

Strengthening Local Governance through Democratizing Rural India

Kumar, Rajesh¹, Ansari Nafees Ahmad²

¹Assistant Professor, School of Governance & Development Studies,
Hawassa University
P.Box-05
Ethiopia (East Africa)
rajeshpundhir80@gmail.com

²Associate Professor, Department of Political Science
Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh
India
nafeesansariam@hotmail.com

Abstract: The process of globalization has led to discourses on development having different perspectives. One of the major upcoming development discourses puts gender and governance on the forefront of these. In this context, the government of India has amended their laws for fair representation of gender in the local government to ensure good governance. Notwithstanding the fact that constitutional support and legislative measures are necessary for bringing about social change, but this, however, cannot be achieved single-handedly. Constitutional efforts are needed to strengthen and consolidate them for meaningful empowerment. The question is whether an intervention like the constitutional amendment is able to ensure the local governance. Decentralization brings government closer to the people. The existence of local political arenas makes it easier for ordinary citizens to participate and exert influence. When power is brought closer to the citizens, the political process becomes more tangible and transparent and more people can become involved. Decentralization may also create a more open political system in that it implies a division of powers in society. The Village panchayats which formed an integral part of the national life, helped to preserve democratic traditions in social, cultural, economic and political life, survived the onslaughts of centuries of political upheavals and saved Indian society from disintegration.

Keywords: Governance, Decentralization, Panchayats, Transparency.

1. Introduction

The existence of local bodies in ancient India is a positive proof of the inherent genius of our people to manage local affairs efficiently and on a decentralised basis. The decentralisation of power in the kingdoms of the Maurya and the Gupta period was unique. Such devolution of power was unknown to the western world until modern times. The local governments at different levels, performing many functions, though not very democratic, were sufficiently autonomous. Recognizing the importance of democratic institutions at the grass-roots level, the Indian Constitution laid down in Article 40 of Part IV of the Directive Principles of State Policy that the state would take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as might be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-

government. The Village Panchayats as a part of ancient Indian tradition that deserved to be preserved, the constitution laid down as a directive principle of state policy that, the state shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and to endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government (Art-40). [1]

Thus this paper is discussing about Local self government working in rural areas, How far these institutions are efficient to provide self governance to rural people. The Panchayati Raj institutions became a state subject under the Constitution. Professor W. A. Robson opines that Local Government may be said to involve the conception of a territorial, non sovereign community possessing the legal right and the necessary organisation to regulate its own

affairs. This in turn presupposes the existence of local authority with power to act independently of external control as well as the participation of the local community in the administration of its own affairs. [2]

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was appointed in 1957 to study the Community Development and National Extension Service programmes, especially from the point of view of assessing the extent of popular participation, and to recommend the creation of institutions through which such participation could be achieved.

Decentralisation has a system effect that can increase efficiency. In India there is more space for doing so with 3.2 million people's representatives at the Village, 151412 at the intermediate and 17935 at the district level [3] A decentralised system sets the stage for policy experimentation on a large scale. With many independent decision-making bodies, there is considerable room for different initiatives. New approaches can be tried, and those that turn out well can (through diffusion) be applied in other places as well. In this respect, a decentralised political system can function as an open 'market' Decentralisation brings government closer to the people. The existence of local political arenas makes it easier for ordinary citizens to participate and exert influence. When power is brought closer to the citizens, the political process becomes more tangible and transparent and more people can become involved. Decentralisation may also create a more open political system in that it implies a division of powers in society; many channels of representation and power sharing become available. This counteracts the monopolisation of power by certain elite groups, often the consequence of centralised political and administrative structures. A decentralised system is also more accessible to new political movements and minority groups in their attempts to influence politics. This is particularly important in ethnically divided societies, where political exclusion can have seriously polarizing effects. Decentralisation promotes participation and improves the controlling function held by the lower levels of the political system. Its greater degree of political inclusiveness may also have important conflict-dampening effects. In addition to such consequences – which have obvious democratic merits decentralisation can also be an effective means of enhancing state capacity. As is well known, the actual steering capacity of the public administration is fairly weak in many developing countries. In its centralized form – often bloated with excessive staff – the state apparatus has in many instances proved to be poor at implementation.

