

Making Panchayats Accountable

While democratic institutions and democratic practice are important for good governance, the latter is not guaranteed by the former. In the context of panchayati raj institutions, strengthening people's participation in the gram sabha is a critical prerequisite for making panchayats accountable to people. The arguments in this paper are drawn from experience in mobilising and studying gram sabhas in select locations in Andhra Pradesh.

ANIL KUMAR VADDIRAJU,
SHAGUN MEHROTRA

It is a decade since the constitutional amendments were made to strengthen local self-governance. All state governments have amended their Panchayati Raj Acts in accordance with the constitutional amendments. In a number of states, at least formally, the provisions of the 73rd amendment are implemented. Since the enactment of the constitutional amendment in 1993, we see three broad views emerging on the democratic practice of panchayati raj institutions. Two main views about the experience of the past decade are: (a) that all the state acts have been paper laws and their implementation is nil [Upadhyay 2002] and (b) there has been institutional change and the impact of amendments is to some extent positive but that there is still a long way to go [Rai 2001]. There is a third view that goes a step further and says that local self-government in general and panchayati raj in particular should be made accountable. In the context of these views the argument of this paper is that the process of making gram panchayats accountable should be the business of the gram sabha, and that efforts to strengthen people's participation in the gram sabha need to be made. While making this point the paper discusses other alternative mechanisms of accountability such as a citizen's charter for panchayats.

In order to translate the democratic ideal of the accountability of panchayats into practice, the Andhra Pradesh government has initiated some efforts. Initiatives such as 'citizen's charters' are to be implemented through citizens services centres and were proposed some time ago by the

Andhra Pradesh government in association with the Centre for Good Governance. These initiatives are well meaning but they need rethinking. This is, inter alia, for two reasons: (a) the accountability of panchayats through citizen's charters is being established in the context of a reality where devolution of powers has not taken place. Therefore, panchayats are essentially powerless but still need to be accountable, and (b) the provisions of such charters make elected representatives accountable in a context where they do not even know their roles and responsibilities and the significance of local self-governance.

Thus this paper argues that gram panchayats should be accountable to the gram sabha in this context and the process of making panchayats accountable should be the business of the gram sabha. While democratic institutions provide opportunities for achieving democratic ideals, it is democratic practice through which these can be realised. While both democratic institutions and democratic practice are important for good governance, the latter is not guaranteed by the former [Dreze and Sen 2002]. In the context of panchayati raj institutions, strengthening people's participation in the gram sabha is a critical prerequisite for making panchayats and the system accountable to people. We elaborate these arguments drawing from Society for Participatory Research in Asia's (PRIA) experience in mobilising and studying gram sabhas in select locations of Andhra Pradesh.

IThe gram sabha is one of the integral and central features of the 73rd amendment and it is also seen as a means to ensure direct democracy in rural areas.

While the hopes raised through the amendment are high, the real picture at the grass roots level is different and mixed. While to a large extent citizens' participation in the gram sabha is not satisfactory, where they have participated the outcomes are impressive. One important aspect that is to be noted while discussing this form of rural direct democracy is that for the most part elected representatives come from oppressed sections of society. They may lack literacy and education and may not understand the significance of the amendment through which they have come to occupy these positions. This makes accountability a tricky issue. Dalits, women, dalit women and backward class representatives came to occupy rural institutions for the first time (because reservation is on rotation basis). They were not aware of their roles, were not given the powers and finances due to them, and they did not wield de facto power in villages because of these reasons, but they are still expected to be accountable. This is a tricky issue because a precise mechanism such as a citizen's charter, with a compensation package for delay or non-compliance on the part of the elected representatives can easily become a handy tool for powerful local elites in village society. In fact, it can defeat the purpose of reservation and positive discrimination. Whereas an event and process such as the gram sabha has a larger scope of promoting participation and political education, it can become the starting point of a collective learning process even if the sabha is not so satisfactory at present. Below we discuss the experience of PRIA in mobilising gram sabhas in Padmanabham Mandal, Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh. There are important implications in this experience.

PRIA initiated its work in Padmanabham Mandal by supporting a research study, conducted by scholars of the Department of Social Work, Andhra University, on dalit and women's leadership in panchayati raj institutions. The study brought out the acute problems faced by dalit elected representatives. Following the study it was decided by PRIA to start a Panchayat Resource Centre (PRC) at Padmanabham. The main activities of this PRC were information dissemination on PRIs, capacity building of elected representatives, gram sabha mobilisation, micro-planning support and networking of dalit and women elected representatives. Gram sabha mobilisation is one of the planks of PRC work. Following this schedule of activities as the

date for mandatory gram sabhas approached (April 14, 2003) efforts were made to mobilise gram sabhas in all the 21 gram panchayats of Padmanabham Mandal. It may be noticed that these efforts by PRIA PRC were made at the initial stages of PRC work.

