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# PRI–CBO Convergence: Democratic Equations

SARADA MURALEEDHARAN

*Carving out an alternative space for ensuring the advancement of the interests of the poor, community based organizations work with panchayati raj institutions in many areas of public service delivery and poverty alleviation, despite deficient state laws and policies on the one hand and inadequate human and financial resources on the other*

In India, the ascendance of the SHG and the Federation has coincided with the space and importance that has been formally given to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as local governments. The onset of the Swarn Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), a centrally sponsored scheme for poverty alleviation, set much stake by livelihood activities through SHGs, followed closely on the heels of the 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendments and the institution of elected *panchayats* in the states. The programme was later restructured as the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), which went one step further and insisted on federating SHGs of women at the village, block and Cluster levels, capacitating local women's leadership and routing financial assistance as 'capital in perpetuity' for livelihood support through federated community based organizations (CBOs).

## DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE AND ELITE BIAS

Very often, policies in favour of the poor (with regard to, say, access to common property resources, to market space, or for raising minimum wages) come at the expense of local elite groups that are reluctant to give up their interests. Numerous studies have pointed out that one of the dangers of decentralization is that it may simply empower the local elite and, worse, perpetuate existing poverty and inequality. An important concern here is that poverty will have a debilitating effect on the ability of people to engage in formal political processes. Voters from the poorer sections of society will become marginalized from centres of power and influence, from knowledge about rights and entitlements and from democratic platforms. This can create obstacles in the process of strengthening democracy and on the ability of this section of people to influence the democratic process.

There is an implicit assumption that PRIs have both the wherewithal and the capability to execute programmes benefitting the poor. The extent of centrality of PRIs in the implementation of schemes and services targeting the poor depends on the extent to which they have the authority and power with regard to the conceptualization and implementation of such schemes

*The politics of representation and the legacy of social inequity have impaired the capability of women and scheduled communities of converting their presence in PRIs into active participation, thereby vouchsafing their interests*

and services, and this has not been taken into account. The power and authority of PRIs in a state is dependent on state laws and the resources made available to PRIs by the state. Whereas the Indian Constitution provides for PRIs exercising a central role in many areas of public service delivery and poverty alleviation, they are unable to fulfill that role because of deficient state laws and policies on the one hand and by inadequate human and financial resources on the other. The politics of representation and the legacy of social inequity have impaired the capability of women and scheduled communities of converting their presence in PRIs into active participation, thereby vouchsafing their interests. All of this is further exacerbated by the inability of the state to provide adequate hand-holding and capability development support to the elected local government, and the disruption of the local governance criticality every five years, when constituencies are remodeled and seats rotated.

### **THE CBO 'ALTERNATIVE'**

The CBO's space has been carved out as an alternative for ensuring the advancement of the interests of the poor, especially when formal governance structures are found to be slow and misdirected. What is in favour of CBOs is their ability to concentrate single-mindedly on the poor and the marginalized,

beyond political patronage (which is admittedly exclusionary of the most vulnerable and powerless). What goes against it is the absence of democratic processes that will ensure its accountability to its constituency of the marginalized. The very same arguments arrayed against the *panchayat* can be raised against CBOs, if they take on the role of dispenser of benefits and

entitlements. As against political patronage by the elected representative, patronage by the community leader can become the norm. The elected government is at least bound by the processes of scrutiny and accountability. No such processes can be mandated upon a CBO, which is not technically a public entity.

Not surprising, therefore, is the fact that a CBO, created and supported by an NGO, will be seen as taking over the elected *panchayat's* role as a representative of the community and usurping the legitimate space of the local government for service delivery and development. The reasoning that people's groups are efficient substitutes for 'corrupt or political' PRIs forgets the fact that PRIs are accountable to the entire population of a *panchayat* and not only to a small circle of beneficiaries, unlike the SHG network. CBOs, although community based, are neither elected nor accountable to the community as a whole. It must, however, be remembered that the larger society or the 'entire population of the *panchayat*' actually comprises interests that are larger than the interests of the poor.

### **CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE GRAM SABHA**

As far as democratic decentralization is concerned, the most significant platform for exercise of voice is the *gram sabha*. In almost every state, a citizen, who participates

in the *gram sabha*, is poor and vulnerable. The challenge for democratic decentralization is to convert the passive participation of the poor in the *gram sabha* into an active churning of opinion, feedback and expression of need. Despite the extent of participation of the poor, *gram sabhas* across the country have not been able to demonstrate the idiom of participatory democracy in their working, and have been either hijacked, co-opted or routinized to the extent of being ineffectual and trivialized.

The development of a strong and vibrant civil society is also inextricably linked to the ways in which poor and marginal groups in society are able to exploit political opportunities that the state makes available. This requires the poor to coalesce into an identifiable constituency with clear needs and demands, which are articulated and agitated for. A vibrant civil society, representative of the poor and the marginalized, is a pre-condition to meaningful democratic decentralization. How then can the impetus for the creation of such a society come about?

### **THE CITIZEN SPACE, THE GOVERNANCE SPACE**

An important distinction needs to be made between governance space and citizen space. The governance space belongs to the local government, that is, the *panchayat*. The citizen space, however, cannot and should not be owned or controlled by the local government. A CBO is very often alleged to transgress into the space of local governance of the *panchayat*. This needs to be deconstructed, and the control of the citizen space of a CBO also needs to be

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questioned. Can the exercise of autonomy by a CBO be seen as bypassing the authority of the local government?

A CBO that takes on the role of the government—taking responsibility for service delivery, driving the agenda for local development, undertaking all programme delivery (such as conducting immunization camps) on its own could be said to be running parallel to the local government. However, whereas the governance space has to necessarily be led by a PRI, it does not mean that a CBO cannot participate as a citizen body in the management.

What is the governance space for service delivery and local development that the *panchayat* is expected to occupy? What are the services it needs to be held accountable for and the resources it needs to control for equitable access?

In the case of universal entitlements such as education or health, the role of the local government is paramount in ensuring the quality and consistency of its delivery. Even when the entitlement is universal, however, there are bound to be issues of differential access and differential treatment, which will be loaded against weaker segments of society. Social exclusions and knowledge barriers are likely to come in the way of the exercise of these entitlements. In such an instance, a CBO should come in as claimant and monitor of universal entitlements. There will also be opportunities for synergetic collaboration between the local government and the CBO for overcoming barriers to participation and access, as in committees and forums.

It must be remembered that the mere constitution of participatory mechanisms will not lead to equal participation, especially if the civil society of the poor is weak and intimidated. The enforcement of laws surrounding the right to access and livelihood, and especially land and water rights, is also the domain of the local government. Here too, issues of violation or undue privileges as well as interventions for positive discrimination in favour of the poor will get highlighted only if an articulate civil society has the institutional platforms to engage the local government on the same.

In case of targeted assistance, as in housing or irrigation facilities, the funds are public but the resources are not adequate to cover all claimants. Therefore, some sort of screening or selection needs to be made. This is where the ground lies wide open to patronage. Along with patronage, nepotism, influence and corruption may also come into play. The challenge of governance will be to ensure normative provision of such goods, and eschew patronage.

### THE CONTEXT OF NRLM

The responsibilities of the SHG network, as listed in the NRLM framework, include participating actively in *gram sabhas* and other forums of PRIs, providing feedback through community based monitoring, and supporting PRIs in their development initiatives and planning exercises. The roles identified for PRIs in the NRLM framework include identifying and mobilizing below the poverty line (BPL) households into SHGs, with priority for the poorest and the most vulnerable

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amongst them; facilitating SHG Federations at various levels, and providing accommodation and other basic facilities for their effective functioning; incorporating and making suitable financial allocations to the priority demands of SHGs and their Federations in

the annual plans and activities of PRIs; and coordinating with different departments and agencies on behalf of the network.

Apart from the vital area of citizen engagement, there are traditional areas of cooperation between the PRI and the CBO, which can be mutually beneficial, especially in service delivery and programme outreach. A strong CBO can aid in mobilization and participation, as well as in dissemination of knowledge, that will help *panchayats* improve the reach of their interventions. From the point of view of a CBO, this will facilitate greater access of its members to entitlements.

CBOs exist, or should exist, in a citizen space, and the local government should be accountable to its citizenry. Thus, whereas the onus is on a *panchayat* to include CBOs in planning for the resources under its control, the responsibility is not limited to ensuring participatory planning processes but goes further to providing pro-active, responsive governance. There is the danger of a CBO being used as an implementation arm of the *panchayat*, wherein its role will be to execute decisions and not participate in decision-making. Such a relationship between the *panchayat* and the CBO would foster subservience, not autonomy, and is to be guarded against. A vibrant civil society, capable of engaging with its government, should be able to hold political bodies accountable.

## ROAD MAP TO PRO-POOR CITIZEN-CENTRIC GOVERNANCE

Today, organizations in rural India that are most representative of people on the periphery are SHG Federations of poor women. CBOs of NRLM have the potential of being representative of extremely vulnerable populations such as Scheduled Castes, migrant workers, destitute and tribals. Mere inclusion in a CBO does not automatically generate representation. The responsibility of a CBO is to inculcate citizen capability, claim citizen space and convert the *gram sabha* into a vibrant institution of democracy.

Therefore, whereas a *panchayat* needs to institutionalize the space for citizen interaction, a CBO needs to build citizen capability to occupy that space. CBOs of NRLM, which are exclusively institutions of rural women, will need to combat the strong value systems of gender inequity, over and above the social distances of poverty and marginalization, in order to be paid heed to. The democratic capability that needs to be acquired through the medium of a CBO will include, among others, the capability to organize, participate, protest, confront, agitate, articulate need, raise claim and hold to account. This needs to manifest as individual capability, as capability of the collective, as also the capability to protect the interests of the marginalized 'other'.

There has to be a sustained empowerment process targeting a CBO that works towards internalizing knowledge, motivation and self-esteem, and, through these, infuse democratic capability. This cannot be a one-off bolstering but an engagement that evolves over time and develops the capability of the leadership of a CBO. Members have to be sensitized to their citizenship rights and be familiar with the means and processes of participation

*CBOs had to become practitioners of the very principles of transparency and accountability that it expected of the local government.*

in governance. A CBO, then, becomes the space to rehearse democracy and apply the lessons learned in the public domain.

The impact of persistent citizenship training of a CBO is, perhaps, best captured in the observation of Laly Baby, a former *panchayat* member of Udumbannoor, Kerala, on the strength of the Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) of Kudumbashree: "Democracy succeeds when it is able to hear the voice of the poor. A CBO is the tool for this; it also works as a sub-committee of a *gram sabha*. The role of NHGs in improving the social status of women has been important. Thousands of women, who did not have the courage to hold their own in any conversation, panicked when they initially attended an NHG meeting for the first time. These women, who would, at first, only listen to discussions, slowly began to take part in them. Those who did not know about their rights began to understand them. Once they got to know their rights, they began to claim them and this made a world of difference to the activities of NHGs. Women, who had been very shy to come out, began to take on executive positions in NHGs. Our NHGs became workshops that catapulted women into public life."

CBOs had to become practitioners of the very principles of transparency and accountability that it expected of the local government. These principles did not evolve automatically. They needed to be structured into the organization. The checks and balances that are brought into the systems of administration of CBOs and the nature of capacity building they undergo will determine the extent to which they are able to break the barriers to participation. The extent of internal participation and outreach that CBOs can generate on a regular basis will determine the extent of transaction of information and

knowledge to their members, which will, in turn, determine their ability to articulate demand and extract good governance.

