SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

An overview
Identification criteria
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Development impact
In this dissertation, a geographic appraisal of backward area development programmes in India has been accomplished. This involved an overview of their overall objectives; an examination of their identification criteria and any subsequent changes therein; an assessment of their areal coverage and the effect of any change in identification criteria in this respect; an understanding of institutional and financial arrangements for their implementation; and an analysis of their impact on the socio-economic development of the targeted areas. The entire exercise carried out was a part of ‘Geography of Public Policy’, which so far has remained grossly neglected.

The methodological tools used for such a study were those necessary to meet the requirements of varying themes. Notwithstanding the fact that area programmes have strong spatial perspective, available government documents on area programmes provide little direct information in this spirit. A purposeful perusal of government documents, especially those available from the Planning Commission and the Central Ministries, Government of India, New
Delhi, through a spatial perspective became necessary so as to obtain a geographic image of backward area programmes in India.

For an understanding of identification criteria and mapping of areal coverage under different backward area programmes, reports of various Commissions, Committees, Task Forces, and the Expert Groups such as the National Commission on Agriculture, National Committee on Development of Backward Areas and the Technical Committee Report under the Chairmanship of C.H. Hanumantha Rao were gleaned to infer information on these aspects. It was startling to find that a number of backward area programmes were formulated and implemented without maps of their areal coverage. This amounted to being practically blind to the setting on which the entire scene of a programme is being enacted.

For studying institutional and financial aspects of backward area programmes, various Five Year Plan documents published from the Planning Commission and Annual Reports of different Central Ministries were used to process data. In some cases, information was available only in the form of mimeographs.

For assessing the impact of area programmes on socio-economic development of backward areas data on indicators of development have been collected from Primary Census Abstract and General Population Tables for 1971 and 1991, published from Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, New Delhi. Wherever necessary, the processed data were represented by maps and diagrams.

The study also intended to test a number of basic hypotheses:

- Backward area development programmes would have positive effect on the development process in backward areas.

- The backward areas located nearer to the metropolitan or state capitals would respond quickly and more positively to area development programmes than areas having peripheral location.
The areas better equipped with physical and social infrastructure at the initial stage would respond earlier than other types of areas.

Backward areas, falling within developed states, would respond faster than those in backward states.

An overview

India is one of the few developing nations to start development programmes for its backward areas. Since its inception, development planning in India has shown its concern for regional inequalities. The Fourth Plan was, however, a landmark in this regard for its explicit focus on area based programmes.

A large majority of area development programmes in India were identified during the Third and the Fourth Plans and implemented the Fifth Plan onward. The hill area development programme, conceived during the Fourth Plan, was the first and the border area development programme, during the Seventh Plan, was the last in the series. Incentive schemes for industrially backward areas were, however, the first to become operative.

The Planning Commission formulates and implements area development programmes of regional nature, such as the hill, the border, and the North-East. On the other hand, area development programmes of sectoral nature, such as drought prone, tribal and industrial, are looked after by the respective Central Ministries.

In a large and diversified country like India, fundamental/physico-geographic backwardness is the most widespread. Hence, the majority of area programmes have been launched for the restoration of ecological balances in areas such as drought prone, desert and hill areas. Economic backwardness is no less widespread. Social backwardness is most acute in tribal pockets.
The industrially backward area covers 70 per cent of the total area of the country whereas the border area has coverage of only 4.2 per cent. The former, with the largest areal coverage among programmes, was seventeen times that of the smallest coverage programme (Border Area).

The drought prone area programme, among the operational programmes, has completed a maximum of more than 27 years, while the border area programme is only 13 years old. All other programmes are running for more than two decades.

The area programmes differ widely even in terms of financial assistance. While there are three types of financial arrangements, the majority of programmes are centrally assisted. The border and the desert are fully financed by the centre, against this the drought prone programme which is shared between the central and the respective state governments on fifty-fifty basis.

II

Identification criteria

In the absence of an adequate institutional framework, programmes identified in the early stage of the backward area development programme had to wait for years to get implemented. The period of gestation was, however, considerably reduced in the case of programmes evolved at the later stage. The designated hill area programme, which was identified in 1965, was launched in 1974-75. As against this, the border area programme was identified and launched in the same year, i.e. 1987.

For a majority of programmes, identification criteria evolved in the initial stage were subjective and thus lacked scientific precision. The state governments and interested individuals, mainly political leaders, to cover otherwise undeserving areas manipulated such a situation. Industrially backward, drought prone and hill area development programme illustrate this observation the best. At one
time, more than 70 per cent area of the country was covered under the various schemes for removing the industrial backwardness.

