

ANTI-POVERTY PROGRAMME: A REAPPRAISAL

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Two issues being much debated today in the context of India's Eighth Plan are decentralised planning and the involvement of panchayati raj bodies at various levels in the implementation of anti-poverty programmes. These are vital issues which can make a spectacular difference to the effectiveness of the anti-poverty programmes. The focus of this article is on the Integrated Rural Development Programme in India.

At a time when discussions on the approach to India's Eighth Plan and its broad strategies are taking place, a thorough review of the ongoing anti-poverty programmes is called for. Apart from the fact that poverty continues to be the prime concern of the nation, the recent revival of strands of trickle-down theories of economic growth makes it necessary that a dispassionate and objective discussion of issues relevant to the topic takes place. Two related issues which are also being widely debated in the country in the context of India's Eighth Plan are decentralised planning and the involvement of panchayati raj bodies at various levels in the implementation of anti-poverty programmes. We argue in this paper that these, indeed, are very vital issues which can make a spectacular difference to the effectiveness of anti-poverty programmes. We will be touching upon the entire gamut of anti-poverty programmes in the course of the paper. The focus, however, will remain the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), which continues to be the centre-piece of the anti-poverty package in the country.

India's draft Sixth Plan (1978-83) visualised the IRDP as a total development plan for rural areas with the community development Block as the unit of planning. The individual beneficiary-oriented schemes for the rural poor were to be part of this plan and had to be consistent with and form an integral part of the total plan for the block. But block planning is a time-consuming process. Therefore, as an interim device, it was decided to concentrate attention on the identified rural poor and prepare plans for the development of these individual beneficiaries, and call this the IRDP. That is, in effect a name which is appropriate only for the whole programme was given to a part of it. Subsequently no serious attempt was made to

develop the block plan. IRDP continues to be a programme for the improvement of the rural poor, without any overall plan or conception of total development of the villages within the block. In fact, the Sixth Plan (1980-85) had categorically stated: "IRDP has been conceived essentially as an anti-poverty programme". Indeed, this implies that IRDP has become a misnomer.

This policy shift, that is, the emphasis being shifted from assistance to the poor as part of overall planned development of the block to one of direct assistance to the poor without integrating the same with overall development of the area has important operational significance. One of the criticisms of rural development programmes in this country from the days of community development (CD) programmes onwards, including the green revolution technology is that many a time most of the public efforts and public investments benefited the relatively better-off sections of rural society to the exclusion of the very poor. In fact, the very genesis of anti-poverty programmes was born out of this apprehension. To have programmes, projects and schemes exclusively meant for the rural poor could be an effective way of ensuring that the benefits reach the target groups. At the same time this approach faces the danger that the projects and schemes under this programme may not get properly integrated with the resource endowments, economic activities and market forces of the area. Various evaluation studies have noted this as an important operational deficiency of IRDP during the Sixth Plan.

Another danger in this approach is that IRDP and the allied anti-poverty programmes generate a complacent attitude, among policy planners and programme implementors as well as the general public, towards the needed anti-poverty thrust in the mainstream social and economic development programmes. There is an implicit feeling that the anti-poverty programmes will take care of the poor and hence the rest of the programmes can be directed at the non-poor. In fact this line of thinking has been weakening the overall thrust of implementation of important institutional reforms and equity-oriented programmes like land reforms. Though these problems have been fully recognised and appreciated in India's Seventh Plan and a num-

ber of corrective measures have been suggested, it is not quite certain whether enough efforts are being made to overcome them.

