

People, PRIs and Rural Development: A study in the context of the hills of Darjeeling in West Bengal and Sikkim

Ramesh Dural

Abstract

Rural Development in India has been a major concern and has drawn attention since independence. It is a multi-dimensional concept encompassing every aspect of rural life, which primarily involves alleviation of poverty and unemployment through the creation of basic social and economic infrastructure, thereby, bringing a quality rural life. The necessity for rural development arises with the intent to develop the rural area as a whole in terms of culture, society, economy, technology, health, etc. and developing the living standard of rural mass. It involves the development of human resources, infrastructural development; provide minimum basic amenities; develop rural institutions like that of Panchayats, Cooperatives, Post, Banking; develop rural industries, develop agriculture, animal husbandry; promote employment opportunities, eradicate poverty; promote peoples' participation, empowerment. Since development in general and rural development in particular, involves peoples' programme; peoples' participation, through the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is imperative to rural development. The present paper, therefore, is an attempt to interrogate peoples' involvement and participation in rural development, in the context of the hills of Darjeeling in West Bengal, and Sikkim, which exhibit similar geographical and other characteristic features.

Keywords: Rural Development, PRIs, Participation, Darjeeling hills, Sikkim.

1. Introduction

Rural Development has been an integral part of India's socio-economic and political development. At the time of nation's independence around 83 percent of the population resided in rural areas and about 60 percent of the workforce in these areas were engaged in agricultural and other allied sectors for their livelihood. According to 2011 census, 69 percent of the total population of India still resides in rural areas. Rural Development, therefore, has been a major concern and has drawn attention since independence. It has been the strategy designed to improve the economic and social life of rural poor. It is a multi-dimensional concept encompassing every aspect of rural life, which primarily involves alleviation of poverty and unemployment through the creation of basic social and economic infrastructure, thereby, bringing a quality rural life. It is about bringing change in rural community from the traditional way of living to progressive way of living. In India the launching of the Community Development Programme (1952) and the National Extension Service mark the beginning in creating awareness of the potential and means of development among the rural population. The successive Five Year Plans introduced several programmes for agricultural development,

employment generation, poverty alleviation, promoting rural, cottage and artisan based industries meeting basic minimum needs towards rural development.

The necessity for rural development arises with the intent to develop the rural area as a whole in terms of culture, society, economy, technology, health, etc. and developing the living standard of rural mass. It involves the development of human resources, infrastructural development; provide minimum basic amenities, develop rural institutions like that of Panchayats, Cooperatives, Post, Banking; develop rural industries, develop agriculture, animal husbandry; promote employment opportunities, eradicate poverty; promote peoples' participation, empowerment. Since development in general and rural development in particular, involves peoples' programme; peoples' participation, through the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is imperative to rural development. The present paper, therefore, is an attempt to interrogate peoples' involvement and participation in rural development, in the context of the hills of Darjeeling in West Bengal, and Sikkim, which exhibits similar geographical, linguistic, and other characteristic features.

2. PRIs and Rural Development

Panchayats have been the backbone of Indian rural structure since ancient time. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have been proclaimed as the vehicles of socio-economic transformation in rural India. Panchayat Raj system was conceived for rural development through local participation representing local aspirations and local expectations. In India, Panchayat Raj and rural development is co-terminus as well as co-intensive. PRIs aim at incorporating Gandhian idea of village self governance and to become an effective tool of rural development and reconstruction. The Directive Principles of State Policy envisages the establishment of Panchayat Raj institutions for people's participation in rural development. PRIs, in India are expected to take the onus of rural development, and the importance of which has been reflected during the plan periods, especially, the First and the Second five Year Plans. These plans envisage PRIs responsible for village development. It mentions that the rural progress depends entirely on the existence of an active organization in the village which can bring all the people into common programmes, to be carried out with the assistance of administration.

PRIs are expected to play an important role in planning and implementing various developmental programmes. After independence, India has continuously implemented development programmes with the objective of improving the social and economic conditions of rural people. One of the major development attempts, as mentioned, was the Community Development Programme (CDP) introduced in 1952, though the programme failed to achieve the objectives of development because of the lack of people's participation. However, the government continued to introduce various development initiatives to catalyse rural development. These, apart from community development and allied programmes in the 1950's,

included target group approach programmes like Small Farmers Development Agency (SFDA) in the 1970's and employment generation and poverty alleviation programmes like Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), etc., in the 1980's.

