

Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) and its Role in BTAD (Assam)

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Abstract: The role of democratic institutions in empowering local people has also been highlighted in development literature. One observation is that the current structures do not provide public institutions with sufficient authority to deal with rural people in ways that promote better performance. The question "what is local government?" is difficult to answer. Local government is defined as government by publicly elected bodies charged with administrative and executive duties in matters affecting the residents of a specific district or location, as well as the authority to enact bye-laws for their direction. The study covers an overall scenario about the VCDC as local self-government in the BTAD area.

Keywords: VCDC, Local self-government, Administration, Public policies, Execution, Peoples' participation

Introduction

India is a rural country. Rural India is home to more than half of India's population. Since the dawn of time, India's rural areas have been impoverished. The development of villages in India has been a difficult endeavour due to the multi-faceted nature of the issues, which vary in severity from place to place, and the huge areas that must be covered with large quantities. Development in India has been a complicated phenomenon that has impacted different facets of people's socioeconomic and political lives (Basumatary, 2017). In terms of rural development, the topic has garnered a lot of popularity in recent years. This is largely due to the way development challenges were perceived in the first place. During the post-war era, the emergence of a new paradigm in development theory reduced the old view of development. Dissatisfaction among development theorists with the way traditional concepts of development emphasised growth while ignoring issues of distributive justice and other dimensions of development is partly a result of this disillusionment, but it is also due to a growing recognition of the importance of rural development in facilitating the overall development process (Hakhrari, 2020).

The history of rural development in India provides a comprehensive picture of the country's progress. In India, rural development has been referred to as "Integrated Development" in a wide sense. It refers to the concept of all-round development of rural areas and the people who live there by making the most use of local resources, both physical and human (Borah, 2020). It involves progress in all aspects of human life, including social, economic, political, and cultural aspects. The government has been working to improve the political and socioeconomic situations of rural populations, as stated by the government: "Rural poverty alleviation has been the key focus in the country's economic planning and development process... The elimination of poverty in rural areas can lead to an overall enhancement in the general quality of life in rural areas, which is known as rural development (Basumatary, 2018).

Given the need for rural development, the value of local self-government as a means of altering rural areas was deemed desirable. Local self-government is a critical institution that has the potential to alter rural communities. In rural areas, the local self-government is in charge of implementing development initiatives, including district plans, and holds them accountable through administrative oversight. People in particular places can take greater engagement in the effective execution of rural development projects through local self-government. Democratic decentralisation became possible as a result of local self-government (Basumatary, 2018).

VCDC stands for Village Council Development Committee, and it is a local self-government organisation based in BTAD. In BTAD, it is a grassroots level government that serves as an alternative to village Panchayats. VCDC, as a local government body, is in charge of putting development programmes into action at the grassroots level. Village Panchayat is the equivalent of VCDC. VCDC, as a village development committee, plays an important role in implementing government projects in the villages. VCDC has been operational at the base since 2006, three years after the BTC was established in 2003. As we all know, local government plays a critical role in rural development; therefore, the study's goal is to look into the function of VCDC in rural development in BTAD (Basumatary & Panda, 2019). Rural development is a notion that incorporates the total social, economic, political, and cultural development of rural areas. It also evaluates the villages' socio - economic and political progress. Improvements in village facilities, rural household income, and rural education and health are all indicators of rural development. Local governments play an important part in the process of achieving rural development (Bodo, 2017).

In the development literature, the relevance of democratic institutions in empowering local people has also been highlighted. One view is that the difficulty with current systems is that public institutions are unable to achieve a reasonable level of autonomy in

order to interact with rural people in ways that improve performance. There is a perception that local government structures are unable to adequately respond to the socio-economic functions that they are expected to perform, despite the fact that decentralisation was intended to promote and address socio-economic issues that arose from the need for effectiveness and efficiency.

Statement of the Problem

In developing countries, rural development is a crucial notion. Since independence, India's government has prioritised the country's overall growth. Rural areas must be developed for a country's overall growth. Poverty is still a persistent problem in India, affecting over a third of the country's rural population. Absence of availability of productive assets and financial resources is a primary cause of poverty among India's rural population, both individually and collectively. Furthermore, rural residents face high levels of illiteracy, poor health care, and restricted access to social services. As a result, rural development has become a major component of the country's overall growth. More than two-thirds of the country's population is now reliant on agriculture for a living, with one-third of rural India still living in poverty. As a result, it is critical for the government to be productive and give sufficient resources to improve their standard of living.