Another important weakness of IRDP, as it is being articulated and implemented, is that it is essentially a bureaucratic programme. And bureaucracy in our country is not known for its ability to absorb the ethos of economic development and social change, especially those with an equity orientation. And this is all the more true at the lower levels of the hierarchy, i.e., at the cutting edges of the bureaucracy, in relation to anti-poverty programmes. More often, owing to caste and community affiliations and other class factors and sheer tradition, the functionaries at the lower levels of government as well as the banks and other developmental institutions have their empathy with the cause of the non-poor rather than the poor. Another aspect of the bureaucratic involvement in programmes of this type which need a lot of motivation and involvement on the part of the implementors is precisely the lack of the same positive factors. For, the bureaucracy has its own system of postings and transfers, career prospects and reward structures and incentives and disincentives which have very little to do with the efficient and successful implementation of the programmes and their effects and impacts on the affected individuals and society at large. In other words, accountability is conspicuous by its total absence.

It is often said that we have entered the era of information technology. Information is power. The bureaucracy knows this better than anybody else. Normally basic data/information and reports on achievements are not made available to people or elected representatives or even to parallel government offices. Almost invariably progress reports move vertically upwards only. Also the management information system developed for the purpose of monitoring of these programmes is, by and large, weighted in favour of assessing the results in terms of expenditure incurred (higher the better) and physical achievements in terms of numbers irrespective of the physical quality of the achievements.

Similarly, on the planning side, too much is expected from the very nominal planning expertise available at the district and block levels. Planning at the district/block level at present is, by and

large, official compilation of schemes in specified sectors according to the guidelines issued by the central/state government. This exercise has very little to do with the local resource base, comparative advantage of the area or the felt needs of the people. Again, it is a purely bureaucratic exercise and there is hardly any input from experts, productive enterprises or other non-official agencies. The net result is that most of the time voluminous district plan and block plan documents are nothing more than statistical tables giving the disaggregation of the outlays and physical targets for various anti-poverty and related programmes in a purely mechanistic manner without any consideration of the potentials and requirements.

Need for People's Participation

Considering the mammoth dimensions of IRDP in terms of the number of beneficiaries covered and the various complicated steps involved in planning and implementation according to the guidelines, no doubt, the bureaucratic limits have been reached during India's Sixth Plan in the literal sense and perhaps more so in a logical sense. This may be an important reason for the emphasis in India's Seventh Plan on people's involvement in the planning, implementation and monitoring of IRDP and other anti-poverty programmes by involving elected bodies and people's representatives, voluntary agencies (NGOs) and promoting organisations of the rural poor. During India's Sixth Plan the only meaningful association of people was at the selection stage by the gram sabha, that too, in finalising the list of persons to be assisted as prepared by the block functionary. But even the limited involvement had a very salutary effect on eliminating ineligible beneficiaries.

An important concern in this context is the fact that 'people's participation' means different things to different people. The experience of panchayati raj institutions and co-operative movement in the country cast some doubts about the bona fides of these institutions as vehicles of social change and economic equity. Also there have been several instances where well-articulated cases were presented by influential sections of rural society to get significant concessions and economic advantages, which they hardly pass on to the rural poor. At the same time, experience shows that genuine participation of the people and a level of radicalisation, activism and poli-

ticisation are essential pre-conditions for the success of programmes like IRDP. The crucial question is whether state-promoted people's participation can achieve this. At the functional level of the bureaucracy certainly there may not be much enthusiasm for encouraging such radicalism and activism, which in many cases, will naturally be directed at the very same promoters. As one perceptive observer of the rural development scene puts it: At best the attitude of the bureaucracy about people's involvement is, 'you co-operate and we will operate'.

