

Political Economy of Backward Area Development Programmes in India

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Abstract

The present paper is a critique of the Government of India's programmes/schemes for promoting development in backward areas. It deals with issues relating to conceptualization of area backwardness and identification of backward areas/districts. An attempt is also made to trace the trajectory of measures taken to address the problem and to look at the politico-economic dimension of the entire process. A basic question is why areas/districts identified as backward under any programme/scheme generally persisted with that nomenclature for an indefinite time? Why a blanket approach was adopted in treating backward districts as one category by way of usually funding them equitably despite wide variations in their population and area size, terrain and accessibility conditions, and nature and intensity of problem, resulting in a big difference in their per unit cost of development? Above all, why the backward area programmes/schemes could not make the desired impact?

Question of Area Backwardness

The issue has a history of interest to several countries. During the modern times, the idea of backward areas and strategies toward their development took shape on systematic lines in socialist as well as advanced countries of the world. The planners in the former Soviet Union were forerunners in addressing the issue of spatial injustice directly. A liquidation of backwardness of lagging regions was set forth as a primary objective right in the beginning of the planning era in 1928. Territorial specialization based on local resources at micro-level and regional diversification at meso-level, together with linking of backward regions with the developed ones at the national level, were deemed as the most effective strategy for the purpose. Siberia was in focus, in particular.

In 1934, the British Government enacted the 'Special Areas (Development and Improvement) Act' to address the problem of massive unemployment in identified lagging regions, such as the Midlands and the Scottish Highlands. The backward areas were designated as 'special areas'. The objective was to promote investment here to generate employment.

From 1963 onwards, a group of research institutes from about a dozen European countries has been carrying out studies on issues pertinent to backward regions. Regional backwardness in developed countries, such as

the United Kingdom, Germany and France, is essentially referred to the indicators of unemployment rate and poverty incidence. This is facilitated by an easy availability of reliable data on these two parameters. In 1969 the International Economic Association held a conference at Varenna, Italy, to deliberate over issues relating to backward areas in advanced countries. The experience of Western Europe and the United States and that of Socialist Republics of Eastern Europe was in focus. The development problems of backward areas in Hungary were expounded by L. Kőszegi at the occasion. The proceedings of the conference were published in the form of a book, edited by Robinson (1969).

In the United States, the Appalachians, the Deep South, and reservation pockets of Nebraska were marked as relatively backward. These were noted for comparatively high poverty rates, low education levels, and worrisome incidence of alcoholism. Even the richest country in the world has to contend with backwardness in places.

A variant is offered by China in its recent efforts at the Great Opening of the West to address its backwardness (Ptakova, 2013). A fifty year plan, spread over three phases, was prepared. The first phase of 2000-10 was devoted to the development of infrastructure. The second phase of 2010-30 is meant for accelerating economic and social progress. The final

phase of 2030-50 aims at raising the living standard of the people to a high level. As such there is no quick-fix to removal of backwardness. It is also evident that concern for backward areas carries a stamp of universality.

The Case of India

In India, where society is so diverse, economy is largely on informal lines, and polity is highly fragmented, the concept of backwardness becomes difficult to enunciate. Permutations and combinations of 'place poverty' and 'people poverty' coexist here in all possible shades. The primary responsibility of the state in eradication of backwardness is taken as an axiom in India. Hence 'planability' becomes an imperative in its case.

It is worth recalling that the National Committee on the Development of Backward Areas (1981, p.11) opined that a meaningful way of defining a backward area would be to find if it has a capacity to respond to development impulses and is subject to some specific problem which can be targeted. Such an area must have a base for raising its productivity. So to say, to qualify as a backward area, it must exhibit the following three attributes:

- Have a potential for getting transformed into a developed one
- Display some inhibiting factor which is preventing this potential to be realized
- Be in need of a special programme/scheme to remove its backwardness.

Accordingly a 'problem area' approach was initially deemed as most effective in identification and development of such areas. The diagnosis itself was to suggest the line of treatment. A categorization of backward areas into the drought prone, flood prone, hill, tribal or border by definition would itself suggest a specific strategy in each case. The only flaw of such an approach is that the focus gets centered on a particular problem in place of dealing with a holistic scenario.

