

## REDUCING REGIONAL DISPARITIES THROUGH DISTRICT LEVEL PLANNING : A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GOPALGANJ (BIHAR) AND KUSHINAGAR (U.P.) DISTRICTS

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*Decades of plan exercise in India to reduce disparities in development at the regional levels have resulted into widening of the same instead of getting it reduced. Inter state as well as inter district inequality has increased during the plan periods in India, especially during the post reform era. A study group of the Planning Commission (1996), identified 100 most backward districts through poverty ratio and identified 69 districts across the country as the most backward and the districts belong to East U.P. and North Bihar.*

*This study has undertaken two backward districts, each from Bihar and U.P. i.e. Gopalganj and Kushinagar, respectively. Both districts have many similarities, topographically, economically, and socially but Gopalganj figures in the list of 100 and 69 identified most backward districts while Kushinagar is conspicuously absent. On a closer evaluation of the status and functional mechanism in both the districts, the most pertinent difference is evincible in terms of the fact that a decentralized form of planning in frame of district level planning is operative in the district of Kushinagar while there is no such planning mechanism and system in operation in the district of Gopalganj.*

### INTRODUCTION

Existence of wide inter-regional variations in economic and social development in India has well been recognized in various studies. Planning Commission of India, in appreciation of this problem has also been adopting Balanced Regional Development as one of its goals of various five year plans. Various studies conducted in recent years to mention a few of them like Ahluwalia (2000), Depankar Das Gupta (2000), Kurian (2001), Dev & Ravi (2003) and Radha Krishnan & Ray (2005) have come out with a general conclusion that the interstate as well as intra-state disparities in development have continued to increase during the plan period in India, more specifically and with greater intensity during the post-reform era.

Laveesh Bhandari and Debroy (2003) conducted a study in order to identify the most backward districts in India based on the rationale that it will lead to stimulate interest in taking the development debate beyond state boundaries and thereby impart focus to that district where backwardness exists and development is needed.

In a similar vein the Planning Commission of India has constituted from time to time various study groups for identifying such districts across the country which are the most backward, not only

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in terms of incidence of poverty or disparity in urbanization or quality of life but also in terms of utilization level of the locally available talents and resources. One of such committees (1996)<sup>1</sup> as per (Annexure-1), identified 100 districts across the country as the most backward using primarily the “poverty ratio”. Subsequently Lavees Bhandari<sup>2</sup> using six broad parameters identified 69 districts across the country as the most backward as per (Annexure 2 & 3), along with the conclusion that backwardness is essentially an east India phenomenon.

The economic survey<sup>3</sup> (2006-07) published by the Government of Bihar also rightly appreciates the fact that a “highly disadvantaged economy is the general phenomena of Bihar, but this disadvantage is not equally present in all its regions or districts along with a small number of districts where agricultural productivity is reasonably high resulting in the relatively better off economic status while there are other districts where the conditions of the local economy are very poor”. The districts in south Bihar are relatively more prosperous than those in the North.

Similarly, comparative evaluation of the most backward districts as identified by Planning Commission and Bhandari makes it clear that 44% and 56.52%, respectively, of such identified districts belong to the state of Bihar, specially north Bihar, and U.P., specially east U.P.

In the backdrop of aforementioned facts, the present study has been undertaken with a view to the fact that Gopalganj district of Bihar and Kushinagar district of U.P. are located adjacent to each other and are almost similar in terms of topographical and socio-economic conditions pertaining to two different states, yet Gopalganj district figures as the most backward district in both the lists of 100 and 69 while Kushinagar is conspicuous by its absence from both the lists. As such, it generates curiosity and stimulates interest in undertaking a closer study in order to know the factors causing such a difference in the status of the two districts. Specially so when one finds that Kushinagar acquired the status of a district more than two decades later than its counterpart Gopalganj. The present paper is devoted to investigate the underlying facts causing the difference in the status of the two districts under study, so that a suitable policy prescriptions could be made for evolving an appropriate strategy of development of all such districts which are lagging quite behind the others in the process of development.

