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Twenty years of ‘empowered’ local bodies in India: Time for course corrections

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This November 3, 2015 file photo shows LDF activists engaged in a road show in the traditional way during the final phase of campaign for local body elections in Palakkad, Kerala. Photo: K. K. Mustafah

*Twenty years after the first local body elections were held after the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution came into being to usher in democratic governance at the grassroots, the experiment, at best, has delivered mixed results. Assessing the manner in which local self-government has worked for the past two decades, **R. K. Radhakrishnan, Associate Editor, Frontline**, says that training of the 30-lakh elected representatives, is as important as devolution of power and finances, and needs to be strengthened at all levels.*

Two decades have passed by since the revival of local governance in most parts of India pursuant to the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution¹. Nearly half a century after Mahatma Gandhi’s passing away, his idea of *Gram Swaraj* was translated into action, the Constitution was amended, and a few years later, after the States of the Indian Union amended their laws accordingly, the first elections were held in 1996.

Local Government is a State subject figuring as item 5 in List II of the VII Schedule to the Constitution of India. Article 243 G of the Indian Constitution enshrines the basic principle for devolution of power to the rural Local

Bodies. As per this Article, subject to the provisions of this Constitution, the Legislature of a State may, by law, endow the Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-Government and such law may contain provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon Panchayats at the appropriate level, subject to such conditions as may be specified therein, with respect to the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice; the implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to the 29 matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule ².

The Amendment was portrayed as the most revolutionary step in the history of governance in India. The move would decentralise powers to the village level, empower hundreds of thousands of people from across caste groups, including the lower castes, and was generally seen as a panacea for all the ills of governance, if media reports of that time are to be believed. As many as 30 lakh elected representatives from the over two lakh rural panchayat bodies and about 3,700 urban panchayat bodies, were expected to transform India ³.

Two decades later, a reality check would reveal that the experience has been mixed. “The essential problem in village level planning is that people in villages obviously will think of their village and the needs thereof,” said a former bureaucrat, who served in various capacities, and retired as a Secretary to Government of India two years ago. “They will need a decent road, connectivity, provision for water supply, and, sometimes, a community hall,” he added. None of these were bad things. But the problem is that villages were not islands; they needed a vision that goes much beyond the immediate needs articulated above.

Generational problems

“Local Governments have become institutionalised and have become the third tier of governance. However, State governments still try to retain control over Local Governments. Consequently, Local Governments today continue to have first generational as well as second-generation problems as a consequence of changing context,” said Kripa Ananthapur, Associate Professor, Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), who has studied the institutions for the past two decades.

Asked about the impact of reservations for women, Ananthapur said that “reservation has definitely made a difference but performance of women still tends to be patchy as they are not allowed to build political constituency by reconnecting for the second time.” However, she was confident that the 50 per cent reservation should make a difference.

Asked if reservation on its own had led to empowerment of women, Ananthapur felt that the main issue was that political reservation without accompanying fundamental shifts/changes in education and social norms is always going to have limited impact

The Kerala Model

The experience of Kerala with “Janakeeya Assothranam” (People’s Plan), is well documented in *Local Democracy and Development: People’s Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala* ⁴, co-authored by T.M.Thomas Isaac, who as a member of the Kerala State Planning Board was in charge of the Plan, and a U.S. based academic, Richard W.Franke. (Left Word, Rs.185, 2000, ISBN: 81-87496-18-5 (paper back)).

The story in short: 1996 saw a change in Government in Kerala. The Left Front was returned to power and the People's Plan was one of its many poll promises. The Left Front Government decided to devolve 35 per cent to 40 per cent of its Ninth Plan Outlay for projects and programmes to be formulated and implemented by local self-governments, the authors note in the preface. More than two million people attended 14,149 assemblies to take part in the exercise of identifying local needs ⁵.

On the implementation of the plans, the authors note that "the utilisation of plan funds by the local self-governments was very tardy during the year 1997-98. Even though the release of funds to the *grama panchayats* was inaugurated at the end of May 1997, the majority of the grama panchayats could finalise their plans and receive the first instalment of the grant-in-aid only by August. A majority of the municipalities, blocks and district panchayats could make it only by September of October. At times it took more than a month for the plan funds to be actually credited to the Personal Deposit accounts of the implementation officers after the allotments were received. It was November before the guidelines for the local rates were cleared. It was January by the time the implementation system became fully operative ⁶." The financial year ends in March.