The main methods used for gram sabha mobilisation were wall writings about the significance of the gram sabha in all 21 villages in prominent places, 'kala jathas' (folk theatre and songs) in eight gram panchayats, distribution of pamphlets and communicating with 'sarpanches' and ward members individually. Despite all these efforts, the results appeared to be mixed and disappointing. Below we present the profile of gram sabha events in four gram panchayats, (i) Pandrangi, (ii) Padmanabham, (iii) Krishnapuram and (iv) Potnuru, following which we come back to the theme of accountability in local self-governance.

(i) *Pandrangi*: Pandrangi is a gram panchayat with a population of 5,156. The total population of dalits is 257 and total number of villages in Pandrangi are five. Apart from the sarpanch and including the 'upa-sarpanch', there are a total of 12 ward members. The sarpanch and six other ward members come from the main Pandrangi village while six others come from the remaining villages. The interventions PRIA made in this village in the process of gram sabha mobilisation are (a) wall writings, (b) distribution of pamphlets on gram sabha and (c) kala jatha programmes. In this village the sarpanch is a woman from the upper caste, and she did not attend the meetings. All affairs of gram panchayats are looked after by her husband, including conducting the gram sabha. The total number of gram sabha members that attended the gram sabha is only 73; of this 31 are women and 42 are men. Out of the total of 73, five are dalit, two are upper caste and the remaining 66 belong to backward castes.

The sarpanch, as mentioned earlier, belongs to the upper caste and it is her husband who looks into the work. In an information discussion with PRIA staff he said that they had no agenda for the gram sabha. He said that they were neither receiving any funds nor any information or circulars from the mandal parishad. There are stark policies of power in the village. The present proxy-sarpanch (husband of the present sarpanch) wants to become the upa-sarpanch by becoming a ward member (a post which is due to be vacated) and then wants either his wife to resign or wants to run the show entirely as is the

case now. This is the state of the gram sabha and of citizenship. Those who attended the gram sabha say that they have done so not to discuss development issues of the gram panchayat but to receive coupons for ration cards, which will be issued later. This case clearly tells us that there is a need for work on both sides of the equation: to make the sarpanch accountable and to make people aware of their rights and duties.

(ii) *Krishnapuram*: This gram panchayat is two km away from the Padmanabham Mandal headquarters. The sarpanch is male and belongs to the dalit community. The total population is 1,947 of which males are 988 and females are 959. The total scheduled caste (SC) population is 334 of which males are 176 and females are 158. These figures are according to the 2001 Census.

PRIA's interventions in this village were the same as described earlier. In spite of these efforts the turnout at the gram sabha was disappointing: 38 members. Apart from the sarpanch only one dalit person attended the gram sabha while the rest were from backward castes. Going by the village secretary's register we could find signature of only three women. Of the total turnout of 38, 18 people put their signatures and the other 20 put their thumb impressions. The PRIA staff had a discussion with the village secretary about this and about why the sabha was conducted away from the village community hall. But the discussion did not yield many tangible answers. This case of Krishnapuram suggests two things (a) the apathy and ignorance of the people (they commended the efforts of PRIA from whom they heard about the gram sabha in detail for the first time), (b) the inability of the sarpanch to convene a proper gram sabha.

As said earlier we need to work on both sides of the equation for effective governance at the village level. It is necessary to build capacities of elected representatives as well as that of ordinary citizens, and the capacities of sarpanches in particular. It may be required to say here that the need and relevance of the gram sabha can be more easily comprehensible to the sarpanch than an abstract out-of context citizen's charter.

(iii) *Padmanabham*: This is the mandal headquarters and its gram panchayat has a population of about 1,953. Total SC population is about 53 persons and ST population is around 59 persons. There are a total of 10 ward members. The gram sabha was conducted on April 14 and not

even 10 people were present. It is only the village leaders who made up the 10 member gram sabha.

The main excuse given by the sarpanch for the abysmally low attendance of people was that people had gone for wage labour due to the drought situation. And moreover, people would come to any meeting only if they had tangible benefits. The only people who attended were the sabha office-bearers and one or two outsiders. The Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) women's groups and self-help groups (SHGs) were invited but they did not show any interest, nor have they ever attended gram sabhas. When asked, ordinary people said that the village secretary was never present to hear their grievances, the panchayat office was never kept open and grievances about requirements such as street lights were never heard by the sarpanch. As a result people have lost interest in matters concerning the gram panchayat and since they do not have much faith in the panchayat, they have not attended the gram sabha.

