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Go Pack a Panchayati Punch



Swati Piramal & Manmohan Singh

The launch of Gol's Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana (SAGY) scheme in 2014 was a step in the right direction towards Mahatma Gandhi's vision of a robust 'panchayati raj' system. It recognised good governance in gram panchayats (GPs) based on their holistic development. After three decades of panchayati raj, it is heartening to see many model panchayats, like Buchkewadi in Maharashtra and Vennampalli in Telangana, to name just a couple. While the structure of rural decentralisation has been created, its actual potential is much greater, and requires a greater focus to ensure efficacy of local governance.

The grants provided to the 2.5 lakh GPs are to be used to support and strengthen the delivery of basic citizen services. The 15th Finance Commission has further increased the grants in its interim report for 2020-21. Despite this constitutional empowerment, local bodies face problems of inadequate

unrestricted finance to implement need-based activities.

It is imperative that the panchayat leader be empowered such that she or he can leverage unutilised funds and divert them where they are needed most. However, for this to happen, the sarpanch needs to have access to information regarding implementation of various schemes within her or his panchayat. One way is through a tech tool, which would not only make real-time data available at the fingertips of sarpanches but would also inform development of the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) to ensure saturation of schemes and utilisation of allocated funds for the welfare of citizens.

While the sarpanch is uniquely positioned to convene fora to bring in multi-department functionaries to work together towards a goal-based plan, she or he is not empowered to do so. It is necessary that sarpanches also have the same convening power other elected members and officials — be it the office of the chief minister or prime minister who can address, decide and act on state or national priorities — have. This power, largely absent at panchayat level, needs to be mandated, empowering the panchayat to regularly govern and review plans and ensure their effective implementation

through active participation of key department representatives deployed at the panchayat or village level.

Each department has its individual goals, agendas and mandates. But the sarpanch should bring them together to achieve a common goal, thereby making jan bhagidari (people partnership) a reality. Also, support by other panchayat representatives, such as panchayat secretary and panchayat facilitator, would further strengthen the hands of the sarpanch.

GP should have access and authority to utilise funds. The sarpanch should be mandated with convening power across various departments and have support teams. However, this will work only if there are no last-mile worker gaps and workers are equipped with the required capabilities.

This gains even greater importance in cases where the sarpanch may be a first-time head, lacking the adequate experience to develop and deliver a robust GPDP.

To address this gap, district collectors could identify, say, 20-30% of panchayats, based on development indi-

cators, where the sarpanch could deploy functionaries — teachers, accredited social health activists (ASHA), Anganwadi workers (AWW), auxiliary nurse midwives (ANM), etc — in departments other than their own to fill worker gaps. This would help towards achieving goals for significant initiatives such as Anaemia-Mukt Bharat, Zero Dropout, Zero Malnutrition and water-surplus panchayats.

While convergence of various development programmes has been a government priority it must cascade down to the panchayat level. The introduction of theme-based panchayat goals, aligned to central schemes by the rural development ministry, presents a great opportunity to empower panchayats to effect last-mile convergence for improvement of health, education, nutrition, water, agriculture and other outcomes.

It is a cause of celebration that many GPs are already going beyond their traditional civic functions and taking up more and more developmental responsibilities. Challenges do lie ahead. But with more empowerment, they can overcome these challenges, and essay their crucial role in letter and spirit towards building a self-reliant India.

Piramal is vice-chairperson, Piramal Group, and Singh is head, Aspirational Districts Collaborative, Piramal Foundation-NITI Aayog



Sir-Madam sarpanch

[View: Gram panchayats are a step towards building a self-reliant India](#)

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panchayats to effect last-mile convergence for improvement of health, education, nutrition, water, agriculture and other outcomes. It is a cause of celebration that many GPs are already going beyond their traditional civic functions and taking up more and more developmental responsibilities. Challenges do lie ahead. But with more empowerment, they can overcome these challenges, and essay their crucial role in letter and spirit towards building a self-reliant India. Dr. Swati Piramal is vice-chairperson, Piramal Group, and Manmohan Singh is head, Aspirational Districts Collaborative, Piramal Foundation-NITI Aayog (Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this column are that of the writer. The facts and opinions expressed here do not reflect the views of www.economictimes.com.)