Over the period, identification criteria of all the programmes were modified to make them more precise, as also to extend their benefit to uncovered states. This was in response to availability of new data and additional experience gained from the implementation of the area programmes. In relative terms, identification criteria of drought and desert area programmes are the most elaborate. These criteria, however, did not succeed in weeding out undeserving areas. At times, lack of information to work out newly devised identification criteria and at other times the political pressure, especially from state governments, did not allow a strict application of avowed criteria. In several cases, committees were frequently put under pressure from the state governments to re-tailor the criteria so as to retain areas facing exclusion. The Western Ghats Development Programme is a typical case of this kind. For instance, the dual coverage of Nilgiri district (Tamil Nadu) under both designated hill district and the Western Ghats programmes, under political pressure is now recognised as a ‘historical accident’. The cherished objective of rationalising the areal coverage through application of identification criteria is yet to be realised.

The number of identification criteria also differs by programmes. While six indicators were used to figure out industrially backward areas, only one indicator was used to identify designated hill districts.

There exists a positive association between the frequency of change in identification criteria and areal coverage. In case of drought, desert and tribal area programmes, where major changes in criteria have been effected three to four times, the change in areal coverage has also been very high. In the case of drought prone programmes where criteria were changed four times, the number of districts covered almost doubled from 74 to 155. In tribal development, three changes in criteria resulted in addition to as many as 72 districts in areal
coverage, from 113 to 185. In case of Border area programme, areal coverage tripled. In designated hill districts and North-east region, the criteria changed only once. The change in areal coverage was also marginal.

The unit of identification varied by programmes over time. For instance, the tribal development programme reached down to village-level. It reveals the space intensification of the programme. While, in a number of programmes including industrially backward, designated hill, border and Northeast region plan programmes the identification unit has remained the same, since inception. On the whole, tribal, desert and drought prone programmes typically represent the case of space intensification while border and industrially backward programmes showed no change in space intensification with change in identification criteria. The unit of identification of programmes differs from as small as the village in case of tribal development to as large as the State in case of the North East region.

III

Areal coverage

With exception of few urban industrial pockets and the Green Revolution areas in parts of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, almost entire country is covered under one of the seven backward area programmes studied here. Nearly ninety per cent of districts and eighty per cent of geographical area of the country are covered under one or the other backward area development programme.

Barring the union territories of Chandigarh, Delhi, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Lakshadweep and Pondicherry, all the states and union territories of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Daman & Diu are covered under at least one of the seven backward area programmes. The entire North East including Sikkim, Orissa, Rajasthan, Goa and Andaman & Nicobar Islands are completely covered under backward area development programmes, while Andhra Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal are pre-dominantly covered.
It is, however, ironic that Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, which are the two most backward states of the Indian union, have relatively limited coverage under backward area programmes. The inherent regressive factor in the states is rooted in the long feudal history rather than visible physical characteristics of the land. The rampant industrial backwardness in these states was addressed in the incentive schemes for large industrially backward areas in the early 70s. However, most of these schemes are non-functional since 1991.

Both these states have large flood prone areas. The National Committee on Development of Backward Areas included flood prone areas in the list of fundamentally backward areas yet flood, being a state issue, has not been able to attract attention of planners for a separate national level area development programme.

Before its termination in 1991, industrially backward areas had the largest coverage of 2.29 million square kilometer or 70 per cent of the total geographical area. As many as 288 districts scattered over all the twenty-five states of India, were covered by incentive schemes for these areas. The entire states of Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura were declared as industrially backward.

Next to industrial backwardness, fundamental backwardness programmes, such as drought, desert, and hill area development programmes operated in 207 districts of 17 states. Almost entire Deccan plateau is covered under the drought prone, while entire Himalayan region is under the hill area programme. In relative terms, fundamentally backward areas are more in south India in comparison to north India. The same is true of western India as compared to eastern India.

Among the fundamental backwardness programmes, drought prone area programme has the largest coverage of 746 thousand square kilometres area or 23 per cent of total geographical area of the country in thirteen states. Every
second state, every third district and every sixth block in the country is covered under this programme.

Border area development programme is relatively the most recent and the smallest in areal coverage of all the programmes. It covers 138 thousand square kilometre area, accounting for only 4.2 per cent of the total geographical area of the country.

There is high degree of overlap among backward development programmes. At least, area equivalent to 1.12 million square kilometres or 35 per cent of the total geographical area of the country is covered under more than one area programme. In as many as 186 districts, more than one programme is operative. There is a high degree of overlapping in this regard.

At least 167 districts are covered under two programmes, 27 districts under three programmes and three districts under as many as four programmes. At the level of programmes, areal coverage under the drought prone and the desert development frequently overlaps.

