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## **Rural Development and the Role of Gram Panchayats: A Case Study of Dawaguri Gram Panchayat in Cooch Behar District**

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**Abstract:**

*In India majority of the people live in the rural areas with agriculture as their main source of livelihood. Similarly, a sizeable percentage of the population lives below the poverty line. Under these circumstances, it was realized by the Indian policy makers from the beginning that unless efforts are undertaken for the development of the rural areas any serious discussion about national development is bound to be a sterile exercise. In this process, the Gandhian philosophy about rural India and Gram Swaraj also gave stimulating influence to the makers of the Indian Constitution. Article 40 lays down an important obligation upon the state in relation to the panchayats. Based on these compulsions of rural development a number of experiments, programs and projects have been undertaken since 1952 with the starting of community development programs. However, it has been found that the success of these programmes related to rural development depends to a significant extent on proper planning, efficient and effective execution, objective evaluation and sincere revision on relevant feedback from the agencies responsible for the task. Practically, agencies of rural development play a vital role in the process of rural development. However, the Panchayati raj system showed that the dream of Gandhiji and his idea of Gram Swaraj were not established through the Balwant Mehta Committee in 1959 or even Askok Mehata Committee in 1978. It is only 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, which ought to provide an effective role to the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the planning and implementation of programmes of economic development and social justice in rural India. The present paper seeks to analyse the role of the Gram Panchayats and the practical scenario of the rural development programmes in Cooch Behar district. To measure the performance of the Gram Panchayats in Cooch Behar district, a survey was conducted in a selected gram Panchayat on the basis of random sampling.*

**Key words:** Rural Development, Panchayats, Development Programmes, Planning, Economic Development

### **1. Introduction**

The subject of the rural development has gained importance in recent years. In India more than three- fourths of the population lives in the rural areas. This was the reason why the politicians as well as planners and policy makers give emphasis on this subject. However, in this field, the scholars provided various meanings, definitions and objectives of rural development. The term 'rural' means an area which is characterized non urban style of life, occupational structure, social organization and settlement pattern (Hoshiar Singh, 1995). Development means an overall positive change in the physical quality of life. In other words, it means an improvement in the quality of life through better health, education, housing and welfare. Thus, the objectives of rural development should be to provide means and ways of catering for the basic human needs of rural inhabitants, which include food, clothing, shelter, employment, school, health centers and other social welfare services. The overall goal should be to raise the quality of life in rural areas and to generate continuous self- development of peasants and rural workers (Shekhar Mukherjee, 1982). According to the World Bank paper in 1975, rural development "is a strategy to improve the economic and social life of a specific group of people, the rural poor, including small and marginal farmers, tenants and the landlords. Uma Lata (1975) defined rural development in term of raising the standard of living of rural people. The scholars like, Taylor defined rural development as a process aimed at the well being of people, particularly those living outside the urbanized areas through forward and backward linkages between the rural and urban sectors. Mishra and Sundaram(1979) define, rural development as not merely the development of rural areas, but also the development of equality of life of the rural masses into self-reliant and self-sustaining modern little communities. Rural development is, therefore, the development of rural areas in such a way that each component of rural life chances in a desired direction. Based on the chinese experiment Sartaj Aziz (1978), focuses on the basic objectives of rural development which may be summarized as follows. "To organize, develop and utilize the available resources of land, water and manpower in such a manner that the entire rural population depended on these resources has an equal (or at least an equitable) opportunity to meet, as a minimum, their basic needs of foods, clothing and shelter with reasonable facilities for education and health and can live together in a positive and healthy social environment "

According to the U.N. report, 'rural development has come into international usage to cannot the process by which the efforts of people themselves are united to those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions in the

life of the nation and to relate them to contribute fully to national programme'. In the words of Robert Chambers (1983), 'rural development is a strategy to enable a specific group of people, poor rural women and men, to gain for themselves and their children more of what they want and need. It involves helping the poorest among those to seek a lively hood in the rural areas to demand and control more of the benefit of rural development. The group includes small scale farmer's tenants and landless (Hoshiar Singh, 1995). From the above definitions, it is clear that rural development is the multi-purpose, multi-functional, multi-sectoral relativity, which includes the development of socio-economic conditions of the people living in the rural areas. It also includes the development of the weaker and poorer sections of rural society. Rural development should ensure the participation in the development process.

