

# Participatory Planning in Jharkhand: A Step towards Democratic Development

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*Transferring the power to plan and implement development work in villages to the villagers themselves is a step toward decentralization, which forms a vital aspect of good governance and has the potential to change the face of rural policies and planning*

The idea of democratic participation is incomplete without the needs of the people translating into policy and its subsequent implementation. The voices of the people often remain unheard in the chambers of politicians and bureaucrats, the decision-makers in the areas of policy allocation and ground-level distribution. Numerous surveys, studies and assessments are conducted each year, elected representatives take the problems to the Vidhan Sabha and the Lok Sabha, and many rural policies are approved each year, and, yet, little seems to change for people in villages.

Because of middle-men, vote bank politics, and a large web of bureaucratic corruption and indifference, people do not receive entitlements that are due to them. The distance of the policymaker from the actual scene of implementation is often a hindrance to seeing the needs and requirements of the rural population. The government has tried to change this by incorporating new, participatory ways of decision-making, notably the Integrated Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE), implemented in certain blocks across the country.

IPPE works on the principles of policy convergence and public participation; nonetheless, in its first phase, it has had little impact in Jharkhand, where the rural population continues to suffer from exclusion, poverty, and a high outward migration rate. During the second round, IPPE-2, new ideas and experiments, focussed on deepening the practices of democracy, have emerged.

At the cusp of the practices of decentralization and policy convergence lies the IPPE being held in Jharkhand—the Yojana Banao Abhiyan (YBA). The programme, a brainchild of civil society actors and a close derivative of the People's Planning movement in Kerala in 1996, has seen large-scale

participation and publicity in the past month. Implemented across all blocks in the state, YBA is a programme designed to benefit rural populations as per their needs, with their priorities being strictly kept in mind. It also aims at strengthening the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs) in the area. In its initial phase, the programme seems to have created a stir and has instilled hope in a significant section of the rural poor in Jharkhand.

## ABOUT YBA

YBA is a decentralized planning programme that aims at increasing the participation of the rural public in the development of their area. It creates a platform for villagers to step in and determine the development works that will be most beneficial for the community. The programme was launched by Chief Minister Raghubar Das in December 2015 and has seen a tremendous show of political will and publicity.

Apart from the wide press coverage, the programme has been advertised through many hoardings across the capital city of Ranchi as well as in rural, peri-urban and urban areas of Jharkhand. Various events have been organized across the state to create a resource pool for the programme, and several planning exercises have been conducted. For example, training workshops for Community Resource Persons (CRPs), mega rallies in villages, and awareness and mobilization drives have been

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organized. Many aspects of the state apparatus have been put to use, with the strong support of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Ministers, MLAs and MPs have been made in-charge of specific areas, and professors from universities, members of SHGs, workers from various non-governmental organizations

(NGOs) are part of the resource base that the campaign has created.

The state's expectation from the movement is that the villagers will manage allocations in a way that is suitable for their community's geographical, social and environmental needs. With the introduction of YBA, the rural public along with their local governments, that is, *gram panchayats*, will make rural development plans, based on their resources, livelihoods and requirements. These plans are to be made at the hamlet-level meetings and then passed by the *gram sabha* of the revenue village. Once these plans are made and priorities have been decided by the *gram sabha*, a *panchayat* working committee meeting will finalize the plans and record these in the formats provided. The plans will be implemented as per the guidelines of MGNREGA and the 14th Finance Commission, and through funds that are allocated for such schemes.

Villagers can now choose and prioritize, through YBA, how they wish to use the funds that are allocated under MGNREGA. Whereas MGNREGA is in itself an employment and livelihoods-generation scheme, YBA allows for the public to determine its priorities in terms of developmental works that get sanctioned under MGNREGA. The 14th Finance Commission, which provides funds for basic amenities in the village, will provide the funds for these projects. A Panchayat Planning Team (PPT) will be formed in each village, to guide

villagers about the scheme, and help in mapping and planning projects for the village.

