



ASSAM: SIGNS OF OPTIMISM

Dr. JOYEETA AHMAD

Associate Professor, Department of Pol Science,
Deshbandhu College (DU), Kalkaji, New Delhi, India.

ABSTRACT:

The economy of Assam is characterized by a long-standing poverty. More than fifty percent of its population live below the poverty line. As the rural sector constitutes the backbone of the state's economy rural poverty is more acute in the state. Low agricultural productivity along with low per capita income and absence of an alternative means of survival has resulted in such a dismal situation. But the state government has not remained altogether passive. As the country ventured into the planning phase the State government of Assam too began its journey for initiating schemes to promote the cause of the poor mainly in the rural sector. The NREP programme was meant to generate employment opportunities for the assetless ones. With inherent deficiencies having their way this scheme was done away with and a massive wage employment scheme called Jawahar Rojgar Yojana (both being Centrally sponsored Scheme) was launched. Self-employment schemes and programmes for the development of entrepreneurship among the poor have also been another landmark initiative of the State. IRDP and TRYSEM are such some examples. The Assam government has also been involved in various activities/schemes to upgrade the socio-economic status of women and also that of the backward classes, the tribal population in particular. The present article seeks to analytically study all the above initiatives in a diligent manner and arrive at concrete conclusions about their rationale.

KEY WORDS:

Rural Sector, poverty conditions, agricultural growth, employment generation, inequality reduction, wage employment, beneficiaries, productive assets, gram sabha, village panchayats, corrective measures, poverty alleviation, rural development, cropping pattern, women empowerment, tribal development.

AIM OF THE STUDY:

The aim of the present study would be to know and understand in detail the multidimensional efforts of the Assam government to contain the adverse situation in the State emerging out of poverty conditions. How it has been implementing the centrally sponsored schemes, the limitations therein and the individual effort of the State has also been probed and discussed. This article will in a way also highlight those aspects of the working of the state, society and economy which have hampered the smooth implementation of the various poverty alleviation projects. Infact a full picture of the State would be placed for display and judgement.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

1. Bhomick P.K., "Land Reforms and Rural Development in the state of West Bengal," (R.N. Bhattacharya Publishers, 2001)
This book written by P.K. Bhomick discusses the land reform programmes of the State of West Bengal and also analyze their impact on the rural sector and population. Who have been the central beneficiaries of these measures and whether there has been a change in their standard of living has also been looked into.
2. Dattta, P.K., "Panchayats, Rural Development and Local Autonomy: The West Bengal Experience" (Dasgupta and Company, 2001).
The above book presents in a vivid manner the nature of the working of the Panchayiti Institutions in fulfilling their responsibilities of promoting rural development and ensuring rural empowerment. Emphasis has been placed on the autonomous character and working of these institutions and also its inbuilt restrictions.
3. Ghosh Arun, "Planning in India: The Challenge for the Nineties", (Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd., 1992).
This book provides its readers with the issues which obstruct the socio-economic growth of our country. It also discusses the reasons for the existing social problems whose roots lay in the economic sphere. The author also suggests ways and means to improve the growth of the economy including a renewed emphasis on decentralized planning, mobilization of local resources, less and less emphasis on the rigidity of the bureaucratic rules and more emphasis on deregulations.
4. Gupta Rahul, "Economic Development of West Bengal" (ICFAI University Press 2001)
The above book discusses the achievements and problems of both the industrial and agricultural sector of West Bengal. How the State government with its huge rural population has made attempts to strengthen its infrastructural basis to resurrect its small-scale industries and also the agricultural sector has also been analysed.
5. Kar Samit "Rural Development in West Bengal: a quest" (Sarat Book House, 1991).
As the name of book clearly suggests the state of the rural sector has been the central focus of the book. The diverse schemes promoting the cause of the rural poor specifically those that are meant to generate employment opportunities and provide relief to the landless and agricultural labourers have been discussed. The role of the local institutions in this regard has also been taken up.
6. Rajasekhar D, Gayathridevi K G, Satapethy S, "Good Governance and Poverty Alleviation," (Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd., 2007)
The joint authors of this book in their book on good governance and poverty alleviation seeks to emphasis the fact that the success of pro-poor policies depend solely on the machinery of good governance which can be ensured once the public officials are committed and dedicated towards the cause of uplifting the standards of the deprived sections of the society. It means that the success of poverty alleviation schemes is tied to the issue of effective governmental machinery.

