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ISSN: 2278-9529

# GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol. 3, Issue-III May 2014



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## Politics of Rural Development: A Theoretical Perspective

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of PRIs in the process of rural development and to find out major deficiencies in the working of these institutions. It also try to analyze the level of 'rural politics' in the context of development programme and to find out possible solutions for strengthening and horizonting the process of rural development in Maharashtra. For this purpose the paper is divided into four parts. In Part I, the concept of 'Rural Development' is thoroughly discussed.

The existing structure of PRIs and the process of District planning is given in the Part II. In Part III of this paper an attempt is made to analyze the level of 'Rural Politics' and major organizational draw backs of the PRIs. And lastly, a solution is prescribed to strengthen the administrative apparatus and organizational set-up which is working for the acceleration for rural development.

**Keywords: Politics of Rural Development, rural politics, national policy and implementation, Panchayat Raj**

The establishment and working of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIS) as democratic bodies at the grass-roots have accelerated the Process of Politicization and development below the state level. Historically speaking the Community Development Programme gave birth to the Panchayati Raj (PR). While carrying on with the Programme of CD, the need was felt for popular participation for development purposes. This led to the emergence of PRIs, following the recommendations of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee in 1959. The structure of PRIs is democratically conceived and its functional content is development oriented, peoples' participation in the CD is sectional and even self seeking because the democratic procedure of self governance as it has come down to us presupposes the existence and inevitability of groups being formed and utilized as instruments for seizure of political power. Thus, the politics of Rural Development has become more competitive instead of constructive.

The PRIs are considered as instruments of socio-economic change. Therefore its functional base is development oriented. The idea of 'planning from below, was mooted to get the popular participation in the development process and to lead the process of horizontal development in the rural areas. The PRIs in Maharashtra are instruments of microlevel planning. The PRIs have yet to fulfill their promises. The defects and deficiencies in the organization and working of the agencies and institutions for planning and development are responsible for the present state of affairs in the PRIs.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of PRIs in the process of rural development and to find out major deficiencies in the working of these institutions. It also try to analyze the level of 'rural politics' in the context of development programme and to find out possible solutions for strengthening and horizonting the process of rural development in Maharashtra. For this purpose the paper is divided into four parts. In Part I, the concept of 'Rural Development' is thoroughly discussed.

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### I. An Approach towards Rural Development.

The search for alternative development strategies has now become intense, particularly among political leaders and social scientists within the third world. The starting point for this search is the recognition that a development strategy that aims at creating a consumer society is neither feasible nor desirable. The main focus of their development efforts must be on meeting the basic human needs of the entire population. Conceptually the acceptance of a basic- needs approach to development can be regarded as something of a break through but that by itself does not provide a practical development strategy and set a workable policies. Many difficult political, economic and social issues must be resolved before a development strategy based on basic-needs can be evolved. The fulfillment of basic needs requires not only a rapid increase in the production of certain types of goods and services but also a redistribution of land and other productive assets and that cannot be achieved without drastic changes in the political power structure. Therefore, the basic objective of rural development could be to organize, develop and utilize the available resources in such a manner that the entire rural population has an equal opportunity to meet their minimum requirements. Thus, the thrust for rural development has been two-pronged-one providing certain social goods and services in terms of socio-economic infrastructure and the other, increasing income of individual rural poor and equitable distribution.

The goal of rural development is to enrich the total quality of rural life and its availability at minimum levels to all sections of the population of course the development is not merely the provisions of opportunities for development, but it also involves the actual utilization by the people for whom they are intended and involved. This basic objective has three significant components. Firstly the economic component – the basic needs of the entire rural population cannot be made without a sustained increase in agriculture production and that

in turn requires investments, inputs, technology and trained man power. Secondly, the social component – the objective of equal or equitable opportunity to develop and share the resources cannot be achieved unless the initial and subsequent distribution of income and assets is equitable and adequate employment opportunities for everyone. Thirdly, the Political component of these objectives must include the improvement of socio-economic

relation and creation of positive and healthy social environment.<sup>(1)</sup> Rural Development thus, becomes an interdisciplinary concept. Therefore, the isolated project approach is not worth to achieve the desired goal. The integrated approach of rural development implies functional and spatial integration of all aspects of development. The functional integration and spatial planning are linked with the concept of 'Growth Centre'. The term 'Growth Centre' is that 'which is an urban core of rural hinterland capable of growth. It serves its surrounding territory with services available in it and provides employment opportunities to the people living in that area. The concept provides methodology for micro-level planning for an infrastructure where a number of services and development investments can be located at the minimum cost.

