Strengthening Panchayati Raj System in Odisha: Initiatives and Concern

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Village or a group of village constituted as Village Panchayat or Village Council is the lowest unit of administration at different stages i.e. Ancient, Medieval and pre-independent India but nothing much is known about their status, structure and functions. However, those institutions were dominated by the economically affluent and upper caste people and were mostly dealing with village level dispute resolution, organizing social, cultural and religious activities. The concept of community development, decentralized village level planning and participatory governance was not inherent in the system of village administration. The post independent India witnessed revolutionary changes in visioning the village Panchayat as core of decentralized democratic set up. Different State Governments introduced the Panchayati Raj System without giving much autonomy and provisioning for self regulatory mechanism to function as self government.

The concept of ‘Gram Swaraj’ (Self Government) as envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi found its expression in the drafting of the Constitution of India. Yet, the Panchayats were not given much Constitutional power and financial support to act as a catalyst to strengthen grass root democracy. The provisions made by different State Governments were marked by long delays in holding of Panchayat elections, dissolution of the Panchayat bodies, lack of functional and financial autonomy, inadequate representation of marginalized and weaker sections and tied meager Government grants. This affected the functioning of Panchayats to function as institutions of local Self-Government as had been envisaged in the Constitution.

During mid 80s and early 90s several administrative reforms were made by the Government of India to accelerate the rural development process. However, due to irregular Panchayat election and dissolution of Panchayats, these reform measures were not successfully implemented. This underlined need to streamline the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions by making necessary Constitutional Amendment. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 ushered a new era in the federal democratic set up of the Country. It provided the much needed Constitutional sanction to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) for functioning as an organic and integral part of the participatory democratic process through giving power to the people.

Our democracy has reached the stage where the full participation of the people brooks no further delay. Those who decry Panchayati Raj as an election stunt are only those whose feudal interest will be overthrown by the power reaching the people. The late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said, “We trust the people. We have faith in the people. It is the people who must determine their
own destinies and the destiny of the nation. To the people of India let us ensure maximum democracy and maximum devolution of power. Let there be an end to the power-brokers. Let us give power to the people.

The Act made provision for the states to endow the Panchayats with such powers as to enable them to prepare and implement plans for economic development and social justice. The Act has five main features: (a) a 3-tier system of Panchayati Raj for all States having population of over 20 lakh; (b) Panchayat elections regularly every 5 years; (c) reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women (not less than one-third of seats); (d) appointment of State Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats, and (e) constitution of District Planning Committees to prepare development plans for the district as a whole. The 11th schedule in the constitution listed 29 functional areas to be brought within the purview of the decentralized planning level, including agriculture and allied activities, irrigation, social forestry, village and small-scale industries, water supply, housing, roads, education and poverty alleviation programmes etc.

Panchayati Raj System in Odisha

The Orissa Gram Panchayat Act, 1948 is the first legislation prescribing constitution, power and functioning of Gram Panchayats in the State of Odisha which was revised in 1964. Yet, the Panchayats were not much vibrant and empowered to function as local self government. Regular conduct of election, financial autonomy and administrative power remained as the key factor affecting the effective functioning of the Panchayats. After the introduction of 3 tier Panchayati Raj system, regular elections are held in 1997, 2002, 2007 and 2012. The State Election Commission, State Finance Commission has been set up and District Planning Committees have been constituted. Out of 29 subjects listed in the 11th Schedule of the Constitution of India, 21 subjects of 11 Departments have been transferred to the Panchayats. The State Government during the Panchayat election of 2012 has increased the reservation for women from 33 per cent to 50 per cent.

