

Rural Idle human resource is the Toll for the development of Nation- a study

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Abstract

A major concern of planning in this country has been, and must remain, the proper utilisation of manpower for economic growth and for providing gainful employment to the population in the working age-group. While setting the objective of fuller employment the consideration of economic welfare has also been kept in mind since, because of the very size of the work-force in our country, it will never be possible to provide workers an adequate living except by giving them gainful jobs to do. In spite of all the concern with the problem, this is precisely the field in which planning has made the least impact. The fact of mounting unemployment is too well known to need any elaborate statistical evidence.

Yet to suggest the broad dimensions of the problem, one may mention that the Second Plan began with a backlog of 5.3 million unemployed. At the beginning of the Third Plan, unemployment, rural and urban, was reckoned at 8 million. There has been an addition of 17 million to the country's labour-force during the Third Plan period. But employment opportunities created do not seem to have exceeded 13 million.

Thus 4 million more unemployed have been added to the backlog of 8 million with which the Third Plan started, making a total of 12 million. Nor is there in the draft of the Fourth Plan any evidence to suggest that a significant dent will be made on the backlog of unemployment. According to its framers, the Plan would be considered a success if it could provide jobs to the new entrants to laborforce, numbering about 23 million. The lack of gainful opportunities for employment is common both to the urban as well as rural areas, though the nature and characteristics of the employment problem differ in the two areas.

The acuteness of unemployment in urban areas becomes obvious because a large part of the anemometric is overt. The problem is not less serious in the rural areas where most of the unemployment is in the guise of under-employment coupled with meagre purchasing power. Of the total rural work-force, numbering nearly 162. million workers (in 1961), about 79 per cent were engaged in agricultural activities. Of these, nearly 60 per cent were cultivators and 19 per cent agricultural labourers. Of the rest about 6 per cent got employment in household and cottage industries, and the remaining 15 per cent, were engaged in construction, trade, commerce and service, etc.

Key words: social menace, human resource, development, rural, urban.

Introduction

To provide adequate employment to this labour-force needs very careful planning. There are economic as well as social factors which have to be given due recognition in any attempt at rural manpower utilisation. The unemployment or under-employment situation among different categories of rural workers differs as it does from one industrial category to another. The problem, therefore, has to be disaggregated. Cultivators Should Stick to Farming From data collected during the Farm Management Surveys in eight States, Maharashtra, Madras, Punjab, U P, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Bihar, it seems that on an average effective work on the farm ranges from 100 to 250 standard days (of 8 hours). The number of

days in a year when the farm family worker is unemployed ranges from 100 to 150 standard days. It will be wrong to conclude from this data that most farm family labourers will be available for off-farm jobs for all these days.

This is because the days of unemployment are arrived at after totalling the hours of employment each day and converting them into standard days of eight hours. To these are added hours (converted in to standard days) spent on social activities and hours (again converted in to standard days) when the respondent was not available for work due to sickness, etc. The residual figure is considered as the unemployment during the year. Therefore, they should be considered as available for any type of un-skilled work.

Thus, hours of unemployment are spread practically through-out the working days of the year though with differing intensity. It is not as if a continuous period of 100 to 150 days is available for off-the-farm jobs. Even if it were possible to have a continuous period of 100 to 150 days of unemployment it is doubtful if the cultivators would opt for off-the-farm employment if they could help it. Several studies by the different AgroEconomic Research Centres, other institutions and scholars clearly show that from the social point of view cultivators above the rank of marginal farmers, the latter being strictly agricultural labourers rather than cultivators, consider it "beneath them" to offer themselves for non farm employment, specially in construction type of activities. Even if they accept employment in the cottage industries during the intermittent periods of unemployment, it is doubtful if it would be of much avail. Even in these traditional industries it is desirable to aim at skill formation which comes with continuous work on a job for a long period of time.

Off-and on employment in a traditional industry will not be of much help to farmers economically nor will it expand the pool of skills in the industry. What is worse, it may affect the efficiency of agricultural operations adversely.

Objective:

This paper intends to look into the importance of rural human resource and elucidate the passivity of the human resource is a great misfortune of the nation.

