

Centrality of Panchayats in Rural Development

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For long we have been used to the centralisation of development planning in this country, with the Planning Commission as the supreme think-tank. Over the years, the limitations of such kind of development planning have been gradually realised. The complaints are often made that the planned programmes are not responsive to the urgent needs of people or are out of tune with the realities of the ground and, what is more, in the entire process of decision making there is no scope for participation of people for and on behalf of whom development plans are made.

In the above context, the need for introducing decentralised planning process was being strongly felt. The 73rd and the 74th constitution amendments recognised this gap and mandated the panchayats and the municipalities to prepare area plans to achieve 'economic development' and ensure 'social justice'. Planning at the national and state levels has always been an important tool of the state to achieve similar goals. Mandating the local councils to prepare plans to pursue the same goals is an admission of the fact that the macro-level plans remain incomplete unless they are built upon the plans prepared at the micro level through participatory method. The Constitutional provisions have thus recognised the local government institutions as partners of higher level governments in making public interventions for removing poverty and social injustice and to usher in a process of inclusive development.

The 73rd and the 74th constitution amendments have not only created space for local level planning for individual villages and towns, they have also created another institution called District Planning Committee (DPC) for each district, which is composed principally of the elected representatives of the panchayats and municipalities and some nominated members (not more than one-fifth of total members) drawn from among experts and activists in the field of development. The purpose of DPC is to prepare a draft development plan for the whole district after consolidating individual panchayat and municipal plans and making such provisions as are necessary for integrated development of both rural and urban areas of a district.

With these constitutional provisions, the country has entered into a regime of multi-level planning in which each level is entitled to exercise autonomy within a common framework that evolves through constant bottom-up and top-down interactions and flow of information among different levels. This is, indeed, an innovative architecture of development planning for a vast country where people live in nearly six hundred thousand villages and over five thousand towns and cities.

The centrality of panchayats in rural development has to be understood in the above context.

That the Constitution envisages a crucial role of panchayats in development will be evident if one looks at its 11th schedule, which provides an illustrative list of functions that may be assigned to the panchayats. This list contains 29 items covering economic sector, social sector and infrastructure. Responsibilities for undertaking

activities in each of these sectors may be assigned to the panchayats. In economic sector, there are subjects like agriculture, land reform, land improvement, soil conservation, minor irrigation, animal husbandry, fishery, social forestry, fuel and fodder, markets and fairs, small scale and cottage industry. Thus almost all the components of rural economy may be brought under the purview of panchayat-level development planning. Besides, for alleviating poverty, panchayats may be entrusted with the implementation of various anti-poverty programmes like employment generation, construction of houses for the poor or mid-day meal for the school children.

In the social sector, panchayats may be assigned an important role in providing elementary education, skill formation, preventive and curative health care, water and sanitation, development of women and SC/ST people, social security, public distribution system, disaster management and relief.

Economic and social development needs improvement of physical infrastructure. Here also the 11th schedule suggests that the panchayats could be assigned responsibilities in respect of roads, bridges, waterways, etc and rural electrification including development of non-conventional energy sources.

It is true that no state government has yet assigned so many functions and resources to the panchayats. But following the constitutional intentions many state panchayat Acts have permitted the panchayats to get involved in all or many of such functions. The experiences of the last one decade and a half show that whenever reliance has been placed on panchayats and adequate resources and other kinds of support have been given to them, they have produced results. It would be appropriate to cite the cases of Kerala and West Bengal to bring home the point.

In 1996, the state government of Kerala took a 'big bang' approach to decentralisation by devolving as much as 35-40 percent of plan funds to the local bodies in untied form and by institutionalising the local level planning. For this purpose all the rural and urban local bodies along with the DPCs were activated. A detailed methodology of participatory local level planning was developed and the local councils were given autonomy in taking decisions on local development projects, within the framework of broad guidelines developed by the State Planning Board. In evaluating the experience of this bold experiment, an observer noted that in respect of making provisions for 'shelter, drinking water, sanitation facilities and connectivity, the local governments ... performed *beyond expectations*. In other sectors, particularly in agriculture, animal husbandry, health

and education, there have been good models, which can be ... replicated.'

West Bengal introduced the panchayat system and empowered the rural local bodies in the late 1970s, much before the enactment of the Constitution amendment bill. In the 1980s and 90s the state experienced a 'green revolution' particularly in the production of food grains and dramatic reduction of rural poverty. Many authors are of the view that the panchayats

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played a crucial role in making these outcomes possible. Panchayats contributed to the growth process of the rural economy (which also reduced poverty) directly by improving the rural infrastructure and providing various services. Panchayats played important role in improving connectivity, developing social forestry, improving small irrigation systems, providing water supply and sanitation facilities. They were also involved in providing non land inputs to farmers, such as seeds and fertilisers and in facilitating farmers' access to credit. After the advent of the panchayats, horizontal coordination at the field level of different development departments improved. Panchayats also played very important role in implementing the state's land reform programme, which facilitated the growth process and helped reduce poverty. Last but not the least, it is because of the panchayats that there has been negligible targeting failure in the execution of various poverty alleviation programmes. Taken together all these contributed to the reduction of rural poverty.