### Panchayati Raj Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PR institutions &amp; P.R. Members</th>
<th>In the State as a whole</th>
<th>In scheduled area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of Dist./ZPs</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>07 (Fully)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>06 (Partly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of blocks/PSs</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>118 (Fully)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>03 (Partly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of GPs</td>
<td>6236</td>
<td>1966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Elected Representatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZP Members</td>
<td>854</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS Members</td>
<td>6236</td>
<td>1965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarapanches</td>
<td>6236</td>
<td>1966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ward Members</td>
<td>87542</td>
<td>24734</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total No. of Villages 51349**

The Government is committed for progressive devolution of funds, functions and functionaries to the Panchayat for effective planning and implementation of different rural development programmes sponsored by the Central and State Government. It has devised the mechanism to position the Gram Sabha at the core Panchayati Raj system for true self-governance & ensuring transparency & accountability of Gram Panchayat. Efforts have been made to build organizational capacity of the PRIs & Professional capacity of elected representatives & official functionaries to perform the mandated roles effectively. The centrally sponsored major flagship programmes of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS),
Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF), 13th Finance Commission Grants, Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) and National Rural Livelihood Mission is implemented by the Gram Panchayats. This apart, State government sponsored schemes like Gopabandhu Grameen Yojana (GGY) implemented in 11 coastal districts and Mo-Kudia is also implemented by the Gram Panchayats. The Panchayats also have the responsibility of distribution of PDS, Pensions, National Family Benefit Schemes etc. The programmes of other line Departments i.e Health & Family Welfare, Women & Child Development are also implemented by the Gram Panchayats.

New Initiatives

Several administrative and policy decision measures have been taken by the Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Odisha in the recent past to create an enabling environment, to make the Panchayats more vibrant for effective implementation of rural development programmes, to promote grass root leadership and participatory planning. These includes training and capacity building of the newly elected PRI members on a mission mode, conduct of Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha in a campaign mode, training of officials of Panchayat, Block and district level, devising Job Chart and orientation for the officials engaged in MGNREGS, Odisha Modernizing Economy, Governance & Administration (OMEGA), setting up of Panchayat Helpline, Grievance Redressal Cell, Odisha Livelihood Mission and Odisha State Social Audit, Accountability & Transparency (OSSAAT).

PRI CB & T-Resource Pool, e-monitoring, materials

Capacity building and Training of newly elected PRI members is one of the major initiatives to promote grass root leadership. The government took the policy decision to impart 3 days induction training to over 1 lakh PRI members within 100 days of assuming the office. The State Institute for Rural Development is the Nodal agency for the conduct of the training programmes. Partnership was developed with 202 civil society organizations to conduct the field level training in different locations at the Block level. The organizations were selected on the basis of a set of capability parameter. They were physically verified by the concerned Block level officials and in some cases officials from the State level to ascertain the presence of the organization, training venue, infrastructure and suitability to conduct such training programme.

Over 700 Resource persons have been trained at the State level to impart the training programme to the PRI members. As of now over 60,000 PRI members including the Block Chairman, Sarapanch, Panchayat Samiti Member and Ward Member have been trained for 3 days on Induction Module. The training was very much needed and very useful owing to 50 per cent reservation for women most of whom were elected first time. For the first time web based monitoring system has been introduced to monitor the conduct of training programme across the State at different locations. This will help in generating a range of auto generated report which include the personal profile of the participants and training detail.

Gram Sabha Sashaktikaran Karyakram

Gram Sabha is an institutionalized people’s platform to promote participatory democracy representing each and every section of the community and their needs. It is mandated to create an enabling environment for participatory decision making process and function as a mechanism to plan, monitor and evaluate the development activities carried on by the Panchayat. Gram Sabha endowed with the power to participate in preparing village level plan, implementation and monitor the process, asking
for accountability, transparency and information regarding planning and budgeting. However, over the last few decades, these institutions of public interest have lost some of their momentum, getting disconnected with the people they were meant for. Communities were oblivious of their significance and often, these meetings were held with limited attendance. Overall, a feeling of mistrust and doubt was created regarding their outcomes. While both were meant to serve basic interests of the community, namely to finalise and announce beneficiary list of schemes and list of projects in Annual Action Plans, these details remained obscure.