"Role of VCDC in rural development in BTAD, ASSAM" is the research problem for this study. This research focuses on the activities of the VCDC (Village Council Development Committee) in attaining rural development, as well as the composition of the VCDC, as well as the nomination procedure for VCDC chairmen and members.

Limitation of the Study

In this study there are some limitations to covering all the aspects of VCDC as well as BTAD districts. Because it is impossible to write everything in a single research paper, each study will always have some limitations. It's also impossible to discuss all of the VCDC difficulties and aspects that are prevalent in BTAD (ASSAM) locations.

Significance of the Study

The study's goal is to evaluate VCDC's activities to see if the organisation is capable of implementing and implementing rural development plans and policies. The study's findings are intended to boost rural empowerment, poverty reduction, infrastructure enhancement, and living standards through the implementation of various VCDC plans. In light of VCDC's application of democratic decentralisation, the study becomes pertinent. The role of local governments in grass-roots development is critical. It's also significant because it'll look into the nomination process as well as male and female representation in VCDC.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the structure and the formation of the VCDC
- To study about the role of VCDC in the BTAD area
- To evaluate the schemes, policies and it's implemented in the area
- To find out the major problems and challenges of VCDC as local government

Methodology

The term "method" refers to the various approaches for gathering evidence regarding the social environment. The study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods. Subjective evaluation of attitudes, views, and behaviour is the focus of qualitative research. It mostly consists on verbal information rather than measurements. Focus group discussion and observation are employed in qualitative method interviews. Quantitative analysis is a formal, objective, and systematic method of obtaining information about a subject by analysing numerical data. In quantitative research, the researcher employs the survey method and an interview questionnaire to collect data from the chosen area. The researcher used both qualitative and quantitative methods in the analysis.

For the study, the researcher used both primary and secondary data sources. With the use of an interview questionnaire, the researcher gathered primary data from face-to-face interaction, group discussion, and observation with the study population. Secondary data is information that has previously been acquired and analysed by another person. The researcher gathered data from books and websites, as well as secondary data from the VCDC chairmen and village heads, including the number of households, total population of the family, and number of people living below the poverty line, as well as data on rural development schemes, policies, and facilities.

Review of Literature

Eminent Indian researchers have performed a variety of studies on poverty, rural development, and the function of local government in India. Here are some notable research findings on rural development and local government.

According to Jagadish and Kiron (1989) as mentioned in their study, there have been various initiatives to enhance the socio-economic status of Nepal's rural inhabitants since the country's revolutionary political changes in 1951. As a result, various rural development approaches have been developed and tested. This research shows that IRD programmes in Nepal, which began in 1975, have had no positive influence on the socio-economic position of the rural poor. According to the report, the performance of IRD programmes in Nepal could not be considered good.

A Research on the administrative aspects of rural development was done by H.R. Chaturvedi and S.K. Mitra in 1982. The study's main goal was to look into the nature and scope of citizen participation in rural development. The writers chose two districts from two different states. According to them, people's participation in such activities, particularly through local governments or panchayat raj institutions, is critical to achieving rural development.

Harijan M.F. attempted to investigate the effect of panchayat raj systems in the empowerment of landless peasants in West Bengal in his study (2001). As the study's findings reveal, there is a link between the role of the panchayat raj system in the empowerment of landless cultivators.

According to Ghosh (1967), close involvement of elected representatives in development initiatives is encouraged. On the other hand, rural development is more than just a collection of government assistance programmes. Each programme has its own set of goals and objectives for the development of people in rural areas.

According to Kothari (1991), development programmes had only scratched the surface, and a micro-planning strategy was needed to solve the multi-faceted problems of rural India.

According to Singh (1995), rural development has received a lot of attention from all political parties and governments at both the national and state levels. Even in the planning phase at the national level, it is given top priority. Almost all emerging countries have a large rural population, with a large number of people living in poverty. In this case, the government's attention is critical; otherwise, non-governmental groups will be forced to enter the crisis to educate and put-up welfare measures for the people's growth. There is also a need to establish a link between rural residents and development organisations.

