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Capability Building of People in Panchayats

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The Constitution of India¹ defines Panchayats as institutions of local self-government in rural India. With the exception of the states whose population is less than 2 million, the three-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) system is mandatory for all states. The tiers consist of: Gram (Village) Panchayats at village or cluster of villages levels, Block Panchayat at sub-district or block level and the District Panchayat at the district level. For smaller states such as Sikkim, only two tiers, namely Village Panchayat and District Panchayats, have been constituted. The Constitution also mandates that democratically elected Panchayats should prepare plans for local economic development and social justice². They should also implement the schemes for local economic development and social justice as entrusted to them by Central and State governments. The Eleventh Schedule in the Constitution of India provided an indicative list of 29 subjects as possible work areas for Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Any conversation on capability building of 'institutions' of Panchayats should take into account three aspects. First, what are the capacity requirements of Elected Representatives (ERs) and staff in Panchayats so that they could electively undertake their mandated roles and responsibilities. Second, who are the ERs and the officials of Panchayats; what are their social and educational backgrounds? The third and final aspect, dependent on first two, should be how to ensure timely capacitation of the institutions and people therein. The present article strives to look into the number of people in panchayats whose capacities should be enhanced. It also analyses the current strategies and emerging issues for capability building.

Capability Needs:

Panchayats are physically most proximate institutions of government for people living in villages. Panchayat members and officials live with the people in their respective villages, or those nearby. They themselves are primary stakeholders in any local development initiative in their Panchayats. Being physically close to the people and so, easily accessible, Panchayat members are expected to respond to various demands from the locals, as well as from external agencies including state and central governments. They must follow well-defined norms and procedures to manage the affairs of institutions of Panchayati Raj. Thus, Panchayat functionaries (elected representatives and staff) should be well aware about the intricacies of Management and Finances of Panchayats, including the procedures to conduct Panchayat meetings, Gram Sabha meetings, meetings of standing committees and other institutional mechanisms. They should know the roles, responsibilities and rights of institutions of Panchayats and their limitations. Such competencies are essential. Other core competencies include fundamentals of Panchayati Raj and Local Development such as: democracy, participation, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, the State Panchayati Raj Act, participatory planning, gender equality, social justice, practices of good governance and e-governance.

The situations of the three tiers of Panchayati Raj vary from state to state due to variations in extent of devolution of functions, funds and functionaries to different tiers of the Panchayats. Accordingly, depending upon the Training Need Assessments (TNA), the capacity needs for elected representatives and other stakeholders also vary in different states. That said, there are several common

¹ Constitutional (73rd) Amendment Act, 1992 which created the modern three tier Panchayati Raj in India.

² Article 243G of the Constitution of India

issues, which concern every Panchayat across all states. These include basic services and social welfare etc. Issues in communal harmony, human rights, climate changes, environmental issues, disasters and changing demographic profile are other important issue of local governance. Across all states, the roles of Panchayats in implementations of Centrally Sponsored Schemes are also increasing.

Panchayats are associated in the implementation of most schemes of Rural Development. Other departments/ministries like Agriculture, Health, Water, Sanitation, Women and Child Development, Tribal Development and other social sector ministries also implement programmes at Panchayat level³. The Ministry of Rural Development alone had a budget of Rs 1,05, 447.88 Crores for 2017-18. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna-Grameen (PMAY-G) and Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojna (PMGSY) are among the top five centrally sponsored schemes which involve Panchayats. Other major programmes implemented at Gram Panchayat level include: Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan, National Health Mission and Swachh Bharat Mission. Beside these schemes, the Fourteenth Finance Commission provided over Rs 2 lakh crores for 2015-20 to Gram Panchayats. Panchayats are supposed to spend this funding on basic civic functions of water supply, sanitation, street lighting, playgrounds and crematorium. Many of the States also implement their social sector schemes at Gram Panchayat level. The respective State Finance Commissions can also provide funds for Panchayats for various works. All these have implications on capability building of Panchayats.

