CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 3

BANGLADESH: RURAL DEVELOPMENT PARADIGMS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

3.1 Rural Development: Genesis

Rural development in Bangladesh has always been a multi-sectoral activity. Almost all the nation building and development programmes include a major component that spread in rural areas. The major activities related to agriculture, food, land, irrigation, water resources management, livestock, forestry, cottage industries, health, family planning and education etc. are significantly related to the development of rural areas and the people living there. Rural development, therefore, has become a conglomerate of diverse aims, objectives and activities involving different sectors and institutions both government and non-government.

Agriculture and related activities constitute the most important and major sector which have a direct bearing on rural development. Agriculture is not only the major source of income and employment, it is also the source of food supply. Other sectors of economy are presently unable to absorb the growing labour force especially in the rural areas. At the same time, for the majority in agriculture who live in the villages, the only escape from poverty is also through increased production and efficiency in agriculture and related activities. The national effort to break out of the presently deepening poverty trap the country have to depend mainly on the agriculture and ensure that agricultural growth-rate significantly exceeds the population growth-rate where rural population is the major contributing factor.

The trends in the growth and performance of agriculture sector is inevitably linked with the existing situations and weakness in other affiliated sectors such as inefficient use of land over various land holding and farm sizes resulting from the existing land ownership patterns and tenancy relationships. The low proportion of cultivated area under effective irrigation and water control, inadequate availability of credit, deficiency in soil nutrients, deterioration of soil quality, inadequate physical and institutional infrastructure, etc are important issues having direct impact of agriculture and rural development.

To understand the state of Bangladesh rural development and its implication on sustainable development one has to go back to the country's past while it was under colonial rule
for a very long period. The causes of backwardness of the rural areas coupled with poverty can be rooted in the perpetual neglect accompanied by exploitation and distortion of the economy and manipulation of the social structure by successive colonial regimes to their advantage.

The need for rural development in the sub-continent was felt for the first time by the British colonial rulers while it underwent experience of large-scale famine and its aftermath at times when the nationalist leaders pressed for paying attention to rural development activities. Before the great famine in 1943 a few British officers and social workers took voluntary schemes for creating model villages in part of Sundarban areas of erstwhile Bengal based on co-operative principles. It was Sir Daniel Hamilton who first set up rural reconstruction institute to provide training facilities in cottage and subsidiary industries for the rural people.28

Thus the need for training of villagers for rural development was well understood by some individual British officers and Indian social workers in the very early part of this century and positive steps in this direction were initiated. However, in the absence of inststitutionalisation of such training and a comprehensive rural development training policy, these efforts disappeared with the departure of the individual officer or the social worker that had initiated such training activities.

After the creation of Pakistan development did not receive serious attention from the Pakistan government during the period from 1947 to 1952. Its immediate concern was to deal with the unsettled conditions that followed partition of India and creation of Pakistan. Subsequently Pakistan was influenced by the concept of community development masterminded by USAID and other international agencies in 1950s. Their influence resulted in the introduction of a community development programme namely, ‘Village Agricultural and Industrial Development (V-AID) programme in 1953 in Pakistan.29

This was the first effort for rural development on the part of Pakistan government since partition in 1947. The V-AID programme was considered as the “means for bringing better living standard and a new spirit of hope and confidence to the villagers”.30 The policy of the V-AID


programme was to foster effective citizens participation in rural self-help projects in the field of agriculture, health and sanitation, adult literacy, primary education, cottage industries, minor irrigation and rural communications systems, co-operative societies and recreational activities. But the multipurpose programme could not create much impact on rural economy of erstwhile East Pakistan, as they were only isolated attempts.31

Given this background the government of Pakistan set up a rural development academy at Comilla named East Pakistan Academy for Rural Development, later named as Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD), in 1959. It was entrusted with the task of evolving a rural development model suited to the socio-economic condition of the then East Pakistan. The government designated the whole of rural Comilla Kotwali Thana as a development laboratory. The Comilla model attempted to overcome past deficiencies in rural development programmes by making provision for participation of the rural people in the process of development. The model provided for creation of rural employment opportunities through execution of the work programme schemes. The model recommended for adopting two-tire co-operative system with formation of village level co-operative society (KSS) and the Thana central Co-operative Association (TCCA) for the rural development and training for the village co-operators to modernise agriculture and thus to boost up agricultural production.

