



COVID-19 Lesson - A Time for Disruptive GPDPs

The pandemic has taught many lessons including the need for disruption towards self-sufficiency in basic needs at all levels starting villages and gram panchayats. It is relevant to recall that in India the quest for a local self-government persisted ages back as evidenced in the Kautilya's *Arthshashtra*. Post-independence, India's Constituent Assembly, recognising its formal need, modified the Draft Constitution, 1948 and added an Article with the aim to, unequivocally direct the State to realise a *Panchayati Raj* system in India, which became Article 40 of the constitution. The 73th Constitutional Amendment in 1992 gave a further fillip by removing some prevalent shortcomings in the way of empowerment of Panchayat Raj Institutions. Still across the country gaps prevail in the devolution of 3-fs, viz, functions, functionaries and funds, hindering their capacities and effectiveness.

Now, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, on 24 April 2020 the National Panchayati Raj Day, Prime

Minister while interacting with Gram Panchayat representatives¹ applauded their resilience, and launched the e-Gram Swaraj Portal and 'PM Svamitwa Scheme 2020', giving a shot in the arm to this vital governance ecosystem. The e-Gram Swaraj aims to bring in better transparency and strengthen e-governance in PRIs². This would help prepare and execute Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs), to ensure real time monitoring and accountability. This e-portal is thus a major step towards digitisation down to the Gram Panchayat level.

These new initiatives aim at making rural local bodies more self-sustainable, financially stable and more efficient. The e-portal would act as an interface between the preparation and implementation of GPDPs, a massive task entailing annual updation on the 29 subjects covered in the XI schedule of the Constitution. Further the PM 'Survey of Villages And Mapping With Improvised Technology In Village Areas' (SVAMITVA) or 'PM

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¹ PIB Press Note 24th April 2020.

² e-Gram Swaraj Portal, Ministry of Panchayati Raj.

³ GPDP Campaign, Ministry of Panchayati Raj.

⁴ MGNREGA Soft, Ministry of Rural Development.

Svimitva Scheme 2020' aims at demarcation of rural assets and land areas by using the latest surveying methods such as drone technology with collaborated efforts of the Survey of India, through state, central and panchayat raj institutions with active participation of gram sabha members. It would also facilitate any owner to check and validate his property online and unlock the formal credit channels. Moreover, the geo-tagging of rural assets created would also be available. This in turn would support to prepare better quality GPDPs by use of GIS maps.

Self-sufficiency

PM also added that the pandemic has taught us that we have to be self-sufficient and self-reliant always, for basic needs, terming it as the biggest lesson learnt from the pandemic. This beacons the path to prepare comprehensive and flexible GPDPs, and carry out this mantra of disruption from the grass root level of each village to GP, block, district, state and national level, encompassing not only the rural but also urban LSGs. Not long back the Ministry of Panchayati Raj had chalked out the Gram Panchayat Development Plan Campaign to be accomplished over the period 2 October 2019 to 31 December 2019 for the preparation of GPDPs for 2020-21³, but the programme was hit by the unforeseen pandemic.

Optimum management of financial resources by GPDPs is not

any more limited to welfare of the GP inhabitants, but can act as a force multiplier. Today the GPs have some legal provisions for raising own resources, but in practice these can't be much invoked as physical proximity in the local setting comes in the way of taxing the people. This handicap renders GPs more dependent on finance commissions/states/centre, etc. Thus, major untied funds trickling in remain State Finance Commission devolution funds, general purpose grants, etc. These are topped up by partiality tied funds like the 14th Finance Commission devolution, etc. In addition, project based tied funds for schemes like MGNREGA (under which 2019-20 over INR 66,925 were spent⁴), SBM-Rural, PMAY, etc. are available; besides non-universal funds like under the corporate sector CSR, which are available only for limited section of GPs.