MAIN TEXT:

The economic and overall scenario of Assam may not be a favourable one but the battle for an improved state of affairs is on. It is however pertinent to analyze and study all such initiatives being pursued in the state for the same. The National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) was a centrally sponsored scheme devised to generate additional gainful employment opportunities for the unemployed and under-employed persons, particularly the asset-less ones. This scheme does not exist now as it has been merged with subsequent wage employment schemes, but its importance lies

in the fact that it played a significant role in transforming the rural sector for the better. The process of providing durable community assets for making available employment benefits to the rural poor was initiated in the state of Assam during the latter period of 1980-81. Projects, under NREP included construction and renovation of village roads, fisheries, horticulture, flood protection measures and construction of the much-needed embankments. The nature of these activities was such that the rural poor could themselves take the initiative to participate in these schemes as they are very much aware of the fact that these measures involve their own development. NREP had also taken steps to upgrade the nutritional status of the rural poor through the payment of wages in terms of food grains. Considering the chronic problem of unemployment in the state the NREP had made an encouraging progress during the latter part of the eighties. The NREP had in fact brought instant relief to the assetless rural poor and to those who, in the absence of adequate resourceful assets are compelled to thrive on wage employment. In the beginning of 90's NREP had introduced a scheme for the unemployed youths which involved giving them a "margin money of Rs. 50,000/- each to 10,000 youths at a total cost of Rs. 50 crores"¹. With the margin money available beneficiaries have been allowed to secure bank loans for setting up industrial projects service-oriented enterprises and for conducting trade and business. However, the main shortcoming of this programme was that employment was provided only for a very short duration and this was not likely to make any dent on rural poverty. Majority of the beneficiaries selected under this scheme are not properly identified, as such the actual poor remain untouched, and their condition worsens. Wage paid under this scheme is also much below the market wage rate. To make this scheme more successful the primary goal of our planning should have been the creation of employment opportunities and all other objectives should be woven round this main goal. It is only then that the problem of unemployment and underemployment could have been solved to a great extent otherwise this problem will ever remain unresolved.

Unemployment and underemployment in the rural areas has been a major factor contributing to poverty in the state of Assam. As such providing wage employment to the rural poor has been a significant part of the state's rural development strategy. Such an effort found expression in the JRY which was introduced in the state in April 1989 along with other states in the country. The two employment generating schemes, viz., National Rural Employment Programme (NREP - in operation since 1980) and Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP in operation since 1983) were merged together under JRY. There are two essential objectives of the JRY. Firstly, it seeks to create additional gainful employment opportunities for the unemployed and underemployed men and women in the rural areas. Secondly it seeks to create productive community assets so that the rural poor gets direct and continuing assets out of which direct and continuing benefits would follow. Thus, this programme not only seeks to improve the overall quality of life of the rural people, but it also seeks to strengthen the rural economic and social infrastructure so that the rural economy grows at a faster rate. By the very nature of the JRY it is clear that its target group consists of those people who are below the poverty line. As JRY seeks to provide wage employment to at least one member of a poor rural family for 50-100 days a year it has proved to be beneficial to the rural economy of Assam where the problem of unemployment looms large. This is mainly because the state Government has been seriously implementing this scheme via the Zilla Parishads at the district level and village Panchayats at Village level. This is proved by the fact that "in 1989-90, 1991-92, 1992-93 the number of employments generated under this scheme was 105 lakh, 124.16 lakh, 109.72 mandays as against the target of 122.6 lakh 114.99 lakh and 119.71 lakh mandays respectively"² The given figures are however not too impressive. This is because the scheme has been suffering from various inadequacies which has reduced its inefficiency. Some of which are as follows: (i) Prior to its implementation the Village Panchayats are required to discuss the action plan in the Gram Sabha meetings. But studies on JRY have shown that in Assam the Village Panchayats have not cared to discuss with the Gram Sabha members the works which it seeks to take up. In the wake of such discussions, it is likely that the interests of the weaker sections of the society may be jeopardized. As such emphasis should be given on transparency of all tasks undertaken if JRY has to be more effective. The center should also