Human resource employability: the utility and device

For the present, however, the employment opportunities as well as wage-levels of these workers are directly related to the profitability of agriculture in the particular area. Agricultural labour faces a continuous period of unemployment which more or less, coincides with the slack season in agriculture. The duration of the slack season in various parts of the country ranges from two to eight months depending largely upon irrigation and the crop pattern. For the larger part of the country, the latter figure is more relevant; it also indicates, broadly, the period of unemployment faced by agricultural labourers. The continuous period of unemployment spread practically through the slack season facilitates mobilisation of this work-force for gainful employment. The above characteristics of agricultural labour provide certain guidelines for a programme of utilisation of this section of rural manpower. The programme devised has to be, perforce, highly labour intensive. It should be dispersed in such a way that it is within walking distance of the population it seeks to cover.

This condition is particularly necessary to overcome inertia and apathy. It should be a programme which can be completed within the duration of the slack season in the particular region and should strengthen agriculture. It will have an indirect impact on underemployment of cultivators and will promise fuller employment to labour in agriculture. Of course, in the choice of programmes a degree of flexibility will have to be maintained, depending largely on the population and the area

to be covered. Failure of Rural Works Since 1960-61 a Rural Works programme has been in operation with more or less the same objectives as I have mentioned above. This programme unfortunately has not met with any perceptible success. As against the target of providing employment for 100 days to 2.5 million workers in the Third Plan, total employment generated till 1964-65 is not more than 3.5 lakhs. It is envisaged that during the fourth Plan, the programme will receive high priority. More than 1,500 blocks are likely to be covered and something like Rs 250 crores will be spent on it. The target is to provide 5 million rural workers employment for 100 days by the end of the Plan.

This target in itself seems quite impressive, but in view of the dimensions of the problem of unemployment and under-employment even if it is fulfilled it will bring only modest relief. It is all the more necessary, therefore, that rigorous standards should be set in coverage of population, selection of areas and choice of projects. It follows from what has been said above that agricultural labourers qualify for this type of programme more than any other section of rural population. Therefore, the existence of a large number of agricultural labourers should be the most important criterion for the selection of areas. Similarly, the projects selected should be such as create the potential for future development of the region and fuller employment of labour so that the programme does not remain merely a relief programme but becomes an economic programme in the true sense of the term. The selection of the projects will be conditioned by several considerations, viz, they should be labour-intensive, quick maturing, and, preferably, conducive to development of more intensive agriculture in the area. There is another aspect which also should be kept in mind, namely the objective of skill-formation. The programme should be so devised that at least the elementary skills, e.g. those of masons, brick-layers, ordinary surveyors, etc, should be imparted to the workers on the site, so that the programme will be helpful in transforming the outlook of the participants and in enhancing their capacities. Development of organisational skills and leadership should also find a suitable place in the programme.

Programme pace and the economy

As the programme is phased over five years, it should be the aim that at least in the later years the skilled or semi-skilled workers needed are recruited and trained from among the workers who came to work in the earlier years. In this connection it will be worthwhile to experiment with a labour crop employed all the year round in the construction of works of quick-maturing nature. This crop should be organised in those areas where the problem of surplus agricultural labour is particularly acute. In such areas it may happen that the prospects for intensive agriculture and consequent increase in agricultural labour requirement may not be there and so structural changes in the economy have to be initiated.

This will be facilitated by a labour crop working all through the year in construction projects and attracting to their ranks even the small and marginal farmers who may, if assured year-round employment, dispose of their tiny bits of land. In this way the programme can indirectly help in initiating radical structural changes. There is no desire to deprive agriculture of its normal labour requirements. Artisan Classes Another important group whose labour-time can be utilised for development is that of the artisans and craftsmen. They constitute about 6.1 per cent of the total rural labour-force. They pursue a number of crafts, most of which have not received any direct aid or support from government or quasi-government agencies. It is for this group that the programme of cottage and rural industries should be specially oriented. The artisans have the tradition of such activity behind them. The identification of occupation with caste is still a real phenomenon in the rural areas. It will be difficult to interest any major group in the rural areas in rural industries with as much ease as the artisan castes. Further, they can pursue these activities exclusively and round the year which, again, no other group in the rural areas will be able

to do. The advantage of the year round pursuit of one particular activity as against division of interest has already been pointed out. Third, the artisans have the elementary skills for the type of industries which can be developed with little effort and attention.