The government of Pakistan accepted the Comilla model as the strategy for rural development in the 1960s. Having noted its success and tremendous response of the rural people of Comilla an scheme entitled the ‘Comilla District Integrated Rural Development Programme’ (CDIRDP) was approved by the then government.32 The project later named as Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP).33 Initially seven out of twenty Thanas of Comilla district were covered in 1965 and the remaining thirteen Thanas were taken up in 1968. The success of the IRDP drew applause of the Pakistan central government and subsequently, in 1970 it was decided to replicate Comilla model in the entire country. A scheme for the entire East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was prepared and approved by the government but it was not materialised due to the outbreak of freedom movement in Bangladesh in 1971.

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The Comilla approach provided the first systematic opportunity for the small and marginal farmers to participate effectively in the dynamic process of promoting agricultural revolution in the then East Pakistan. The approach had four basic strategies: (I) promoting organisation of the poor in the primary cooperatives of their own, (ii) the integration of these primary co-operatives with the Thana Central Co-operative Association (TCCA) for credit support, (iii) an extensive extension training system through the institution of Thana Training and Development Centre (TTDC) and (iv) provision of adequate supply of water along with other agricultural inputs through a Thana Irrigation Project (TIP). Later, this institutional mechanism was modified to organise also the poor women and landless for income generating activities.

Based on the success of the above experiments, the Comilla approach in its second phase, developed a comprehensive Thana/union development planning format with focus on optimal land utilisation and crop diversification. This exercise was to be initiated at the village level, to be consolidated at the union level and to be coordinated at the Thana level. In the absence of appropriate government support, this effort could not be consolidated and applied in the field.

In spite of good intentions the Comilla approach bypassed some of its main targets. The often repeated and documented criticism of the model is that it worked only with the rich farmers and left the landless and the large section of the rural poor with very marginal benefits. Moreover, the participation of the beneficiaries did not take place to the extent it was intended for. This was largely due to: disregard of the social structure of the village with its diverse groups and conflicting interests. Counter productive forces like the existing tenancy relationship were not touched upon. The Comilla approach treated the whole village community as a homogenous unit. The rural elites and the influential section of the village, usually the most educated and enterprising lots, came forward to grasp the benefits, which they then restricted to themselves. The hope of 'trickle down' did not materialise.

As the Comilla approach enters into its degeneration phase the government of the day of the newly independent Bangladesh without going into its efficacy and learning lessons of mistakes in a new milieu where people of an independent country dreamt for a poverty and exploitation-free society adopted it as Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP). The new government in an effort to gain popularity offered large-scale highly subsidized agricultural inputs through the co-operatives of the BRDB. In reality all these agricultural assets came into the possession of big farmers and influential members of the co-operatives and village leaders.
 Stories had it that new cooperatives came up over night on paper to reap the benefits of subsidized pumps by influential peoples and in some cases transfer of ownership took place from fake co-operatives to really interested farmers groups. In most of the cases funds for repairs were not forthcoming; therefore, 50% of tubewells soon fell into disuse due to lack of repair.

Despite its limited success as a role model for rural development the newly independent Bangladesh in its First Five Year Plan (1973 - 1978 ) adopted a programme in haste for bringing 250 Thanas under the IRDP without creating prior environments for the effective functioning of the model. The government of the day for the first time ignored the idea of a setting up of an autonomous rural development board instead placed the IRDP under a sectoral ministry to function as a distinct department and thus sowed the seeds of weakness in the programme.

Another effort in rural development in the mid-seventies, which came to be known as the Swanirvar movement (movement for self-sufficiency), was initiated with the active support of the then military ruler President Ziaur Rahman. The movement envisaged a six-tier set-up at the village, union, Thana, sub-division, district and national levels under the guidance of Swanirvar Committee. The village was taken as the basic unit of development instead of a Thana (subsequently named as upazila) as was taken in the Comilla model.