PPT comprises at least five members including the *panchayat sewak*, the *rozgar sewak*, two Ward Members, and two social planners (representatives from Self-Help Groups—SHGs, Cluster Facilitation Teams—CFTs, etc.) from the village. PPTs are being trained and supported by the State Resource Team (SRT) members of each district, comprising civil society members, CFT members, Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS) officers, government officials and functionaries, Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellows (PMRDF), PRI trainers and Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP) officials. Bureaucrats and local politicians, including MPs, MLAs and ministers, have been actively involved over the first phase of this scheme, by visiting the villages allotted to them and ensuring the smooth functioning of these meetings.

Bureaucrats such as the block and district Project Officers and Block Development Officers (BDOs) monitor the planning process. In order to prepare them for the programme and to sensitize them to the issues at hand, these bureaucrats underwent a special residential training in Ranchi. The District Programme Officers attended a five-day residential workshop, which included three days of planning and two days of field visits, along with other key actors such as members of the State Resource Teams (SRTs).

YBA has attracted a remarkable amount of enthusiasm, with innumerable aspects of the state and the civil society being called on board so as to make the programme work. Evident also is the enthusiasm of the people, who

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have shed a lot of inhibitions and are participating in it in unprecedented numbers.

## THE PLANNING PROCESS

The planning exercise for YBA is conducted over a period of three days. Guidelines are laid down to help the villagers assess

the needs of the village, vis-à-vis the resources available in the area. Every day, a specific set of activities that need to be conducted is allotted. An important aspect of YBA is to uplift *vanchit parivars* (deprived families) in a village and to ensure at least 100 days of employment to members of such families. Whereas the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) recognizes certain families that meet the criteria of *vanchit parivar*, YBA allows the *gram sabha* to recognize many more categories such as widows, senior citizens living alone, landless families, poor families with a large number of children, etc. Additionally, the *gram sabha* can suggest the removal of the *vanchit parivar* status from families that are well-off.

Day one of YBA is preceded by an awareness rally across the village and detailed information is put up on the notice board so as to inform and collect as many people from the village for the meeting. The schedule for the first day includes a discussion with the villagers, explaining to them the nuances of the scheme, and assisting them in the process of planning. A social map of the village is drafted with families marked as below poverty line (BPL), schedule caste (SC), schedule tribe (ST), other backward caste (OBC) and *vanchit parivar*. The purpose is to have a visual representation of the population distribution so that resources may be allocated in a fair manner, accessible to all. A month-wise plan of the livelihoods and MGNREGA employment scheme is set, after considering the needs of individuals and the

community. Issues concerning *vanchit parivars* are discussed and listed as a priority.

Day two of YBA focusses on resource planning. A resource map is drawn, wherein wells, rivers, check dams, arable land, land for grazing, etc., are marked. Both the social map and the resource map are initially drawn on the ground, using colours provided in the YBA kit given to all PPT members. Different colours are used to mark different social groups and resources in the respective maps. After there is agreement on the maps and the village has been inspected for their accuracy, these maps are drawn on chart papers. The areas marked for developmental works are inspected and a tour of the village is made so as to verify the records created in the previous two days.

On day three, the verification continues and the households marked as *vanchit* are visited to check if the family is actually deprived. Sometimes, a family that has been marked as deprived is well-off in reality. Such families are removed from the list and other families are marked as deprived, if that is so. The aim is to eliminate errors such as inaccurate inclusion of prosperous families and omission of needy families from the records. A primary understanding of the policies marked out by the village is undertaken and the plan is revised and rectified before it is sent to the *panchayat*. The third day is largely dedicated to documentation—the details are written down and forms are filled, chiefly by PPT.

## **OBSERVATIONS OF THE PLANNING PROCESS**

The involvement of such a large resource pool did have an impact on the mobilization across the state. Participation in most areas was noticeably high, and the involvement of SHG women positively affected their participation in YBA. Most people in these areas had their

reservations about MGNREGA due to late payments, improper maintenance of records, etc.