The above case studies show how panchayats can play a crucial role in rural development. It is true that in all states panchayats are not adequately empowered. In many states, they are starved of funds as well as human resources. Hence their roles in development are uneven across the states. Nevertheless, in most states the panchayats are playing important roles in implementing very important anti-poverty programmes of Government of India.

In recent times, a historic programme has been launched by the central government for reducing rural poverty and to improve rural infrastructure. Known as National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), this scheme guarantees employment of at least 100 days in a year to all who need jobs and are willing to do manual work. For this purpose hundreds and thousands of public works schemes like construction of roads, excavation of canals, improvement of lands, digging of ponds, social forestry are being designed and executed in thousands of villages. The landless agricultural labourers are being given job cards that entitle them to get work or financial compensation if work cannot be given. The three-tier panchayat system has been put in charge of executing this huge programme. Without the involvement of panchayats, it would have been impossible for the national government or any state government to undertake such a gigantic task.

Another flagship programme of Government of India relates to health. Known as National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), this programme aims at ensuring health for all with particular emphasis on women and children by making 'architectural correction of the health system'. A major strategy of this 'architectural correction' is decentralisation of health management at the local level. For this the Mission has given several important roles to the panchayats, particularly gram panchayats. This includes preparation of village health plan, management of sub centres, and integration of health care services with drinking water supply, sanitation, improvement of personal hygiene and environmental cleanliness and nutrition.

Some other important centrally-sponsored poverty alleviation schemes in the economic and social sector are: *Generation of wage employment and self employment*: Sampoorna Gramin Rojgar Yojana (SGRY), Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana (SJSY); *Education*: Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA), Mid-day Meal Programme; *Housing for the*

poor: Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY); *Health*: Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS); *Water and Sanitation*: Swajaldhara, Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC).

Different states have involved panchayats in the execution of above schemes in varying degrees. In some states, SGRY, SJSY, IAY, Swajaldhara, TSC etc are fully managed by the panchayati raj institutions. In some other states, panchayats are involved in the selection of beneficiaries and in supervision of schemes. In most states, panchayats are principal actors in the execution of SGRY. In some states, the intermediate and district panchayats are collaborating with the state government institutions in executing schemes like Remote Village Electrification Programme, Rajiv Gandhi Vidyutayan Yojana and Pradhanmantri Gram Sadak Yojana.

In many states, panchayats play key role in managing primary schools and child education centres. In Kerala, management of institutions like Anganwadi centres, PHCs and health sub centres, veterinary centres, Krishi Bhavans etc has been handed over to the PRIs. In West Bengal, the PRIs play a key role in managing natural disaster like flood or cyclone and targeted public distribution system. In almost all states, selection of beneficiaries for individually oriented poverty alleviation schemes is done by the gram panchayat in consultation with gram sabha.

Panchayats are thus gradually emerging as a vital instrument of rural development. Their full potentialities are, however, still remain unrealised. In most states, they have little autonomous functional jurisdiction and they hardly receive funds from higher level governments in untied form. They also do not have enough fiscal powers to raise revenue from local sources. Policies for providing staff to the rural local government institutions are still unclear. Relentless efforts have to be made to remove these deficiencies. The national goals of removal of all forms of social injustice, inclusive development and removal of income and non-income poverty will remain elusive unless we enrich the practice of local democracy. □

Promoting sports in rural areas

The union government, on 7 March, approved an outlay of Rs. 1,500 crore in the Eleventh Five Year Plan period (2007-12) to promote sports infrastructure and games in rural areas. Under the Panchayat Yuva Krida Aur Khel Abhiyan (PYKKA), each village panchayat and each block panchayat would be given one-time seed capital grant of Rs. 1 lakh and Rs. 5 lakh, respectively. In addition, while village panchayats would be given annual acquisition grant and annual operational grant at Rs. 10,000 and Rs. 12,000 per annum, respectively, block panchayats would be given Rs. 20,000 and 24,000 respectively.

The scheme aims at providing basic sport infrastructure and promoting games and sports in rural areas in a phased and time-bound manner through concerted efforts of all stakeholders, particularly the state governments, panchayats, educational institutes, sports promotion bodies. Under the scheme, each block panchayat would also be provided an annual competition grant of Rs. 50,000 for holding block level competitions and each district will be provided an annual competition grant of Rs. 3 lakh for holding district level competitions. Prize money would also be provided to the winners (first three positions) in block level and district level competitions.