

Towards improving Panchayat governance

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THE PERSPECTIVE

"Just as the whole universe is contained in the self so is India contained in the villages. My idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbors for its own vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary"

MAHATMA GANDHI

The Panchayati Raj is a South Asian Political system operating mainly in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. The word "panchayat" literally means "assembly" of five wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the local community. Panchayati Raj is a system of governance in which panchayats are the basic units of administration. This system was adopted by state governments during the 1950s and 60s as laws were passed to establish panchayats in various states. It also found backing in Indian constitution with the 73rd Amendment in 1992 to accommodate the idea.

WHY PANCHAYATI RAJ ?

Rural India is where ¾ of our countrymen live. The Nation can, therefore, be strong and prosperous only when all villages are freed from backwardness and poverty. Panchayats have been the backbone of Indian villages. Rural development is not a mechanical development. It is a human process it requires hard work, dedication, responsiveness and accountability of both official and non-officials to make rural development a success. In recent times, the emphasis in regard to development has shifted to rural development for bringing about an appreciable improvement either in the living conditions of the weaker sections of the rural population or in reducing the poverty and unemployment. Panchayat is an instrument to carry out the programs of rural development. Good governance is of great significance in making panchayats functional and efficient. There is no other way to include the aspirations of all our people to guide our collective destiny other than to develop a strong local government system. Inclusive growth, which is the motto of the 11th five year plan, can be achieved only through inclusive governance. And the key to this is an effective, well functioning Panchayat system.

IMPROVING GOVERNANCE OF PANCHAYATS

Despite steady urbanization, over 70% of India's population continues to live in its villages and about 60% of the nation's workforce draws its sustenance from agriculture and related activities. Improved Panchayat governance based on the following tenets is therefore inexorably linked to efficient functioning of Panchayati raj institutions and achievement of the cherished objective of inclusive growth.

Appropriate structure and size: States should ensure that as far as possible Panchayats should be of an appropriate size which would make them viable units of self-governance and also enable effective popular participation. This exercise will need to take into account local geographical and demographic conditions. There is need for States to re-examine Panchayat delimitation so as to aim for greater efficiency of scale in delivery of services. Though gains can be expected when small villages are clustered, the trade-off could be in terms of larger Gram Sabhas. The participation of the people is

inversely proportional to the size of the Gram Sabha. The factors that would have to be taken into consideration for determining the minimum size of a Panchayat are: (a) potentiality for resource generation, (b) sustainability of the staff structure, (c) suitability as a unit of planning for core functions, (d) geographical cohesiveness, (e) terrain conditions and (f) communication facility within the Panchayat area.

Leveraging Information technology : Steps should be taken to set up Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Space Technology enabled Resource Centres at the Village and Intermediate Panchayat levels for local resource mapping and generation of local information base.

Adoption of performance indicators: For all services provided by local governments there is need to develop a set of performance indicators. The concerned Ministry should lay down broad guidelines for this purpose. Thereafter, the State Governments could lay down norms for this purpose. The concerned Ministry should maintain a State-wise database about the performance of various service delivery systems. Similarly, the State should have a database for such services covering all municipal bodies.

Transparency : A key to the success of the Panchayati Raj system is transparency in the way these bodies function. Being closer to the people, the Panchayats' right to information -- and accessibility to the Panchayats -- must be ensured. Panchayats, should display all vital information about development projects (especially receipt of funds and how they are being spent) in the Panchayat Offices or on a prominent board outside the village school for the information of the public, all relevant records should be open to inspection and members of public should also be able to obtain photocopies of documents related to development projects as also matters of general public interest by paying a nominal charge.

Empowerment : Empowered Gram Sabha has significant development potential and can play multiple roles to transform subsistence village economy into a vibrant one facilitating village to emerge as an organized unit managing its administration and development affairs. As a powerful institutional mechanism it can keep a close vigilance on the implementation of development programs and virtually eliminate inefficiencies and misuse of development funds. Empowerment of Gram Sabhas would require efforts at mobilisation of the village community for mass participation in meetings of the Gram Sabha. Further, a massive awareness generation programme needs to be taken up to inform Gram Sabhas about their rights in planning, implementation and audit of development programmes and in control over natural resources, land records and conflict resolution.

Peoples' active involvement : and meaningful participation in planning and implementation of socio-economic development programs meant for them are necessary to yield better results. People in their villages are the best to identify their development needs including infrastructure, programs and beneficiaries under Government sponsored programs. Besides, their collective decision has much significance as to how to plan and implement programs based on local resources and how much money would be required for local projects.

*The views expressed are personal views of the author and it should not be taken as views of the NIRC-ICSI.

Accountability: To what extent are the village panchayats accountable to the common people and looking after public interest? Do the ordinary masses feel involved and participate? Accountability involves the existence of mechanisms that ensures the public officials and political leaders are answerable for their actions and use of public resources

Attitudinal and behavioral changes : The style of functioning of Panchayats needs to be change-oriented, result-oriented and people-oriented to enable the PRIs to flourish as self-governing units. The same applies to political masters as they are expected to play the role of big brothers and faithful guides so as to allow these bodies to function as effective units of participatory democracy.

