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Participatory Rural Governance in India: A myth or reality

Prof. Ratna Naik Murdia
TISS, Mumbai
Introduction

People’s participation in an ongoing process of mobilization and self organization that reshapes the community itself. The process starts with the identification and description of problems, needs and opportunities, continues through grassroots involvement in conception, planning and implementation and carries on through monitoring and evaluation. The present global trend in self-governance is democratic decentralization and strengthening of the local self-governments as strong grassroot level institutions with appropriate safeguards for weaker sections.

Acquiring a Constitutional status in 1993, the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs, a three tier rural local self government institutions) in India gave the vision of a democratic governance down even to village level (the gram sabha) by decentralizing state’s developmental functions, finance and functionaries to PRIs, granting them autonomy so that they function as institutions of self government, securing people’s participations in local development and ensuring accountability and transparency of the government to the people. It is not only a system of participative self-governance but it ensures political empowerment to the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed. The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act has made Panchayats instruments of local governance with potential space for women and marginalised groups in the federal set up. It has perceptually widened the democratic base providing the potential for local-level planning and implementation of development programmes. These potentialities include the participation and self-governance by ensuring political empowerment to the poor, marginalized and oppressed – Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and women – at the grassroot level.

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The present paper is based on a recent study carried out in Maharashtra, India, which attempts to assess the effectiveness of PRIs as institutions of self governance. The paper attempts to address issues pertaining to (a) devolution of powers, (political, financial and administrative) functions and functionaries right up to village panchayat level, (b) capacity building and empowerment measures to equip these institutions, especially the gram sabha, through creation of an enabling environment with appropriate policy and legal frameworks, institution building, human resource development and strengthening of managerial capability, and (c) involvement and participation of people especially women, poor and other marginalized groups in the functioning of these institution. The paper also highlights major findings and offer recommendations to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of PRIs (and gram sabha) as the real instruments of self governance.

PRI in Maharashtra

The State has adopted three tier structure since 1960. At present there are 33 Zilla Parishads, 320 Panchayat Samitis and 27,700 Gram Panchayats. Election of all these bodies are held regularly by the State Election Commission constituted in 1994 after the 73rd constitution amendment.

Most of the rural development programmes have been transferred to PRI except the subjects like public distribution scheme, rural electrification, land reforms and land consolidation, etc. Since October 2, 2000 Government of Maharashtra has transferred 124 subjects to PRIs with a view to strengthen the Gram Panchayat/Gram Sabha and to involve rural people in developmental decision making.

Under Mumbai village Panchayat Act, 1958, wide powers have been given to the gram panchayat (GP) and gram sabhas (GS) for preparing village plans for economic development and social justice. GP can execute works up to Rs.5 lakhs. As no technical staff is available at GP level, GP have to obtain technical sanction from Block Development Officer (BDO). Rural people are to select, prepare execute and evaluate the development related works undertaken in the village. Funds for the purpose are kept at
the disposal of the GP. In order to augment their resources, GP have been authorized to levy and collect a number of taxes and collect its revenue, major source being property tax on buildings and lands. Other taxes include yatra tax, bazar fee, water charges, etc.

The GS, as a vital grass root level institution, is required to meet atleast once in a quarter. It is assigned to perform the following functions: (1) to approve the BPL list, (2) to identify and select beneficiaries under various rural development schemes, (3) to discuss, approve and prioritize the action plan for the development of village level infrastructure prepared by GP. (4) to monitor and review the progress of different schemes and scrutinize the decision of panchayat in GS meeting, (5) discuss annual financial statements of GP in GS. (6) to seek and ensure active participation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women.

The Findings: Issues and Recommendations

The findings of the study suggest that, by and large, PRI have not delivered the services to rural people even though they are empowered to prepare plans for economic development and social justice. They have not yet become the real institutions of self governance largely due to (a) lack of people’s participation, especially, the women, the poor, and other marginalized groups because of ignorance, poverty and lack of distributive justice; (b) reluctance of the higher tiers of the Government to devolve financial and administrative powers to them as the Line Departments and District Rural Development Agency continue to control the planning and implementation of developmental projects; apathetic attitudes of bureaucrats and politicians; insufficient capacity and resources of the PRIs (and Gram Sabha) in running their activities effectively; and, lack of organic linkages among the three tiers.

