

PROSPERITY THROUGH PANCHAYATS: THREE YEARS OF RURAL TRANSFORMATION

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It is interesting to know that the Constitution of India, even prior to the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution explicitly recognised only a Village Panchayat under Article 40 (Net three tier Panchayati Raj system). It mandates that the "State shall take steps to organise Village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them as a unit of a Self-Government". No doubt, there is a Entry 5 in state list in seventh schedule to the Constitution generally providing for the establishment of Local Self Government Institutions, but here again, we find a particular mention of a Village Panchayat only. After the 73rd Amendment, the Three Tier Panchayat Raj system recognised Gram Panchayat as one of the tiers leaving it at the discretion of each state to decide the degree / extent of the devolution of the Funds, Functions, Functionaries & also the division thereof amongst each of the tiers including Gram Panchayat. However, a common prudence would entail that Village Panchayat has to be recognised as a cutting edge governance & grass root delivery institution while other tiers should have a policy making, guiding, mentoring & monitoring role. It needs to be remembered that the Article 40 still remains a part of the Constitution even after 73rd Amendment. However, this **Subsidiarity Principle** had to make a long wait even after 73rd Amendment to be brought into deep practice in Panchayati Raj till the commencing of the term of the Central Government under the leadership of the honourable the Prime Minister. A few states like Kerala may have taken striding steps to truly empower Gram Panchayats but overall performance of the states is not very encouraging even after a lapse of 25 years of passing the 73rd Amendment. Central Government has constitutional limitations to thrust any agenda upon the states, as it being a State Subject. Many of us have still not forgotten the strong opposition of many state governments to put word 'Shall' in the clause providing for transfer of 29 subjects to the Panchayats when law makers in the Parliament had to ultimately settle for the word "May" leaving it to the mercy of the states to take

their own time, pace & extent for devolution to the Panchayats. In some states, Village Panchayats are still treated as either the limbs of the state or a state tends to create parallel institutions under line departments outside Panchayat to implement / deliver the programmes including those pertaining to 29 subjects in the Eleventh schedule which should rightfully be in the domain of the Panchayats. Constitution, in fact, provides complete freedom to the States to devolve / entrust any responsibility even beyond the subjects specified in Eleventh Schedule. However, most of the States in the country have a huge unfinished agenda with regard to 29 subjects, forget about reaching beyond.

However, in spite of all these constraints, the Central Government had adopted an ingenious and innovative strategy, without interfering in the autonomy of the states and remaining within the confines of law, not only to empower the Panchayats, but also impress upon the states to follow suit. It shows how a strong determination of a visionary leader can ensure the accomplishment of a **Mission Panchayat Empowerment**. A few decisions by the Central Government in last three years of its tenure may substantiate this writ.

Take a decision to implement **14th Finance Commission award**. The complete 100 per cent funds provided under the Award for Panchayats



are required to be transferred exclusively to the Gram Panchayats. Not only direct transfer of funds to Gram Panchayat is a revolutionary step, but insistence to treat it as a Untied Grant giving full authority & autonomy to the Gram Panchayat to utilise it for the implementation of Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) prepared by the Gram Panchayat through participatory process by the villagers in Gram Sabha is a giant leap to imbibe upon the community the concept of "Hamara Gaon, Hamara Vikas" (My Village, My Development) and to pull them away from the tendency of depending upon sovereign state government even for simple day to day service provision & delivery. Linking the **Performance Component** of the 14th Finance Commission with the Reforms to be adopted by the Gram Panchayats in a stipulated time is sure to create a sense of responsibility, commitment & accountability amongst the political executives in Gram Panchayats.

Digital Funds Transfer:

While transferring funds directly to Gram Panchayats, it is also being ascertained that the services which the Village Panchayat is expected to deliver should reach the beneficiary in the most transparent, speedy and timely manner through a **Bharatnet Mission** under which, all the Village Panchayats in the country are being connected through cable networked broad band. Through a Gol sponsored programme namely **CSC:2**, a Village Level Entrepreneur (VLE) is being encouraged to provide G-G, G-C, B-C online services either free or on a reasonable payment to the villagers. This **Rural Information High Way** will provide a seamless connectivity from village to the international and all the e-services will lie at the doorstep of the villagers, may it be online transactions, money transfer, cashless dealings, agriculture input purchases, agro marketing / sales and such other activities. Getting routine certificates will no more be a tedious task and will also arrest palm greasing, corruption and red tapism which is so prevalent at the grass root level.