How anti-poverty programmes can deplete resources for the poor

In this context we may also recall the structuralist critique of IRDP which has been an issue of much debate in the recent anti-poverty literature. The basic philosophy of IRDP is to depend on the entrepreneurial abilities of the poor who do not have the needed capital. The main thrust of the programme is to provide the needed asset and the requisite skills. It is hoped that this 'privatisation drive' will generate a new crop of millions of 'penny capitalists' in the country. But the structuralist critique of IRDP is that it is a programme without a framework considering the realities of the situation on the ground. To quote Kurian "Traditional rural society was hierarchical and iniquitous, yet it was also of mutual obligations. But growing privatisation of resources and the commercialisation of economic activity have almost completely marginalised the weaker sections who find increasingly that they have to buy things which they formerly used to receive in the form of traditional claims. Special mention must be made of the manner in which common property resources—grazing lands, forests, water resources—are coming to be eroded through the inter-related processes of privatisation and marketisation". The empirical study of N.S. Jodha convincingly established this trend. Again, to quote Dantwala, "Degradation of forests and swindling of grazing land are also hurting the poor most. The point we wish to emphasise is that while anti-poverty programmes are launched by the dozens, social and economic processes which continuously deplete the resources from which the poor derive their income and employment and make their traditional skills redundant are either not noticed or ignored and effective action to stop such processes is rarely taken. Thus, what the government gives to the poor through its anti-poverty programme is taken away, not un-

stealthily, by the social process dominated by the rich". The contradiction of the situation depicted here is apparent.

The foregoing paragraphs have rather clearly brought out the limitations of IRDP as it is conceptualised, planned and implemented today. At the same time one should recognise a number of remarkable positive aspects of the programme. Let us briefly examine a few of them.

Positive aspects of IRDP

Even with all the limitations detailed earlier, IRDP has a number of merits. First, it has a significant public appeal. This is because of the fact that IRDP is the first major development programme which directly addresses itself to the poor families specifically and offers direct assistance in the form of income earning assets. In the past, most of the rural development programmes were addressed to the rural community as a whole. Almost invariably the lion's share of the benefits used to accrue to the better off sections of the rural society. The poor, almost invariably assetless and without a saleable skill, were neither able to contribute much to development nor receive any significant reward from it. With the introduction of IRDP, the poor got a chance to acquire a productive asset which could give them a psychological boost and social respectability apart from the economic gains from the asset. 'The state' is undertaking the responsibility to provide the asset and this fact is being given wide publicity. Unlike in the case of most other rural development programmes, the potential beneficiaries gradually become aware of their rights. This awareness is gradually seeping in on the poor and is going to be a deterrent to many malpractices. Often, evaluation studies and other investigations bring to light several cases of malpractices and misappropriations in the context of IRDP. This does not necessarily imply that corruption is more rampant in the implementation of IRDP as compared to other rural development programmes or for that matter any other government programmes. It only implies that unlike other programmes where the benefits and beneficiaries are diffused, in the case of IRDP, the identifiable beneficiaries are there to tell the untold story.

Though originally IRDP was introduced as a truly integrated rural development programme, the rather hurried ex-

ension of the programme to cover the entire rural areas at the beginning of India's Sixth Plan has resulted in the dilution of this integration at least in practice, if not in concept. This has been a major reason for much of the undesirable results we have noted earlier and for a lot of criticism. At the same time the commitment on the part of the government to expand the outreach of the programme had its own positive effect. Once an undertaking is given, there is hardly any going back on this responsibility. Now it is mainly a matter of improving the quality and efficiency of the programme.

Even the staunchest critics agree that IRDP as a concept has great merit. Since the scope of redistribution of the existing main rural asset, viz, farm land, is rather limited in many parts of the country, the concept of provision of newly-created assets to the poor is a welcome one. The question is whether such a programme has universal applicability at the present level of development in all regions. Probably the answer is a no. It is in this context that wage employment programmes can play an important role. In the relatively backward regions, where lack of basic social and economic infrastructures like roads, water supply, schools, health centres, housing, etc, stand in the way of development, employment programmes could be directed at creating such facilities. Wage employment generation could also be used for development of irrigation systems, soil conservation, etc, which will significantly improve the agricultural productivity and incomes. And such developments will create opportunities for viable IRDP activities.

