

Analysis of Social Sector Programme on Poverty Alleviation, Water Supply and Rural Electrification Programme

Eradication of poverty has been one of the major objectives of planning. The magnitude of the problem is still believed to be quite staggering. Various estimates show that about thirty-six percent of Indian population still lives below the poverty line (BPL) in 1993-94 and the absolute number of poor was 320 million out of which 244 millions lived in rural areas.

The main determinants of poverty were (a) lack of income and purchasing power; (b) continuous increase in the price of food; and (c) inadequacy of social infrastructure. Though economic growth has been important, because it created more resources and had the potential of creating more space for the involvement of the poor. However, the involvement of the poor depended on the sources and the nature of growth.

Poverty could also be effectively tackled if the poor started contributing to the growth by their active involvement. The implementation of programme, therefore, should be based on the approaches and methods that involves the poor themselves in the process of poverty eradication and economic growth, which was only possible through a process of social mobilization by encouraging participatory approaches and their empowerment.

The following programmes were analysed

- (a) the public distribution system (PDS),
- (b) rural water supply programme (RWS), and
- (c) rural electrification (RE)

7.1 Public Distribution System

The Public Distribution System (PDS) is one of the key components of the government's food security system in India. It has been an instrument for ensuring the availability of certain essential commodities, at affordable prices, to the poor. The government via the Food Corporation of India (FCI), processes and stocks food grains which are released every month for distribution through PDS network across the country. In addition to sugar, edible oils and kerosene, food grains, mainly rice and wheat are distributed to the public via a network of Fair Price Shops (FPS).

The PDS till recently, had been a general entitlement scheme to all customers without any targeting. However, the mounting food subsidy bills, increase in the minimum support price (MSP) etc. and the prime concern of the economic reforms to curtail subsidies and other forms of non-plan expenditure forced the government to abandon open ended coverage under the scheme. However, coverage of poor people continued under targeted public distribution system (TPDS).

Profile of Beneficiaries

The public distribution system could be called as the general category programme, because its coverage extends to both the sections of society viz. households below the poverty line and the households living above the poverty line. Our sample also contained households from below the poverty line as well as above the poverty line, the public distributing shop owners, the programme functionaries from block and district. However, the emphasis was on the benefit received by the focus group of households.

Performance of Programme

The study of working of the public distribution systems in the two sample districts of Varanasi and Saharanpur reveals that its performance suffered from many accounts and could not be called to be good. The first being the selection of beneficiaries. It was found that the selection of beneficiaries, identified to be living

below the poverty line by the block office was not accepted by the supply department, who, in turn, pursued their own list of beneficiaries recommended by influential local people, teachers, panchayat members etc. All this isolated and further marginalised many genuine focus group of households from availing the benefits of P.D.S. scheme. Likewise the performance of the programme also suffered on account of the distance between the PDS shop, which, was, generally located in Gram Sabha, and its distance with other revenue villages, which many a time, was found to be very far. This often affected the dissemination or transmission of information regarding the arrival of food grains to the shop. The result of all this was that the benefits of PDS were, by and large, localized to those villages or habitations which were located in its proximity or where the information had reached, at the cost of those villages which were located at distant places. It was also found that there has been no fixed day meant for distribution of food articles by PDS shops. And after operating for two or three days, the PDS shop owner declared that the articles had exhausted and deprived many prospective consumers, whereas the ground reality was quite different. Generally it was found that many articles were stored in his residence which later found their way to market place at a higher prices. The consumers were also found to be ignorant regarding the volume or amount of articles they were entitled to collect against their cards benefiting the shop owner. It was also observed in many cases that the quantity of articles supplied to the consumers was lesser than amount declared in the card. Another disappointing and shocking part was to discover that, with the exception of kerosene, none of the food items like wheat, rice, sugar etc. arrived regularly every month in the PDS shops. However, only during the Hindu and Muslim festivals these items arrived and got distributed. However, in actual practices, it was found that the arrival of all items to the PDS shop owner was regular, which were sold in the open market with active connivance of concerned people, and the functionaries. The PDS shop owners were also found to be manipulating their registers and showing all article to have been distributed, on

their own, and whenever a card beneficiary owners brought card to him, for purchase of articles, it was surreptitiously completed, for those months also in which no distribution of articles had taken place, without the knowledge of the card owner. Likewise, the quality of articles supplied by PDS shops were of extremely poor quality for which, they blamed the supply department. It was also found that PDS shop owner and market businessmen nexus operated to siphon of the good quality articles and replace them with inferior ones.