Vision and Strategy: There must be a Roadmap which lists issues and Action points for nurturing the Panchayats into the institutions of self government in a multi-level democracy and a common platform for all line departments, people etc for realizing the objective of sustainable inclusive growth.

The need for capacity building : Capacity building should be attempted at the local level by shifting the currently available post school generalistic education to a skill and technology based system. Systematic training of the elected representatives of the PRIs is critical for effective functioning of Panchayats. The first time elected representatives, especially from reserved categories have no experience of performing the functions of the PRIs. Moreover, they also feel handicapped in exercising their powers and performing their duties due to lack of education and poor social & economic status

Implementing and Supervising Schemes Effectively : The effective implementation of social schemes will bring a positive change in the lives of members of the Panchayat. For effective implementation of these schemes, The functionaries must fully inform themselves about the schemes and any changes by seeking information from the block level officials.

The various steps that the Panchayat can take for the effective implementation and supervision of schemes are:

- Disseminate information about the scheme in the Gram Sabha
- Ensure that locally relevant works are taken up under the schemes
- Ensure that Gram Sabha approvals are obtained as required, especially for beneficiary selection.
- If funds are transferred to the GP under the scheme, maintain accounts scrupulously.
- Review the implementation of the scheme from time to time
- Organize social audit of the scheme
- In case there is a major problem in the implementation of the scheme, inform the block office in writing, after passing a resolution in the Panchayat.

Social Audit Committee (SAC): The Social Audit Committee is set up to strengthen the process of constructive engagement between the citizens and the Panchayat and to improve the use of public resources to deliver goods and services. The SAC is formed at the Ward or Panchayat Levels. The Committee comprises of 10 members, 50% whom must be women. Typically the SAC should comprise of local respectable persons like members of support organizations/ NGOs, retired school teachers, retired government officers, coordinator of the local National Social Service Chapter, woman members of SHGs etc. The Chairperson and 5 members form the quorum for a SAC meeting.

Proactive Disclosure : Proactive disclosure means sharing of information on a person's or institution's own initiative, without having been asked to do so. The Panchayat is a public institution and has to function in transparent, accountable and responsive manner. This means that all the important information related to functioning of Panchayats must be shared with the villagers. The Panchayat President, Secretary and other office bearers must

respond to demands of villagers and reply to their queries. They must also explain their actions, or reasons for lack of action, to villagers individually.

Grievance Redressal : Despite the best intentions to reach the poorest of the poor, there may be discontent and complaints with regard to implementation of programs, particularly with regard to selection of beneficiaries, timely release of grants/ entitlement, irregularities with regard to procurements and disbursements etc. Timely redressal of people's grievances to their satisfaction not only reduces discontent, but also helps Panchayat improve its functioning.

Many a time, grievances arise due to poor communication or lack of access to concerned authorities. Citizens' expression of grievances should not be perceived as threats or as irritants, but as suggestions/ feedback to improve program outcomes and functioning of Panchayat. If many complaints are received, this can be a positive indicator of villagers being aware, and the Panchayat being accessible and responsive. If a grievance registered at the Panchayat level cannot be redressed to the satisfaction of the complainant, Panchayat should develop a mechanism to forward it to the higher level.

Perspective and Annual Plans : Primarily, the Panchayats may prepare two types of plans

- Perspective Plan for the long term, which should include the goals, strategy and activities for the next five years.
- Annual Plan, to be made every year. The annual plan should contain activities to be taken up during the year, and has to be detailed with specifics about the funds required, the time at which various activities will be undertaken, etc.

Participatory Planning - The planning exercise should be participatory, or, in other words, involve the people of the village. It is important that real needs and problems of local citizens, especially the poor and vulnerable ones, are given top priority and get reflected in the GP plan. This can only be ensured if all the sections of the local population, especially the poorest, women and other vulnerable groups, are consulted during GP plan preparation.

Conducting Panchayat meetings : The meetings of the Panchayat and its Standing Committees are important for decision- making. These meetings have to be conducted in a participatory and democratic manner, so that views of all the members are heard and collective decisions are made in the interest of poor and vulnerable groups. Key decisions should be taken after discussions in the Panchayat meeting, where all the Elected Representatives have the opportunity to remain present.

Smart Panchayat: Government spends huge amount in rural development and reaching out to the rural people. Many govt. departments are targeting the villages through PRI in some way or other to deliver their services through various schemes. From an in-depth analysis of these schemes it has been found that the benefits are not reaching the common people, the reasons being the complexity in the Govt. delivery process and lack of information to the public. It results in the creation of touts/brokers who are responsible for the pilferage and corruptions as citizen have to spend a lot of time and money to avail the services, which they end up not getting. Some of the State Governments have started using a Project Accounting and Monitoring system (PAMS) specifically tailored for use in Panchayats. The system has revenue streams in the form of grants from the Government for schemes implementation, taxes of various forms, income from own assets of Panchayat. The Revenue management system helps in managing tax collection and other revenue streams. Organizational and Governance module helps the recording of all information relating to Organization structure of the Panchayat and the Governance system such as Gram Sabha. Scheme Services Monitoring Tool looks after automation of the services related to the scheme. The package also provides administrative Services Monitoring Tool and Grievance Redressal System.