During the tenure of Ziaur Rahman from 1975 - 1981, the country witnessed a number of parallel and conflicting programmes in the rural development sector. Zia did not show any specific interest in strengthening the IRDP by modifying the decisions of the previous government. Apart from Swanirvar movement Zia started a parallel rural development programmes like, canal digging programme, own village development programme, mass literacy programme, village food production committee and total village development programmes. He gave the Swanirvar movement a national movement and wanted to ensure participation of peoples of all walks of life. The response towards the movement was euphoric till President Zia was alive

While Zia went on full swing in promoting his pet canal digging and swanirvar programme the IRDP got into oblivion. Emmert therefore, rightly observed.

In 1975 the new Government’s rural development efforts were oriented towards creating a new self reliance [ Swanirvar ] movement at the village level. IRDP staff again did not know
whether Comilla type co-operatives were being replaced or being challenged to join self-reliant activities.  

Steven Jones, however, mentioned that commitment of the Zia government to the Swanirvar movement was based on Zia’s desire to consolidate his power base at the rural areas and observed, the Gram Sarkar [Swanirvar movement] was introduced by late President Zia in part as a way to increase his power base in the countryside.

Like the Comilla approach the Swanirvar movement also showed (I) how the different interest groups at the village level could be organised in their interest-cum-functional groups, (ii) how in the second stage, they could be represented through an informal village based organisation and (iii) how in the third stage, they could be informally linked with the union parishad on the one hand and the Thana officials of the various ministries and agencies on the other. Its difference with the Comilla approach was that (a) while the Comilla approach paid more attention on the small and marginal farmers, the Swanirvar movement tried to bring all the interest cum functional groups first under their own informal organisation and then bring them together under a village development committee with approximately two representatives from each group.

It is true that the Swanirvar programme initiated by President Zia in a massive scale for the first time in the history of rural development of Bangladesh it is also true that he initiated the programme with a political motive to spread his new found ideology at grassroots level. He not only presented the nation with a new movement but also simultaneously set up Gram Sarkar (village government), a parallel body with union parishad, with his own people. When the Gram sarkar was given enormous power to do and undo anything in the local community the common people get disenchanted with Zia’s so-called Swanirvar programme and all the euphoria got waned. His canal-digging programme for ensuring irrigated cultivation mostly benefited the big farmers and local influential lots. As has been revealed by micro-level evidences, the pursuance of such development efforts has failed to arrest the upward spirals of rural poverty. The extent of landlessness has increased manifold; the incidence of malnutrition has become alarmingly acute; the level of health status and availability of medical services have declined; the rate of literacy has remained low and the rate of unemployment has shot up alarmingly.

34 Jan Paul Emmert, "Breakdown of an Organisational Ideology: The Replication of Comilla type Co-operatives in Bangladesh", The University of Michigan, 1981.

Then came another military government in the centre of power in 1982. Immediately after assumption of power President Ershad dissolved the Gram Sarkar institutions under the Swanirvar movement and dismantled the canal digging, mass literacy, VFPC and OVD programmes to which the earlier government of Zia was specially committed. Immediately after taking over power Ershad put first priority on the decentralisation of administration renamed the Thana as the upazila(sub-district). The military regime was preoccupied with infrastructural development in the newly formed upazilla and in the process the long tenure of Ershad for nine years gave the nation a total withdrawal of the rural development activities in the rural areas. During this period the NGOs came in the picture of rural development in a massive way. As a matter of fact new NGOs were floated overnight. The government of the day for the first time set up NGO Affairs Bureau under the direct control of the President secretariat.

During this period while the government apathy in rural development became apparent possibly because of huge drain on the economy because of infrastructural development took place in the newly set up upazilas the NGOs became very active in the rural development arena. In the same period a more successful experiment in poverty alleviation that attracted attention of all in the 1980s was the Grameen Bank. Its main hypothesis was that the poor were bankable. If credit could be advanced to them through an innovative process, they would not only repay the credit fully as per schedule, they would simultaneously generate a dynamic process of savings and investment that could eventually lead them to graduate to self-reliance.

