

THINK LOCAL CLIMATE ACTION, THINK MEENANGADI

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A climate literacy campaign being undertaken by volunteers going door to door in Meenangadi panchayat, Kerala. File photo: Special Arrangement

If India has to achieve the set of goals enunciated in the [‘Panchamrit’ resolution of the COP26 climate summit](#) in Glasgow 2021, it is necessary that panchayati raj institutions, the third tier of government which are closest to the people are involved. Although international and national policies have been formulated with large-scale investments, it is necessary to have a suitable local action plan for implementation and enforcement, initiated and coordinated by local governments. In the context of greater devolution that has taken place, panchayats, as local governments, can play a pivotal role in tackling many of the causes and effects of climate change.

Over the past few decades, there has been a manyfold increase in the number of climate-related national disasters. Much of India's population still lives in the rural areas and is involved in agriculture and other agri-based activities. The greater variability in rainfall and temperatures, etc. experienced of late has directly affected the livelihood and well-being of millions of rural households. India's National Action Plan on Climate Change 2008 identifies a range of priority areas for coordinated intervention at the national and State levels. However, there would have been better results had panchayati raj institutions been given a greater role. Through the ongoing decentralisation process which ensures people's participation, panchayats can play a crucial and frontline role in coordinating effective responses to climate risks, enabling adaptation and building climate-change resilient communities.

The climate change discussion also focuses on the emerging and widely accepted concept of 'carbon neutrality' which puts forth the notion of zero carbon developments, nature conservation, food, energy and seeds sufficiency, and economic development. As human activities are the cause of the current climate crisis, mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to growing and extreme weather events are critical. Zero carbon development which promotes sustainable living is the effective solution to reducing anthropogenic emissions and improving climate resilience.

In recent years, many panchayats have come forward with the concept of carbon neutrality, a prominent example being Meenangadi gram panchayat in Kerala's Wayanad district, which serves as a model to emulate. In 2016, the panchayat envisaged a project called 'Carbon

neutral Meenangadi', the aim being to transform Meenangadi into a state of carbon neutrality. There were campaigns, classes and studies to begin with. An awareness programme was conducted initially. A greenhouse gases emission inventory was also prepared. The panchayat was found to be carbon positive. An action plan was prepared by organising gram sabha meetings. Socio-economic surveys and energy-use mapping were also carried out. Several multi sector schemes were implemented to reduce emissions, increase carbon sequestration, and preserve the ecology and bio-diversity. 'Tree banking' was one of landmark schemes introduced to aid carbon neutral activities which encouraged the planting of more trees by extending interest-free loans. Interestingly 1,58,816 trees were planted which have also been geo-tagged to monitor their growth. The entire community was involved in the process, with school students, youth, and technical and academic institutions given different assignments. Five years have passed and the changes are visible. Local economic development was another thrust area where LED bulb manufacturing and related micro-enterprises were initiated.

There is also the example of Palli gram panchayat in Jammu and Kashmir that has followed the same people-centric model, with specific local activities. The panchayat has prepared a climate-resilient plan where villagers have been made aware of climate change Mitigation factors such as reducing energy consumption, cutting down on the use of fossil fuels, the use of solar energy, abandoning plastics and promoting plantation and water conservation measures were given prominence. Bio-gas plants and solar panels were also introduced. A solar plant (500KW) has been installed to power 340 households. A Gram Panchayat Development Plan for 2022-23 is being prepared by integrating a climate-resilient plan.

There are many other panchayats that have also initiated carbon neutral programmes. In Seechewal gram panchayat, the Kali Bein river was rejuvenated with people's involvement. Odanthurai panchayat in Tamil Nadu has its own windmill (350 KW). Tikekarwadi gram panchayat in Maharashtra is well known for its extensive use of biogas plants and green energy production. Chapparapadavu gram panchayat in Kerala has several green islands that have been nurtured by the community. Many more panchayats are coming forward in this regard.

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has focused its attention on localising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on a thematic basis. 'Clean and Green Village' has been identified as the fifth theme where panchayats can take up activities on natural resource management, biodiversity protection, waste management and afforestation activities. According to the latest data, 1,09,135 gram panchayats have prioritised 'Clean & Green Village' as one of their focus areas for 2022-23. The Ministry has highlighted the need for the documentation of best practices and for wider dissemination. The net result is that many panchayats are coming forward with their eco plans. The integrated Panchayat Development Plan prepared by all panchayats is a stepping stone towards addressing many of the environmental concerns of villages.

In today's age of rapid technological advancements and digital transformation, India's rural local bodies are silently contributing their strength to ensuring the global target of carbon neutrality, as envisaged in the UN conference on climate change.

Rekha Yadav who was Joint Secretary, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India till recently, is now Divisional Railway Manager, North Eastern Railway

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