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Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 27 (Jul. 5-11, 2003), pp. 2873-2879

Published by: [Economic and Political Weekly](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4413760>

Accessed: 29-05-2015 05:35 UTC

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# Aggrandiser Government and Local Governance

*'Aggrandiser government', in most states, continues to hold on to most powers, even as they have been formally devolved to local government through conformity legislations. Deficiencies in facilitating the potential of panchayati raj persist at three levels – state, panchayati raj institutions and societal levels. Big government at the state level with a patrimonial perception of self and aggrandiser instincts has pushed the 'self-governance participatory model' of the panchayats to the periphery, both at the level of discourse and praxis. This coupled with conceptual inadequacies, epistemic and operational constraints, poor finances, and political interference have posed a serious challenge to the realisation of the potential role envisaged for panchayats in the 73rd Amendment. If panchayati raj has to fulfil its foundational tenets of empowering the community there is need to recognise the primacy of societal good over individual or political goals. PRIs have to transform themselves into community institutions fulfilling a social contract with an all inclusive participatory planning and associationalism as essential methodologies.*

AURELIANO FERNANDES

The post colonial polity, in India, has witnessed tensions between the overbearing size and growth of governments, central and state, (both in terms of numerical growth of political executive and bureaucracy), the functions performed by government (both extensively and intensively), and the democratic aspirations of civil society. 'The principal clash, at this point, appears to be between the logic of modernity', which haunts the state and in which it is embroiled, in its transition from colonialism to post colonialism, 'and the issues of identity and high politics of the state'.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the ambiguity over modernity-rationalisation connectiveness, the Indian state continues to legitimise itself, maintaining that it has exclusivity over social transformation. This logic has been extended by states showing reticence to devolve functional powers to panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) frontally violating the centre's decentralisation initiatives such as the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment (CA).

The predatory nature of these state governments, encapsulated in the term 'aggrandiser government' has a firm anchorage in a political bourgeoisie, which is a class coalition. Indefinite in composition and character, it is able to ensure substantial domination of PRIs and communities, sufficient enough to render them impotent in bringing about significant social transformation, despite powers and functions mandated by the CA.

Although state governments themselves have grown substantially,<sup>2</sup> there is a growing failure to engage with not only major societal problems, but even routine civic issues. This syndrome is increasingly getting reflected even in local government, with few being able to provide good motorable roads, implement water supply, electricity or social welfare schemes or even impound stray cattle due to anomalies associated with not just non-devolution of funds, but substantive powers and staff.

The fundamental question therefore is, can state governments ever sort out their aggrandiser instincts and empower PRIs to

work in accordance with the constitutional mandate under Article 243 (g) for preparing plans and implementing schemes for ensuring 'economic development' and 'social justice', or will structural compulsions of state politics, which are determined by capitalist system, coalitional arrangements and the changing balance in the class coalitions dimunitise local government?

PRIs left at the periphery of discourse, have been plagued with serious conceptual inadequacies retarding their transformation into vibrant institutions of village development within and across states.

## Conceptual Inadequacies of Role of Panchayats

In its present genesis, role of panchayats has evolved broadly through four stages:

(1) *Role as appendage to empire*: where panchayats were conceded to freedom fighters demanding democratisation, by the British, since local bodies were perceived as least important within the colonial regime.

(2) *Role emerging as byproduct of tribute to the Mahatma*: where panchayats emerged in part IV of the Constitution as a compromise between the gram swaraj vision of the Mahatma and intense village factionalism perception of Ambedkar. Panchayats here were not a conviction, but an option.

(3) *The post-independence implementary role*: where concerns of political stability and national interest legitimised a strong state at the expense of PRIs even as Nehru threw his weight behind people's elective institutions. Up to 1993, panchayats in most states functioned as village level implementing extensions of administrative departments.

(4) *The post 73rd Amendment 'potentially self-government role'*: Though the 73rd CA was a watershed in Indian democracy bringing with it mandatory provision for constituting panchayats, holding elections to PRIs, and introducing reservations for women and SCs and STs, the role of the panchayats was essentially left

to the mercy of state legislatures. The criticality hinged on a single word wherein the CA said:

The legislature of a state may, by law endow the panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government...

The first three conceptual inadequacies hardly created conditions for panchayats to emerge as institutions of self-government. Other concerns whether at the central or state levels, took precedence thus pushing panchayats to the periphery. Even in its fourth 'avatar' legitimisation of panchayats rests with state governments, due to federal constraints.