2. Decentralization policies and legislation in India

The Constitution of India has set up a republican parliamentary democracy at the national level with the Council of Ministers chosen from and collectively responsible to the elected House of People. This structure of governance is replicated at the level of states, which form the Union of India. The Constitution provided for

decentralization in the form of a general directive to the state to establish Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) at the village level as the lowest rung of governance. According to Article 40 of the Constitution: "The State shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government."

The true potential of Article 40 lies not merely in its directive to set up village panchayats as part of a constitutionally formulated principle of state policy, but in the significant concomitant mandate that panchayats be endowed with "such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government". This means that the task would remain incomplete unless village panchayats begin to function as units of self-government as a part of a democratic polity. Wilson and associates define that "Local Government is a large geographically defined multi functional organisation, pursuing a variety of social, political and economic objectives, either through the direct provision or through the sponsorship, indirect funding, regulation or monitoring of a very extensive range of services to its local community. [4]

The vision of village-based self-government came to be appreciated a few years after the Constitution's adoption in January 1950 when it became increasingly self-evident that socio-economic transformation could not be achieved without democratic participation. The Community Development Programme, launched in 1952, had a 'top-down' approach. Although this was soon strengthened by a National Extension Service to tackle the problems of growth and development at different local and functional levels, there was, relatively speaking, only token public participation through nominated representatives of the public.

The growing awareness that lack of public involvement and participation was a major impediment to the implementation of the Community Development and National Extension Service Programmes, was reflected in the government's Second Five-Year Plan. "Unless there is a comprehensive village planning which takes into account the needs of the entire community, weaker sections like tenant-cultivators, landless workers and artisans may not benefit sufficiently from assistance provided by the Government," the Plan document noted.

"Indeed, rural progress depends entirely on the existence of an active organisation in the village which can bring all the people including the weaker sections into common programmes to be carried out with the assistance of the administration," it added. The document emphasized the need for "an agency in the village which represents the community as a whole and can assume responsibility and initiative for developing the resources of the village and providing the necessary leadership".

The thinking underlying the Second Five-Year Plan was that village panchayats, along with co-operatives, could play a major role in bringing about a more equitable and integrated social structure in rural areas. However, the Plan's thrust was to establish statutory panchayats in all villages, more as vehicles for national extension and community development projects rather than as units of self-government.

It was primarily from this angle that it set the target of more than doubling the number of panchayats by 1960-61.

The Balwantrai Mehta Study Team, appointed in January 1957 to assess the Community Development and National Extension Service programmes, observed: "Development cannot progress without responsibility and power. Community Development can be real only when the community understands its problems; realizes its responsibilities; exercises the necessary powers through its chosen representatives and maintains a constant and intelligent vigilance on local administration."

The Team's recommendation for early establishment of statutory elective local bodies with the necessary resources, powers and authority led to the enactment of a three-tier Panchayati Raj system in different states in 1959 with two basic objectives viz., democratic decentralization and local participation in planned programmes.

The three tiers of the system consisted of the Zilla Parishad (district council) at the apex district level, the Block Samiti (council) at the intermediate level and village panchayat (council) at the grassroots level. The States of Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh were the first to adopt the system. By 1959, most states had Panchayat Acts and by the year 1960 Panchayati Raj institutions had been set up in all parts of the country.

The introduction of Panchayati Raj signified the beginning of a new era of participatory development and laid the foundation of 'democratic decentralization' to:

- (a) Promote people's participation in rural development programmes;
- (b) Provide an institutional framework for popular administration;
- (c) Act as a medium of social and political change;
- (d) Facilitate local mobilization; and prepare and assist in the implementation of development plans [5].

However, the promising start towards decentralization in most states soon began to fade, either under political pressure or due to changes in the growth strategies and policies of the government. The creation of panchayats was not followed up by the devolution of powers and resources to these bodies, stalling progress of the decentralization process in the country.