## METHODOLOGY

Undertaking a micro level study in Bihar is a challenging task specially so when it is being conducted on the basis of a secondary database. At the same time, methodological hegemonies associated with the use of indices for measuring regional imbalances create other impediments. Despite everything we concentrated on the specific purpose of study and thrived on the methodology adopted by Laveesh Bhandari using poverty ratio, hunger, infant mortality rate, immunization, literacy rates and enrolment rates as a measuring rod for identifying the most backward districts without assigning specific weight to a particular parameter and followed four out of six rules. These indicators on the one hand provide picture of “inclusive growth”<sup>4</sup> and at the same time the status of human development. In order to supplement the indicators with the associated facts and data, the functioning of financial institutions and other developmental institutions were also included in the study. The secondary data for the study were collected from the District Census, Handbook, the District Gazetteer, Economic Survey, Govt. of Bihar, 2006-07, Encyclopedia District Gazetteer of India, Master Plan of Gopalganj District, Annual Action Plan, Potential linked credit plan prepared by the lead bank

under the auspices of NABARD, the Annual Report of the District Industry Centre, all for the purpose of facts and figures for the district of Gopalganj, while the facts and figures about Kushinagar district were sufficiently procured from Zila Sankhiki Patrika and Socio-Economic Analysis of Kushinagar published annually by economic and statistical division under the auspices of State Planning Institute.

In order to beget some required facts with regard to Gopalganj district, especially for recent years, some files and records of the concerned offices had to be consulted. The facts, figures, opinions etc, collected from various sources pertaining to the above two districts were analyzed with the help of simple statistical methods in order to arrive at a pin-pointed conclusion as to what causes such a subtle difference in the socio-economic status of the two districts.

### **SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILES OF GOPALGANJ AND KUSHINAGAR**

The two adjacent districts of Gopalganj and Kushinagar belong to two separate states Bihar & U.P., respectively. Gopalganj was carved out of Saran district in 1973 and Kushinagar from Deoria district in 1994. Both these districts have common characteristics of predominance of agriculture, similar topographic and climatic conditions and also the socio-cultural background while demographically the size of population of Kushinagar is greater than its counter part Gopalganj i.e. 2235505 persons and 2149343, persons respectively. However, the density of population in Kushinagar district is less than its counter part (778 & 1057 per sq. km respectively). The difference is caused primarily by the difference in the area of the two districts. The work participation ratio of population in both the districts comes out to be almost uniform with a difference in the female work participation rate, wherein Kushinagar district with 16.3% is marginally ahead of Gopalganj with 14.9%. It is interesting to note that the percentage of working population in total population in Gopalganj district presents a disturbing feature when compared with the percentage for the state of Bihar as depicted in Table no. 1

**Table 1, Percentage of Working Population to total Population (2001 Census)**

	Bihar		Gopalganj	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Total	47.72	18.83	29.89	15.00
Rural	48.42	20.19	22.37	7.76
Urban	22.43	3.19	22.08	3.96

*Source: Calculated from the data obtained from [www.census.india.net](http://www.census.india.net)*

It is evident from the table that percentage of working population to total population in the district of Gopalganj for male is almost half of the average for the state of Bihar. Similar is the case of percentages for rural male and female in both the cases. However, when a comparison between urban males and female for the state of Bihar and the district of Gopalganj is made, it becomes clear

that the equal percentage of urban male of the working population is there in both the cases while the percentage of urban female in Gopalganj is marginally greater than the urban females in the state of Bihar.

As regards the occupational classification of the main workers, the percentage engaged in agriculture comes out to be almost similar in the two districts i.e. Gopalganj & Kushinagar – 86.21% & 85.8% respectively. But when one compares the percentage of cultivators and agriculture labourers in the two districts one finds that the percentage of agriculture labourers in the district of Kushinagar (24.3%) is quite below that of Gopalganj district (33.68%). It is reflective of the fact that the problem of rural exodus in Kushinagar district is not as severe as in the district of Gopalganj. Moreover, relatively a greater percentage of work forces seem to be engaged as cultivators in Kushinagar (61.5%) than that in the district of Gopalganj (52.53%).

The classification of population engaged in the industrial and tertiary sector procreates the similar results in both the districts under study that is to say, both these districts have a very small percentage of population engaged in industry which is still to get diversified there.

A comparative evaluation of income poverty may provide the most important understanding of the economic status enjoyed by the regions under study. A comparative description of the same has been presented in table no. 2.

**Table 2, Per Capita Income in Gopalganj, Kushinagar, Bihar and India for the year (2000-2001) in Rs. (at constant 1993-94 price.)**

Sl. No.	Country / State / District	Per Capita Income
1	India	17883
2	Bihar	5007
3	Kushinagar (UP)	4500
4	Gopalganj (Bihar)	2800

Compiled from : (i) Economic Survey : 2006-07 : Government of Bihar

(ii) Zila Shankhiki Patrika 2003-04, Kushinagar

It is evident from the table that Bihar's per capita income in the year 2000-01 was almost only 28% of the average for the country as a whole and Kushinagar with a per capita income of Rs. 4500 in the same year seems slightly below the average for the state of Bihar while Gopalganj district is lagging far behind the average not only for the state of Bihar, but also for the district of Kushinagar.