### Status of Devolution of Powers to PRIs

The conformity legislations of most states have not significantly altered the functional domains of gram panchayats, across the country. A study of 15 select states<sup>3</sup> revealed, that where middle or top tiers were not constituted, states did not endow them with adequate functional responsibility post-73rd CA. States which had constituted PRIs prior to CA, merely repeated the provisions of existing statutes in the new conformity legislations. The study conducted across Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Punjab, Haryana, Assam and Goa, also discovered that most states granted a plethora of functional responsibilities but no executive follow-up of granting adequate powers, staff and additional financial resources was done.

Most states and bureaucracies were indisposed to have elected PRIs and quite obviously the moot issue was not devolution of additional responsibilities but granting them necessary powers, staff and funds within the present dispensation itself. A dominant lack of political and administrative will to strengthen panchayats is evident in several states. Taking the state of Goa as a typology, it is pertinent to map the structure and timeline of devolution of powers to panchayats as an indication of the absent political and administrative will.

Goa has a two tier structure with 188 village panchayats, covering two-thirds of the population with 1,428 members. The four categories panchayats with five, seven, nine and 11 member wards have populations ranging from 1,500 upto 2,000 for D class panchayats to over 8,000 people for A class panchayats (Table).

Although the Goa Panchayati Raj Act (GPRA) 1994, was passed within a year of the 73rd CA. elections to panchayats were held three years hence. For six years the single tier structure

existent since 1962, continued to exist, until the zilla panchayats were constituted through a governor's ordinance, when the state was under president's rule. The state election commission and the state finance commission were constituted five years post passage of GPRA.

Eight years post-GPRA, the status of PRIs in Goa remains substantially unchanged, since 29 subjects allocated to panchayats have still not been devolved. Five minor parts of subjects have been devolved to zilla panchayats and quite incomprehensibly, the subject of maintenance of primary school buildings has been unceremoniously ripped off from ZPs and given to parents teachers associations of each school. It can be surmised that the 'potentially self-government role' [Fernandes 2001a:16] of panchayats has not materialised due to failures at three levels – failure at state government level, at PRI level and at societal level.

### Aggrandiser Government and Deficiencies at State Level

In discussions on devolution or non-devolution of powers to the sub state level in most states, one perceives the emergence of a form which necessitates the coinage aggrandiser government. A government which may not belong to any particular political party but is defined by a political culture which is characterised by metaphysical megalomania, especially of the leadership; which believes in institution bashing for its own political ends in general and in particular, it shows reticence in acknowledging the criticality of PRIs, in rural transformation, due to its own power compulsions.

(1) *Perception of the self and the other*: Aggrandiser government comprising the political class and supported by state level bureaucracy, is patrimonial and patronising and believes that it alone knows best, what is good for the state. It puts no faith in the capabilities of rural communities to better understand and solve their problems, nor in their right to be able to decide on issues and problems that confront or concern them.<sup>4</sup> It perceives itself as indispensable and rights and powers of local communities as dispensable.

Even in Kerala, from the mid-1950s to the 1990s, successive governments did not reconcile the need to plan sectoral targets and or ensuring vertical coherence with the need for horizontal coordination and integration at local levels...the easier path of retaining resources at the top and fixing targets and making

Table: Time Scale of Devolution of Powers to PRIs in Goa

Year	Event	Notable Features	Status in Dec 2002
1994	GPRA passed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 tier structure proposed</li> <li>• No elections held</li> <li>• 29 subjects in act</li> </ul>	No powers devolved
1997	VP elections held	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 188 panchayats constituted</li> <li>• No elections for ZPs</li> </ul>	V P elections last held in January 2002
1999	SFC Constituted in February 1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chairman took office April 1999</li> <li>• Report sub in April 1999</li> </ul>	SFC recommendations not implemented
1999	SEC constituted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 years after GPRA</li> </ul>	SEC conducted the 2002 election for the first time.
2000	ZPs constituted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ZPs constituted under president's rule</li> <li>• 25 subjects in the act</li> <li>• No powers devolved</li> <li>• 5 minor subjects delegated to ZPs from 1999-2000 financial year onwards</li> </ul>	One minor subject (of the five) given to ZPs, that of maintenance of primary school buildings transferred to Parents Teachers Association without consulting ZPs.

delivery through vertical system of organisation was followed [Ramachandran 1995]. Fortunately, this changed post-1994 with withdrawal of the aggrandiser government there and emergence of a transformative leadership.