intervene to ensure that meetings of the Gram Sabha are regularly held so that the needs of the people are met at large. The departments responsible for the same in the state has not taken care to maintain the assets well. As such special care has to be taken. It has also been seen that a number of heads of the elected Panchayats are not given adequate training. Effective implementation of JRY is bound to suffer unless proper training to the Panchayats heads is imparted beforehand. An essential component of JRY is that 30% of the employment is to be provided to women but the share of women in employment generation in Assam has been marginal. This called for an increasing attention by the state government on the rural women so that they overcome all social barriers and avail the benefits which accrue from this scheme for them and thus improve their standard of living. But the government has failed in this. According to JRY guidelines payments to JRY workers are made either on a daily basis or weekly basis but in Assam the wages paid to the workers are highly irregular. Delay in wages for workers who rely solely on this work has proved to be crucial. This has called for an urgent action by the state government so that wages are given on time and according to the prescribed norms. Nevertheless, JRY is a massive wage employment scheme in all the districts and village panchayats of the state. This programme is a unique case of decentralisation where the village panchayats are responsible for the planning and execution of the scheme even though a major amount of the funds come from the central government. Construction of rural roads have also received priority in the state under this scheme. The extent of employment generated has also been more or less satisfactory considering the shortcomings within which it is being operated. Corrective measures according to suggestions given above would go a long way to increase the efficiency of JRY in Assam.

Making additional employment opportunities available to the rural poor has been the corner stone of Assam's strategy of poverty alleviation. To promote this objective several schemes of employment generation has been taken up from time to time. The latest to add to the list is the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS). JRY failed to provide adequate employment opportunities for the rural poor, so a better alternative called the EAS was introduced in the state in October 1993. This scheme aimed at providing at least 100 days of unskilled manual work to the rural poor who seeks employment and really needs it. It is particularly targeted at the rural poor who are deprived of any means of livelihood during the lean agricultural season. As this scheme gives priority to areas afflicted by natural calamities, it has proved beneficial to the people of Assam especially during floods which is a regular feature in the state. Moreover, since in most of the areas of the state single cropping pattern is followed, the period of lean agricultural season is quite long. Under such circumstances a scheme like EAS has proved to be a blessing for the rural poor. Further as all works under EAS is labour intensive ones, the problems of unemployment could be solved to some measure. However, the main shortcoming of EAS is that, because of limited funds, the resources are spread out thinly over a large area thus reducing the chances of these funds being used in an appropriate manner.

Self-employment schemes and programmes for the development of entrepreneurship has been another set of schemes to alleviate the condition of the rural poor. Commonly known as IRDP this scheme seeks to make a direct attack on poverty by endowing the poor living below the poverty line with productive assets or skills so that they are able to employ themselves usefully to earn greater incomes and thus improve their standard of living. IRDP recognises two primary causes for rural poverty. One is inadequate assets possessed by rural households and the other is the limited access of the rural poor to institutional forms of credit. As such the nature of activities covered within this scheme has been framed accordingly. IRDP was introduced in Assam in the latter part of 1978-79 and since then the state government has been persistently trying to help the poorer and weaker sections of its society by making credit based productive assets available to them because this would provide the beneficiaries with self employment opportunities on a long-term basis. The backbone of Assam's economy is the rural sector accompanied with low productivity and its related problem. As the target group under IRDP consists of small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers and rural artisans this scheme has been particularly beneficial for the rural poor of Assam.

IRDP has helped the poor of the state to acquire productive assets, improved skills and know-how of modern technology. In other words, via this scheme attempt has been also made to modernize the outlook of the target groups. Substantial credit is also being mobilized under IRDP through different financial institutions. Over the years IRDP has become a basic strategy of the Assam Government to promote the cause of the poorest section of the rural society because it has been trying to transform the rural economy in their favour.

