

## Decentralised Governance: Concept and Implications in Planning and Development

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Decentralised governance, in true sense, views the process of development not as the sole responsibilities of the state or the community, rather it involves collective responsibilities. In this form of governance people's participation is recognised as a means of empowerment. Increase in literacy level, access to technology and process of digitalisation are allowing for greater public participation in policy planning.

**T**he foundation of democracy of the modern time was laid by 'The Magna Carta' of England in 1215. It gained its prominence in some countries after the World War I (France, Germany etc.) and in many other countries in Europe after the World War II. From raising awareness in 1960s, democratic decentralisation has evolved as a process of engagement with government in decision-making related to development programmes as well as management, production and allocation of public goods and services.

Since last few decades, new modes of governance like 'democratic decentralisation', 'participatory development' and 'civil society' have gained immense importance in the development paradigm. During 1990s, many countries including Philippines, Bolivia, Tanzania, Uganda and India have amended their legislations towards decentralised governance and created new spaces for people's participation and a process of

participatory development planning. Along with these countries, there were only 39 countries in 1974, which had electoral democratic governance, the number increased to 121 in 2002 (World Bank, 2004). Currently, it is found that, more than half (57 percent) of the world's population lives in some form of democracy, compared to 36 percent in 1975 (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2019). This rapid democratisation is stated to have brought the government closer to people and made the process more participatory. The primary aim of democratic governance is to give people an empowered and meaningful role to participate in the decision-making process. Rather than following traditional approaches like bureaucratic decision-making or decision-making by the political representatives, people's participation in the decision-making process is being seen by the policy makers as an essential pre-requisite for improving the performance of public service delivery system (World Bank, 2004). Decentralisation, or decentralising governance, as referred by

UNDP (United Nation Development Programme, 1997) is the restructuring or reorganisation of authority so that there is a system of co-responsibility between institutions of governance at the central, regional and local levels according to the principle of subsidiary. This increases the overall quality and effectiveness of the system of governance, while increasing the authority and capacities of sub-national levels. It is expected to contribute to key elements of good governance, such as



increasing people's opportunities for participation in economic, social and political decisions; assisting in developing people's capacities; and enhancing government responsiveness, transparency and accountability. There are three major forms of decentralisation, namely 'Deconcentration', 'Delegation' and 'Devolution'. Deconcentration is the weak form of decentralisation and refers to mere shifting of responsibilities from central government officials in the capital city to those working in regions, provinces or districts and grass root levels. On the other, delegation refers to transferring responsibility for decision-making and administration of public functions to semi-autonomous organisations not wholly controlled by the central government, but ultimately accountable to it. Devolution is the strongest form of decentralisation, where the central government transfer functions, authority for decision-making, finance, and management to quasi-autonomous units of local government with corporate status.

The decentralised governance, in true sense, viewed the process of development not as the sole responsibilities of the state, or the community, rather it involves collective responsibilities. In this form of governance people's participation is recognised as a means of empowerment. The idealised aim is 'to enable people to present, share, analyse and augment their knowledge as the start of a process. The ultimate outcomes are, however, enhanced knowledge and competence, and ability to make demands, and to sustain action (Chambers, 1994).

### **Decentralised Governance in India: A Historical Perspective**

India has adopted decentralised and participatory governance system since the inception of the five year plans. The effort to promote decentralised governance in rural areas is practiced by government through the promotion and strengthening of the Panchayati Raj system. The need for Panchayati Raj system of participatory governance is traced as far back as to the recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta committee in 1957. The committee recommended a three-tier Panchayat system at district, block and village levels. The National Development Council approved the recommendations of the Mehta Committee in January 1958 and suggested that each state should implement this as best suited to its own

particular conditions. The second plan document acknowledged the necessity of development of democratic institutions and emphasised upon 'comprehensive village planning' for efficient distribution of state benefit to weaker sections of society. Some other important recommendations are, by the Dantwala Committee on Block Planning in 1978, which prescribed integration of block plan with district plans, Ashok Mehta Committee in 1978 recommended considering district as a first point of decentralisation, and L.M Singhvi Committee, recommended involvement of Panchayati Raj institutions in basic planning and implementation of development projects and consider Panchayati Raj Institutions as Institute of Self Governance to facilitate the participation of the people in the process of planning and development (Datta & Sodhi, 2020). Although these recommendation were considered as the stepping stone of the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) in India, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, in 1992, have formalised such an institution by giving PRI the constitutional provision to constitute three-tier panchayat system in each state as well as emerge as an institute of self-governance. This Constitutional Amendment mandated setting up three tier Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) system in rural areas, holding of election in regular interval and institutionalised participation of citizen in planning process.