There are a number of approaches to rural development that government can be grouped as:

- The Multi-purpose approaches
- The Minimum Package Approaches
- The Target Group Approaches
- The Area development approaches
- The Special Planning Approaches
- The Integrated Rural Development Approaches. (Hoshiar Sing, 1995)

In India, rural development approach began with the Multi-purpose approach. In 1952, the community development programme (CDP) was launched 'to secure the total development of the material and human resources of rural areas and to develop local leadership and self-governing institution' (Katar Singh, 1986). Under the Minimum Package Approach, a package programme was launched as the Intensive Agricultural District Programme (IADP) in the year 1960-61. Under this approach, 'a particular group is taken up for in-depth studies and plan priorities are accordingly modified (Hoshiar Sing, 1995). Programme like the SFDA/MFLA were started for the development of small scale farmers and marginal farmers and landless labourers in the rural areas. The Area Development Programme Approach is an extension of the growth centre approach and takes into account the local factors in achieving economic growth. Under this approach various programme such as DPAP, TDP, CAD, Hill Area Development etc. were launched. The Spatial Planning Approach was to bring under close action strategies relevant to the acceleration of integrated area development around potential growth centers, but the scheme was not pursued beyond the pilot stage. Spatial planning in India is at the crossroads and the efforts made so far can, at best, be said to be half-hearted, sporadic and often self-defeating. The Integrated Rural Development Approach has been developed because the area development approach by and large failed to address the question of inequalities in the distribution of employment, income and assets. 'It comprises four types of activities, namely, increased production in agriculture and allied sector, such as animal husbandry, fisheries, forestry and horticulture. It lays emphasis on villages and cottage handicraft and tiny industries, the tertiary sector, which would cover artisans and the requirements, of skilled workers in several rural activities and finally, labour mobilization which includes training in skills and organized employment for labour class' (Hoshiar Sing, 1995). Thus, the rural development in the developing countries in general and India in particular is the combination of a number of approaches and strategies. It is a comprehensive aspect of social, political, economic and administrative activities aimed at the improvement of the quality of life in the rural areas.

It is clear that rural development is the multi-purpose, multi-functional, multi-sectoral relativity, which includes the development of socio-economic conditions of the people living in the rural areas. It also includes the development of the weaker and poorer sections of rural society. Rural development should ensure the participation in the development process. In India, with the realization of the compulsions of rural development, a number of experiments, programmes and projects have been undertaken from 1952 to present-day under various Five-Year Plans. Some of the programmes for rural employment and the eradication of rural poverty, health, education, and some are related to target programme. However, it has been found that the success of these programmes related to rural development depends on some factors. One of them, Panchayati Raj Institution is an agency or institution of rural development which takes a significant role in the process of rural development. Community Development Programme was started in 1952 and it very soon realized that development is people centered and participation of people in their development has to be mobilised. In this process, Panchayats were viewed as the instrument of rural development, according to the recommendation of Balwant Rai Mehata Committee in 1958. It suggested three tier system of Panchayati Raj with freedom to the state to structure the system in line with their socio-political environment. In 1978, the Ashok Mehata committee was set up and next year, the committee recommended two tiers of Panchayats and open political participation and constitutional protection for Panchayats to be played an active role in rural development. But the Panchayati raj system showed that the dream of Gandhiji and his idea of Gram Swaraj were not established through the Balwant Mehta Committee in 1959 or even Askok Mehata Committee in 1978. Finally the Panchayati Raj Bill i.e., the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment act was passed on 22, December, 1992. This act established a three tier Panchayats and provided for reservation of seats for SCs & STS and 30% reservation for women. Furthermore, the eleventh schedule comprising 29 subjects has been included in the Constitution, which ought to provide an effective role of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the planning and implementation of programmes of economic development and social justice. After the passing of 73rd Amendment Act, the West Bengal Panchayat Act 1994 has been passed in West Bengal and the Panchayati Raj Institutions were institutionalized and began to act as one of the most important agencies of rural development.