Area Backwardness and the Plans

Backwardness has been a recurrent theme in development planning literature of India. This represents a combination of sectoral and spatial approaches in addressing

the issue. Under the first approach, a number of backward classes commissions were constituted by the Government of India as also by some state governments from time to time. Among these the Mandal Backward Classes Commission is most well-known. Likewise the issue of area backwardness has been of regular interest right since the First Five Year Plan. Over the years, a number of pertinent policies were formulated and a variety of programmes/ schemes were implemented to address the issue of regional backwardness (Mohan, 2005).

One of the primary objectives of the First Plan (1951-56) was to stimulate the agricultural and industrial development of hitherto un-served areas through a large number of irrigation and power projects dispersed throughout the country. Industrial development, especially by way of setting up of modern steel plants under public sector in resource rich tribal areas, was the hallmark of the Second Plan (1956-61). The Third Plan (1961-66) sought a balanced development of both agriculture and industry, especially through intensive agricultural development of some selected districts. This policy continued under the ensuing three annual plans (1966-69) which witnessed the ushering in of the Green Revolution in states where water for irrigation of wheat and rice was available in requisite quantity.

A direct attack on backwardness of certain well-defined regions was the hallmark of the Fourth Plan (1969-74). This is said with reference to the industrially backward districts and drought prone areas for which special programmes were started. Meanwhile the North - East Region was also adopted as one unit for special development initiatives (Table 1). The Fifth Plan (1974-79), which was terminated in 1978, witnessed the adoption of three development programmes, namely the Tribal Areas, Hill Areas (including Western Ghats), and Desert Areas, carrying forward the trend set in the Fourth Plan. The following two annual plans (1978-80) and the Sixth Plan (1980-85) were without any new area development Programme. The focus during this phase shifted to a direct attack on poverty through measures like Minimum Needs Programme.

The Seventh Plan (1985-90) is noted for the adoption of Dacoity Prone Areas Development Programme (which was terminated in 1990), and the initiation of the Border Area Development Programme. And again during the following two annual plans (1990-92) and the Eighth Plan (1992-97), no new area development programme took shape.

Plan Period	Name of the programme	Year of commencement
Fourth Plan (1969-74)	Industrially Backward Area	1970
	North-East	1972
	Drought Prone Area	1973
Fifth Plan (1974-79)	Tribal Areas	1974
	Hill Areas including the Western Ghats	1974
	Desert Areas	1977
Seventh Plan (1985-90)	Dacoity Prone Areas (withdrawn in 1990)	1985
	Border Areas	1987
Ninth Plan (1997-2002)	KBK (Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput region in Odisha)	1998
	Left Wing Extremism Affected Districts	2001
Tenth Plan (2002-07)	Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana (RSVY)	2003
Eleventh Plan (2007-12)	Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF)	2007
Integrated Action Plan (2010-11)	Left Wing Extremism Affected Districts	2010
NITI Aayog (2015 -)	Transformation of Aspirational Districts (TAD)	2018

Table 1. India: Chronology of Backward Area Development Programmes

Source: Compiled from various official documents of Planning Commission, NITI Aayog, and Central Ministries, Government of India, New Delhi.

Under the Ninth Plan (1997-2002), the Kalhandi-Bolangir-Koraput region of Odisha was taken up as a special case for its care, primarily in response to the reporting of some starvation deaths here. Left Wing Extremism affected districts were also brought under cover for action.

At the time of framing the Tenth Plan (2002-07), the persistent backwardness in vast areas over the country emerged as alarming. To address this issue in selected districts, *Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana* (RSVY) or Backward Districts Initiative Scheme was designed and launched in 2003 (Krishan., 2005, p. 164). At the time of finalizing the Eleventh Plan (2007-12), it was realized that this scheme was not meeting the desired purpose. A new scheme under the title Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF) was introduced in 2007. Subsequently in 2010-11, an Integrated Action Plan for 82 Selected Tribal and Backward Districts was initiated, most of which were Left Wing Extremism affected. Finally, the Transformation of Aspirational Districts (TAD) Programme was put in place in 2018. The plan mechanism had been terminated by that time and this programme was an ambitious initiative of the NITI Aayog.

