CHAPTER - VI.

Even though the targets under the Minimum Needs Programme were not duly fulfilled in the Fifth Plan period the importance of the Programme in the distribution of benefits of Plan programmes to at least a portion of the weaker sections of society cannot be minimised. This Programme is one of the main tools in the hands of the planners to make a direct attack on poverty. The limitations of the Programme are to a certain extent due to the usual emphasis placed in an underdeveloped economy on the development of infrastructures. It has also been difficult to keep pace with the growth of population. Of course, as seen in the previous chapters, a lack of appreciation of the significance of the Programme, both by the Central Government and by some of the State Governments, has brought about only sporadic and partial results. But, that should not be the reason why it should not be pursued with more funds and better management in future.

It will not be easy to compare the situation in India to that of the United Kingdom where social services now claim the major share of Government expenditure. The following table shows the growth of social services in U.K.:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Social Services (Percentage of total expenditure)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1790</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It has been stated that by 1939 Britain had developed a system of social services as good as that of any country in the world at that time. Though the range had considerably widened from pre-1914 days it was still considered that social services were not comprehensive in their coverage even in 1939. In that country, social services at first catered to the limited categories of needy persons. A change in pattern was effected to give benefits of welfare to all citizens. The scheme, as then formulated, was to provide unemployment benefits, sickness benefits, retirement pensions, widows' and orphans' pensions as well as training benefits and maternity and death grants. The scheme was to be financed by compulsory contributions from employers, employees and self-employed and by a contribution from the Exchequer. At the present stage of development in India it is difficult to formulate any scheme on the scale as exists in the United Kingdom now. Only a beginning in distribution of social benefits has just been made here and it should be the aim to implement the Revised Minimum Needs Programme with certain modifications so that its targets are achieved in time.
It is, therefore, felt that under the Revised Minimum Needs Programme the existing items minus Rural roads and Rural Electrification may be continued. But, to make the Programme really effective and purposeful, the following measures will be necessary -

i) Identification of the target groups for whom the Programme is intended, and

ii) An organised distribution system which will make available to the poorer sections the essential commodities like food, clothing, etc.

It has been observed that without proper identification of beneficiaries the benefits of the Programme are likely to flow to the comparatively well-to-do sections of the community. Some of the projects with the focus on the rural poor are Small/Marginal Farmers' Development, Tribal Area Development, Drought Prone Area Programme, Integrated Rural Development, Desert Development, Fish Farmers' Development etc. These programmes have, however, benefited only a limited number of persons so far and the bias in some cases is on the development of infrastructures. Unless the problem of poverty is tackled at least on the family basis no real breakthrough in the process of uplifting the poor can be possible. It is on this line that Rajasthan has pioneered the Antyodaya scheme where the coverage starts from the bottom
and travels upwards. This programme envisages identification of the five poorest families from among those who live below the poverty line in each village with a view to give them means of livelihood and assisting them to cross the poverty-line. In view of the high degree of poverty prevailing in Rajasthan certain basic criteria were fixed for selecting the poorest of the poor. These criteria were:

1) Families having no economic assets like cattle or investible property and no person in the age-group 15-59 years capable of economic activity due to infirmity, disability or old age.

2) Families having no economic assets but having one or more persons capable of economic activity whose annual per capita family earnings do not exceed Rs.100/- per month for a family of five members. Generally, families of landless labourers and artisans etc., fall in this category.

3) Families with some assets with annual income between Rs.1200/- to Rs.1800/- for a family of five persons.

4) Families which have some landed properties and other assets, but are below the poverty-line.

Based on these criteria, a socio-economic profile of each family may be prepared and concrete proposals for giving assistance to these families can be formulated. Thus, it is possible through the Antyodaya approach of identification.

of beneficiaries to prepare a definite action-plan for the benefit of the poor. Further, such identification in each village will ultimately give a population profile at the Block level and then at the District level. These data will enable the planners to formulate the Regional Plan dovetailing the Minimum Needs Programme with the prospect of bringing the benefits to the identified poorer classes of society.

This task of identification of beneficiaries is easier for a local man than for a Government official. In Rajasthan, the Gram Sabhas did this work for execution of the Antyodaya Programme. In West Bengal, the Gram Panchayats may do this work themselves or help the Government officials in performing the job.