(2) *The question of size:* Compared to state bureaucracies, the panchayats are inadequately staffed. In some states they have no staff support at all. The study of select states cited earlier revealed that except for four major states where the intermediate and apex tier had adequate staff, in most other states, either the staff was not directly relevant to rural development or inadequate.

In Goa, 64 departments with a shockingly large bureaucracy of over 50,000 usurp Rs 250 crore by way of total emoluments [Narayan 1999]. Contrast this with the situation of panchayats which are woefully understaffed with just one secretary and peon. One secretary in south Goa serves three panchayats, spending just two days (effectively 16 hours) at each panchayat. Not only are secretaries physically unable to process the cases of the neediest, but lack of staff mortgages the entire functioning of panchayats, in matters such as tax collection, which is their major source of revenue. Only the larger panchayats have an additional clerk to facilitate administrative tasks.

(3) *The refusal at operational devolution:* The refusal at operational devolution includes the problem of (i) democratisation and the (ii) problem of administrative decentralisation.

(i) *The problem of democratisation:* Roots in the unitary British colonial governance provided the matrix for centripetal Indian state. Today this system is perceptibly moving towards incremental centralisation in actuality. For instance in Goa, some powers of the district collector have been appropriated by the state without devolving these to higher panchayat bodies such as zilla panchayats, as also in Orissa [Mohanty 1997].

Thus panchayats are saddled with residual powers and functions well short of the legitimisation of 'panchayat government' as a third tier. The small size of the Goa state and the incapacity of PRIs to deliver, are the principal rationalisations of the political class against constituting zilla panchayats and devolving powers to them. But a more serious impediment against decentralising is the perception that state governments deliver better and they cannot experiment with the fiasco of decentralised planning by panchayats or ZPs, if subjects are devolved.

Although it appears that at least political decentralisation (in terms of governance) has eventuated post 73rd CA, this is not so. In Goa, the political decentralisation process is stuck at various stages of redundancy as evident from the timeline of devolution, (see the table), since MLAs are unwilling to cede powers for fear of being unable to dispense favours to supporters at the grass roots level.

(ii) *The problem of administrative decentralisation:* Rural development inheres a necessary human component which is quintessential to planning, decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development projects. Planning conceptualised at a distant state capital is largely irrelevant or unsuited to people's needs even in small states such as Goa. The different geographical locations require administrative decentralisation to respond to their needs, in an efficient, economical and effective manner.

The zilla panchayats have been assigned 25 subjects in Schedule II of the GPRA but till date no full-fledged powers/subjects have been allocated to them. For the years 1999-2000 and 2000-2001, five functions had been allotted to zilla panchayats including minor irrigation and farmers training, maintenance and repair

of government primary schools, construction/repair and maintenance of rural roads, rural health centres and sub centres and rural water supply. In real terms the zilla panchayats are handicapped in their functioning even while exercising these powers.<sup>5</sup> The district rural development agencies have been constituted as late as in 2002. No line staff from state government departments have been transferred to DRDAs. Finally the DRDAs have not been brought under the administrative control of the ZPs.

(iii) *Women and weaker sections:* The representation of women in panchayat bodies stands at 458 members, just five more than the reserved quota of 453, this is not path-breaking, given Goa's colonial background and relatively better position of women than in the rest of the country. But nowhere is there a fear in the minds of women to participate at elections, protest movements or any meetings. There is no semblance of violence against women for political participation. Socially too, they are on equal footing with men. The 73rd Amendment has only reinforced the status of women even more and women themselves contest, win elections and participate in the development of the villages, in Goa, without being a proxy to their male family member.

The total number of seats reserved for women in north Goa panchayats is 284, while those in south Goa are 169. Women have 17 seats reserved in the zilla panchayats, 10 in north Goa and seven in south Goa. Besides one-third of the seats of sarpanchas and deputy sarpanchas, and one seat of chairperson and deputy chairperson are reserved for women. Thirty one seats in north Goa and 46 seats in south Goa have been reserved in the panchayats for OBCs to facilitate their political empowerment.