In brief, regional approach to alleviation of area backwardness can be conceived as having gone through three phases. In the initial phase, it was in the form of irrigation and power projects targeting both agriculture and industry, particularly in deprived areas. In the intermediate phase of the Fourth to Ninth Plans, the effort got diversified in terms of drought prone, desert, hill, tribal and border area development programmes. On the way, the Sixth Plan went for a direct attack on poverty anywhere, and the Eighth Plan, which coincided with adoption of the New Economic Policy, opted to go without any new area development programme/scheme. The focus shifted in favour of comprehensive area development approach in the latest phase beginning with the Tenth plan.

Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana (RSVY)

In response to the evolving situation, a fresh approach was adopted in 2003-04 for the upliftment of backward areas. It was called *Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana* or Backward District Initiative Scheme. The scheme had three major objectives: (i) to generate employment (ii)

to raise agricultural productivity, and (iii) to fill critical gaps in physical and social infrastructure. This route was adjudged as most effective in addressing area backwardness. Initially 100 districts were earmarked for the scheme. The actual number was raised to 147 to cover 115 backward districts (12 additional districts incorporated from Bihar and 3 from Odisha) and 32 left wing extremism affected districts. The four North Indian states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh partook 68 districts among these while the four South Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu had only 21 districts as their share. For a backward state like Odisha, the coverage of only 5 districts was evidently inadequate. The same was the case of Rajasthan with only 3 districts under the programme/scheme.

The number of districts to be allocated to different states was to be decided on the basis of value of agricultural output, agricultural wage rate, percentage of scheduled caste/tribe population, and incidence of left wing extremism (Table 2).

A rider mentioned that each state was to have at least one district under the programme/scheme. The selection of such a district was left to the state. This indeed introduced some distortions. The selected districts of Sirsa in Haryana, Hoshiarpur in Punjab and Ahmadnagar in Maharashtra, for example, could not be called as backward. These were relatively well-off in the context of their respective states.

The programme/scheme was initiated in 2003, and was fully funded by the Central Government. Each district covered got an allocation of Rs. 15 crore (approximately 3.3 million US\$) per year for a period of three years, that is a total of Rs. 45 crore (approximately 10 million US\$) per district. The preparation of a three year master plan in the nature of three nested annual action plans was made mandatory. The participation and involvement of the panchayati raj institutions (local elected bodies), non-government organizations and self-help groups was to be ensured in formulation, implementation and monitoring of the development projects. All projects were

No.	Programme / Scheme	Organsiation	Criteria/ Indicators
1	<i>Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojna</i> (RSVY)	Planning Commission (2003)	(i) Value of agricultural output per agricultural worker based on 1990-93 (ii) Agricultural wage rate based on 1996-97 (iii) Percentage of scheduled caste /tribe population based on 1991 census (iv) Left Wing Extremism affected districts
2	Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF)	Planning Commission (2007)	(i) Credit per capita (financial backwardness) (ii) Percentage of agriculture labourers in total working population (indicates low share of industrial and modern service sectors in economy) (iii) Percentage of SC population (social backwardness) (iv) Percentage of ST population (social backwardness) (v) Female literacy rate (educational backwardness) (vi) Infant mortality rate (quality of health services) (vii) Percentage of households without electricity (quality of infrastructure services)
3	Transformation of Aspirational Districts (TAD)	NITI Aayog (2018)	49 indicators falling under 5 groups of: (i) Health and nutrition (13) (ii) Education (8) (iii) Agriculture and water resources (10) (iv) Financial inclusion & skill development (11) (v) Basic infrastructure (7)

Table 2. India: Criteria/Indicators for Identification of Districts under *Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana*, *Backward Regions Grant Fund*, and *Transformation of Aspirational Districts Programme*. Source: Compiled from various official documents of Planning Commission, NITI Aayog, and Central Ministries, Government of India, New Delhi.

to be completed within the prescribed period of three years.