A comparative evaluation of socio-economic profiles of the districts under study can be undertaken on the basis of the facts provided in table 3.

**Table 3, Comprehensive Socio-economic Profiles of Gopalganj and Kushinagar Districts**

S.N.	Indicators	Gopalganj	Kushinagar
1	Percentage of population below poverty line	27.6	44.1
2	Percentage households going hungry	6.1	0.3
3	Percentage of children getting complete immunization	21.2	55.6
4	Literacy rate	48.2	48.4
5	Pupil-Teacher ratio	72.7	47.1
6	Percentage of population under the age group of 0-6 years	38.9	38.4
7	Percentage of women receiving skilled attention during prequancy	21.8	24.2
8	Percentage of urban population	6.1	4.86

*Sources : Obtained from 'District Level Deprivation of New Millenium', Laveesh Bhandary and Debroy (ed) (Page 173, 175, 188, 190)*

The indicator in the table reveal the fact that relatively a greater percentage of population is recorded to be below the poverty line in Kushinagar than that in Gopalganj. It becomes a matter to be investigated into, especially so when the per capita income level of Kushinagar stands at quite a higher level than that of Gopalganj. In rest of the indicators, conclusions arrived at by Lavees Bhandari and Debroy and also by Committee constituted by Planning Commission stand justified. The percentage of hungry household is almost twelve times greater in Gopalganj district than Kushinagar. In the social parameters Gopalganj district is evidently lagging not only behind its counter part Kushinagar but also than many other districts of Bihar. Whether in the spheres of immunization or in the matters of pupil teacher ratio or with regard to female work participation ratio or with regard to women receiving skilled attention during pregnancy, that is all the parameters used in preparing Human Development Index or even Physical Quality of life Index, Gopalganj district lies behind Kushinagar.

The present study took a comparative account of the availability of infrastructural facility in both the regions under study. There is no denying the fact that the pace of socio-economic development is conditioned, to a great extent, by such variables. It was found that the differences in the magnitude, the quality of delivery, the intensity, the accessibility and also the availability differ widely in the two districts under study in respect of physical and financial infrastructures and also in respect of social overhead capital. As for example the availability of power, connectivity by road, health hygiene facilities, are greater in Kushinagar than that the Gopalganj. At the same time the process of deepening of financial institutions in Kushinagar as compared to Gopalganj can easily be witnessed with the help of the data regarding C-D ratio of the commercial banks, which is almost double in the case of Kushinagar than that of Gopalganj as is evincible from table no. 4.

**Table 4, C-D Ratio in Year 2002 (Rs. in lakh)**

	<b>Deposit</b>	<b>Credit</b>	<b>C-D Ratio</b>
Kushinagar	74, 751	24, 563	32.9%
Gopalganj	74, 245	12, 057	16.2%

*Sources : R.B.I. Basic statistical returns of scheduled commercial banks in India*

The above facts and figures reveal a picture of better socio-economic conditions prevailing in Kushinagar than in a district with a common border but of a different state i.e. Gopalganj. While, on the one hand, both the regions pertain to two different underdeveloped states i.e. Bihar and U.P. and Kushinagar too can be placed in the category of a disadvantaged district as compared to the other developed districts of either U.P. or of other developed districts in India. But the basic fact for consideration here is that with regard to the resource endowments, potentialities, and other requisites of development both these districts stand almost at an equal footing. The transfer of resources from the central pool is also almost uniform, locationally the distance from the state headquarter is also proportionally the same in both the cases yet the levels of social and economic development vary one from the other and that too when Kushinagar acquired the status of a district almost two decades later than Gopalganj. What we found in the course of our study is that besides other things the primary difference lies in the process of planning at the district level and the role of the state government and its agencies as agents of development in the two states, i.e. Bihar and U.P.

The state of U.P. with the state Planning Institute at the apex level has only decentralized its plan process to the district level in the real sense of micro level planning. The District Planning Department constituted in all the districts of U.P. with two standing committees (1) Co-ordination and implementation (2) District Planning and Supervisory Committee; work in co-ordination with each other under the general guidance, supervision support and control of the State Planning Institute.

The primary exercise of formulating a district level plan is carried out by the District Planning Department. Thereafter, it is suitably adjusted in the plan framework of the state by the State Planning Institute. Financial resources for the same are allocated accordingly for the district level plan. The programmes as laid down in the plan are implemented by the district level agencies as per the targets set for the specific programme. The monitoring and evaluation (both ex-ante and ex-post) exercises are carried out by the district planning and supervisory committee. The agencies devoted to the task of district level plans are so structured as to ensure representation of the local people's representatives as well as the specialist and the bureaucrats. In the whole process of plan formulation, priorities for the plan and strategy for the same are so designed that the local needs and aspirations of the people of the region are taken proper care of. At the same time the resources and talents available in the region are fully identified, harnessed and the efforts are geared up to optimize their uses with the help of plan machineries as per the targets and strategy laid down in the plan documents. In course of this study, the effects of these exercises could be visualized not only in terms of outcome of the plan programmes, but also in obtaining the data and facts required for the study from a single agency i.e. the district planning department of Kushinagar district and that too in a published form.