While this was the experience of a State that invested substantially on developing grass roots governance in a real sense, the experience of most other States – including Karnataka and West Bengal, which had attempted decentralisation earlier ⁷ – remained a mixed bag.

Examples of excellence

There are several individual examples of excellence. Some of them featured in media reports are:

- Chhavi Rajawat of Soda village, Tonk district, Rajasthan, who gave up a lucrative job to head her village. She has brought better water, solar power, paved roads, toilets and a bank to her ancestral village.
- Arati Devi, an investment banker, who was elected sarpanch in a village in Ganjam district in Orissa. It is also her hometown and she is credited with starting a literacy campaign for women in the panchayat and reviving traditional folk art in Ganjam.
- Meena Behen, the first woman sarpanch from a village in Gujarat, in the district Vyara in Gujarat, heads an all-women Panchayat board. In a patriarchal society, where women were never allowed outside their houses, Meena and her friends attribute all their leadership skills to the self-help group (SHG) that World Vision India helped form.
- Sushma Bhadu, a sarpanch in Harayana, is credited with improving the dwindling education and notorious sex ratio levels of her villages. She is elected sarpanch of three villages - Salam Khera, Chablamori and DhaniMiyani Khan.
- DhaniMiyani Khan has achieved a zero dropout rate at the village's only school, and every child in the village attends school.
- Radha Devi is a sarpanch of a village in Rajasthan. Despite the Right to Education Act, children across Rajasthan do not make it to school. Women sarpanch leaders stepped in to ensure that this trend reverses and girls attend school.

Divine intervention

Then there are also stories of how women sarpanchs got around the male bastion. One woman chief in Maharashtra invoked God each time she did anything for the village. "The first thing she did was to lay a road to

the village temples,” said Preeti Mudliar, Assistant Professor, IIIT-Bangalore. She details the sarpanch in her Ph.D dissertation, *The Curiosities of Participation: A Community’s Practice of Participatory Governance* (The University of Texas at Austin, May 2013). The following extract is illustrative:

“KMG [the village] elected Swati [name changed by Mudliar] as its first woman sarpanch four years ago. Her story is an interesting narrative of how women are introduced to governance that I shall elaborate upon in another section on ‘Consent’. During the course of my informal interactions with her and later a formal 90-minute interview, Swati made repeated references to how participation was an act of serving her lord. She not only credited her *naath’s* (god) mercy in bringing her into the public eye through her election to the *sarpanch* post, but also spoke much of her work as a service to god. When I asked her if she would like to serve on the gram panchayat body again she said, “Of course. It is a chance to serve my *naath*, my lord. I feel very enthusiastic and excited that I got a chance to serve my *naath* and I am doing this work in his name. I will always be happy to do so.” While the devotion to the deity was a common theme of reference for the entire village including the Muslims who would equally participate in the religious activities of the temple, it was interesting to observe that the sole woman sarpanch in the history of the village was the only one who chose to frame participation in terms of devotion to the lord. Swati also framed much of the work that she did as a sarpanch as a way to increase the prestige of the lord.”

For each such success story there are a dozen depressing stories of failure, and women merely being the figure heads. In Rajasthan, an NGO worker spoke about two *sarpanchs* that she knew of “sitting on seats won by their daughters.” They do not actively get involved in supporting the work of the NGO, but they welcome the work the organisation does in the villages. Asked about their interaction with the people, she said that they usually stick with powerful people from the village. “Don’t take suggestions from women or the general public during the *Gram Panchayat* meeting. Actually women don’t attend these meetings at all,” she added.

The handicap for women

Another problem of a woman leader managing the show is highlighted in many practical examples across India too. “When a man is an elected member, chances are that only he indulges in corruption,” says P.V. Kalyanasundaram, a former Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) whip in the Chennai Corporation Council, from 1996-2001, and was also elected for a second term from 2001 to 2006. “In my experience, when it is a woman, there are many who begin collecting money on her behalf – her husband, her brother or brothers, her local party leader etc. There is no end to this. We have seen in umpteen cases in Tamil Nadu where the woman is merely there because the Act says so,” he adds. When this is the situation in Tamil Nadu, which is a progressive State, imagine what happens in other States!

Secretaries to Government in at least half a dozen States have spoken of brazen corruption that had come to their notice from the local bodies. One Rural Development Secretary says he has dismissed “quite a few” local body heads on charges of corruption, after giving him/her a hearing. The irony is that a government official is in a place of responsibility where he can dismiss an elected representative.