Leaving aside the items of Rural roads and Rural electrification, the items of Minimum Needs Programme may be classified in these broad categories -

1) Urban - Environmental improvement of urban slums.
2) Urban & Rural,
   a) Elementary Education.
   b) Adult Education.
   c) Nutrition.
3) Rural -
   a) Rural Health.
   b) Rural Water Supply.
   c) House-sites for the landless and Rural housing.
For the first category, there is no difficulty in identifying the urban slums and the persons living in the slums are the beneficiaries. Popular participation will involve co-operation with the authorities in executing the programme. Unnecessary and frivolous obstructions and demands may be taken care of by the local bodies and influential neighbours.

In the second category, identification and popular participation are utmost necessary in Nutrition as in this sector the really deserved may be actually deprived of the benefits by the more vocal sections. Voluntary organisations may help the distribution in urban areas. In the rural areas, both the voluntary agencies and the Gram Panchayats should come into the picture. For Adult Education, the Government has already expressed the desire to take the help of voluntary agencies including educational institutions. The Gram Panchayats in West Bengal have got sufficient scope to participate in this programme vigorously.

Popular participation is not particularly involved in the execution of the programme of Rural Health. Primary Health Centres, Sub-Centres, Rural hospitals are constructed by the Government. All sections of the community get the benefits of this programme. In West Bengal, the programme of Rural Water Supply was so long being executed by the Government. But, the Zilla Parishads have since entered the field and schemes of Rural Water Supply are being entrusted to them now.
In distribution of house-sites and Rural Housing the Panchayat bodies can play a significant role in identification of both land and beneficiaries. In West Bengal, Panchayats are now directly associated with the execution of the scheme. In order that the Panchayat Samitis have no difficulty for want of technical staff, nine plans and type designs with estimates have been prepared by the Eastern Region of the National Building Organisation, which will be adopted in different areas according to local conditions. Besides, revised guidelines regarding construction of huts have been prepared in local language for facility of work through Panchayat Samitis.

In 1972 the Government of West Bengal had constituted District Planning Committee in each district with the M.L.A.s and M.P.s from the district among the members. The proposed task of these Committees was to prepare the Plan for the district and to co-ordinate all Plan schemes in the district. A few districts did bring out Five-Year Plans, but these were rather lists of demands and desirabilities than actual Plans. Moreover, the Plan under Minimum Needs Programme was nowhere clearly spelt out. Thus, the hope raised with the formation of the District Planning Committees was not actually realised. Under the Statute, District Planning Committees have also the power to supervise and evaluate the works of the Panchayat bodies. These Committees have, however, not met for a long time. Unless Panchayat bodies take an active

91. The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 - Section 211.
interest in the Minimum Needs Programme the popular participation, though desired, will not take shape. An important aspect of public participation, through Panchayat bodies or otherwise, is that it will also act as a check on the bureaucratic distribution system.

The poor have often no cash to buy the articles supplied even at very low prices. There should be a provision which will enable them to get their essential requirements from the shops on easy credit. In fact, provision for consumption credit ought to be one of the additional items in the Minimum Needs Programme as it will make available to the poor their minimum needs on food and clothing, which may be distributed through a chain of co-operative societies or fair price shops. The selection of beneficiaries under this item may be made on similar criteria mentioned earlier in respect of the Antyodaya Programme. A suitable ceiling on the amount of consumption credit admissible to a selected family may be fixed. The identification of such families may be made by the Panchayat and other local bodies.

Another item which ought to be included in the Programme is employment. It is intended that the income of the people belonging to the lower strata of society should be augmented. How can it be achieved except through provision of employment? Some measures for creation of opportunities for self-employment in transport and village and small industries sectors may be taken by procuring bank finance and granting
subsidy. A programme for training of young people in various occupations for subsequent absorption in existing organisations or for self-employment may be undertaken. A few programmes like Additional Employment Programme, Training Rural Youth for Self-employment have already been started on these lines. Surplus land distributed among the landless labourers may be a source of income for them. But, distribution of land, capital etc. can not cover the entire population. Hence, there is the necessity for taking up massive rural works programme for the people who remain unemployed or underemployed in the rural areas.