(4) *Refusal at financial devolution:* Little headway seems to be made at economic decentralisation (planning) either. State governments seem to have delegated economically less productive, politically less feasible or administratively cumbersome taxes [Choudhury and Subramanyam 2001] to the PRIs, in most states. Potential revenue earners such as profession tax and entertainment tax have been usurped by the states after devolution citing grant in aid compensation as adequate.

A fundamental step in the direction of economic decentralisation is the constitution of the state finance commission (SFC). In many states, the constitution of SFC itself has been sluggish or their reports not tabled or accepted or new SFCs have been constituted, in an endless bid to delay financial devolution. In Goa, the SFC's recommendations for devolution of 27 per cent of state's own tax revenue and share of central tax for activities transferred under non-plan and 13 per cent of annual state plan, excluding earmarked negotiated loan component and project specific central assistance, for activities transferred under plan expenditure have not been accepted by various state governments.<sup>6</sup>

Eight years post-GPRA, panchayat government hangs in balance on the last promise of the incumbent BJP chief minister made in November 2001, to devolve more powers to panchayats before January 2002 panchayat elections, with a rider that they would also be made accountable for any lapses on their part [Sinha 2001:1]. A new legislative assembly and nine months later no powers have been devolved to any tier.

Secondly, although Article 243 G assigns the function of preparation of plans for economic development and social justice to PRIs, planning at the sub-state level is still a non reality. Panchayat finances are fragile in most states where the total receipts of tax revenue is only 3.5 per cent from 1992-98, in the 15 select states of the study conducted by NIRD. It is about 5 per



cent in Orissa, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Haryana, and between 10 per cent and 20 per cent in Assam, Goa and Kerala. House tax is the single largest revenue earner for most panchayats across states. Most other taxes are non-remunerative and meagre. Embedded in the question of financial viability is the issue of self-reliance. The primary aim of strengthening grass roots level democratisation at the panchayat level would succeed only if they became economically self-reliant [Fernandes and Mukhopadhyay 1999b: 62].

(5) *The epistemic constraints*: The fragmentation of government into multiple departments and agencies has created a number of 'black boxes' at various systemic levels. This coupled with the tendency of the bureaucracy for centralisation and of holding on to power, has led what Ghosh (1998) calls a culture of holding back vital information, even as Goa is one of the few states to have passed the Right to Information Act.

Bureaucrats who pride themselves in the Weberian construct characterised by anonymity, impartiality and impersonal attitude, feel that since panchayat members are guided by interests of party and or caste, and political support, and hence withholding information would enable them (bureaucrats) to pursue the larger interests of the community. Viewed from the panchayat perspective, government appears to be secretive, since people as well as panchayat members have to get into an endless maze of going from one unhelpful bureaucrat to another creating the feeling that they have to know some hidden 'first principle'. Broadly classified, knowledge deficit falls into (i) lack of information about the panchayat acts, amendments and their implications and (ii) lack of knowledge about structures, functions, rules and procedures governing the delivery system.<sup>7</sup>

### Deficiencies at the PRI Level

(1) *Perception of self as incapable*: Most panchayat members have developed a sort of institutional inferiority complex vis-a-vis the state government. They seem unable to catalyse any activity without state funding and manpower. Understandably, it emerges from long years of political interference which has now rendered the proactive traditional institutional culture<sup>8</sup> almost impotent.

Across many states in India PRIs have no programme for resource mobilisation from existing revenues. The "government as a crutch" perception of panchayats was evident in the training programme for panchayat members and functionaries<sup>9</sup> where out of the total of 160 questions asked via telephone, 72 per cent invariably ended with the emphatic interjection "What is the (state) government doing about it?". Although one may contend that serious questions like control of pollution from mining waste cannot be tackled by panchayats alone, especially when the mining lobby has a visible nexus with politicians, one is simply underlining an alarming attitude where panchayats could not throw up solutions as to how to solve farmers' problems with regard to dehusking of grain of basmati and indrayani varieties and ridiculously enough even unable to control the stray dog menace [Fernandes 2000: 282]. This is in stark contrast to cooperative water supply projects or transportation projects in states such as Kerala.

(2) *Endemic instability*: The patterns of the emerging core formal institution at the village level – the village panchayat, in the context of the structural factor – size, does not augur well for participatory governance or transformation of the socio-eco-

nomic terrain. The small size of the panchayat (with members ranging from five to 11) makes it a focal point of intense political conflict and instability for varied reasons, listed below in order of significance:

(i) Horizontal political conflict (arising out of conflicting political aspirations among panchayat members themselves).