Aside from the Grameen Bank host of other NGOs came in the rural development scenario with new ideas of development. The government of the day also encouraged the NGO involvement in the rural development programme. NGOs have come to believe that the key to breaking the hold of the poverty trap in Bangladesh lies not in the flow of financial resources in abundance, but in restructuring the predominant rural power relations through the empowerment of the poor, development of their institutions and evolving an effective and just dynamic mechanism for distribution of resources. Meanwhile, the foreign donors instead of disbursing money through the government channel tend to offer easy loans to the NGOs for their rural development undertakings. The development NGOs are actively working in various fields of rural development of Bangladesh. One estimate says that out of 68,000 villages, NGOs have been working in about 50,000 villages in the country.
The challenge of ensuring sustainable rural development for Bangladesh is daunting. It is an uphill task on the part of government alone with its resource constraints and lack of appropriate manpower and institutional facilities to carry forward the development objectives. The government needs to involve the NGOs as partners as in many other countries NGOs are doing collaborative activities to bring about the desired goal.

3.2 Rural Development: Government Experience

As is the case with other countries of the South Asia the Rural Development in Bangladesh has been the under the government domain since its emergence as a new state. Basically there are four government agencies, which are actively involved in the rural development undertakings of Bangladesh. These are: Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB), Department of Co-operatives (DOC), Bangladesh Rural Development Academy (BARD), Comilla, and Rural Development Academy (RDA), Bogra. While the BRDB and DOC implement government policies and programmes in rural development undertakings the BARD and RDA are entirely devoted to research activities. Apart from these some other government agencies are also engaged in activities, which are directly related to problem and issues of rural development. Some of these are: BASCIC, BWDB, BADC, LGEB, DWA, DOY, DSS, BHB, BSB, etc.

3.2.1 Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB)

BRDB as a statutory body was created through an ordinance in 1982 to replace Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP). Section 25 of the said ordinance dissolved IRDP and vested all its assets and liabilities with the BRDB, which was placed under the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives. Section 7 of the ordinance enumerated fourteen functions of BRDB. Some of the important functions of BRDB are as follows:

- to promote village based primary co-operative societies and TCCAs with a view to enable them to be autonomous, self-managed and financially viable vehicles for increasing production, employment generation and rural development;
- to encourage functional co-operatives for generating income and employment for the rural poor;
• to arrange for effective training of members of the managing committees of village 
based primary co-operative societies and TCCAs and model farmers in agriculture 
and rural development activities;
• to liaise with concerned ministries, departments and agencies for mobilising 
supplies, services and supports for the TCCAs and village co-operative system.36

The BRDB was launched in 1971 to replicate the two-tier co-operative model successfully experimented at the Comilla Academy in the sixties. After the independence of Bangladesh the BRDB was entrusted with implementing the government rural development programmes in line with the Comilla approach. As stated earlier the two-tier co-operative system of the Comilla approach was basically meant for the middle and small farmers where the landless had no place in the rural institutions. So in the process a vast majority of the country’s poor remained outside the main stream of development process. It is only in 1983 the landless poor were included in the BRDB programmes. When the Second Five Year Plan ( SFYP ) was about to be ended two organisations for the landless were floated. One is Bittahin Samabaya Samity (BSS) and the other is Mahila Samabaya Samity (MSS). Twenty non-farm income-generating activities were selected at that point of time in line with the Grameen Bank and other NGOs for credit channelling to the landless groups, which among others also include pond fisheries and cattle raising. The BRDB now pursues 24 agro-related and non-farm income-generating activities for the rural poor.

The government in a sectoral policy paper drawn by the planning Commission in 1983 called “Strategy for rural Development Project”, proposed a plan to cover the whole country with area programmes in 10 years time. On the basis of that Area Development Programmes were undertaken with foreign aids. The BRDB has so far implemented 14 socio-economic development projects throughout the country. Of which three projects were said to be specifically meant for poverty alleviation of the rural poor, namely Rural development RD- 5 , RD - 9 , and RD - 12 . A brief review of these three rural development projects is made to understand the efficacy of the foreign aided rural development projects implemented by the BRDB.

RD - 5 programme was undertaken for 100 flood prone and depressed Thanas in the district of Faridpur, Rangpur and Mymensingh with the financial aid of SIDA, DANIDA and

NORAD. The donors basically financed the physical infrastructure development component of the project. The donors did not show interest in financing employment generation component of the project. The project though meant for poverty alleviation could not make any headway in poverty alleviation other than generating temporary employment opportunities for the rural poor who gave their labour in infrastructural development in the areas.