Village panchayats have been an integral part of village administration since times immemorial but nothing much is known about the status, structure, functions and finances of panchayats in ancient India. Although the idea of decentralised planning is as old as the Gandhian economic thought, attempts at giving a concrete shape to this thinking may be said to have been made in the post independence period. During the constitution making process and thereafter since the inception of planning in India, certain hard choices had to be made between the needs of national security, national unity and economic growth, on the one hand, and the consideration of achieving a measure of distributive justice, on the other, so that the benefits of development accrue to the people at the grass-root level, and also people may participate in the process of planning and development at different territorial levels.

3. Union Government and local Governance

The central government must take measures to enhance the responsiveness of its field agents and to further the development of local institutions and civic network. A remarkable change in the democratic structure of governance is underway in India following the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts. The Acts were the culmination of a historic political move towards deepening democracy and advancing development through decentralization by making Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Municipal Institutions mandatory. The Acts aimed at building up local bodies as institutions of self-government.

The decentralization process has now given rural and urban local bodies an opportunity to assume greater responsibility for rural and urban management. The installation of representative local governments across the country, apart from political decentralization, also enables, to a substantial extent, a multi level self-governance in the cities and villages of the country.[6]

The new Panchayati Raj system are outlined in the 73rd amendment to the constitution of India as a framework, the operational part of the new system depends on the act enacted by the state government have enacted legislation to give operational dimension to the principles of the 73rd constitutional amendment.[7]

The establishment of effective institutions of statutory control is likewise a prerequisite. 'Local Government' including self-government institutions in both rural and urban areas is an exclusive State subject under Entry 5 of List II of the Seventh Schedule (Article 246), so that the Union cannot enact any law to create rights and liabilities relating to these subjects. What the Union has, therefore, done is to outline the scheme, which would be implemented by States by making laws or amending their own existing laws to bring them in conformity with the provisions of the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts. The main features of the Articles are:

- (A) Establishment of a three tier structure of local self-government in rural and urban areas **For rural areas, Panchayats at the village, intermediate and district levels.
- (B) For urban areas, a Nagar Panchayat for a transitional area (an area in transition from a rural area to an urban area), a Municipal Council for a smaller urban area and a Municipal Corporation for a larger urban area.
- (C) Regular elections after every five years.
- (D) Proportionate seat reservation for SCs / STs as well as for women not only in membership of panchayats but also for posts of chairpersons.
- (E) Constitution of State Finance Commissions to recommend measures to improve the finances of local bodies.
- (F) Constitution of State Election Commissions.
- (G) Gram Sabhas at the Gram Panchayat level.

Besides being institutions of self-government and performing agency functions in respect of Central or State government-sponsored schemes of community development or direct delivery programmes, the local bodies were intended to be developed as powerful institutions of

economic development. Articles 243G and 243W vest powers in the State Legislatures to endow Panchayats and Municipalities with such powers and authority to function as institutions of self-government. Panchayats and Municipalities are responsible for preparation of plans and their execution for economic development and social justice with regard to 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule and 18 subjects in the Twelfth Schedule of the Constitution respectively.

4. Accountability of Local Governments

Good local governance is not only about delivery of services but also about preserving the life and liberty of residents, providing an environment for democratic participation and civic dialogue, supporting environmentally sustainable local development, and facilitating outcomes that enrich the quality of life of residents. Decentralisation calls for a sub-national government structure with several tiers with each tier delivering those services that provide benefits to those residing in their jurisdiction. The term 'decentralisation' encompasses political, economic or fiscal and administrative decentralisation. In the Indian context, it means providing a suitable legislative framework for establishment of elected bodies of self-government at local level and transfer of power from State Governments to democratically elected local bodies.