The crux of the problem lies in the fact that – in this case – the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department is responsible for the implementation of various Centrally-sponsored, State-funded, and Externally-aided schemes

for poverty alleviation, employment generation, sanitation, capacity building, women's social and economic empowerment, apart from provision of basic amenities and services. The Department is also entrusted with the responsibility of enabling the various Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) to function as effective units of Local Self-Government. The District Collector functions as the Inspector of Panchayats, and is in a position – after due process – to dismiss an elected Local Government representative.

In Tamil Nadu, for instance, the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act was enacted in April 1994, and says very specifically what is expected of the local bodies: they were “Institutions of self-government and for more effective implementation of rural development programmes.” But in effect these powers rest with officials in the district administration.

The Government of Tamil Nadu says it is committed to ensuring that the Panchayat Raj Institutions function as effective institutions of Local Self-Government. In 1996, soon after the conclusion of the first ordinary elections to the three tiers of Panchayats, the Tamil Nadu Government constituted the First High Level Committee under the Chairmanship of L.C. Jain, the then full-time Member of the State Planning Commission to give recommendations on the entrustment of powers and functions to the three tiers of Panchayats. Since then, there have been several committees which have gone into the issue of additional powers to the local bodies. It is safe to say that it is not for the lack of recommendations that the government is not handing over additional power to the local bodies.

R. Elango, who was panchayat president for two terms from 1996, and who was commended for making his village, Koothambakkam, a model village, says that the politicisation of the panchayat level presents peculiar problems. In addition to the lack of power to do any substantial change in the village, politicisation makes it difficult for social and community activists to even think of entering the fray. “There are many social activists who want to contest the [local body] polls. But increasingly, candidates from the ruling political party make it known very well in advance that they would be contesting the post of president and that they would want the process to be unanimous. More often than not, the social activist will back away,” he said, and added that this was a new trend.

The reason why a politician wants the seat of power, even in a rural local body is because of the development funds that he manages to handle. “The income of a village panchayat varies widely and hence an average number does not make sense,” says a former secretary for Rural Development from Tamil Nadu. There are two issues here: One, villages with very small populations. The inhabitants in a village vary from 500 to about 30,000. Two, the income variation. Many villages near Chennai, for instance, have huge incomes. A Rural Development policy note of the Government of Tamil Nadu, from 2007-08, that compared income of villages, found that there were 10 villages with an income of Rs.50,000 or less in Tamil Nadu, while two had income of over Rs. 3 crore. The majority – 7,422 villages – had an income ranging between Rs.1 lakh and Rs.5 lakh. The next biggest category was villages with income from Rs.5 lakh to Rs.10 lakh – 3,181 villages. Add to this additional development funding – which is largely tied to specific projects, and State Finance Commission grants – and the villages usually have a decent outlay to carry out development work. In India, there are as many as 2,32,855 village panchayats, 6,094 intermediate panchayats and 633 district panchayats, according to the Rural Development Ministry's 2009 report.

In all, despite the fact that India has had local governance for the past two decades, the desired impact of the 73rd Amendment is yet to be felt on the ground. But then, flaws are part of a democratic evolution of any system. Two decades is not a long time in the existence of a democratic system. There only needs to be the will to recognise the flaws and set course corrections accordingly.

References:

1. [^] The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution were finally passed in 1993. These prescribe a three-tier system of governance: village, taluk/block and district (village level), and town panchayats/municipalities/corporations in urban areas. A five-year term was fixed, and, in the event of a dissolution, a new body had to be elected in six months. SC/STs were provided representation according to their proportion in the population, and, most importantly, a third of seats were reserved for women. A 11th Schedule to the Constitution listed 29 subjects that could be devolved to local bodies.

2. [^] [Tamil Nadu Rural development department.](#)

3. [^] Chaubey, P.K. (2003) *Urban Local Bodies in India: Quest for Making Them Self-Reliant*, Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi. Last accessed October 3, 2016.

4. [^] Issac, Thomas, T.M., Heller, P. (nd) *Local Democracy and Development: People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala*. Last accessed October 3, 2016.

5. [^] Ibid, p 56.

6. [^] Ibid, p 174.

7. [^] In 1983, the Janata Dal Government passed a legislation based on the Ashok Mehta Committee recommendations. Elections were held to *Zilla Parishads* and *Mandal Panchayats* in January 1987. The Congress government in West Bengal passed the Panchayat Act, which envisioned a four-tier model, in 1973. The Left Front government held the first local body elections in June 1978.

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