### **THE GRAM PANCHAYAT DEVELOPMENT PLAN**

The Fourteenth Finance Commission award has resulted in an exponential increase in financial resources made available to *gram panchayats*. The focus of the funds is to improve the delivery of basic services by *panchayats*, including all services listed in the respective state Acts. The stimulus for sustained citizens' engagement has been provided in the stipulation to make plans at the *gram panchayat* level for the efficient utilization of *panchayat* resources. States have been tasked with setting in motion processes and facilitating structures for participatory planning at the *gram panchayat* level. This has two main intentions—to activate *panchayat* committees to take up the mantle of leadership for local development, and to catalyze the citizen space to come into its own through participatory planning platforms. *Panchayats* are now expected to conduct situation analysis on local

development and welfare through processes that require community participation in both conducting and informing the assessment. *Gram sabhas* are to use these reports, to base visioning exercises that lead to articulation and prioritization of development needs; they then develop annual plans and budgets that are in consonance with the prioritization done in the *gram sabhas*.

Grass-roots planning, with detailed participatory processes, was undertaken earlier but never on a universal scale or with such institutionalization. This is an opportunity for community structures to possess and occupy these processes and transform routine, perfunctory participation into pro-active, determined citizenship. This is an opportunity to learn from Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise and blend it into the processes of planning by the *gram panchayat*. This is an opportunity for institutions of NRLM to galvanize the flow of entitlements to the poor and to develop democratic equations that will culminate in responsive good governance for equity and justice.

# Applying Organization Development Principles in *Gram Panchayats* to Effect Change: A Case Study

SONALI SRIVASTAVA AND MADHAVI RAJADHYAKSHA

*That gram panchayats through organization development, including appropriate organization design, incentive structures, and behaviour norms, strengthen and improve local governance and ensure service delivery to citizens at the last mile effectively is being proved in Karnataka and Maharashtra*

It has been over two decades since democratic decentralization was mandated by the Constitution of India. Decentralized governance is a complex interplay of both demand and supply factors. It is as much an outcome of efficient institutional and organizational arrangements as it is about empowering citizens to engage with these institutions and hold these accountable. The Centre for Decentralized Local Governance (CDLG), Avantika Foundation, focuses on strengthening the supply side of local governance, using organization development principles. A strong *gram panchayat*, we believe, can herald a butterfly effect on the development of villages. Our change management framework was developed in action research mode in two *gram panchayats* from 2011–15. It is now implemented in nearly 50 *gram panchayats* across Karnataka and Maharashtra, and is being steadily enhanced through collaborative partnerships, even as we acknowledge that effecting systemic change at the grass-roots is a gradual process fraught with multiple dependencies.

As a first-time member elected to a *gram panchayat* in Karnataka, Vijayamma's is a typical story of triumph in the face of adversity. She was elected to the Oorkunte Mittur *gram panchayat* in 2011, and admits to initially feeling ignorant and under-confident about herself. Being unlettered, she was unable to sign her name and felt intimidated by the citizens and their concerns. She had no inkling as to how she could potentially nudge her village towards any significant development; this would often result in her shying away from the public. Barely aware that *gram panchayat* members are key potential change-makers, Vijayamma, who was elevated as *Adhyaksha* (President) in 2013, is unfortunately representative of many elected representatives across India's six lakh villages.

It was a repeated encounter with many such Vijayammas across Karnataka and the realization that grass-roots elected representatives were unable to deliver their mandated functions that inspired a change management framework for the organization development of *gram panchayats*. The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 1992, defines a *panchayat* as an institution of self-government, for rural areas, constituted under Article 243B. Our key assumption was that a strong *gram panchayat* could improve local governance and ensure service delivery to citizens at the last mile, more effectively. This required appropriate organization design, incentive structures and behaviour norms to enable *gram panchayats* to deliver to their potential.

### CHANGE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The *Gram Panchayat* Organization Development (GPOD) was thus designed as a step-by-step framework that seeks to move the needle from one-off capacity-building trainings of *gram panchayat* members to initiating systemic change of the *gram panchayat* institution in an organized and collaborative manner. At the outset, it is important to point out that systemic change is a slow process because it involves re-engineering historically established processes and practices as well as encouraging modification in the behaviour and beliefs of citizens. Moreover, change management interventions need to keep evolving to meet the changing socio-economic realities on the ground.

GPOD was inspired by the Delores Ambrose model of change management (The Delores Ambrose model of change management 1987 proposes that change is successful only when all the components of an organization are aligned.)

*GPOD aims to increase the efficiency of the gram panchayat as an institution, even as it allows each individual gram panchayat member to develop his or her own potential*

and its basic premise was that random one-off interventions do not bring sustained change. GPOD aims to increase the efficiency of the *gram panchayat* as an institution, even as it allows each individual *gram panchayat* member to develop his or her own potential.

GPOD was conceived in the Action Research mode in two *gram panchayats*—Oorkunte Mittur in Kolar district and Dibburhalli in Chikkaballapur district in Karnataka, spanning 32 villages and covering a population of 15,220 citizens. Elected representatives were themselves at the core of designing the framework, with its success hinging on their ownership of the process. The project was incubated in Arghyam, Bangalore, and since then has evolved substantially, incorporating learnings from the various *gram panchayats* and their staff; academic and research inputs from leading institutes like the Abdul Nazir Sab State Institute of Rural Development, Mysuru, and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai; and the grass-roots experience of practitioner organizations such as the Grama Vikas and Foundation for Ecological Security. In its current form, GPOD comprises the steps as shown in figure 1.

Change management in *gram panchayats* begins with environment building, wherein elected representatives and citizens are oriented to the role and importance of the *gram panchayat* and motivated to introduce change in their communities.

The next phase involves elected representatives and citizens collaboratively developing a shared Vision and Mission. Whereas the Vision serves to articulate values that serve as a guiding principle to *gram panchayat* members, the Mission encourages the *gram panchayat*

**Figure 1: Gram Panchayat Organization Development: Steps**



to think of the work areas it wants to prioritize; of how it will achieve its dreams and who are the stakeholders it will focus on. All these steps encourage the *gram panchayat* to realize its potential as a local self-government body.

This is followed by process mapping, a crucial step in enhancing *gram panchayat* members' knowledge of the key processes in select functions such as water and sanitation, nutrition and agriculture, to understand service delivery and identify bottlenecks that impede public services from reaching citizens. They learn about their role vis-a-vis the roles, responsibility and accountability structure of other agencies.

Linked to this, the next phase involves the development of an organization structure that builds upon the structure of the *gram panchayat* as defined in the Panchayati Raj Act. In Karnataka, for instance, an innovative GPOD structure introduced in the Action Research moves beyond the legally-prescribed hierarchy of *Adhyaksha*, *Upadhyaksha* (Vice-President) and three Standing Committees, to introduce

'Heads' based on interest and skills of *gram panchayat* members. Each Head is vested with an individual portfolio of functions, thereby introducing a system of distributed leadership and laying responsibility and accountability on individual *gram panchayat* members instead of the collective unit of the *gram panchayat*.

The *gram panchayat* is then empowered to draw up a long-term perspective plan in a systematic manner, ensuring that plan priorities are aligned with the Vision and Mission earlier articulated by members. The long-term plan is then dove-tailed into an Annual Planning exercise, wherein *gram panchayat* members outline their priorities and targets for a given year.

GPOD then focuses on hand-holding *gram panchayat* members, to budget for priorities included in their plans, implement the provisions and monitor the plan implementation effectively. This also involves strengthening of institutional mechanisms of citizen engagement.

## Concept to Action

In the two *gram panchayats* where the GPOD framework was developed and implemented in Action Research mode from 2011 to 2015, small transformations were recorded from year-to-year, even as it was understood that success was still a long way to go. Over the years, both *gram panchayats* demonstrated systemic and structural shifts in their functioning and brought in accountability systems, all of which in turn triggered positive shifts in other areas of village development.

Unlike most *gram panchayats*, wherein annual plans are often drawn up by the Secretary without the involvement of the elected village

**Figure 2: Demographic Profile of Gram Panchayats in which Action Research was Undertaken**

Gram Panchayat	Number of villages under the Gram Panchayat's jurisdiction	Population Covered
Oorkunte Mittur, Mulbagal taluka, Kolar district	13	7,482
Dibburhalli, Sidleghatta taluka, Chikkaballapur district	19	7,738

representatives, *gram panchayat* members in both action research areas took ownership of the planning process. For three consecutive years, members themselves decided the priorities of their villages and instituted plans with clearly accounted budgets. Citizen sub-committees, including the Bal Vikas Samiti (Child Welfare Committee) and the School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC) that were previously defunct were also activated through the initiative of *gram*

*For three consecutive years, members themselves decided the priorities of their villages and instituted plans with clearly accounted budgets*

*panchayat* members. This resulted in even more active participation of the citizens in the welfare and governance of their village, as substantiated by a better turnout of citizen members at mandated *gram sabhas* and *ward sabhas*.

Avantika Foundation's CDLG closely monitored over 51 development indicators across 13 key developmental sectors, including health, agriculture, nutrition, water and sanitation among others, through a GP-MIS system that it devised. Whereas there is much scope for improvement, many significant indicators showed shifts, indicating the positive role a strong *gram panchayat* could play. For instance, both the *gram panchayats* developed citizen redressal mechanisms, whereby complaints on streetlights were fixed within a two-day period. Ration shops became more transparent by displaying their stock and distribution patterns. Dibburhalli *gram panchayat* created the highest assets and was the *gram panchayat* with the highest adherence to its plan under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) in 2013–14. Similarly, Oorkunte Mittur *gram panchayat* boasted of the highest number of individual toilets built in the entire Mulbagal block in 2013–14. The outcomes and achievements of each *gram panchayat* were documented in the Annual Report Cards that were handed over to the *panchayat* office.

Significantly, change is triggered as an organic process and is not always uniform in its impact. The organization development of the *gram panchayat* was accompanied by individual development of many *gram panchayat* members like Vijayamma. During her tenure as *Adhyaksha*, Vijayamma emerged as the 'go-to person' for citizens with problems in her village. With a better sense of her role and responsibilities, she was not only empowered

### Impact: Improvements across Key Sectors in Action Research *Gram Panchayats*

Sector	Before	After
<b>Drinking water</b>	Fire-fighting for resolving drinking water shortages	Operations and maintenance schedule in place for drinking water systems—complaint resolution within 24 hours
	Chemical and bacteriological contamination in water	Water quality at source tested and results shared with citizens
<b>Sanitation</b>	13% households had toilets in the <i>Mittur gram panchayat</i>	Highest number of toilets constructed in the block of 30 <i>gram panchayats</i> in 2013–14
<b>Agriculture</b>	Centralized distribution of agricultural inputs leading to skewed set of beneficiaries	<i>Gram panchayat</i> facilitated distribution of subsidized seeds
<b>Nutrition</b>	Malnutrition status of children not always known to the <i>Gram panchayat/citizens/parents</i>	List of children and their malnutrition status with the <i>gram panchayat</i>
<b>PDS</b>	Erratic adherence to norms in flagship programmes such as ICDS, PDS	Two inspections per month by the concerned Head, leading to better adherence

to engage with citizens but was able to redress their complaints as well. “I am particularly proud of my contribution in streamlining the ration card renewal process for citizens. In the past, it required citizens to make multiple visits. I ensured that it was done in one go,” she narrates. Vijayamma facilitated the availability of ration to 348 families in 2014–15, and ensured that most ration shops displayed the details of the ration and its distribution, as per government norms.

This wasn’t, however, a uniform outcome. There were still members within the *gram panchayat*, who failed to actively engage with the intervention. This only goes to highlight the complexity of the challenges, yet to be overcome.

#### ENROLLING PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

Buoyed by the visible impact of GPOD in the two Action Research *gram panchayats*, the

Government of Karnataka partnered with CDLG to implement the GPOD framework in an entire *taluka* (Mulbagal block in Kolar district). This pilot was sanctioned as the country’s first innovation project under the Rajiv Gandhi Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyan (RGPSA) for a two-year period from 2015–16.