Wherever small scale or cottage industries have developed rapidly the artisan castes have been the first to take the advantage of them, In Punjab and in parts of Gujarat where such industries are becoming important the artisan castes have taken the lead. Finally, a class of people fully devoted to and specialising in small industries in the villages will also help, indirectly, in encouraging farmers to use ordinary mechanical appliances which can supplement human and bullock labour more fully since the servicing and minor repair of these appliances will no longer be a deterrent.

With a majority of the population living in rural areas in India, rural development is key to the development of the country. Based on his experience of working closely with the district administration in Purulia district in West Bengal, Pushkar Pahwa discusses the issues in the implementation of rural development programmes on the ground, and makes suggestions to improve their effectiveness.

In a predominantly rural country like India the importance of rural development in driving the nation's development cannot be overemphasised. At present, there are a number of ambitious rural development programmes in place. In this article, I analyse the issues in the implementation of rural development programmes¹, based on my experience of working closely with the district administration in Purulia district of West Bengal and with the beneficiaries of programmes at the grassroots level. I also make suggestions to ensure better implementation and results.

Credit linkage under NRLM: Forced or demand-based?

The National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) is a poverty alleviation programme of the Ministry of Rural Development that aims to bring at least one woman from each poor, rural household into the self-help group (SHG) network, and enable them to access gainful self-employment and wage employment opportunities by providing them with microfinance. An important component of NRLM is bank linkage of women SHGs to ensure access to hassle-free loans and other banking products and services for livelihood activities, which they lack individually because of their poor economic status. However, the emphasis is merely on achieving the annual targets² of the number of SHGs provided with cash credit by each bank branch in the district, and not on the effective usage of these loans. What is often ignored is the difference between 'forced lending' and 'demand-based lending'. Due to a lack of micro planning, the loan money is often used for unproductive purposes rather than for undertaking a remunerative semi-skilled/skilled activity. The focus on achieving the annual target in the last quarter of the financial year further contributes to the 'forced' nature of the credit linkage.

As a result many SHGs fail to make timely repayments. This is a lose-lose situation as on the one hand, it leads to an increase in Non-Performing Assets (NPA) of the banks, which in turn makes them reluctant to further lend to this segment; on the other hand, the SHGs become debt-ridden due to unwise use of loans.

Skill training under NRLM: End in itself?

To fulfil the livelihood training objective of NRLM, many trainings for skill development are organised by the district administration to enable SHGs to undertake skilled and high-income activities such as tailoring, incense stick making, gardening, running canteens etc. With a sound business proposal it becomes easier for them to 'cajole' bank managers to approve their loan proposals.

However it is a sad fact that instead of being a means to enhanced income and improve livelihood, the trainings merely become an end in themselves with neither side taking the learnings forward to ensure that the trainings result in successful livelihood projects.

MNREGA: Guidelines vs. practice

Huge gaps exist in the implementation of programmes vis-à-vis their guidelines. For instance, the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE) guidelines for preparing labour budgets³ under MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) mandate that the block planning teams responsible for conducting household surveys should have a female member who would be the representative of upa sangha (women SHGs representative body at the gram sansad⁴ level) to ensure convergence between MNREGA and IPPE. However, the actual composition of planning teams is not uniform across blocks and in many cases female representatives are missing. This leads to the question of how participatory, in reality, the IPPE has been?

Lack of wider community participation in preparing social and resource maps⁵ as a part of the IPPE exercise, as mandated by the guidelines, again lead to the exclusion of demands of the most vulnerable.

Human resource crisis: Cliché or reality?

Often human resource shortage is cited as the reason behind poor development in remote and conflict-affected areas. While it is true to an extent that the district administration in difficult areas is constrained by the lack of manpower, what is of concern is how efficiently the existing human resources are utilised.