## 2. Selected Area

The selected area of the study is the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. Cooch Behar is the North Eastern district of Jalpaiguri division. In shape it is an irregular triangle. The district of Cooch Behar is the entry pot to the North-Eastern states of India, Bhutan and Bangladesh. During British rule, the Cooch Behar district was a native state. Consequently, the district has a separate

administrative experience. The king was named 'Maharaja'. During these days, the system of administration was highly centralized and the development aspect of administration was either beyond comprehension or was ignored. It was 'maharaja' Nipendra Narayan, who first made a council based on the concept of the modern cabinet system to establish a democratic rule. The Maharaja was the president of this council and was assisted by three heads, namely, superintendent, Dewan and one experienced judicial servant. Really, this period was known as the 'age of modernization' in the history of Cooch Behar. During his regime, the red system of 'Dewani' was abolished and the Chowkidhary Act passed in 1893 (Krishna Chandra Chatterjee, 1990). The enactment was made on the model of Bengal act. Under this act Nayeb Ahilikar was authorized to appoint at least three and not more than five persons as Panchayats. The Panchayat was vested with the authority to appoint and dismiss the chowkidhars of his area. Beside it, the Panchayats had to keep contact with the nearest police station and inform the higher authority regarding the emergence cholera and epidemic in the area; unfortunately the village level Panchayats were not charged with the responsibility of performing village level development function. However, it was the old example of the panchayati Raj system in the Cooch Behar State (Krishna Chandra Chatterjee, 1990). The Chowkidhary Act, of 1893 was amended to collect revenue. On the other hand, the scenario of urban administration was not poor during the regime of Maharaja Nipendra Narayan. The Cooch Behar Town Committee act was enacted in 1885 and it was rectified in 1897. It was extended to the sub divisional towns of Dinhat and Mathabhanga in 1897 and after five years in Haldibari and Mekhliganj in 1932. The Town Committee considered of 10 members and were authorized to collect land and property tax, preserve and protect roadways of the towns, make arrangement of street lighting, clear waste and to make arrangement of sewerage and drainage. In 1944, the Cooch Behar Municipal act, was passed and on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1946 came into operation. The administrative system of Cooch Behar State was centralized system. This was essentially urban oriented and did not bother to think in terms of the eradication of ignorance, alleviation of poverty and to foster the minimum standard of living such as food, clothing and shelter at the rural level. In fact, this was the standard scenario of any Indian state subjugated to colonial power and Cooch Behar was no exception. In 1947, India became independent, but the Cooch Behar state did not join in Indian Union. In 1950, it was merged into Indian Union and became a district of West Bengal (Dipen Chanda, 1990). Thus, unlike of the other districts of West Bengal, Cooch Behar turned into a sub-state system from an autonomous independent political system. Unfortunately, from 1950 to 1958, no arrangement was made for the development of the rural areas of the district. In India, the first five- year plan stressed the policy of decentralization for development. In this context, during the second plan, west Bengal also took the policy of decentralization through the creation of panchayat. The draft of the panchayat bill was placed before the assembly in 1956 and it was passed in 1957. The west Bengal panchayat act 1957 proposed that gram panchayats will be established at the village level and that the union board be replaced by Anchal panchayat (Webster Neil, 1992). Accordingly, along with other districts of West Bengal Panchayat Raj system was first experienced in the district of Cooch Behar. The second step in restructuring Panchayat Raj as the grass-root agency of democratic decentralization was put forward during the third plan period. In 1963, the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act was passed and 15 Zilla Parishad and 325 Anchalik Parishads were also formed in the state (Webster Neil, 1992). The act of 1957 and 1963 provided, altogether, for a four-tier system composed of Zilla parishad, Anchalik Parishad, Anchal Panchayat and Gram Panchayat. In 1964, Cooch Behar District was first experienced with Anchalik parishad and zilla parishad. Consequently, it is needed to mention here that the district of Cooch Behar did never have Union Board as it was in the other district before the passing of the West Bengal Panchayat act of 1957. Thus, the year of 1964 is the turning point for the district of Cooch Behar because this year marked by the beginning of a new era of district development administration through decentralization. After the passing of West Bengal Panchayat act, 1973 third step towards decentralization was started. This Act brought certain changes by replacing the four-tier system of Panchayat in three-tier system such as Zilla Parishad at the district level, Panchayat-Samittee at the block level, Panchayat at the village level being the lowest institution of grass-root level democracy. 'However, although the act was passed in 1973, failed to be implemented because of political instability in the state at that time and of Indira Gandh's subsequent declaration of a state of emergency in India in 1975. it was not until the return to electoral politics and the 1977 election's of the Left Front Government in West Bengal that the task of reorganizing the system of panchayati local government could take place' (Neil Webster, 1992). The last step towards the decentralization is the 'West Bengal Panchayat Act 1992'. The West Bengal Panchayat Act introduced the same three-tier panchayat system which was constituted by the 73 act. At present, the district of Cooch Behar has 128 Gram Panchayats, 12 Panchayat Samittees and the Zilla Parishad. All these tiers are directly involved in the development process of the district. The district bureaucracy consists of the District Magistrate, Sub-Divisional Officers and Block Development officers. The other specialized agencies are also involved in the development effort of the district by providing auxiliary technical and specialized supports to the different tiers of panchayat of the district. According to the provisional Census Report, 2011, the total population of this district is 28,19,086 and covers an area of 3,387 sq.km. and the density of population is 832/sq.km. 89.73% of the population of the district reside in the rural area where as 10.27% of them reside in urban areas. The literacy rate of the district is 74.78%. Among them 73.16% literate people live at rural area and 88.36% of them belong to the urban population.