With the exception of designated hill districts programme, all the backward area programmes have registered increase in their areal coverage over the period. The largest increase in coverage took place in the case of drought prone area programme, followed by the tribal development programme. Not only the spatial spread but also the spatial intensity of both the programmes changed over time. Areal coverage under the former increased by about 90 per cent and under the latter by 37 per cent.

IV

Institutional and financial aspects

A variety of institutional and financial arrangements have been made to formulate and implement backward area development programmes. Broadly speaking, two national agencies, the Planning Commission and the Central
Ministries, formulate different programmes, and the state level agencies, especially District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) implements these programmes.

Area programmes, in the nature of regional plans like the Hill Area, Border Area and Northeast Region are formulated and financed by the Planning Commission. On the other hand, programmes of sectoral nature, such as Drought Prone, Desert Development, Tribal Development and Industrial Development, are formulated and financed by the Central Ministries of Rural Development, Tribal Affairs, and Industry, respectively. More specifically, the State Plan Division in the Planning Commission monitors the Hill, Border and North-east Region Programmes, the Western Ghats Secretariat looks after the Western Ghats Development Programme, Land Resources Department in Ministry of Rural Development takes care of the Drought Prone Areas and Desert Development Programme and the Ministry of Industry was responsible for the Industrial Backward Area Development Programme.

State Level Screening Committees monitor programmes in respective states, while District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs) / Zila Parishads/ District Councils monitor projects and schemes implementation at the district level, in general. With 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1994, some of the schemes and projects under the national level backward area programmes are now directly implemented by the Village Panchayats.

Like institutional arrangements, there is a wide variety in distribution of the Central financial assistance to state government to implement schemes and projects under area programmes. Broadly, the Planning Commission allocates funds for programmes of regional nature, while the Central Ministries do the same for those of sectoral nature. In addition, funds also flow from the all-India financial institutions, such as Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI), LIC, nationalised banks and market borrowings, for the purpose.
The Border Area Programme is fully funded by the Planning Commission. The financial assistance for Tribal development comes through as many as four sources: (i) states plan resources; (ii) central plan and centrally sponsored schemes; (iii) special assistance from Ministry of Home Affairs; and (iv) institutional finance. Funds allocated to the Drought Prone Areas are shared on 50:50 basis between the centre and the concerned states. The Ministry of Industry provides only incentives for locating industries in backward areas.

It is interesting to learn that the content of space remained almost missing from the funds distribution criteria among backward areas for a long time. In the initial years, funds were distributed on the basis of the number of administrative units, such as districts or blocks covered, rather than the size of geographical area covered. As a result, states with large sized districts or blocks suffered. In due course of time, this distortion was rectified. The modified criteria now provide weightage to both area and population of administrative units covered under a programme. While the designated hill districts programme in the Himalayan region provides equal weightage to both area and population, the designated hill taluka programme in the Western Ghats assigns 75 per cent weightage to area and remaining 25 per cent to population. Another important modification affected in the funds allocation has been to consider block/taluka as the unit for the allocation of funds, in case the programme identification unit also happens to be the block/taluka. Earlier, district used to be the unit for allocation of funds even if programme was implemented at the block/taluka level. All this made backward area programmes more focused in space context. Such a realisation is, of course, of recent origin. One may add here that while block/taluka are identification units, spatial data base at this level is inadequate for objective allocation of funds.

Timely utilisation of funds allocated for backward area development programmes has been a matter of serious concern in the different five year plans. Though things have improved over time yet certain programmes and states lag far behind in timely utilisation of allocated funds. The hill area
development programme utilised about 96 per cent of the allocated funds
during the Fifth Plan but the state Tamil Nadu could use only about 71 per cent
of such allocated funds. During the Annual Plan of 1979-80, the expenditure
made only about 70 per cent of allocated funds in case of North-east Regional
Plan. Expenditure has never been cent per cent of the allocation in the entire
life of the drought prone area programme. Among the states, performance of
Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh, and Gujarat has been
poor whereas Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Haryana and Jammu & Kashmir
fared better in meeting targets.

An aggregate amount of Rs 129 billion has been invested as the public money
in major seven backward area development programme in India. Th amount
appears huge but it makes hardly 0.8 per cent of the total Gross Domestic
Product (GDP) of India in 1998-99. Secondly, geographical coverage under
backward area programmes has been very wide; hence per sq. km. investment
works out as a meagre amount.

The Hill Area Development Programme received the largest share of Rs 30.5
billion which accounted for about one-fourth of the total expenditure on
backward area programmes in India. Tribal development received another Rs
27 billion or more than one-fifth. The North-eastern Region Programme, with
an amount of Rs 23 billion closely followed. All the three programmes together
received more than two-thirds of the total expenditure on area programmes. In
contrast, the Border Area Development Programme received the smallest share,
accounting for only 6.5 per cent of the total.