The 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts 1992, supplemented by legislation/resolutions in the States in 1994, changed the structure of governance permanently from a two-tier to a three-tier system consisting of the Union, the States and the Panchayats/Municipal Bodies with a distinct developmental orientation. With these landmark Constitutional amendments, the units of local self-governments at various tiers/levels got a new lease of life and many far-reaching changes in the Constitution and the State laws were brought about to ensure proper functioning of democracy at the grassroots. The Government of India (GOI) Task Force on Decentralisation (2001) stated, "Decentralisation in the context of panchayats means that when authority is transferred from the state to the local governments, the latter should have the prerogative of taking decisions on the planning and implementation of such activity." A panchayat structure at the district and block levels was also envisioned at this time. An important post of the Block Development Officer (BDO) was created to support old revenue unit of the tehsil or taluk and develop every village in the respective block. However, this gave rise to a complex system of multiple controls. In the implementation of rural development schemes, the BDO has to seek directions of (i) elected pradhan (ii) elected zila pramukh (iii) district collector (iv) chief executive officer, zila parishad (v) district level officers connected with line departments of states (vi) director/commissioner, panchayats (vii) secretary – in-charge of the concerned district (viii) divisional commissioner (ix) elected member of the Samiti (x) MLA (xi) M.P (xii) Minister- in-charge of the concerned district.[8]

The functioning of the third tier of government depends on the devolution of resources, subjects and functionaries to the Panchayats and Municipalities. With increasing funds being

made available to the local self-governments and the slow but gradual transfer of functions to these units, the question of accountability of these institutions has assumed great importance.

The panchayati raj system of the pre and post independence period differed on the topic of representation. Before independence, members of the upper class and caste dominated the system of local government. Women were also generally excluded from formal representation. In the 1950s, several laws were passed which increased representation in local government through regular elections and meetings and also increased its strength by widening the scope of their functions. Women's involvement in local government became an issue at the same time that efforts were underway to strengthen the panchayati raj. Although women's involvement in local governments since independence has been low, this is not to suggest that women have been totally excluded from the local government system. [9] The vast majority of Indians, and particularly the 720 million people who live in rural villages, are largely dependent upon remote and unresponsive government structures historically characterized by bureaucracy, corruption and lack of transparency.

5. Rural Local Self Government and Question of Good Governance

In many parts of rural India, there has been a deep rift between the people and their government. Rural people rarely receive information about the plans and actions of government. They lack ways to influence policies, programmes, or resource allocations for development. Many have no effective means of participating in shaping their future and government officials are not always accountable to the communities they purport to serve. It is no wonder that progress in improving the conditions of life in most parts of rural India has been slow to nonexistent. As Nobel Prize-winning economist **Amartya Sen** has pointed out, "Democracy is not only the goal of development; it is the primary means of development". Only when every individual experiences greater freedom, voice and opportunity will each fully bring her or his creative powers to bear on solving the problems of the community.

Panchayat Raj is an ancient institution as antique as India. In fact, it has been the backbone of Indian villages since the beginning of recorded history. Gandhiji dreamt of every village a republic under the Panchayat Raj system of local self-government administered by a council or 'Panchayat' duly elected by the people of the villages in a democratic manner. The institution of Panchayati Raj is specifically designed for rural population to take care of the problems of rural areas. It provides the administrative apparatus for implementation of the programmes of rural development.

Rural India represents two third of the total national population but the irrepressible facts of industrialization and its handmaid urbanization could not be ignored for long besides, when rural India is pulsating with new life under the exuberances of Panchayati Raj, its echo

must inevitably penetrate into the town cause commendations there, and town, cause commendations there, and raise the cry for appropriate change town government also. In November 1958 the national development council adopted a resolution on 'co-operative policy' for the development of co-operative as a people's for the movement, the council declared that it was essential that co-operatives should be organized on the basis of the village community as the primary unit, and that the responsibility and initiative for social and economic development at the village level should be placed fully on the village co-operative and the panchayat.[10]

The importance of rural development in a country where seventy percent of the people are contracted in villages is no longer a debatable fact Mahatma Gandhi said that Indian means villages the late P.M. said that if villages are rich India is rich. It is in the context of rural improvement that the question of decentralization comes to the force. It is now an axiomatic fact that the benefits of democracy can be assured to the rural folk only through the decentralization of authority functioning from the village upward the date. P.M. said that the basic problem of India is to remove the poverty from the Indian villages.