### 3. Objective

On the basis of the background, the Dawaguri Gram Panchayat of Cooch Behar -1 block in Cooch Behar district is selected for the study. A survey was conducted in this gram Panchayat on the basis of schedule questionnaire taking the method of random sampling. The aim of this study is to assess the impact of the government policies and rural development programmes in this gram panchayat and to what extent the rural development programmes are successful to uplift the rural masses in this gram panchayat.

#### 4. Field Study

Dawaguri Gram Panchayat is under the Cooch Behar -1 Panchayat Samiti. According to the 2001 census report the total population of this gram panchayat is 19,398. Total male and female population is 10,092 and 9306 respectively. The Scheduled Castes population in this area is 8258. The area of this gram panchayat is 38.62 square K.M. Most of the people are engaged in agriculture and its allied sector. The detail information of this gram Panchayat is given below.

Sl. No.	Subject	Percentage/Number
1	Literate	63%
2	Primary school	15
3	High School	02
4	Sishu Shikha Kendra	06
5	Sub-Health Centre	03
6	Bank	01
7	Post Office	01
8	Agriculture Cooperatve Society	02
9	Veterinary centre	01
10	Telephone Exchange	01
11	PHE Pump	02
12	MSK	01
13	Angan Awari Kendra	26

Table 1

Source: Annual Report, 2013-14, Dawaguri Gram Panchayat

The major important rural development programmes are running in this gram Panchayat. These are NREGP, APY, IAY, AAY, Rural Drinking Water, PMGSY, SJGSY, Normal Gram Yojona etc. Social security scheme like NOAPS, Widow Pension, IGNDPS, Crop Insurance etc. are also running in this Gram Panchayat. The total numbers of Kissan Credit Card holders are 500(approx.). 140 BPL self-help groups were formed by the VLWs in this Gram Panchayat. Rural connectivity, flood control, water conservation, agro-irrigation, plantation, individual benefit scheme is running under the National Rural Employment Generation Scheme in this area. The expenditure of the NREGS scheme in the years 2011-2012 and 2012-13 are Rs. 1, 13, 28,000 and 69, 2200 respectively. The total number of job cards under this scheme is 4274. Apart from these official records, a survey, based on random sampling, has been carried out in this gram Panchayat which are discussed in the following tables.