(ii) Vertical political conflict (arising out of conflict over power sharing between constituents of state executive/legislature (ministers/MLAs) and panchayat members, which leads them to interfere in the leadership and functioning of panchayats and indulge in toppling games of the ruling group by proxy).

(iii) Gender conflict (arising out of the constitutional provision of reservation of post of sarpanch for women, and, a male deputy sarpanch's desire to control the panchayat in connivance with other male members).<sup>10</sup>

These conflicts overrun the institutional presumptions of decentralisation – participation, efficiency and responsiveness, leading to (i) inadequate public service delivery and (ii) creation of inequity. The village panchayats, then, instead of eliciting increased citizens' participation, are witnessing people "voting with their feet" (as seen from minimal participation at gram sabhas in most states). Citizens then approach ministers at the state level for dispensation of state largesse, showing a preference for centralised functioning, in effect.

(3) *Political leadership and culture*: The institution of gram sabha is dysfunctional in most states. The sarpanch and panchas ritually go through the motions of publicity and end up with attendance poor enough not to secure a quorum. Citizens keep away for lack of a political culture of collective and transparent decision-making within panchayats. This is evidently clear from the fact that a gram sabha meeting of Calangute panchayat (north Goa district) which was first initiated in May 1997, was adjourned for over two years for failure on the part of the sarpanch and members to conclusively reply to charges of corruption and misappropriation of funds.<sup>11</sup>

Lack of awareness, or interest, or anticipation of a quarrel, as in Haryana, selective mobilisation of people with rehearsed agenda at a venue disclosed only to the leadership's supporters in order to take decisions that benefit the group or the leadership<sup>12</sup> are other responsible factors. Hence there is a perceptible and growing disjuncture between a weakening institutional culture and incremental process of political decentralisation. Village governments operating with hairline majorities are reticent to translate popular support into popular governance [Fernandes 1999a]. This has led to certain deficiencies of public perception of PRIs.

### Deficiencies at the Level of Civil Society

The societal perception of panchayats is an important factor for its legitimacy and support. Panchayats often get perceived as 'poor man's burden' since only those that are economically badly off, need to depend on the panchayat for monetary support and employment and hence have to attend the gram sabha meetings. The panchayat is also seen as a school or training ground for MLAs and therefore murky in essence, since that is where the first lessons in corruption are rehearsed and perfected. Panchayats are perceived as agencies of nepotism where favours are bestowed on either the kin of those in power, political supporters or prospective vote banks. Finally panchayats are seen by some as 'talking shops' with no real powers to constrain and hold panchayat members accountable for their actions.

Legitimacy of panchayats is thus gauged from attendance at the gram sabhas. In Goa, gram sabha attendance ranges from 0.33 per cent (15 to 25 people) in Chodan-Madel panchayat (north Goa district) to a high of about 3.33 per cent (200 people) in Candolim panchayat (north Goa district). Many gram sabha meetings have to be adjourned due to lack of quorum and are then held without quorum. The level of attendance shoots up to about 16 per cent (1,000 people) only if issues concerning some sensitive political or financial interests are at stake, such as merger of panchayats with municipality which would either mean dilution of support base of a political group or higher taxes under a municipality. Participation is higher in the interior talukas of Goa, which are less developed, and essentially agricultural.<sup>13</sup>

In order to ensure legitimacy for the PRIs, while there is need for equitability in its dispensation of functions and welfare benefits, the more dominant concern is the devolution of powers to panchayats to facilitate village governance, enhance human development and offer people choice of a better quality of life. For this a series of strategies have to be evolved at all three levels mentioned above.

### Strategising towards Devolution of Powers to PRIs

Reluctance of state government to devolve powers, is a political problem which necessitates a political strategy. Other strategies would collate the effort but would not in themselves displace the importance of the former. Broadly two sets of strategies are in order: (i) strategies specific to the present leadership/party government in concerned states, and (ii) strategies that may be generic to all leadership/party governments in all states.

#### Specific Strategies

In order to suggest a strategy one has to understand the nature of the incumbent state government and its compulsions in assumption and continuance in power. In states plagued by frequent instability and defections the specific nature and structuration of coalitions will be crucial to devolution of powers to PRIs.