### **Panchayati Raj Institution in India**

Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) is a three-tiered structure in India. PRIs include Gram Panchayats (village level), Mandal Parishad or Block Samiti or Panchayat Samiti (Block level), and Zila Parishad (district level).

- (i) Zila Parishad (ZP) or district panchayat: Each district has one Zila Parishad or district panchayat.
- (ii) Block Panchayat (BP) or Panchayat Samitis: Each block in the said district has one block panchayat.
- (iii) Gram Panchayat (GP): A Gram, as defined by law, may consist of a single village or a cluster of adjoining villages. It is divided into a minimum of five constituencies (again depending on the number of voters the Gram is having). From each of these constituencies, one member is elected. Body of these elected members is called the

Gram Panchayat. Size of the GPs varies widely from state to state.

PRIs, under the law, are required to prepare plans for economic development and social justice for their areas, and also implement them. After the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendments, these bodies have been granted greater powers and additional financial resources to promote local economic and social development. The Article 243ZD(1) recommended for constitution of District Planning Committee at district level to integrate plans prepared by panchayats and municipalities and to prepare draft development plan for district.

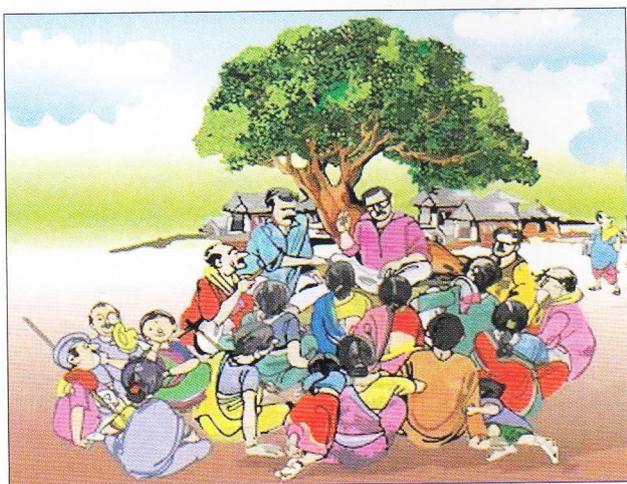
### **PRI and implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act**

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), 2005 ensures minimum 100 days of wage employment for rural unskilled workers. MGNREGA has introduced a change in paradigm of wage employment programme in India through the features of legal compulsion and demand driven component. The decentralised governance structure has significant role to play in implantation of MGNREGA. The role of Gram Panchayat is quite pivotal one. In one hand, the Act mandates that the selection and prioritisation of works to be taken up in a financial year has to be done by Gram Sabha. People are expected to participate in gram sabha for selection and prioritisation of works to be implemented by the PRI, to address the development needs of each village. On the other, the Act also prescribes that works be allotted in a way that at least 50 percent of the total works (in terms of costs) be undertaken by the Gram Panchayats. This is to provide the Gram

Panchayats a substantive role in the implementation of works. The Act directs the District Programme Coordinator at district level to prepare a Labour Budget every year in the month of December for next financial year, which will contain details of the anticipated demand of unskilled manual work for the next year. A time bound participatory planning exercise, with bottom up approach, is required to undertake preparation of this labour budget and shelf of work for next financial year. Decentralised planning of works related to natural resource management, agriculture and allied activities, providing sustainable livelihood opportunity had been emphasized. Along with this, MGNREGA has been integrated with Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY), Integrated Watershed Management Programme, Command Area and Water Management schemes for better outcomes in water conservation and water harvesting works. The recommended work plan need to be sent to the concerned gram panchayat for community validation and vetting and the final document will reflect the people's suggestion recommended at gram sabhas under gram panchayat involved in those works.

### **Livelihood Promotion Scheme and PRI**

Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) was designed to pursue sustainable livelihood opportunities through Micro-Finance and Micro-Enterprises for population Below Poverty Line (BPL) in the country and to provide sustained level of income over a period of time. This objective was planned to achieve through the creation of Self Help Groups (SHGs) by the process of social mobilisation, providing training and capacity building and provision of creating income generating assets. SGSY was converted to the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) or Aajeevika launched by the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Government of India in June 2011. NRLM has set out with an agenda to cover 7 crore rural poor households, across 600 districts, 6000 blocks, 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats and 6 lakh villages in the country through self-managed Self Help Groups (SHGs) and federated institutions and support them for livelihoods collectives in a period of 8-10 years. NRLM believes in harnessing the innate capabilities of the poor and complements them with capacities (information, knowledge, skills, tools, finance



and collectivisation) to participate in the growing economy of the country. NRLM follows a demand driven strategy, the States have the flexibility to develop their livelihoods-based perspective plans and annual action plans for poverty reduction.