Just after two years of its operations, the Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana was reviewed in 2005. Questions were raised on the efficacy of its implementation and ability to ensure its participatory nature. Based on the assessment made, it was decided to go in for a new programme/scheme after its completion in the coming one year. This decision was taken under a new political dispensation which had come into power in 2004.

Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF)

The new avatar of the RSVY scheme took birth in the form of Backward Regions Grant Fund, with a provision that the unutilized funds with the districts under the RSVY will remain with them under the new programme/scheme. Only 3 districts among the 147 districts were reported to have utilized the allocated funds fully. The new programme/scheme was again district centric but carried the expression 'Region' in its nomenclature. Launched in 2007, it had an annual allocation of Rs. 4670 crores (roughly one billion US\$). Of this Rs. 250 crores (roughly 56 million US\$) were meant for capacity building and the remaining were disbursed as development fund. The scheme was placed under the care of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India.

The objective of the programme/scheme was to address the issue of regional imbalances by way of promoting the development of backward districts. To that end, the measures included: (i) filling the gaps in local infrastructure and other development requirements not being adequately met through existing inflows; (ii) strengthening the panchayat and municipal level governance with more appropriate capacity building, (iii) providing professional support to local bodies in planning, implementation and monitoring of development activities, and (iv) improving the performance and delivery of obligatory functions of local bodies (Government of India, 2007, p. 4). The expected outcomes of the programme/scheme were to mitigate regional imbalances, alleviate poverty in backward districts, and promote accountable and responsive character of their panchayats and municipalities.

At the time of its inception in 2007, the programme/scheme covered 250 districts. This coverage was extended by 22 districts in 2012, raising the tally to 272 districts. Every district was mandated to prepare a comprehensive plan in place of just the programme-centric plan.

The World Bank (2010, p. 3) observed that the four stated objectives and the expected outcomes, specified in the BRGF guidelines, were neither clearly defined nor logically structured or linked. The programme/scheme fails to stimulate vertical convergence of the existing government schemes at local level and does not ensure horizontal cooperation among various adjoining backward districts. Moreover, the budget provisions are highly inadequate, the national average being Rs. 103 (2.2 dollars) per capita. A restructuring of the objectives in a clear logical framework from inputs to outcomes was recommended. In line with this, the President of India in her address to Parliament on 4 June 2009 called for redesigning of the BRGF. A clear inference is that the programme/scheme was conceived and implemented in haste, not uncommon with the government at large.

Such assessments apart, the BRGF could not escape the vagaries of the change in the political regime. The same was earlier the case with the RSVY. A replacement by a new scheme subsequent to change in the government comes as no surprise. A similar change was in the offing in years to come.

Transformation of Aspirational Districts (TAD)

On January 1st, 2015, the Planning Commission of India was replaced by the National Institution for Transforming India or NITI Aayog. This was not merely a change in name but also a redefinition of the role of the new institution. The new arrangement was meant to 'foster cooperative federalism to evolve a shared vision of national development' rather than being a mechanism for devolution of funds to the states and ministries of the central government, as was the case with the Planning Commission. It has a Governing Council in place of National Development Council. The Governing Council has all the chief ministers of states and union territories with legislatures, and lieutenant governors of the other union territories as the members, with Prime Minister of India as its Chairperson. The members are expected to play a much more effective role in the decision making process than was the case with the members of the National Development Council.

It was a practice with the Planning Commission to formulate the Central Plan, and to allocate funds to the states for finalizing their plans. This ritual was given up. One major obligation of the NITI Aayog is to 'actively monitor and evaluate the implementation of the programmes and initiatives' of the government. The issue of na-

tional security was to be an integral part of any economic strategy devised by the NITI Aayog (Government of India, 2019, pp. 451-452).

