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Democratic Decentralisation and Rural Development

Need of Bottom-up Participatory Approaches

By

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Rural Development should aim at economic growth and social justice, improvement in living standard of the people by providing adequate and quality social services and other minimum basic needs and ultimately improving the overall quality of rural life. It is a holistic concept encompassing both natural and human resource development in an integrated manner. It should attempt to bring a balance between economic and social development. It requires a thoughtful balance between local priorities and global demands. They must aim at increasing the opportunities of all rural people in respect of health, knowledge and skill development, income and participation of people in decision making.

Since Independence rural development has been considered synonymous with poverty alleviation. The National Planning Committee (1948) of Indian National Congress recommended, "The achievement of a national minimum standard in respect of the essentials of physical and social well-being within a reasonable period must be pursued as the practical goals of all schemes for economic development". The Planning Commission of India almost restated the 1948 statement in 1962, in its official document. It highlighted that 'the central concern of our planning has to be the removal of poverty within a reasonable period of time.' This paved way for a programme-approach since the Sixth Plan. Planning Commission of India propagated an ideology of centralised planning with top-down approaches for implementation of the rural development plans. With this ideology, a number of rural development agencies were created at Central and State government levels. These agencies became patrons of top-down rural development programmes. A plethora of programmes and schemes were launched to eradicate or alleviate poverty from rural areas.

But Independent India, even after half a century of planned development, is still a developing country. According to recent estimates, one out of every three persons in India is below the official poverty line, and two of the three are undernourished or malnourished. About 80 percent of these poor people live in villages. The Government of India as well as most state governments have formulated and implemented various schemes to alleviate poverty or improve social security of those below poverty line. But a large majority of Indians are still vulnerable to rising prices, unemployment, illiteracy, declining incomes, and disease. There is evidence of substantial income disparities among states, between rural and urban areas, and among various population groups within a state. Inter-state inequities, in terms of human development, are often glaring. India's success in removing poverty, ignorance, disease, and inequality of opportunity has been markedly less substantial than that of many other countries. Why has India's success in removing poverty, ignorance, disease and inequality of opportunity been markedly less substantial than what was intended to be? What is the development dilemma?

Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 has created a third tier of governance beyond the existing two tiers of national and state levels. The Act, therefore, has enormous implications with respect to local self-governance, devolution of decision-making powers and enhanced direct participation of people in managing their own affairs and development. The opportunities inherent in the Act are particularly relevant to issues of women's empowerment, community participation and local planning at village level and implementation of the plan by Gram Panchayat and the Gram Sabha.

The present paper aims at exploring the possibilities of people's participation through the process of participatory planning at village level. The paper is divided into three sections. Section one deals with

brief analysis of existing approaches and models of rural development. In the light of insights gained during PRIA's work with Panchayati Raj Institutions, an alternative perspective for rural development has been discussed in section 2. The third section concludes the paper.

1. History of Planned Rural Development in Independent India:

No doubt, the policy makers were well aware of the importance of rural development. It was logical at that time to proceed with a holistic objective of rural development as being eradication of poverty. Naturally the mission was to improve the quality of life of masses and the focus was on growth with equity. However, it seems that experiences of (World War II) war time control ruled the mind set of politico-bureaucratic executive when they were devising strategic for rural development at the beginning of planned development in Independent India. Perhaps that is why their strategic hope lied with the trickle-down effect of growth in Indian economy. And the approaches, they pursued to achieve the goal, relied heavily on ever controlling top-down bureaucratic delivery system.

(a) Trickle Down Model:

The live years plans, formulated by Planning Commission, in India envisaged that overall growth in economy would benefit all the sections of society through the 'trickle down process'. It was believed that ultimately poor would benefit from large-scale public-sector initiatives. The profits or economic growth, it was hoped, will percolate down to the door steps of socially and economically insecure poor people. However, despite a modest growth in economy, rural areas have lagged behind in the process of development. Based on Five-Year Plans the government framed and implemented various rural development programmes in other country from time to time. But the economic growth of country has remained concentrated in few sectors and in certain regions of the country.

The edifice of rural reconstruction was laid through the launching of Community Development Programme in the year 1952 based on the philosophy of people's participation. This programme failed to achieve its desired result. One of the most important reasons behind the failure of Community Development Programmes was lack of people's participation in these programmes. Government of India constituted a number of committees to review its development programmes. The need to ensure people's participation in these programmes were echoed by almost all committees. Till date, the Government of India has initiated more than 40 major programmes for rural development. Most of these target-based development programmes performed poorly, and increased burden on nation's exchequer. In terms of cost- benefit, we have achieved nothing. We had started with the concept of poverty eradication and now we are talking of poverty alleviation. Why? The trickle-down model of planned development has brought distortions in all ocations and skewed sectoral and regional growth. It has failed to tackle structural constraints like land reforms and terms of trade for agriculture. Even today, when we know the importance of participation and have learnt many lessons for community participation, the government programmes for rural development are being 'managed' by city-based bureaucracy.