People to be capacitated:

The Capability building and training of Panchayats involves huge numbers with extreme diversity in knowledge, backgrounds and interests of those to be trained. Since the enactment of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1993, about 248620 Village Panchayats, 6425 Block Panchayats and 601 District Panchayats are currently functional across the country. The three-tier structures of Panchayats in all states elect a total of about 3 million representatives for 5-year electoral terms. Out of these, more than 1.2 million representatives are women. The elected representatives from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Castes are also close to a million. For most of these women and marginalized men, getting elected to Panchayats is their first ever experiences of achieving public roles and opportunities for working in public spaces. They are required to perform many assigned duties in non-enabling social (patriarchy, feudal culture) and institutional (limited powers and authorities devolved to Panchayats in most of the states) environments. These elected representatives are also responsible for overseeing the appropriate implementations of the Central and State schemes in the Panchayats. That role may require specific skills and technical knowledge. Heading an institution (Panchayat) and managing its affairs also requires specific training and capacities.

The training and capability building of Panchayat Functionaries are quite challenging in terms of the sheer number of trainees, as well as trainee diversity and varying contextual situations. Apart from millions of Elected Representatives, there are lakhs of officials and crores of the Gram Sabha members. The Core Panchayat functionaries of Panchayats usually include Panchayat Secretaries, accountants and

³ Report of the Committee on Performance Based Payments for Better Outcomes in Rural Development Programmes (Sumit Bose Committee Report), 2017, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India

Panchayat Development Officers. In some Panchayats some technical staff are also available. Beside these core functionaries, departmental functionaries, especially from departments devolved to Panchayats, need to understand the Panchayati Raj system, as well as their roles in it. They need to be also dis-oriented (from departmental vertical accountabilities to accountability towards people and Panchayats), oriented, sensitized and trained.

Modes of Capability Building:

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India prepared a National Capability Building Framework in 2014 to provide guidelines to states for training contents, types of trainers and modes of training. It proposed the engagement of various training institutions of central and state governments, accredited NGOs, academic institutions and mass media in undertaking various types of capability needs of the Panchayati Raj system. The State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs) have been in the forefront for providing institution-based trainings. Some of the leading SIRDs in this regard are: SIRD-Karnataka, SIRD-Rajasthan, KILA-Kerala, YASHDA-Maharashtra and SIRD-Assam. Almost all states have their own SIRDs, which financially well supported by the Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Panchayati Raj and respective state governments. The National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR) in Hyderabad act as a national nodal institute for all SIRDs. Many NGOs such as PRIA, Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra, Unnati, Samarthan, Mahila Chetna Manch and CYSD also perform institution based and extensive trainings for Panchayati Raj. Though institution-based training is critical, it also has limitations in reaching and catering to a very large number of stakeholders.

The institution-based training may also be a bit disenabling to many villagers, especially women whose mobility is socially restricted. There cascading trainings are very popular mode of providing trainings. A cascade mode of training enables decentralization of training to many locations, such as district, block and even village or cluster of villages levels. It helps in conducting many programmes simultaneously across thousands of places. Trainees also feel more comfortable with this approach, being close to their homes and environment for face-face interactions with the trainers who often speak in local languages. For cascade modes of training, Master Trainers are prepared amongst knowledgeable and interested persons from different locations in intensive MTOT (Master Training of Trainers) programmes conducted by the SIRDs and Extension Training Centres (ETCs) or NGOs such as PRIA. The Master Trainers in turn train large numbers of Trainers in institution-based intensive Training of Trainers (TOTs), which are conducted in various regions or districts. These trainers finally deliver more training at locations closer to the people.

Though cost and time intensive, exposure visits have been found to be one of the most effective way of capacity building. These visits provide great opportunities for peer learning. The ERs and officials of panchayats visit the locations to see the real practices and learn from seeing and discussing. PRIA's own experiences of facilitating exposure visits of mixed group of ERs and officials found that these exposure visits also promoted friendship between the officials and the ERs. The ERs and officials appreciate each other's roles, which facilitates good working environment in Panchayat.

