

Decoding Rural Governance in India

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Abstract

This paper is based on an interview with Dr Vikas Jha, Director, Governance & Policy Advocacy, Sehgal Foundation as part of Academic Interface series. Dr Jha obtained his diploma in policy studies from University of London and master's as well as doctoral degrees from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He has been involved in developmental outreach and activism on a range of issue such as citizen participation, community engagement, capacity building and accountability of grassroots leaders. In this interview, Dr Jha shares his candid views on governance-related issues at the village level, how Panchayati Raj Institutions are tackling those issues, strategies for improving rural governance and augmenting community participation in resolving local problems.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions, Rural Governance, Grassroots, India

What are the major governance-related issues at the village level in India that needs immediate attention of the local communities?

At the outset, it is important to explain the meaning of governance. Governance implies those institutions and processes through which government, civil society organizations and private sector interact in shaping public affairs and through which citizens articulate their interests, mediate their differences and exercise their political, social and economic rights¹. To understand major governance related issues at village level, we should know how it can be measured. Governance at the village level can be measured against the benchmarks such as delivery of basic services, transparency in functioning of Gram Panchayat and local government department, level of corruption and opportunities for citizens to participate principally to ensure accountability².

Measured against these benchmarks, one can find that villagers have poor access to public distribution system, Indira Awas Yojana, Swachh Bharat Mission and Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act. Such problems are there in several government programmes. Villagers have to pay bribes to get benefits under the government programmes. Corruption hits people especially the poor in a big way in villages. Opportunities for citizen participation such as Gram Sabha, social audits and community monitoring are mostly absent in most parts of India. So participation of citizens has been limited to elections and different avenues of participation after elections are largely dormant in rural landscape.

Local bodies such as Gram Panchayats do not have enough funds, functions and functionaries except in four–five states of India, so people regard it as symbolic institution, a 'vehicle without engines'. Hence they do not take much interest in its functioning which is cause of serious concern in democracy.

Greater participation of citizens in local affairs might strengthen their belief in democratic processes and inculcates a culture of solving issues democratically. However, motivating rural folks to participate in deliberations of local bodies or collectively influence decision-making is a bit challenging due to traditional marginalization and presence of strong power brokers.

Are the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) able to tackle the key issues at the grassroots levels effectively?

Within the context of limited administrative and fiscal decentralisation in India, PRIs have to meet huge expectation of people. PRIs have been able to take up issues of villagers to line government departments and they have been able to make substantial contribution in improving the village infrastructure.

PRIs have very crucial role in monitoring of government programmes such as Public Distribution System, Mid-Day Meal, Integrated Child Development Services and schools. Any complaint by PRIs on poor functioning of the government departments is taken very seriously by district administration. In MGNREGA and Swachh Bharat Mission, PRIs have very important role in monitoring and implementation.

PRIs are bridge between citizens and government which helps in channelizing demands of citizens to government and government message to citizens. PRIs through its platform such as Gram Sabha offer opportunities to citizens to participate in governance regularly. Otherwise, citizens participate just once in five years for electing government at local, state and national level –making India an electoral democracy lacking features of citizen participation.

I would say that within the administrative, fiscal and capacity constraints, PRIs have worked quite well.

What are the reasons behind apparent failure of Panchayati Raj Institutions in living up to the expectations of its primary constituency?

PRIs have not failed in India but they seem to be failing or underperforming due to various reasons. The primary reason for outward failure of decentralized units such Panchayati Raj Institutions (elected local bodies) is design failure except in some states of India. It means inconsistent design of political, administrative and fiscal decentralisation. I feel that decentralization in India has been designed to fail as administrative and fiscal powers have deliberately not been given by state government as they fear losing power to elected local bodies.

The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment envisages devolution of 29 subjects to village councils and 18 subjects to municipalities respectively. However in practice, they have not been transferred to local bodies in most of the states in the country. The World Bank study also points out that although the constitution has recognised the local village councils but states are unwilling to allocate sufficient fiscal and administrative functions as state level political leaders fear losing power³. Further, states reserve the right to withdraw functions from the local village councils by executive decisions and dismiss local functionaries⁴.