It was found that, the GS in sampled villages (N=40) are not held regularly. Thus, important decisions that need to be taken at the GS are invariably taken by the GP members or Sarpancha without involving the villagers. It was reported that fake signatures and thumb imprints are obtained on manufactured agenda and minutes for GS meetings simply to fulfill quorum requirements, and the requisite decisions are in fact taken by a few influential members of the GP and the active elements of the village polity. Gram Sevaks (the village level workers) often have more than one village under their jurisdiction which reduces the amount of time and effort that they can devote towards any one village on developmental activities/ convening GS meetings, etc.

The study reveals that in almost all sampled villages a large majority of villagers don’t attend GS meetings for reasons such as lack of education, lack of time, lack of interest, lack of information about the meeting, lack of faith in the system, distance from home, etc. In spite of provisions to convene GS meetings in far-flung dwellings (Vasti/Wadi) and in member villages of group GP, it seems, it is not followed. Therefore, villagers who live far away find it difficult to attend GS meeting. A majority of daily wage earners and farmers do not attend the meeting at the cost of loosing wages. Several people complained that they do not get information about the meeting in advance. The study reveals low attendance and poor participation of women and SC/ST persons in VP/GS in almost all villages including in those Panchayats which were headed by women.

Political factionalism in some villages tends to create disputes and disagreements which affects the proceedings of the meeting. It also creates an aversion in the minds of the common man towards attending GS. It was also reported that while selecting beneficiaries, GS is biased and favourable towards the privileged individuals from BPL listed families. The GS as an institutional mechanism for making complaints or seeking redressal of grievances have remained ineffective. Hence, by and large, GS are held only as a formality and accomplished only on paper.

Thus, the study reveals that the sheer size of the body (GS), the general lack of interest on the part of rural poor except when some perceptible gain is in sight, the emasculated condition of the GP, paucity of resources, the high opportunity costs of attending the body for labour class and the lack of specific role for the ordinary members of the Panchayat in GS stand in the way of development of institutions of GS. The body is unable to perform effectively its statutory functions relating to granting approvals to plans and selecting beneficiaries.
It is important to create awareness among the people with regard to their responsibilities, duties and rights in the process. People have to be motivated to realise that their active participation in GS is crucial to the development of their village as well as to control malpractices, to monitor that the guidelines are properly followed, and to ensure transparency and accountability of GP to GS.

GS could be effective in its role only through its empowerment and capacity building, political education of masses, larger participation in developmental programmes, more effective control over Panchayat leadership, better responsiveness of the administration, better mobilization of resources, and better care of community/village assets. Thus GS needs to be strengthened by handing over Real power otherwise it will remain only a shadow of the panchayat and not an independent entity.

The Panchayats (at all levels) are still dominated by bureaucracy. There is a need for bureaucrats to change their mindset. The middle level bureaucrats are not yet prepared to give powers to poor and illiterate villagers. It is also important to strengthen the internal resources mobilization capabilities of PRIs for functional autonomy. They should also be given control over natural resources such as land, water, minor forest produce and minerals. All village level, users’ groups formed under different developmental programmes such as watershed committees, water user’s groups, forest protection committees, self help groups, etc. should be linked and brought under the control of GP.

The Panchayat should have better control over funds which is possible through timely release of funds so that they have enough time to plan and implement the programme and freedom to take up works in response to local imperatives. Further, practice of giving special grant to MP/MLA for local area development should be allotted to Panchayats to utilize it for strengthening local development and poverty alleviation measures.

Decentralization which ensures people’s participation in planning and governance is considered an efficient instrument of conveying benefits to the poor with the least cost. Accountability and transparency are expected to ensure minimisation of beneficiary mis-identification, better enforcement of asset acquisition, its retention and maintenance, loan repayment, capital plough back, etc. Besides, since local wisdom and local resource are readily available under decentralized governance, local human, animal and physical resources can be effectively utilized resulting in creation of employment opportunities and production of goods and services relevant to the needs of the poorer section of society.

In order to ensure greater involvement and effective participation of gram sabha and to improve accountability and transparency in the administration it is necessary that GS should be vested with Right to Information and more powers. At present the wide powers of suspension and dismissal are vested with the bureaucracy which is a disadvantage for PRI as it weakens their rights as elected representative bodies. The GS should therefore be given power to dismiss the GP. Besides, stringent disciplinary regulations be adopted for defaulting Government, semi-Government and Panchayat employees. GS should be further empowered with Right to ask for information regarding irregularities committed by any employee of PRI.

Apart from package of devolution of powers, the PRI need qualified and trained technical staff to help them in day to day transactions at various levels and to advise gram panchayat or group of Panchayats in formulation of action plans and technical feasibility of the plans. The technical staff posted at block level may be assigned to work in GP for this purpose. Orientation/ training and time to time guidance should be provided to GS/ GP with respect to their day to day conduct regarding financial and administrative matter.

