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Civil Society And Grassroot Democracy In India

Dr. G. L. Sharma*

India is a country of kaleidoscopic diversity and plural society. Its ancient and rich civilisation has been shaped by various combinations of geopolitical, economic, social and demographic forces, which have produced a rich variety of institutions, social movements, traditions, systems of belief and practices. This Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic of more than one billion people living in 28 States and 7 Union Territories (UTs) is governed by a Constitution which is federal in structure with unitary features. The traditional social norms coexist with liberal democratic institutions in an uneasy, ambiguous, and contradictory relationship. One of the major limitations of Indian parliamentary democracy has been its centralised nature. Centralised democracy in India has failed and the pendulum has moved towards participatory and responsive government. Indians want a participatory and responsive democratic government. This research paper on Civil Society in the New Millennium discerns a shared dream among the citizens of India. Indians want peace, education and socio-economic security. They want to act and act responsibly, in the interest of shaping such a society and governance.

Recently the movement of civil society, nationwide accepted and popularised as "ANNA movement" initiated by Gandhian activist Sri Anna Hazare was a landmark one. It was,

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I think, only nationwide mass agitation after Complete Revolution by Loknayak Jay Prakash Narayan in 1975. The first things that people in India want for the future are peace, education, social and economic security, the opportunity to take responsibility for their own society, and a voice in local self-government. The present paper is an attempt to capture the contours of the relationship between the civil society and the institutions of local self-government in India in general and their interactions with civil society organisations in particular.

About 75 % of India's population live in more than half a million villages. Village communities and their organisations have been in existence in India for centuries. In olden days, Panchayats were functional institutions of grassroots governance in almost every village. The village Panchayat or elected council had large powers, both executive and judicial. However, the autonomy of Panchayats gradually disappeared owing to many reasons. But the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, which came into force on 24th April 1993, was meant to provide constitutional sanction to Panchayats and establish democracy at grassroots level as it is at the State level or national level. Except for 3 north-eastern States (having tribal councils) and two urban UTs, all the States/UTs coming under the purview of this Act have amended their Panchayat Acts in conformity with the Central Act. The Gram Sabha or village assembly has been envisaged as the foundation of the Panchayati Raj system.

There are three tiers of Panchayats (PRIs) at village (Gram Panchayat – GP), intermediate (Panchayat Samiti – PS) and district (Zilla Parishad – ZP) levels. The States having a population not exceeding 2 million have not constituted the Panchayat at intermediate level. As a result, at present, there are about 3.4 million representatives of Panchayats at all levels comprising 3,198,554 at the village level, 151,412 at the intermediate level and 15,935 at the district level. These members represent 227,698 Gram Panchayats, about 6,000 Panchayat Samitis and about 500 Zilla Parishads. All the seats in a Panchayat at every level are filled by elections from the respective territorial constituencies.

Not less than one-third of the total seats and offices of chairperson at each tier have been reserved for women. Reserved seats for weaker castes and tribes (SCs, STs and Backward – Dalits) have been provided at all levels in proportion to their population in the Panchayats. To supervise, direct and control the regular and smooth elections to Panchayats, a State Election Commission has been constituted in every State and UT. The Act has ensured constitution of a State Finance Commission in every State/UT, each term of office being five years, to suggest measures to strengthen the finances of PRIs. To promote bottom-up-planning, the District Planning Committee (DPC) in every district has been accorded constitutional status. An indicative list of 29 items has been given in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution. Panchayats are expected to play an effective role in planning and implementation of works related to these 29 items. The spirit of the Constitution visualises Panchayats as institutions of self-governance. However, given the federal structure of our polity, most of the financial powers and authorities to be bestowed on Panchayats have been left at the discretion of the State Legislature concerned. Consequently, the powers and functions vested in PRIs vary from State to State.

The constitutionally decentralised institutions have come into being. But they can't be a solution to all ills of governance. The reality is quite harsh. The distribution of rural assets and powers is heavily skewed in India – the bottom 39 % of rural households (belonging to lower castes) own only 5 % of all assets, while the top 5 % own 46 %. The literacy level among SC/ST and women is quite low. A rigid patriarchal structure inhibits women's participation in public affairs. Moreover, the majority of the elected representatives are first timers with little or no prior knowledge of the functioning of PRIs. Most of the women PRI members are illiterate and have to comply with social taboos and patriarchal values. They are 'expected' to be shy and submissive, resulting in weak articulation skills. So it is not easy for the rural weaker population to actively participate in the development process. Also at local levels, the powers held by individuals have traditionally always exceeded the limits imposed by social institutions. If the

people and their institutions are not active, the state and its institutions, whether in centralised or decentralised form, are forced to assume leadership of the people. Under these conditions, people's ability to exercise options in civil society interactions and within social hierarchies often becomes the requisite condition for local government to be responsive and accountable.