The institutional design for decentralized development management has to be commensurate with the responsibilities devolved upon it. Panchayati Raj both from political and socio-economic developmental angles is an imperative to decentralized power, planning, process and developmental activities below the State level. 'Panchayati Raj is an interconnected, interdependent, federal- democratic and decentralized structure of rural local self-government at the village block and district levels based on decentralization, devolution and democratization of power and responsibility for the specific purpose of planning and implementing rural development and welfare programmes with people's participation and active co-operation.'<sup>(3)</sup> Integrated rural community development, democratic development and integrate area development are the triple objectives of Panchayati Raj in Maharashtra.<sup>(4)</sup>

Though the PRIs are considered as instruments of socio-economic change and are comparatively better equipped in Maharashtra, the dis-illusionment did set in when it was found that 'These institutions are dominated by economically or socially privileged sections of society and have as such facilitated the emergence of oligarchic forces, yielding no benefits to the rural poor. The purpose of PRIs has also been vitiated by political factionalism rendering developmental thrust either warped diluted. Organizational inefficiency, political interference, power concentration instead of service consciousness – all these have limited the utility of PR for the average villagers'.<sup>(5)</sup>

## II. Institutional Framework

The credit of recommending PR in the form in which we understand today goes to Balwantrao Mehta Committee, which published its report in 1959. The principle thrust of this report was towards decentralization of democratic institutions in an effort to shift decision centres close to the people to enable their active and continuous participation under local popular control. The committee observed that 'so long as we do not discover or create a representative and democratic institution which will supply the local interest. Supervision and care necessary to ensure that expenditure of money on local objects conform with the needs and wishes of the locality, invest it with adequate power and assign to it appropriate finances, we will never be able to evoke local interest and excite local initiative in the field of development'.<sup>(6)</sup> For this purpose the team suggested a three tier system of democratic decentralization ( called Panchayati Raj) with the bloc as its basic unit. The committee suggested direct elections for village and block Panchayats, wherein the indirectly elected District body has given only co-ordinating role. Maharashtra ushered in the PRIs on 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1962, following the report of Naik

Committee. While submitting its report the Naik Committee observed that ‘our most gratifying thought is that, we are providing opportunities not only for political training of the people and their leaders and a strong base stable democracy in our country but are also making it possible for the people to press the virtues of local government into their service so as to meet their real needs and aspirations.’<sup>(7)</sup>

Accordingly, the Maharashtra adopted a unique pattern of PR which a Zilla Parishad (ZP) is a highest tier in the system and is stronger than in any other states. Panchayat samitis are constituted as intermediary bodies.

PRIs in Maharashtra are charged with the responsibilities of development work. They have assigned in pivotal role in the process of rural development and planning. ‘The main purpose of decentralization is to achieve rapid, intensive and co-ordinate rural development.’<sup>(8)</sup> Thus, the need to separate development administration from the traditional revenue administration was equally felt. Most of the development departments at the district level are transferred to the PRIs. The most striking innovations made by rural development administration right at the start of its career are principally C.E.O

(an IAS rank officer) as the head of the development administration at the district level, BDO as head and co-ordinating functionary at the Block level- the new unit of administration and VLW, as the joint agent of all development agencies in the village.

District planning / planning from below has been remained as the accepted strategy of the planners in India. But, until the third five year plan a proper organizational machinery in the district has not been created to realize the micro-level planning strategy. With the increased stress on district and local planning by third and fourth five year plans, the importance of PR in this field has become unquestionable. The State Government has decided to utilize the PRIs for this purpose. The concept of district planning aims of removing regional disparities and imbalances and to promote participation of local people. Local requirements and potentials of development also are to be considered in district plans. Therefore, the principle of ‘planning from below’ has been accepted as the most efficient method for formulation of State / National plans. Experimental studies on ‘Growth Centres’ for evolving a planning strategy at the grass-roots level has also been undertaken.

In Maharashtra the district development planning is undertaken through PRIs. The PR administration is entrusted to prepare development plans. ‘It is an obligatory function of ZP, to promote planned development of the district, by utilizing, to the maximum possible extent local resources and for that, to prepare annual and long-term plans, giving regard to the plans by Panchayat Samitis’,<sup>(9)</sup> Similar plans are to be framed by the Panchayat Samitis, as preparatory to the ZP plans, as well as for the utilization of block grants.<sup>(10)</sup> the village panchayats also have to prepare plans for the development of villages.<sup>(11)</sup> A planning branch with a planning officer at its head has been created in each Zilla Parishad. District Development and planning committees ( DPDC ) are also set-up at the district level to integrate and co-ordinate all district development schemes. The DPDC, in Maharashtra are working since 1974. The DPDC comprises of all heads of the development departments in the district and non-officials from local bodies as well as MPs and MLAs in the district. The DPDC is an advisory and co-coordinating body.