(b) Top- down Approaches

The bureaucracy led development cannot be sustained for long as it creates dependency syndrome. Moreover, masters of top-down approaches are not directly accountability to the people. Even if there has been theoretical emphasis on people's participation in development programmes,

one or the dominant underlying principles behind participatory philosophy of development projects have been 'I manage, you participate'. It is an irony that bottom-up participation for top-down plan is directed by men sitting at the top. It is likely that the poor at whom the programmes are aimed may have other more appropriate needs suited to their situations and want to tackle them according to their priority. But who cares for people's priorities? The people are just asked to participate as per whims and fancy of the participation managers (bureaucracy).

As per a senior civil servant, bureaucracy in India is considered to have following characteristics: too large and slow, extremely rigid and mechanical, no innovation and enterprise, low motivation and morale, low accountability, *not democratic and lack of expertise*. The attitude and insensitivity of officials at lower level (the *BDO, ADO, tehsildar, kanoongo, patwari*, police inspector and constable) is even worse. It is the root cause of alienation of the rural folk. There is a sense of helplessness coupled with loss of faith in the government machinery. The poor people do not feel that they are part of the decision-making processes even on issues which affect their daily lives. The seriousness which is shown in talks regarding trickle-down models is rarely seen in practical top-down approaches.

The problems with top-down approaches are that they do not encourage mobilisation of people for taking their destiny into their own hand. India is one of the richest countries in natural and human resources. At the same time, it is one of the poorest countries in the world. Who is to be blamed for this tragic image of the country? Obviously, the fault lies with our development perspectives. We have to think about an efficient, responsive, accountable, and demand driven delivery system. Time has come when we have to think about those alternative approaches to development, which keep people in the centre of the processes. That is, we have to think of a development process which is people centred and people controlled.

2. Participatory Bottom-up Approaches to Rural Development

Economic growth alone does not provide sufficient condition for reducing disparities. The objective should be to counter the marginalisation process by ensuring people's participation in improving rural resources and infrastructure. Development must take from within and not brought in by outsiders. That is, people should participate in their development and their participation should be sustained. To sustain people's participation, what is needed is an institutional framework. Panchayats provide hopeful possibilities in this regard.

(a) Need of an Institutional Framework- Panchayati Raj Institutions

Since 1995, PRIA and Partners are working with Panchayats to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions in India. Our experiences suggest that Panchayati Raj Institutions offer possibilities to catalyze, mobilise and sustain people's participation in development programmes, these institutions (with mandatory reservation of seats to women and dalits) also provide political space to more vulnerable sections of the society. There are provisions to ensure that these institutions function as vibrant and accountable institutions of local self-governance. Panchayats can exchange information and interface with other social and political institutions including markets, trade and commerce. Being constitutionally elected bodies, Panchayats are capable of negotiating with

the people and governments for efficient delivery of services and accountability. And with the provision for elections every 5 years, there are conditions for choice and change".

PRIA's Perspective:

1. Panchayati Raj Institutions are to be viewed as institutions of local self-governance, and not as mere implementers of centrally determined development programmes. Bottom-up, comprehensive planning, based on micro-planning exercise, is to be the basis of self-governance. Panchayati Raj Institutions should not be allowed to become third tier of development administration.
2. Emphasis must be placed on active participation in decision-making by women (and other weaker sections) with a view to enhance their role, status and leadership in local self-governance.
3. Interventions in strengthening Panchayati Raj Institution should focus on building, promoting and empowering new leadership of women, SC/ST and Dalits.
4. Panchayati Raj Institutions should assert their access to and control over local natural and human resources, as well as other development resources being available with State and national governments,
5. Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions will entail clarity of their roles, systems of governance, accountability and transparency and inter-linkages.

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 has provided constitutional sanctions to Panchayats in India. At present, there are about 3 million representatives or Panchayats at all levels. These members represent more than 0.22 million Gram Panchayats, about 6,000 Panchayat Samitis and about 500 Zilla Parishads. All the seats in a Panchayat at every level are filled by elections from respective territorial constituencies. Not less than one-third of the total seats for membership as well as office of chairpersons of each tier have been reserved for women. Reservation for weaker castes and tribes has been provided at all levels in proportion to their population in the Panchayats. To supervise, direct and control the regular and smooth elections to Panchayats, a State Election Commission has been constituted in every State and Union Territory. The Act has ensured constitution of a State Finance Commission in every State/Union Territory, for every five years, to suggest measures to strengthen finances of Panchayati Raj Institutions. To promote bottom-up-planning, the District Planning Committee (DPC) in every district has been accorded constitutional status. An indicative list of 29 items has been given in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution. Panchayats are expected to play an effective role in planning and implementation of works related to these 29 items. The spirit of the Constitution visualises Panchayats as institutions of self-governance. However, the powers and functions endowed to the Panchayati Raj Institutions vary from State to State.