The mobilization conducted by SRTs and CFTs was crucial to breaking inhibitions in people and played a great role in reviving the trust of the people in the state. Whereas certain issues were common to all, the composition of the society and the level of intervention in the areas affected the outcomes and the process of organization. Some areas were easily motivated in large numbers to take up the schemes prescribed by the government whereas some stuck to the structures they trusted. In some areas, the meetings functioned fairly smoothly whereas meetings in other areas experienced arguments and conflicts when making decisions.

In a village of Koderma block, where there was sufficient attendance in the *gram sabha*, the community split into two—men and women. The men became drunk, as is a usual occurrence in the area, and created a huge ruckus. This segregation was initiated by the women after the men started fighting amongst themselves. Even in the women's group, in which most of them were from SHGs and were aware of the evils of caste, a few conflicts arose around the construction of walls around their cremation grounds. Because the village was divided on basis of caste, the upper castes had two cremation grounds and the lower castes had one. There were prolonged arguments about which of the grounds was to be enlisted for development work; both sides presented heated arguments. SHG members mediated in the matter and helped the group reach a conclusion eventually about which one of the cremation ground walls for higher castes was to be repaired first. The nature of the demands was more individualistic in some areas and the issues of caste often arose in the decision-making. Nonetheless, in most cases, members

did arrive at a consensus. What was interesting was the kind of discussion and debate that suddenly became a part of the public lives of these villagers. A culture of participation, planning and presenting arguments for their own welfare could emanate from such a programme, leading to a healthier democracy.

### NATURE OF DEMANDS

One of the biggest problems across the state is availability of water, both for drinking and irrigation. The focus of the government training was, therefore, chiefly on water conservation schemes so as to increase the level of the water table in these areas. The plateau region is characterized by rocky, uneven terrain and it is often tough to retain rain water. There is inadequate storage of surface water and the water table in the area is fast declining. Most farms are uncultivated during January and February because the agriculture is rain-fed and there not many other alternatives to irrigation. Villages were being encouraged to use YBA to construct structures that contribute to increasing the water table levels and harvest rain water for long-term use. The construction of new structures such as *dhoba* and *medhbandi* are being encouraged whereas old structures such as check dams and wells are the other available alternatives.

The distribution of the available water sources is itself not equitable and often some of the farms are at a disadvantage. Women from farther regions have to walk for several kilometres to access clean drinking water. The seasonal nature of agriculture also drives up migration rates in the area. Most men travel to urban areas in search for work, owing to the higher wage rates and the lack of alternatives

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in the villages. Hence, the concerns regarding availability of water sources seems to be uniform across areas and most villagers recognize the desperate need for irrigation facilities.

Whereas the authorities suggest structures for rain water harvesting, most of the villagers seem to prefer wells and lift irrigation. This is partially because most villagers are not familiar with the structures

that the state suggests as a means of water conservation whereas wells are a reliable, familiar source for them.

Another common request is for the construction of sheds for domestic animals such as goats and cows. A series of queries about the allocation of houses under the Indira Awaas Yojana also came up. The state and the civil society actors have been encouraging water-related demands at the community level; however, it is common for the demands to be of a more individualistic nature.

### A FEW CHALLENGES

#### *Communication with bureaucracy:*

Development and planning in Jharkhand has chiefly been driven by the bureaucracy, which seems to hold power. The rural poor, who have been distanced from the bureaucratic set-up due to the very nature of interaction that exists between the bureaucracy and the citizens, have largely been unaware of their entitlements and rights. Even in places or groups that do seem to be aware, the public's control on their development has been minimal or negligible. Most procedures of the bureaucracy are driven by a strong focus on paperwork and formats. Not only does this serve as an impediment in connecting the needs of the people with the

bureaucracy, it also distances the state from its people.

Until now, funds from various government schemes would be transferred to local bureaucrats, who determined what development works would be fit for the area. The public was expected to apply for benefits and schemes by approaching either the local representatives or the block office. Whereas the noticeable presence of SHGs has helped bridge this gap through social organization and awareness, bureaucratic procedures continue to be a hindrance in people's involvement in their welfare. The people's experience of their interaction with bureaucracy has often been uncertain, tedious, and requiring a large amount of paperwork, characteristic of bureaucratic systems.

