

# ***Tola Sabha*–A Model for Community Development**

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*Mobilizing and empowering people for a shared developmental goal and inculcating in them a sense of ownership are paramount for the effective implementation of development programmes. Setting up a community governance mechanism, bringing transparency and accountability in the implementation of programmes and transferring power to the villagers are some of the much-deliberated and critical issues with which development projects across the nation are grappling*

The essence of the Gandhian philosophy of Gram Swaraj lies in governance, not by a hierarchical government but through self-governance by individuals and the community. This rhetoric has been further reinforced by the Government of India's commitment, reflected through the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992, in which the *gram sabha* has been envisaged as the foundation of the Panchayati Raj System.

Empowerment of the *gram sabha* is the key to strengthen Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs). Mobilizing and empowering people for a shared developmental goal and inculcating in them a sense of ownership are paramount for the effective implementation of development programmes. Setting up of a community governance mechanism, bringing transparency and accountability in the implementation of programmes and transferring power to the villagers are some of the much-deliberated and critical issues with which development projects across the nation are grappling.

The MoRD (Ministry of Rural Development), Government of Jharkhand, through its Special SGSY project, has taken definitive steps to implement Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM)-based livelihood programmes. It has kept the village community at the epicentre of its projects and all major project functions are carried out by the community.

PRADAN, the project implementing agency (PIA), recognized the developmental paradigm and the potential of the *gram sabha*, or the people's body. Taking a calculated step, in accordance with the overall spirit of the functioning of a *gram sabha* in which the community is in the driver's seat, PRADAN seeded the concept of working through *tola sabhas* (hamlet associations). Hamlets, or *tolas*, are small, socio-economically homogeneous, natural and historical settlements in a village. People within a hamlet enjoy far greater affinity and societal affiliations with each other than with inhabitants of other settlements. Many of the *tolas* in rural India are based on caste lines. Even nomenclatures such as Adivasi *tola*, Santhal *tola* and Ghatwari *tola* of settlements reflect the clan. Usually, communities in one *tola* share similar resource endowments and, hence, are also characterized by a similar set of social and resource constraints. Keeping the household as a unit of planning, the *tola sabha* is the basic platform for planning, execution and monitoring of INRM projects.

The implementation of INRM projects requires comprehensive planning for an entire patch of land. All adult residents of the *tola* are members of the *tola sabha*. The small size of the *tola sabha*, usually comprising 50 to 60 households, ensures inclusiveness in the planning process. Because of the undulating topography of the state, at times, *tolas* are spread over large distances; the socio-cultural homogeneity of the *tola sabhas* thus provides the much-required emotional and social bond essential for the active participation of all members. The members of a *tola sabha* not only get an opportunity and space to share

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their views but are also able to access appropriate, adequate and timely information about all project-related work.

Usually, hamlets that have a reasonable level of social mobilization and the presence of a high number of SHGs are selected for the formation of a *tola sabha*. This helps in

building essential trust and confidence among community members. The work starts with concept seeding in the hamlet, in which the emphasis is on building an understanding of the basic objectives of the project, its implementation process, and opportunities for all-round development of the families as well as the hamlet. After the consent of the villagers is obtained, the planning process is initiated by using participative rural appraisal (PRA) tools and techniques.

*Tola sabha* members are trained in various tools, techniques and processes of INRM and participatory planning. Members become familiar in the use of PRA tools such as resource mapping, ownership mapping and chapati diagram. Subsequently, each *tola sabha* prepares its own comprehensive INRM plan through a participatory approach. With the objective of assessing and analyzing the current situation vis-à-vis the dormant potential, information regarding land-use patterns, cropping, water availability, animal husbandry practices, forests resources etc., are mapped in detail.