Mere equipments of a factory cannot produce unlimited quantity of goods but if the knowledge of a certain mode of production increases large quantity of goods can not only be produced, during any period but employment opportunities are also generated. This is the philosophy behind the introduction of the TRYSEM. As a centrally sponsored scheme TRYSEM was introduced in the state of Assam in 1979-80 with the aim of providing technical and entrepreneurial skills to the youths of rural families who live below the poverty line. This scheme seeks to make the poor rural youth capable enough to take up self employment and wage employment in various fields be it agriculture, industry or their allied sectors. Special safeguards are provided for the weaker sections of the society and for the physically handicapped persons. Under this scheme training is imparted both through formal training institutions and also via non-formal means like the master craftsmen.

Studies conducted in the State of Assam with regard to the effectiveness of TRYSEM showed that the duration for which training was being given was not adequate. The training faculty was not satisfactory and practical training was also not enough. According to the guidelines of TRYSEM the trainees are supposed to be given stipends, the amount of which would vary according to the nature of training and the position of the institution imparting training. But majority of the beneficiaries in Assam like in many other states have complained that the amount of stipend received was very meagre. They have also complained that their training was not of much use to them because after the completion of the same they could not take up self employment and as they put it this was due to the lack of funds and lack of proper infrastructure. These may be the reasons as to why the progress of the scheme in Assam has been far from being satisfactory. Nevertheless, the importance of the scheme lies in the fact that it has opened up new avenues of employment to the rural poor, particularly the enterprising ones. As they received training in various trades and crafts, they could also hope to lessen their dependence on the primary sector and pin their attention on the small-scale sector whose prospects in Assam has already been recognized. Studies have also shown that after receiving training the beneficiaries have realized the importance of sending their children to schools at least at the primary stage. This is also a positive development. However, in order to improve the working of the scheme the wide gap between training and demand should be removed. As the main problem with the scheme is the increasing number of trained youths who fail to get or take up jobs the solution would be to first identify appropriate activities that require particular skills and then impart training accordingly. Unless the demand side is first looked into the problem would become all the more acute. It is also necessary to upgrade the skills according to the changes of time. As the beneficiaries lack funds to take up self-employment the financial institutions should play a significant role in advancing credit to the poor. In fact, "their involvement in the selection of beneficiaries and of viable schemes is critical to the programmes success".²

On 2nd October 1993 new employment-oriented scheme was launched in Assam along with the other states of the country. This scheme is popularly known as the PMRY. It seeks to provide self employment to one million educated unemployed youths in the country in small enterprises, business ventures and manufacturing services. This scheme also sought to provide loan up to a ceiling of Rs. one lakh out of which the subsidy elements would be 15 per cent. Those eligible for this scheme would have to undergo Government sponsored technical courses for a minimum period of one month besides having a matriculate and a ITI diploma certificate. Benefits from this scheme accrue to the educated youth of both rural and urban areas. Another significant aspect of the scheme is that women entrepreneurs are given preference to men. Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas - (DWCRA)- DWCRA is the product of a concept that participation of the women is