Age Wise Distribution		
Age Group	No. Of Respondents	Percentage
18-30	10	20%
31-40	18	36%
41-50	11	22%
51-60	07	14%
61 and above	04	08%
Total	50	100%

Table 2

Source: Primary Data

Table-2 shows the age wise distribution of the respondents. The distribution reveals that 20 percent are 18-30 age group, 36 percent are 31-40age group,22 percent are 41-50 age group,14 percent are 51-60 age group and 8 percent are 61 and above age group.

Religion Wise Distribution		
Religion	No. Of Respondents	Percentage
Hindu	39	78%
Muslim	11	22%
Christian	00	00%
Buddhist	00	00%
Other	00	00%
Total	50	100%

Table 3

Source: Primary Data

Table three presents the scenario of the religion wise distribution of the respondents. From this table it is found that majority of the respondents are Hindu i.e. 78 percent and remaining are Muslim.

<b>Sex Wise Distribution</b>		
<b>Sex</b>	<b>No. Of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	35	70%
Female	15	30%
Total	50	100%

Table 4

Source: Primary Data

From the above table, it is found that comparatively large number of respondent, i.e., 70% come from the males while only 30% of the respondents are females.

<b>Caste Wise Distribution</b>		
<b>Caste</b>	<b>No. Of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
SC	20	40%
ST	00	00%
OBC	10	20%
General	20	40%
Total	50	100%

Table 5

Source: Primary Data

Table -5 shows the caste wise distribution of the respondents. It shows that 40% of the respondents are both belong to SC category and general category while 20% OBC category and no one from ST category.

<b>Education Wise Distribution</b>		
<b>Education</b>	<b>No. Of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Illiterate	05	10%
literate	10	20%
Primary	12	24%
Junior High	02	04%
MP	10	20%
HS	05	10%
UG	04	08%
PG	02	04%
Total	50	100%

Table 6

Source: Primary Data

Table-6 depicts the education wise distribution of the respondents. Here it is found that 10% percent of the respondents are both illiterate and H.S. level while 20 percent are both literate and Madhyamik level. 24 percent have education up to the primary level and 4 percent are both junior high and PG level while 8 percent have education up to under graduate level.

<b>Income Wise Distribution</b>		
<b>Income(yearly)</b>	<b>No. Of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
5,000 and below	23	46%
5001 to 10,000	20	40%
10,001 to 15,000	02	04%
15,001 to 20,000	02	04%
20,001 to 25,000	02	04%
25,001 and Above	01	02%
Total	50	100%

Table 7

Source: Primary Data

Table-7 shows the income wise distribution of the respondents. It is found that majority of the respondents come from the lower and lower middle income group ranging up to Rs. 10,000/- per annum. 2% percent are from Rs. 25,001/- and above while 12 percent are from remaining groups.

Occupation Wise Distribution		
Source	No. Of Respondents	Percentage
Farmer	9	18%
Agriculture Labour	11	22%
Business	05	10%
Rickshaw/Van puller	08	16%
Industrial Labour	08	16%
Private Service	06	12%
Government Service	03	06%
Total	50	100%

Table 8

Source: Primary Data

Table-8 depicts the occupation wise distribution of the respondents. Here it is found that the 22 percent are agriculture labours, 18 percent are farmers, 16 percent are both Rickshaw or Van puller and industrial labour, 10 percent are from business sector, 12 percent are in private services and only 4 percent are in government services.

Energy Wise Distribution		
Source	No. Of Respondents	Percentage
Electricity	32	64%
Kerosene	18	36%
Others	00	00%
Total	50	100%

Table 9

Source: Primary Data

Table-9 shows that the nature of the source of energy used in the house of respondents. From the table, it is found that the majority of the respondent's house has electricity facility while 36 percent use kerosene.

Drinking Water Wise Distribution		
Type	No. Of Respondents	Percentage
Dug Well	00	00%
Tube-well	18	36%
PHE	22	44%
STW	03	06%
DTW	05	10%
Ponds	00	00%
Rivers	02	04%
Total	50	100%

Table 10

Source: Primary Data

From this table it is clear that majority of the respondents' sources of drinking water are Tube well and PHE pump supply. 6 percent, 10 percent and 4 percent of the respondents' source of drinking water are STW, DTW and River respectively.