As part of the process, detailed wealth-ranking exercises are conducted to identify and prioritize the poor and marginalized families. Adequate care is taken to ensure that the needs and aspirations of the most

marginalized are integrated in the overall plan. For the wealth-ranking, the villagers assess themselves on four categories, namely, the poorest of the poor, the poor, the relatively well-off and the well-off, based on criteria such as food-sufficiency, income, land-holding, family size and belongings such as motorcycle and warm clothes. Special livelihood provisions are made for the landless and asset-less families. Usually, the landless and the asset-less families are provided with farm and allied activities such as poultry farming and vermi-compost making, the two most rewarding enterprises for the impoverished, developed by PRADAN, specific to the region.

The villagers start planning around their resources in a three-day exclusive *tola sabha* resource management and planning meeting, to prepare a detailed implementation plan (DIP). The process starts with a sharing of the INRM concept and approach. It promotes the sustainable use of various natural resources such as land, forest, water, animal and human, by logically integrating them. The villagers then identify their existing resources and map them in the revenue map; they also identify the existing resource use and their problems, and follow it by generating options for action. After this, the villagers go for a transact walk in every field to decide on the plan of action, according to the problems identified and the technical suitability. The action plan usually comprises the construction of civil structures such as small farm ponds, seepage tanks, irrigation wells, micro-lift irrigation, earthen check dams and storage units, as well as organizing land husbandry, horticulture and off-farm activities such as vermi-composting, poultry-rearing and goat-rearing.

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The process of creating an action plan, and especially its depiction on a map, provides an understanding about the type of resources available, the current situation and the visualized state after the completion of the project.

A DIP, thus formulated, vividly encapsulates the aspirations of the community. The DIP, the core of the programme, is discussed and deliberated upon by the members every fortnight, thus making it truly dynamic and practical. Both the physical and the financial progress are regularly tracked in these meetings. Any anomaly in the plan is thoroughly discussed, the cause and effect relationships analyzed and remedial actions suggested.

Women remain at the centre of all programme interventions. For day-to-day co-ordination of project activities, a seven- to ten-member Project Execution Committee (PEC) is constituted. The PEC actually finalizes the plan, gives work orders, monitors the physical and financial progress, makes payments to the beneficiaries and suppliers and, in case of default, penalizes the concerned individual. In the selection of the PEC, women are preferred over men. Today, most of the posts in a PEC are occupied by women. This system has empowered and inspired rural women enormously to take on leadership roles.

The implementation of the work starts with the layout of the activities by the PEC members and a pool of local resource persons. The villagers in their *tola sabha* meeting decide on the availability of labour, the plan for their engagement and other related issues such as whether labour from other villages should

be required and permitted to work. It is mandatory for the *swarozgari* (the owner of the asset) or a member of her family to contribute 10 per cent of the total cost. This often comes in the form of labour.

All works are closely monitored by the *tola sabha* and the PEC. PEC members ensure both the quantity and the quality of the work done. They themselves carry out on-field measurement of each and every activity and ensure that the quality of the work is maintained during the project implementation and even after that. For example, they ensure that mango orchards are being well-managed; that inter-culture and inter-cropping is being done; that pruning and watering takes place as per schedule; and that they engage early in planning for marketing the fruit.

The PEC furnishes a status report to the *tola sabha* in its monthly meeting. This ensures timely and adequate dissemination of information about the progress in implementation of the project to all the villagers. Some members of the PEC are specifically nominated to monitor the quality of the programme implementation and are better known as being part of the Nigrani Samiti (Management Committee).

The monitoring of the project is, however, not confined to the boundaries of the hamlet. The members of the Cluster also discuss and examine the project implementation progress in their monthly meetings. In times of crisis, Cluster members from nearby hamlets support the implementation of the project. The support is in the form of maintenance of accounts, training for layout, and providing

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labour. Similarly, the block-level Federation, the apex institution of the SHGs, in many places, keeps an eye on the progress of the project.