GPDPs for New India

The task as it essentially aims at local economic development and social justice by utilising the resources available can no longer be delayed. Moreover, it is the time to enhance resource base, of course not limited to financial aspect. This realisation has come at a time when rural areas rose to the unprecedented occasion and maintained critical supply chains of food and nutritional security. Buttressing the momentum realistic GPDPs can fast emerge as the cherished vehicles of development

towards which broadband connectivity needs to be scaled up from the current 1.25 lakh GPs to all GPs numbering a high 2,69,118.⁵ Also the number of Common Service Centres should be scaled up from current about three lakh, and in this series the expansion of low cost smart/feature phones should be expanded further.

This is the opportunity to gain from the pandemic-time experience of common villagers from all walks of life. Currently GPDPs encompass ‘resource envelope’, which is largely limited to financial resources mostly for execution of infrastructure projects. The clarion call is to also map soft power of resilience, perseverance, benevolence, adaptability and innovative skills of the people, to ensure protection of lives and livelihoods.

The New India Framework needs disruptions to enlarge scope of GPDPs, and should also include:

- Complete vulnerability mapping of each person (not limited to adults) to identify gaps in coverage under ICDS, MDM, PDS, pensions, insurance and their digital, financial and Aadhaar inclusion status. This exercise shouldn't be limited to the 6.62 lac revenue villages, but within each of these percolate to each constituent habitation. If any family isn't willing/ availing a facility, say PDS that should also be recorded.

- Village/ GP self-sufficiency plans covering agricultural labour, out/in migrating labour etc.
- Skill mapping with potential skill mapping (and appropriate skilling modules) of SHG members/ others for manufacturing of items like masks, micro processing of edibles, etc. and running of community kitchens to provide hygienic, hot and nutritious meals and flexibility to scale it up. Capacity building should also be an integral part of it.
- Mapping of livestock, milk chains, crops, cold storage, soils, geo-tagged drinking water and irrigation water sources, electricity, MSME processing and manufacturing units etc.
- Institutional mechanisms like committees on one or more of health, nutrition, hygiene & sanitation, education, livelihoods, women empowerment; banking, post office, etc.
- A detailed adaptability plan covering foreseen exigencies and flexibility mechanisms to handle if any unforeseen crops up.

Beyond Self-sufficiency

Moving outside GPs, a major opportunity that has come up is not only to be self-sufficient in food, nutrition and immunity-building security, but also in the items and services for which it can become an assured supplier to nearby peri-urban and urban areas.

⁵ Ministry of Panchayati Raj.

⁶ Gaetano Santeramo, Fabio; Guerrieri, Valentina and Lamonaca, Emilia. 2018. 'On the Evolution of Trade and Sanitary and Phytosanitary Standards: The Role of Trade Agreements'. Special Issue: *Agriculture Policies: Experiences and Challenges*, Volume 9, Issue 1.

Expanding further beyond, a village to global linking of value chains needs a lot of support of value addition linkages for the villages. As an example, this is also the time when movement of produce, especially its internationally traded component, has contracted, forcing short-term aim to be only constrained optimisation. However, India being the second largest global producer of vegetables and fruits, it can increase such exports especially to needy developing and LDCs.

The PRIs already have global institutional linkages. For instance, India is a member of 'The Commonwealth Local Government Forum' (CLGF), which aims at to contribute and learn through interaction and exchange of ideas in decentralisation, devolution and local governance.

This is also the time to make global trade ecosystem fair towards which food and nutrition security is a valid candidate. As an example reform of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Standards (SPS) can be pushed now. Fabio *et al.* (2018) argue that, 'Programmes of harmonisation of standards make available regional standards for SPSs to contracting and other interested parties, in order to facilitate trade and to avoid the use of unjustifiable SPSs as barriers to trade.'⁶

To sum up, in this endeavor the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be the beacon light to expand the current focus, as GPs can prove to nestle and nurture a new narrative, to realise the cherished vision of New India, to unlock potential amidst the calibrated opening up of lock down.

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