Nehru said, I think nothing has happen in any country in the world during the last few years. So big in content and so revolutionary in design as the community projects in India, Every village should have three things A Panchayat, Co-operative and school. Only these can the foundation of the country be strong, Pt. Nehru. 'Development of our nation necessarily mans development of rural community as bulk of our population is living in the village three Institutions: Panchayat, Co-operation and School need to be developed .

6. Grass-root Democracy for Participatory Development

Democracy at the grassroots level is a prerequisite for proper functioning of local self government bodies the concept of village panchayat as the local self government is as old as the Indian civilization. In 1957, the central council of local self government resolved that Village panchyat should be given a danger role in the development programmes of the village including land reforms. The state government adopting the system were allowed to awoke a structural pattern of Panchayat Raj suitable to their respective local conditions. The participation of the rural poor especially the women, dalit and tribal communities can be ensured. The inherent hierarchies, power differentials, and socio-economic disparities both within and out side the communities play a big role in bringing differentials in participation. [11] As Gandhi often pointed out, India lives in villages and unless village life can be revitalized the nation as a whole can hardly come alive. When India became independent in 1947, perhaps one-third of the villages of India had traditional Panchayats and many of them were far from flourishing conditions. The congress government has made a determined effort to promote the creation of Panchayats and to make them effective units of local self- government. Article 40 of the Constitution clearly declares 'The state shall take necessary actions to organize

village Panchayats and to endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government'. The aim was to foster democratic participation, to involve villagers in the development of the community and to reduce the burden of higher level of administration. Though various steps were taken by successive governments to revitalize the system, Gramswaraj through village Panchayats remained as a distant dream till 1992. Bureaucratic apathy, indifference of the people, lack of political will, lack of uniformity etc were the main factors behind the failure of the system.

Realizing the potential of the PR system, Rajeev Gandhi government initiated a process of Constitutional amendment to give sanctity and uniformity to Panchayati Raj system so that it can be immune from political interference and bureaucratic indifference. Rajeev Gandhi introduced 64th Constitutional amendment Bill in 1989. But the Bill did not materialize because of the fall of his Ministry. Finally the P.V. Narasimha Rao government introduced Panchayati Raj system in India through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992. The article mainly focuses on the effectiveness of 73rd Constitutional amendment in securing empowerment of people.[12] The article tries to capture the efforts of various states to implement panchayati Raj system and makes a comparative study of performance of states in terms of people's participation, capacity building, de-bureaucratization and decentralization of powers.

7. District Planning Committee to prepare draft development plan

Effective implementation of local works requires the participation of large numbers of panchayat / municipality representatives at each level through Ward or Panchayat Sub-Committees that execute the implementation jointly, enforce the monitoring parameters and undertake a collegiate supervision of the implementation of the work.[13] Similarly, the role of the Gram/Ward Sabha is essential in the implementation of programmes which require beneficiary identification in a transparent and participatory manner and the award of utilization and completion certificates for various physical works undertaken. Except for a few States, not enough has been done to devolve powers, resources, capacity and planning and implementation functions to PRIs in most part of the country.[14] Democracy requires the subordination of the bureaucracy to the elected representatives. This applies as much to the third level of governance through the elected local bodies as it does to governance at the level of the state or Union government.

- Merger of District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs) with the district panchayat (zila parishad) under the chairpersonship of the district panchayat chairperson should be considered, as recommended by the 37th Report.[15]
- Functionaries posted to the PRIs must be brought under the authority and discipline of the elected bodies. Progressively, states should build a cadre of bureaucrats and technocrats who would be

constituted into a Panchayats Service.

- PRIs must be left free to determine the number of bureaucrats/technocrats on their rolls so as to free them of the financial overburden of excess staff which plagues state governments.

At present, the decisions and functioning of PRIs is subject to review by bureaucratic authorities who are often empowered to over-rule the elected authority. States may move towards a system of peer review, where it is the panchayat at the higher level, rather than the bureaucracy, which reviews and rectifies errors at the lower level. Where decisions of the district panchayat require review, a standing committee of the legislature may be constituted to undertake this task. For the municipalities, a parallel system of peer review may be put in place. [16] Of course, since the minister is ultimately responsible to the legislature for the elected local bodies, he must remain the authority of last resort on matters that are not resolved at lower levels.