In view of non-transfer of power, local bodies do not have capacity to deliver and they fail to meet expectations of people. Simultaneously, it must be pointed out that decentralisation across the world faces unrealistic expectations and overambitious goals. Pranab Bardhan, renowned political scientist says “decentralisation has undoubted merits and strengths; however, idea of decentralisation may need some protection against its own enthusiasts”⁵. Ironically, expectations of rural folks are fueled by

national level leaders talking about Gram Panchayats as an institution which will be panacea of governance-related problems in the villages across the country whereas on the ground, PRIs are not well-placed to deliver due to lack of real powers which the states are reluctant to let go.

Is the scenario identical across the country or there are some better examples in some of the states?

PRIs in some states are doing very well in terms of devolution of funds, functions and functionaries (3Fs), infrastructure, governance and transparency. The annual study 2015-16, the Panchayat Devolution Index (PDI), the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India and TISS, Mumbai ranked Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Karnataka as first four states in India while, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Jharkhand are the low performers.

The study looked at two different indices for all the levels: Index of Devolution in Policy (DPo) and Index of Devolution in Practice (DPr) in addition to 3Fs and IGT (Infrastructure, Governance & Transparency).

The success of Kerala in decentralization is not new. At the same time, it is important to find out why Kerala has been so successful. Its success can be attributed to transfer of 3Fs to local government from 9th Plan. It has transferred 117 functions to Gram Panchayats and 151 functions to municipalities. All offices and staff at the appropriate level have also been transferred to the respective Local Governments. The local bodies have been given ample powers to control their staff including the Heads of Offices. The Mayor/Chairpersons/Presidents act as the Executive Authorities under the Acts⁶.

Kerala also has robust participative planning process in which Gram Sabhas and Ward Sabhas prepare and approve the plan. It has also powers of selection of beneficiaries to various welfare schemes, social audit and budget approval⁷. As a result, in Kerala today, Gram Panchayat has its own income of nearly rupees one crore and a Municipality with 3-5 crores and corporations with 5-20 crores, besides the State Governments Plan grant, Maintenance grant and General purpose Grants amounting another rupees 1-2 crores to Gram Panchayats. Besides, Central government grants like Mahatma Gandhi NREGS, Swachh Bharat, also come directly to them. It gives enough resources to local bodies to plan and spend on their priorities and they are no longer dependent on line government departments for projects⁸.

What could be the possible strategies for improving the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions so that they turn into model of effective rural governance?

The first step should be to address the design flaws in decentralisation in India. We should learn from Falleti's theory of decentralization who maintains that right kind of sequencing i.e. administrative decentralisation, fiscal decentralisation and political decentralisation (AFP) as per the context may influence success or failure of decentralisation and power relations between local and central government may determine sequence in a particular context⁹. In context, where central government is dominant, decentralisation starts with administrative followed by fiscal and political. Domination of local government would mean political decentralisation followed by fiscal and administration. However, decentralisation in West Bengal and Kerala (Indian states) has given good results with focus on all three dimensions of AFP at the same time. In most states, only political decentralisation has taken place with very few changes in administrative and fiscal decentralisation. Falleti also points out that decentralisation is along drawn process with various successful reforms rounds. Each dimension of decentralisation is enacted in specific rounds taking place at different points of time. Hence next round of reforms in decentralisation in India must happen in administrative and fiscal spheres.

After design issue, next important aspect is political commitment of leaders. While national leaders are inclined to giving powers to local bodies, state leaders are quite reluctant. We have seen tussle for

power in decentralisation politics for nearly 24 years now and leaders of local bodies have lost in this power tussle. All elected representatives in local bodies should launch non-violent struggle 'panchayat stayagraha' for administrative and fiscal decentralisation in India, otherwise existing decentralisation scenario may not change in the country for next decade.