Involvement of Beneficiaries

The poor performance of the programme often finds its manifestation in the level of involvement of beneficiaries. The revealed that the level of involvement of functionaries was quite low, because the selection process, itself, deprived genuine focus group of households from joining the scheme, supplemented with complete dominance of PDS shop owners over the distribution of food articles. It was found that, very often, the genuine beneficiaries were deprived of availing benefits, which also lowered his involvement level. The ignorance of beneficiaries about the volume of benefits they were to receive from PDS shop was also a reflection of their poor involvement.

Involvement of Functionaries

The performance of the programme also depends on the involvement level of functionaries. It was found that the functionaries had not carried out physical verification exercise neither of the PDS shops of their area nor of beneficiary cards. The plausible reason of that being that many of the PDS shop owners were either the village pradhans or their relatives or were member of panchayats or some one who was very influential and rich. It was found that for availing food articles from supply departments to their godowns the owner had to pay twenty to twenty five thousand rupees in advance, which a poor person, could not afford to pay.

It was also found that many households were availing benefits by assuming different names or getting the PDS card from two different gram sabhas and no physical verification was found to have taken place. Likewise, it was also found that many beneficiary households, whose size of family had changed and who had applied for updating of their cards, through the village level functionaries. However, his application or request, by and large, had remained un-attended. All this clearly, projects the poor involvement of functionaries.

7.2 Rural Water Supply Programme

The supply of safe drinking water to rural areas has become one of the top priorities of the government and efforts are being made to provide coverage to more and more habitations in subsequent plans. Formation of Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission (RGNDWM), the principle coordinating agency, to look after the water supply programme has laid down certain rules and conditions to define the coverage levels of habitations as 'no source' or 'partially covered' or 'fully covered' habitations. According to which, if a habitation is provided forty litres of drinking water per capita per day (LPCD), a public stand post for 250 persons and the horizontal distance in plains of the source be within 1.6 kms. or at 100 metres elevation in the hills, the habitation is declared to be fully covered. Any thing below this norm, is then accepted to be partially covered whereas not covered habitations are those where no safe public stand post has been provided or installed. As against these norms, the secondary records of 1997 reveals that there were 61,724 habitations without any safe source of drinking water, about 3.78 lakh habitation were partially covered and another 1.51 lakh habitation had problems like excess fluoride, salinity, iron and arsenic etc. (Ninth Five Year Plan, 1997-2000).

Performance of the Programme

The performance of the programme seemed to be suffering from many deficiencies. The comparative study of the two sample districts shows that the

problem of water supply in Varanasi was more acute than in Saharanpur, where it has largely been overcome by the installations of private hand pumps in abundance. The study of distribution of hand pumps also shows that their distribution was not based on the standard norms of the mission viz. of providing coverage to uncovered population or of deprived sections but largely being governed by the influence of powerful people, panchayat people or even influential people of deprived sections. It was found that the incidence of installation of hand pumps had generally taken near or around these peoples' place. It was also observed that no consideration was given to the specific level of boring, which resulted not only in poor quality of water but also in less quantity. The study also found that in most of the cases the coverage norm of habitations, in relation to population, was satisfactory. However, coverage, on the basis of local habitations, was not found to be satisfactory. Distribution of hand pumps was found to be more pronounced in those areas which already had this facility, though the deprived habitations had qualified, in principle, on the basis of distance norm. Further, it was also seen that, in many cases, though the installation of hand pumps had taken place in public places. In practice, however, they were beyond the reach of the public in general and the socially deprived sections in particular. Likewise, undue bias was also observed in the case of repairing of hand pumps and those hand pumps received immediate attention that had been installed near the location of influential group of households whereas no action was taken of those defunct hand pumps that had been installed near the locations of poor and deprived sections of the society. It was shocking to see that no efforts were made to test the quality of water discharge from public stand post despite many complaints in Varanasi district. In several instances, it was also found in Varanasi district, that on account of dropping level of ground water table, both the quantity as well as the quality of water discharged from public stand declined.

Involvement of Beneficiaries

On the basis of the performance of the programme and the proportion of households in Saharanpur opting for private sources, it could be said that the level of involvement of beneficiaries was also not to be of a high level. The inability of the programme functionaries to attend defunct sources or unduly long time taken to attend these sources located in poor or deprived sections houses and their poor maintenance had demoralized people in general and weaker sections in particular.

Involvement of Functionaries

After the implementation of 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment act, the task of providing safe drinking water at the village level has now been assigned to local bodies like panchayats, block samities etc. However, it was found that, in a majority of cases, these bodies were dominated by influential group of people as a result of which even if some problem was discussed, its solution lacked consensus because the incidence of failures were observed to be high with those public stand post which were located near weaker or disadvantaged sections of households. The debate, at these local bodies, at many times took shape of a tussle and the decisions generally went in favour of the influential people, which underscores the involvement of programme functionaries.

