

PURA - Concept and Strategies to Implement

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PURA, as an important strategy to improve the quality of life of the rural population, is quite consistent with the concept of development evolving over time. As Dr. Abdul Kalam describes, its justification arises from the recent economic growth experience of Indian economy. Over the past decade or so, income from agriculture and allied activities such as animal husbandry, plantations, orchards, hunting, forestry, fishing and so on has grown only at about 2% per annum in real terms. As against this, the rest of the economy is growing at the rate of more than 8% per annum in real terms. Because agriculture and allied activities account for more than 50% of the employed labour force but less than 18% of the national income of the country, the rural areas, where these low-productivity activities are heavily concentrated, continuously lag behind the urban areas in matters of income and living standards. This trend got accentuated by the growth differential observed during the last decade in the country. The urban-rural income differential reflecting the inequality in living standards and physical quality of life of people has become a serious issue in ensuring that the high-growth strategy required for the nation to convert itself into a developed country status does not bypass the rural areas and about 70% of the country's population. The emphasis on inclusive growth comes largely from such concerns.

High growth of per capita income in the urban areas leads to greater demand and consciousness about better quality infrastructure - both physical and social - by the urban consumers and by urban producers. Entrepreneurial activities motivated by profits in the private sector and governmental investments dictated by political pressures generally ensure provision of the needed infrastructure in the urban areas. It raises living standards and conditions of the urban population in general, although slums in urban areas do not get several physical infrastructural facilities. However, they have proximity and access to several other critical infrastructural facilities that the rural population does not enjoy. The concept of development of society is now widened to consider expanded choices available to people. A reasonable quantum of what may constitute minimum physical and social infrastructure, often called amenities, generally available in urban areas should be available to rural areas for equity. This in itself can lead to spectacular development in rural areas and hence in the nation. This is the basic rationale for the programme of PURA.

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by common agreement amongst most nations in the world and monitored by United Nations Development Programme also include explicitly several goals and means to achieve them that implicitly point to PURA. In fact, MDGs also have separate and explicit goals about slums in the urban areas. PURA needs expansion to cover urban slums as well to derive its justification from the wider concept of development and social justice in terms of ensuring equity. As per the commitment made by India, the MDGs need to be achieved by the year 2015. The establishment of 7,000 PURA projects covering 600,000 villages before this deadline seems to be too ambitious for the right quality and content of the projects. In any case, the PURA projects, as envisioned by Dr. Kalam in his 2006 lecture, depend on collaborative and co-operative efforts of

governments, NGOs, corporate sector, educational institutions and local bodies such as Gram panchayats. There are definitely a few success stories as quoted by the ex-President, but replication of those stories in other settings is extremely challenging if not impossible.

If he were to look at the same issue now, his views could be very different. In October 2009 when he visited Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Ahmedabad, he wanted to know two things: (1) has Gujarat state really achieved the remarkable unprecedented growth of its agriculture and allied activities? and (2) if yes, how could it achieve the same over a long period of 9 to 10 years? We attempted to answer both these questions in detail and it is available in public domain (Dholakia & Datta, 2010). The growth experience of agriculture in Gujarat during the last decade has been truly splendid and unprecedented, considering the magnitude of the growth rate and duration over which it is achieved. Our analysis points to the strong possibility of the growth story continuing in the future at least for a decade or so. Gujarat has achieved more than 9% per annum growth of agricultural income in real terms during the last decade. This by itself resulted in a substantial improvement in the standard and quality of life of rural population in the state, and made the economic growth in the state very inclusive. The objective of PURA projects is practically achieved in the whole state. Dr. Kalam is really impressed with this solution. What is indeed gratifying is that such a remarkably high growth performance of agriculture and allied activities in Gujarat were achieved by following the basic concept of PURA.

Policy makers had identified water and electricity as the basic minimum necessary infrastructure for progress and development in the rural areas including agriculture and allied activities. The state government therefore concentrated on provision of these two basic amenities to all villages without exception. Moreover, the electricity should be available in all villages for domestic and commercial purposes for all the time round the clock. Rainwater harvesting through various methods wherever possible was also aggressively pursued. This coupled with excellent condition road network linking every village to trade centres, market places, and ports as well as providing electronic linkages through telecom and Internet increased effective options and choices of rural producers and consumers. These were precisely the contents of the PURA projects as described by Dr. Kalam in his 2006 lecture. However, the implementation strategy adopted in Gujarat was very different but effective. The state government took the necessary lead by providing basic infrastructural facilities and augmented critical resources with the farmers and rural producers. The rest was left to the private initiatives and entrepreneurship. State government facilitated all such initiatives by promoting market culture and competition. This model is definitely workable and replicable, perhaps to a greater extent, than the models discussed by the ex-President in his 2006 lecture.

Finally, after his lecture of 2006, the Indian government has passed several empowering legislations such as Right to Information Act, Right to Education Act, National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and so on. These acts have serious implications on the allocations of public expenditures and hence on the funding of the PURA projects as initially envisaged. Public-private partnership is the only viable option now available and corporate social responsibility can prove to be an effective way to involve corporate sector in such projects

on a large scale. However, working through achieving a rapid agricultural growth by following the example of Gujarat state seems to be the most viable and effective way to fulfil the basic objectives of PURA.

References:

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