



Good Governance at Rural Level

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ABSTRACT

Good governance, generally implied orientation of people in favour of a democracy, defined as a government of the people, by the people and so far the people, the 'good' or 'welfare' or 'interest' of people is assumed to be the necessary and sufficient condition of governance (not to speak of good governance) and its legitimacy.

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Good governance being an adjectivated expression connotes certain value-assumptions, whereas governance as a process denotes a value-free dispensation. *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines it as "act or manner of governing" and "the office or function of governing" while 'govern' is inter alia defined as "rule or control (a State: Subject, etc.) with authority; conduct the policy and affairs of (an organisation etc.)". Which means, governance refers to a process or the act or function of exercising (usually legitimate) authority to regulate affairs of men in a given territory, generally a state? In effect, it is the conduct of business of a policy or society. Again, because of a generally implied orientation of people in favour of a democracy, defined as a government of the people, by the people and so far the people, the 'good' or 'welfare' or 'interest' of people is assumed to be the necessary and sufficient condition of governance (not to speak of good governance) and its legitimacy.

Kautilya's Vision

In much the same vein, Kautilya in his treatise *Arthashastra* (written circa 300BC) propounded the traits of good governance by the ruler-king as follows:

In the happiness of his subjects lies his happiness, in their welfare his welfare; whatever pleases himself he shall not consider as good, but whatever pleases his subjects, he shall consider as good.

Kautilya's state administration principles, enunciated about 2300 years ago, bear striking resemblance to modern day welfare state model in respect of ideology, ideals, functions, tasks, duties, socio-administrative organizations, etc. It is really surprising that even in those days, king or ruler's duties and obligations towards holistic interests of State, society, nation, citizens care clearly laid down as were the detailed guidelines for the governance of the Kingdom in its diverse fields, like economic and financial administration, trade and commerce, agriculture and manufacture, mining, transport, village development, land-use, taxation, punishments for dereliction of duties assigned to superintendents of State and other employees as also private citizens (for developmental work). Kautilya was interested not only in the material welfare of the people but also in their moral welfare. Another interesting aspect was that Kautilya's framework of governance also included programmes for advancement of weaker and vulnerable sections of the society and provision of many concessions and facilities, more or less akin to those for our backward segments of society in recent times. All this indicate how Kautilya's system of governance was quite modern in concept and contemporary in opera-

tional guidelines. To this day, therefore, quite naturally, these precepts and writings have attracted the attention of not only the academic researchers but also many present-day thinkers, administration-watchers and political leaders, just as the philosophy, tenets, advice and suggestions contained in the two ancient epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, have significant relevance even today in terms of basic principles of state craft and governance.

The Preamble

The "Preamble" to the Indian Constitution reflects broadly the goals and ideals the Indian state should pursue for the well-being of its people. The most important goal is "to secure to all its citizens justice-social, economic and political". This, in fact, summerises the very purpose of any good state. The several aspects of this goal and the way to achieve them have been more explicitly spelt out in part IV of the Constitution containing the "Directive Principles of State Policy" (Articles 37 to 51). Article 37 says that these Directive Principles though not enforceable by any court "are nevertheless fundamental in the governance of the country and it shall be the duty of the State to apply these principles in making laws".

Problem Areas:

Confusion Regarding Functions

There is no delineation of functions between the three tiers. The Eleventh Schedule in the Constitution lists the functions that can be performed by the PRIs. But what tasks are to be performed at each level is not clear. There is wide variation in the assignment of functions in different states. Even these variations are also not clear-cut. At times, there is reference to the role of the Gram Sabha and the village panchayats in planning. But this is more a rhetoric than reality. Among the prerequisites for planning, to be meaningful, are formulation of objectives, resource inventory, identification of priorities and formulation of programmes. But neither than Gram Panchayats nor the Gram Sabhas have the requisite capacity. Asoka Mehta Working Group on District Planning and the G.V.K. Rao Committee, suggested that the appropriate decentralized unit for planning should be district. So also the National Integrated Rural Development (NIRD) guidelines. Given the present administrative structure, personnel with requisite skills to formulate a functional plan are likely to be available at the district level only. The village panchayats and the mandal/samithis can indicate their felt-needs to the district planning body. However, at present, problems exist at the district level too.

Absence of Autonomy

At the district, there is little autonomy for planning as nation-

al and state plans have to be accommodated. Many of the schemes are centrally funded Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), Drinking Water Supply, etc. and the norms and targets are more or less defined. There is room at best for slight adjustments. As such, for district plan to be meaningful, there has to be a District List. If there is such a list, planning pertaining to these items at the district level can become functional. Otherwise, in midst of the present system of Central and State lists, the district will more or less have a post office function.

Absence of Coordination

There is fragmentation of the administrative structure at the district, mandal and village level. There is no coordination between the line and the horizontal units. Studies indicate that there is great frustration at the mandal level as the Mandal Parishad Development Officer (MPDO) and the Extension Officers feel that their functions are routine and not creative. The village level worker is more or less the lone functionary at the village level. He has to cover a number of schemes. He is also expected to collect taxes levied by the village Panchayats – which makes it difficult for him to mobilize people's participation in development programmes. Being over-burdened, he follows the line of least resistance – not to undertake much activity.

Fragmented and overlapping Structure:

Some development programmes are outside the pale of the PRIs – ICDS, Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWACRA), etc. Even the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), till recently, was not under the PRIs. Each of them have a line administration with little coordination. They could ensure that the delivery system operates efficiently. More importantly, they have a role in enabling the community to overcome the dependency syndrome and become self-sufficient in meeting some of their own needs. They can educate the community with regard to issues at election time and approach of the various parties towards them.

Need to Democratize and Vitalise Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs):

The lower level administration also needs effective democratization through the three-tier, popularly elected Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) at the District, Block and village levels. These institutions for proper discharge of their functions need to be made financially viable. Being closer to the people, they ought to be legally empowered to enforce many minor laws through their own agencies. Panchayat-level Lok Adalats could also deal with minor civil and criminal disputes to relieve the higher judicial courts of their mounting case work. There should, of course, be proper supervision and guidance at the initial stages to these PRIs to ensure impartiality and fairness in their functioning. Retired judicial officials could also be made honorary advisers to Panchayat Adalats. Many local development works could be entrusted to these bodies. In fact, a beginning has already been made in many states to hand overall developmental activities to the PRIs. What could be additionally given to them is legal dispute settlement duties. They could also be empowered to give various kinds of legal certificates, i.e, birth, death, marriage, caste, character, etc. The Panchayat should be entrusted with maintenance of peace and security in their respective areas. Administration in many respects should be self-managed and closer to the people.

Conclusion

For democracy to be successful at the national level, the grassroots organizations have to be strong. The local authorities have to respond to the felt needs of the people. The citizens have to have faith in the efficacy of the administrative system so that the distance between people and the government is reduced. The administration, for good governance has to be accessible. In developing countries, it is the government, which initiates and implements development programmes. It must gain support of the people in the discharge of development programmes, particularly at the cutting-edge. Such support would strengthen democracy as well as a positive response of the community to development programme which should be the ultimate goal of good governance.

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