In a state, where a government is formed through the instrumentality of defectors or independents, and where the hounding concern is therefore popular legitimacy, as is the case with the BJP government in Goa, the strategies would vary from a state where there is a stable one party government. Clear and transparent decision-making matrix within a state would evoke a strategy in contrast where key middlemen filter information to the leadership. In all these cases unless the leadership perceives that a particular action will benefit its consolidation of political support base<sup>14</sup> as seen in Karnataka in 1983 [Manor 22] it will not support issues pertaining to devolution.

The plausible thing to do in states such as Goa, therefore appears to be lobbying through key men, who have access to the leadership or individual cabinet ministers. These could be party men who are panchayat members or are committed to the success of PRIs. This non-confrontationist approach would not antagonise the leadership, which is in a hurry to gain the allegiance of various levels of government and civil servants, bringing in a new patrimonialism [Peters and Wright 1996]. This approach of lobbying carries with it an apprehension that the political leadership would perceive the state as its personal dispensation and devolution of powers to PRIs would be part of this package,

much against the spirit of constitutionalism that is so sacred to democracies.

### Generic Strategies

The more legitimate and 'respectable' political strategy would be to engage in a struggle for devolution of powers. A struggle that is deftly conceptualised, sustained and pervades at all levels –institutional, as well as at the level of civil society.

(1) *Leveraging the legislature*: In Goa, at the institutional level, the strategy would be to sensitise the opposition Congress, which is organisationally totally in disarray and confused, ever since the BJP came to power in November 2000, and again in June 2002. A firm strategy such as that of the Karnataka Janata Dal in 1983, would gain them much support if they raised the issue and showed commitment to devolution of powers in the Goa legislative assembly.

Since the GPRA is largely comprehensive and adequate in its design, minor amendments such as providing for direct election of sarpanchas and deputy sarpanchas are necessary to ensure stability. But what needs urgent attention is pressurising for a government order to ensure financial and administrative devolution. The opposition could force discussions on this through the BAC. The issue could also be raised in a sustained manner at question hour, calling attention motions, adjournment motions and at political meetings called for the purpose.

(2) *Sensitising the media*: The role of the fourth estate is crucial to devolution of power to PRIs. The incumbent leadership, in Goa, with primacy to the legitimacy factor, has reposed much faith in the print media, which in general has the power to create and sideline leaders. Most governments in Goa have cultivated the media<sup>15</sup> in such a manner that by the late 1980s criticism of the government rested on the efforts of a solitary newspaper. Presently, critics believe that the media is briefed about certain policy decisions even before the cabinet learns of the same. If this is true then using this institutional mechanism as a leveraging tool, appears even more strategic.

(3) *Participatory struggle*: Another strategy at the political level would be to engage in a sustained participatory struggle through the All Goa Panchayat Parishad (AGPP). To ensure success, the 1,428 panchayat members have to cease 'running with the rabbit and hunting with the hound' whenever it is politically exigent. Then state level politicians cannot be blamed for believing that sarpanchas and panchas are willing pawns in their political games.

The AGPP seems to indulge in 'double speak', individually paying obeisance to politicians to better their own political prospects, but collectively paying lip service to empowerment of PRIs. They have to form a strong pressure group with a realisation of the 'greater common good' which has to supersede myopic individual gains. In its initial struggle, the AGPP could organise meetings all over Goa to sensitise citizens to the criticality of devolution of powers to panchayats and how they could be utilised to transform their lives and protect community interests. In its extreme form, it could engage in boycott of all functions organised at village level by cabinet ministers and government officials especially those dealing with PRIs. This could be done in small states such as Pondicherry where no elections have been held.

(4) *Making the bureaucracy proactive*: The onus of good governance rests as much on the bureaucracy as with civil society. Often, more than politicians, it is the bureaucracy which feels

threatened by decentralisation process for fear of losing powers to PRIs. Bureaucracy needs sensitisation about the 'greater common good' which could emerge from their 'sacrificing a few files from their signatures'. Directorates such as the directorate of panchayats, district-rural-development agencies should suo moto draw up models of rural governance with scenarios of power devolution, and inter-alia suggest how their implementation could benefit even politicians' narrow political goals and enhance prospects of electoral victories, as the Janata Dal Karnataka experience has demonstrated.