To reach out to a large number of stakeholders spread across different locations, many SIRDs use distance learning methods, such as SATCOM training, which is based on satellite communications through central studio relay centres and

decentralized Satellite Interactive Terminals. Many Academic Institutions, SIRDs and NGOs also run courses on Panchayati Raj programmes for benefits of students, officials of Panchayats and the elected representatives. Radio, Television, Vernacular Newspapers, Folk Groups and other popular media are used for spreading popular knowledge about the Panchayati Raj. Easily understandable IEC materials in local languages are prepared, produced and distributed in bulk to spread knowledge about different components of functioning of the PRIs.

Challenges:

Despite allocations of good training grants from the Ministry of Panchayati Raj and other agencies, the SIRDs and other training institutions are not able to qualitatively train even half of the elected representatives and functionaries within 6 months of getting elected/posted. PRIA itself has raised this issue many times in past. There are number of studies and reports, which also raise this issue. More than 50% of the elected representatives, for example in state of Uttar Pradesh did not receive any training after even one year of being in their positions. Most of the training in majority of states remain (Panchayat) Sarpanch and (Panchayat) Sachiv centric. Elected representatives differ in age, experience, educational status, caste, ethnicity, gender and income groups. Their needs and languages are different. In order to 'achieve the targets' on paper, training institutions often overlook these diversities and so, learning suffers. Distance training has advantages in outreach but it is less exciting to the ERs and staff, who are more attuned to face-to-face interactions.

Throughout its 25 years of existence, the new Panchayati Raj system has seen many ups and downs. But people have recognized and accepted its importance for local development. It has therefore become a trend to include the roles of Panchayats in the guidelines of almost all development schemes, which are being implemented in the rural areas. While this seems exciting in writing, actual practice reveals that Panchayats are burdened with many additional functions without any additional support. For example, with the exception of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), for all other central and state programmes, field functionaries do not exist at the Gram Panchayat level. Panchayats are supposed to support implementation of these programmes without any additional allocation of functionaries at Panchayat levels even though most of these programmes have earmarked 3 to 6% of funds for administrative expenditures. That means existing members of Panchayats and the staff have to oversee and support the implementations of these programmes with neither any training, nor additional human resource supports.

Panchayats are receiving promising grants from different sources of central and provincial governments. This, however, increases their dependency and so, raises questions of the financial freedom of a statutory institution, which a Panchayat is. The most recent Economic Survey Report⁴ also highlighted this concern when it stated that Panchayats were not generating their own resources to the tune of even 5% of their total revenue income. This is perhaps one of the most important areas for capacity building of Elected representatives and panchayat functionaries. Unfortunately, this area has not been adequately addressed in most of the capability building initiatives of the governments or NGOs. Communal harmony, climate mitigation, violence against women etc. are other areas, which require due and intensive attention in capability building initiatives.

⁴ Economic Survey 2017-18, prepared by the Government of India and tabled in Indian Parliament on 29th January 2018.

Ways Forward:

Before suggesting some steps forward, there are two important questions. Does Panchayat mean Sarpanch? Are elected Panchayat members mere doers or are they also leaders? These questions are due to prevailing local contexts, as well as differing focuses of capability initiatives from different agencies. Capability building is not a standalone solution. Parallel initiatives are necessary in strengthening the PRIs. Panchayats should be first appropriately empowered to play their constitutional roles. For that, appropriate powers and authorities must be devolved to them devolving due Functions, Funds and Functionaries. Unless that happens, capacity building will remain one side affair. Also, in capability building, more emphasis should be placed on evolving the leadership roles of these elected representatives. India has time tested examples of cabinet and bureaucracy system at Union and State levels. Elected members of Parliament and State legislatures do more of leadership roles. Similarly, Panchayat members should be encouraged to play leadership roles for local development. Accordingly, training focus for Panchayats should also differ for leaders and doers.

With reference to ongoing training and capability approaches, urgent steps must be taken to ensure the accountability of training institutions, in order to ensure timely and quality training of all. Delayed training make training useless. All elected representatives (Chairpersons, as well as ordinary members and members of different committees) must be provided quick orientations within 6 months of being elected. Furthermore, most of the training components must be covered within one year of the constitution of newly elected Panchayats. The training on core functions should be jointly provided to elected representatives and their staff, so that both of them receive common inputs on roles and responsibilities, as well as methods to complete them. Governments are promoting e-governance in Panchayats.

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