Setting aside the Backward Regions Grant Fund, initiated by the previous government in the 12th Plan, the NITI Aayog started a programme under the title Transforma-

tion of Aspirational Districts on 1st January, 2018. An Aspirational District was a polite euphemism for a backward district. Drawing upon its aspiration to shed backwardness and focusing upon its potential, the objective was to transform it into a prosperous one.

State	Number of districts covered by			
	RSVY	BRGF	TAD	At least 2 Programmes
Andhra Pradesh	2	4	3	3
Arunachal Pradesh	1	1	1	1
Assam	5	13	7	7
Bihar	21	38	13	26
Chhattisgarh	8	15	10	11
Gujarat	3	6	2	4
Haryana	1	2	1	1
Himachal Pradesh	2	2	1	2
Jammu & Kashmir**	3	5	2	3
Jharkhand	16	23	19	19
Karnataka	4	6	2	4
Kerala	2	2	1	2
Madhya Pradesh	10	30	8	14
Maharashtra	9	12	4	9
Manipur	1	3	1	2
Meghalaya	1	3	1	1
Mizoram	1	2	1	1
Nagaland	1	5	1	1
Odisha	5	20	10	14
Punjab	1	1	2	1
Rajasthan	3	13	5	6
Sikkim	1	1	1	1
Tamil Nadu	5	6	2	5
Telangana	8	9	3	8
Tripura	1	1	1	1
Uttar Pradesh	21	35	10	25
Uttarakhand	3	3	2	3
West Bengal	8	11	3	8
Total	147	272	117	183

Table 3. India: Statewise* Number of Districts covered by Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojna (RSVY), Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF), and Transformation of Aspirational Districts (TAD) Programmes

Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, New Delhi.

* Only states, barring Goa, were covered under the programme.

** The state of Jammu and Kashmir was reorganized as union territories of : (i) Jammu and Kashmir and (ii) Ladakh on 31st October 2019.

The methodology was to converge all the ongoing central and state level schemes as the main mechanism, to assign the responsibility of running the show to a designated Joint Secretary level officer at the central level and the district collector at the state level, and to promote competition among these districts to turn the whole process into a mass movement. The overall approach was not to call these districts as backward but aspirational so that their potential could be unlocked. They were to remain in regular competition not only with other districts but also with themselves so as to reach the level of the top district in their state.

Initially 115 districts among 712 in the country at that time were covered under the programme/scheme. Subsequently two additional districts from Odisha were included, raising the number to 117. The districts were placed under three groups for focused attention and care. Among these, 32 were specified as the primary responsibility of the NITI Aayog, 35 of Ministry of Home Affairs, and 50 of a pool of central government ministries. Taking all the three programmes/schemes into account, as many as 183 districts were covered by at least two programmes among the three, discussed in detail (Table 3). Around two-thirds of the districts designated as Aspirational were the same as in the Backward Regions Grant Fund list and one-fourth were more developed than the national average. All of these were to be periodically subjected to a base line ranking, using 49 indicators belonging to five key sectors of health and nutrition (13), education (8), agriculture and water resources (10), financial resources and skill development (11), and basic infrastructure (7). The performance of these districts was to be judged from the behaviour of specified indicators over time.

The main source of funding of this programme/scheme was the allocations available under the already ongoing programmes/schemes of the central government. Additional financial resources were to originate from the Corporate Social Responsibility component of the 331(257 actually functional) Public Sector Enterprises in the country, as on 31st March, 2017. These were expected to contribute at least two per cent of their annual profit to this effect under such a provision. There was no obligation on the part of Central Government to allocate any additional funds for the purpose.

Concluding Observations

To address the imperative of correcting striking regional disparities, a variety of backward area development programmes/schemes and pertinent policies were adopted by the Government of India and state governments through the successive Five Year and intervening Annual Plans. The backward areas were identified by using relevant criteria and indicators based on available data. Virtually in every case district was adopted as the primary unit for implementation of a programme/scheme, though in the case of the Border Area Development Programme the choice got finalized in favour of the block (a component of a district).