Since independence, the government has been making several attempts towards revitalization of Panchayat system in India. Recognizing the significance of village panchayats as a part of ancient traditions and establish self governance at the village level, article 40 has been inserted in the Constitution of India, which says "the state shall take steps to organize village Panchayat and to endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as unit of self government". Accordingly, several measures were adopted by the government to look into the working of panchayats as institutions of local self government. Several committees were set up, for instance, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), the Ahsok Mehta Committee (1978), the Committee on Administrative Arrangement of Rural Development (1985), L.M. Singhvi Committee (1987), the 64th Amendment Bill 1989, and the like. However, it was the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 which brought about a landmark change in the working of PRIs in India. The Act formally established PRIs as the third level of federal democracy. It requires the states to legislate the establishment of PRIs. It provides broad guidelines for the structure and operations of these local institutions. Accordingly, each state needs to enact legislation that establishes a uniform three tier PRI system comprising the Zilla Parishad, the Panchayat Samity and the Gram Panchayat at the district, block and village level respectively. The issue of empowering the PRIs also involves transferring of i) Funds, ii) Function and iii) Functionaries.

The role of the PRIs as instruments of rural reconstruction and development cannot be undermined. The post 73rd Amendment Act reorganized the PRIs with wider powers and functions and has made it institutions of political participation at the lowest level of governance, and at the same time institutions of development. Since the emphasis of rural development would be to bring about peoples' participation and involvement in the developmental programmes envisaged, it becomes possible only through the working of the PRIs.

As mentioned, rural development means an overall development of rural area in social, economic, political and cultural spheres so that people live a quality life. Broadly, it involves socio-economic and political development of the rural areas, on the one hand, and also to strengthen the democratic structure of rural society through the PRIs, on the other. The basic objective of rural development, however, remains alleviation of poverty and unemployment through creation of basic social and economic infrastructure, thereby bringing a quality rural life. To this end, the Government of India, accordingly, have launched several rural development programmes, which has been broadly categorized as Self and Wage Employment Programmes, Rural Infrastructure and Basic Minimum Needs

Programme, National Resource Management Programmes and Social Security Programmes.

As poverty was a major problem and main concern of the Indian Planners, therefore, eradication of rural poverty has been the major goal of India's economic policy since the commencement of planning era. Integrated Rural Development Programme was conceived during the Fifth Five Year Plan and was launched in 1978-79. The main objectives of the Integrated Rural Development Programme were the alleviation of poverty through growth and generation of employment opportunities for the poorest of the poor in rural India. These programmes were implemented through DRDAs.

In order to remove the problem of poverty and unemployment of the rural areas and to create additional employment opportunities for the rural poor, a scheme was introduced in 1976-77 popularly known as Food for Work Programme (FFWP). The objective of the programme was to offer gainful employment to the rural poor and improve their nutritional status and income level through development of infrastructure.

The National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), launched in October 1980 and became a regular plan programme from April 1981 is the modified and restructured version of FFWP. This programme was conceived during the Sixth Five Year Plan as an integrated strategy of rural employment.

The Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP) was introduced on 15th August 1983. It was a centrally sponsored programme and parallel to NREP. The basic objectives of the programme were: (i) improvement and extension of employment opportunities for the rural landless labourers with a view to provide them the guarantee of gainful employment to at least one member from each of the landless households for a period up to 100 days in a year, and (ii) creation of durable assets for strengthening the rural socio-economic infrastructure and improving the overall quality of life in the rural areas.

During the year 1989-90, two employment guarantee programmes NREP and RLEGP were merged into a single programme known as Jawahar Rozgar Yojana. Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana is the restructured and streamlined, comprehensive version of erstwhile JRY, launched on 1st April 1999 with a changed focus on programmes aimed at giving self-employment and wage employment to the poorest section of the community. The JGSY was implemented entirely by Gram Panchayats at the village level to create need based rural infrastructure to boost rural economy in general and improvement in the quality of life of the rural poor in particular. The DRDAs and Zilla Parishads were the media through which the funds from the center along with the state's matching share, directly released to the Village Panchayats. And the Village Panchayats were in charge of preparation of annual action plan and for its implementation

with the approval of Gram Sabha. People living in villages below the poverty line constitute the target group of JGSY.

The Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana is the single self-employment programme for the rural poor launched on 1st April, 1999 by replacing the earlier self employment and allied programmes- IRDP, TRYSEM, DWCRA, SITRA, GKY and MWS. These programmes are no longer in operation. SGSY is an innovative and carefully thought out Yojana. It takes into account all the strengths and weakness of all earlier self-employed programme. It aims at establishing a large number of micro enterprises in the rural areas. The objective of SGSY is to establish a large number of microenterprises in the rural, building upon the potential of the rural poor.

Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana is a new centrally sponsored scheme introduced in 1st April 2001, by merging EAS and JGSY. The scheme is to provide additional wage employment in the rural areas as also food security, along with creation of durable community, social and economic assets and infrastructural development of direct and continuing benefits to rural poor.

To meet the housing need of the rural poor, Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) a component programme under JRY was introduced in the year 1985-86. The programme is being implemented from 1st January 1996 as an independent scheme. The aim of the programme is to help rural people living below the poverty line in constructing dwelling units and upgrading the existing houses by providing grant-in-aid.

The three scheme i) National old-age Pension Scheme (NOAP), ii) National Family benefit Scheme and, iii) National Maternity Benefit Scheme launched in 15th August 1995 to cater to the targeted sections whether they live in rural or urban areas.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), previously known as NREGS, launched by the Government of India in 2006, was the outcome of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005. The significance of the Act lies in conferring legal rights to employment for the rural poor for at least hundred days, and provide livelihood security to them.

These are, therefore, some of the important programmes that the government has been launching in order to facilitate rural reconstruction and development. However, since rural development is peoples' programme, their participation becomes imperative for the success of any development programmes. The necessity for peoples' participation in developmental programmes arises mainly: (i). for better planning and implementation of rural development programmes; (ii). to mobilize resources required for rural development; and, (iii). for empowering the rural people. The Constitution 73rd Amendment Act enables and empowers the rural people to participate in developmental activities. The rural

people can participate in decision making process, monitoring and implementation of rural development programmes.

3. PRIs in the hill areas of Darjeeling

The hill areas of Darjeeling come under the administration of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (The Gorkhaland Territorial Administration Act, 2011). The Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) was formed to establish an autonomous self governing body to administer the region (comprising the three subdivisions, namely, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong, and some mouzas of Siliguri sub divisions in the district of Darjeeling) so that the socio-economic, infrastructural, educational, cultural, and linguistic development is expedited. Darjeeling, the northernmost district of West Bengal, roughly resembles an inverted wedge with its base resting on Sikkim, its sides touching Nepal, Bhutan and the Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal. The district is divided into four sub divisions, namely, Darjeeling Sadar, Kurseong, Kalimpong and Siliguri. Darjeeling Sadar is the district headquarters. The district has twelve Development blocks out of which three are in Sadar Sub Division, three in Kalimpong Sub-Division, two in Kurseong Sub Division and remaining four in Siliguri Sub Division.

Darjeeling has a population of 1,846,823 (2011 Census), of which male and female are 937,259 and 909,564 respectively. In 2001, Darjeeling had a population of 1,609,172 of which males were 830,664 and 778,528 were females. There was change of 14.77 percent in the population compared to population as per 2001 Census. The data released by the Census 2011 shows that density of Darjeeling is 586 people per sq.km.

Over the years, the hill area of Darjeeling has experienced an enormous mixture of governing patterns. The first municipal body (Darjeeling Municipality) was established in 1850 followed by the establishment of Kalimpong Municipality in 1945. The hill area has experienced the working of rural local government in the form of Panchayats, Panchayat Samity and Zilla Parishad prior to the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC). Darjeeling witnessed a violent movement, under the leadership of Subash Ghising in the decades of 1980s, the consequence of which, led to the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), an autonomous administrative set up for the region. Darjeeling went through another wave of movement under the leadership of Bimal Gurung and his Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, formed in 2007, which eventually, resulted in the formation of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA).