(iv) *Potnuru*: Potnuru is another village belonging to the Padmanabham mandal. The total population of Potnuru, according to the 2001 Census, is 3,019. The dalit population is about 553, and the sarpanch is a dalit woman.

In this village too, PRIA made interventions through wall writings, pamphlets and kala jatha programmes. The gram sabha was attended by the sarpanch, village secretary, the Mandal Parishad Territorial Candidate (MPTC) and ward members. This gram sabha was slightly more successful than the others in the sense that 60 people attended in total. Majority of the participants were youth and attended the gram sabha after seeing the kala jatha programmes and wall writings. They did not have any inkling of what the gram sabha was otherwise. The reasons listed for low attendance were general ignorance, pressure of drought and crisis in livelihood, and paradoxically, frequent meetings conducted by the government in the name of 'Janmabhoomi' and 'Jala Chaitanyam' and so on.

One ward member present at the meeting made an interesting point: the resources with the panchayat are limited and the grievances of the people are many. He said, "We have inadequate funds to take up all the developmental activities people expect of us. We want to fulfil the demands of the people; at the same time we are unable to take up all the proposals made by the people". In this situation he felt "we rather not inform

and encourage people to attend the gram sabha. But if we inform and invite people then we should fulfil their demands”.

III

The above picture suggests that, firstly, PRIs operate in a complex social environment. Caste, class and gender hierarchies have a crucial bearing on institutional processes and democratic practices. Secondly, participation in the gram sabha is affected by the apathy of the villagers. This indifference has its roots in the long historical background of non-participation in governance, entrenched because of caste, class and gender hierarchies, which are quite un-participatory, to say the least. The political culture promoted since independence has also been one of patronage and it has certainly not encouraged the participation of people in institutional processes. Thirdly, where the gram sabha did take place, the issues discussed were important and participation was genuine. Here it can be argued that establishing processes such as citizens' charters do not obviate the importance of strengthening events and processes such as the gram sabha. This is for two reasons. First, because it is again the state structures, above the level of the gram panchayat or village that decide the substance of a citizen's charter. The problem with a gram panchayat citizens' charter is to what extent citizens can prepare a charter. There is every possibility that the citizen's charter will be sent down to the gram panchayats by district and state government officials or by officials above them. Second, to what extent are dalits, women, dalit women and backward class representatives equipped to prepare and operate a citizen's charter? Third, even to arrive at an agreement on a citizen's charter and its operation a panchayat needs a periodic gram sabha. A strengthened gram sabha is more effective both in the short-run for immediate accountability and in the long-run for building a healthy decentralised democracy. As Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen say, “The practice of local democracy is also a form of wider political education. In the context of village politics, people are learning (if only at varying speed) to organise, to question established patterns of authority, to demand their rights, to resist corruption, and so on. This learning process enhances their preparedness not only for local democracy alone, but for political participation in general” [Dreze and Sen 2002a].

A decentralised democracy has more possibilities of being participatory than any other. One can emphatically say that, in the Indian context, participation is not only a means to an end but an end in itself. The irony in the issue of accountability of panchayats is that it is demanded without giving panchayats powers, though one certainly agrees with the principle that all governance institutions are invariably accountable to the governed. While one agrees that the gram sabha performance is not satisfactory, again to quote Dreze and Sen, “The limitations are best addressed through democratic practice itself, and as far as the potential for the latter is concerned, there is much ground for hope” [Dreze and Sen 2002b]. While instruments such as citizen's charters are to be considered while making panchayats accountable, it is the gram

sabha which can provide a basis for grass roots democracy and democracy in general, in a sustainable manner. Promoting and activating gram sabhas will serve a larger purpose and has a wider scope even if their present state leaves much to be desired. **EPW**

References

- Dreze, Jean and Amartya Sen (2002): *India: Development and Participation*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- (2002a): *Ibid*, pp 360-61.
 - (2002b): *Ibid*, pp 362-63.
- Rai, Manoj et al (2001): ‘Grama Sabha: The People's Council’, *State of Panchayats: A Participatory Perspective*, PRIA and Samskriti, New Delhi, pp 77-104.
- Upadhyay, Videh (2002): ‘Panchayats and Paper Laws: Simmering Discontent on 73rd Amendment’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 20, pp 2988-89.