- Gram Sabha should meet at least in each quarter preferably on Republic Day, Labour Day, Independence Day and Gandhi Jayanti.
- Decide developmental work to be undertaken by Panchayats based on needs assessment.
- Suggest remedial measures for economy and efficiency in the functioning of the Panchayats.
- Question and scrutinise the decisions of Panchayats in the meeting of Gram Sabha. Discuss the Annual Financial Statement of Gram Panchayats.

8. Why We Need Panchayats

Issues of democratic decentralisation and rural development raise a number of questions about the ways in which states intervene in rural society, and how this affects economic opportunity. Although there is of course great variation among cultures, countries and regions, we can identify a number of roles that governments typically play in poor and predominantly rural areas:

1. One is the provision of **public goods**, such as universal education and healthcare.
2. A second is the provision of **divisible goods**, such as irrigation, agricultural extension and credit.
3. A third is the **determination and enforcement of laws** regulating key economic inputs, such as land, labour and capital.
4. A fourth and critical element is the **recognition and protection of rights** allowing for organisation, association and entitlement in the eyes of the state.

India is a federal republic with central, state, and local governments. **The Ministry of Panchayati Raj** is dedicated to the oversight of decentralization and local self-government in the States. The Ministry for Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, the Ministry for Rural Development, and the Ministry for Urban Development have oversight for developing policy in each sector as well. Every state has a minister responsible for local government administration (CLGF, 2009).[17]

One of the most striking aspects of Panchayat elections is that there is qualitative difference in the meaning of the vote when it comes to federal and state elections, versus voting

for Panchayats. While, federal/state elections are extremely well organized, village level politics are inherently problematic. In fact, some of the historical electoral malpractices especially the use of violence and the stuffing of ballot boxes, which are said to be diminishing, are making their presence felt in village level elections.

This phenomenon is even more apparent in case of women belonging to Schedule Cast or Schedule tribes T. In order to fulfill the reserved quota, the political workers have to deploy various strategies to convince the women and one of the most adopted strategies is to influence the women through the family members. **Zenab Banu** argues that it is extremely difficult to make tribal women stand for Panchayat elections as they consider Panchayats as bad and full of quarrels. Therefore, in such a situation, the argument that having more women in political decision-making would bring about gender-related equality and justice is seriously questioned. The paper had so far explored how the prevalence of corrupt practices, violence, societal cleavages based on caste/class/religion clubbed with the dominant male discourse in rural Indian society have created a situation where women in political decision making have been reduced to mere 'proxies' thereby impeding the mission of empowering women politically through affirmative action. Researchers Lab-to-Land' has hardly succeeded in removing widespread misery, illiteracy and exploitation so building on local knowledge system with the help of participatory methods still stands tall. Thinking about development in terms of capabilities allows us to get behind the superficial indices of access and usage of technology that is often used. [18] On the other hand, however, there are several cases of positive changes brought about by the implementation of the quota system where SC/ST women have been observed to bring about socio-economic and political changes.

It may be argued that the women members in the PRIs today are 'first generation learners' who are gradually learning to adjust to the new political conditions. The political knowledge of women is increasing and gradually a sense of confidence is getting instilled in them, as they are now aware of the problems being faced by their locality. However, one has to keep it mind that without the system of reservation women would have had no role to play in grassroots politics in India. As statistics show, 95% of women claimed they would never come to acquire positions in Panchayats, if there were no provision of reserving seats for them (Centre for Women's Development Studies 1999).