Guhan's critique of IRDP and wage employment programmes is based on the argument that the low-end poverty in its worst forms cannot be ameliorated by providing them with opportunities for self-employment or wage-employment. Of course, the very poor and old who suffer extreme forms of physical and mental disabilities have to be taken care of by publicly funded and well-administered social security schemes which should form an integral part of the anti-poverty programmes. At the same time, it has to be recognised that the vast majority of the poor or their kith and kin are employable either in self-employment or wage-employment. Certainly, if option is given, they would prefer to earn their living rather than depend on government charity. Further,

the role of a productive asset to a poor family, which probably never had any valuable material possession, can be very significant. It can add a lot to its self-respect, self-confidence, social standing and even creditworthiness. In this context, the importance of land, even for non-land based activities has to be emphasised. Possession of a piece of land, even a homestead, can make a lot of difference in the rural set-up.

An important aspect of IRDP which is worth commenting upon is its totally indigenous nature, both in terms of ideas and resources. India's rural poverty is largely a by-product of the interaction between the traditional economic and social arrangements and modern economic and social relations based on commercialisation. Problems are largely indigenous and solutions have also to be necessarily indigenous. Though there is nothing wrong in learning from the experiences of other countries, there is hardly any scope for transplanting alien ideas and techniques. Further, in matters of articulation, conceptualisation, policy planning and even implementation of anti-poverty programmes, it appears that India is ahead of international aid agencies and donor countries by a couple of decades. And often the donors may have their own hidden axes to grind which may not necessarily be in the interests of the rural poor in the recipient countries.

Crossing the poverty line

In the foregoing paragraphs we have discussed the strengths and weaknesses of anti-poverty programmes in general and IRDP in particular as the way they are conceived, planned and implemented in the country today. India's Seventh Plan objective is to reduce the percentage of rural population below the poverty line from the base year level of about 40 percent to around 28 percent by 1990. The perspective is to reduce this percentage further to 10 by 1995. However, one has to objectively assess the potential viability of IRDP and the battery of other anti-poverty programmes along with the overall economic growth to achieve this objective.

The latest estimates of poverty in the country are based on 38th round of NSS conducted during calendar year 1983. The provisional estimates derived from these data place the number of rural poor at 222 million which works out to 39.9 percent of the total rural population. These estimates are significantly lower than the previous poverty

estimates based on the 32nd round of NSS for 1977-78 and also the lowest of estimates based on the 32nd round of NSS for 1977-78 and also the lowest of the percentage estimates of rural poverty in the country for the last three decades for which estimates are available. The Seventh Plan document attributes this 'welcome trend' to higher economic growth and increase in agricultural production as well as to the effect of massive expansion of IRDP and wage employment programmes. The Seventh Plan was formulated with much optimism regarding further significant reduction of poverty in the country during the ensuing decade as noted earlier. The plan document states: There is now evidence to suggest that the process of economic growth and the anti-poverty programmes have made a significant dent in the problem of poverty... The development strategy of the Seventh Plan and the pattern of growth emerging from it are expected to lead to a reduction of poverty at an even faster rate... in absolute terms, the number of poor persons is expected to fall from 273 million in 1984-85 to 211 million in 1989-90, the bulk of this improvement being in the rural areas.

It is true that the provisional estimates of rural poverty based on 38th round showed a spectacular decline of about 11 percentage points as compared to the 32nd round. But, does it constitute convincing evidence of a 'welcome trend' in decline of rural poverty? Since the survey period of the 38th round overlapped with the very good crop year 1983-84, part of the explanation for the steep fall in poverty comes from the well-known strong inverse correlation between the time series of poverty estimates and foodgrain output. The foodgrain production in the subsequent four years remained below the level of 1983-84. The 43rd round of NSS covering consumer expenditure which forms the basis of poverty estimates, was carried out during July 1987-June 1988. As a result of the severe drought, the foodgrain production for 1987-88 was the lowest since 1980-81. If one invokes the inverse relationship between foodgrain production and poverty estimates, the estimates based on 43rd round which will form the basis for Eighth Plan are unlikely to be in conformity with the Seventh Plan expectations.