GP be provided with adequate manpower support including technical and authorized to take up works up to Rs.10,000/- with the approval of GS without seeking approval from BDO/District Rural Development Agency (DRDA). The GP president be accountable only to GS and no one else. In order to
ensure that PRI functions as an instrument of local government it is important that their functional and financial autonomy is guaranteed and transparency in their functioning is ensured. The role of local people in conducting social audit and fixing responsibility on Panchayat functionaries can be effectively ensured with GS becoming active and empowered. State government’s control and intervention over PRI should be minimized and if there is any specific complain against any Panchayat, it should be referred to a body similar to the ‘Ombudsman’. A time bound and comprehensive training programme for PRI elected representatives and general awareness among the rural people are essential for strengthening of PRI including the GS. Social audit is essential to curb corruption and misutilization of funds.

To enable the Panchayats to function as instrument of Self Governance, it is no longer necessary for the Centre to route its financial support to the Panchayats through the state government. In a large number of instances, funds for rural development and poverty alleviation appear to have been diverted, at least temporarily, leading to inordinate delays and even the lapsing of funds meant to be spent through PRIs. It is therefore suggested that the Central Government must channel all funds directly to the Panchayats at the appropriate level. Further, the instrument DRDA should be disbanded and merged with district Panchayats. The devolution of functionaries with functions implies the closing down of line departments and the transfer staff to the administrative and disciplinary control of the Panchayats. Along with this, there is a need to clearly demarcate responsibilities at the three tiers. There is also a need to establish a panchayat service, for both administrative and technical functions, on the lines of existing state and central services for effective self governance. With a view to enhance women’s participation in meeting of GS, a sub-quorum of female attendance should be built into the required quorum. A provision may be made that meetings of GS be preceded by meetings of the Mahila Sabha comprising all adult women voters of the GP, to ensure that gender concerns and preferences get fully reflected in the proceeding of GS. (Aiyar, 2003).

The study observes that it may be more appropriate for the Panchayats to function only as an institution of “Governance” and not as institution for ‘Execution’ of Projects. The Projects implemented by beneficiary committees, Self-Help Groups or any other group of individuals selected by the GS were found to be more effective than projects directly implemented by the Panchayats themselves. Simple and transparent methods of monitoring projects by people were found to be more efficient compared to pre designed official procedure.

Constitutional amendment alone cannot be effective if demand for de facto decentralization does not arise from the grassroots. For this, social mobilization is required which could be done only through a social movement for greater autonomy of the Panchayats in discharging their responsibilities. The civil societie− NGOs and voluntary actions of all kinds− can play an inter-mediating and supportive role in their effort to strengthen PRIs and democracy at the grassroots through various interventions such as public awareness and information and dissemination, social mobilization capacity building efforts, advocacy and campaigning for various issues with a view of working towards a social just society and by enabling local bodies to engage in participatory bottom-up micro-planning processes to determine priorities and design programmes which address locally appropriate needs of different segments of local society.

Participatory approach needs access to a wide variety of information by the officials as well as the people and civil society and Information Technology has the potential to increase the speed and quality of this process. It can ensure a more accountable, responsive and citizen friendly PRIs. The government−civil society interface gets a facelift by increased access to government information and facilitating dialogue and public feedback on government projects and performance. E-panchayat can only be realized by e-gram sabha which is designed to facilitate interaction between the members of GS and the PRIs.

Conclusion:

If Panchayats have to function as institution of self-governance at the grass root level they have to fulfill three basic conditions, namely, (a) institutional existence in the sense the decisions are taken by the
people’s representatives, (b) institutional capacity in the form of empowering institutions to make their rules independently, and (c) financial viability in terms of sufficiently empowering panchayats in raising resources to meet their responsibilities. In other words, the panchayats should enjoy functional, administrative and financial autonomy (Pal, Mahi, 2004).

REFERENCES


About the Author

Ratna Naik is heading a Unit for Social Policy and Social Welfare Administration at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Bombay, India. She has done her Ph.D. in Developmental Sociology from Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

Her major area of interest are Poverty and Rural Development, Developmental Policies and Administration, Environment, Natural Resources Management and Sustainable Development, Local Self Government, Gender and Equity Issues in Development, Affirmative Action Policies, Role of Corporate Sector in Rural Development, etc.

She is teaching courses at Master/Ph.D levels, conducting research on issues mentioned above, and organizing seminars/workshops/training programmes for various target groups. She has published 3 books and several articles in reputed journals.