

RESPONDING TO COVID-19 AT THE GRASSROOTS

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

Mahatma Gandhi envisioned that a free India would rest on a foundation of gram panchayats, village republics that governed locally and epitomised Swaraj in practice. B.R. Ambedkar was sceptical; he described the caste-ridden, unequal village society as a cesspool. Yet, he was not unequivocally against decentralisation.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment mandates the constitution of panchayats at the district, intermediate and village levels as devolved institutions of self-government and provides for the endowment of powers and responsibilities to plan and implement programmes for social justice and economic development. This fulfilled the vision of the Mahatma, whilst addressing Dr. Ambedkar's concerns by providing for reservation in both the elected seats and leadership positions of sarpanches, mukhiyas and adhyakshas.

Yet, the progress of panchayati raj has been patchy, since its constitutionalisation 27 years ago. Some States have walked the talk by devolving untied grants to panchayats so that they can plan flexibly and implement locally relevant initiatives. However, in most, the substantive spirit of the constitutional design has been obstructed by politicians and bureaucrats, who fear the loss of their patronage powers. Panchayats are not given enough funds and are bypassed by State-controlled line departments that continue to implement programmes falling within the rightful domain of the former.

Past pandemics, apart from decimating populations, have also caused paradigm shifts in the perception of governance. The plague waves of the 15th century, which killed nearly three quarters of England and nine-tenths of people in some quarters of Europe, also undermined the political position of the Pope, whose assurances that god would come to the help of the virtuous, were not fulfilled. Will the novel coronavirus crisis trigger a reaction of greater faith in the local governments, or will it result in more centralisation? The picture on the ground is a fascinating one.

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While much of the deservedly generous appreciation that Kerala has received for combating the COVID-19 pandemic so far is focused on its Chief Minister and Health Minister, administering the lockdown with firmness and compassion and alleviating the distress caused to the poor has also been largely due to Kerala's empowered panchayats. True, Kerala has had a head start; no State has such a panchayat-friendly fiscal system. Nearly a third of Kerala's plan funds have been given to the panchayats as flexible development and maintenance funds, a policy that the government follows even though it suffers from chronic fiscal stress. The Kudumbashree system, which encourages women to form self-help groups and their federations, acts as an organised civil society counterpoint to the panchayats, collaborating with and yet holding to account the latter for their performance. Kudumbashree has also been an effective incubator for women leaders who have then stepped into the political sphere; nearly 65% of all women elected to the panchayats are Kudumbashree members.

Kerala's panchayats were COVID-19-ready because years ago, they stepped in as caregivers for the old, the weak and the marginalised. From their flexible funds, panchayats feed the destitute through their Ashraya programme, and run free day care centres for the mentally and physically challenged through 'Buds' schools. These are initiatives in which the government later

participated in, but the initiatives were those of the panchayats themselves. Moving from that to taking care of those affected by COVID-19 has been an easy transition.

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In contrast, Karnataka typifies the stop-start approach of most States to strengthening local governments. Its politicians play a double game. For political reasons they have passed laws that create a powerful framework for democratic decentralisation. But in practice the panchayats are tied down through restricted finance and administrative controls, parallel structures, and have deputed officers who owe allegiance to their line departments rather than to the elected panchayat body. Most bureaucrats support and implement this charade of devolution.

Yet, today, the State is witnessing a revival of panchayati raj in practice, triggered by the State response to the COVID-19 crisis. First, it would have been impossible to impose the lockdown in the State effectively without the cooperation and support of the panchayats. Second, the lockdown has also tied the hands of the government; only essential services of the government, such as the police and the health departments, are functioning without physical restrictions. All other departmental staff have stopped travelling to villages, giving instructions and monitoring their programmes and plans.

Governance abhors vacuums, and that is what is prompting the revival of democratic decentralisation. As locked-in senior officials cannot oversee their frontline workers, panchayats have stepped in and are taking charge. Nearly all panchayats in Karnataka passed a formal resolution that no one in their respective areas will go hungry.

Kadashettihalli Satish, an elected member to the Kadaba gram panchayat in Karnataka's Tumkur District, is president of the Karnataka State Grama Panchayat Sadasyara Maha Okkoota, a federation of district and taluk associations of elected panchayat representatives in the State. He speaks of how panchayats are rising to the occasion. He credits the government with the creation of gram panchayat and village-level COVID-19 task forces, and the way these have begun to easily and readily function to handle the crisis.

The panchayat-level task force meets twice a week. The primary health centre doctor, auxiliary nurse midwives and accredited social health activists are part of the task force in which all elected representatives and panchayat-level staff participate. Decisions taken on COVID-19 related management such as implementing the lockdown, disinfection, providing food to those who need it and ensuring the supply of other essential services are implemented by the village-level task forces.

Yet, all is not well. In a panchayat in Kolar district, while the entire body resolved to buy masks for people, the panchayat development officer, an officer deputed from above and placed with the panchayat, obstructed the resolution. He owed no allegiance to the panchayat to which he was posted, and ignored government guidelines giving flexibility to panchayats to decide appropriate responses to the pandemic.

Another problem looms large. Very soon, the five-year terms of the panchayats will come to an end and an election is impossible in the current circumstances. A confident and caring government ought to continue with the current elected bodies functioning as administrators. If instead they appoint officials or their chosen political representatives to take charge, then we will know where the government stands on its commitment to democratic decentralisation.

T.R. Raghunandan is Former Secretary, Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, Karnataka, and

Former Joint Secretary, Ministry of Panchayat Raj, Government of India

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