Rural Development - 12 may be one of the whole-hearted pro-poor project so far undertaken by the government where a number of donors like CIDA, UNDP, ODA and the World Bank actively took part in aid of financial and technical support to the landless poor. This led to the establishment of separate co-operatives for the poor men and women. The RD-12 was implemented in 139 Thanas of the six greater districts with CIDA as the sole donor agency. The aspects of implementation was wholly rested on the donors preference where a separate federation for the landless cooperatives was formed at the Thana level which is seen to be a major deviation of the BRDB approach to rural development. The project apparently in line with NGO principle distributed credits to the target groups for productive income generating activities. Before groups are formed baseline surveys were undertaken to collect information on the socio-economic conditions of the target groups. The solidarity group membership was limited to one man and one woman from the same family having homogenous background.

According to one study, the performance of RD-12 has been very successful. Its loan recovery rate was very high. The project services reached the rural poor and the rural wages were said to be higher in the project villages. However, financial viability at the Thana level societies has not yet been attained.

Rural Development - 9, also known as Rangpur Regional Development Programme, was taken up for the greater Rangpur district with the financial assistance of EEC again implemented bypassing the conventional two-tier co-operative approach of the BRDB. In this case the target group members were to be landless households, marginal and small farmers. For the landless, the project aimed at promoting viable economic activities based on functional education, skill training, extension efforts, credit, and distribution of other inputs. Regarding households of marginal and small farmers, the programme intended to increase agricultural productivity through

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dissemination of appropriate agricultural technology for which access of beneficiaries to know-how, credit and inputs, and marketing facilities were to be facilitated. The modalities of the project implementation appear to be in the line of NGO approach.

The RD - 9 project gave emphasis on the development of more income generating activities to bring about more income and employment. It devoted much time to develop the new products by adopting higher level technologies under efficient management system aimed at identifying already locally available skills, give product a comparative advantage by improved quality design and facilitate training, credit and marketing of their products. It is difficult to say as to what extent the project objectives were realised since no formal evaluation of the programme has so far been made.

Four projects, namely, RD - 2, North-west rural Development project, Nosakhali rural development Project and South-East Rural development projects were undertaken with foreign assistance. These projects among others included such components as homestead production, livestock and fishery development, social forestry, cottage industry, health and nutrition, family planning, mass education, setting up of rural institutions like BSS, MSS, rural infrastructural development etc.

Apart from these foreign aided programmes the BRDB has been pursuing its own poverty alleviation programmes at Thana level. As of 1990 it has covered all the Thanas excepting 145 in 23 districts and those in Chittagong Hill Tracts. To bring into rest of the Thanas under its programme the BRDB has undertaken a programme in 1993. In view dwindling aid regime the BRDB started to carry out these programmes from its own resources provided by the government in the ADP. It is oft repeatedly said that the donors has lost interest in financing the government rural development projects because of the rising poverty in the rural areas.

Given the massive efforts by the government and the foreign donor countries and the institutions the rural poverty continues to remain a most area where a new strategy has to be developed. Before that the concept of two-tier co-operative system evolved by the BARD, Comilla and implemented by the BRDB has to be discarded or need to be reshaped. The reasons are simple. The often repeated and documented criticism about the Comilla approach is that it worked only with the rich farmers and left the ladles and large sections of the rural poor with very marginal benefits. It is also said that the true participation of the beneficiaries also did not take
place to the extent it should have. This was largely due to: disregard of the social structure of the village with its diverse groups and conflicting interests. Counter productive forces like the existing tenancy relationship were not touched upon. The Comilla approach treated the whole village community as a homogenous unit. Rural power politics and factions within the village community helped to crack true participation of the people. The wealthier sections, usually the most educated and enterprising, came forward to grasp the benefits, which they then restricted to themselves. The hope of 'trickle down of benefits' was not realised. All these symptoms are very much prevalent in the present rural scenario of Bangladesh. Without going into whole hog corrective measures of the Comilla model the task of rural development cannot be continued at times the backlog of problems mounted into an astronomical heights.