Thanks to the extremely favourable monsoon during 1988-89 and with ap-

appropriate policy measures, the Seventh Plan could, to a large measure, make good in the fourth and fifth years the lost ground in agricultural production and overall economic growth. The perspective in respect of rural poverty is, however, unlikely to improve significantly. A high rate of overall growth of the economy or even the aggregate agricultural growth may not ensure any significant reduction in rural poverty. Any sustained reduction in rural poverty can be ensured only by a structure of economic growth which is socially equitable and an agricultural growth which is regionally balanced. The available signals in the economy do not indicate any major departure from the past growth path which was largely distribution-neutral, even when many policy measures were included to introduce a bias in favour of poor. Even though there is enough evidence to the effect that at the present stage of agricultural development there is little trade-off or conflict among the objectives of growth, stability, equity and efficiency, there is hardly any evidence of efforts directed at achieving these complementary goals.

In the early part of this paper we have discussed the strengths and weaknesses of IRDP in detail. From the beginning of India's Sixth Plan, i.e., April 1980 to the end of the third year of Seventh Plan, i.e., March 1988, about 27 million poor rural families have been assisted as per official statistics. After adjusting for double counting of families which were assisted during the Sixth Plan as 'second dose beneficiaries' the total number of distinct families which received IRDP assistance works out to about 23 million. This indeed, is more than half of the 44.4 million rural families who were below poverty line in 1984-85 as per estimates based on 38th round of NSS. During the Sixth Plan an assisted family received, on the average, an asset worth Rs. 3000 and during the Seventh Plan a freshly assisted family received asset worth about Rs.4500, on the average. The various evaluation studies of IRDP conducted so far indicate that the income generated by the IRDP asset varies substantially—from nothing to even more than the value of asset. If one judges IRDP strictly in terms of 'crossing the poverty line' it has so far been a grand failure as only 10 to 12 percent of the beneficiaries could reach this goal. If the criterion applied is increase in family income, about three-fourths of the assisted families experienced at least some increase.

The combined employment generation under the two wage employment programmes, viz, National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP) works out to around 700 million mandays per year. This may appear to be an impressive figure and the annual outlay for this order of employment generation is roughly about Rs. 1500 crore. This, however, has to be compared to the total requirement of employment for providing 100 days per one member of 44.4 million poor rural households, which works out to 4,440 million person days. A related problem is the inadequacy of the wage income to enable a family to cross the poverty line even if there is full employment. To illustrate this point, consider a family with no income other than wage income and one worker who is fully employed, i.e., for 270 days by normal agricultural wage labour supplemented by NREP/RLEGP works. The statutory minimum wages for agricultural workers fixed by the states vary from Rs.10 to Rs.15 for most states and the same is paid under NREP/RLEGP. Assuming the higher minimum wage of Rs. 15, the total annual income of a one-worker-household comes to only Rs.4,050, well below the poverty line of Rs.6,400 at 1984-85 prices. At the minimum wage rate of Rs. 10, even if two members of a family are fully employed throughout the year, the family income works out to only Rs. 5,200, again well below the poverty line.

Individuals and families who suffer from extreme forms of deprivation are neither normally taken care of by general economic growth nor by anti-poverty programmes like IRDP and NREP/RLEGP. The worst-placed among the poor are those who are not able to participate in economic activities on account of old age, physical and mental handicaps, various disabilities due to morbidity, etc. Traditionally social security in India has been embedded in a variety of family, religious, caste, village and production relationships which are gradually disappearing with the rural-urban mobility, commercialisation of agriculture, urbanisation and industrialisation. The solution lies in a publicly-funded social security system as an integral part of the anti-poverty package to take care of the poorest. In recent years, a number of state governments have introduced old age pension for agricultural labourers and other social security schemes. How-

ever, by and large, their coverage is partial and the amounts of benefits inadequate.

