

## 1 Public participation, community action and governance

Empowerment of people is a goal of our democracy; it is also an instrument for development. It is true that in the modern society, economic growth is largely led by government policies and programmes, expansion of large-scale industrialisation and services sector, technological advances, urbanisation, global trade and flow of investments etc. This has also been accompanied by phenomena such as centralisation of political and economic power, destruction of environment, inequality of wealth and incomes, migration for work etc. The foundations of development are strong when it is based on sustainable action and aims at equitable outcomes.

Democracy is strengthened when the efforts for development and social mobilisation are driven by people. It is true that common people may not always know what is good for them or how to achieve what they wish for and may not be capable of initiating desired action. However, unless the community is mobilised to think and act for itself, there are risks of democratic systems and economic policies becoming tools for concentration of power and inequitable growth.

The masses in India have shown their resilience in face of adversity and their capability for selfless mass action in times of need. The participation of people in the freedom struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the various other mass uprisings during the British rule including in tribal areas, the silent contribution of people to various nation building efforts and also the participation in various mass movements from time to time post-independence are testimony to the innate strength of the masses and their belief in the efficacy of socio-political movements. What is also generally not realised is that the enthusiastic participation of people in the electoral process over the last so many decades has been the founding block of the strength of Indian democracy.

Local self-rule is not a concept foreign to the people of India, especially the villages. Panchayats, not just in villages, but in various other social groups and occupations, have always been mechanisms of governance through group deliberations even if some of these institutions have been influenced by the various social mores such as concepts of hierarchy, gerontocracy, gender bias etc. Besides these age-old institutions, there have always been examples of the community coming together for various acts including local religious and social events. Some of these customs were also reflected in the later day experiments such as shramdan, monetary contributions for a cause etc.

### 1.1 Potential and possibilities

The innate potential of people for community action and contribution for a cause is by and large untapped. The bonds shared – despite social differences and hierarchical structure – within a village are visible when social or religious events are organised and people from all strata and groups come together for the success of the event. The fraternal bonds are also evident when a family celebrates an occasion such as marriage in a village or in times of adversity such as illness or death.

These community bonds could be harnessed to ensure participation by all in matters related to governance, provision of civic amenities and addressing local issues. People could come together to communicate with greater confidence with the government authorities and attempt to find resolution of the issues. Their participation in designing of schemes for their welfare as also their being vigilant about the accountability of the administration in implementation could ensure better delivery of public services.

While it has been mentioned about the ability of the people to come together for community action and their willingness to contribute for a cause, it also has to be acknowledged these strengths were also curtailed by certain restricting factors. The hierarchical structure within a village based on caste,

status, occupation, land-holding etc.; the reluctance to question authority except in exceptional circumstances; the gender discrimination etc. are influences which need to be addressed.

## 1.2 Existing provisions and arrangements

It is not that efforts have not been made over the years for empowerment of the people. Beginning from the principles enshrined in our Constitution, the rule of law and the electoral system with adult franchise to the granting of various rights through statutory provisions for community empowerment and decentralisation of power such as the statutes related to the Panchayati Raj Institutions, the various rights and safeguards granted to the weaker sections etc. have been well meaning attempts toward the formation of an equitable society. However, it has been found that some of the instruments granted to people for ensuring their participation in governance and decision making, such as the rights granted to the institution of the gram sabha or to the panchayat or local self-government institutions, have not been adequately utilised by people to exercise their rights. As a result, democracy does not get strengthened at the grass roots.

## 1.3 Reasons for under-achievement of potential

### 1.3.1 Pattern of control

In the course of the unfolding of the process of India's democratic evolution, the formalisation of the participatory process, which existed in a somewhat nebulous form traditionally, led to the handing over of the executive aspects of the political system to the elected representatives and the bureaucracy. Though people showed keen interest in the political developments and also participated on a fairly large scale in the electoral process, they were left to exercise their power only once in five years. For the rest of the period, the people were rarely consulted in the legislative process or the planning for development. The electoral process was also hijacked to some extent by various vested interests. As regards the participation of people in panchayati raj institutions and in development planning etc., the villagers, who were expected to function in an environment of gram-swaraj, rarely exercised their right to participate.

### 1.3.2 Institutional capacity

The age-old social institutions of caste and hierarchy could have contributed to quite an extent to the exclusion, willing or otherwise, of people from the process of participatory governance. However, this assumption does not explain the apathy of the urban people toward participation in governance of local matters or even in the electoral process. While the influences of caste and status etc. are much weaker socially in urban areas, the participation in local self-government is much better in rural areas.

A reason for the low participation and the inability to hold government officials accountable could be that while there are well defined institutions for local self-government, there is no institutional structure for training people to participate. This function can perhaps be performed better by civil society organisations rather than government bodies. The scale of the effort and the enormity makes it difficult for civil society institutions to address this on a large scale. Political parties could have been the best suited organisations to take up the educating of masses in the basics of participatory democracy but perhaps they saw it as a double-edged weapon.

### 1.3.3 Adequacy of financial provision

One of the reasons for the civil society institutions such as voluntary agencies not taking up this task of educating people could be the scale and the humongous resources required.

## 1.4 Suggested steps

It may be argued that it is idealistic to expect common people to take active interest in issues of governance when they are burdened with their day to day struggle to earn a decent livelihood. The solution would perhaps lie in getting people together to discuss and act on the issues related to their livelihoods. If they get organised in groups to strive for better livelihoods, this could be the starting point for community action in other areas. Once people learn not only the benefits of acting together but also the skills of working together – discussing issues, analysing alternative solutions, sharing responsibilities, learning negotiating skills and arriving at a consensus - the groups would realise their ability to address issues jointly. To some extent, such a phenomenon has already been observed in the Self-Help Group movement, where women came together for mobilising savings initially but later took up some activities and also started discussing and acting jointly for addressing their issues of day to day governance.

The various suggestions for action included in the foregoing sections, whether relating to livelihoods promotion or relating to improvement in the sectors of health, education etc., have a common theme – community action through forming of small groups, strengthening of the groups and wherever required, forming a federation of the groups.

While forming of groups has been suggested for various activities, it is not necessary that there are separate groups for each activity. For example, the group for taking up processing and selling of farm produce or for organic cultivation could also be the group for working on forest produce, unless the actors are different and the situation demands separate groups for each activity. Similarly, the group for organic farming and eco-tourism could be one group as the tourists could also be buyers of organic produce or act as ambassadors for the organic produce in the urban areas. The process becomes simpler where SHGs are active. These could serve as starting points for processing and other activities.

Once the villagers start coming together to work in groups, the groups for discussing civic issues and matters of governance could be formed. The members would also get the confidence to discuss their issues with government authorities. They could start demanding regular attendance of teachers or better infrastructure in schools.

This is, of course, easier said than done. An organisation of willing volunteers would be needed, with some paid staff, to guide and support the groups, to monitor the activities and to ensure that the progress is on the desired lines. This supporting organisation would also have to help in marketing activity, managerial functions, co-ordinating and liaising with government authorities. Moreover, in case the attempts at mobilising people for activities such as processing and marketing are resisted by vested interests, the volunteers would have to discuss with all concerned for a consensual decision.

Mahatma Gandhi had dreamt of gram-swaraj where people take responsibility for their affairs. This could be a small attempt in that direction.