Performance So Far:

There are many more concrete steps taken in the last three years of its stint which exhibits a strong desire of the Central Government to empower & strengthen the Panchayati Raj Local

Government institutional set up in general and the Village Panchayats in particular. It has also taken firm steps to bring in attitudinal, behavioural and mind-set changes amongst people & village level public functionaries. Let us examine one master stroke mind set transformation brought in by one single appeal by the prime Minister; to surrender cooking gas subsidy. Just recall the politicisation of the "Number of subsidised gas cylinders" to be allowed per household and social media campaign on the issue when every body wanted to be in the "Poor" category, not agreeing to a reduction of even a single subsidised cylinder. The Prime Minister in a sincere appeal to the conscience of the middle class made lakhs of same citizens to surrender the cooking gas cylinder subsidy and utilised so saved amount to provide gas connections to crore of families, mostly rural, reducing the drudgery of the women folk, improving community health, reducing rural pollution and saving the firewood consumption resulting in reduction of dwindling forest cover. Just compare this visionary action with the implementation of a subsidy scheme for bio-gas plants in rural areas which is being implemented for decades with no visible sustainable impact. It is a classic example to demonstrate that rural development need not always be linked to increase in budgetary allocation, but an innovative thinking & imagination by the leadership, too, can generate resources.

Gram Uday to Bharat Uday Abhiyan :

Through a nationwide *Gram Uday to Bharat Uday Abhiyan* launched on 14th April, 2016 on the birth anniversary of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and culminating on 24th August 2016, the Panchayat Raj Day, the rural community was sensitised to create an atmosphere of social harmony in the villages through Gram Sabhas and such other activities. The Prime Minister launched Swachh Bharat to pay a true homage to Mahatma Gandhi through cleaning India, a dream of Mahatmaji to his heart, by 2019, his 150th birth anniversary whereas *Gram Uday to Bharat Uday* is to cleanse the community mindset of caste and class disparities to pay homage to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, an ardent social revolutionary, on his 125th birth anniversary. These programmes display the commitment on the part of the Government towards these sensitive social issues and awareness that attitudinal & behavioural changes in the community

can happen only by involving their owned, grass root institutions, hence the focus on sensitisation and active involvement of the Gram Panchayats and Gram Sabhas in spreading the messages and practices entailing social transformation. Making it a Pan-India, time bound movement has provided a necessary Mission Mode Launching Pad to these social issues.

Community Ownership through Panchayati Raj:

While providing boost to building social & technological infrastructure in rural areas through Gram Panchayats, development of physical infrastructure involving them in decision making & monitoring process, the Government is further ensuring that all developmental activities taken up from any public resource including CSR funds or non-monitory support goes towards enhancing the community ownership, involvement and accountability through their Panchayati Raj Institutional Network. As a result of this approach, the construction completion of the rural roads under Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana has increased from 133 Kms per day to 173 Kms per day in the year 2016-17. Along with it, a separate boost to Internal Village Road and Farm Access Road construction and emphasising uncompromising approach on quality / maintenance, making tree plantation as an integral & obligatory part of the Project with adequate budget provision and involving Panchayats in these processes have tremendously improved the quality of social monitoring and meaningful involvement of the Panchayats.

There is 25 per cent increase in the Central Budgetary allocation for the year 2017-18 for rural sector programmes totalling to Rs. 187200 Cr. It is not only the quantitative increase, but also the qualitative modifications brought in the spending pattern & grass root institutional involvement. Construction of 10 Lakh rural houses, credit linked subsidy on housing loan, Gram Sabha led selection process for those who are entitled to get them under *Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana*, special allocation for *Mahila Shakti Kendra* in villages, Priority for water availability not only for drinking, but for toilet by reuse of water to provide fillip to regular use of toilets, doubling the income of the farmers in 5 years with totally redesigned & revamped Crop Insurance

Scheme *PM Fasal Bima Yojana* (No more a Crop Loan insurance Scheme), soil health card & setting up of Mini Labs in Krish Vidhnyan Kendra, target of Rs.10 lakh agricultural loan disbursement, Model law on Contract farming, coating urea with Neem Powder to stop its misuse, changing colour of the subsidised Kerosene to stop its diversion & black marketing, specially designed Solar Energy Programme for the rural areas are some of the initiatives that indicate the qualitative aspects imbedded in the rural development programmes of the Government.

Emphasis on skill development in educational contents from the schooling level to increase not only the employability, but to inculcate entrepreneurial spirit amongst youth to aspire for self-enterprise formation and become a employment-giver than a employment-seeker is a new approach in imparting not only knowledge, but also market oriented skills and values through education, especially for the rural youth. Interventions like Business Correspondent Model, Mini / Mobile ATM network is increasing self-employment opportunities on one hand, while complimenting the vision of **Less cash India** of the Prime Minister. Panchayats are volunteering, rather competing to make their Panchayat a 100 per cent **Cashless Transaction Village**. **Direct Benefit Transfer** (DBT) with opening of **JAN-DHAN Bank** accounts, mostly in rural areas, increasing Mobile phone use for money transaction complimented by Government initiated **BHIM app**, linking the accounts with **AADHAR** data base will certainly make the dream of bringing Prosperity Through Governance in rural areas a reality.

In a nutshell, the Agenda propelled by the government is :-

- **CUP** (Corruption - Unemployment - Poverty) full of this agonising stuff in Rural Administration as mentioned in the bracket should be emptied and filled with :
- **TEA** (Transparency - Entrepreneurship - Affluence) that will infuse freshness, energy and efficiency in Rural Governance.

Let us wait for two more years to witness crossing of a Tipping Point .It is destined to happen.

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