The foregoing paragraphs clearly bring out the fact that the structure of growth of the economy at the present juncture alongwith the existing anti-poverty package is unlikely to make any significant and lasting dent on the rural poverty in the country. This is because growth is at best distribution neutral and the spatial spread of growth is inequitable to regions where poverty is a chronic problem. The current anti-poverty programmes, though quite significant in terms of absolute outlays are not sufficient in terms of absolute outlays and not sufficient to tackle the poverty problem in the country. Further, the anti-poverty programmes are at present entirely the responsibility of the bureaucracy. The bureaucratic machinery, which is geared to uniform operations over wide geographical areas is not attuned to the requirements of small areas or individual beneficiaries. The target approach which characterises all these programmes stands in the way of taking up schemes of a purely local nature which do not fit into national targets, however relevant they may be for the local conditions and people's requirements.

Another aspect of bureaucratic management is that the official claims of achievement usually relate to the 'quantum of inputs', eg, 'how well the money was spent' and 'whom it benefited', etc. As a result there is a vast gap between promise and performance, between input and actual output between the expected effects and the actual effects and lastly between the expected impact and the actual impact. The only way to prevent all this is to build into the system a mechanism which will ensure continued vigilance and continuous monitoring of rural development programmes at the grass-roots level. Such a mechanism cannot be provided by the bureaucracy but can only be provided by the community itself. In order that the community is able to do this, it must be allowed to organise itself.

As we have noted elsewhere, the rural community is not a homogeneous one. In the past, when general development schemes were implemented, most often the real benefits hardly reached the poor. The introduction of target-group-oriented anti-poverty programmes was primarily to tackle this problem. The result is that, often, the better-off sec-

tions of the rural community perceive these programmes as inimical to their interests. As example, Food-for-Work-Programme in the past and NREP/RLEGP at present are to ensure, besides providing employment, that labourers receive minimum wages and that they also receive foodgrains at subsidised prices. Large farmers who employ labour at below minimum wages and traders who sell foodgrains to the poor at the highest possible prices find that their interests are adversely affected. Similarly, successful IRDP beneficiaries do not remain, any more, economically dependent on the large farmers, traders and moneylenders. However, via markets and other institutions and structures, the economically stronger sections, often, ensure that their losses are made good.

Conflicting interests

It is important to recognise the conflict of interests between the rural poor and rural non-poor. This rural 'contradiction' is further accentuated by the fact that often class groupings get superimposed on the traditional caste groupings in the country. In most of the economically depressed regions where the poor are concentrated, agricultural productivity is extremely low. This is so even when these regions are well-endowed in natural resources including rich water resources and high-quality soil, and abundant supply of surplus labour. The upper classes/castes who have virtual monopoly of landownership in these regions keep the lower classes/castes locked up in exploitative institutional arrangements like sharecropping, moneylending, bonded labour, etc. A fast agricultural growth is a necessary precondition for poverty removal in these regions. However, since the existing semifeudal arrangements serve well the interests of the powerful rural rich, it is not easy to bring about a green revolution in these regions.

On the other hand, in a number of agriculturally prosperous regions, the rich are not willing to share their prosperity with the poor. They often resist payment of statutorily fixed minimum wages and resort to adoption of labour-replacing technology, even when it does not enhance productivity. Commercialisation of agriculture has brought in a number of problems for the small tenant cultivators and the landless labour. The tenants are often evicted by the landlords for self-cultivation and the landless labour face unemployment due

to mechanisation. Indeed, some of the regions which have been experiencing social tensions and witnessing atrocities on the poor have been precisely those regions which have been experiencing high agricultural growth. Unfortunately, some of the most enterprising and successful agricultural communities in the country also happen to be extremely cruel and ruthless towards the weaker sections in the rural society. The poor may not necessarily be suffering from extreme forms of material deprivation in such areas. Yet they may not be able to live with dignity and self-respect and without fear.

It is thus clear that growth, though necessary, is not a sufficient condition for equity, social justice and removal of poverty. Unlike economic growth which is essentially a techno-economic issue, these are issues essentially in the domain of social engineering. Once this basic reality is explicitly recognised, the next step is to conceptualise possible alternative strategies. Two such plausible strategies are considered here—an enabling strategy and a co-operative strategy.