### III Evaluation

The establishment and working of PRIs as democratic bodies at the grass-roots, inspite of their limitations have deepened the political consciousness in rural areas. The institutions have provided opportunity to come forward to participate in the affairs of their own locality. 'The PR has introduced a new class political elites in the district. This class claims the lion's share in the authority and the prestige hitherto enjoyed by the bureaucracy and challenges the monopoly of popular mandate of their counter-parts from the State Legislature.'<sup>(12)</sup> Several other studies<sup>(13)</sup> have also found that a younger, more educated and better equipped rural leadership is slowly emerging. The educated generation is breaking the barriers in the leadership process.

But at the same time, the rural reality is ridden with caste, money, privilege and muscle power. Therefore, the present PR leadership has become a product of group process and political intrigue. Though the poor are in majority, they are divided by caste and religion. So these institutions are usually dominated by economically or socially privileged sections and have as such facilitated the emergence of oligarchic forces yielding no benefits to the rural poor. The purpose of PR has also been vitiated by political factionalism.<sup>(14)</sup> The rural leadership is more dependent upon the group alliance because of its federal structure. The PR system provided the interlinked power structure in the rural politics. Not only are the PR bodies dominated by the privileged people but, these are also structurally incompetent to execute effectively, schemes designed for the rural poor. The fruits of development, whatever little achieved so far, are not reaching to the rural masses. They have all been pocketed by a few privileged classes. Although the average rate of development has increased, it has been very unequally distributed between socio-economic groups of rural community. This pattern of concentrated growth is perpetuated by limited access to land, credit, education and modern sector employment etc. The dominance of oligarchic elements is a malice affecting the political system and vitiating the rural development programmes at all levels. The pace of development administration is adversely affected due to too much of political interference in the work of the development functionaries in the PRIs. 'It has been evident that the emerging semi-enlightened local leadership consider position in PRIs as more a matter of prestige, patronage and power than service to the community. There has been, therefore, interference in every petty matters of administration by the elected leaders, converting every development scheme into the members of their own caste, class or group. 'Political interference has not only been felt in matters of postings, transfers and grants of contracts but also in the matters of location of services like schools, hospitals, health- centres etc. .. it was found that the sphere in which the influence of PR has been most prominently marked is political rather than economic or social.'<sup>(15)</sup> It has been expected that 'Pr would primarily be a development mechanism and make for the short falls on the CDP .... in practice it has emerged as a power mechanism.'<sup>(6)</sup> Thus, there is a need of drastic change in political power structure at the rural level in order to achieve the aims of rural development.

Rural development is vitally linked with proper 'planning implementation and evaluation'. But this has not yet been done. The Evaluation Committee<sup>(17)</sup> has found that, 'there is no evidence to show that there was any conscious and systematic planning in the local sector.' The neglect of planning function by the PRIs is indicated by several trends. Political interference is not only the reason of lack of scientific planning at local

levels. The faulty formation of development plans, its improper implementation due to bureaucratic inefficiency, is other major deficiencies of PRIs. Though the necessary steps have already been taken by standardizing techniques and procedures for district planning in Maharashtra and district is made a key unit of planning and development, this is merely a beginning to develop local planning. The institutional structure of PR has not been taken into account the functional necessity of propelling the ongoing development thrusts building upon the intricacies at the appropriate levels and transmits the impulse to the people through local specific people.<sup>(18)</sup> It is evident that the lack of understanding of the socio-economic characteristics and the needs of rural poor weakened the planning process (particularly at village and block level) and lead to difficulties in the formulation of realistic plans and programmes.

Therefore, the nature of planning attempted at district level by ZP cannot be called as adequate horizontal planning. The ZP plan are nothing more than the allocation of sectoral or departmental resources. The district planning is what is called 'one form of spatial planning', and spatial planning requires identification and analysis of local problems local potentialities and aspirations, investigation and collection of information and association of local people. District plans are deficient in this regard. The development plans / programmes are not generally formulated / implemented on the basis of reliable data but through acquaintance and political influence rather than any proper assessment of needs... Several development programmes are executed on an adhoc basis rather than reliable data base.<sup>(19)</sup> What is needed, therefore, is an objective examination of realities in our rural areas and to make plans on the basis of such study. The primary motto of such an examination should be to develop scientific concept of 'community and of a region'. The existing administrative units of PR are less useful in this regard. Thus, there is need of organizational reform at the PR level to prepare them to face the new challenges of development planning.

Another major problem in the planning and administration of rural development is that of identification of the beneficiaries. Rural statistics is notoriously poor and unreliable, and the list of poorest prepared for providing benefits ( under IRDP) to them does not always comprise the poorest only. Politically motivated inclusions and exclusions are not rare and this vitiates the rest of the process of poverty alleviation.