*Gram panchayats* in Karnataka underwent elections in May–June, 2015, and the newly elected bodies in Mulbagal have been working alongside CDLG towards strengthening their systems, processes and structures. Since June 2015, significant environment building efforts were undertaken in the form of *Kala Jathas*, focussed group discussions and wall writings to mobilize community knowledge and build a rapport with elected bodies, even as a wealth of data was being collected to baseline the development status of the 389 villages in the block and the *gram panchayat* bodies that govern them.

Fourteen other newly-elected *gram panchayats* in Karnataka's Kolar and Chikkaballapur districts too have been working with the GPOD framework through a network of regional NGOs.

*Partnerships with leading academic organizations have seen the organizational development work at the grass-roots evolve in innovative ways*

Each of these geographies brings unique learnings that require a deeper understanding of the triggers of change. Like-minded partners are, thus, being enrolled towards deepening perspectives in mainstreaming *gram panchayat* institutions.

Partnerships with leading academic organizations have seen the organizational development work at the grass-roots evolve in innovative ways. CDLG has been working with TISS, Mumbai, since 2013 to develop professionals, who can work with local governments. A 'Young Professionals Programme in Local Governance (LGYP)', which was co-anchored by both organizations, had three young professionals reside and work in *gram panchayats* in Osmanabad district, Maharashtra, to facilitate real-time change in villages. Through sustained grass-roots engagement, these young professionals effected significant changes in the operational capacity and management of the *panchayats*, with which they worked. As a result of this, *gram panchayats* spearheaded results-based village development in several areas, including basic entitlement, agriculture, SHGs, livelihoods, and conflict resolution. *Gram panchayat* offices that were previously locked were opened up for citizens more than twice a week, even as regular interaction was initiated between Village Development Committees and *gram panchayats*. The Sanjha *gram panchayat* in Osmanabad block, Maharashtra, witnessed its first-ever mandated Mahila *gram sabha* credited to the LGYP's mobilization

efforts. Building upon the success of this fellowship, TISS, along with CDLG, has now initiated an M.Phil programme in Decentralization, Local Government and Development towards institutionalizing the involvement of professionals in

local governance.

Another leading development institute, Azim Premji University, Bangalore, houses a local governance clinic with senior academicians and post-graduate students of development, who work alongside CDLG and *gram panchayats* to strengthen institutional mechanisms of citizen engagement. The collaboration, kick-started in November 2015, will not only create a body of rigorous research work but also aims at effecting real-time change in select citizen sub-committees in the *gram panchayats* of Mulbagal taluka.

CDLG has also nurtured Knowledge Partnerships, to channelize technical and financial expertise to *gram panchayats*. Experts and/or organizations with specific sectoral focus engage with *gram panchayat* members, to improve development indicators in these sectors. A knowledge partnership forged on education seeks to improve the learning levels of the students in the *gram panchayats* of Mulbagal, even as a water and sanitation knowledge partnership seeks to enable the *gram panchayats*, to develop effective water security plans in the drought-prone Mulbagal taluka.

## CHALLENGES

Like all breakthrough initiatives, the endeavour to introduce and integrate organization development in *gram panchayats* has not been without its challenges. It has, in fact, been a process of continuous learning.

As the process of embedding organization development deeper in *gram panchayats* grows, the process of building the institutional capacity of *gram panchayats* too needs to focus more specifically on political economy variables such as gender, caste and power dynamics. Traditional practices are so entrenched that they hamper democratic functioning of local bodies, both in terms of their organizational efficiency and functioning, as well as violating basic constitutional principles of social justice and equality. One of TISS's young professionals admits to having concealed his dalit identity for most of his two-year fellowship period in a *gram panchayat* in Maharashtra for fear of retribution from the community and a rejection of his change management efforts.

In retrospect, the capacities of local citizens could have been leveraged more effectively. Skill profiling and experience mapping of citizens in a *gram panchayat* were conceptualised with a view to leverage local expertise and build capital. However, this could not be made operational due to lack of time and resources.

Working in a *gram panchayat* is often perceived as social service, with few incentives accruing to members performing their roles diligently. Their time and resources are seldom compensated adequately. Incentivizing elected representatives is another area that calls for further research and advocacy.

The other key learning of the Action Research project is that whereas GPOD focussed effectively on developing the capacity of Heads created as part of the augmented *gram panchayat* structure, more dedicated effort and resources needed to be allocated to develop the capacity of other elected representatives as well.

## CONCLUSION

This article lays out a conceptual framework for the application of organization development principles to *gram panchayats* on the premise that a strong *gram panchayat* can effect substantial change in several development sectors. Our approach moves beyond routine capacity-building training of *gram panchayats* to a more systemic development of various organizational components of an elected body. The process lays huge emphasis on individual elected representatives also realizing their own potential.

The intention is not to create parallel planning and implementation structures that are vulnerable to collapse on the exit of an external agency but on nurturing constitutionally-mandated government institutions to ensure sustainability of any change management interventions.

That the application of this change management framework at the grass-roots has effected positive changes in service delivery to citizens and local governance in the *gram panchayats* has been demonstrated. Indicators over a four-year period have been monitored, even as it acknowledged that there is much scope for further improvement.

Partners who share our vision to strengthen the *gram panchayats* are being enrolled steadily, and several innovative mechanisms have evolved in the course of this.

Change is a constantly evolving process and an organization building framework such as GPOD needs to evolve as per the local needs and requirements of a *gram panchayat* at a particular time. Strong *gram panchayat* organizations will be in a position to ensure the realization of their own dreams and potential and also trigger change in external agencies.

# Deepening Democracy:

VEDA BHARADWAJA

*Emphasizing the immense value of having women in leadership roles in village bodies, this article laments the restrictive steps being taken by governments to impose mandatory criteria such as having a bathroom in the house or being able to read and write on candidates wishing to contest elections*

This article has been written against the backdrop of a petition that is currently being heard in the Supreme Court of India. The petition challenges the move made by the Haryana Government prescribing a minimum educational qualification as a pre-requisite for contesting the *panchayat* polls.<sup>1</sup> Such disqualification criteria for contesting the *panchayat* elections are not the first of their kind, and the deep concern is that these will not be the last.

## OMINOUS SIGNS

Lately, the state governments of Rajasthan and Bihar have introduced additional disqualification measures in their respective Panchayati Raj Acts, leading to systematic denial of opportunities for the rural electorate. Let me illustrate this further by citing specific instances. In Bihar, the recently amended Bihar Panchayati Raj Act (August 2015) now has a clause wherein the candidates contesting the forthcoming *panchayat* elections in April/May 2016 need to have toilets in their households. In Odisha, apart from the two-child norm in the State Panchayati Raj Act, the candidates are also required to read and write in Odiya. In Rajasthan, along with the existing two-child norm as well as the toilet criteria, the recently introduced educational qualifications measure in December 2014 has severely restricted the space for women and other marginalized groups to participate in local politics actively.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Haryana Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Act 2015 requires that general candidates must have passed Class X whereas women and dalit candidates need to have cleared Class VIII and Class V, respectively.

The reason I refer to these disqualification measures is to highlight the propensity with which state institutions, mechanisms and their processes disregard the negative impact of its practices in achieving equality.

*Public policies and legislations lead to the exclusion of the very groups that are already bearing the brunt of existing inequalities and discrimination*

This is further compounded by the fact that the poor and the marginalized, who do not have land, water or access to basic services, are the ones most affected by such measures, and not the rural elite. It, of course, does not help when public policies and legislations lead to the exclusion of the very groups that are already bearing the brunt of existing inequalities and discrimination. No one is questioning the importance of education, health and sanitation as important indicators for the overall well-being and growth of an individual, but to try to actualize these by making them a mandated measure for participation in the process of governance strikes at the heart of decentralization.

More importantly, just whose representation is the state ensuring by the introduction of these selective disqualification criteria?

### **THE ROLE OF THE STATE**

Social change cannot be engineered through such blatant discriminatory actions. The state has to take the primary responsibility of ensuring the delivery of basic services. State governments must create enabling institutional mechanisms for empowerment. The approach adopted by them should be complementary and not mutually exclusive. The state should induce positive action on the ground, rather than suppress its people.

For instance, in the case of Rajasthan—in one stroke, the ill-thought-out policy measure has led to 80 per cent of the rural electorate not

being able to contest elections. The figures are alarmingly higher in the reserved categories. At the *panchayat* level, due to the lack of gender disaggregated data/information available, the figures could be significantly higher. In addition to this, it

has led to discrimination, based on age group (currently in the age of 40–55 years), towards people who did not have access to education as a right guaranteed under the Right to Education (RTE).

Introducing such selective disqualification measures such as the two-child norm, mandatory requirement of toilets in the household of potential candidates, and now a minimum education requirement, is hindering inclusive participation of all in grass-roots development and governance in a democratic country. There is a paradoxical trend, wherein, on the one hand, the government has made promises to empower women and, on the other hand, the spaces for women to participate in decision-making roles are shrinking. The principles of equality and fairness—the core of any democratic framework—will not be able to function, if the most disadvantaged, marginalized groups are under-represented in the decision-making processes.

### **BACK TO THE BASICS: REVISITING THE PRINCIPLES OF 73<sup>RD</sup> CAA**

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act (CAA) provided an opportunity to the people of this country, especially the marginalized groups, including women, to have a share in the decision-making about and the utilization of public resources. It provided a Constitutional mechanism, to devolve power and decision-making right at the lowest unit of democracy, that is, the villages and to groups that have traditionally been marginalized. It changed

the rules of the political, social and economic engagement between the state and its citizens. "The normative—the political project of greater inclusion and representation of historically disadvantaged and marginalized groups, constitutes the truly exciting part of the Indian experiment. Of course, the persistence of patriarchy and of entrenched caste and class hierarchies often militate against the success of the experiment but there is also much evidence that affirms its worth."<sup>ii</sup>

The most significant provision under the 73<sup>rd</sup> CAA was the introduction of 33.33 per cent reservation of seats for women in *panchayati raj* institutions (PRIs), with many states increasing it to 50 per cent. As a result, more than one million women got elected to *panchayats*, making it one of the largest mobilizations of women in the public role—a feat that is unmatched anywhere else in the world.

Over the years, The Hunger Project's experience of working with elected women leaders at the *gram panchayat* in seven states—Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttarakhand, Tamil Nadu, Odisha and Karnataka—indicates a remarkable progress made by elected women leaders. The nature of leadership exercised by them has evolved—shifting the discourse from reservation to participation to effective participation. These women leaders are constantly challenging the traditionally defined, existing structure of power and dominance. Women who have the capacity to perform, regardless of their educational qualifications, class or caste, have overcome the biggest hurdle to their leadership—that is, gender-based constraints (read the Bhagwati Devi case).

There has been extensive research that showcases the importance of women's leadership in local governance. It has brought

about distinct values and addressed interests that otherwise are neglected in the male-dominated political sphere. Issues of social justice and gender justice have received priority by elected women leaders. To give an example: a study undertaken by the Harvard Business School Professor, Laxmi Iyer, and co-authors attempts to test the impact of women's political empowerment on the incidence of crimes against women. Using the 1993 constitutional amendment, the authors were able to test statistically whether the increase in women's representation had an effect on crimes against women at the local level. They found that the mandated political representation for women resulted in a 44 per cent increase in reported crimes against women, with rapes per capita rising by 23 per cent, and kidnapping increasing by 13 per cent in the period 1985–2007. Based on these statistics, they suggest that women feel more comfortable coming forward to report crimes against them when there are women in the local government with whom they have interacted.<sup>iii</sup>

The magnitude of problems relating to effective functioning of local governance is daunting. It is even more daunting for elected women representatives to exercise their mandate in a system of governance that is underpinned in a patriarchal social environment.