Sanitation Wise Distribution		
Type	No. Of Respondents	Percentage
Kuccha	12	24%
Pucca	18	36%
Tinshed	16	32%
Open Feild	04	08%
Total	50	100%

Table 11

Source: Primary Data

Table-11 shows the scenario of sanitation system of the respondents' house. From the table, it is found that 8 percent of respondents use open field while 32 percent have tin shed latrine. 36 percent of respondents have pucca latrine and 24 percent have kuccha latrine.

<b>Kissan Credit Card Wise Distribution</b>		
<b>Opinion</b>	<b>No. Of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	08	16%
No	42	84%
<i>Total</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>100%</i>

Table 12

Source: Primary Data

Table 12 holds up that the majority of the respondents have no Kissan Credit Card, i.e., 84 percent while 08 respondents have KCC, i.e., 16 percent of the total respondents.

<b>Opinion on public Distribution System</b>		
<b>Satisfaction</b>	<b>No. Of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	17	34%
No	28	56%
Undecided	05	10%
<i>Total</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>100%</i>

Table 13

Source: Primary Data

Table 13 upholds the opinion of the respondents about public distribution system. It is found that majority of the respondents, i.e., 56 percent are not satisfied with the working of the system, while 34 percent are happy and satisfied with the same but 10% of the respondents are unable to decide.

<b>Opinion about the Selection of beneficiaries</b>					
<b>Sl. No.</b>		<b>Agree (No. Of Respondents)</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Disagree (No. Of Respondents)</b>	<b>%</b>
1	Beneficiaries are selected through the Panchayat with democratic process	40	80%	10	20%
2	No political interference is there in selection of the beneficiaries	42	84%	08	16%
3	Beneficiaries are selected in other way	8	16%	42	84%

Table 14

Source: Primary Data

Table 14 presents the positive attitude about the selection process of beneficiaries because 80 percent of the respondents have positive opinion about the selection of beneficiaries about different development programme while 16 percent of respondents feel that political interference is there in the selection process. Only 16 percent believe that the beneficiaries are selected in other way instead of democratic process.

<b>Opinion on the Satisfaction of Development works</b>					
<b>Sl. No.</b>		<b>Agree (No. Of Respondents)</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Disagree (No. Of Respondents)</b>	<b>%</b>
1	Beneficiaries are Satisfied with the working of KPS	30	60%	20	40%
2	Beneficiaries are Satisfied with the working of Gram Panchayat	40	80%	10	20%
3	Beneficiaries are Satisfied with the working of Govt. Officials	33	66%	17	34%
4	People have been benefited in different development programmes	38	76%	12	24%

Table 15

Source: Primary Data

From this table, it appears that 40 percent of the respondents are not satisfied with the working of KPS, while 80 percent are satisfied with the working of Gram Panchayats. 34 percent of the respondents are not satisfied with the working of Government officials while 76 percent opined that they have benefited from the different development programmes.

Success of Development Programmes		
Success	No. Of Respondents	Percentage
Mostly	25	50%
To some extent	15	30%
Not at all	10	20%
Total	50	100%

Table 16  
Source: Primary Data

Table-16 shows that majority of the respondents i.e. fifty percent believe that the rural development programmes are working successfully in the gram panchayat. However, 20 percent of the respondents have a negative attitude towards the development programs.

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that a large number of rural development programmes are smoothly running in this gram Panchayat for the socio- economic, development and eradication of rural poverty for the rural people. Official records claim that these programmes are functioning well and more or less can achieve the target. The data, available from the field survey also make it clear that majority people are satisfied with the functioning of the gram Panchayat to implement the projects and programmes those are introduced to the development of the rural masses. The present socio-economic conditions of them also support this claim. It is noticed that the common people much aware about the rural development programmes and the role of their local Panchayats. For example, they are not satisfied with the BPL list and the public distribution system. The common villagers become conscious about their health and sanitation also. However, it is noticed that early marriage is still there in that Gram Panchayat and it is expected that the newly introduced Kanyashree Scheme may help to stop the early marriages in the rural areas in all over the state. On the basis of the performance of the gram Panchayat, finally, it can be said that the Panchayat more or less act as the institution or agency of the rural development in India.

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