(5) *Drawing up an agenda for rural governance*: Any venturing out into governance or devolution of powers for governance has to be preceded by goal setting, development of core competencies and research. In goal setting one has to debate the role of the state and local governments, what would be the purpose of decentralisation, and how there is need for creative destruction or downsizing of government. The use of information technology and debureaucratisation have also to be factored into the agenda of rural governance. The agenda for rural governance has to be drawn up through inter-organisational linkages, research, participation of NGOs and people themselves. Key to this project will be the research agenda which will have to be interdisciplinary, inclusive of a wide range of options. A series of seminars and workshops would have to be organised with paired papers with opposing views. Discussants could be from bureaucracy, including secretaries to state government. This would work towards creating a critical mass of intellectual activity, by soliciting contributions from scholars, practitioners (sarpanchas, panchas, women members politicians), NGOs, bureaucrats [Fernandes 2001b] with people at the core of this exercise.

(6) *Reinvigorating state institutes of rural development (SIRDs)*: The SIRDs which are autonomous institutions for training at the state level, have a key role in aiding the process of capacity building for functionaries, panchayat members, women and core groups within civil society, through research and training. Strangulation of funds and lack of commitment at the political level to sustain and reinvigorate these institutes could prove counterproductive. There is need for structural and orientational changes, sustained inter-organisational linkages between educational and research institutions such as the universities, so as to create a body of knowledge on which additional devolution could be based [Fernandes 2001b]. Through training of elected members, SIRDs could develop core competencies and consequently create confidence among panchas to demand devolution.<sup>16</sup>

(7) *Choosing transformative leadership*: A remote village in Rajkot district, Raj Samadhiyala, embodies transformation through choice of inspired leadership. The village is self-sufficient in water amidst drought all around. Even the poorest have a pucca house. No political party is allowed to enter the village, every house has water, electricity, telephone, television. No crime has occurred in the mainly agricultural village for the last 20 years. The transformation has causality in the visionary leadership of sarpanch Hardevsinh Jadeja, an English literature graduate who believes in discipline, integrity and complete allegiance to the leader, which is perhaps responsible for the transformation of the village in 15 years. When such leadership brings a sea change in the livelihood of people, state governments cannot but concede the effectiveness of local governments.

(8) *Creation of social capital*: Robert Putnam claims that new technologies promote individualism to the extent that they are

privatising our lives. High per capita income and a decent standard of living has injected a high level of individualism in Goa. Consequently, civic culture based on group formation is dying. More and more people are disengaging with politics. Lack of trust in others and the polity itself is evident.

In Goa there are no 'standing armies' to take up a battle cry for a cause, such as devolution of powers to panchayats, as may be in Kerala, which is dominantly agrarian. The transformation of Goa into a city-state has led to the emergence of lifestyle politics. Goans may better adapt to volunteer activity than to demands of say attending the gram sabha meetings. While these could be encouraged, disengagement with politics at the local level could have tragic consequences for local governance.

Changes in empowerment of PRIs will not emerge without a change of attitude at the level of civil society. There is need to inculcate social capital through associationalism and promotion of group activity. To the extent that society contends 'governance is not its business' and large sections of the citizenry are not conscientised and do not participate, in the struggle for devolution of powers to PRIs and limit aggrandiser government, to that extent the promises of panchayati raj will remain unfulfilled.

## Conclusion

It must be said that the form of governance envisioned by panchayati raj, which is egalitarian, participatory, and all-inclusive catering to the needs of village communities cannot emerge by strategies alone. No amount of lobbying could move an obstinate political class if it wishes to remain unmoved. Strategies would be successful to the extent that they enhance the dawning of the 'age of reason', a sort of a 'political enlightenment' for the political class, where they arrive at a realisation that long-term societal goals have a primacy over individual or short-term political goals. Therefore in this paper the realisation of the 'greater common good' has been oft repeated.

Finally, if panchayati raj has to fulfil its foundational tenets of empowering the community, there is need to transcend the thinking that devolution of powers will alone ensure good governance at village level. PRIs have to transform themselves from being 'constitutionally created institutions from above', to community institutions, which attain a certain legitimacy with support and participation from a large section of the population. They has to fulfil a 'social contract' with an all inclusive participatory planning and associationalism as essential methodologies, to transform rural India. Otherwise devolution of powers to the third tier may just result in replacement of a state bureaucracy with a panchayat bureaucracy with all its functional malaise. **EPW**

