

## Panchayat leaders for protecting agriculture

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While it is widely agreed that an important goal of Panchayati Raj is to ensure better implementation of government's rural development programmes by ensuring participation of people, it is also important to assert that the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions at various levels (or three tiers) is certainly not restricted to blind acceptance of the policies and programmes of the central and state governments. Of course when a panchayat or gram sabha accepts the beneficial role of a programme then it should strive for its better and participative implementation to maximise the potential benefits to people. However it is equally true that when a panchayat or gram sabha after careful broad-based discussion comes to the conclusion that a programme, scheme, policy or agreement is not beneficial for the local people, then the panchayat/gram sabha can and should oppose such a policy or programme.

Such a strong, assertive and essentially democratic role of panchayati raj institutions can prove invaluable in forcing the government to rethink its policy options. Imagine a situation when a harmful decision has been taken and this immediately evokes the protests and dissent of many panchayat/gram sabhas. The government will then have to reconsider this decision and in the process a lot of damage likely to be caused by distorted policies or programmes can be avoided.

To deny such an independent and assertive role to panchayats would amount to needlessly curbing their vast democratic role and potential. This wider democratic role of panchayats was very much in evidence on April 8, 2011 at a conference on 'Agriculture and Panchayats in Rajasthan in the Specific Context of Agreements with Multinational and other Big Agribusiness Companies'. This conference was organised jointly by the Association of Local Governance of India (ALGI, New Delhi) and Rajasthan Samagra Seva Sangh (RSSS) at the RSSS campus located in Jaipur.

In this conference panchayat leaders from 14 districts of Rajasthan unanimously called upon the Rajasthan government to cancel agreements on farm research, seeds and other important areas of agriculture reached with seven multinational and other big agribusiness companies during 2010. Panchayat leaders with a good representation of women were joined by several social activists in expressing serious concerns about the harmful impacts of these agreements.

This conference was highly critical that the most important agreement with Monsanto is based on high levels of secrecy. As the document signed by the Rajasthan govt. with Monsanto says, "The contents of this MoU shall be kept confidential ("Confidential Information") and the parties shall not make, use, disclose or disseminate, or in any way share any Confidential Information to any person without the prior written consent of the other party. Each party shall treat all Confidential Information with the same degree of care as it accords to its own confidential information and shall not

disclose the same except where it is required to be so disclosed by Law." In other words, before the Rajasthan govt. gives information about this agreement to the people, or panchayats, it has to take the "prior written consent" of Monsanto!

An important objection raised by some experts to these agreements is that these agreements which deal collectively with almost all the main crops of Rajasthan emphasise time and again hybrid seeds while from the point of low-cost farming best suited to farmers of Rajasthan and their rain-fed, arid and semi-arid conditions of farming improved and selected traditional seeds are most suitable for farmers of Rajasthan.

However, it was emphasised by the conference of panchayat leaders that the real implications of the agreements go beyond such concerns, important as these are. The full implications of these agreements can be understood only in the context of the background of the real interests of big seed companies, including some colossal multinationals, with special emphasis on the companies which are promoting GM crops and technology. It is significant that these recent agreements of Rajasthan government involve the biggest GM (genetically modified) giant Monsanto and other biotechnology leaders capable of spreading GM technologies.

An eminent group of scientists from various countries who constitute the Independent Science Panel have said in their conclusion after examining all aspects of GM crops - "GM crops have failed to deliver the promised benefits and are posing escalating problems on the farm. Transgenic contamination is now widely acknowledged to be unavoidable, and hence there can be no co-existence of GM and non-GM agriculture. Most important of all, GM crops have not been proven safe. On the contrary, sufficient evidence has emerged to raise serious safety concerns, that if ignored could result in irreversible damage to health and the environment. GM crops should be firmly rejected now."

The conference of panchayat leaders emphasised that it is in this wider context that the agreements which the Rajasthan govt. reached with like big companies in year 2010 taken collectively (with special emphasis on Monsanto agreement) can be very harmful. The conference recommended unanimously that all these 'memorandum of understanding' should be cancelled immediately.

The conference emphasised deep regret that while the Rajasthan government has always expressed its commitment to panchayat raj and the transfer of important subjects like agriculture to panchayats, this kind of agreements are a mockery of rural decentralisation and go in the entirely opposite direction of over-centralisation. □

### Jharkhand to award panchayats with low school dropout rate

Chief Minister Arjun Munda on 16 May announced a scheme of awards for those panchayats which have low school dropout rates. 'The state government will award those panchayats where dropout rates of students in school is low. The data which has been released by the central government shows improvement in the state's performance in education sector but we cannot term it satisfactory,' said the chief Minister.