The sectoral approach has been the dominant style of all the Five Year and annual plans since the ushering of the planning era in 1951. The spatial approach, in the form of backward area development programmes / schemes, has also been an adjunct in some manner. The spatial approach had mainly three dispositions: (i) irrigation and power projects as well as iron and steel and other industry under public sector in undeveloped areas, (ii) select districts for agricultural and industrial stimulus, and (iii) backward districts defined on the basis of their problems and potential. In their own turn, backward areas had three variants as : (i) suffering from some fundamental problem, such as being drought prone, flood affected, or remote tribal, (ii) self - defined by a strategic location, such as the international border, and (iii) persistent poverty stricken.

Often the conceptual basis of any programme/ scheme is very convincing and its methodology is spelt out in detail. In actual the things do not seem to be working on desired lines. One is not sure whether the fault lies with formulation of the programme/scheme or with its implementation. The situation could be attributed partly to a lack of training and motivation on the part of the bureaucracy to run any development programme/scheme. They lacked the skill and preparation for such a special assignment.

Additionally one serious issue lies with identification of backward areas/districts. In most cases, the identification of backward areas of a particular kind was in response to a vociferous demand from some state. The initial idea was that there could be only a few areas of the kind and problem would be of manageable size. But when the list gets prepared on the basis of some logical criteria, it invariably becomes elastic, with additional demands

emerging from inadequately or uncovered states. Once the net is spread to cover them, these tend to be scattered all around. Ultimately the spatial coverage of every programme is so vast and funding so limited that it would be futile to hope for the moon. Often such a scenario to arise is not visualized right in the beginning.

The fact is that districts identified as backward are not differentiated on the basis of their population, degree of remoteness, topographical configuration, and associated differential in per unit cost of development. The official definition of geography in India for development interventions is just a uniform area (Yumnam, 2007, p.1668). The real picture is that of a lot of ruggedness. It is imperative that varying nature of districts in the country must be taken into account while developing of funds for development.

Still another lacuna arises from the fact that little effort is made to generate up-to-date data for working out the selected indicators for identification of backward districts. The listing of BRGF districts in 2006-07 was essentially based on data for early 1990's. Moreover backward districts are assumed as being persistent in their nature. The successive list of backward districts is largely a recycled version of the previous ones. Once a district is listed as backward, it carries this appellation for an indefinite period. The impression given is that hardly any backward district could be uplifted through any development programme on the way.

An undue haste is observed in replacing one programme by another without waiting for the previous one to show its impact. The Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana was an initiative of the National Democratic Alliance government. It was replaced in less than three years by Backward Regions Grant Fund after the United Progressive Alliance government came in power in 2004. In its own turn, the Backward Regions Grant Fund was given up in favour of Transformation of Aspirational Districts programme/scheme after the National Democratic Alliance returned to power in 2014. Any political change comes with a new stamp in its approach to development issues.

The emerging message is that to be effective any strategy toward development of backward areas must carry the elements of clarity, implement-ability, and stability. There are other pre-requisites too. The first one is to sensitize the people of the concerned districts that backwardness is a stigma and a bane and they must do their best to challenge, strategize and change the situation. The second essential is to ensure a culture of

law and order and good governance for which the state government is primarily responsible and herein the responsibility of the people boils down to electing right kind of political leadership. The third essential is to realize that aspirational districts will get transformed only when their infrastructure is strengthened. This involves investment by both public and private sectors. An exclusive dependence on the state will not help as in India three-fourths of the fixed capital formation comes from the private and corporate sectors (Ahluwalia, 2013, p.4). Above all, the rationale and efficacy of creating a special cadre of Indian Administrative Services officers, exclusively for backward areas is also worth consideration.

In ultimate analysis, backwardness is a political category. Which district is to be adopted as backward and stay as such, which state should be allocated as many districts of the kind, and how the funds meant for a backward district are to be spent, all this is not free from political considerations and calculations. Backward areas seem to have acquired the status of a reserved category and their names often recycle themselves in the list of successive programmes/schemes. Ironically there is a political competitiveness for getting declared as backward in the name of development.

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