

BOOK REVIEW

Socio-economic Profile of Rural India, Volume- I of the Series - III, edited by C. Ashokvardhan and Varunendra Vikram Singh, Concept Publishing Company (P) Ltd, New Delhi, pp. 456, Price: ₹ 1600.

The book under review is a compilation of field data collected from the rural areas of Haryana, Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh during the training period by the trainee officers of Indian Administrative Service (IAS). However, the basic ingredients of these State papers are borrowed from the village study reports. Undoubtedly, the State papers are of high quality because they are enriched by inputs from the long-experiences of the State specific authors in the field of rural development.

The introduction of the book gives an overview of the study area and a panoramic view of the villages in it encompassing sectors like agriculture, horticulture, livestock, rural development, education, health, employment, skill development, etc. Each paper presents a detailed analysis of the rural scenario of the respective State.

The State paper on Haryana examines the strengths and problems in the process of implementation of various socio-economic development schemes in the villages. It clearly states that in Haryana, villages located in remote places improved their physical infrastructure in a better manner. Almost all the villages are electrified, connected with neighbouring towns with good roads and every village has a school but quality of infrastructure and services need to be improved. The authors of the paper observe

that the resource base of the gram panchayats should be strengthened in order to take more initiatives by them to empower the community and drive towards economic prosperity.

The paper dealing with the State of Punjab discusses about the socio-economic development of rural Punjab. It gives evidences on the process of transition of rural areas of the State, i.e., large-scale shift of subsistence or commercial agriculture to non-farm business activities both by the cultivators and farm labourers. The State government has been implementing a number of welfare and development schemes to improve the conditions of rural people especially in the sectors of health, education, poverty alleviation, etc.

The State paper of Jammu & Kashmir highlights the resources available in the sectors of agriculture and horticulture and activities carried out towards rural development in a detailed manner. In this paper, the author clearly explains the rural socio-economic scenario with status of infrastructure, agriculture, social structure, livelihood activities of the people and implementation of development programmes and state of Panchayati Raj system in Jammu and Kashmir.

The paper on Rajasthan portrays the rural picture of the State. According to it, nearly 80 percent of the rural population of the State is engaged in agriculture, but systematic reforms at village level are required across all sectors. The paper also contains 10 case studies on the achievements of women leaders. The case studies illustrate their contribution for the development of the

villages through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and also the challenges faced by them. The paper further discusses the situation of rural poverty in detail and explains the reasons. It advises to evolve appropriate strategies for improving the standard of living of rural people. It finally concludes that despite constraints like scarcity of resources and natural calamities the State is striving for the upliftment of rural masses.

The State paper on Himachal Pradesh gives the socio-economic profile of the State.

The editors of the book state that the objective of fast, inclusive and sustainable growth depends on the development of human capabilities. India has the advantage of having significant percentage of youth population. To reap this demographic dividend, the country has to ensure that the youth are engaged in the productive sectors with higher levels of education and skills. Addressing the quality issues in our schools is critical for an effective development of human capabilities and also for achieving the objective of equality of opportunities. Proper development of human capabilities will also ensure that our growth is more inclusive in the sense that the marginalised and disadvantaged sections of our society will be more able to access the opportunities thrown up by the growth process.

Building the capabilities of institutions like PRIs and ULBs (Urban Local Bodies) is need of the hour. There is a mismatch between the demand for training of rural local bodies and training and manpower development initiatives undertaken by the government. Delivery of public services in many States is

hampered due to weak institutional capacity. So greater involvement of citizens' organisations can help the government to identify problem areas and work out appropriate strategies.

In regard to growth of agriculture, there are evidences that land productivity has been improved through creating water harvesting structures in the lands of small and marginal farmers through MGNREGS works which also helped them to slowly revert back to agriculture and allied activities for livelihoods. MGNREGS is enabling crop diversification particularly in horticulture.

Data relating to education and health from the study States indicate that the vision of rapid, sustainable and more inclusive growth is getting materialised. In the areas of gender neutrality and inclusiveness, a number of States have mandated for 50 per cent reservation for women in PRIs and efforts are on to involve women in the planning process at the grassroot level. But a review of SHG interventions is needed to determine how SHGs could better serve the interests of poor women and suggest changes required in the overall SHG policy framework.

The social inclusion process in the country provides opportunities to participate in the development process by all the marginalised groups facing acute poverty, especially the SCs and STs. It was reported that, even though the incidence of poverty among these groups declined over the years, it remains higher than the national average in case of SCs and STs. Over the years, several steps have been taken to bridge the gap between these marginalised groups and rest of the population. But reality proves that gaps still persist and further efforts are needed.

The conclusion chapter of the book further reveals that in recent years there has been a steady decrease in all kinds of common lands and pastures, village forests and ponds or even burial grounds. These are due to diversion of CPRs for urbanisation, industrial use, mining, homestead and development

process. There is a need for building greater public awareness in this sector. People's perspective on CPRs should be thoroughly understood and taken into consideration while designing public interventions.

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