A plan becomes an instrument of action only when the financial provisions stipulated in it are also made available for use at the appropriate time. The *tola sabhas* maintain their own bank accounts into which the project fund is directly transferred by the Jharkhand State Livelihood

Promotion Society (JSLPS), the nodal agency for the implementation of livelihood programmes, including that of NRLM in the state. The project fund from MoRD is routed through JSLPS. Usually, a woman member of the *tola sabha* or a local youth is trained to maintain the minutes book, the muster roll, the cash book, the ledger book, the stock register, the bank book and the pass book. All the three signatories in the *tola sabhas*, responsible for financial transactions and transactions with banks, are women. Handling large-scale mainstream funds has further helped build the confidence of the women.

One copy of the books is kept with the *tola sabha* and another is submitted to the PRADAN office, which in turn, has them audited by the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA). As mandated in the project, the *tola sabha* also ensures that each and every beneficiary contributes a minimum of 10 per cent of the cost.

All bills and signatures are validated by the three signatories. As soon as the *tola sabha* achieves 60 per cent fund utilization, a fresh request for funds is raised.

Breaking tradition and eons of inhibitions, the women from these *tolas*, mostly belonging to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Categories, and the minority communities, can now be seen actively interacting, persuading and negotiating with banks, government officials and market players. The increased mobility has infused the women with a higher sense of confidence and has developed amongst them a 'can do' attitude. Women in the *tola sabha* are empathetically engaged in demonstration and scaling up of models of livelihood, community mobilization, empowerment and natural resource management, thus contributing to the overall well-being of women and their families.

The members' direct involvement in the planning process has resulted in enhanced project ownership, further encouraging them to complete the project well within the stipulated budget and timelines. Instances of default or dropouts are resolved through peer engagement of members. Starting from the measurement to labour payment, everything is done in front of the PEC and the *tola sabha*, thus making every activity transparent.

The *tola sabhas* have also contributed in further scaling up social mobilization. Due to the distinguishable impact of the work done by the *tola sabha*, households that had been left out of the ambit of the SHGs are now attracted to it. One of the unintended benefits visible is the significant contribution of the *tola sabha* in strengthening *gram sabhas*. The *tola sabha* members now feel far more confident and empowered to not only raise relevant questions in the *gram sabha* but even actively steer the process of decision-making

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at the village level. Issues related to rights and entitlements, which were earlier taboo, are now articulated in the village decision-making forum. Villagers in the *gram sabha*, today, are demanding more meaningful assets such as a grading house, lift irrigation or mango orchards that will immediately contribute to their livelihoods. Demands by the community, to initiate

the formation of *tola sabhas* in the remaining hamlets and villages are in itself testimony to the success of the institution. A *tola sabha* is now a conduit between the people and the *gram sabha*. The *tola-wise* plan, if created, by all *tolas* in a village, can then effectively contribute to strengthening the plans of the *gram sabha*.

The supportive role of PRADAN professionals at the grass roots has been extremely noteworthy. Concerted efforts have been made in the capacity building efforts of the community. Structured, as well as on-the-job-training, is imparted to villagers, in order to equip them with the required technical and managerial skill-sets. In order to raise the aspiration level of the community, visioning exercises are conducted for SHG members, *tola sabha* members and PEC members. Exposure visits to see the fruits of the INRM projects have significantly helped in winning the much-required trust, confidence and belief of the farmers.

The process of project implementation through *tola sabhas* has generated opportunities and sparked the interest of local youth in land and water development activities such as digging pits and constructing water harvesting structures.

The success of the *tola sabha*-based planning process is evident from the fact that activities undertaken in the project continue to be utilized. For example, in Khunti district, more than 100 ha of high yielding varieties of mango plantation have been completed with more than 90 per cent survivability, even after five years of implementation of the project. Similarly, the use of irrigation structures has changed the project villages of the district from mono-seasonal cropping to multi-seasonal

cropping. A few villages such as Saridkel in the Khunti block and Chandarpur in the Torpa block have become leading producers of watermelon in the district. Damray village of Murhu block of the district has earned its identity as a vegetable producing village round the year. The project has witnessed multi-fold increase in the coverage of families for livelihood activities for both *rabi* and summer agriculture.