On the contrary any specially organized plan machinery is non-existent or non-functional in the state of Bihar. A State Planning Board was constituted in early 70's which became non-functional in

the 90's. Similarly, at the district level various departments of the government can be seen to be engaged in carrying out the programmes of the concerned departments devised either by the Planning Commission or by the government of Bihar. In the absence of a comprehensive plan mechanism, co-ordination amongst the activities of various departments is seen to be completely lacking. Funds are allocated, targets are laid down but their consonance with the local needs and aspirations can hardly be witnessed. One has to go through the government files and records for the purpose of procuring data and facts about the functioning of the developmental agencies at the district level in Bihar and those too are available in a haphazard way scattered at many places. It becomes difficult to reconcile them together. No sign of a comprehensive effort at the level of identifying the locally available resources and potentials at the district level can be seen in Bihar in general and Gopalganj in particular. Under utilization of allocated resources becomes a regular phenomenon along with adhocism at the policy formulation level and non-fulfillment of targets at the level of implementation is a common feature in the state of Bihar in general and Gopalganj district in particular.

Over the years, specifically after making the Panchayati Raj Institutions functional in the state of Bihar, an effort seems to have been initiated in making the district level plan process a functional one. However on giving a look to the state of affairs prevailing presently in all the districts of the state of Bihar with regard to the functioning of the Panchayati Raj Institution, one can easily draw a simple conclusion that these institutions are yet to be endowed with the required level of resources and also the authority as per the constitutional proviso. Moreover, they are still lacking in their development orientation because of the lack of knowledge, skill, initiative, vision and primarily because of a different type of mission of the people of all categories making these institutions. What evidently comes out is that the district level planning, if at all, becomes a replica of the national plan. District level schemes are hardly identified in a manner which could reflect a mission and vision of development, whatsoever schemes are identified are hardly integrated with the state plan. Resources come primarily out of devolution, nothing being mooted locally. At the implementation level, the nexus formed amongst the bureaucrats, politicians, technocrats and contractors, operate in such a manner that the whole story of development gets converted into a story of leakages. In the absence of a well devised plan machinery in the districts of Bihar or at the level of the state, available resources get spilled over into the uses which do not form a part of any comprehensive mission and vision for development. As a result of complete absence of a planned system, mechanisms and procedures at the district level, a road map for development in tune with a critical minimum effort and with vigour to break the vicious circle of backwardness is not prepared. Resources that are available locally, potentialities of development inherent at the grass root level, the prioritization of local needs and the aspirations etc. are not taken care of. Accountability is not fixed; resulting into a lack of monitoring, supervision and surveillance of the ongoing projects or programmes and that too keeping in view the rationale of efficiency auditing behind the same.

## CONCLUSION

A comparative evaluation of the current status of planning in the two districts under study leads to the conclusion that a perfect form and spirit of district planning is lacking in both the districts. In Kushinagar district there is of course a defined district plan agency in function but it can be witnessed to be in a handicapped position arising out of the resource constraint, lack of sufficient skilled manpower, dichotomy prevailing in the size of plan and objectives on the one hand and the targets on the other, besides the problem of discrimination in devolution and leakages in operation. Yet, however, Kushinagar escaped from being identified as one of the most backward districts which Gopalganj could not escape from, is perhaps based on the fact that the former works in a planned



manner and the latter on an adhoc basis. The difference in institutional framework with regard to planning at the district level creates disparity in development amongst regions which has happened in this case as well.

From the above mentioned finding, the study suggests the following

- (i) An all out, urgent and comprehensive effort is required to be initiated for organizing the district plan machinery in each district and making it fully functional in all respects i.e. formulation, execution, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- (ii) Clear demarcation of planning functions and administrative powers at the district level should be made keeping in view the operational and constitutional suitability and efficacies.
- (iii) Disaggregation of plan funds and devolution of financial resources should be made on the recommendation of an expert committee to be constituted for the purpose.
- (iv) An elaborate arrangement for providing continuous training to the personnel involved in the process of planning at the district level is required to be made.
- (v) The state machinery with a separate plan mechanism should come forward to act as an active agent of development and ensure smooth, self sustaining and continuous process of planning at the level of state as well as that of a district.

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