Similarly, effectiveness of the PRIs’ officials has to be promoted either by awareness or training. But, the most important fact is that all the PRI officials as well as the local people must be dutiful and obliged to render their services to ensure the local as well as national development.

The PRIs are best suited to assume the responsibilities for the provisions of almost all the public services. But the problem is that, in reality, there is no guarantee that the bundle of services, assigned to the PRI will be matched by the set of revenue instruments assigned to them. Hence, to ensure the accountability, the PRIs should charge for the services they provide, or they should finance such services from taxes borne by the local tax payers. Otherwise, they have to rely on fiscal transfers from the central or the state governments.

CONCLUSION:

The objective of sustainable development must be achieved by the PRIs through their developmental functions. This will be possible only when the PRIs can prepare, execute and monitor the developmental plans on the basis of the availability of resources, needs and aspirations of the people of the locality independently without much interference from the state or the central governments and party politics. This requires the mobilization of sufficient amount of the own revenue both from the constitutional sources and the exploration of new sources. The PRI representatives, state government as well as the policy makers must be sincere, efficient and responsible enough to lead the PRIs to attain the goal of sustainable rural development. To attain the goal of sustainable development, PRIs must provide facilities to the local people to explore their capacities and to contribute in the development process of their localities and India's too.

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