

Panchayat Raj and Development – A Darjeeling Perspective.

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“Participatory development process in the Darjeeling Hills”

Defining Development is a complex and controversial task. This is so because of the fact that one defines development on the basis of one's perception and background. Thus, the economist and a spiritual leader would have definitions, which might be juxtaposed. The economist might define development on increasing material consumption patterns while the goal of spirituality might be reducing material wants.

Thus the paper does not go into defining concepts like development but looks upon it as a process of change from an existing state to a better-evolved state. It looks upon the opportunities and ownership that people have in this process of change.

Historically communities developed in an organic way within their given resources. With growing industrialisation, with production moving from the home to the factory, the process of centralization started. Centralisation of production also led to the centralization of ownership and decision making.

This holds true for India too with a history of centralization of processes and products. The centralization becoming more organized with the coming of the British.

With Independence, this process of centralization did not cease but became more defined with growing nationalism and the Indian identity. Planning became centralized, top down, with high capital investment.

This led to the skewing of the development process of communities who lost their ownership of the process. In addition, the asset development was done on a large scale taking it beyond the reach of most communities. The technology adopted was also very formal and western denying the traditional knowledge base of rural India.

In sections of successful rural development, the focus was on large or medium scale farmers with an asset base, which enabled them to adopt the technological changes and inputs.

All this was done in the name of development, thus it becomes difficult discussing development, because using economic parameters there has been a tremendous economic development. But, when we use the yardstick of “sustainable development” and measures of empowerment the process adopted becomes highly skewed, pro-asset based, formal education based and urban. This leaves out the majority of the rural based Indians.

The 73rd constitutional amendment on devolution of powers to local self governing bodies reverses the trend of centralization. Not only has it created and given powers but it has institutionalized them. Once again with a stroke of a pen, certain powers have been handed over to the community and the process of planning has been changed from the top down to a bottom up approach.

The challenge today is to take the amendments from the letter to the spirit. The challenge is to go beyond the existing formal knowledge systems knowing that traditional knowledge has evolved within the environment and is sustainable. To believe in the traditional knowledge

systems, adopt and adapt it knowing in many places that the knowledge system has undergone tremendous changes or are lost due to the years of centralized planning. Knowing that community assets are no longer the way they used to be, the concept of ownership, rights and responsibilities drastically changed.

Thus today participatory decentralized planning within the 73rd amendment is one of the ways to redeem us towards sustainable development. A development process, which believes in the local people owning and managing their resources, is imperative in this process. This does not necessarily mean going back but taking into account what we have here and now and moving forward.

With this conceptual background we would like to focus specifically on the Darjeeling Hills. A brief statement of the area of Darjeeling gives an overview before moving on to 73rd amendment with reference to the Darjeeling Hills. Based on the experiences we would like to suggest some recommendations and also present some case studies as possible realities in the Darjeeling Hills.

Darjeeling, the northern most district of West Bengal, is the only Hill district in the state. The three hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling District, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong, comprise of an area approximately 2417 square km and post 1988 come under the Darjeeling Gorkha Autonomous Hill Council (DGAHC) within West Bengal. The DGHC covers a land area of 2,476 sq. km with 2,433 sq. km rural and 43 sq. km urban.

The total population of DGAHC is 6 93 793; rural 5 33 413; urban 1 60 380; female 2 59 882 and male 2 73 531. (1991 primary census abstract[pca])

In such a scenario the concept of local self-government within the 73rd amendment within Darjeeling proves to be unique. The amendments clearly states: 73rd amendment, ‘Part not to apply... relating to Panchayats at the district level shall apply to the hill areas of the District of Darjeeling... for which Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council exists under any law for the time being in force;’

This paper does not deal with the powers, roles and responsibilities of DGAHC but looks at the provisions of the 73rd amendment within the Darjeeling District of DGAHC. Even though it does not look into the DGHC it is imperative to note that with regard to peoples’ participation clarity that is there in the 73rd amendment is not there with the DGAHC. There is a great need for role clarity with the offices of the DGAHC and the 73rd amendment.

One needs to note at this juncture that the devolution of powers for Panchayati Raj Institution within DGAHC is on a single tier basis with the DGAHC handling development schemes and District Administration handling the institutional aspects. This is a complex working system, which expands the administrative activities of programmes increasing the official processing time and bureaucratic hurdles for development schemes.

An important indicator for community participation in the 73rd amendment is in the description of powers, authority and responsibilities of Panchayats, ‘the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice; the implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to the matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule’. The Eleventh Schedule enlists exhaustive indicators for community management of resources.