The crux of the problem is that we are still guilty of attaching notional value to their political agency that has, over a period of time, matured due to reservation in PRIs. This becomes even more evident when selective disqualification criteria are imposed only on elected representatives at the *panchayat* level, and not at the higher echelons of political power. The disadvantaged and the marginalized are punished for no fault of theirs. It doesn't help when state legislations and other mechanisms view them as an

extension of the service delivery mechanisms as well as a means to achieve their state specific targets (read sanitation). One can only fault their aspirations, that is, of contesting elections by exercising their constitutional right.

*No system is perfect. Agreed. But to make the current, local democratic framework vibrant and truly representative of public will, de facto equality needs to be progressively realized*

to create enabling conditions for women to access and use it. If people have very few tangible resources such as land and income, intangible resources are especially important in shaping their lives. The barriers in the guise of various disqualification measures should be removed or

## THE WAY FORWARD

No system is perfect. Agreed. But to make the current, local democratic framework vibrant and truly representative of public will, de facto equality needs to be progressively realized. The state and its institutions need to initiate multi-dimensional interventions to address political and social exclusion. Democratic decentralization has to be supplemented with other development initiatives, to address poverty and marginalization.

Some specific suggestions for making PRIs accountable and effective in their functioning are:

- ♦ Inclusive development cannot be attained unless women participate equally in the development process; this also means that they need to have equal opportunities to exercise their political agency. Equality before law is not enough. The state needs
- ♦ The yardstick for measuring women's participation or decision-making in public roles needs to change. One needs to measure the progress made by women after they become elected leaders. The government should measure the progress of women's participation and influence in decision-making that includes arriving on indices that go beyond measuring the number of women 'entering the local government'. Qualitative Indicators should be able to measure change in perceptions, attitudes and influence, as well as the

*Bhagwati Devi is the Sarpanch of Molela panchayat, Rajsamand district in Rajasthan. Bhagwati belongs to the Bhil tribe. She was elected unopposed to the post because there was no other candidate that could meet the educational criteria for contesting the panchayat elections. For her, completing everyday household chores and working as a daily wage worker was a set routine. Slowly, Bhagwati realized and was also made aware of her roles and responsibilities as an elected leader of her community. Her leadership is constantly challenged and defied by the dominant members of her community. Not the one to be deterred easily, Bhagwati Devi recently brought to the notice of the District Collector the discriminatory behaviour of the panchayat secretary towards her political leadership. She also got people their entitlements under MNREGA. The District Collector visited Bhagwati's panchayat and took the necessary action on the issues she raised. This is leadership in action.*

impact on decision-making. Such data will help in assessing the outcome of reservation and the impact it has had in realizing gender equality.

To conclude, if we are serious about achieving gender equality in public and political roles, governments, its institutions, actors, laws, policies and programmes—all need to work towards changing the unequal power relations between men and women. People need to see *panchayats* as institutions that promote democracy and development and not the

other way around. The processes adopted need to reflect this intent otherwise women's equal participation in local governance will remain rhetorical, with no real substance to back the claims. Bold action and commitment are needed by respective governments to guide the future of local government in India. It is time for *de jure* enjoyment of equal rights, to translate into *de facto* enjoyment of rights to make the framework of local governance more effective, more representative, more participatory and non-discriminatory.

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<sup>i</sup>This is further compounded by the dismal literacy level—across social groups in the state. The literacy level of women is 45.8 per cent. It is much worse for the Scheduled Caste women, with the rate standing at roughly 34.38 per cent (Census 2011).

<sup>ii</sup>Local Governance in India—Decentralization and Beyond: Ed. by Niraja Gopal Jayal, Amit Prakash and Pradeep K Sharma.

<sup>iii</sup>The Power of Political Voice: Women's Political Representation and Crime in India. Lakshmi Iyer, Anandi Mani, Prachi Mishra, Petia Topalova July 2011

# Kudumbashree-PRI Collaboration in Kerala: An Approach to Poverty Alleviation

SOUMEN BISWAS AND D. NARENDRANATH

*Starting in a modest way by engaging in neighbourhood groups, the Kudumbashree model spread like wildfire through the state of Kerala, which was already practising devolution of power and decentralized planning; it became "a process, a project and a delivery mechanism for the poor."*

Following a recent policy decision to strengthen collaboration between Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and community institutions, changes were made in the implementation framework of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM). The amended chapter on PRIs in the NRLM implementation framework envisages that SHGs and village-level Federations shall work closely with PRIs to access entitlements of the government for their members and to lend constructive support to the efforts of the *gram panchayats* (GP) for public good.

Meanwhile, the Fourteenth Finance Commission report, accepted by the Government of India, has allocated Rs 2 lakh crores of 'untied funds' to *panchayats* from 2015 to 2020.

Whereas the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) is re-designing poverty reduction initiatives using the Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) survey data and creating *gram panchayat* (GP) poverty reduction plans, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) is devising ways to decentralize planning across the country.

These facts suggest that a major shift is being attempted in field approach, coordination between actors at multiple levels and convergences of schemes for rural poverty reduction, focussing on *GPs* as units for action.

In the above context, a study of the PRI–Community Institution collaboration in Kerala, facilitated by Kudumbashree, the only statewide initiative of this kind, was thought to be useful, to gather learnings for making future interventions elsewhere more appropriate and productive. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to understand the Kerala model of poverty reduction through decentralized planning, the PRI-Community Institution collaboration and the convergences of action/scheme in their own context, and find major pointers for consideration while introducing similar initiatives elsewhere.

This report is based on findings from a five-day field study of the rural areas in two districts (Pathanamthitta and Kollam) of Kerala and the study of available literature. During the field visits, meetings were held with women members of Kudumbashree, various functionaries of GPs and Kudumbashree, government officials, and others involved.

### **KUDUMBASHREE**

No understanding of Kerala's model of devolution of power, decentralized planning and the approach to poverty alleviation is possible without understanding Kudumbashree, which is "not only envisaged as a Mission, but also as a process, a project and a delivery mechanism for the poor." (Kudumbashree document). As we begin, it may be worthwhile to quote from Matthew Block and Cynthia Fuchs-Epstein, who summarize some of the salient features of Kudumbashree.

"Founded in Kerala, India's southernmost State, in 1998 as an outgrowth of one of the largest experiments in participatory democracy in the world, Kudumbashree is a women's

*Kudumbashree is a women's organization made up of over four million women in 258,000 neighbourhood groups, permeating every town and village in Kerala.*

organization made up of over four million women in 258,000 neighbourhood groups (or NHGs) permeating every town and village in Kerala. Since its inception 16 years ago as the Kerala State Mission for Poverty Eradication, Kudumbashree has grown at a staggering rate of roughly 320,000 women and 18,000 NHGs annually (Vijayakumar 2012), and now represents more than half of all the families in Kerala (KDMS 2015). There are four key components of Kudumbashree's mission. First, it is founded upon a micro-thrift and micro-credit approach to poverty eradication. Second, it is funded and managed by the Government of Kerala rather than as a private NGO (in stark contrast to the norm). Third, it is directly linked, at the grass-roots level, to local self-governance institutions (or LSGIs) that were empowered through democratic decentralization in Kerala and have substantial budgeting and administrative decision-making capacities. Fourth, the Mission is oriented not only toward economic advancement, but also to the social and political empowerment of Malayalee women."

### **GENESIS OF KUDUMBASHREE**

The Urban Basic Service Programme, implemented first in the municipal areas of Alappuzha district and later taken to all the municipalities in Kerala, and the Community Based Nutrition Project implemented in the rural areas of Malappuram district in the early nineties were early initiatives of community participation in the current context. These programmes helped bring about large-scale awareness and social development initiatives among the community through a network of women's collectives.

The decentralization campaign, undertaken on a mass scale during the People's Plan Campaign (PPC) in the state, led to the mass mobilization and sensitization of *panchayats*. Two significant steps were taken as part of the decentralization process in Kerala, namely, 33 per

cent reservation for women in elected local bodies and the introduction of the Women Component Plan that mandated for every local body to reserve a minimum of 10 per cent of the plan expenditure (grant-in-aid to local bodies) for directly targeting women and for facilitating greater women's participation in democratic institutions. Women's reservation in local bodies has now risen to 50 per cent. Under PPC, the concept of the NHG was introduced, comprising a number (15–40) of actual (physical) neighbours of women and men of all classes, with several perceived common interests relevant for local planning in urban and rural areas. NHG was seen as an additional sub-structure under the Kerala PRI system at the Ward level and below. It was set up to take care of the large number of people and families under one *gram sabha* (GS). These experiments, being carried out in different *panchayats*, laid the foundation for the understanding of the SHG-led community model of participatory development.

In 1997, a Special Task Force drafted the proposal for Kudumbashree to be set up as a Mission. The task force comprised Dr Thomas Isaac, then member of the Kerala State Planning Board, Sri S.M. Vijayanand, Secretary, Local Administrative Department, and Dr. Prakash Bakshi, Head of NABARD (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development) Regional Office in Thiruvananthapuram. The task force prepared a comprehensive project to eradicate

*The decentralization campaign, undertaken on a mass scale during the People's Plan Campaign (PPC) in the state, led to the mass mobilization and sensitization of panchayats.*

absolute poverty in Kerala within a ten-year time period. The state government expedited the formalities and gave its approval to the project. This led to the inclusion of the Kudumbashree programme in the state's annual budget for 1997–98.

Kudumbashree was inaugurated by the then Prime Minister, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, on May 17, 1998, in Malapuram and was initially launched in 262 GPs where the PPC was best implemented. Local resource persons were mobilized under the leadership of local governments. The formation of Kudumbashree *ayalkoottams* (Neighbourhood Groups) did not stress on below the poverty line (BPL) categorization but on the norms laid down by Kudumbashree. These included a willingness to meet every week in the homes of different members, an interest and motivation to interact and work in a group, the mentality to respect the common interest, etc. A local Information Education Communication (IEC) material for mobilization was developed, Ward-level training programmes were organized and one-day campaigns were held to motivate women.

Kudumbashree was registered as the State Poverty Eradication Mission of the Government of Kerala in November 1998. The Mission started functioning on April 1, 1999. The Mission functioned under the administrative control of the Local Administration Department, later renamed as the Local Self Government Department and is headed by the Minister of Local Self Government.

The Kudumbashree network developed across the state in three phases. By March 2002, the entire state was brought under it.

## THE KUDUMBASHREE CBO STRUCTURE

The Kudumbashree Community Based Organization (CBO) is a three-tiered network of poor families, represented by a woman of each family. At the base are the NHGs that work on the principles of mutual affinity and benefit. NHGs are federated at the level of a Ward at the level of the local government into Area Development Societies (ADSs), and further into a Community Development Society (CDS). Figure 1 shows the Kudumbashree structure.

The Kudumbashree CBO structure does not have a 'Federation' beyond the GP level.