PRIs in India are an effort to decentralize government to promote greater participation by people. The Constitution 73rd Amendment Act 1992 enabled decentralized governance through PRIs in rural areas. West Bengal is one of the forerunners in installing a 3-tier panchayati system for rural local governance in India. The present generation Panchayats in the state started its journey in 1978

i.e., 15 years ahead of the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution of India. Following the 73rd Amendment Act guidelines accordingly, the PRIs in West Bengal have adopted a three tier structure with the establishment of Gram Panchayat at village level, Panchayat Samity at Block level and Zilla Parishad at the District level.

However, the provisions of the 73rd Constitution Amendment have not been applicable to the hills of Darjeeling, the northernmost region of West Bengal, and that, it exhibits a distinct character in its structure and functions. Even though the hills had witnessed the working of the three tier PRIs prior to the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988, presently, it is different from rest of the regions in West Bengal. After the formation of DGHC, the Zilla Parishad was divided into the DGHC in the hills and Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad in Siliguri sub-division. The hill region follows one tier panchayat system, whereas the subdivision of Siliguri follows a three tier system like the rest of the region in the state. Out of total 134 no of Gram Panchayats, 112 are in the hills and 22 are in Siliguri sub-division of the district. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the hills have not held elections to these rural local institutions for a long period of time, to be precise the last election to the panchayat bodies were held in 2000. This contradicts the spirit of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, which prescribes for peoples' participation at the grassroots through regular elections.

4. PRIs in Sikkim

Sikkim, which was a protectorate, became the state of Indian Union in 1975. It is a landlocked state, lying in the Himalayas with Tibet on the north and northeast, Bhutan on the east, Nepal on the west and the hills of Darjeeling of the state of West Bengal on the south. Administratively, the state is divided into four districts, namely, the North district, the West district, the South district and the East district. The district is further divided into smaller administrative division as subdivisions i.e. North district has two sub-divisions viz. (1) Chungthang subdivision and (2) Mangan sub-division. West district has two sub-divisions viz. (1) Gyalshing sub-division and (2) Soreng sub-division. In South district also there are two sub-divisions viz. (1) Namchi sub-division and (2) Ravong subdivision. But East district has got three sub-divisions viz. (1) Gangtok subdivision (2) Pakyong sub-division and (3) Rongli sub-division. Rongli subdivision was carved out from the then existing Pakyong sub-division in 1999 after the completion of 1991 census. The sub-division is again further divided into smallest administrative divisions as Block Administrative Centre.

According to the 2011 census, the total population of Sikkim state stands at 610,577 which is the accumulation of 43,709 belonging to North district, 136,435 belonging to the West district, 146,850 belonging to the South district and 283,583 belonging to the East district. The population comprises mainly of the Nepalis, the Bhutias and the Lepchas. Out of the total population 74.85 per cent of the state population lives in the rural areas while 25.15 per cent of the state population lives

in urban areas, according to 2011 census. Out of the total 400 revenue blocks (villages) excluding 51 forest blocks (villages) in the state, 136 are in the South district, 112 are in the West district, 107 are in East district and 45 are in the North district. Beside revenue Blocks, there are 51 forest blocks. Out of which 26 are uninhabited. There are 34 large Revenue Blocks having above 2000 population of which 2 falls in North districts followed by 12 in West district, 7 in South district and 13 in East district. There are only 3 Revenue Blocks which has population above 5,000 and they fall in East district only (Census, 2011).

The statutory panchayat in Sikkim is a recent phenomenon, however, the system of village panchayats in Sikkim can be traced back to the traditional tribal council or the panchayat system of the Bhutias and Lepchas called the Dzumsas and the Chhodu. These tribal societies were accustomed to regulation of their own domestic, religious, socio-economic, political, and judicial affairs at the grassroots through their traditional councils and the collective wisdom of the people. The Sikkim Panchayat Act 1965 established one-tier panchayat bodies in the name of Block Panchayat, however, incorporating the traditional tribal councils. The Sikkim Panchayat Act 1982 established a two tier panchayat system with Gram Panchayat at the village level and the Zilla Panchayat at the district level. The Sikkim Panchayat Act 1993 was enacted in compliance to the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act. Accordingly, the Act provides for the constitution of Gram Sabha, two-tier panchayat system, five year tenure of these bodies, reservation of seats for women and SCs and STs., etc. However, the Government of Sikkim has amended the Act of 1993 number of times to make institutions of local government more effective and vibrant, and also to revitalize PRIs by way of transferring power to the people at the grassroots level.

