

Experiences of Development Practice

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In 2012, the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India (GoI) started a new scheme titled “Prime Minister’s Rural Development Fellowship (PMRDF) Programme.” This was a three-year fellowship programme for “young professionals,” who would work with the government in the conflict-affected districts in India, which included some of the most backward and remote areas of the country. The main objectives of the programme were to provide support of these “young professionals” to the district administration in the implementation of key government programmes and schemes in these conflict-affected regions and also provide an opportunity to the country’s youth to directly engage with issues of grassroots development in these regions through the government system.

It was expected that the selected fellows would work with the district administration and local panchayati raj institutions, while not being a formal part of the bureaucracy, and provide a voice to the concerns and aspirations of the local people. The programme was executed and supervised by the government agency called the “Council for Advancement of People’s Action and Rural Technology” (CAPART) with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) as the knowledge and implementing partner. The first batch consisted of 150 selected fellows, who were placed in 78 districts across nine states of India. The book being reviewed here seeks to document the experiences

Making Development Happen: Transformational Change in Rural India, Volume 1 edited by K Seeta Prabhu and S Parasuraman, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2020; pp xxiv + 330, ₹1,095, (hardback).

and reflections of some of these fellows from the first batch (published as Volume 1), as part of working with the government and local people in the conflict-affected districts of India.

The book is edited by K Seeta Prabhu, who was visiting professor at TISS and programme director, PMRDF and S Parasuraman, who was director of TISS when the programme was implemented. The book consists of 21 chapters and 10 shorter notes in the form of “Insights.” It is organised into four main sections, namely “personal experiences of working in conflict regions,” “protecting people’s rights,” “enhancing lives and livelihoods” and “ensuring participation and local governance.” However, as may be expected of an edited volume on these issues, the discussion is cross-cutting in nature.

Development and Conflict

The preface to the book provides a detailed discussion of the background, rationale, and objectives of the PMRDF programme and mentions that this book is not intended to be in the genre of “best practices,” but rather in the form of personal narratives of some of the fellows. The introductory chapter provides a context to the development issues in conflict-affected regions in India by also drawing upon the expert group government

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report (GoI 2008) on this subject. It mentions that this report marked a watershed in the approach of the GoI to address issues of left-wing extremism—also referred to as Naxalite or Maoist insurgency—which is largely concentrated in some of the tribal regions of the country. In this government report, a two-pronged policy approach consisting of acceleration of development in these regions and at the same time tackling violence through firm action was discussed. The book, however, mentions that there may sometimes be tensions in trying to follow both aspects of this approach simultaneously. The introductory part of the book also contains a separate chapter providing an overview of the “political economy of India,” wherein the emergence of conflicts in post-independence India is traced to issues of distributive justice.

It is the personal experiences, narratives, and initiatives of the fellows that are the focus of the major part of the book. It was interesting to note that the then Rural Development Minister Jairam Ramesh, when launching this programme in 2012, had mentioned that for the selected young PMRDF this would be akin to a “leap in the dark.” The personal experiences of the fellows narrated in the book bring out their very diverse backgrounds in terms of their academic and professional qualifications and also in terms of their prior real world exposure to pressing issues of rural India. The narratives bring out various issues and challenges of working as part of the government structure in conflict-affected regions. These include initial challenges of finding their role and function in a government hierarchical system, being personally affected by way of close proximity to the violent conflict, and issues such as challenges faced by the women fellows. The personal experiences and

narratives also reflect on the causes of the conflict and the way forward. It is mentioned that every conflict has a trigger point and this may be exploited by some for their own benefit, leading to further escalation. It is suggested that though there is the difficult background of an ongoing violent conflict, the government administration should not ignore its core function of ensuring basic services to the people, which would help towards addressing the “governance deficit.” In this context, an image of a supportive and compassionate government administration would also help to reduce the “trust deficit” between the government and the local people.

In its discussion on “protecting people’s rights,” the book seeks to provide a conceptual framework to understand the causes of violent conflicts in these regions from the perspective of the entitlements approach and that of horizontal inequalities. Long-term and persistent entitlement failures may lead to horizontal inequalities along the lines of group identities, thus creating potential situations of violent conflict. Though the government provides for various rights-based legislations and welfare schemes, their weak implementation may also affect the legitimacy of government institutions, thus creating a vicious cycle. The book in this section documents various initiatives involving the fellows to protect people’s rights and entitlements and enable them to benefit from government programmes and schemes. These include initiatives relating to education, sanitation, access to institutional deliveries, stopping human trafficking of girls, liberating bonded labourers, addressing child marriage issues, and welfare of children with disabilities.