Illiteracy is often blamed as the underlying cause for poverty; however, bureaucratic literacy in India continues to be a distinct phenomenon, inaccessible even to the functionally literate. This plays a large role in distancing bureaucrats from local information, thus adversely affecting their choice of developmental works. The pressure on bureaucrats to fulfill certain criteria and reflect the result in numbers is immense. This year's (2016) YBA exercise chiefly focusses on water conservation schemes and a long-term focus on sustainable income-generation schemes. Bureaucrats often face a challenge in emphasizing the need for such schemes to villagers, especially given their limited interaction.

For example, during a YBA meeting in Digri village. Torpa block, Khunti district, a number of bureaucrats attended the meeting for about half an hour. The bureaucrats, including the District Collector, the BDO, and the Circle Officer, suggested that the villagers take

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up livelihood activities such as bee-keeping, plantation of timber wood, fisheries, etc. The villagers, who were more interested in discussing their missing pension and the money that they were to receive from the government for filling Aadhaar cards, literally laughed

at these ideas. To them, activities such as bee-keeping were far from their requirements of irrigation facilities and basic health facilities.

In Porna Tham in Koderma block, the requests of the villagers were met with a condition of the District Collector, who insisted that all households get toilets constructed before they receive the schemes from YBA. Some villagers agreed that this was a fair demand but others were exasperated by the request. Whereas the bureaucrats focussed on the involvement of the villagers in activities that generate income or tried to use YBA to negotiate for other government targets (such as the construction of toilets under the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan), the focus of the public was on personal and more intrinsic needs. The BDO of Khunti district said, "The people want schemes that will bring noticeable and sudden changes to their life. The villagers usually want to construct wells and goat-sheds, the former as a trusted system of getting water despite the fact that water levels are alarmingly low in the area and the latter as an addition to their land-based assets."

***Thekedaars and political pressure:*** In areas that are characterized by public corruption, the decentralization process has challenged the lobbies of *thekedaars* and political groups who have vested interests. Often, allocations will be made to the middle-men or *thekedaars*, who cut costs and pocket a large chunk of the development funds while the public struggled with incomplete, unnecessary and

shoddy works. The *thekedaars* use capital intensive machinery, thus driving up costs and also reducing chances of employment for the local poor. In fact, in areas such as Kisko district, a number of *thekedaars* were offended by the YBA and tried to create pressure on the villagers and local bureaucrats to plan schemes that would benefit the *thekedaars*. Organized by SRT members, the villagers stood up against their dominant presence and continued the planning with even more participation.

**Retaining the momentum:** A major challenge is to retain the momentum the scheme generated among the rural population. In order to ensure implementation and maintain better accountability, the community needs to be pro-active and aware. If the schemes are not implemented as per the allocations, the *gram sabha* should check with the authorities and take necessary action. The villagers need to keep close track of their respective development works, follow through with them and, when needed, generate public support and raise their voice against any missing funds, misallocation or exploitation.

## CONCLUSION

Decentralization is a cornerstone for good governance and better networking between the state and the public. Policy convergence is another practice that allows for comprehensive

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growth because schemes overlap to provide the citizens what they need—after they have recognized this for themselves. If implemented correctly, these practices reduce state costs and increase systems of information between the state and the people. The transfer of power to

the public for the use of their resources is a seminal step and has the potential to change the face of rural policies and planning.

Schemes such as MGNREGA, one of the biggest livelihood generation schemes in the world, look to be strengthened via similar mechanisms. A major challenge lies in the continued motivation and mobilization of the general public. If proper implementation is to be ensured, it requires pro-active change in the distant processes of the bureaucracy, the continued awareness and vigilance of the people, and the support of the local representatives to the *panchayat*. Different areas and their experiences should be considered under different spectrums rather than using a single, one-size-fits-all approach. YBA is a positive step in the direction of creating a government of the people, a government that ensures pro-people development, unmarred by the selfish desires of the local elite. If the different actors and the public involved in the project continue with the momentum generated in the past few months, Jharkhand will be looking at a new story of development.