Social engineering strategies

The former strategy, explicitly recognises the conflict situation and attempts to resolve the problem by enhancing the bargaining strength of the poor. This could be done by reforming the existing institutional framework to make it subserve the interests of the poor; by introducing economic and social programmes exclusively for the benefit of the poor; by building up institutions and structures for economic and social development of the poor; by introducing reservations for the poor in employment, education and various economic and social development programmes; by organising the poor to stand up to the economic and social power of their rivals and tormentors. In a sense we have been pursuing this multipronged strategy during the last two decades. However, as we have seen earlier, the result have not been quite commensurate with either the intentions or efforts and certainly not flattering.

The co-operative strategy in its conventional form is not much different from what Mahatma Gandhi wanted his countrymen to practise when he talked about trusteeship and gram swaraj. The Community Development Programme initiated in the early fifties and the panchayati raj institutions which came into existence in the early sixties have, indeed, incorporated some of the features

of a co-operative strategy. The panchayati raj institutions have declined over the years mainly for lack of effective role, authority and finances. Even in those states where the panchayati raj institutions were having adequate powers and finances, there has gradually, been a decline in their relative status as a result of creation of other powerful parallel institutions. In many instances elections to these bodies have not been conducted in time or they were superseded on some pretext or other. The primary reason for the decline of panchayati raj institutions appears to be the reluctance on the part of state-level politicians and bureaucrats to share authority and power of patronage with their counterparts at the district level and below. Also it is a fact that often the rural elite got themselves elected to these bodies and utilised the powers and privileges bestowed on them for furthering their class/caste interests at the cost of the poor. As a result, a climate of lack of trust or at best of indifference on the part of the poor towards these institutions exists.

From the late seventies there has been a revival of interests in panchayati raj bodies in the country. Some of the state governments have introduced new panchayati raj legislations effecting restructuring of the elected bodies at the district level and below and vesting enhanced powers and functions on them. The most noteworthy among them is the Karnataka Zilla Parishad and Mandal Panchayat Act of 1985. According to this act, the zilla parishads virtually become district governments. The act was operationalised in early 1987 when the new bodies were elected to office in the state.

At the national level, the government has been taking keen interest in the revival and strengthening of panchayati raj institutions. The government of India has been urging the state governments to conduct timely elections to these bodies. As a result, barring a few exceptions, elections have been carried out in recent years in almost all states. However, the key question is whether regular elections alone will revitalise these bodies. Or for that matter whether even enhanced authority and resources will make these elected bodies socially responsible and sympathetic to the cause of the poor. It is apparent that the answers to both these questions are likely to be in the negative under the present dispensation.

We have seen so far that overall econo-

mic growth is no guarantee for removal of poverty; even anti-poverty programmes along with growth are unlikely to solve the rural poverty problem; there is hardly any social security for the poor; the bureaucracy is totally unequal to the task of poverty removal; panchayati raj institutions have, generally declined over the years due to supersessions, lack of authority and resources; even if regular elections to these bodies are conducted and sufficient powers and resources are vested on them, they are unlikely to take up the cause of the poor; the class/caste contradictions on the rural scene are such that the bureaucracy and the traditional as well as the modern institutions and structures are at the command of the dominant sections of the community; by and large the poor benefit from the anti-poverty programmes to only that extent which do not affect the economic and social interests of the dominant sections of the rural community and lastly that there has been hardly any attempt at changing this unequal bargaining game in the rural areas.