In view of the above, conceptualization and implementation of 45 days historical Gram Sabha Sashaktikaran Karjyakrama (GSSK) 2012 was launched through conduct of Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha from 2nd October-18th October 2012 across the State. With the twin approach of social mobilization in a campaign mode and build the institutional capacity of the PRIs through administrative and technical support has laid several milestones to strengthen local self governance.

An effort was made to bridge the gap between government provisions and their perception among the rural people. GSSK 2012 attempted to resurrect all the essentials of organizing a successful Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha through social mobilization, individual and collective awareness building, and information dissemination to involve the people in the process. The effort also consisted of facilitation for creation of leadership from among the marginalized section of the community. To provide real substance to grass root governance, special effort was put in ensuring participation of women and socially excluded communities in the Gram Sabha meeting.

The conduct of Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha in a phased manner across the State within a stipulated time frame has recorded over 99.44 per cent success in terms of the number of Palli Sabha conducted and 97.37 per cent with regard to the conduct of Gram Sabha. A total of 84 lakhs of projects have been planned under MGNREGS, IAY, BRGF, CC Road and GGY out of which 64 lakh projects are under MGNREGS. Each projects selected have been assigned an unique ID Code and the project documents have been uploaded for online monitoring, transparency and accountability.

Panchayat Helpline

Panchayat Help Line, a Toll Free number (18003456768) under the aegis of Grievance Redressal Cell was launched by the Hon'ble Minister of Panchayati Raj, Govt. of Odisha in the campus of State Institute for Rural Development (SIRD), PR Department on 1st November 2012. The objective of setting up of Panchayat Help Line is to reach out to 55,000 villages and 3.12 crore people across the State. This is a platform to listen to the people, solicit suggestions, receive grievances and address their grievances. This is based on 3 important principles of Transparency, Accountability and Accessibility. The people should know their rights and entitlement and access information as well as services. This will ensure transparency and accountability. Located in the campus of SIRD, the Help Line will function from 8 a.m to 8 p.m with a team of 9 professionals well trained to how to talk to people and how to register their suggestion and complain through the Help Line.

Grievance Redressal Cell

Grievance Redressal Cell (GRC) is headed by an Officer In-Charge in the rank of Joint Secretary to strengthen the existing grievance redressal system. Each complaint received will be recorded properly and a timeline will be given through SMS. In every 15 days, a review will be made on the number of complaint received and the status of complaint for speedy disposal. The
official procedure of inquiry and investigation will be made for appropriate action as per the statutory norms or the prima facie of complaint. For matters of important complaint or serious allegation, high level investigation may be made from the state level. The grievances received from office of Hon’ble Chief Minister and Hon’ble Minister of Panchayati Raj will be given priority for speedy disposal of complaint.

The GRC will remain open on all Monday from 10 a.m onwards and on the same day and time all BDOs will be present in their respective Offices and will attend to the grievances of the people. Grievance received from people will be sent to the BDOs, DRDA or the District Collector depending on the nature of complaint. It will take 3 months time to streamline the system and after 3 months a review will be made by SIRD to analyse the nature of complaint and its disposal.

**Odisha State Social Audit, Accountability & Transparency (OSSAAT)**

Social Audit at the grassroot level has become a cutting edge of introducing transparency into governing programmes by handing over the right to review the government programmes to the Gram Sabha. Initially Social Audit was a mandatory component in MGNREGA but now it will be extended to all the programmes implemented by the Gram Panchayat. Odisha is among the few States in the Country to establish an autonomous Social Audit Agency named ‘Odisha State Social Audit, Accountability & Transparency (OSSAAT)’ under the aegis of Panchayati Raj Department. The objective of OSSAAT is to facilitate the Social Audit process by the Gram Sabha towards strengthening and deepening social Audit process as integral part of the governance system in the State. It will ensure impartial and effective Social Audit of the social sector development programmes for greater transparency and accountability.