Expenditure in terms of geographical coverage provides entirely different
picture. Border area programme, which received the smallest amount in
aggregate terms, got the second highest amount in terms of geographical
coverage. It received Rs.6.08 million per thousand Km² which was next only to
the HADP (Rs. 6.51 million per thousand Km²). In contrast, industrially
backward area programme got only a meagre amount of Rs 220 thousand per
thousand Km$^2$. On the whole, programmes focusing on ecologically fragile areas, such as hill, desert and drought prone received comparatively a greater attention of the government in allocation of funds; socially weak tribal areas followed; and the industrially backward areas were the smallest beneficiary.

Among the states, Uttar Pradesh got the largest amount of assistance for the backward area development programme, Rs 23 billion or 19 per cent of the total. Arunachal Pradesh received the second largest sum of Rs 13 billion, or 10 per cent of the total amount. Assam, Rajasthan, and Nagaland were the next in order. All the five states together received more than a half of the total expenditure incurred on backward area programmes. In contrast, Bihar, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh, which are considered among the most backward states, together received only about 9 per cent of the total. West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Karnataka, which are considered moderate to highly developed states, received a comparatively larger share of 15.3 per cent.

V

Development impact

Notwithstanding the continuing low development level of most of the backward districts, these did experience an improvement in their condition during 1971-91. This finding validates our hypothesis that backward area development programmes would have positive effect on the development process in backward areas.

In terms of intra-group compression, the development score of the most backward district was 1/31 of the relatively least backward in 1971. This gap was reduced to 1/17 by 1991. With exception of four districts of Jhabua, Bikaner, Jalor and North Tripura, which registered negative change, all other backward districts registered an increase in their development index score during 1971-91. In fact, nearly a half of the backward districts showed a marked improvement over the years. The districts recording relatively higher
level of development index (1991) and a relatively higher change in development index (1971-91) are broadly coterminous to the districts relatively better in 1971 in terms of six amenities, such as educational institutions, medical institutions, electricity, drinking water, communication (pucca roads) and post and telegraph facilities. Such a finding validates our hypothesis that districts equipped better with physical and social infrastructure, at the initial stage, would respond faster than others lacking this advantage.

During 1971-91, about one-half of the backward districts recorded a rise in their literacy rates that was higher than the national average. In diversification of rural economy, such a distinction was achieved by two-fifths of districts. On urbanisation, only about one-third of districts could make such a claim. Hence, in relative terms, backward districts have performed high on social development, moderate on rural development and low on modernisation. This confirms the importance of the role of the State in rendering spatial justice.

Backward districts located in developed states were not only ahead of their counterparts in backward states but also performed better during 1971-91. In fact, an overwhelming majority of backward districts recording significant improvement in their development index were located in proximity to already developed districts. This validates our hypothesis that backward districts located in close proximity to already developed districts and in developed states respond more quickly to development programmes in comparison to districts having peripheral location and falling in backward states.

The development of industrially backward areas was also more typically of districts located close to state capitals or metropolitan cities. They attracted sizeable industrial investment. It validates our hypothesis formulated on the same lines.

Areas covered under the hill area programme were not only far ahead but also growing fast in female literacy in comparison to areas covered under all other programmes. Against this, area covered under desert programme suffered badly
on this count. Tribal areas were the least urbanised among all the backward areas. In other words, desert areas suffer badly in social development, tribal areas in economic development, and drought prone areas in diversification of rural economy.

In aggregate terms, hill areas are the least backward while desert areas are the most backward. The districts covered by the North East Regional Plan were noted for a dynamic change. The opposite was true of the districts covered by desert development programme.

The present study naturally raises the question of how can backward area development programmes be an effective instrument of evolving a regionally balance pattern of socio-economic development in India. Any attempt in this direction would require answers to issues, such as: (i) effective and rational methodology for identification of backward areas; (ii) data base requirements for a scientific formulation and effective implementation of backward area programmes as well as creation of a spatial data base for the purpose; (iii) territorial administration desirable for effective implementation of area programmes giving direct responsibility of formulating and implementing area programmes to the Zila Parishads and Nagarpalikas; and (iv) replication of success stories for the development of backward areas with similar ecological and socio-economic setting.

Again, fruitful area of research inquiry that needs attention relates to initiation of micro-level studies to understand area-specific development needs so as to reorient area programmes. It raises question for future research, such as, (i) How is the formulation of any policy related to the specific requirements of different regions of the country? (ii) What is its spatially varying impact?

Lack of spatial data-base and difficulties in gaining access to available government documents are going to prove the biggest constraint to such studies. Anyway, here lies the challenge for geographers who are interested in spatial analysis of public policies. They have to accept this challenge and demonstrate the inherent dynamism, strength and relevance of such kind of geographic studies for the general welfare.