The extension spirit of development bureaucracy is very feeble and intermittent. Transfers at this level are too frequent with delayed replacements. Inspection and supervision by higher level officers are perfunctory and the functionaries generally show a disturbingly high degree of susceptibility to local political influence. The morale and motivation of personnel is low and they perpetually complain about unsatisfactory terms and conditions of service and lack of promotional opportunities. A consequence of such disoriented bureaucracy is poor execution of the programmes with considerable leakage and even down-right abuse of public funds officially earmarked for them.<sup>(20)</sup>

#### **IV Solutions**

We are experimenting rural development through PRIs and Bureaucracy about five decades. The abovementioned short-comings of the system leads one to believe that the present system is incapable of carrying out the development planning for rural poor. The organizational set-up and the plan strategy therefore needs to be reviewed and a 'Growth Centre' model of rural development needs to be given more attention.

1. The basic objective of our planning should be to improve the capacity of large number of decentralized planning entities, and to identify their needs, mobilize their own financial and human resources to meet their needs and distribute the benefits created on the basis of socialist principle.
2. An integrated framework of rural development should be based on the following principles.<sup>(21)</sup>
  - i. Organization of farming and other related activities including land and water development on co-operative basis in order to ensure a fuller utilization of available physical and human resources and more equitable distribution of future incomes.
  - ii. Diversification of rural economy within agriculture and small and medium scale agro-bases industries to provide additional employment opportunities and incomes and to improve the pattern of rural life.
  - iii. An active policy of social development through the expansion of social services and the improvement of relations.
  - iv. Political and administrative capacity for the planning and implementation for this strategy to provide linkages with the rest of the economy and protect the legitimate interest of the rural population.
3. Panchayati Raj both from the political and socio-developmental angles, is an imperative to decentralize power, planning process and developmental activities. Realistic plan formulation and the effective implementation of plans depends critically on sound viable local government structure. The recommendations made by Ashok Mehta Committee have to be considered positively and PRIs should be reorganized on the basis of 'Mandal Panchayati Scheme', to ensure scientific and effective development planning at local level.
4. This requires a better skill in development planning on the part of local authorities and administration. Better skilled and trained personnel should be made available to the PRIs. It is necessary therefore, to make provisions to attract qualified persons to the PR services.
5. It will also minimize the level of political interference at least in the location of services, because the plans would be based on the actual needs and requirements of the locality.
6. Finally there is a need to change the entire Rural Power structure. The success of Rural Development Programmes would depend on the emergence of an appropriate leadership in the Rural Areas as well as the co-operation it is able to get from the people. In reality the peoples' participation has remain as myth. Because it is the privileged few who participate – that too mostly for amassing political power and money. Others are either meek followers or silent spectators. What is needed therefore, to take concrete steps to mobilize the political leadership from privileged to masses. The situation will not improve merely by amending the Acts or by appointing Committees or Commissions and receiving theoretical suggestions from them. Solutions are numerous and have been tried with varying results. Inter-Caste or Inter-Community relationships in all respects of social or even individual life needs to be deliberately developed. Concrete programme in different sectors of rural life should be implemented on priority basis and on equitable lines for this purpose.

There is a need to give high priority to Land reform Policy. A large portion of land is owned by a small number of land owners. The well-being of rural poor cannot be improved without drastic land reform. Though the Land reform is a function of Revenue Department it should be properly linked and co-ordinated with the development Administration of PR.

Special programmes for small farmers with a package of inputs credit and other services should be implemented.

Rural Works Programmes should be undertaken to provide large employment opportunities to the Rural Poor while building local infrastructure.

The programmes of education, health, sanitation, road construction and transport, supply of drinking water, regular power supply etc. should also be implemented on high priority basis in Rural areas instead of creating more T.V. Centres or opening Sugar Factories.

The involvement of people in the development activities is possible only through organizing the Rural poor. Incentives therefore should be provided to establish voluntary organizations and co-operatives of the landless labourers, rural artisans and small farmers. This would mobilize the manpower for the development activities in the rural areas. A proper representation also be given to these organizations in the PRIs.

Thus the only long term solution to the problems or rural poverty is a comprehensive approach to the rural development in which land and other resources can be distributed equally or equitably followed by gradual process of co-operation and then the diversification of rural economy. This strategy can be further strengthened by way of organizational involvements in the administrative apparatus of PRIs, with the help of 'Growth Centre' model, and by an improvement in the structure of social relationship which is based on collective and co-operative spirit and principle of equality and by political system committed to improve the lot of the poor.

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