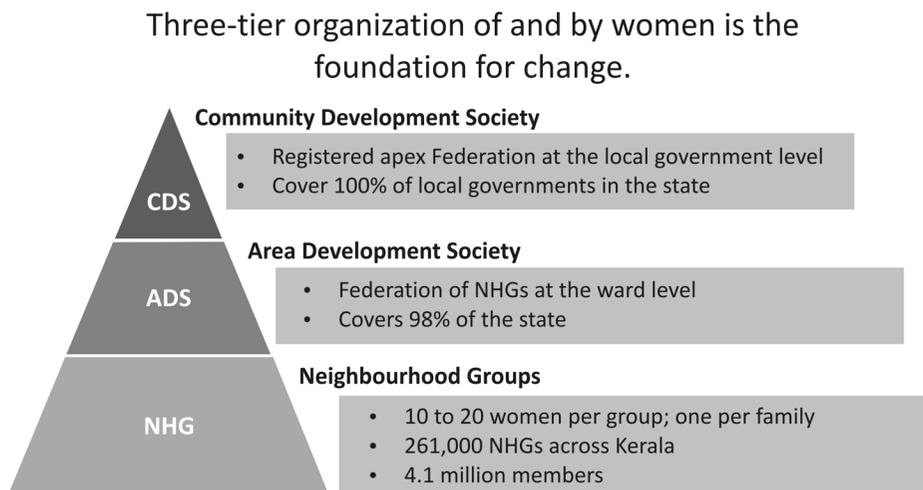
In the initial days, the Kudumbashree community structures functioned as part of the GPs. The presidents of the GPs presided over the CDS meetings. The *panchayat* presidents had an informal say in the selection of CDS chairpersons. The new bye-laws for the Kudumbashree CDS, introduced in 2008, attempted autonomy of the CDS from the

*panchayat* and ensured independent elections in the community structure. Whereas the interference from the *panchayats* was to be removed, care was taken that the CBO would not become a parallel structure. A mutually beneficial working relationship between the CBO and the *panchayats* was attempted. The bye-laws provided spaces wherein CBOs and *panchayats* would work together for the common good of the people.

According to Kudumbashree, the introduction of the new bye-laws was the next big step in its history. It enabled autonomy of community structures and provided space to them to put their voice across, to 'grow and flourish'.

## COORDINATION BETWEEN LOCAL SELF GOVERNMENTS (PANCHAYATS) AND THE KUDUMBASHREE STRUCTURE

The structural and functional mechanisms for coordination have evolved over the years. The following diagram (Figure 2) indicates the major points as they stand today.



**Figure: 1 Autonomous Institution of Women**

The Annual Action Plans of the Kudumbashree CDS get integrated with those of the *panchayat*. The Evaluation Committee of Kudumbashree CDS meets once in three months to review Kudumbashree projects. The GP President chairs the meeting whereas the CDS Chairperson is the Vice-Chairperson of the Evaluation Committee. There are also MLA committees set up at the constituency level that include Kudumbashree members, and look into issues of local development and livelihoods creation. Whereas Kudumbashree ADS members are mandated to be mates in MGNREGA in Kerala, *panchayat* Ward members become patrons of ADS. The Kudumbashree network is seen as the fastest and easiest channel for information dissemination in a GP—90 per cent attendance in GSs in Kerala is from the Kudumbashree network.

*The penetration of Kudumbashree is very impressive. Its presence in hamlets and its coverage of population is varied and extensive.*

## OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIELD VISIT

*Outreach and inclusion of the poor:* The penetration of Kudumbashree is very impressive. Its presence in hamlets and its coverage of population is varied

and extensive. Yet, it must also be mentioned, that those who are left out are on two extreme ends, either likely to be better off or are poor. Since Kudumbashree largely influences the selection of beneficiaries of government schemes, it has to be seen whether it has been inclusive of the marginalized. “How do women leaders of the network learn to respect and appreciate the deeper vulnerabilities of the poorer in their midst”—a question rightly asked in the annual report of Kudumbashree (2009–10) continues to remain a challenge for Kudumbashree’s success as the State’s Poverty Eradication Mission.

## Platforms for convergence between the women’s organization and local government make the three-tier model more effective

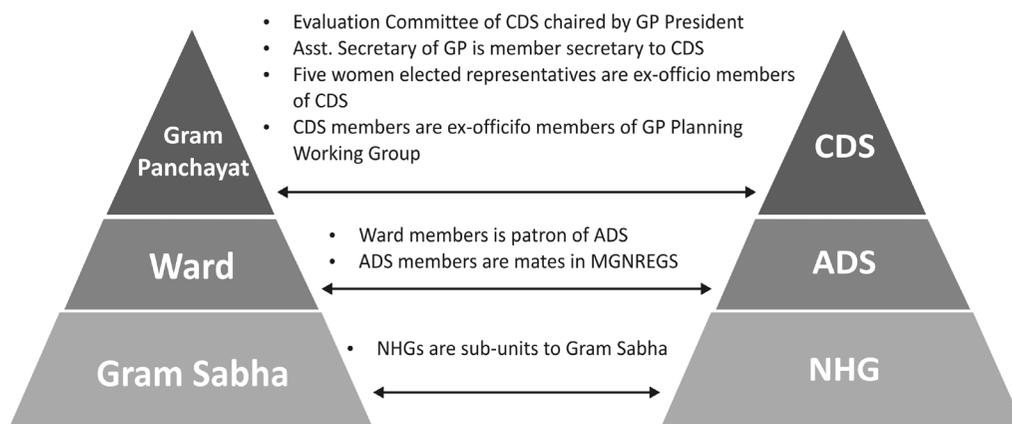


Figure 2: Working with Local Governments

*Financial intermediation:* A very noteworthy feature of Kudumbashree is that financial intermediation has mostly been confined to the NHG level. ADS or CDS does not have any financial functions. So the multiple tiers in the system are not bogged down with the task of managing finances, financial intermediation and associated risks. For that matter, even the financing of micro-enterprises has been separated from NHGs. Joint Liability Group (JLGs) (they actually do the enterprise activities) are financed directly, without having to go through NHGs. This has given the community structures, time, space and freedom to devote to many other activities.

*CBO structures not top-heavy:* The other notable feature of Kudumbashree is that the community structures are only until the *panchayat* level. There are no block- or district-level 'Federations'. The reason for this, as cited by Kudumbashree, is that since sufficient powers have been devolved to the GPs, the community structures at other levels are not necessary. Whereas this argument has its merits, there are other advantages for this lean and thin architecture. CDS and ADS do not face the prospect of domination or control by the upper-level structures or by others through them. The absence of the 'higher' community structures is likely to reduce the chances of top-down corruption. The cost of promoting and maintaining various tiers is reduced and efforts can be concentrated at the grass-roots tiers (NHG/ADS/CDS).

*Power of togetherness, knowledge and experience:* As we could sense intermittently through our interactions with various CBO structures, the power in Kudumbashree was

*Women members of the network value, practice and gain from the powers of togetherness, knowledge and experience; however, circumventing the burden of hierarchy and changing the perception about position power have not been easy*

sought to be associated with togetherness, knowledge and experience. If a person held an official position (in an NHG, ADS, a CDS or *panchayat*) it was because of her contribution, experience and knowledge. Not that the obverse was not heard. For example, to a question on what would have been the seating arrangement if the District Collector was attending

the CDS meeting, the first answer was that the Collector would sit alone on the dais because he held a superior position. This, however, was amended soon by the others through discussion—the District Panchayat President and the Collector would sit on either side of the CDS Chairperson, who would preside over the meeting.

Kudumbashree, which vowed to act for changing the power equation and enhancing the agency of women, has definitely had significant successes. Gender and patriarchy have been a strong theme of discourse and action. Women members of the network value, practice and gain from the powers of togetherness, knowledge and experience; however, circumventing the burden of hierarchy and changing the perception about position power have not been easy. Only time will tell if the Kudumbashree network, as an institution, will be able to thwart the tendency of patronage and rent seeking among its new leaders. Given its success, the halo associated with it, the indulgence enjoyed by the women and the graduation of the Kudumbashree leaders to mainstream politics, these may arise. One can only hope that the 'wall-to-wall carpeting' with community structures laid by Kudumbashree will offer some resistance and act as deterrents.

## ORCHESTRATING CONVERGENCE— INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS IN KUDUMBASHREE AND THE PRI

There are a number of factors in the Kudumbashree Mission that facilitate PRIs and CBOs to function in alignment. Some of these are:

- i. *Kudumbashree evolved in the panchayats:* Soon after the 73rd and 74th amendments, the PPC for decentralized governance created strong local self governments (*panchayats* and municipalities) in the state. Kudumbashree was launched in 1998 as a community network that would work in tandem with local self governments for poverty eradication and women's empowerment.
- ii. *Women's empowerment for decentralization:* As per Dr Thomas Isaac, Kudumbashree was originally created to involve women in the decentralized planning process. The slogan was 'decentralization for women's empowerment'. But today, he admits, women have really become a decisive force in the villages and are making the political leadership accountable. The new slogan from the lessons learned should be 'women's empowerment for decentralization'.
- iii. *Kudumbashree Mission (KM) housed in the Ministry of Local Self Governance (LSG):* Kudumbashree was conceived as a joint programme of the Government of Kerala and NABARD, implemented through CDSs of Poor Women, serving as the community wing of local governments. Kudumbashree is formally registered as the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM), a society registered under the Travancore Kochi Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies Act, 1955. It has a Governing Body chaired by the state minister of LSG.

The Mission is thus strongly anchored in the *panchayats*.

- iv. *LSG has influence on the KM agenda:* Kudumbashree functions as the voice of LSG—in particular, the voice of the economically and socially weak, and of women. Most of the plan interventions of GPs and urban local governments in the areas of poverty reduction and women's development use the CDS network as an agency. The guidelines for the formulation of the 11th Five Year Plan by the local governments highlight agricultural production, local economic development, poverty eradication and social equity as core objectives. All these are significant areas of interface of CDS with the local government. Through their interventions in the GSs and sectoral working groups for plan formulation, the women of Kudumbashree try to put the core objective of the 11th Five Year Plan at the heart of the development debate.
- v. *LSG depends on KM:* The functioning of Kudumbashree is tied up with the development initiatives of the local government, be it for social infrastructure, welfare, rights-based interventions or for employment generation. From food security to health insurance, from housing to enterprise development, from the national wage employment programme to the Jagratha Samiti, every development intervention depends on Kudumbashree to provide the community interface.
- vi. *Mission Statement of KM:* "To eradicate absolute poverty in ten years through concerted community action under the leadership of the local governments, by facilitating the organization of the poor for combining self-help with demand-led convergence of available services and resources, to tackle multiple dimensions

and manifestations of poverty, holistically.”

vii. *Co-terminus structures:*

The population pattern of Kerala allows CBOs to be co-terminus with the *panchayat* levels. NHG is at the hamlet/neighbourhood level; ADS is situated at the

Ward level; and CDS at the GP level. There are inter-locking mechanisms created at each level to ensure convergence.

There are other task-related interdependences and interlocking mechanisms to ensure that the linkage is institutional and not left to chance:

- i. A CBO is linked institutionally with the MGNREGA programme. The Mate is always a member of the ADS in a given Ward. In addition, NHGs assist the GP in identifying the persons who have not got job cards and in facilitating the provision of cards. NHGs are involved in organizing site meetings and in identifying works to be taken up. The activities of CBOs in MGNREGA are:
  - a. Registration of labourers
  - b. Preparation of the Annual Action Plan, including labour budget and the identification of works
  - c. Selection of Mate (Work Supervisor)
  - d. Provision of amenities at the worksite
  - e. Provision of tools and implements for work
  - f. Community network to support a social audit
- ii. The Ward Member is designated as Patron of ADS. The Ward Member keeps in regular touch with NHG members and also attends ADS meetings, as a matter of practice. The Ward Member is thus able to keep in touch with NHG women and

*Because women form a substantive voting population in a given Ward, it is in the interest of any Ward Member to try to influence the GP plan and activities in favour of women.*

be aware of their needs quite closely. Because women form a substantive voting population in a given Ward, it is in the interest of any Ward Member to try to influence the GP plan and activities in favour of women.

