

Progress in delivery of services: the case of rural west Bengal

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Abstract

Objective: The objective of the study is to examine the infrastructural development of rural West Bengal which has direct impact on quality of life of rural people.

Methods/Statistical Analysis: The study has used an array of three service facilities as the parameter of infrastructural development of rural West Bengal. They are: availability of safe drinking water, primary health facility and primary school facility. The selected facility services are having direct consequence on the quality of life of rural people. Progress in delivery of services has been measured through inter-temporal changes in the concerned service facilities. Time points considered are 2001 and 2014. Areas still identified as poor in supply of selected services has been demonstrated accordingly.

Findings: The distribution of selected service facilities in the year of 2001 in rural West Bengal has been meager. However, among these three services, in primary health sub centre facility remarkably poor condition has been found. The same situation persists in the concerned facility till date. Altogether six districts have been found to be poor performing in two or more selected facilities in 2001. They have been termed as major backward districts. These districts are Bankura, Birbhum, South Dinajpur, Murshidabad, South 24 Parganas and East Medinipur. As far as the decadal improvement across districts of rural West Bengal is concerned, it shows a mixed scenario. South Dinajpur district has been identified as consistently major backward (i.e. backward in both selected time points). Few districts such as Bankura, Birbhum, South 24 Parganas and Murshidabad have shown decadal improvements in delivery status of selected facilities while districts such as Maldah and West Medinipur have shown degraded performance. These two districts have been found to be major backward currently although not previously.

Improvements: It is an established fact that performance of any macro unit of observation (e.g. a district) is dependent on the performance of the micro units of observation (i.e. blocks of the concerned district). Hence, the task ahead is to identify the poor delivered blocks responsible for poor performance of the districts hence identified.

Keywords: Rural Development, Service Delivery, Major Backward, Infrastructural Development, Rural West Bengal

1. Introduction

India is a nation with full of villages out of which more than 50% are very poor by their socio-economic conditions. An important complication that arises for the nation of diverse minorities is majority of them live in rural areas. They need to be protected and promoted as they belong to socially and economically backward classes. Since independence many of the initiatives have been taken by government to improve living condition of villages across the nation. Rural development has always been made of key concern in all the consecutive five year plans [1]. A three tier system of Panchayati raj spreader from district to village had been created across nation with the objective of channelizing all development schemes through different levels of administration [2]. The study selects the state of West Bengal as the major focus area. With the population of about 9 million [3], out of which 72% of the population living in rural areas, West Bengal acted as a pioneering state in establishing decentralized service delivery institutions in its rural counterpart [4].

In addition to this, West Bengal is the only state where for 25 years rural local governments have functioned under the uninterrupted ruling of left government. The same practice is still getting continued in the newly started non-left regime.

The last two decades witnessed several meaningful steps taken by West Bengal government in rural development. The pioneering move towards decentralized service delivery institutions and participatory pro-people approaches were an attempt to activate public delivery system and organize the poor in demand of quality services. However, in spite of all these, the state of West Bengal lagged behind many other Indian states in developing a sustainable quality life for rural people.

2. Objective of the study

The present study intends to evaluate the availability of few selected rural essential services in the state of West Bengal considering districts as the units of observation. Since infrastructure facility, both physical and social, are the basic needs for rural development, the present study concentrates on the delivery of both physical and social infrastructure. The objective here is to trace the current status of the availability of selected variables across districts of West Bengal. In addition to this, an attempt has further been made to find out the decadal growth in performance of the districts across selected amenities.

These will help to identify the relative position of districts in delivery of selected services along with their status of improvement in delivery of the same.

The disparity thus found would be helpful to establish the fact that uniform policy direction towards development of rural West Bengal may not be sufficient to bring improvements at the macro level.

3. Data source and Methodology

The distributional status of the selected infrastructural facilities (physical and social) across the districts of West Bengal has been examined using district level statistical database [5-7]. For every variable, performance has been evaluated in terms of non-availability (i.e. deprivation) instead of availability (i.e. enjoyment). Hence it is improvement in performance when deprivation goes down.

These have helped to establish a comparative assessment of the districts in relation to the performance of the states across the selected amenities along with the decadal growth. For any selected facility, a district is identified as a developed one, when it occupies a position, equal to or better than the position of the state. Hence, as per level of deprivation the district concerned should have higher value to be identified as a backward one in the concerned amenity.

In the opposite case, the district is identified as a forward district. Further, a district has been identified as major backward one if the concerned district is found with backwardness in any two or all the selected facilities in any of the selected time points.

4. Delivery status of selected facilities across districts of West Bengal

The focus of the present subsection is to evaluate the availability of selected facilities across the districts of West Bengal for the two selected time points.

The exercise concentrates on identifying the relative position of the districts in terms of percentage of villages deprived of the selected facilities as shown in Table 1,2.

The following major observations do follow from Table 1,2.