The PRI structure was introduced in most parts of the country as a result of the Balwantrai Mehta Report. However, it did not develop the requisite democratic momentum and failed to cater to the needs of rural development. Reasons for this were: (i) political and bureaucratic resistance at the state level to sharing of power and resources with the local level institutions, (ii) the takeover of these institutions by the rural elite who cornered a major share of the benefits of the various welfare schemes, (iii) the lack of capability at the local level, and (iv) the absence of political will of the grassroots leaders.[19]

The K.Santhanam Committee in 1963 was appointed to look solely at the issue of PRI finances. Its recommendations

have influenced the thinking and the debate to date on this issue: (i) the Panchayats should have special powers to levy special tax on land revenues, home tax, etc; (ii) all grants and subventions at the state level should be consolidated and untied; and (iii) a Panchayat Raj Finance Corporation should be set up which would look into the financial resources of PRIs at all three levels, provide loans and financial assistance to these grassroots level governments and also provide support for non-financial requirements of villages.[20]

9. Conclusion:

PRI have not delivered the services to rural people even though they are empowered to prepare plans for economic development and social justice. They have not yet become the real institutions of self governance largely due to (a) lack of people's participation, especially, the women, the poor, and other marginalized groups because of ignorance, poverty and lack of distributive justice; (b) reluctance of the higher tiers of the Government to devolve financial and administrative powers to them as the Line Departments and District Rural Development Agency continue to control the planning and implementation of developmental projects; apathetic attitudes of bureaucrats and politicians; insufficient capacity and resources of the PRIs (and Gram Sabha) in running their activities effectively; and, lack of organic linkages among the three tiers.

Gam Sabha could be effective in its role only through its empowerment and capacity building, political education of masses, larger participation in developmental programmes, more effective control over Panchayat leadership, better responsiveness of the administration, better mobilization of resources, and better care of community/village assets. Thus GS needs to be strengthened by handing over real power otherwise it will remain only a shadow of the panchayat and not an independent entity. The Panchayats (at all levels) are still dominated by bureaucracy. There is a need for bureaucrats to change their mindset. The middle level bureaucrats are not yet prepared to give powers to poor and illiterate villagers. It is also important to strengthen the internal resources mobilization capabilities of PRIs for functional autonomy. They should also be given control over natural resources such as land, water, minor forest produce and minerals. All village level, users' groups formed under different developmental programmes such as watershed committees, water user's groups, forest protection committees, self help groups, etc. should be linked and brought under the control of Gram Panchayat. The Panchayat should have better control over funds which is possible through timely release of funds so that they have enough time to plan and implement the programme and freedom to take up works in response to local imperatives. Further, practice of giving special grant to MP/MLA for local area development should be allotted to Panchayats to utilize it for strengthening local development and poverty alleviation measures.

Thus, Decentralization which ensures people's participation in planning and governance is considered an efficient instrument of conveying benefits to the poor with the least cost. Accountability and transparency are expected

to ensure minimisation of beneficiary misidentification, better enforcement of asset acquisition, its retention and maintenance, loan repayment, capital plough back, etc. Besides, since local wisdom and local resource are readily available under decentralized governance, local human, animal and physical resources can be effectively utilized resulting in creation of employment opportunities and production of goods and services relevant to the needs of the poorer section of society.

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Author Profile



Rajesh Kumar received Masters and Ph.D degree in Public Administration from Aligarh Muslim University in 2003 and 2010 respectively. During the 2009 to 2011 he worked as an Assistant Professor in SSM.PG College and from 2011 to March2012 worked as Regional Consultant in Indira Gandhi National Open University. He also worked as the Post Doctoral fellow with University of Delhi (funded by ICSSR) since March 2012 to October 2013. Presently he is working a *Assistant Professor* in School of Governance & Development Studies, Hawassa University, Ethiopia (**East Africa**).



Dr.Nafees Ahmad Ansari joined as a lecturer on 21-12-1994 in the Department of Political Science, A.M.U Aligarh (**India**) and promoted as a reader on 21-12-2003. He has been actively engaged in the academic and corporate life of the university. The area of specialization is Public Administration. Nine students have completed their research under his supervision. Twenty three articles have been published in the reputed journals .He has been member of educational Board of India Journal of Politics and life member of IIPA and IAPS. He has been member of A.M.U court, A.M.U Academic Council and member of Academic Council and member of A.M.U executive Council. Currently, He has been appointed as Director of Centre for Distance Education of Aligarh Muslim University. He has been completed a major research project work of the UGC on the issue of status of administrative frame work.