In this context, I would like to mention the ambitious fellowship programme of the Ministry of Rural Development called Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellowship (PMRDF). The PMRDFs are highly qualified and self-motivated young professionals appointed for a period of 2-3 years to work as development catalysts with district administrations in the most backward districts in the country. The fellows are completely at the disposal of the district magistrate who can involve them in any works related to rural development.

With manpower crunch, it is expected that the PMRDFs would be 'utilised' well by the district magistrates in planning, execution and monitoring of various works in the district. However in reality, there is a huge disparity in the way the PMRDFs are being treated by the district administration and how they function. While in some districts that are led by motivated and proactive district magistrates, the PMRDFs have made significant contributions to the district administration, in many other districts, they are not being utilised as per their calibre and have ended up as glorified clerks preparing note sheets.

Another area of concern in this context is the quality of training imparted to the cadre of workers appointed to work at the grassroots level. For example, in Purulia district of West Bengal, there has been a lot of recruitment of ground staff under NRLM in the past year. These include community service providers (CSP), sangha coordinators⁶ (SC) and district-level trainers (DLT), who are the key players in ensuring the success of the programme. However due to lack of effective training programmes for the staff and no objective performance appraisal format, they are hardly able to make significant value addition. Also, many a times even the efficient and motivated personnel are removed due to personal vendetta or political considerations leading to failure of the programme. For example, a pilot project of the West Bengal government called Muktidhara, which aimed at improving livelihoods, suffered badly in Purulia district when the employment contract of the district project manager was not renewed despite the existing manpower crunch - leaving the project leaderless.

Another aspect is the lack of awareness of the district administration of the presence of a cadre of motivated community personnel who have been well-trained in best practices by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In Purulia district, there exist a large number of Mahila kisans (MKs)⁷ who have been trained by the NGO Lok Kalyan Parishad (LKP) under the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP)⁸ in modern agricultural practices and organic farming. There is also a cadre of female farmers trained in dryland agricultural practices by NGO PRADAN. However, the presence of both of these is limited to the areas where NGOs are working in partnership with the district administration and no efforts have been made to replicate their success in other areas by conducting trainings with the already trained MKs as master trainers.

Therefore, ensuring more efficient utilisation of the talent available with the district administrations would contribute immensely to better implementation of development projects.

Way forward

A common thread in the issues outlined above is the lack of an efficient leader. With most government officers considering posting in backward areas as punishment postings, the attitude is that there is nothing more to lose by not performing. So ironically, while we should be having the best and highly motivated officers to accelerate the process of development in hitherto underdeveloped areas, what we actually have is a cadre of uninterested officers waiting for their punishment postings to get over. Thus, what is needed is to transform these so called punishment postings to prized postings, which attract the best of talent to such areas. This can be done by offering additional perks like hardship allowances or by assuring more sought after postings after the officers have served well in such areas for a minimum period.

Unburden the district magistrate

The office of the district magistrate in most of the backward districts combines within itself the functions of revenue, development and law and order, which overburdens the district magistrate, leaving little time for development administration. Thus, the district magistrate tends to only focus on developmental issues that he/she considers more important and the whole direction of development is steered as per his/her priorities. It is high time that the principle of division of work is adhered to and the district magistrate unburdened by appointing a separate district-level officer as the executive head of the Panchayati Raj body for overseeing development administration in the district.

Conclusion

For formulating any practical programme of utilisation of rural manpower for development, it is necessary to take a disaggregated view of the rural unemployment and underemployment situation. The characteristics of the problem and consequently the solutions offered differ from one class to another and have to be viewed in the specific context of the locality and the region. The broad policy approach suggested is to encourage the cultivators to go for more intensive cultivation and supplement it by dairying and similar activities. For agricultural labourers a programme on the lines of the rural works programme included in the Third Plan with a portfolio of quick maturing projects, which also help make intensive agricultural possible, for each locality, is proposed. The programme must provide for training which may lead to formation of elementary skills and development of organisational abilities. For the . artisan class it is proposed that they should be covered by a programme of rural industries which takes into account their existing skills and develops them further while providing them remunerative employment round the year.

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