According to Mishra (2016), Panchayati Raj institutions have played a vital role in monitoring rural development programmes. These institutions have aided in the identification of true beneficiaries in order to maximise the benefits of various schemes. Priority has been given to reserved castes and tribes, women, weaker groups, and the upliftment of backward areas under the initiatives. The failure of these rural development programmes is also due to a multitude of roadblocks, restrictions, and flaws. In order to develop the panchayati raj institutions in India, elected representatives from panchayats must exercise supervision and control over government personnel, i.e., serve the Panchayats rather than play a supporting role. As a result, it is critical to educate local leaders on their legitimate role in nation building and country governance. The Gram Sabhas should be extensively involved in the formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the Gram Panchayats' development projects.

The adoption of rural development programmes through Panchayat Raj Institutions has resulted in a drastic transformation in the economic factors of the rural tribal people in the study village, according to Kumari (2018). The execution of rural development programmes has had an impact on people's social and political lives. These programmes have influenced an improvement in the village's economic position in the economic field.

Bora (1992) discovered that the IRDP enhanced the income and employment of landless and marginal agricultural recipients significantly. He believed that the IRDP had a favourable impact on income and job creation. However, the analysis demonstrates that a significant number of beneficiary households are living in poverty. In Assam, the IRDP is being implemented entirely by government agencies, with no participation from grassroots organisations.

In his paper "Rural Employment Programmes in Assam," Adhyapok (1999) concluded that poverty alleviation, employment, and income generation for rural people through rural development programmes might be considered strategic strategy for the development of the rural economy. The findings of this study suggested that beneficiaries of self-employment and wage employment schemes should be selected in a systematic manner by rural development programme implementers at the grassroots level. It should be highlighted that those who benefited from one or more of these programmes were able to escape poverty. These programmes should be implemented in the context of a developing economy, with a particular focus on poverty alleviation and the provision of income and employment for the poor.

Conceptual Framework

Local Government in India

India has the honour of being the world's unique federal republic. Federalism is usually divided into two levels, with the first being the central/union government and the second being the state/provincial government. The Indian constitution, on the other hand, establishes a three-tier federal system, with the Union Government at the top. State Government in Middle, and grassroots i.e Panchayats and Municipalities. As a result, in India, local government is the third tier of government, with the central and state governments being the first two. India is regarded for having the largest democracy in the world. Democracy, in the constitutional sense, is a form of government in which every adult citizen of the country has a direct or indirect role in its administration. Local government is an essential aspect of governance and administration in India, keeping in mind the true spirit and high ideals of democracy.

The division of labour principle underpins the institutions of local government. They are necessary because they allow the government and local governments to share responsibilities. From the outside, the administration lacks the vitalizing ability to be accountable to the public. It is unable to comprehend the genius of the location. As a result, local government is possibly more educational than any other branch of government. The Indian constitution intends to construct a welfare state, and strengthening local government can help to ensure that this goal is met. In principle and practise, the social services of the modern state are primarily municipal in nature, due to the need for a flexible administration style.

The relevance of local government can be shown in the preservation of democracy. If democracy is to work efficiently, it must promote and give opportunities for as many citizens as possible to take an ongoing interest in its operations and issues. People must work with considerable patience and effort in a democracy. In the long term, we may find that progress made through democratic procedures is more stable and robust than progress made by dictatorial techniques. People should believe in democracy, which is

the same as believing in themselves. People can more easily acquire faith via experience working in democratic organisations because faith supports people's patience.

Local Government in BTAD Assam

Assam has six autonomous councils, two of which were established after the 1990s and are known as Hill Autonomous Councils. The Plain Autonomous Councils (RAC, LAC, SKAC, MAC) and Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (N C Hills) are among them, as are the Karbi Anglong Autonomous (KAAC) Council and the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (N C Hills). The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC Act of 2003) replaced the Bodoland Autonomous Council Act of 1993 as an enlarged sixth schedule administrative organisation for Bodos in Assam. All of these autonomous tribal arrangements in Assam are the result of a political agreement reached following years of agitation by students, social organisations, and armed rebel groups in the state. It is seen as a more desirable and appropriate form of local self-government than the parallel imposed political structure of Indian federalism (Nath, 2003).

Its goal is to defend tribal people from municipal hegemony in terms of language, art, culture, customs, and politics.

The Bodoland Territorial Area District, or BTAD, is the plains tribe's only administrative structure established under the Indian Constitution's Sixth Schedule. The hill tribes were the first to benefit from the provisions of the Sixth Schedule. To form BTAD, however, both the Central and State governments had to create a special enactment of the Indian Constitution. BTAD is the result of an agreement struck on February 10, 2003, between the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and the Bodo Liberation Tigers, an extremist group fighting for a separate Bodoland (Mishra, 2012).

