

Addressing Regional Backwardness: An Analysis of Area Development Programmes in India

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This book is the result of a research involving painstaking collection of material and data related to India's 'Area Development Programmes' undertaken by the Planning Commission. Replete with illustrations, simple diagrams, tables and annexures, the last occupying a quarter of the entire space, the text is organised in a very systematic style. As the title suggests, the book starts by tracing the evolution of the Area Specific Development Programmes in India, and in particular Backward Areas Development Plans in India, with an overview and classification of such areas in the country. An interesting section of the book devoted to 'Criteria for Identification of Backward Areas' sets the pace for further treatment of the theme. This, as shown in the book, has undergone frequent changes following the grievances of the people in the adjacent areas omitted from the plans, on the periphery of the delineated regions, as well as the perception of the committees or institutions entrusted with the task of identification. To quote an example, the criteria for identifying Drought-prone Areas were changed seven times between 1967 and 1994. The author has, no doubt, faithfully recorded and tabulated the criteria adopted by different committees, but one would have expected him, as a scholar and more so as a geographer, to comment on the suitability or otherwise of some of the criteria and even suggest what he thought could be the

most appropriate criteria for delineation of such areas. The author has discussed Seven Classes of Backward Areas, some of them being very specific. These include: Industrially Backward Areas, Hill Area Development Programme, Western Ghats Development Programme, Drought-prone Areas Development Programme, Desert Development Programme, Border Area Development Programme, and Northeast Region Development Programme. Significantly, author's comments on lack of uniformity in applying the criteria for identification reveal the re-tailoring of criteria under pressure from aggrieved state governments.

The areal coverage of different programmes is comprehensively recorded and illustrated with maps for different periods during which the programmes were undertaken. There are nonetheless some intriguing questions like why no area of Eastern Ghats was ever thought of while delineating the Hill Areas Development Programmes. The institutional and financial aspects of these programmes are analysed in detail as some of these programmes are funded by more than one agency.

The most important part of the book is the assessment of impact these Backward Area Development programmes had on the socio-economic progress of the regions. This, the author has evaluated by taking such

deconstructs as have witnessed uninterrupted implementation of all these programmes over two decades (1971-1991) and devising an index of development (DI), which is equivalent to (1-deprivation score). The entire exercise hinges on the deprivation scores which the author has worked out for 186 districts he has selected for impact assessment, taking into consideration female literacy, urbanisation and non-agricultural rural employment as indicators of social economic and rural development. The index devised by him for the degree of deprivation appears, to say the least, very subjective. The maximum value of these indicators, taken as a benchmark, is not only imperfect but even absurd. Is hundred percent urbanisation, as in the case of Bombay, an ideal situation to be reached as an indicator of economic development, or should we stop at 65.5 percent female literacy as in the case of Alleppey, Kerala, as having reached the goal, or do we want hundred percent non-agricultural rural population as a goal of rural development? None of these positions is tenable either as a goal or as an ideal to be achieved. Conversion of rural into urban is no rural development.

The author has found that these Area Development Programmes have made a significant impact in minimising the gap between the districts benefiting from these programmes and the developed districts of the country, and reduced disparity within the group of backward districts, yet he is justified in seeking an effective and rational methodology, a sound spatial data base, and an administrative arrangement in which Zilla Parishads and Nagarpalikas become more active participants in formulating and implementing these plans.

The book represents a most comprehensive review of the Backward Area Development Programmes undertaken by the Government of India through Planning Commission. The present reviewer has not come across a work of this type and scale earlier. It is well organised and systematically presented. The data marshalled by him and the maps presenting spatial aspect of the programmes show the amount of work and dedication that have gone in the preparation of the doctoral dissertation which has taken the shape of the book under review. It is an excellent doctoral dissertation and its publication is well deserved. It should be especially interesting to those who have interest in the geography of development in general and regional planning in particular. The reviewer believes that there would be addition to the Existing Area Development Programmes which may include 'Flood Prone Areas', 'Cyclonic Areas', 'Earthquake prone areas' and the like. In these situations, the methodology evolved in the present volume could serve as an appropriate starting point.

The quality of printing and paper is good and the text is virtually error free. The publishers, besides the author, deserve credit for bringing out the volume in a presentable form. Everyone who is interested in Area Development in general or Area Development Programmes of the Government of India would find this book rewarding. The book is modestly priced and affordable. The reviewer has no hesitation in recommending the book as a background reading material for those engaged in Area development programmes in India.

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