The constitutional provisions provide new opportunities and possibilities for building up leadership from among women and Dalits (Scheduled caste and scheduled tribes). The PRIs can also become the basis for further elaboration and strengthening of civil society in the country. A broad framework for strategic intervention was developed on the following principles:

1. The PRIs are to be viewed as institutions of local self-governance, not as mere implementors of centrally determined development programmes. Bottom-up planning, based on micro-planning, is to be the basis of self-governance. The PRIs should not be allowed to become the third tier of development administration.
2. The emphasis must be placed on active participation in decision making by women (and other weaker sections) with a view to enhancing their role, status and leadership in local self-governance.
3. Interventions in strengthening PRIs should focus on building, promoting and empowering new leadership by women, SC/ST and Dalits.
4. The PRIs should assert their access to and control over natural and human resources as well as other development resources available with the State and the national government.
5. Strengthening PRIs will entail clarifying their roles, systems of governance, accountability, transparency and inter-linkages.

The said intervention is multi-sectoral. Various studies revealed that only a strong, participatory, responsive and accountable government at local level can fulfil people's aspirations

and their needs. The PRIs have to be supported by strong voluntary actions. The people's bodies like Gram Sabhas have to be strengthened. There should be a healthy co-operation between community organisations and Panchayats. Finally, governmental policies should create an enabling environment for PRIs to act as vibrant and thriving institutions of local self-government.

One of the primary strategies of PRI's work comprises capacity building. It entails direct strengthening of the capacities of citizens, citizens' organisations, voluntary development organisations, support organisations and networks and coalitions of such organisations. To promote democracy at local level, a variety of local civil society organisations have been involved in strengthening PRIs. In many areas, successful conscientisation, group building and promotion of local leadership among marginalized sections have already been achieved through the efforts of voluntary organisations and activists. As a result, these NGOs or voluntary agencies (VAs) and activists have been enabled and mobilised to play a more direct role in the promotion and strengthening of PRIs. Therefore, building capacity and encouraging participation of such VAs and activists is an important strategic intervention.

The review established the relevance of the mix of intervention strategies carried out in the programme during the past two years. The uneven development of Panchayati Raj Institutions in different states (arising largely out of the socio-political environment and civil society engagements) necessitates a more judicious and synergistic mix of these various interventions. The range of interventions available to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions as institutions of local self governance needs to be applied differently in different contexts and stages of development of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Four broad categories of interventions are designed to respond to the programmatic priorities and strategies for strengthening PRIs. These categories are: 1. Promoting Public Ownership (Information Dissemination, Public Education, Linking

Civil Society, and Accountability), 2. Building Capacity (Gram Sabha, Elected Representatives, New Leadership, Structural Functioning, Negotiating with Administration, and Networking), 3. Local Development (Micro-planning, Resource Use, Matching Funds, and Managing Services), and 4. Research and Advocacy (Monitoring Strategies, On-line Feedback, Policy Implementation, Policy Reform, Creating Enabling Environment and Knowledge Building). In the following pages, we will discuss some of our experiences related to PRIs.

In every village there is a people's body called Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha is a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral roll at the village level. It is the only forum which provides opportunities to all the adult villagers to directly participate and suggest what can and needs to be done for their own village, and how. Only a strong Gram Sabha can ensure public regulation of authority. If not made accountable to the community, Gram Panchayats have a tendency to become Sarpanch (chairperson of GP) Panchayats. The Gram Sabha serves to keep Gram Panchayat accountable.

Gram Panchayats across the States have been constitutionally mandated to ensure that Gram Sabha meetings be held at least twice a year. But in reality, in most places, Gram Sabha meetings are held on paper only. Most of the GS members are unaware of their rights and responsibilities as GS members. Many of them can't distinguish between the GS and the GP of the village. It has been also found that villagers in general are not informed about GS meetings. Even if informed, women may not participate because of social customs. Lack of a common venue for meetings (and the distance to be travelled to attend GS meetings) where the GS is too large is also a barrier to people's participation in GS meetings.

Information dissemination to the people, and the process of bottom-up-planning or micro-planning are some of the most effective ways of strengthening participation by people in their own development. The local civil society organisations play a

vital role in strengthening people's participation (in local governance) through these processes. They also help civil societies to strengthen their voice in people-centred people's development.