In the section on “enhancing lives and livelihoods,” the book makes the key point that it is the absence of livelihood opportunities for the youth in these regions, which makes it easier for them to be mobilised to take up arms. Enhancing livelihood opportunities, especially for the youth, through existing and new innovative livelihood programmes and schemes therefore becomes critical. The book mentions the potential of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural

Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which however only provides one step forward in this regard. Another important aspect mentioned is about investing in the skill development of the youth, expanding their access to credit and financial services and providing support to them in setting up their own small enterprises. The book discusses various initiatives involving the fellows with respect to livelihoods and skill development, such as in coffee plantation, producer’s groups for mango cultivators, promoting fisheries, preserving indigenous rice varieties, fly-ash brick manufacturing, establishing a livelihood college and skill training centre, and facilitating recruitment of the local youth into the Indian Army. With particular reference to skill development, the discussion from various chapters indicates that there is a demand for skill training among the tribal youth in these regions as they are looking for non-farm-based opportunities for a better livelihood. The discussion here indicates that not all youth aspire towards employment opportunities outside their local area. They would also be content with smaller opportunities in their own area, which would help in supplementing their farm incomes while continuing to live with their families.

There is a relatively smaller section in the book on the theme of “ensuring participation and local governance,” though some of the related issues are also discussed in other sections. Here, the discussion first seeks to provide a brief overview

of the challenges of governance in India since the post-independence period and an analysis of the various initiatives by the state towards better governance. This section discusses selected initiatives involving the fellows, such as implementation of community forest rights; pension delivery through e-governance systems; promoting convergence in government programmes and schemes; and also an interesting initiative to create federations of traditional artists and use them to disseminate information regarding various government policies at the village level.

The final chapter in this section and also of the book reflects on the successes and challenges of the PMRDF programme. It mentions that it is to the credit of the fellows that they strived to ensure the effective implementation of programmes that guaranteed people’s rights under the most challenging circumstances. The fellows also worked towards bringing about a more bottom-up participatory approach and sensitising the district bureaucracy to the language of rights and entitlements. However, the chapter mentions that despite various achievements of the programme, the success was not uniform across states and districts and one of the main challenges was the lack of a clear understanding of the role of fellows at the state and district levels. The programme was often heavily dependent on the district collector, who often enlisted the fellows in the role of an executive assistant, rather than engaging them at the field level. The fellows were also

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uncertain about the continuity and sustainability of the development initiatives they were involved in once their fellowship term would be over.

Reflections on the Book

The book therefore covers a wide spectrum of issues relating to experiences of development practice in the conflict-affected regions of India and is an important contribution to the literature in this regard. However, there remain some lacunae in the analysis and discussion. First, in many chapters of the book, the tribal context of the issues of conflict and development is not emphasised enough. It is known that these regions affected by Naxalite or Maoist violence are largely tribal areas. It would have been useful to provide more insights into the issues being discussed keeping the distinctive

context of tribal development at the forefront. Second, while the book focuses on the experiences and narratives of the fellows working in the conflict-affected regions, the emic perspectives of the local tribal people themselves are largely under-represented. One exception to this is the following quote from the book:

You cannot develop tribal people by pulling us down from our hills. We have everything we need here. If you make us live away from our hills, we will not survive, we will end up as daily wage labour and make only enough money to buy what we get for free from our forests. (p 285)

This quote from a traditional village head of the Konda Reddi tribe provides insights into the concerns of the tribal people themselves and the fellows could have been encouraged to provide more of such perspectives. It would also have been interesting to know how the local

village people perceive the role of the fellows and what were their expectations, if any, from the fellows. Third, given that the fellows were working with the government, the perspectives of the various government functionaries are also a very notable omission from this book. Such perspectives could have contributed towards providing a more holistic understanding of issues of development policies and implementation in these regions, besides providing feedback on the PMRDF programme itself.

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REFERENCE

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