The issue of capacity building and creating a resource centre in each block for supporting local bodies administratively and technically should follow if struggle mentioned above is successful. Community empowerment is the most important issue but most neglected by policy makers in the discussion on PRIs. We have hardly seen initiatives for making communities aware at grass roots level in India, exception being Swachh Bharat Mission where mass awareness drives has been taken by government and panchayats. Government assumes that communities will become aware on their own. Without community empowerment, PRIs will not perform effectively. As Falleti says, reforms in decentralisation is continuous process, so all the issues mentioned above should be given serious thought if PRIs are to be turned into model of effective rural governance.

How participation of local communities can be augmented in Panchayati Raj Institutions?

Participation of local communities can be augmented in Panchayati Raj Institutions by activating various mechanisms of participation such Gram Sabha, Committees of Gram Panchayats and various monitoring committees formed in Gram Sabha. At present, the participation happens only on paper.

One of the ways to activate Gram Sabhas was witnessed during *Gram Uday se Bharat Uday Abhiyaan* in April 2016. It was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to generate nationwide efforts to increase social harmony across villages, strengthen panchayati raj and promote rural development. The central and state governments reached out in mass media, including newspapers, television, and radio, urging citizens to participate in Gram Sabha in large numbers. In Haryana, the state government asked the district administration to prepare a schedule of gram sabha meetings and allocated responsibility to government officers across departments to be present in the meetings. Finally, and key to success, the people felt the seriousness of the state government in facilitating gram sabhas, hence they participated in large numbers¹⁰.

Presence of people in meeting of various institutions is first stage of participation, the second stage is citizens' ability to voice their opinions and concerns and last stage how they influence decision making of the institution. Last two stages can only happen if community is empowered.

It is important to explain the meaning of community empowerment here. Community empowerment means "how members of a group are able to act collectively in ways that enhance their influence or control over decisions that affect their interests"¹¹. However capacity of communities to act and influence decisions depend on four elements¹²:

1. Access to information: availability of laws and procedures for accessing information. It enables communities to hold government departments accountable and fight corruption
2. Mechanisms for inclusion and participation: legally mandated institutions e.g. reservation for women in local bodies, social audit in MGNREGA and spaces of grass roots movement e.g. movement of tribal against land acquisition. Communities can use these spaces for raising voice without any threat
3. Accountability: communities hold government department accountable by forming watchdog groups and budget analysis
4. Local organizational capacity: capacity and resources of communities to organize and voice their interests e.g. neighbourhood groups, farmers group, tribal group

The presence of these four elements in any socio-political context empowers the communities and they participate effectively in functioning of public institutions. Provision and strengthening of the four elements in rural India will not only augment participation of communities in PRIs but also make these institutional accountable. Hence it is often said that community empowerment is the foundation of grass roots democracy.

Sehgal Foundation, an NGO based in Gurgaon, has used Brinkerhoff and Azfar's theory to design a community empowerment program named "Good Governance Now" in Nuh district, one of least developed district in Haryana. In the program, select community leaders are trained on key provisions of government programs, right to access information, developing village level group to raise voice and approaching government departments with demands. Good Governance Now coupled with strengthening village institution has been built into Good Rural Governance Model which is being implemented in 435 villages of India by Sehgal Foundation. This model has yielded very good results e.g. improving delivery of public services, building capacity of panchayats and village infrastructure.

What about marginalized sections like women, minorities, transgender and people with disabilities who have traditionally been at the receiving end for centuries?

India has revolutionary legislation to ensure participation of marginalized sections such as women and deprived sections (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) in the local bodies. Women have reservation varying from 33 percent to 50 percent in the seats of local bodies and Scheduled Castes are given reservation as per population in the state. Minorities, transgender and specially challenged people do not have reservation of seats. But local elections give opportunity to them to get elected which is otherwise difficult when electoral constituency is large such as Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha elections.