indispensable to promote economic development. With this objective in view a special programme for women was introduced in the State in the beginning of the eighties. This is again a centrally sponsored scheme, and it seeks to provide income generating skills and activities to poor and needy women in the rural areas by providing them seed money and expecting them to work collectively in groups. To achieve this end this scheme sought to increase and improve the access of rural women to such basic requirements as credit, training skills, skills in marketing etc. The very nature of this programme shows that it seeks to improve the quality of life of rural women and children so that their social and economic status increases, and the children grow up well. DWCRA is the only scheme operating in the state of Assam which sought to empower the rural women by making them economically strong. As per the guidelines in the scheme ten to fifteen women preferably of the same locality are organized in groups for taking up some economic activities. Substantial financial assistance is also offered to these groups. This scheme thus encourages collective action among women and tries to integrate them in the economy of the state. As the Assam Government appears to be seriously taking up this scheme it can be expected that over the years more and more rural women would come forward in groups and take up economic activities for their own benefit. Prior to the introduction of this scheme rural women in Assam used to limit their activities only in the paddy fields and their home but DWCRA has given them an opportunity to cross all social barriers and make their presence felt in the society. Besides implementing the scheme of DWCRA the Assam government has also been taking up numerous other activities at its own level to improve the socio-economic conditions of the women in general and the needy among them in particular. Vocational training centers and rehabilitation bodies for the needy and destitute women have been set up through out the state. There is also a provision for financial assistance to be provided to them in cases when medical treatment is required. Pensions are provided to widows who are deprived of any means of livelihood under the State Widows Pension Scheme. Several working women's hostels has also been set up by the government. As the Assamese women are largely engaged in weaving to cater to their domestic requirements, steps are also being taken to encourage them to produce on a commercial basis, so as to earn adequate remuneration for their efforts. The distribution of handlooms and sewing machines at a low cost by the Government and the availability of credit facilities have also proved beneficial for women in general. Supply of yarn at subsidized rates, provision of marketing facilities and training facilities for weavers by the previous Saikia Government has helped the reorganization of the industry as a profitable venture and have thereby provided higher employment avenues and income opportunities to them. In spite of all these efforts made by the Assam government the condition of majority of the Assamese women continue to remain backward. The causes of such a situation can be traced to some unique socio-economic factors which characterize the State Assam's economy is dominated by agriculture. Women along with men equally participate in all cultivation related work. Moreover, as the soil of the state is very fertile nearly every required consumer item is produced at home and hence every family is more or less self supporting. This self-sufficiency discourages the Assamese women who are poor to step out of their house looking for other facilities to improve their lifestyle. As such they remain educationally and hence economically backward. The obvious result of this is that the schemes initiated by the government to promote their upliftment has remain valid only in paper. Infact, majority of the Assamese women are not aware of these schemes as they willingly remain too engaged in the daily household chores. As such there is every possibility that funds allocated for their upliftment may not percolate below the official level and thus may be misused.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, we see that the Assam government has gone a long way in trying to alleviate poverty amongst its masses. As rural poverty is the acutest in the state, the present chapter has laid a particular emphasis on those programmes which sought to do away with the same. A detailed study of the anti-poverty schemes in the state leads one to conclude that much still needs to be done. The

percentage of poverty is still large, and the rate of unemployment is still significant. Though the state government has been trying to implement a long list of anti poverty schemes, they seem to get distorted during the process of implementation. Thus, what is required is a greater representation of deprived sections of the society in those bodies which are responsible for the implementation of varied schemes. There should be greater awareness among the beneficiaries so that the nexus between the bureaucrats / politicians and the landlords or the capitalists is brought into open and as such broken. Credit facilities must be improved for the rural poor so that they are in a position to make themselves self-reliant. Only under such conditions poverty eradication schemes can achieve a measure of success. Lastly and most significantly as there is no scarcity of natural wealth in Assam, the state government should make full use of them by giving a boost to such sectors as the small-scale industries etc. It should also realise that implementing nutritional schemes or health care facilities cannot solve the problem of poverty. Unless the basic necessities of the poor are fulfilled the utility of these schemes would be nullified. Along with adequate attention to the agricultural sector the industrial base of the state should be strengthened so that the base of the economy becomes strong, unemployment becomes less, and poverty reduces as a gradual process.

FOOT NOTES:

1. The Hindustan Times, June 30, 1992.
2. P.K. Dhar. The Economy of Assam (Kalyani Publishers, New Delhi, 1995). p 297.

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- 3 P.K. Dhar, n. 2, p. 297
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- 5 Milestones: From Strength to Strength, -Four years of faith and Fulfilment, Janasanyog, Assam, p. 9.
- 6 Nilkanth Rath, "Garibi Hatao, Can IRDP do it"? EPW, Feb. 9, 1985, p. 241.
- 7 Planning Commission, Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-81) Midterm appraisal, (1983), p. 49.
- 8 Draft Eighth Five Year Plan 1990-95. vol. I, An Overview Government of Assam, Planning and Development Dept. Assam, p. B-26.