Under the existing system there are two tier PRIs in the state, known as the Gram Panchayat at the village level and the Zilla Panchayat at the district level. The Zilla Panchayats are constituted of 110 members elected from the same number of territorial constituencies. The state has four Zilla Panchayats, i.e. one in each district. The Zilla Panchayat is headed by an Adhyakshya and Upa (Deputy) Adhyaksha who are elected from within the elected members of the 108 Zilla territorial constituencies. The District Collectors have been designated as Ex-Officio (Sachivas) of their respective Zilla Panchayats. There are 907 Gram Panchayat wards/seats which constitutes 165 Gram Panchayat Units. Each Gram Panchayat has a Sabhapati, Upa (deputy) Sabhapati, Sachiva and two to six ordinary members. These officials of Gram Panchayats are also elected from amongst the elected members of the wards comprising the Gram Panchayat unit.

5. People's Participation in Rural Development: Darjeeling hills and Sikkim

Participation is an indispensable ingredient of development process. Advocacy of people's participation in rural development has been growing in stridence in recent years in developing countries (Lalitha 2004). The UNESCO has recommended

that governments should adopt popular participation as a basic policy measure in national development strategy and should encourage widest possible active participation of all individuals such as women and youth organisation, in the development process in setting goals, formulating policies and implementing plans (Commission for Social Development 1975).

People's participation in simple term implies participation at all stages of the programme viz. plan formulation, implementation, decision making, sharing of benefits of development, monitoring and evaluation (Mishra and Kumar 1983). The World Bank defines community participation as an active process by which beneficiaries influence the direction and execution of development project with a view to enhancing their well being in terms of income, personal growth, self-reliance and other values which they cherish. The rationale for people participation is that the goals of socio-economic development are not achievable unless the citizens actively involve themselves in the preparation, implementation and follow up of the developmental plans and programmes.

Since peoples' participation is imperative to rural development, it is essential for the people to actively participate in rural development activities as the failure of development attempts in the past has been to a great extent because of the lack of active peoples' participation. The significance of peoples' participation in rural development has long been realized by B.R. Mehta Committee, advocating that rural development can be possible only with peoples' participation. It was, however, the Constitution 73rd Amendment Act which brought about a landmark change in the concept of participation and provided for decentralized governance through participation and how rural reconstruction and development would be brought about. Accordingly, initiatives were undertaken by the government at the centre and the states to actively involve the rural people in their goal for rural reconstruction and development.

As majority of population of Sikkim is living in rural areas, development of rural areas under such situation receives much attention in the various schemes designed for the development of state's economy. Accordingly, rural development and alleviation of poverty have been accorded high priority in the plans for economic development. In pursuance with the central government's policies and programmes on rural development, the Government of Sikkim has also launched various rural based development programmes.

Sikkim, along with other states of the country, introduced various rural development programme which include Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS), Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), etc. The government has been taking every initiative to implement all rural based programme throughout the state. The Department of Rural Management and Development was created to this end. The

Department undertakes the responsibility of enhancing rural livelihood through a variety of programmes and projects. The emphasis is on building up of local resources through increasing the capability of the rural poor through self-employment programmes and through building up of critical infrastructure in the rural areas of Sikkim. The state government also constituted a State Planning Commission in 2000 with the Chief Minister as its chairperson.

The Rural Management and Development Department (RM&DD), Government of Sikkim has been entrusted with the responsibility of initiating and steering rural development programmes in the state. It is committed in improving the quality of life of the rural people by way of implementing different rural development programmes, including poverty alleviation and infrastructural developmental programmes like that of construction of houses, roads, bridges, sanitation, water supply, schools, playgrounds, etc.

The Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), introduced in 1978-79 and universalized from 2nd October 1980 has provided assistance to rural poor for productive employment opportunities. IRDP had several sub-programmes like Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment (TRYSEM), Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), Ganga Kalyan Yojana (GKY), Million Wells Scheme (MWS) and Supply of Improved Toolkits to Rural Artisan (SITRA). However, these schemes were implemented as 'Stand alone programmes', an approach which substantially detracted from their effectiveness. The Mid-Term Appraisal of Ninth plan had indicated that IRDP together with the several sub-schemes presented a matrix of multiple programmes without designed linkages. These were implemented as separate programme without keeping in mind the overall objective of generating sustainable incomes. On 1 April 1999, the IRDP and allied programmes were merged into a single programme known as Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY). In Sikkim, these programme were introduced in 1980-81 with a view to assist selected families of below poverty line in the rural areas. The main objective of the programme has been the elimination of unemployment and the eradication of poverty in the rural areas by providing income generating schemes including working capital through package of assistance comprising subsidy and other institutional credit. The target groups of the programme consisted of small farmers, marginal farmers, agricultural labourer, rural artisans, scheduled castes and tribes and women.

Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment (TRYSEM) introduced in 1979 in India and 1980 in Sikkim was one of the main sub-schemes of IRDP. The main aim of the programme was to provide basic technical and entrepreneurial skills to the rural poor in the age group of 18-35 years to take up income-generating activities. The training was imparted in different trade like carpet, handloom, rari weaving, cutting and tailoring, knitting, carpentry, black smithy, cane and bamboo work, etc.

Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) was launched as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme on 15 April 1989 by merging National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP). The Programme was restructured as Jawahar Gram Samriclhi Yojana (JGSY) w.e.f 01, 04.1999. The primary objective of JRY was the generation of additional gainful employment for the unemployed, by strengthening the rural economic infrastructure and asset and improvement in the quality of life in rural areas. The people below the poverty line including the SC and STs and free bonded labourer were the target group. The programme was implemented by Rural Development Department in the state. Besides, the Zilla Panchayat and Gram Panchayat were also involved to implement the programme at the district and village level.

The Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) was launched during 1985-86 with the objective of providing dwelling units free of cost to the members of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and bonded labourers living below the poverty line in rural areas. The Gram Panchayat is empowered to select the beneficiaries under the scheme. The president/Sabhapati of Gram Panchayat forwards the application of the identified beneficiaries to the District Development Officer who scrutinizes and submits to the Assistant Project Officer (APO) for approval. The SGSY is financed on 75:25 cost sharing basis between the centre and the states and is being implemented by Sikkim Rural Development Agency with the involvement of the panchayats and the banks.

The Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) launched in December 2000 as a centrally sponsored scheme, aims at providing rural connectivity to unconnected habitations with population of 500 persons or more in the rural areas. In Sikkim, the Government had entrusted the Department of Rural Management and Development as the nodal department and Public Work Department (Roads and Bridges) as the executing agency for the execution of the programme. As in other states, Sikkim Government also set up Sikkim State Rural Road Agency which coordinates the execution of the programme in the field.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), later renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes (MGNREGS) was launched by the Government of India on February, 2006. This programme was the product of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) 2005, (later renamed as MGNREGA) which was passed by the parliament on 23rd August 2005 and was promulgated on September 2005. In Sikkim, initially the scheme covered only the north district but later on extended to all the district of Sikkim. As outlined in the Act, the focus of the scheme has been:

1. Water conservation and water harvesting;
2. Drought proofing (including afforestation and tree plantation);
3. Irrigation canals including micro and minor irrigation works;

4. Provision of irrigation facility to land owned by the SCs/STs;
5. Renovation of traditional water bodies;
6. Land development and
7. Rural connectivity to provide all-weather access.

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) i.e. Gram Panchayat at the village level and Zilla Panchayat at the district level have been assigned the role of implementing MGNREGS. The identification of projects and preparation of plan is decided at Gram Sabha. The PRIs are responsible for execution and supervision and maintenance of records pertaining to works and employment.

The Chief Minister's Self Employment scheme was launched by the chief Minister of Sikkim on 23rd March 2002 to provide self-employment opportunities to educated unemployed youth in the state. The scheme has come into effect from June 2002. The scheme has been designed to provide employment for setting up micro enterprises the educated unemployed youth. It relates to the setting up of self-employment ventures through service and business routes.