- iii. **Evaluation Committee:** The GP oversees CBOs through a mechanism called the Evaluation Committee. It is a high power committee, which shows the seriousness that the GP provides to the proper functioning of CBOs. In addition to almost all GP's top functionaries and many CBO members, it also has external invitees such as the bank representatives. This Evaluation Committee meets at least once in a year to take stock of the functioning of CBOs.
- iv. **CDS annual action planning:** This is a very elaborate annual exercise in which CBOs from each level are involved actively and so is the GP. The CDS action plan is officially mandated by the GP and also finally sanctioned by them. The elaborate planning process has the involvement of the GP at each stage. The planning is carried out through special working groups (on various themes) consisting of women drawn from NHGs and is led by the Convener, who is an NHG member and selected by the GS. The Ward Members are nominated as members of the working groups but are not the Conveners. These plans that are made by the working groups, are discussed and consolidated at the CDS level and then finalized in the GS. Once the GS clears the plans, they make them a part of their own larger plan.
- v. **GP facilitation of CBO plans:** In addition to providing funds for the plans, the

GP also provides other facilitation support. One instance, for example, is the intermediation that the GP provides to JLGs in taking up collective farming. The land for the activity is made available by the *panchayat*. The Ward Member, along with the JLG, identifies the land where the farming can be taken up, and then negotiates with the land-owner to make the land available. The intermediation of the GP gives confidence to the land-owner (who in most cases does not stay locally), to provide the land. Once the farm produce is ready, it is sold in the market set up especially for JLGs by the *panchayat*.

- vi. Participation in the GS: As per the testimonies of both the NHG women and the GP functionaries, the participation of women has gone up dramatically in GS meetings after the formation of NHGs. This way they also exercise considerable influence over the planning in GPs. The collectivization under CBOs and the official space provided to them have contributed in no small measure to their increased confidence in speaking out in public and in making demands.
- vii. Elections: The state government takes interest in the elections of CBOs and appoints returning officers to conduct elections, a la co-operatives, to ensure that there is no undue influence of anyone in the processes. The elections are conducted through secret ballot. The women consider this a major enabler in their efforts to carry on their business with autonomy.

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These are specific instances of how the GP and the CBOs are organically linked and how they facilitate the convergence of the programmes. Of course, as we read the history of the decentralized planning process and the evolution of Kudumbashree, it is obvious that given the political landscape of the state, it could not possibly have happened any other way. It is not possible to ignore the *panchayats* in Kerala because they have traditionally been powerful institutions. Even before the decentralized

planning process was initiated, the *panchayats* had been empowered with funds, functions and functionaries to a much larger extent than in most places in the country. The difference between earlier and now, after the formation of community institutions, is that the *panchayats* can no longer ignore women's groups.

But, there is also criticism of the way the convergence has happened.

#### 1. Convergence or partnership

Whereas *panchayats* are inclusive institutions and have jurisdiction over the total area, CBOs are exclusive institutions, because they are organizations of the poor, and that too only women. A CBO, technically, is a sub-set of the GS and is bound by the larger decisions taken by the GS or the GP. In that sense, as Dr Isaac points out, a true partnership is not possible. The institutions are, by design, not equal. So the term convergence has been used when CBOs are the community interface of the GPs—they help GPs in ensuring depth and outreach; they also contribute in planning. However, convergence has an underlying power dimension.

It was observed that the de facto President was a far more powerful person than the CDS Chairperson. It was not always that the CDS could override the decision of the GP. Of course, there have been instances of protests by women, but those would be few and far between. Ultimately, the political leadership in a GP decides the final plan. In one instance, it was stated that a shopping complex that was the priority of the ruling party in a GP got precedence over the expansion of the Asraya programme (for rehabilitation of destitute families).

That politics, even at the *panchayat* level, is also along party lines does not help the cause of women much. Elections are fought on party lines and promises are made by political parties. Thus, CBOs have little leeway in influencing plans and priorities of the GP leadership when they are implementing the manifesto upon which they have been elected.

This has resulted in, as one *panchayat* President complained, the CBOs becoming politicized. Each of the elected members in the CBOs at the NHG, ADS or CDS levels also has their political affiliations. Even though the Kudumbashree Mission CBOs are apolitical entities and are supposed to place women and the poor as priority, they do sometimes get carried away along political lines. Whereas we did not hear many instances, a few statements by some of the people did reveal the fault-lines.

## 2. CBOs reflecting mainstream norms and values

In the context of the deprived and marginalized communities, their own organizations are supposed to be the vehicle for building their sense of agency and develop the confidence to take on the mainstream. They, in reality, practice a counter-culture there and then embark on

the process of influencing mainstream society with a new set of behaviours, and create space for themselves. Women's SHGs and their Federations find their own space and feel free to be themselves, away from patriarchal norms.

It will be a challenge for institutions of the poor to not be influenced by behaviour that is predominant in the political system—governed by norms of patriarchy and patronage. But then, that is the change that must take place. Kudumbashree CBOs seemed to be struggling on this account. The general functioning of NHGs and the allied tiers did not seem to be able to provide women with that special space to challenge the norms and be different. The close proximity to PRIs has influenced NHGs and their tiers, so that deliberations almost always veer around to the agenda set by the *panchayats*. CBO leaders even found it difficult to articulate any lacunae in the way the *panchayat* operates. It could be that they never had a chance to think of their existence in any manner outside the PRI system. A gap one perceived was the absence of external facilitation in NHG or tier meetings. It is important to have an external perspective in CBOs, to present a different view-point, even if just for the purpose of debate.

## 3. Autonomy

The GP requires that the ADS representation in CDS is elected, based on caste and economic status. And this norm is enforced quite strongly. In case the secret ballot does not throw up representatives in accordance with the reservation policy, elections are carried out again. One would imagine that, left to themselves, CBOs would not have had any reservations on these lines for any of their posts because the position of women has hardly been correlated to caste or economic

status (in fact, the obverse has often been found to be true). But since they are housed in the PRI system, they are forced to follow the caste and economic status-based reservation policy. The question that arises is whether such proximity is healthy when CBOs are not allowed to select their own leadership without external interference? It is as if CBOs did not think that there was another way possible. If they were autonomous in the true sense, they would select their leadership, based on criteria evolved by their own selves and deal with PRIs on a need basis.

#### 4. Exclusion of the poor or marginalized

As per its own admission, Kudumbashree does not seem to be able to reach out to the very poor and the marginalized communities such as the tribal communities and the fishing communities. The tribal communities are awarded tribal sub-plan assistance, in addition to the share they receive from the plan funds of PRIs. The norm followed, however, is that plan funds are entirely spent on non-tribals and the tribal communities are left to plan with Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) funds only. NHGs have not taken up issues such as this for any struggle with PRIs. Is it because tribals are a politically less significant (less assertive and less in numbers) community and, therefore, are not important for votes?

## CONCLUSION

The above issues notwithstanding, large scale successes in convergence and participatory governance, particularly as it refers to women from disadvantaged families taking charge of initiatives at the local level and expressing themselves in various ways cannot be overlooked by even its strongest critics. The fact that Kudumbashree has been very indigenous, designed and carried forward in-house without any active support or intervention of external aid agencies adds merit to the case. Since its initiation in 1998 and up to 2011, the expenditure of Kudumbashree Society has been Rs 383 crores, financed almost exclusively by the government's own resources and through the convergence of schemes. This will be considered frugal and even novel for a project of this magnitude by any standard. There is, thus, an urgent need to look into the Kudumbashree model, if the new approach of rural poverty reduction focussing on GPs as units has to be given a head-start. Whereas the context of other states will differ from Kerala and, to that extent, modifications will surely be necessary, it gives the scope to other states to make an indigenous model of their own. This should be possible now because the State Rural Livelihood Missions are ready.

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# Exploring Mendha Lekha: An Ideal Village

VISHAL JAMKAR

*Stepping out of the position of being a passive receiver of state largesse, a tiny village in Maharashtra has found its power, over the last two decades, in a collective decision-making process that takes cognisance of the needs and capabilities of each of its people, paving the way for enhanced confidence to interact with the government, agencies and the outside world, and creating living conditions and environment worth emulating*

Mendha Lekha is among the celebrated villages of India, along with other well-known villages such as Hivre Bazaar and Ralegan Siddhi. Hivre Bazaar has undergone a remarkable transformation from being a drought-affected *gram panchayat* to a village that has adopted a three-crop farming system. This shift has made every family in the area a *lakhpati*. The credit for this transformation goes largely to the leadership of the young and educated village *sarpanch*, Popatrao Pawar. Ralegan Siddhi, in Ahmadnagar district of Maharashtra, is known for the transformation that took place because of the ridge-to-valley watershed work, as well some of the remarkable decisions of the *gram sabha*, under the leadership of Anna Hazare.

Similarly, among its other achievements, Mendha Lekha is known for being the first village in India to have been allotted Community Forest Rights on 1800 ha of its land. It is also quite uniquely famous for the functioning of its *gram sabha* and the negotiations the community has conducted with the government over the last three decades.

At PRADAN, our image of an 'ideal' village is one that has certain characteristics, which includes a significant change in the livelihood scenario, the active preparation and implementation of Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) plans in the village, and one where women are members of a vibrant collective—either of a producer institution or of an SHG Federation. It is a place where residents have negotiated strongly with the government to establish basic amenities in their village, have acted against the atrocities they face, have played a pivotal role in governance of their village, etc. Wanting to see one such 'ideal' village in the country, I visited Mendha Lekha, in Lekha *panchayat*, Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra.

### My visit to Mendha Lekha

With these PRADAN assumptions of an 'ideal' village in my mind, I got down from the bus at the beginning of the village Mendha, popularly known as Mendha Lekha. I was very excited to finally come to a place I had heard so much about. As I started walking towards the village, I was struck by its simplicity. It appeared like any typical village. The houses were made of mud and had tile roofs. Except for the main road into the village, the other roads were of *murrum*. The first thing I saw was a meeting hall, a simple building with a tiled roof. A big tree offered shade to the surrounding area. There was a large open space behind the meeting hall, which had bathrooms and toilets for visitors.

I soon met Devaji Tofa, the *ex-sarpanch* and Mohanbhai Heerabai Heeralal, who, through his organization Vrikshamitra, has played a very pivotal role in making Mendha Lekha what it is today. They welcomed me and were pleased with my first impressions of the village, which I told them were beyond my expectations. After a while I just had to ask, though I was worried about how the question would be received, "Why is this village one of the most talked-about, so-called 'ideal' villages in India?"

Tofa was not fazed by the question and explained that it is something that he is often asked. He responded, "We have never claimed ourselves to be an ideal village. It is the outsiders who have called us that. It is possible that it is because of the kind of change that has taken place here."

What he said next was profound and has stayed with me and has forced me to reflect on the way I have been working as a development worker all these years.

*"We have changed not out there (referring to infrastructure), we have changed in here (pointing his hand towards his head and heart). There is no limit to greed. However, our needs are very limited."*

"We have changed not out there (referring to infrastructure), we have changed in here (pointing his hand towards his head and heart). There is no limit to greed. However, our needs are very limited."

He spoke of the identity of the Gond community and how it has

evolved, and gave examples of their ancestors' beliefs. The essence of what he said was that the community believed in preserving the very identity of the Gonds and not be swayed by the mainstream development agenda. They did not blindly accept everything that came to them but rationally questioned these before accepting or rejecting them. This rationality and clarity came through to me as Devaji Tofa spoke. His response is engraved in my memory. It has made me question my approach, and the approach of all interventionists to work, or for that matter the very discourse of mainstream development. Bettering rural livelihoods does not necessarily mean urbanizing. Communities are challenging this discourse and that is evident in Mendha Lekha.

I met Devaji Tofa again later in the day along with other villagers. The general practice in the village is for villagers, mostly women, to come together and discuss the pertinent issues and then meet with any visitors and share their experiences. I had many questions, specifically about how this entire process began and how much time it took them to come to where they were today. I wanted to know if there was any external agency supporting them and how all the villagers became mobilized about the issues that needed addressing. I was also curious about whether they faced any opposition from the state and how they dealt with that, and what the role of women was in this movement. What was the contribution of women in upholding and preserving Gond

culture, and what was their vision for the future?