(b) Panchayats and Participatory Micro-Planning

Participatory Micro-planning is a way of prioritising problems and getting them solved and, in the process of planning, to enhance social justice by encouraging the increased participation and hence increased exercise of power by women and weaker sections. The greater the distance from where a plan is formulated to where it is implemented, the greater the gap between objectives and actual achievement. As per Article 243-G, Panchayats are constitutionally mandated to prepare plans for economic development and social justice. Thus, every Panchayat has to prepare a plan taking into account local needs and local conditions. The process of Bottom-up-Planning or Micro-Planning is one of the most effective ways of achieving people's prioritised objectives, it strengthens people's participation in their own development.

Participatory micro-planning is (a) a way to turn (centralised top-down) planning on its head, (b) a way to mobilise resources, (c) a basis for negotiating with block/district government, and (d) a framework for accountability (of Gram Panchayat to Gram Sabha). The whole process develops a framework of agreement within the Gram Sabha about development priorities. Villagers sit together to prioritise the community problems, prepare a list of resources available and ask the Gram Panchayat to implement the plan. Since the Plan is implemented year around, it provides a more rigorous framework for the Panchayat to be accountable to Gram Sabha. A plan allows villagers to scrutinise and judge the performance of their Gram Panchayat.

A typical micro-planning process involves many stages. Informal meetings are organised at ward levels to orient people. In these meetings community analyses village situation. Often individuals and groups come up with their specific individual needs and problems. Ensuring full participation of all the (caste, class and gender) groups, and synthesising specific needs, an exhaustive list of community problems/needs is prepared. The ward/village level needs are prioritised and synthesised to prepare Gram Panchayat level plan. Then these needs are prioritised and a detailed village plan is prepared. On the fixed date (usually fixed in advance by government), the Gram Sabha meets under the chair of Gram Panchayat chairperson.

The plan is made known to everyone in the Gram Sabha meeting. The Gram Sabha approves the village plan. It is now the responsibility of the Gram Panchayat to mobilise resources from village (with the help of Gram Sabha) and other sources, including funds from Union and State governments, to implement this plan. It has been found that from preparation to implementation of the plan, the Gram Sabha keeps an eye over the Gram Panchayat. Even an ordinary villager feels a part of the village development plan, resulting in the direct participation of the community in village government. The whole process of micro-planning, it has been seen, helps strengthening of Gram Sabha by enhancing people's participation in Gram Sabha meetings.

The micro-planning process at village level does not only involve people at grassroots. It also helps in strengthening linkages among the three tiers of the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The district planning committee at district level, though non-functional in majority of the states, provide a linkage between rural and urban local bodies. So, the whole development process become an integrated process of human development. Being backed by the mandate from Indian constitution, Panchayati Raj Institutions can sustain a process of accountability and responsiveness of the government structure and the underlying community-based demand system. The Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution provides for a structural framework for Panchayat's role and responsibility in rural development.

Participatory Micro-Planning Process Facilitated by NGO	
PHASE: I Preparation by NGO	PHASE: II Action at Village Level and Facilitation by NGO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of unit/area of planning • Formation of core team of NGO members and a team of volunteers: Orientation and training capacity building • Building alliances with local CSOs • Educating and persuading • Identification of stakeholders and involving them in planning process • Getting government support • Building trust: information dissemination, repeated interaction • Involving the common people • Thorough understanding of community problems and dynamics: Collection and interpretation of data, Community problem analysis and prioritization- identification of activities ➤ Ready Core Team ➤ Interaction with Gram Panchayat/ Gram Sabha for initiation of village development micro-plan 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ward level meetings ↓ 2. Identification of ward problems ↓ 3. Prioritisation of Needs at ward level ↓ 4. Aggregation and Synthesis of ward level needs ↓ 5. Identification of Resources ↓ 6. Preparation of Plan by Gram Panchayat ↓ 7. Approval of Plan in Gram Sabha Meeting ↓ 8. Technical consultation by Gram Panchayat ↓ 9. Operational Plan Preparation by Gram Panchayat ↓ 10. Resource mobilisation by Gram Panchayat/ Gram Sabha ↓ Implementation of Plan

3. Conclusions

The above discussion illustrates importance of community participation in the process of need identification and prioritise on planning and implementation. It may be inferred that some form of organisation/institution is fundamental to the process of a meaningful sustainable participatory development and Panchayats provide an institutional framework for participatory rural development.

There is no alternative to bottom-up participatory approaches to rural development. Panchayati Raj Institutions are legitimate and permanent locale of participatory democracy in India. These institutions are able to ensure: effective and accountable participatory planning at local level. Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions will certainly enhance people's participation in the rural development initiatives. These institutions will provide an alternative and effectively holistic perspective to approaches for rural development in India. in this regard, it would be very helpful to all the stakeholders if these institutions are strengthened as vibrant institutions of local self-governance in rural India. And all the programmes related to rural development are planned and implemented by these local bodies.

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