

# PRI–CBO Convergence: Democratic Equations

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*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

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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

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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.