Peoples' participation is imperative to rural development, and it is a requisite for the success of any rural development programme. Peoples' participation involves participation in decision making, participation in implementation, participation in monitoring and evaluation of development programmes and project, and participation in sharing the benefits of development. The rationale for peoples' participation is that the goals of socio-economic development are not achievable unless the citizens actively involve themselves in the preparation, implementation and follow up of the developmental plans and programmes. In view of this, peoples' participation has been considered an important aspect of rural development in Sikkim. Accordingly, the working of the PRIs through elected representatives in the implementation of the developmental programmes in rural areas of Sikkim has been highly appreciated.

The Government of Sikkim has taken effective measures to ensure peoples' participation in rural development programmes through the PRIs. The institution like Gram Sabha has been strengthened by giving more powers and functions. This body is the forum that provides direct participation of people in the formulation and implementation of need based programmes. The various rural development programmes like SGRY, RHS, MGNREGS etc. are now implemented through panchayats. The beneficiary groups of the area are also involved in the implementation of projects.

Following the Constitution 73rd Amendment Act (1992), the Sikkim Panchayat Act 1982 was amended and new Act came into force in 1995. The new State Act considerably enhanced the responsibilities of the PRIs to areas mentioned in the Eleventh Schedule. The state Panchayat Act besides (devolving some

responsibilities and) making provisions for constitution of Gram Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat at village and district respectively, also made provisions for Gram Sabha (Village Assembly) at the Gram Panchayat level. This institution is corner stone of rural decentralisation as it gives opportunity to each and every adult eligible voter of the Gram Panchayat to participate in decision-making of decentralised governance, planning and development. The Gram Sabha is expected to meet and to make recommendation and suggestions on development programmes, identification of beneficiaries, etc. The function of the Gram Panchayat has been enhanced by adding the list of items included in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution. In 2003, the State Government transferred major functions of eight line departments to the panchayats in a measure to accelerate the speed of devolution in the state. These devolution measures undoubtedly increased the powers and responsibilities of the Gram Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat giving them a much greater role in the delivery of important social services such as primary school, public health, social security programmes like old age pension, and rural development/poverty alleviation programmes. To implement the designated programme the financial resources of the Panchayats were also augmented. Thus since the 73rd Amendment Act and the Conformity Act of State, a change has been engineered in the democratic rules governing Panchayats which now have greater powers and resources to design and implement rural development programmes. The Act also reduces the political and bureaucratic interference in rural development programmes.

However, the concept of peoples' participation in rural local governance, and the working of the PRIs in the hills of Darjeeling differ significantly with that of Sikkim. The concept of rural local self government in the context of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act is unique to the hills of Darjeeling. Unlike the rest of West Bengal, the hills do not follow the three tier panchayat system. The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), until it got replaced by the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), had been functioning in place of Zilla Parishad, since its formation in 1988.

The different programme for rural development in hill areas of Darjeeling have been executed through the PRIs like the rest of the region in the state, until the formation of the DGHC. However, since the last election to panchayats in the hills was held in the year 2000, ever since, the rural people in the hills do not have their elected representations in these bodies. Therefore it is the gram panchayat officials who have the responsibility of carrying out and implementing the programmes pertaining to rural development, under the supervision of the Block Development Officer and the District Panchayat and Rural Development Officer, at the block and district level respectively. The different rural development programmes under the broad category of Self and Wage Employment Programmes, Rural Infrastructure and Basic Minimum Needs Programme, National Resource Management Programmes and Social Security Programmes, are being

implemented in the hills of Darjeeling by the Gram panchayat officials. This include programmes like the MGNREGS, SGSY, PMGSY, PMGY, etc.

The Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) Act, 2011, under which the present administration of the hills of Darjeeling is being carried out, prescribes that the GTA shall have administrative, financial and executive powers to various activities of different departments including Panchayats and Rural Development department and the concerned District Rural Development Cell. It further prescribes that the GTA shall implement the MGNREGS through the BDO, the panchayats, the DPRDO etc. It also mentions that the DRDC shall function under the administrative control of the GTA and that the DRDC shall implement the SGSY, restructured as NRLM. The IAY, NSAP etc, shall also be implemented by the GTA through the panchayats and the DPRDO.

