

ENABLING PEOPLE TO GOVERN THEMSELVES

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Devolution of Powers & Finances up to Local Levels and Challenges therein - Panchayats & Municipalities

Governance systems at all levels, i.e. global, national, and local, have experienced stress as a fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Architectural flaws have been revealed in their design. Breakdowns in many subsystems had to be managed at the same time — in health care, logistics, business, finance, and administration. The complexity of handling so many subsystems at the same time have overwhelmed governance. Solutions for one subsystem backfired on other subsystems. For example, lockdowns to make it easier to manage the health crisis have made it harder to manage economic distress simultaneously. In fact, the diversion of resources to focus on the threat to life posed by COVID-19 has increased vulnerabilities to death from other diseases, and even from malnutrition in many parts of India.

Human civilisation advances with the evolution of better institutions to manage public affairs. Institutions of parliamentary democracy, for example, and the limited liability business corporation, did not exist 400 years ago. Institutions of global governance, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, did not exist even 100 years ago. These institutions were invented to enable human societies to produce better outcomes for their citizens. They have been put through a severe stress test now by the global health and economic crises. The test has revealed a fundamental flaw in their design. There is a mismatch in the design of governance institutions at the global level (and also in India) with the challenges they are required to manage. Designed like machines for efficiency, they are trying to fit themselves into an organic system of the natural environment coupled with human society. It seems that government institutions are square pegs forcing themselves into round holes.

The global challenges listed in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, which humanity must urgently address now, are systemic challenges. All these systemic problems are interconnected with each other. Environmental, economic, and social issues cannot be separated from each other and solved by experts in silos or by agencies focused only on their own problems. A good solution to one can create more problems for others, as government responses to the novel coronavirus pandemic have revealed.

Even if experts in different disciplines could combine their perspectives and their silo-ed solutions at the global level, they will not be able to solve the systemic problems of the SDGs. Because, their solutions must fit the specific conditions of each country, and of each locality within countries too, to fit the shape of the environment and the condition of society there. Solutions for environmental sustainability along with sustainable livelihoods cannot be the same in Kerala and Ladakh, or in Wisconsin and Tokyo. Solutions must be local. Moreover, for the local people to support the implementation of solutions, they must believe the solution is the right one for them, and not a solution thrust upon them by outside experts. Therefore, they must be active contributors of knowledge for, and active participants in, the creation of the solutions. Moreover, the knowledge of different experts — about the environment, the society, and the economy — must come together to fit realities on the ground.

Governance of the people must be not only for the people. It must be by the people too. Gandhiji and his economic advisers, J.C. Kumarappa and others, developed their solutions of local enterprises through observations and experiments on the ground (and not in theoretical seminars in capital cities). E.F. Schumacher, founding editor of the journal, *Resurgence*, and author of *Small is Beautiful*, had pointed out by the 1970s, the flaws in the economics theories that were driving public policy in capitalist as well as communist countries. He had proposed a

new economics, founded on local enterprise, very consistent with Gandhiji's ideas. Elinor Ostrom, the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Economics, in 2009, had developed the principles for self-governing communities from research on the ground in many countries, including India.

When there are scientific explanations for why local systems solutions are the best, if not the only way to solve complex systemic problems, and when the Indian Constitution requires this too, then why does not the government devolve power to citizens in villages and towns in India for them to govern their own affairs?

An Indian anthropologist gave me an insight. She said she had observed that several Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers she knew, who seemed to have more compassion for communities than their colleagues had, were involved at some time in their careers with the evolution of community-based public health and the self-help group movements in Andhra Pradesh. She contrasted their views about how change is brought about with the views of IAS officers who have implemented the Swachh Bharat programme recently. The latter, also very fine officers, saw their role as 'deliverers of good government'. Whereas the former, through their experience, had begun to see that the role of government is perhaps to 'enable governance'.

The key IAS functionary in India's governance is the District 'Collector' — the role his forebears in the Indian Civil Services set up by the British, were expected to perform. Which was to collect revenues and to maintain law and order. When, after Independence, the Indian state took up a large welfare role, he also became the District 'Deliverer' of government largesse. It strengthened the image of a paternalist government taking care of its wards. The District Deliverer's task became complicated when the numbers of government schemes multiplied — some designed by the central government, and others by State government. The schemes were managed by their own ministries and departments in the capitals, with local functionaries of those departments as the points of contact with citizens. At a meeting of IAS officers in Shimla with the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG), sometime in 2013, to understand why government schemes were not producing enough benefits for people on the ground, an officer presented a list of over 300 schemes that were operational in her district. The citizens did not know how many schemes there were and what they were entitled to. And even she found it hard to disentangle the schemes.

The pandemic has not passed yet, but evidence is emerging that some States in India, such as Kerala, have weathered the storm better than others. And some countries, such as Vietnam and Taiwan, better than others too. A hypothesis is that those States and countries in which local governance was stronger have done much better than others. This is worthy of research by social and political scientists looking for insights now into design principles for good governance systems that can solve problems that the dominant theory of government is not able to solve.

The dominant theory in practice of good government is 'government of the people, by the government, for the people'. Which slips easily into 'government of the people, by the government, for the political party in power'. This has been the prevalent theory in most States of India for too long. Even when government is for the people, as a deliverer of services, money into their bank accounts, (and money for building toilets), it is not good enough. The government has to support and enable people to govern themselves, to realise the vision of 'government of the people, for the people, by the people'. Which is also the only way humanity will be able to meet the ecological and humanitarian challenges looming over it in the 21st century.

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