What they shared with me that evening and from the discussions that I had with Devaji Tofa, and other members at other times, gave me insight into the three-decade process that has made Mendha Lekha what it is today. This is also shared in a small book written by Mohanbhai and Devaji Tofa.

I would like to take you through this journey.

### **IN OUR VILLAGE, WE ARE THE GOVERNMENT!**

“We have our government in Delhi and Mumbai. But in our village, we ourselves are the government.” This epitomizes the approach to polity in the village of Mendha Lekha!

During a participatory study in 1987–89, ‘Forest and People’, a Study Circle was formed by the villagers to study the *nistar* (forest produce being used for the villagers’ own use) rights of the people. The Study Circle comprised persons with an interest in the study, who debated every question threadbare and, thereby, helped the *gram sabha* take proper decisions. No decision was supposed to be taken in the Study Circle; that was the exclusive prerogative of the *gram sabha*. When they realized that securing *nistar* rights required a strong village organization and that the government, political leaders, bureaucracy, or NGOs could not solve this problem, the villagers felt the need of forming their own village organization.

During the Study Circle meetings, the villagers realized that liquor and the lack of participation of women in the organization were the main challenges that needed to be addressed. They also realized that ego, selfishness and

*“We have our government in Delhi and Mumbai. But in our village, we ourselves are the government.” This epitomizes the approach to polity in the village of Mendha Lekha!*

ignorance, in both the rich and the poor, create problems. Discussions were held in small groups to search for solutions at the individual and the collective level. The first step was to accept that they had common interests and needed a mechanism for decision-making

by consensus; that they needed to refrain from imposing any decision on anybody and to continue discussing matters until consensus was reached. This helped in strengthening the village organization. Vinoba Bhave and other thinkers had already talked about consensus decision-making; the villagers realized it when they began to address their needs. They also became aware that they had, to some extent, already been practising consensus decision-making, based upon their own wisdom!

### **CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING**

There are certain concepts to be cognisant of so as to understand the movement in Mendha Lekha. ‘Consensus Decision-making’ process is one such. What kind of polity should there be? Political systems have evolved from being tribal polity to becoming nation-states, and there is now an advance towards sub-continental nation-states. Whatever the ideology—capitalism, socialism, communism or anything else—all centralized polities, based on the principle of representation, have the individual as their basic unit. Individuals surrender their innate power to some or the other power centre and weaken themselves; and these power centres, comprising representatives, also prove to be weak in fulfilling their promises about freedom, equality, brotherhood, justice, prosperity, security, and maintenance of law and order and peace, in spite of all the power acquired from the individuals. It is absolutely clear that any type of dictatorship or authoritarianism or the monopoly of power is not acceptable.

Acharya Vinoba Bhave, a great disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, sketched a picture of the desirable polity in his book *Swarajya-shastra*. He has called it *sarvayatan*. A village community taking decisions by consensus is the basic unit of this polity. Vinoba Bhave talked of consensus, but wrote at the same time that he had never come across a village community taking decisions by consensus.

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Most of the followers of Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave believed that consensus decision-making was too Utopian and dismissed it out of hand. They continued to think and work in the framework of democracy based on representation, decision-making by majority, and centralization.

Every individual has desirable and undesirable qualities. The social structure should be such that undesirable features are effectively suppressed and positive features are given a scope to blossom. A community in a small village or locality that takes decisions by consensus is the only structure that can achieve this successfully. Thus consensus decision-making has always remained at the core of Mendha Lekha.

### **GAON-SAMAJ SABHA**

Mendha (Lekha) is a constituent of the Lekha *gram panchayat*, which comprises three villages—Mendha, Lekha and Kanhartola. The *gram sabha* of the *gram panchayat* of Lekha, as per the Gram Panchayat Act, is the assembly of all the voters in these three villages, whereas the *gram sabha* of Mendha is the assembly of all the adult villagers in Mendha. To distinguish between these two, we may call the latter *gaon-samaj sabha*.

For the *gaon-samaj sabha* of Mendha, attendance of at least one male and one female member from each household is compulsory. If it is not possible for someone to attend on account of some important work or some other genuine reason, he or she has to inform the Chairperson of the *gaon-samaj sabha* or the *Mahila Mandal*. A fine is stipulated for non-attendance without genuine reason, and it

has to be deposited before the next meeting. Decisions in the *gaon-samaj sabha* are taken by consensus. Even if a single person disagrees, the discussion continues until consensus is reached—the disagreeing person may be man or woman, rich or poor. It is not the question of convincing him; it is genuinely believed that he or she may be right and his concerns need to be heard and addressed, before moving forward. If a consensus is not reached in any meeting, the matter is deliberated upon in the Study Circle or in the next *gaon-samaj sabha* meeting. But decisions are never taken by the majority.

To implement the decisions, various committees are formed. They are the Joint Forest Management Committee, the Public Works Committee, the Justice Committee, the Grain Bank Committee, the Health Committee, the Education Committee, the Women's Committee, the Water-Distribution Committee, the Youth or the Gotul Committee, the Village Fund Committee, the Sanitation Committee and the Agriculture Committee.

### **The First Successful Experience—The Creation of The Gotul**

Once these principles were agreed upon, there were a number of issues handled by the *gaon-samaj sabha*. The initial and the most

significant amongst them was that of the Gotul. The Gotul was once a unique cultural institution among the Gond tribals. Influenced by the criticism of the outsiders, they had destroyed it. The *gram sabha* of Mendha, on realizing its significance, decided to rebuild it.

The first step was to build a Gotul hut for which it was decided to bring teakwood from the *nistar* forest. As it was a matter of legitimate *nistar*, there was no question of seeking permission of the Forest department. People went to the forest, brought back teakwood and erected the Gotul hut. The Forest department tried to seize the wood, but the villagers stood their ground and peacefully defended their rights. The department, then, sought the help of the police.

Armed police, more in number than the villagers, entered the village along with the Forest department's party. While the men of the village stayed inside the homes, the women gathered together in full strength in front of the Gotul and faced the police. As decided in the *gram sabha*, they told the police, "We will not reply to bullets with bullets. We will not fight with sticks or throw stones at you. We will not even abuse you. But keep one thing in mind, if you uproot our Gotul and seize the wood, we will again go to the forest, bring teakwood and rebuild the Gotul hut. And we will do it every time you uproot the Gotul. If you still want to uproot it, do so by all means."

The Forest department's men broke the Gotul and took away the wood. The villagers, as declared, rebuilt the Gotul within two days. The incident sparked rage in the Cluster of 32 villages. People of these 32 villages gathered to deliberate the future course of action. Sending a deputation to higher authorities, demonstrations, *dharnas*—all sorts of measures were suggested. Finally, the people thought that they should fight it on their own

ground—in their villages. It was decided to build Gotuls in the other villages as well and 12 villages took up the challenge. And these 12 Gotuls were erected on the appointed day. When one Gotul was uprooted, 12 more Gotuls sprang up. How many Gotuls would spring up if 12 Gotuls were to be destroyed?

The government realized its folly, and did not repeat it. Significant it was that the villagers observed non-violent polity in this struggle.

### NEGOTIATION WITH THE FOREST DEPARTMENT

The *gaon-samaj sabha* of Mendha decreed that outside agencies such as the central or the state governments, contractors and NGOs should not do anything in the village without the prior permission of the *gaon-samaj sabha*. If some agency were to try to do something, the whole village would resist peacefully, adopting the methods of the Chipko movement. The *gaon-samaj sabha*, being supreme at the village level, there was no question of seeking anybody else's permission.

However, many times the villagers did face challenges. The *gaon-samaj sabha* had not allowed the *sarpanch* of the village to cut bamboo although he had approval from the Forest department. There was also the case of a paper mill, which used to cut bamboo from the villages by getting the lease approved through the Forest department. The government had given the lease for bamboo-cutting to the mill on nominal rates, even in the forest where the villagers of Mendha had *nistar* rights.

The villagers wrote a letter to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra opposing this practice. Meanwhile, the people did not allow the mill to cut bamboo in their forests, by resorting to a movement on the lines of Chipko. This protest continued for three years. The paper

mill, the Forest department and the police, all tried their best to persuade the villagers. The *gaon-samaj sabha* offered the solution that the Forest department and the Joint Forest Management Committee of Mendha jointly cut the fully grown bamboos, which should then be provided on priority to farmers, artisans and other villagers, and only the remaining bamboo would be supplied to the paper mill.

After three years of struggle, the government finally accepted this proposal. In 2011, Mendha created history by being the first village to get sanction of Community Forest Rights under the Forest Rights Act.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 is the result of a protracted struggle by marginal and tribal communities of our country to assert their right to forest land on which they have been traditionally dependent. This Act is crucial for millions of tribals and other forest dwellers in different parts of our country because it provides for the restitution of deprived forest rights across India, including both individual rights to cultivated land in forests and community rights over common property resources. The Forests Rights Act (FRA) allots individual or community forest rights to a member or members of a forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribe and to Other Traditional Forest Dwellers [any member or community that has for at least three generations (1 generation = 25 years), prior to 13 December 2005, primarily resided in and depended on the forest and forest land for bona fide livelihoods needs], the right to hold and live in forest land, under individual or common occupation, for habitation or self-cultivation for livelihood.

*In 2011, Mendha created history by being the first village to get sanction of Community Forest Rights under the Forest Rights Act*

A total of 1800 ha of land has been allotted to the *gram sabha* in Mendha Lekha. It has divided the land into four sections. In one section, fully grown bamboo worth Rs 1 crore is cut and sold by the *gram sabha*. About 50

per cent is the cultivation cost; thus about Rs 50 lakhs every year is the income of the *gaon-samaj sabha* of Mendha Lekha!

### OTHER SUCCESSFUL ACHIEVEMENTS

A lot of money is sanctioned and spent in the name of tribal development but it hardly reaches the tribals. The village studied this problem; the *gaon-samaj sabha* wrote to the government that the money sanctioned for the development of the village be given directly to the *gaon-samaj sabha*. After negotiations, this was agreed upon and the Gaon Niyojan va Vikas Parishad (Village Planning and Development Council), Mendha (Lekha), was registered by the villagers to receive the money.

The *gaon-gram sabha* has also devised effective measures against corruption. It decided that a receipt must be insisted upon, if anything is given to government employees. There is an 'opposition leader' in the village. He critiques every proposal in the *gram sabha*. He does not participate in the Study Circle but argues vehemently in *gram sabha* meetings. The villagers do not look upon him as an enemy; rather they look upon him as a friend who points out the pitfalls in proposals.

What Parliament is to the nation or the Legislative Assembly is to the state, the *gaon-samaj sabha* is to the village or locality. However, it does not have an executive; it does not get constituted through an election. It is self-existent. Nobody has created it; therefore, nobody can put an end to it. Such

*gram sabhas*, or local committees, should be the basic units of the socio-political system.

### WHAT HAS CHANGED OVER THESE YEARS?

Devaji Tofa spoke about the changes in the village over the last few years. The inferiority complex of the villagers has decreased to a great extent. Earlier, they could not face any officials or people from urban dwellings; now they deal with any outsider on an equal footing.

The production, sale and consumption of liquor were widely prevalent. The village has now put a complete ban on it. If someone needs liquor for any traditional ritual, he has to seek the permission of the *gram sabha*; he can then distil and use only the specified quantity. If someone drinks outside the village, it is ignored, as long as he does not create a scene in the village; if, however, he creates a nuisance, he is fined.

Earlier, government officials, contractors, traders or NGOs did not consult villagers about any work they proposed to undertake in the village. Now, they have to seek the prior permission of the *gram sabha*.