6. Concluding Observation

The concept of peoples' participation has gained much significance in the context of rural development and rural development programmes. Participation of people, since the 73rd Constitution Amendment, has become a buzz word in the development of the community at the rural level. The failure of past development efforts was largely attributed to the lack of peoples' participation. Peoples' participation is needed for better planning and implementation of rural development programmes, for mobilization of resources for rural development and for empowering the rural people to play an effective role in rural development.

Following the 73rd Amendment Act, the Sikkim Panchayat Act 1982 was amended and new Act came into force in 1995. The new State Act considerably enhances the responsibilities of the panchayat institutions to areas mentioned in the Eleventh Schedule. The state Panchayat Act besides devolving some responsibilities and making provisions for constituting Gram Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat at village and district levels also made provisions for forming Gram Sabha at the Gram Panchayat level. This institution is corner stone of rural decentralisation as it gives opportunity to each and every adult eligible voter of the Gram Panchayat to participate in decision-making of decentralised governance, planning and development. Various studies reveal that the concept of peoples' participation and rural development in Sikkim has been to a great extent realized in theory and practice. The objectives of rural reconstruction and development have been carried out through elected panchayats with people participating in every aspect of rural development, planning, decision making or implementation. The PRIs, to a large extent, has been successful in promoting social welfare, rural infrastructure, providing employment, and improving the conditions of the people of rural areas of Sikkim. Moreover, the implementation of rural development programmes through the PRIs has produced desired results.

However, the working of the PRIs and the implementation of the rural development programmes in the hills of Darjeeling differ largely in comparison

to that of Sikkim. The rural people in Darjeeling hills have not been able to experience the working of the Panchayati Raj system, the way it has been carried out in other parts of India. The creation of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in the year 1988, led to the bifurcation of the district of Darjeeling into two divisions, the DGHC and the Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad. Therefore, it was not possible for the establishment of a three tier PRIs in Darjeeling hills. Further, the single tier system functioned till 2008 and presently it also is defunct. It can, therefore, be understood that the rural people rarely participate in Gram Sansad/Gram Sabha or any of such meetings held in locality, where the formulation of development programmes are decided i.e. with regard to who will take the benefits, how the benefits be percolated down, and how the overall decision making process be carried out. Moreover the rural people are also ignorant of various development programmes and schemes provided by the government due largely to lack of opportunity of participation.

Therefore, the philosophy and principle of the Constitution 73rd Amendment Act, which emphasizes participation and empowerment does not find room in the hills of Darjeeling. Though the institutions of rural local government is working through the officials, and various rural development programmes are being carried out by these institutions, however, peoples' mandate does not have any recognition as they do not have the opportunity of participation. Under the circumstances, whether the spirit of rural reconstruction and development through peoples' involvement in the process is significant, remains contested.

References

- Arora, R.K (2009). Citizen Centric Administration: The Heart of Governance. Administrative Change, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2 & XXXVII, No. 1 pp. 123-130.
- Bhattacharya, M (2002). Panchayati Raj in West Bengal: Democratic Decentralisation or Democratic Centralism, New Delhi, Manak.
- Chhetri, Hariprasad (2008). Panchayati Raj System and Developing Planning: The case of Sikkim, New Delhi, Rawat Publications.
- Das, P.S.(ed.) 2005. Decentralised Planning and Participatory Rural Development, New Delhi, Concept Publishing House.
- Dutta, Prabhat. (2001). Panchayats, Rural Development and Local Autonomy: The West Bengal Experience, Kolkata, Dasgupta Publishers.
- Joshi, S (1999). IRDP and Poverty Alleviation. New Delhi, Rawat Publications.
- Lalitha, N. (2004). Rural Development in India: Emerging Issues and Trends, New Delhi, Dominant.
- Lama, M.P. (2001). Sikkim Human Development Report. Government of Sikkim. New Delhi, Social Science Press

- Mishra, S.N. and Kushal Kumar (1983). Problems and Prospect of Rural Development, New Delhi, Uppal.
- Pandit, A.S and B.V. Kulkarni, (2012). “The Role of Jat Panchayat in Rural Development. Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal II (VI).
- Patel, Amrit (2010). Rural Development Projects and Programs. New Delhi. Kurukshetra, Vol. 58, No. 3, pp 11.
- Singh, Katar (1999). Rural Development: Principles, Policies and Management, New Delhi, Sage.