Reservation has thrown up different kinds of challenges. Women after getting elected depend a lot on male viz. Husband, father, father-in-law, brother for performing their duties as elected representatives. This phenomenon is widespread from Gujarat in west to West Bengal in East and Jammu Kashmir in North to Tamil Nadu in South. Women elected representatives lack education, exposure, confidence and capacity which acts as serious constraint. Even in the places, where they are educated, patriarchy restricts them from taking decisions independently though, exceptional women can be found in local bodies who defy societal constraints to do magnificent job.

State government through various training institutes have tried to build capacity of all elected representatives in local bodies but failed to train effectively representatives of 2.5 lakhs Gram Panchayat in India. However, focus of training till date has been on class room teaching and technical trainings with limited focus on participatory training and citizenship training¹³.

Widely publicized participatory training tool in current times is "Community Led Total Sanitation" which has been developed by Kamal Kar with Robert Chambers (IDS, UK), and it has been very successful in different parts of world in motivating people to construct toilets and keeping their habitats clean. Such tools for training of elected representatives needs to be developed and used, only then women and deprived sections will have capacity and skills to participate effectively in local bodies.

In addition, citizenship training is a valuable education a citizen gets while attending gram sabha or being part of gram panchayat monitoring committees. Such trainings equip citizens with capacity and skills required for performing role of elected representatives in long run, it also makes local bodies accountable.

Another serious issue is elite's dominance of local bodies which reduces election of deprived sections to tokenism. Elites namely dominant castes in India rule by proxy. They take all the decisions on behalf of deprived castes. Elected representatives from deprived sections play important role in local bodies where they are numerically dominant, otherwise dominant castes hold sway over local bodies. Resistance of local traditional entrenched leadership to share power and regressive social customs prevent women and deprived sections from participating in village councils as a result decentralisation in India lacks democratic characteristics.

How do you visualize rural governance scenario in next ten years? Is the future promising?

Rural governance scenario is likely to be positive because communities will be more aware in next ten years. Equipped with mobiles, 103.5 crore people¹⁴ can get information from government on toll free numbers easily provided government disseminates these numbers in big way. Internet kiosks in every Gram Panchayat should speed up flow of information from government to citizens. Informed citizens, thus will act collectively and participate in local bodies to make them accountable, thereby trying to achieve goal of Good Governance in every Gram Panchayat of India.

Government hopefully will launch more campaigns such as Swachh Bharat Mission and Gram Uday se Bharat Uday which not only made citizens aware but also took government officials from chairs to door steps of citizens, a significant change from times, when citizens ran around offices for information and forms. However, 3Fs may not happen without "Gram Panchayat Satygraha" as power is never given up easily and voluntarily. Future will see who will be the 'Mahatma Gandhi' of 'Gram Panchayat freedom struggle' in India?

End Notes

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³ World Bank, 2000, in Craig Johnson, 2003, "Decentralisation in India: Poverty, Politics and Panchayati Raj", *Working Paper 199*, ODI, UK. p. 19.

⁴ See for example, Oommen , 1999; Craig 2003, p. 20

⁵ Bardhan, Pranab, 2002, "Decentralisation of Governance and Development", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, p 187.

⁶ Ravindranathan M. K, UNDP decentralized community – solution exchange, Aug 23, 2016.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Falleti T., 2005, "A sequential theory of decentralisation: Latin American cases in comparative perspective", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99, pp 327-44.

¹⁰ *Gram Uday se Bharat Uday Abhiyaan: Villagers witness gram sabha for the first time in their lives* Vikas Jha, UNDP Decentralized Community Solution Exchange, May 24, 2016, <http://solutionexchange-un.net.in/ftp/decn/resource/res10051603.pdf>

¹¹ Brinkerhoff and Azfar, Making Democracy Work: Democracy, Development and Security (Ed) Connerley, Eaton and Smoke, 2010, p 86

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Smoke, Paul, "implementing decentralisation: Meeting neglected challenges", *Making Democracy Work*, p 202.

¹⁴ TRAI, September 2016.