As per Article 243-G, Panchayats are constitutionally mandated to prepare plans for economic development and social justice. Thus every Panchayat has to prepare a plan taking into account local needs and local conditions. The whole process develops a framework of agreement within the Gram Sabha about development priorities. Villagers sit together to prioritise community problems, prepare a list of resources available and ask the Gram Panchayat to implement the plan. Since the plan is annual, it provides a rigorous framework for the Panchayat to be accountable to the Gram Sabha. A plan facilitated by local organisations and local community groups like youth and women's groups, allows villagers to scrutinise and judge the performance of their GP. These organisations and the GS play a constructive role in augmenting Panchayat resources by enabling Panchayats to mobilise internal resources as well as to negotiate effectively with the government to provide resources to implement the village plans.

In every village there are a number of functional groups like Self Help Groups (SHG), Community Based Organisations (CBO) and Village Development Committees (VDC). Their interaction, co-operation and conflict with local bodies is an area of current debate in India. Besides statutory bodies like the GP and GS, there are a number of non-statutory participatory groups in almost every village. These groups may be of two types. One emerges from the community's own needs and initiative, that is, community-driven groups like Youth Groups, Mahila Mandals (Women's Groups) or even Caste Panchayat. Other types of groups are those which are created by external agencies/projects/programmes, usually for a specified period. These groups possess specialised expertise and have a close linkage with their creators (external agencies). For example, the Government of India's project

District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) has created Village Education Committees (VEC).

For effective collaboration between community organisations and PRIs, the GS should be made aware, active and strong. In every Gram Panchayat, there are sector-specific standing committees like a Health Committee, Education Committee, Social Justice Committee, etc. Each committee is headed by the Sarpanch or a member of the GP. An institutional mechanism may be developed so that these specialised organisations have close interaction with specialised standing committees of GPs. In this regard, project-based committees should be strengthened to be more effective, autonomous and participatory.

NGOs can play a very effective role in facilitating collaboration between community groups and the PRIs. However, our experiences in 9 States reveal that there is no structured institutional mechanism to build a relationship between these two types of bodies. Some policy changes are required in this regard.

The public and policy environment for people's participation in governance is inadequate, if not downright hostile. Positive support from Union and State governments is required for genuine and functional devolution of financial resources and authorities to PRIs. It requires intense advocacy efforts to influence policy changes at Union and State levels. Policy advocacy entails influencing policies from the vantage point of enabling the participation and empowerment of the marginalised. It comprises systematic and ongoing monitoring of existing policies, their implementation and reform. Movements with People's participation that is civil society movement promote citizen advocacy, not just professional advocacy.

To advocate changes in government policy, in addition to public pressure, macro-level well-documented 'proofs of ground reality' become imperative. The participatory research aiming at

building the capacity of the people and CSOs are regularly undertaken. Simultaneously the findings of these studies are widely disseminated to create pressure (from different quarters) for required policy changes. The recent study on the Status of Functions and Finances of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India sensitised citizens, the media, NGOs, bureaucrats, ministers and political parties about the rather weak status of finances of PRIs. A number of pro-Panchayat initiatives were taken by different governments. These recommendations, when accepted by the government, will go a long way to strengthening local self-governance and consequently the civil society in India.

India is the largest democracy in the world. It signifies, among other things, the aspirations of our people and the vision of our leaders. True democracy emphasises decentralisation of governance. The institutions of local self-governance should be strengthened to be participatory, responsive, transparent and accountable. For this citizens should be educated and people's bodies like Gram Sabhas must be strengthened to act as custodians of grassroots democracy. The capacities of PRI members should be enhanced through training and workshops. The government officials who are used to the top-down model need to be sensitised to the new realities of local self-governance.

The Panchayati Raj Institutions should be given control, responsibility and authority over all the resources lying in their geographical jurisdictions. They should be held accountable for local matters by their voters, the Gram Sabha. It must be ensured that women and Dalits participate actively and effectively in local self-governance. The State-led and other types of project committees should collaborate (not be played off as competitors) with PRIs, and PRIs should provide a space to these community organisations.

Anna Hazare's Anti-corruption movement proved that NGOs and civil society have played a very effective role in making people more and more conscious of their roles and rights. Through processes like micro-planning, special emphasis on weaker

sections of the population, participatory research studies and advocacy, people's participation has been greatly enhanced in 'intervened' areas. However, sustained and more aggressive interventions are needed to deepen democratic local self-governance. Research and policy advocacy have to be promoted on an extensive and sustained basis to improve different aspects of local self-governance. And creative individual and collaborative efforts by civil society and the Government to strengthen local self-governance need to be scaled up.

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