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## Notes

- 1 This is an adaptation from Zoya Hassan (ed) 2000. *Politics and the State in India*.
- 2 Goa with a population of just 13 lakh, has a large bureaucracy of 49016 employees [GoG 1999], with a very high ratio, of one government servant for every 26 citizens, as compared to other states. Total emoluments of



bureaucracy amounted to Rs 238 crore, as on March 31, 1998, constituting 58 per cent of revenue expenditure, in the post-Fifth Pay Commission context. Thereafter despite a ban additional staff has been recruited, with figures the 50,000 mark. The expenditure incurred on total emoluments now stands at over Rs 250 crore [Narayan 1999]. This of course does not include the staff of local government – 12 municipalities and two zilla (district) panchayats and 189 village panchayats. The small state's gigantic functional apparatus comprises 64 departments and 26 state owned corporations. Most of the corporations are grossly overstaffed and incur heavy losses.

The legislative assembly size has grown from 30 legislators and three or four ministers in 1963 to 40 legislators and 14 ministers in the post statehood period.

- 3 Study was conducted by R C Choudhury and K Siva Subramaniam of the National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad and sponsored by the Eleventh Finance Commission, government of India. May 2001.
- 4 The obstinate refusal of the former secretary (rural development and panchayats), government of Goa, C V S Ramarao, to accept that no powers can be given to a even limited number of panchayats in Goa at a workshop on *Devolution of Powers to Panchayats*, held at the Goa Institute of Rural Development and Administration somewhere in 2000, is a potent evidence of this tendency.
- 5 For instance, one chief executive officer informed that although zilla panchayats had the power to repair primary school buildings for a short while, until August 2002, could not repair/replace broken benches when requested by the headmaster, since it would amount to audit impropriety.
- 6 In Goa, SFC was constituted in March 1999 with a tenure of three months, but it hurriedly submitted its report by April 1999 end, since the chairman had to leave for US on a personal visit.
- 7 For a detailed study see Fernandes 2000.
- 8 The one that was prevalent in the Comunidades, the ancient local self government institutions in Goa, where all initiative and action was purely societal with no funding from government.
- 9 Conducted by us at the department of political science, Goa University in collaboration with Directorate of Panchayats Goa and Goa Institute of Rural Development and Administration, December 9-18, 1997, via satellite with technical support from Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).
- 10 In Goa two cases were reported at Betki-Candola panchayat and Advalpal panchayat, which were both five member panchayats. Here women sarpanchas were ousted by three male panchas and no re election of another woman was possible since the other woman member could only propose the name of her colleague but male members would not second her nomination. Hence the deputy sarpanch, a male, would continue as de facto sarpanch. This anomaly has been rectified through an amendment recently.
- 11 The lady sarpanch, Muktabai Desai, (1997-2002) who many believe was not responsible for the misappropriation, left the meeting in tears and the involved deputy and panchas absented themselves feigning sickness. The situation was finally rectified with a 'order' from the directorate of panchayats who sent in the block development officer of Bardez taluka. Interview with then deputy director of panchayats (north Goa) C V Kavlekar.
- 12 The sarpanch of Bandora panchayat in eastern Goa's Ponda taluka held the mandatory four meetings a year but kept the venue and agenda of the meetings a closely guarded secret for quite some time. Although this may be seen as competitive democracy, competition cannot be separated from participation since only a combination of them ensures a more realistic measure of democracy [Vanhanen 1997: 34-35] especially at the grass roots level.
- 13 Rivona and Collem panchayats ( in Goa's eastern taluka of Sanguem) get about 7 per cent attendance, i.e, twice that of the coastal talukas; and Honda panchayat (Sattari taluka in eastern Goa) has about 5 per cent attendance.
- 14 The Janata leaders wanted to demonstrate that they were more imaginative and radically democratic from their Congress rivals, to revive the party's fortunes nationally. They also had next to no party organisation in the state, and they believed that a new system of elected councils at the district level and below would provide a framework for party building.
- 15 Various governments have appeased journalists by creating journalists colony,

by offering them land for housing at subsidised rates; housed them in government quarters at low rents; offered vehicles to report on elections. One chief minister even offered Odyssey briefcases with budget books during the budget session to cultivate the press.

- 16 In Goa, the modest beginnings made by the Goa Institute of Rural Development and Administration in collaboration with National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad have been negated by the discontinuation of teaching faculty and reducing training to departmental exercises in futility. Without training the development exercise at the local level could be just be a blindfolded muddling along exercise

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