

A clear case of neglect in every sphere of activity

By USHA RAI

GAUHATI:

ASSAM today is like a giant waking up from a long, deep slumber. For years on end the state seemed to have drifted along. Only during the last five or six years has there been something like a concerted effort to improve the state's economy — to increase the rice yield per hectare, to electrify more villages and to set up more industries in a state that is 80 per cent. agricultural.

The long years of neglect, both by the politicians of the state and the Centre, is reflected in every sphere of activity. The per capita income in 1978-79 was Rs. 572 against the all-India average of Rs. 712 at constant prices. Fifty-one per cent of the rural people lived below the poverty line that year against 49 per cent in the country as a whole. Electricity consumption was 30 units per consumer against the countrywide average of 130 units.

While some progress has been made on the power front, a great deal more remains to be done. The Salakathi thermal power plant is aglow with myriad lights at dusk, but villages situated just a few kilometres away remain plunged in total darkness.

Life virtually stops in the villages at sunset — which is as early as 5 p.m. — because few can afford to use kerosene, sold at Rs. 2.59 a litre in the open market, for lighting lamps. Only 15 per cent of villages in the state are electrified against 41 per cent in the country as a whole.

Though Assam buys 45 Mw. of power from Meghalaya, the electricity shortage is so acute that for the last four years the state government did not allow the setting up of power-intensive industries. The ban was lifted only this year after the commissioning of the Salakathi project.

HANDLOOM INDUSTRY

Under the first phase, a 60-Mw. unit has been commissioned at Salakathi. Another 60-Mw. unit will be ready by March next. In the second phase, two more 60-Mw. generators are to be installed. At Longpi in Karbangle district, another hydel project is under construction.

Execution of such development projects takes time and involves heavy expenditure. But there are other ways in which the state's economy can be improved in the meantime. For instance, there is considerable scope for development of the handloom industry.

In Assam villages, almost every home has a loom. In some cases, it is given as part of the bride's dowry. Most women in rural Assam can weave their own clothes but this tremendous potential for a thriving cottage industry is being wasted. Only 20 per cent of the looms in Assam are being used against 79 per cent in the neighbouring state of Manipur.

An intensive handloom development project was launched at Nalbari in 1978 and for three consecutive years three-month courses in weaving were organised. The production centres give a subsidy to meet 75 per cent of the cost of looms and also provide yard for weaving 'mekhlas' (sarongs), 'gamosas' (thin

Assamese towels), bedcovers, curtains, scarves and handkerchiefs.

Some 1,200 weavers are attached to the main production centre at Nalbari. There are five sub-centres in the sub-division employing about 10,000 weavers. The women earn Rs. 150 to Rs. 350 a month, working three to four hours a day.

During the last four years, 5,000 looms have been distributed in Nalbari among widows and landless women whose family income was less than Rs. 2,000 a year. But only little over one-third of them are working.

Unlike the irrigation pumps which are not working either because they are defective or for want of power, the looms are idle because the supply of yarn, secured from Madurai, is limited. The Assam Government Marketing Corporation has not been able to persuade the weavers to make do with yarn from Calcutta which is not as fine as that from Madurai.

As in many other fields, Assam has to make up the leeway in dairy farming. Milk shortage is a major problem. The per capita consumption of milk is as little as 50 to 60 grams a day, though almost every family in rural areas keeps three to five cattle.

The average milk yield of cows is as low as one or two litres a day and can barely meet the needs of a family. The cows and goats are generally quite small. The Assam villagers do not like to breed or rear buffaloes which could yield more milk.

WHITE REVOLUTION

It may take the Assam government several years to achieve a white revolution, but a beginning in that direction has been made. With an assistance of Rs. 3 crores from Australia and a matching contribution from the Centre, the Indo-Australian cattle breeding project was launched at Barpeta Road in 1974. With 247 cattle (208 of them Jersey cows from Australia and the rest bulls), it has become the nucleus of cross-bred cattle farms in the state.

Bulls raised under expert veterinary care are sent to Khanpar where a deep-freeze semen centre has been established. The frozen semen is supplied to 139 intensive cattle development projects in key village blocks for artificial insemination. Breeding stocks are supplied to cattle development projects in Assam as well as in Meghalaya, Tripura and Bhutan.

Through cross-breeding, the government hopes to improve the milk yield of cattle in Assam from nearly one litre a day to at least nine to 10 litres. A Sindhi-Jersey cross-bred cow can yield 14 to 22 litres a day. The yield of the pure Jersey cow is substantially higher, but it is highly susceptible to infections. As such, veterinarians have gone in for cross-breeding. While the local cows start lactating only when they are four years old, the cross-bred cows start giving milk before they are two.

With rice fields stretching for miles, one would expect Assam to be a major producer of rice. Unfortunately, the Assam farmers have not yet taken to farming seriously. Each family grows just enough to meet its needs. Ironically, with 22.75 lakh hectares of land under paddy, the state still gets some rice from Punjab to meet its needs. Only a few of

the 200-odd varieties grown are high-yielding.

With the increasing awareness of high-yielding strains among farmers, the government hopes that output will increase. The overall per hectare yield has gone up from 896 kg. to 1,112 kg.

Irrigation continues to be a major problem. Barely three per cent of the state is covered by irrigation schemes. The position is expected to improve with the implementation of the integrated agricultural development programme, for which the World Bank has given Rs. 14 crores aid.

Despite the launching of several economic programmes, there is widespread unemployment. The number of jobless people was 331,000 in June last year. Unemployment among the educated has soared at an alarming rate. In 1965, only 18 per cent of matriculates were unemployed. Today, the figure is as high as 42 per cent.

Assam produces large quantities of tea and jute. One of the grievances of the Assam agitators is that a lot of revenue that normally should have accrued to the state has been going elsewhere.

TEA GARDENS

Assam accounts for 54 per cent of the country's tea production but a major beneficiary of this large output is Calcutta. Head offices of most tea companies are located there and tea auctions held in Calcutta have been drawing more buyers than the ones held in Gauhati during the last two years. The main reason for this is that buyers from Iran, Afghanistan, the U.K., Germany, France and the U.S.S.R., can easily export tea from Calcutta to their countries.

Though the British interests in tea gardens have been diminishing, there are still a number of foreign shareholders who prefer to remit their earnings to their country rather than invest it in the state. A large percentage of tea garden workers too send part of their earnings to relations in Bihar and Orissa.

Though Assam accounts for about 15 per cent of the 8.5 million bales of jute produced in the country annually, it has just one jute mill at Silghat. The bulk of jute is sent for processing to Calcutta. Seven years ago, the Centre agreed to set up two jute mills in Assam. Though the necessary licences have been issued, the factories are yet to be set up.

Meanwhile, there has been a slump in the international jute market. Though about 14 to 15 million bales of jute could be processed in the Calcutta mills alone, there is no readily available market for the huge quantity of jute grown in this country.

The Bongaigaon Refinery and Petrochemicals Limited could well change the face of Assam if its downstream products are put to use within the state. Its ancillary industries have tremendous employment potential. Some 30,000 tonnes of polyester fibre will be produced by the BRPL which, with proper planning, could be used by manufacturers within the state.

The Assam government has already asked the Centre for permission to set up 20 spinning mills, each estimated to cost Rs. 100 crores. With its limited resources, the state will require assistance from the Centre. Central financing institutions and others to establish the mills.

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