Earlier, there was no participation of women in the *gram sabha*, at any stage of decision-making and implementation. Now women are equally involved.

Earlier, the cutting of trees for fruits, leaves or honey was widely prevalent. Now, the *gram sabha* has banned the same, and it has completely stopped.

The government had given the contract of felling bamboos in the forest to the Paper Mill whereas the people had the *nistar* rights. The workers of the mill used to cut bamboos into pieces, depriving farmers and artisans of the

long bamboo pieces that they needed. This also resulted in the degradation of bamboo clusters. Now, the *gram sabha* has the Community Forest Rights in its name by which 1800 ha forest land has been allotted to them. The bamboos from one-fourth of this section are harvested each year and first supplied to farmers and artisans on a priority; only the remaining bamboo is sold to traders or the Paper Mill. The annual sale of bamboo is up to Rs 1 crore, of which 50 per cent is net profit.

Corruption was rampant. The villagers looked upon the government employees as enemies of the village, exploiters and plunderers. The government employees, on the other hand, saw the villagers as their enemies and a selfish lot. Now both respect each other and sit together to discuss the various issues. Government employees provide the villagers with the information they need.

Earlier, the villagers were not aware of their strength as a collective. They believed that political leaders alone had the strength. Political leaders, too, had the same belief. Now, both the villagers and the political leaders at the *tehsil* level have realized that the leaders can never match people in strength; and that the leaders can be strong only if the people are strong.

Villagers of neighbouring villages used to think that tiny Mendha could not stand against the mighty government, and they would express this opinion time and again. They now realize how wrong they were, and have even started emulating the Mendha villagers.

The village organization was weak earlier. There was no thorough thinking through before taking any decision. The villagers were scattered, not united and worked as individuals. Now, they study every matter in detail in the Study Circle before taking any decision, which

they do only by consensus. This has strengthened the village.

### SO MUCH TO BE DONE!

The people of Mendha Lekha have never claimed to be the 'ideal' village. They are very candid in saying that like all other villages, they also have a mix of good and bad people, and it is only the process that they have adopted that has helped them perform beyond the ordinary. They also say that they are under no illusion that everything has been achieved in Mendha Lekha. They do realize that much remains to be done. These include:

All the decisions have not yet been fully implemented. For example, it was decided that one man and one woman member from each household should attend the *gaon-samaj sabha* meetings. The attendance is never 100 per cent.

All are not equally sincere about forest patrolling. Everyone wants to fulfil his/her own needs by bringing necessary articles from the forest. When it comes to taking responsibility, however, not everyone evinces adequate enthusiasm and interest.

People attend meetings of the *gaon-samaj sabha* when they need something. For example, if someone wants grain or money from the village fund, he or she does not mind sitting through a meeting, however long; but they do not actively participate in the discussions about village affairs.

Some people do not make timely repayment of loans taken from the *gaon-samaj sabha* even if there is no genuine reason. This sets a bad precedent.

*When asked what has changed over these years, they say it is their thought-process, consciousness as citizens, confidence to deal with internal struggles as well as negotiation capacities with outsiders*

Women do participate in the *gaon-samaj sabha* meetings, but still there is no perceptible rise in leadership among them. Effort is needed to persuade them to speak.

The youth have come together in the Yuvak Mandal; however, they are yet to place their issues

before the *gaon-samaj sabha*. It is not clear what direction they want to take and, as a result, some of them fall prey to addiction.

Although liquor is banned, marriage parties of brides sometimes bring liquor with them. Liquor is also smuggled in surreptitiously at times.

The institution of the Gotul has not yet been fully activated because of lack of proper understanding of its significance.

Devaji Tofa's wise words to his community are: "Believe only in yourself! Learn from others but do not try to emulate them. Always stand by the decisions taken by consensus in the *gaon-samaj sabha*, for therein lies your good and the good of your village. Consensus decision-making as a process has enabled Mendha to forge ahead despite occasional reverses, to build people's power to some extent, and to go from strength to strength."

### APPLYING LESSONS FROM MENDHA LEKHA

#### The idea of Ideal

I was moved by Devaji Tofa and many other villagers' words that they had never claimed that they are the 'ideal'. The people of Mendha Lekha count their shortcomings candidly. When asked what has changed over

these years, they say it is their thought process, consciousness as citizens, confidence to deal with internal struggles as well as negotiation capacities with outsiders.

Mainstream development has always equated development with urbanization, which has an inherent focus on infrastructure building. When government agencies or civil society organizations (CSOs) invite outsiders and funding agencies for field visits to showcase their work, they focus on changes in the physical conditions that have come about over the years through their assistance. The changes are visible in an earthen dam, a vegetable crop, school building or boundary wall, *panchayat bhawans*, poultry sheds, plantations, etc. However, seldom do outsiders and the implementing or facilitating agencies have the intent or the interest to know about the people's internal struggle and journey over the years. Even when it is shared, a CSO's attitude is condescending, as if it could not have happened without it and that the villagers need to be grateful to CSO representatives.

### **Vision of a liveable village**

The communities we work with are mostly tribal. When we 'facilitate' meetings of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) or Village Organizations (VOs), we seldom invest our effort in harnessing the potential of the group or the collective. Our interaction is focussed upon the outcome, which is to be 'facilitated' to arrive at, within a short span. I wish that rather than taking up an agenda from the outside, which we think is useful for them, we invest time in getting to know their agendas/issues/vision. We need to know what their idea of a harmonious village is. We need to understand the community's relationship with nature.

*The vision of an ideal village needs to be that of the villagers and not that of outsiders like the government or CSOs, who are mostly urban-raised and have fancy ideas about development*

Tribals have been living harmoniously with nature since ages. Nature is deified and trees and animals are worshipped by various clans. It is only after colonization that their relationship with nature has become disturbed. Left to themselves, tribal communities

are not materialistic and live in sync with nature and its cycle. The vision of an ideal village needs to be that of the villagers and not that of outsiders like the government or CSOs, who are mostly urban-raised and have fancy ideas about development.

Their exposure to outsiders has made the tribal people doubt their own wisdom, which has been labelled as non-ambitious and happy-go-lucky; this is not completely true. Our engagement with them needs to be such that villagers are reassured that their ideas are valid and that they have a wisdom of their own and will be treated with respect.

### **Decision-making: An empowering process**

Once the vision and the issues are laid down, the next prevalent practice by us interventionists is to provide solutions and alternatives. We miss the important step of the community themselves deliberating on the causes of the current state of affairs, the possible solutions and their prognosis, leading to the choosing of the solution, from the many that come up in their discussions. This process is more important than the actual solution. The Chinese proverb says: 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for lifetime'.

By teaching them the process, the villagers may be empowered to approach other issues in a similar manner. It requires patience

and painstaking efforts of interventionists to engage in this process. The concept of a Study Circle may be encouraged—a group of people from among the community can study issues. We can help the community look at all the options before arriving at any decision.

The process of consensus decision-making needs to be applied to all the decisions that are taken in the SHG or the village. It is not the decision but the process of decision-making that gives ownership of the ultimate decision. The consensual nature of the process empowers villagers. Often, we rely on a few leaders in the SHG and in the village, who help drive the process, leading to early solutions—all the villagers may not be party to it. The outcome might benefit many but it still may not be an empowering experience for many. Ultimately, only some will feel powerful; many, on the other hand, will feel powerless and be dependent upon the powerful. The outcome may benefit and may bring material change; process-wise, however, there will most likely be 'un-development'.

So to traverse this journey, it is important for an interventionist to be convinced of the alternative philosophy. Once there is conviction, the path will be explored.

### Negotiation skills

Rather than empowering a few leaders in the village, the concept of a Study Circle gives space to distributive leadership, wherein many can take charge of different issues, ultimately empowering a large mass, rather than just a few. Different committees, along with Study

*No panchayat election has taken place in Mendha village all these years. Panchayati Raj Institute (PRI) members in the village are selected through consensus without incurring the expenses for an election. This is worth emulating in other places as well.*

Circles, can also be formed to look after the implementation of solutions. What is also important to increase confidence is the ability to negotiate with outsiders without underestimating the self or overestimating others. The community can grow to be confident about approaching the government, other agencies or any outsider on any issue. This can happen when they

are knowledgeable about the issue they are addressing. CSOs often end up seeing government departments as an antagonist to development. Villagers also need to be encouraged and showed how they can initiate and build a relationship between their community and government line departments.

### Governance

No *panchayat* election has taken place in Mendha village all these years. Panchayati Raj Institute (PRI) members in the village are selected through consensus without incurring the expenses for an election. This is worth emulating in other places as well.

The community needs to be aware of the development fund allocated for village development by the government. The frequency of the meetings of the *gram sabha* is also important. It should not only happen as prescribed by the government but also take place as and when the villagers feel the need for one. In Mendha Lekha, every evening, men and women, who were able to, gathered in the meeting hall, to share their daily happenings, discuss news and learn new things. This is an organic getting-together without a set agenda. Meetings like these are more beneficial than the structured ones.

### Understanding the 'life-world' of community

Most important for the villagers is the change in approach from being a beneficiary to an active citizen. The villagers of Mendha Lekha have emerged, not as recipients of the state's freebies, but as people who have made an active contribution to the processes of receiving and actualizing. They proudly claim that they neither pay a bribe nor does anybody demand one from them, simply because they are from Mendha Lekha. They have been utilizing their own funds from the sale of bamboo to give loans to those who need them.

The measurement of MGNREGA work is being done by the villagers and not by the Technical Assistant. The villagers refuse to take government subsidies that are not relevant to them. The village has inspired neighbouring villages to follow its path. Exposure visits are conducted by various CSOs regularly and other villagers learn from the Mendha Lekha experience.

*Most important for the villagers is the change in approach from being a beneficiary to an active citizen. The villagers of Mendha Lekha have emerged, not as recipients of the state's freebies, but as people who have made an active contribution to the processes of receiving and actualizing*

Gadchiroli district has allotted the maximum Community Forest Rights claims to village *gram sabhas* in the country; this is testimony to the efforts of Mendha Lekha village. Last but not the least, we need to understand that a change in consciousness is a slow process and does not happen in few years. Mendha Lekha is what it is today because of continuous efforts in the last two decades. It requires patience, hard

work, belief in people's capabilities and an enduring vision by a facilitating agency. The interventionist also needs to understand the life-world of inhabitants and not make his/her intervention a formal engagement. Mohanbhai lived in the village for a couple of years with his family to be with the villagers.

My wish is that the six lakh villages in India follow the process Mendha Lekha followed—not that Mendha Lekha be copied blindly but that each builds on its own uniqueness to create six lakh examples of what may be called 'ideal' villages.



A gram sabha meeting in village Pondi in district Sidhi, Madhya Pradesh

As far as democratic decentralization is concerned, the most significant platform for exercise of voice is the *gram sabha*. In almost every state, a citizen, who participates in the *gram sabha*, is poor and vulnerable. The challenge for democratic decentralization is to convert the passive participation of the poor in the *gram sabha* into an active churning of opinion, feedback and expression of need.



**PRADAN** is a voluntary organization registered in Delhi under the Societies Registration Act. PRADAN works through small teams of professionals in selected villages across eight states. The focus of PRADAN's work is to promote and strengthen livelihoods for the rural poor. It involves organizing the poor, enhancing their capabilities, introducing ways to improve their income and linking them to banks, markets and other economic services. The professionals work directly with the poor, using their knowledge and skills to help remove poverty. *NewsReach*, PRADAN's bimonthly journal, is a forum for sharing the thoughts and experiences of these professionals working in remote and far-flung areas in the field. *NewsReach* helps them to reach out and connect with each other, the development fraternity and the outside world.

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