Likewise, it was also observed that wherever a village level functionary wanted to provide safe drinking water to their respective regions, involving panchayat or blocks it was being opposed, tooth and nail, by the influential people. The lack of supervision and monitoring by different sections of water supply department and higher level functionaries of block and district has also emboldened the local influential people which also reflect the poor level of involvement programme functionaries. It was also observed that, at the time of crisis, no concerted effort was being made to tide over the situation on their own and what was being done was to follow merely the magistrate's order mechanically.

The inability of beneficiaries to distinguish between safe and unsafe sources of water also points out towards reflects the poor involvement of the functionaries.

7.3 Programme of Rural Electrification

The programme of rural electrification involves the supply of energy for the two types of programmes viz. (a) production-oriented activities; like minor irrigation, rural industries etc. (b) electrification of village, where in the provision is also made to cover socially disadvantaged section of the society. Rural electrification programmes are formulated and executed by the State Electricity Boards (SEBs)/State Government departments.

Profile of the Beneficiaries

The beneficiaries included were villages pradhans, members of the panchayats, the focus group of households, and local people of both castes and genders in block sample districts of Varanasi and Saharanpur.

Performance of Programme

The study of pattern of energisation in both the sample districts shows that, in term of energisation, Saharanpur district has marched ahead of Varanasi district significantly. It could be seen that while a total of thirty six pumpsets were found to have been energised in five sample village in Varanasi, its number was reported to be 398 in Saharanpur, which was over ten times of the level of Varanasi. Further, in Varanasi, the level of energisation of pumpsets through electricity was reported to be about 64 percent, it was merely 15 percent in Saharanpur. However, this low level was more than adequately compensated with the energisation of pumpsets by diesel where its level was estimated to be over 84 percent in Saharanpur against 36 percent in Varanasi. The overwhelming dominance of dieselised pumpsets in Saharanpur has been mainly on account of the fact that diesel engines were being manufactured in Ghaziabad which is a nearby district and were available at cheaper rates. Intensive use of agriculture, substantially brought down the cost element of

installation. The local found it convenient rather than going for leased one supplemented with the uncertainty in the supply of electricity in the Saharanpur district. The high proportion of electrified pumpsets in Varanasi has been largely on account of the fact that water table below the ground was considerably lower which was becoming uneconomical for diesel pumpsets and more importantly, an overhead power line of BHEL unit was passing through some of the sample villages in which power supply was much better and these electric pumpsets were being provided power from it. The study also shows that position of focus groups of households in both the districts was, by and large, the same. The above poverty line households owned high proportion of diesel pumpsets in Saharanpur whereas electric pumpsets were found in higher levels in Varanasi district.

Similarly, the study also shows that the level of domestic electric connections in Saharanpur was higher than Varanasi, where over 29 percent had electric connections against 20 percent in Varanasi.

Further, it was also observed that Varanasi had higher incidence of illegal connection. On account of which, even if the transformer was installed, it became non-functional on account of heavy load incurred due to illegal connections, which remained unaccounted and took undue time for replacement. It was also found that the power connections had been mostly installed in and around those areas which were inhabited by rich and influential people whereas in focus group of households its position was found to be highly unsatisfactory.

Involvement of Beneficiaries

The level of involvement of beneficiaries was also found to be poor largely because the power supply factor was poor and high proportion of illegal connections among the focus group of households contributed to its poor sharing in the form of frequent distribution and unduly long time to get it repair. The supply of overhead

lines, generally passed through the habitations of influential people also which prohibited the poorer households to avail the facility.

Involvement of Functionaries

The involvement of functionaries in the programme was also found to be of low level. The study of perception of beneficiaries reveals that there was no proper maintenance of line, poor power supply and no concerted effort have been made to expand the lines to cover more people despite of the fact that there has been repeated demands by prospective consumers from time to time, which reflected complete indifference of the functionaries (Table - 7.1)

Table - 7.1
Distribution of Pump-sets Domestic Connections in Sample Districts

Particulars		Varanasi	Saharanpur
Pump-sets in BPL families	Diesel energized	1 (7.7)*	17 (5.1)*
	Electric energized	1 (4.4)**	5 (8.2)**
Pump-sets in APL families	Diesel energized	12 (92.3)*	317 (94.9)*
	Electric energized	22 (95.7)**	56 (91.8)**
Total pump-sets	Diesel energized	13 (36.1)*	334 (84.6)*
	Electric energized	23 (63.9)**	61 (15.4)**
Total		36 (100.0)	395 (100.0)
Domestic Connections	Connection in BPL families	29 (20.0)	95 (29.3)
Total BPL families		145 (100.0)	324 (100.0)

Source: Field Survey.

Note: * Denote percentage of pumpsets energized from diesel sources.

** Denote percentage of pumpsets energized from electric sources.