Thus in letter community participation is enshrined and as discussed earlier this is certainly building on community experiences, which were sustainable communities prior to the evolution of centralised planning. In other words, the smooth functioning of these local self-governing institutions would be a positive move rural community development. It would mean a move towards a holistic decentralised development process from a fixation on centralised economic growth.

The challenge is to move the letter to the spirit. In this there are certain pitfalls and shortcomings, which we would like to discuss.

An important factor for development is the ownership of assets whether it is individual or community assets. Within the Darjeeling scenario more than 40% of the land is under forests and more than 20% of the land is under tea. In both the cases the ownership of the land and its resources is not in the community. True that today tea garden workers and forest villages participate in the Panchayati Raj Institution, but their participation remains limited, as they do not own the land and its resources. Thus only less than 40% of land is in individual or community ownership within the Panchayati Raj Institution, which would ensure real community planning for development. A majority of this land area would fall under the Kalimpong sub-division. This is because the British introduced tea in the Darjeeling and Kurseong Sub-Divisions as Kalimpong already had settled agriculture and reserve forests. This is a formal western understanding of community resources. As no rural community evolved within a given environment evolves in exclusion of the forests. Forests and community are an integral part of the same ecosystem, but there is a clear demarcation between forests and rural communities. Both have been made exclusive of each other with the community having no access to the forest resources and its management. True, we have forest villages but this too is limited in definition as the user group of the forests is much larger than those demarcated within forest villages. Thus even with the introduction of Joint Forest Management and formation of Forest Protection Committees and Eco-Development Committees the total user group do not participate in the management of forest resources.

The issue of ownership and community participation becomes more accentuated in tea gardens where the labour community have no access to ownership of the tea garden. Thus, even with their inclusion in the Panchayati Raj Institution community participation in the management of resources can never be achieved. Many of the developmental schemes through the Panchayat depend on the ownership of land. Since the community has no access to land these schemes can never be implemented properly.

In both the instances of the tea and forest, the community either does not have ownership of land or partial ownership of land making the planning process ineffective. But, a crucial aspect of the two situations is also the lack of decision-making capacity of the community in the development process. In the tea garden it is the management and in the forest, the forest department who takes the decisions.

Election is the first process of participation in the institution of the Panchayat. This step has been going on in the hills with certain regularity but this does not necessarily ensure community participation. Reservations also do not necessarily ensure participation of the targeted group. This can be seen that in most cases women's reserved seats are proxy seats for male members of the family. But the most important aspect of community participation is when the entire community comes together for the gram sansads to discuss and plan within

the 11th schedule for their community. Gram sansads are ideal places to discuss issues on agriculture, water shed development, community based disaster preparedness, economic development and social justice issues enlisted in the 11th schedule. The Darjeeling Hills have a poor track record in this. No concrete quantitative data is available but experience shows that most gram sansads end up as adjourned close door meetings, ruining the spirit of gram sansads. Proper functioning of the gram sansads would ensure a larger group discussion on issues of community development.

The lack of translation of the 73rd amendment can be attributed to various reasons. The notion of participatory planning and implementation is a dramatic paradigm shift from the centralised top down approach. The ramifications of this shift are tremendous and needs to be seen at all levels. At the community level years of top down approach has eroded the capacity of the community of their ability to come together, plan and implement. The community has become passive recipients of development aid thus become dependent and not willing to take responsibility but very eager for their rights only.

The elected members have little capacity to facilitate participatory planning and management sessions and their leadership tending mostly to a top down, donor beneficiary approach.

At the administrative level, the top-level administrative cadre understands the need for participation but do not have the time or at times the skills to translate them into action. Their concept to be translated into reality is the lower level field workers who have little or no capacity nor the inclination and belief on the participatory approaches of the 73rd amendment.

Numerous field examples can be quoted to argue the analysis undertaken above. One of them is the drive towards the formation of Self Help Groups (SHGs). Conceptually formation the formation of SHGs is very effective for community participation and action as is seen right across India. But, the processes the SHGs are being promoted lately are juxtaposed to the ideology and nature of SHGs.

The problems of rural Darjeeling are tremendous. We have systems and institutions, which would enable us to make a positive difference. One of them being through community participation within the 73rd amendment. Based on the discussions above we have suggestions to make to improve the quality of delivery within the 73rd amendment.

1. Greater role clarity and proactive and collaborative participation between Panchayats, DGAHC and the District Administration.
2. Greater community participation thorough community participation drives in Gram Sansads.
3. Capacity building towards participatory development process at all levels or community, elected members and administration.
4. More in-depth study of tea plantation areas and forest areas with respect to the 73rd amendment and formulation of a plan of action pertinent to these areas.
5. Involvement of civil society and NGOs in planning and capacity building sessions.

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