What follows is a proposal to change this unequal bargaining situation which on the face of it may appear to be unequal to the task. The crux of the proposal is that the community should be responsible for social security to all its members. The bureaucracy and the governments at the central and state levels should enable/facilitate the community to bear this responsibility. Thus the proposal involves an interchange of role models between bureaucracy and community. At present the various rural development programmes including agriculture, minimum needs programme (MNP) and anti-poverty programmes are planned and implemented by the various government agencies on the basis of certain norms and guidelines issued by the central and state governments. The village community hardly participates in planning, implementation or monitoring of the schemes concerning them. Indeed, often the people who are to benefit from these schemes do not have access to information about them. As against this, the community should be made responsible for the planning and implementation of all the development schemes within the locality with the technical and administrative support of the bureaucracy and following the norms and broad guidelines issued by the governments at the central and state levels.

The critical issue however is, how the

inherent contradictions or conflict of interests can be resolved under the proposed set-up. The answer is that under the proposed arrangement the rich will also have to depend on the poor to protect their economic interests unlike the present dispensation under which the poor are at the mercy of the rich and powerful who can normally pursue their economic interests without let or hindrance. This can be achieved if all development funding to the community or individuals in the community has to be ratified by the community itself or its elected representatives. To illustrate this, consider the various schemes under which assistance is provided to farmers whether it is capital subsidy for pumps or tractors, co-operative credit, various input subsidies for fertilizer, water or electricity or marketing support. Often these are not provided on the basis of economic criteria or equity but rather on the basis of other considerations including influence peddling and even outright bribe. Just like gram sabha or village panchayat should decide who should get any public financial assistance. Also this will ensure that the community has a decisive say on matters relating to the selection of production technology in agriculture to suit the local requirements and also regarding the sharing of the various subsidised inputs. Thus the poor will have power over the rich, for the first time, in matters of vital economic interest.

Each village, panchayat or mandal should be allowed to plan its integrated development using its share of pooled resources earmarked under various anti-poverty programmes, MNP and other development programmes. The blueprint of the local plan should be prepared by a group consisting of elected representatives and local level functionaries of all the line departments and development agencies as well as NGOs operating in the locality. The plan should encompass all families in the community. The plan for public investments including self-employment and wage employment creation should be to supplement private employment opportunities so that the entire labour force in the community is fully employed. The plan should also have provisions for making social security payments to the destitutes in the community. The blueprint has to be ratified by the community and there should be total openness as far as the execution of the schemes are concerned.

The proposal envisages a fundamental

change in the role and functioning of government functionaries. Their primary responsibility should be to the community they are serving. Their career prospects and reward structures should be closely linked with their actual field performance. The performance has to be assessed in terms of physical achievements and end results instead of 'money spent' and 'numbers covered'. The progress has to be seen and felt by the people rather than reported upon to higher authorities. Thus, for example, the performance of the gram sevak should be assessed in terms of the improvement in the standard of living of the poor rather than the number of families assisted under IRDP; the performance of the primary school headmaster should be assessed in terms of the percentage of literate children in the village rather than enrolment in the primary school; the performance of the primary health centre doctor or health worker should be assessed in terms of, say, the decline in infant mortality rate rather than the number of patients treated or the quantum of medicines distributed; the performance of the family planning worker has to be assessed in terms of the reduction in births in the locality rather than the so-called number of couples protected; the performance of agricultural extension workers should be assessed in terms of gain in agricultural productivity in the village rather than in terms of the quantum of inputs distributed and so on.

It will, of course, be naïve to assume that our proposal will be wholeheartedly welcomed by all the concerned parties especially by the rural elite and the grassroots level government functionaries. Also it will be simplistic to imagine that all conflicts of interest in the rural community will automatically disappear or for that matter the gram sabha/village panchayat will function smoothly without external intervention. Since the bureaucracy will be freed from much of its routine work in the nature of execution of the schemes, it can function as an effective watchdog to ensure fair-play. As all the economic and social benefits from the government are to be routed through the panchayat, even the most powerful in the village will find it in his interest to ensure its smooth functioning. As openness and free flow of information are the hallmarks of the proposed arrangement a great educating process also will take place which will minimise corruption and leakages and ensure equity and social justice once the new set-up stabilises.