The inclusion of employment in the Minimum Needs Programme may appear rather ambitious. But, one of the principal objectives of the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1978-83) was removal of unemployment and significant under-employment within a period of ten years. Another principal objective is an appreciable rise in the standard of living of the poorest sections of the population. An amount of living wage, so to say, has, therefore, to be assured. It is not possible or necessary that the entire population will have to be covered within the Sixth Plan period. In the other items of the Minimum Needs Programme like Elementary Education, Adult Education, Rural Electrification, Housing for the landless, Nutrition etc., it has not been possible to stipulate 100% coverage within the Sixth Plan. Similarly, for employment purpose a living wage for at least 50% of the potential workers may be ensured by the end of the Sixth Plan.
Investment in this item should create productive assets for acceleration of economic growth.

It is thus felt that the two items of consumption credit and Employment should be added to the Revised Minimum Needs Programme minus Rural Roads and Rural Electrification.

To be more effective, an alternative way of implementing the Minimum Needs Programme may also be contemplated. The Programme was thought of as an integral part of the Five-Year Plan. It was rightly so, because the Minimum Needs component of a particular sector can not be executed separately without disturbing the cohesion and continuity of the sector as a whole. For example, the Minimum Needs component of Elementary Education should not be implemented in isolation from the requirements of Secondary and Higher Education. It is now observed that, during actual implementation of the Fifth Plan, the Minimum Needs Programme has been treated just like any other programme within the Plan, though the Planning Commission earmarked the outlays under this programme, along with other programmes, with the implication that utilisation of these outlays was linked to overall assistance from the Government of India. It has already been seen that many States could not utilise the earmarked outlays and targets in several cases were not attained. Hence, if the Minimum Needs Programme cannot attract due attention by remaining within the framework of the State Plans it may be considered as a separate Programme sponsored by the Government of India. Many programmes like Integrated Rural Development...
Programme, Integrated Tribal Development Project etc., specially assisted by the Government of India, are currently under execution. These programmes cannot, however, be compared to the Minimum Needs Programme as they have not set any minimum standard which should be achieved. In those cases, some inputs are pushed into particular areas or areas without the objective of reaching a pre-determined level of development. For Minimum Needs Programme, what may be considered is a special programme with contributions from the State Governments and from the Government of India, who may bear the greater share of the burden. Performance of the States should be directly linked to assistance from the Govt. of India. Leaving the execution of the Programme at the hands of the States, as in the Fifth Plan, will mean a repetition of the same lack of particular interest in this Programme. Also, unreasonable delay in attaining the targets of the Programme is bound to reflect on the social and the political fields.

For timely implementation of this Programme a suitable monitoring system will have to be evolved. It has been already observed that a complete picture of the achievement of targets in the country under the Programme during the Fifth Plan is not yet available. While post-facto evaluation of the working of the Programme will bring out the difficulties, deficiencies and various constraints for taking suitable corrective measures in due course monitoring during implementation of the Programme will lead it towards the desired
targets. One has to see that the beneficiaries are correctly identified, that the benefits actually reach the proposed beneficiaries, that the distribution system works properly and that the outlays earmarked for this Programme are not diverted elsewhere. An exercise should simultaneously continue comparing the physical targets to be attained and targets actually attained. For this exercise, monitoring organisations, both at the State and at the Government of India levels, may be activated and strengthened. The Departments, which implement the Programme, should also set up cells to monitor the working of the Programme at different stages. Periodical reports may be obtained from the implementing agencies by a central monitoring organisation which may co-ordinate the functioning of the entire programme.

The Programme, if implemented in earnest and with sincerity, will surely contribute towards reduction of inequalities, which is the policy adopted by the country. It has been the experience that, whenever a cut is proposed on the Plan outlay as an economy measure, the axe almost invariably falls on the sectors having components of the Minimum Needs Programme while priority is maintained on the items of Agriculture, Irrigation and Power etc., for building up infrastructures. It should, however, be remembered that, as in other cases of development of resources, the Minimum Needs Programme also aims at development of a vast section of human resources - the best resources that a country may aspire to possess.