BTAD spans 8790 square kilometres and is divided into four districts: Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri. It was created with specific goals in mind;

- To achieve the Bodos' economic, educational, and linguistic goals while still preserving their land rights, sociocultural identity, and ethnic identity.
- To hasten the development of infrastructure in the BTC area.

The Panchayat system prevailed throughout Assam's plain areas prior to the creation of the Autonomous District and Autonomous Council. The Panchayat System has been defunct in BTAD since 2003, when the Constitution's Sixth Schedule took effect. The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) is a decentralised mechanism that operates at the district level at its apex, while the Territorial Constituency Level Coordination Committee (TCLCC) and Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) were established at the subordinate level, with the former operating at the Block level parallel to Anchalik Panchayat and the latter at the Village level parallel to Village Panchayat. As a result, VCDC is a local government body based in BTAD. As an alternative to Village Panchayat, it is a grassroots level governance in BTAD.

Composition of VCDC

It is well known that the Chairman of the VCDC and other members are not elected through a democratic process. They are nominated by the Council government from among the ruling political party's supporters. BTC authority nominates the VCDC Chairman and other members for a five-year tenure. Members can stay in their positions as long as they have the BTC authority's mercy or trust, unless they are removed due to severe public claims. VCDC prefers to form a committee with 14 officially nominated members, including a Chairperson (One); 2 (two) women members; 1 (one) SC member (1 reserved where SC population is least) but SC community members may be increased as conditions warrant; 3 (three) farmer members; 1 (one) BPL member; 1 (one) Social Worker; and 5 (five) general members. The government employee designated as Member Secretary, whose designation is Junior Engineer, assists these officially nominated members (JE). The JE primarily assists them in the planning and formulation of strategies and policies relating to the estimation of projects associated to government initiatives that are meant to be implemented for rural development.

Though there are no set criteria or standards for the amount of people required to form a VCDC, the optimal number of VCDCs is roughly 3000 to 7000 people, with a few VCDCs covering significant territories with populations surpassing ten to fourteen thousand people. There are other VCDCs with a small number of villages with populations of less than or slightly over a thousand.

A Chairman and Members make up the TCLCC, which is a body established at the constituency level of the BTC Legislative Assembly. The TCLCC is made up of all the Chairmen of the VCDCs that fall within the constituency. The TCLCC's Chairmen and Members are not chosen in a democratic manner. The Chairman and Members of the TCLCC are appointed at the discretion of the BTC authority.

A VCDC usually has authority over 7 to 10 villages, with a population of 4000 to 7000 people. A VCDC is made up of a chairman and at least one member from each of the revenue villages within its jurisdiction.

Result and Discussion

Roles and Responsibility of VCDC

One of the most significant issues in BTAD in terms of local governance is the lack of standards that clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the TCLCC and the VCDC. Even the VCDC Chairmen and Members were found to be unsure of their roles and responsibilities because the BTC administration had not provided them with any necessary documentation. VCDCs will 'help in

rural administration... and many other duties that may be allocated by the BTC authority in due course of time,' according to the guideline for their formation.

Instead of being a local government entity, the VCDCs have been allocated the job of a BTC administration last mile service delivery institution. The VCDCs work as an extension of the Panchayat & Rural Development (P&RD) Department, implementing the DRDA's development initiatives at the village level.

Currently, the VCDCs administer three Central Government programmes: MGNREGA, PMAY-G, and the National Social Assistance Program (NSAP). Many VCDCs, on the other hand, stated throughout the survey that they did not receive any MGNREGA work from 2016 to 2018. The VCDCs also serve as a village-level extension of the line departments, in addition to implementing the aforementioned plans.

Local Level Planning in BTAD through VCDCs

Local government refers to the ability of people in rural areas to manage their own affairs and set their own development objectives. As a result, one of the primary functions of a local government is to identify important development concerns in the area and design solutions based on available resources. According to the PRI system, the Gram Sabha should be conducted at least four times every year for convenience. Gram Sabhas have been held more frequently in recent years, according to the findings of the study.

Implementation of development schemes through VCDC

MGNREGA, PMAY-G, and NSAP are three rural development and social protection initiatives conducted by VCDCs, as previously mentioned. These are the schemes that the PRI system implements.