**Odisha Livelihood Mission (OLM)**

The existing scheme of Swarna Jayanti Grama Sworozgar Yojana is renewed and renamed as ‘National Rural Livelihood Mission. Odisha is the first State in the Country to launch Odisha Livelihood Mission. The objective of the mission is to address rural poverty through social, financial and economic inclusion. This will ensure enhancement of the livelihood of the poor people living in the rural village. The rural families and vulnerable families will be identified and included in the Self Help Groups on a priority basis. The rural poor women will be organized into groups and capacitated by way of extending financial and technical support for sustainable livelihood generation and women empowerment.

**Odisha Modernizing Economy, Governance and Administration (OMEGA)**

Odisha Modernizing Economy, Governance and Administration (OMEGA) Programme is a Government of Odisha initiative commissioned by DFID, UK. OMEGA assists the government to enhance a) private sector investments in industries and infrastructure with environmental and social safeguards b) enhance capacity to mobilise revenue and manage expenditure and c) improve implementation and delivery of selected poverty alleviation programmes that enhance access to employment and food, and build climate resilience. The objective is to provide management and high quality technical support to the Department of Finance (DoF), Planning and Coordination (DoPC), Industries (DoI), Panchayati Raj (DoPR) and Food Supplies and Consumer Welfare (DoFS&CW), Government of Orissa (GoO) for planning, implementing and monitoring of the programme. With Panchayati Raj Department the programme supports in strengthening the implementation of MGNREGS by exploring best possible options for streamlining processes, improving transparency and
accountability, building adequate institutional staff and systems capacity, encouraging IT reforms, integrated planning etc.

**Special Drive for Employment Generation**

Odisha is the first State in the Country to introduce e-FMS (electronic Fund Management System) for the payment of wages under MGNREGS. Payment is now being credited directly to the account of the beneficiaries through Bank Account and Post Office Account. This will help in addressing the delay of payment of wages and mis-appropriation in making payment to the beneficiaries. During the conduct of GSSK 2012, huge number of community development and individual projects (as many as 64 lakhs) has been finalized at the Gram Panchayat level for the year 2012-13. Implementation of such huge number of projects is a big challenge for the PR Department. However, in order to streamline the implementation process Job Charts have been developed for the PD-DRDA, BDO/PO, APO, GPTA/JE and GRS. One day each orientation programme have been organized to orient them about their roles and responsibility. A State Control Room has been set up to monitor the progress of the implementation process of the projects identified on weekly basis. Instead of the district, the Block has been considered as the unit of monitoring.

**Cement Concrete Road**

Quality construction of Cement Concrete Road is another special drive which will make communication easy and help the rural poor people living in remote area to reach out to mainstream development process. Specific guidelines have been developed to ensure the quality of CC Road. People will be educated about the quality parameter and will be encouraged to monitor the quality construction.

**Conclusion**

The initiatives undertaken by the PR Department, Government of Odisha shows tremendous commitment and political will to empower the Panchayat to function as self government. However, the challenge is how to streamline the functioning of the PRIs at the grassroot level with adequate manpower and technical support. One of the critical issues is access to and control over resources and generate revenues at the Panchayat level to make them financially stable. The geographic disparities and demographic settings in the Scheduled Area is the real challenge of how to bring equity and equality in the mainstream development process.

The real issue is how to disseminate knowledge and awareness of the needs of the people, legal rights, and availability and accessibility of social and economic resources. This underlines the need of restructuring relationships and power equation looking at gender issues at both the micro and macro level. There has to be a balance not only between male and female elected representatives but also between the officials and non-officials responsible for facilitating the decentralized planning and implementation of development programmes. Though the involvement of the people in the process of planning and identification of projects has been ensured through the conduct of GSSK 2012, the real challenge is to mobilize local resources, secure people’s cooperation in acceptance and implementation of the projects. Necessary condition of restructuring the power equation of the PR institutions at the grassroot level and leadership development is required to expedite the rural development process through the PR institutions.

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