In addition to these the drawbacks of the government sponsored rural development is well documented. These include red-tapism and non-committal nature of bureaucrats, non-accountability of field staffs and lack of transparency and above all the tilt of the bureaucrats towards the rural elites.

To understand the rural development the another dimension need to be recognised is the role of local government institutions which can play a vital role in the development undertakings in the rural areas. The present discussions will be confined with the Upazilla parishad and Thana parishads because of their direct bearings on the rural development

3.2.2 Rural Development through Upazila Council

Upazila system introduced in place of Thana in early eighties was the direct outcome of the feeling that the fruits of development efforts of the government have so far bypassed the local rural community and the villages. Therefore, with a view to realize the interlinked goals of rural development and equitable distribution of the fruits of development, the reorganised upazila set up was vested with wide powers and decentralised functional responsibility. The main objective of decentralisation was to introduce faster and appropriate development at the local level through direct participation of the local people. The following were the specific objectives of the upazila system:
- reduction of dependence of the rural people on the national government for meeting the needs which can be locally met and development of self-reliance in the process;
- mobilisation and utilisation of local resources which have hitherto remained untapped;
- reducing the direct involvement of the national government in planning and implementation of projects which are purely local in nature.

The following development responsibilities were given to the upazila parishad:

- all development activities at the upazila level, formulation of upazila development plans and programmes and their implementation, monitoring and evaluation;
- promotion of agricultural activities for maximisation of productions;
- promotion of livestock, fisheries and forestry;
- planning and execution of rural public works programmes
- promotion of health, family planning and family welfare;
- promotion and encouragement of employment generation activities.

Since 1982 the government of Bangladesh allocated substantial amounts for infrastructure building and development assistance to the upazila parishes. An amount of taka 1355 crore were allocated during the period 1982-1990 for infrastructure development and during the same period taka 1076 crore were allocated as development assistance. This constituted 7.7% of ADP allocation in 1982-83, 25.17% in 1985-86 and 9.57% in 1989-90.

An evaluation of the development activities undertaken by the upazilas till 1990 reveals that there was a bias towards civil works notably to buildings, roads, bridges, culverts and supply of furniture. Most of the investments were concentrated around the upazila headquarters. The most frustrating aspect that upazila parishes were not able to make any significant contributions in the fields of agriculture, forestry, fisheries, livestock, irrigation. Moreover, the parishes could not make any headway in creating income generating activities and employment opportunities.

While taking into due cognisance of the above problems the government in its Fourth Five Year Plan document adopted as a strategy to formulate special projects for the poor and the less advantaged groups. With the abolition of the Upazila system in 1991 all the development activities under the aegis of the government found backseat and the process continues even today. This has created a vacuum in the developmental activities at the grass roots level. And in the
process with the active support of the donor agencies the NGOs made their strong presence in the rural areas in a more organised manner.

3.3 Strategies for Rural Development: An Overview

The main objective of rural development is to bring about overall improvement in the quality of life - economic, social and cultural. Conceived in such a broad sense, policy for rural development has occupied an important place in almost all development plans. This can be seen in all the Five Year Plan objectives hitherto undertaken.

The integrated rural development programmes were launched in the 1960's. After liberation in 1971 the rural development was given a distinct place in the overall development of the economy, but with small coverage. The First Five Year Plan (1973-1978) was mainly concerned with the rehabilitation of shattered economy. Though it had the major objectives of restructuring the war-torn economy along with achieving an annual growth rate of GDP at 5.5 per cent and creating job opportunities of 41 lakh man-years, yet rural development was not given due importance in the overall development process. The FFYP visualized the need for rural development with a view to creating a sound and institutional base of co-operatives for protecting the interest of small farmers, landless and the rural poor. But, most of the objectives remained unrealised during the FFYP due to resource constraints and other adverse circumstances. Even some strategies set for the rural development could not be implemented due to shortage of domestic and external resources, inadequate institutional support, natural calamities, global inflation and recession.38

The Two-year Plan (1978-80) in respect of rural development continued with more or less same strategy. It was prepared with the emphasis on completing as many on-going projects as possible. Though the situation was much better in 1978-79 than it was in 1974-75, the Two-Year Plan, too, could not implement all envisaged measures of rural development to reduce poverty and generate desired level of employment opportunities. It appears from resource allocation that in these two plans, economic growth in terms of GDP was given more priority than poverty alleviating rural development programmes.