On September 7, 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA) was notified. Every rural household has the right to at least 100 days of unskilled job in their immediate vicinity, such as GP or block, under this act. It is a demand-driven scheme in which households must self-select and apply for job cards; after acquiring a job card, adult members of a home (18-60 years) can demand work. Work must be found within 15 days of submitting a job application to the VCDC or GP, and if work is not found within 15 days of submitting the application, the household will be paid an unemployment allowance of not less than 1/4th of the wage rate for the first 30 days.

The Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) was reformed into the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana- Gramin (PMAY-G) in 2016, with the goal of providing shelter to all homeless and individuals living in kucha or substandard buildings by 2022. All houseless and households living in zero, one, or two room kucha dwellings as defined by the Socio-Economic Cast Census (SECC) - 2011 data are eligible beneficiaries under PMAY (G), subject to the exclusion process.

Participation of Women in VCDC

VCDC Chairmen shared that woman must make up 30% of a VCDC's membership, as opposed to the PRI system's 50% reservation for women in Assam. On the ground, however, it was discovered that many of the VCDCs did not have a 30 percent female membership. In one such VCDC, the community ladies shared that out of ten members, two or three women were chosen, but that one of them had departed the membership, leaving only one-woman member. Because women make up such a small percentage of VCDC membership, the women members acknowledged that they do not have a voice in VCDC meetings.

Suggestions

- VCDCs are impromptu local governing structures. The District Councils can form Village Councils at the local level under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule, but only with the agreement of the Governor of the State. The 'Bodoland Village Council Bill' was passed by the BTC Legislative Assembly in 2012 with the goal of making VCDCs formal organisations. In light of this, all of the stakeholders who contributed to the study have stated that the local governance institutions in BTAD should be strengthened by converting them into statutory intuitions. To do so, the Governor of Assam must sign the 'Bodoland Village Council Bill, 2012,' which is still pending, or any later bill that intends to improve local governance institutions in BTAD, such as VCDCs and TCLCCs.
- The BTC authority selects the VCDC and TCLCC Chairmen and Members, giving an indirect authority to the political party with the most votes to choose its cadres as VCDC and TCLCC office bearers. In BTAD, this selection mechanism holds local government office bearers answerable to their party and party leadership rather than the public. The public and civil society members believe that this has resulted in corrupt practises in some VCDCs and a biased allocation of government aid schemes in favour of party-affiliated households. As a result, all of the stakeholders who took part in the study, including the VCDC Chairmen and Members, unanimously agreed that local governments should be formed through elections.
- As things are, the VCDC / TCLCC's powers and functions, as well as the roles and obligations of the organisations' office bearers, are at best vague. Rather than serving as local governments, the VCDCs now serve as a village-level extension centre for the BTC government and its various departments. The stakeholders believed that, in addition to establishing the VCDC a statutory entity, its powers and activities should be clearly defined so that the office bearers can efficiently carry out their duties.
- Local governments should be financially empowered in order to function efficiently. Local governments should be given their own resource envelope, which they should be able to use for local development with the public's permission.
- The VCDCs and TCLCCs are now infrastructure-strapped and critically lacking in human resources.
- The functioning of some VCDCs is not transparent, according to community members and civil society participants in the study. VCDCs, according to the general public, lack transparency in a variety of areas, including the appointment of VCDC Chairmen and Members, the planning and prioritisation of MGNREGA work, the allocation of PMAY dwellings, and the

selection of beneficiaries for subsidised products, among others. Civil society members believe that in order to improve transparency and people's participation in local governance in BTAD, the community's capability and awareness must be improved.

Conclusion

The village council is merely a blueprint for replacing the Panchayati Raj system with a democratic village council to deal with the values of tribal government. However, most village councils lack elections, power, and development funds. Every village council is bound by the state governments and district council's actions, schemes, and policies. To summarise, the research had both positive and negative features. It has witnessed both successes and failures in some of the key areas for which it is responsible. According to the findings, VCDC has had limited effectiveness in preserving rural infrastructure such as roads, culverts, school facilities, and community assets. Nonetheless, if issues such as insufficient autonomy, financial insolvency, corruption, and nepotism are addressed, VCDC as a local government organisation might assist to the development of rural areas. It has the potential to transform a disadvantaged hamlet into a model village. It has the potential to be a tool for change. It has the potential to change the course of poverty-stricken rural populations.

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