

Across the Wagah Border

Local governance in India & Pakistan

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India took a delegation of 60 participants to Lahore, Pakistan during July 1-4, 2007. The delegation was led by Hon'ble minister for Panchayati Raj Shri Mani Shankar Aiyar. It comprised of state ministers of panchayati raj, officials from the central & state governments, elected panchayat representatives, members of civil society and academia working towards strengthening panchayati raj in India. The visit was hosted by Hon'ble Minister Shri Daniyal Aziz of National Reconstruction Bureau of Pakistan. The two delegations shared detailed experiences of strengthening local government systems in the two countries. The Lahore declaration also commits the governments of the two countries to ongoing dialogue and exchange of good practices between them.

The 'Nazim' (Sarpanch) of the Union Council (Gram Panchayat) near the Wagah border in Lahore district boasted about the improvements to his village brought about since his team was providing leadership. He was welcoming a sixty person Indian delegation under the leadership of Hon'ble Mani Shankar Aiyar, Minister for Panchayati Raj, Government of India to his village last week.

The new local government system in Pakistan is barely seven years old, in comparison to the 14 years since the historic constitutional mandate for panchayats and municipalities in India. Yet, as the Indian delegation was informed, there are some interesting features of the system in Pakistan from which we can take a lesson or two. In its structure, the system in Pakistan is like our three tier one—Union Council (at village level), Tehsil/Town Council at the intermediate level & District Council; Pakistan thus has 111 District Councils, 400 Tehsil/Town Councils & 6125 Union Councils. Direct elections are held for the posts of 13 councillors in the Union level, and one Nazim & Naib Nazim (Sarpanch & Upsarpanch). All Nazims of Union level in a district become ex-officio members of the District Council, and elect a Nazim & Naib Nazim for the district. Likewise, all Naib Nazims from the Union level become ex-officio members of Tehsil/Town Councils, and elect Nazim & Naib Nazim for that Council. Nazims at Tehsil/Town and district level are operating CEOs of their jurisdictions; Naib Nazims are 'speakers' of the respective Councils.

Thus, the structure of decentralized governance in Pakistan appears to have achieved several important goals. First, it has provided for proper and explicit linkages between the three tiers of local governance. Second, it has extended the oversight function of the elected representatives on all functionaries at that level. Third, it has defined distinctive and non-overlapping functions at each level of the system. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, it has integrated the rural and urban local governance bodies in a synergistic manner.

The fiscal devolution to and financial management of local governance institutions in Pakistan has also made some remarkable progress. In each of the four provinces of Pakistan, a Provincial Finance Commission has been set up with clearly laid out powers to allocate resources. The ten member PFC has representation from the elected representatives too. The recommendations of PFC are implemented in toto. In addition, the system of fund flow has been properly streamlined in a way that now each Union Council, Tehsil Council & District Council is able to know in advance how much funds they will receive in which month over the next three years. This has improved the planning and implementation of projects and schemes, as well as enhanced the resources of these Councils.

Another innovative feature of the Pakistan model is Citizen Community Board, which are civic initiatives in partnership with local councils. 25% of all development funds are earmarked to be utilized by such Boards on projects prepared by them.

Finally, the local governance system of Pakistan brings in the District Police Officer under the jurisdiction of District Nazim (imagine Superintendent of Police being accountable to the Zilla Parishad Adhyaksha in India?).

Therefore, in terms of design of structures, systems and procedures, the local governance system in Pakistan appears to be progressive and modern. There are, in reality, likely to be many gaps in implementation. Political empowerment of elected councilors, specially women and minorities (which their system also provides for) may be much slower at this stage (this is the second four year term for local bodies). Relations of power between old structures, attitudes and personnel of bureaucracy and the new Nazims may still be strained and conflictful. The police-military nexus may undermine the civilian authority of superintendence in reality. The new system in Pakistan has been introduced during a period of restricted democracy at the national and provincial levels. Political parties may perceive it as imposed from the top, with a view to undermine their authority. Finally, the absence of durable democratic institutions and practices at the national and provincial level may curtail the full potential of democratic decentralization in Pakistan in the long run.

Yet, there are some useful lessons for India's federal system to consider from this major experiment across the Wagah border. After 14 years of the constitutional mandate, our steel-frame of colonial administration is still intact; there are no benchmarks for pushing effective fiscal decentralization; and, the provincial continues to obstruct the growth of the local in India. How much longer should this be allowed to continue?

The strength of democratic durability is based on its rootedness; both institutions and culture of democracy are important. If concrete and urgent steps towards

making local governance in India are not taken by the political and official class now, it may be difficult to contain the spread of popular disaffection and violence any further.

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(President, PRIA, New Delhi was a member of this delegation)

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