1. There has been no major improvement in expansion of primary schools within the time period 2001-2014.
2. The deprivation in PHSC facility has been major. The improvement in the concerned facility also reveals a slow growth rate.
3. As far as the safe drinking water facility is concerned, the state does not show much improvement and deprivation accounts for more than 40% till date. Overall, it may be stated that the state requires additional resources to upgrade the level of social infrastructure especially for PHSC facility. Such concerted action will undoubtedly improve the position of the state at the all India level.

Table 1. Distribution (%) of villages deprived of selected amenities by districts of West Bengal (Rural), 2001

Districts	Primary school within village	PHSC within village	tap within village
BANKURA	31	93	96
BARDDHAMAN	15	83	88
BIRBHUM	29	94	95
D.DINAJPUR	39	91	95
HAORA	33	81	65
HUGLI	7	78	75
JALPAIGURI	16	82	88
KOCH BIHAR	7	75	70
MALDAH	23	83	86
MEDINIPUR(E)	31	90	97
MEDINIPUR(W)	36	88	91
MURSHIDABAD	48	93	94
NADIA	31	84	94
N.24PARGANAS	16	90	90
PURULIYA	13	81	86
S.24 PARGANAS	21	94	96
U.DINAJPUR	17	78	91
West Bengal	31	89	92

Source: Census of India, 2001

Note: (i). Villages are identified as deprived if the facility is not available within the village territory
(ii). Figures have been rounded off (iii). The district Darjeeling has been excluded from computation

5. Major Findings

The varied performance of the state among the set of selected three basic amenities guides us to decide priority of attention. For improving the performance of the state as a whole, it is rational and useful to identify poor performing units at the sub-state level and pay utmost attention to those areas.

In the present section we intend to find out the status of districts in terms of backwardness. In doing so, districts have been categorized in three ways as shown in Table 3.

The findings could be presented as follows:

1. Consistently Major Backward: The district Dakshin Dinajpur has been found to be consistently major backward i.e. backward in two or more selected facilities in both the selected time points.
2. Previously Major Backward but not Currently: Here, the districts are Bankura, Birbhum, S24 paragon and Murshidabad. This districts demonstrate better position as they showed improvements in the delivery status of the selected facilities in the past few years.
3. Currently Major Backward but not Previously: Two districts such as Maldahand W. Medinipur have been identified to be worse off in terms of the delivery status of the selected facilities. These are the districts which need special attention.

Table 2. Distribution (%) of villages deprived of selected amenities by districts of West Bengal (Rural), 2014

Districts	Primary School	Primary Health Sub-Centre	Drinking Water
BANKURA	20	88	39
BARDDHAMAN	8	75	14
BIRBHUM	18	83	35
D.DINAJPUR	26	88	22
HAORA	3	67	87
HUGLI	9	77	13
JALPAIGURI	5	52	14
KOCH BIHAR	15	74	34
MALDAH	24	80	84
MEDINIPUR(E)	13	81	34
MEDINIPUR(W)	40	91	20
MURSHIDABAD	20	75	94
NADIA	12	76	32
N.24PARGANAS	4	65	65
PURULIYA	16	86	30
S.24 PARGANAS	8	69	76
U.DINAJPUR	11	80	81
West Bengal	20	81	41

Source: State Statistical Handbook, 2014

- Note: (i) Villages are identified as deprived if the facility is not available within the village territory
(ii) Figures have been rounded off.
(iii) The district Darjeeling has been excluded from computation.
(iv) As per data availability, inspite of tap water, coverage of safe drinking water facility has been considered

Table 3. Performance of districts by selected criteria

Status of backwardness	Districts
Consistently Major Backward	Dakshin Dinajpur
Previously Major Backward but not Currently	Bankura, Birbhum, S24 Praganas, Murshidabad
Currently Major Backward but not Previously	Maldah, West Medinipur

Source:- Self computation

6. Conclusion

The optimism of public policies is not sufficient to be realized only through the statutory provisions. There is the need to bring structural changes that would weaken socio-economic strength of elites in villages and preserve the voice of rural poor in formulation and execution of rural developmental projects. Much more representation of the poor in local governance with minimized role of top level bureaucrats is in demand to have a break from past. The role of central government in participatory rural development could be best defined as advisory in nature.

The local self-governing institutions should be capable enough to effectively formulate plans as per local needs and tap resources to materialize the projects successfully. Other way, if the state government is not serious about decentralizing powers to sublevel authorities then it would simply end up with few inappropriate and insufficient plans along with funds released on ad hoc basis.

However, the success in rural development ultimately depends on the way our polity responds to the decentralized initiatives. To achieve sustained economic development especially in rural areas of West Bengal, special emphasis should be put on generating a more balanced and equitable rural society.

Hence, the task ahead is to pay more attention through increased allocation of resources towards up liftmen of the identified vulnerable and needy areas. Policy suggestions to facilitate these areas would have to be formulated accordingly.

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