In NRLM, the role of PRIs could be to facilitate/support in social mobilisation, institution building, Participatory Identification of Poor (PIP) and its endorsement in Gram Sabha, allocating resources to the priority demands of the SHGs and their federations in the annual plans/activities of the PRIs and coordinating with different departments and agencies on behalf of the SHG network. SHGs and their Federations could encourage their members to attend the gram sabha for placing their demands and needs. SHG federations expected to participate actively in the functional committees of GP (if they are members/invitees), in planning processes and in community monitoring of implementation of projects by/through GPs. Participatory Gram Panchayat Development Plan and Planning for Poverty alleviation and livelihood promotion need to have a clear integrated poverty reduction plan with a component addressing vulnerabilities of poor and marginalised people and their livelihood opportunities.

### Current Development Challenge and PRI

Rural population in India is socio-economically vulnerable due to their dependence on agriculture and related activities for their livelihood. Country's 69 percent youth population aged between 18-34 years live in rural areas. Hence, recent rural development schemes like NRLM, PMKVY, DDU-GKY, Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan are programmed to provide skill, to create self-employment opportunities and to remove poverty through participatory approaches. In the current COVID-19 pandemic situation the revival of rural economy in a time bound manner could boost economic growth of the country. Sectors including health, sanitation, agri business, SME could significantly contribute to country's GDP.

National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) adopted a Public Private Partnership (PPP) model which was established to promote skill development in the country through creation of large, quality and for-profit vocational institutions. NSDC also support funding to build scalable and

profitable vocational training initiatives. Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) is the flagship scheme of the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship (MSDE) implemented by NSDC, with objective of enabling Indian youth to take up industry-relevant skill training that will help them in securing a better livelihood through Skill Certification Scheme. Strategy of PMKVY include -short term training that is imparted at PMKVY Training Centres and benefits candidates of Indian nationality who are either school/college dropouts or unemployed; recognition of prior learning; assessing and certifying as Recognition of Prior Learner. The Scheme contributed in terms of providing skill training to nearly 3 million and, currently there are more than 22000 training centers in all over India.

Deen Dayal Gramin Kaushal Yojana (DDU-GKY) launched in the year 2014 also focused on placement-led skill training initiative of the Ministry of Rural Development. The scheme aims at transforming poor rural Indian youth ages of 15 and 35 years from poor families into skilled productive employees to empower industry with the right manpower for success and growth. Like PMKVY scheme, DDU-GKY as a part of the Skill India campaign also works in Public Private Partnership mode. At DDU-GKY, a three tier implementation structure is followed, where, the National Unit (NU) at the Ministry of Rural Development acts as the investor, policy maker and technical support provider. State Skill Missions manage and monitor implementation and Training Partners implement projects in specialist trades in compliance with norms and standards set by DDU-GKY.

DDU-GKY provides adequate skilled manpower, in industry relevant job roles, so that employers have access to a wide talent pool to hire from. A wide range of industries and sectors such as Agriculture, Automotive, Beauty & Wellness, Construction, Electronics, Gems and Jewellery, Healthcare, Logistics, Retail and Tourism & Hospitality amongst many others are included under DDU-GKY. Till date more than 10 lakh youth are trained and 5.59 lakhs got their placement. Huge job opportunities were also created in the COVID-19 situation in terms of making mask, sanitiser, face shield, protective clothing and community kitchen.

## Challenges

Decentralised and participatory development is not free from criticism and challenges. It is often criticised for over emphasis on process of planning. Participatory development is also questioned from the standpoint of unequal empowerment. It at times reproduces social inequalities within communities. Evidence says that, some stakeholders have lesser voice and influence than others and this is particularly true with women, who continue to remain marginalised (Cornwall, 2003). In the context of women's empowerment, one may argue that mere participation of women in decision-making spaces may not signify empowerment, and there is a difference between 'formal' power and 'effective' power. While there is no doubt that women have been given formal power to get elected and there is prescribed mandate to get them involved in decision-making, they continue to face a masculine model of politics, a dual burden of domestic chores and professional obligations, and lack of confidence and self-esteem (Shvedova, 2005). In India, there are instances of women holding formal rather than effective power due to reasons like opposition from the families, interference by husbands, discrimination in meetings, lack of community support, lack of education and dependence on men (Hust, 2004).

## Way Ahead

Despite such shortcomings, participation, as a political concept as well as a process, has opened up space for new relationship between governments and citizens. The concept carries dynamic implications in the wake of recent policies of decentralisation, where people are not only expected to voice their opinions during elections, but also enjoy the power to participate in the decision-making processes. Increase in literacy level, access to technology and process of digitalisation are helping public participation in government policy planning.

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