## Expenses related to panchayat elections - Experiences and Advice

*The Decentralization Community of Solution Exchange, an initiative of the United Nations in India, provides a platform for increasing our understanding of local governance-both rural and urban- through knowledge sharing and collaboration. We bring to you the summary of one of the discussions held recently.*

**Query:** 1. Are there any examples from States on legislations controlling election expenses in PRI elections?

2. Are there any experiences from States on how State Election Commissions have intervened and became successful in reducing the election expenses by candidates?

3. Can you give suggestions on how the issue could be addressed, through legislations as well as social action?

### Summary of Responses

Soaring expenses during elections to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is a widely prevalent phenomenon in the country. Exorbitant amounts of money are spent many times by contesting candidates in a bid to buy votes and seats. Members noted the measures taken through legislation to tackle it in various States but also acknowledged that legislation has limited impact in terms of reducing election expenses and the corruption involved.

### Legislations Controlling Election Expenses and Role of State Election Commissions (SECs)

Most States have a model Code of Conduct for PRI elections. For instance in Kerala senior observers are fielded to enforce rules, regulations and code of conduct. There is also another set of Expenditure Observers who look at the election expenses. The candidates need to submit election expenditure within one month failing which they will be disqualified for five years or so which in turn prevent them from contesting the next election. The disqualification period if election expense accounts are not submitted is three years in Bihar. The SEC also appoints the Financial Officer to verify the expenditure of candidates. Candidates may be disqualified if the expenditure is more than the prescribed amount based on the reports of the Financial Observers. In Bihar the SEC provides for ceiling on election expenses for the seats in various tiers. However, since many malpractices are difficult to prove, legislation has had limited impact in curbing expenses in Bihar.

The limit of expenditure fixed by the State Election Commission in Orissa is Rs. 30,000, Rs. 30,000 and Rs. 75,000 for Gram Panchayat, Samiti and Zilla Parishad members respectively. During the recent panchayat elections in Jharkhand, the SEC issued orders regarding the limits of expenditure for each post with specific guidelines. Some of these were:

- Restricting the number of vehicles to be used;
- Allowing hoardings and posters to be put on candidate's homes only;
- Putting the number of pamphlets printed on each pamphlet; and
- Book of accounts to be shown midway and after election

- Not allowing road shows and rallies for panchayat and ward members.

In Jharkhand, due to the guidelines that the defaulters would be barred from fighting for three terms made some impact in reducing expenses.

### Suggestions

Members observed that though there is a plethora of legislation against corruption and malpractices, the issue of increased expenses cannot be solved unless there is adequate enforcement of rules accompanied by social action. Systems of transparency and accountability must be put in place so as to deter the contestants from excessive election expenses.

Respondents felt that experiences with massive campaigns for fair elections and the tool of Social Audit have shown results in curbing corruption in PRI elections. For instance the efforts of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan were quite successful. This initiative of fielding MKSS candidates, who pledged to a manifesto citing that no extra money would be spent in campaigning and transparency in working would be enforced once the candidate was selected, ensured that election expenses were curbed in those districts.

In each village or gram panchayat, if there is a system of asking for accounts of various schemes, fair elections are likely to take place. Promoting genuine devolution and making the rural development bureaucracy and elected representatives accountable to the people are the strongest ways to reduce election expenditure. Members felt that as long as rural development work is done through shrouded nexus of bureaucracy and elected leaders, the election expenses would go up.

Further, members shared the examples from Madhya Pradesh, where a simple measure such as reducing the number of documents required while filing nominations, reduced expenses and aided candidates from the marginalized groups to come forward to contest.

Additional suggestions for curbing election expenses could be:

- Organizing the rural youth and involving them in process management;
- Creation of village elders' forum in each village; and
- A community hall in each village so that regular meetings are possible.

*For complete responses including related resources and documentation, to join the discussion or to become a member of Decentralization Community, please write to Joy Elamon ([joy.elamon@un.org.in](mailto:joy.elamon@un.org.in)) or Tina Mathur ([tina.mathur@one.un.in](mailto:tina.mathur@one.un.in))*