

‘Mission Antyodaya’ should not fall by the wayside

With the right momentum, the project can help transform rural India — in terms of development and social justice.

Economic development and social justice

1. The Indian Constitution mandates local governments to prepare and implement plans for ‘economic development and social justice (Articles 243G and 243W).
2. Several complementary institutions and measures such as the gram sabha to facilitate people’s participation, the District Planning Committee (DPC) to prepare bottom-up and spatial development plans, the State Finance Commission (SFC) to ensure vertical and horizontal equity, one-third reservation for women (in most States, now 50%), population-based representation to Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe communities, and so on were introduced to promote this goal.
3. Even so, India’s decentralization reforms (with no parallel in federal history) have failed to take the decentralization process forward in delivering social justice and progress in rural India.



Reimagining rural development

1. The traditional poverty line linked to the calorie-income measure, religiously pursued by the former Planning Commission with great academic support proved inane and failed to serve as a purposive policy tool.
2. Moreover, the revealing statistics brought into the public domain by the SocioEconomic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011 were ‘demanding’ remedial intervention.

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3. That 90% of rural households have no salaried jobs, 53.7 million households are landless, 6.89 million female-headed households have no adult member to support, 49% suffer from multiple deprivations, 51.4% derive sustenance from manual casual labour, 23.73 million are with no room or only one room to live, and so on cannot be easily dismissed by any democratic government.
4. Paradoxically, this happened in a country that spends more than ₹3 trillion every year for the rural poor from the Central and State Budgets and bank-credit linked self-help programmes. Indeed, the 'Mission Antyodaya' project was a needed intervention.

Mission Antyodaya

1. Given the right momentum, the 'Mission Antyodaya' project of the Government of India launched in 2017-18 (and cast in a convergence framework avowedly to eradicate poverty in its multiple dimensions among rural households) bears great promise to revive the objectives of these great democratic reforms.
2. The main objective of 'Mission Antyodaya' is to ensure optimum use of resources through the convergence of various schemes that address multiple deprivations of poverty, making gram panchayat the hub of a development plan.
3. This planning process (whose intellectual heritage is traced to the people's plan of Kerala) is supported by an annual survey that helps to assess the various development gaps at the gram panchayat level, by collecting data regarding the 29 subjects assigned to panchayats by the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution.
4. These subjects are broken down into 112 parameters for data collection using detailed questionnaires. Also, data regarding health and nutrition, social security, good governance, water management and so on are also collected.
5. The idea of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj to identify the gaps in basic needs at the local level, and integrate resources of various schemes, self-help groups, voluntary organizations and so on to finance them needs coordination and capacity-building of a high order.
6. If pursued in a genuine manner, this can foster economic development and inter-jurisdictional equity. Although two major reports, one on infrastructure

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and service gaps and the other on a composite index, have been in the public domain, they do not seem to have attracted public discussion.

Gaps in gram panchayats

1. The 'Mission Antyodaya' survey in 2019-20 for the first time collected data that shed light on the infrastructural gaps from 2.67 lakh gram panchayats, comprising 6.48 lakh villages with a 1.03 billion population.
2. The gap report and the composite index show in unmistakable terms that building economic development and social justice remains a distant goal even after 30 years of the decentralization reforms and nearly 75 years into Independence.

Rectify these lapses

1. The scope to reduce the growing rural-urban disparities is tremendous. Given the 'saturation approach' (100% targets on select items) of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, the possibilities of realizing universal primary health care, literacy, drinking water supply and the like are also immense.
2. But there is no serious effort to converge resources (the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the National Rural Livelihood Mission, National Social Assistance Programme, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, etc.) and save administrative expenses.
3. Another lapse is the failure to deploy the data to India's fiscal federalism, particularly to improve the transfer system and horizontal equity in the delivery of public goods in India at the sub-State level. Evidently, the Fifteenth Finance Commission has missed it.
4. The constitutional goal of planning and implementing economic development and social justice can be achieved only through strong policy interventions.
5. The policy history of India has witnessed the phenomenon of announcing big projects and failing to take them to their logical consequence. 'Mission Antyodaya' is a striking case in recent times.