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In the wake of widespread poverty and unemployment in rural areas, the Second Five Year Plan (SFYP) (1980-85) highlighted the need for comprehensive rural development programme with a view to improving the quality of life of the poor. The quality of life was assumed to be improved through accelerated agricultural production, generation of employment, human resources development, participation of poor in production, improvement of rural infrastructures and provision of social services and so on.

The major thrust of the SFYP was on significant reduction of poverty. Poverty was endemic and ubiquitous in Bangladesh that over three-fourths of the population could not afford to meet the minimum dietary requirements. There had been, at the same time, decline in the per cap availability of daily essentials like cereals, fish protein, milk and pulses. There was only less essential goods available per head, but also less purchasing power in the hand of the common man. As the economy grew slowly, the unemployment situation further deteriorated with increase in the number of unemployed and under-employed.

The development objectives were built around the core strategy of bringing about a decisive change in the pattern of growth inherited from the past by focusing on rural development. The cornerstone of rural development was stated to be agricultural development, which, in the short run, would act as the prime mover of development in the rural areas. The plan aimed at preventing further rural pauperisation of people and to bring at least 10 per cent of the rural poor above poverty line by means of increasing gainful employment and productivity. At the end of the SFYP it appeared that overall employment situation remained unchanged. The poverty continue to remain in the rural areas with no remarkable achievement did take place in the rural development sector.

In the Third Five Year Plan (1985-90) poverty alleviation constituted the basic theme, as did the earlier plans. It visualized greatly the need for rural development plan to reduce poverty and to promote greater opportunities for the rural poor for productive employment in both the farm and non-farm sectors of the economy. It also underscored the need for participation of women in rural development. The plan like previous ones also set a target of bringing up at least 10 per cent rural poor above the poverty line. At the end of the TFYP (1989-90) an average annual growth rate of 3.8 per cent in GDP was achieved against the target of 5.4 per cent. During
the plan period it was admitted by the government that about 51 per cent of the rural population were still below the poverty line.⁴⁹

Then came Fourth Five Year Plan (1990-95) which aimed to human resource development, increased employment opportunities, particularly for the lower 50 per cent of the population residing in the rural areas through institutional mechanisms for participatory planning, strengthening the rural economy with a priority given to agriculture, and integration of the sector level as well as micro-level planning with macro-planning along with built in accountability in all stages of socio-economic development process with a distinct bearing on poverty alleviation. The Fourth Plan went to the extent of declaring that the new development perspective gives primary emphasis on employment generation and secondary importance to growth. Employment generation was taken both as an objective as well as a strategy for poverty alleviation. All the other objectives of the Plan were said to revolve around the generation of employment.

If one looks back the First Five Year Plan to Fourth Five Year Plan ended in 1990 it will be evident that the successive governments in their policy objective mostly devoted to poverty alleviation in the rural areas. While doing this all the plans proceeded on the assumption that the programmes undertaken for rural development like area development, agriculture development and infrastructure development would produce a multiplier effect and thereby generate employment and rise the living conditions of the poor. But such type of “trickle-down” strategy failed to produce any visible impact on the economic condition of the rural poor.

In view of these phenomena, in its latest document the Planning commission acknowledged “the enormity of the unemployment problem in the country”, calling for a comprehensive programme for employment generation and human resources development. The draft perspective plan for the rural sector envisages continuation and expansion of successful targeted poverty alleviation programmes/projects and addition of new pro-poor projects based on social mobilisation. In these projects the poor at the grass roots will be enabled to organise themselves, identify their own problems, make their own development decisions, particularly in areas, which concern them, most. For the first time the government with a deviation from its earlier stands from time to time acknowledged the role of NGOs in rural development undertakings. It emphasized the need for social mobilisation with the active support of NGOs

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aimed at reduction of the rural poverty by sustained increase in productive employment, particularly self-employment opportunities in activities like animal husbandry, fisheries, poultry, horticulture and in various non-farm activities having better potentials of better economic returns. It also calls for social mobilisation aiming at social development of the poor in education, health and sanitation, family planning and population control by linking the poor with the government’s programmes in these sectors.

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