



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Volume-I, Issue-VI, May 2015, Page No. 100-103
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

Gram Panchayat Facilitating Team: The West Bengal Model for Ensuring People's Participation in Decentralized Planning Process

Sudipta Biswas

The author is a development Practitioner; presently working with Rural Development Institute (Landesa), an international non-profit organization, West Bengal, India

Abstract

Decentralized planning is widely regarded as a powerful tool to address challenges such as poor service delivery, social exclusion and disparities across varied geographical areas and communities. The very participation of people in the decentralized planning process is a matter of concern for governments, policy makers, academics and thinkers in developing countries like India. Different national and international agencies, government departments and institutions experimented different models in different geographies. West Bengal, one of the pioneering states in this arena adopted a model called 'Gram Panchayat Facilitating Team' (GPFT) during 2006-2009. It worked as a link between Gram Panchayat and common villagers. It helped ensure participation of all stakeholders at Gram Panchayat level, the lower tier of local government system irrespective of political colour, economic class, caste and gender. This paper is an attempt to reflect on the model, strategies adopted and analysis of the efficacy of this model to ensure participation of people in local governance.

Key Words: *Gram Panchayat, GPFT, Gram Panchayat Facilitating Team, Gram Unnayan Samiti, Decentralized planning, Participatory planning.*

Introduction: Panchayat, the local government in India is traditionally viewed as an institution of the people, for the people and by the people. Being the lower level institution of the three tier structure, Gram Panchayat is considered as the most important institution compared to Panchayat Samiti or Block Panchayat in the middle and Zila Parishad or District Panchayat in the upper level. Gram Panchayat is the nearest level institution having direct relation with daily life of its citizens. Participation and involvement of people in Gram Panchayat is instrumental for preparing plan and executing development programmes for economic development and social justice. But the overall picture of participation in Panchayats is a matter of concern across the country barring few states like Kerala, Karnataka etc.

Considering the fact of gloomy picture of participation of people in their own institution different policy measures have been taken in different states. Few common examples are mandatory reservation of weaker section of society like Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and women; provision of quorum in Gram Sabha meeting; provision of organizing meetings in public places; mandatory dissemination of information etc. Apart from these common policy level measures several innovative techniques are being experimented in different states like special Gram Sabha for women; organizing entertainment event before Gram Sabha etc. But it has to be kept in mind that participation of people is not a one-time event like Gram Sabha meeting; it is rather a continuous process. People should raise local level problems, discuss and debate over their problems in the meetings, identify local resources as well as resources available from different government schemes and programmes to meet their problems, analyze and prioritize their problems, prepare their own plan of action along with budget, design and develop participatory monitoring system, select beneficiaries to fit with different welfare schemes for the most vulnerable section of people, implement their plan, monitor the implementation of their own plan, evaluate their action in different forums and again formulate further plan of action for equitable development in a participatory manner. It will go on round the year and prove the true spirit of participatory democracy.

In order to ensure participation of people in the decentralized planning, implementation and monitoring process, West Bengal adopted an innovative model – formation of 'Gram Panchayat

Facilitating Team' (GPFT) in selected Gram Panchayats under a DFID funded state run programme, Strengthening Rural Decentralization (SRD) in the year 2005-06. The objective of the SRD programme was to institutionally strengthen the Panchayats through building capacities of Elected Representatives and Panchayat Functionaries (in selected Gram Panchayats of selected districts) for preparation of pro-poor, participatory, decentralized plan and utilization of resources. As a part of the strategy to adopt the model across the selected Gram Panchayats (GP) of selected districts, the Panchayat & Rural Development Department of Government of West Bengal issued a Planning Sub-guideline. The sub-guideline delineated the process of the formation of GPFT, their role and responsibilities in mobilizing people and ensuring effective participation of people in the participatory planning process.

Process of the Formation of GPFT: The sub-guideline addressed to Gram Panchayats that for installation of participatory planning at GP level Gram Panchayat Facilitating Team (GPFT) would be formed in each Gram Panchayat at the initial stage. The selection of GPFT members entails a time taking process. At first, a group of representatives from selected GPs are taken to a nearby GP for an exposure visit, where participatory planning process has already been started on a pilot basis. This group of representatives comprises GP Pradhan (Head or President of GP), Upa-Pradhan (Vice-President of GP), all GP staff, President and Secretary of all Gram Unnayan Samiti¹ (Village Development Council), leader of women Self Help Group (SHG) and active villagers. A broad indication was given about active villagers like school teachers, ICDS workers, member of CBO/CSO or any person who is residing at that Gram Sansad area and interested in the development of their own village. There should be 3 to 4 representatives from each Gram Sansad (Ward). They are presumed to be member of proposed GPFT. During selection of probable GPFT members it is to be taken into consideration that these members are pro-active, able to give more time, believed that they can make development on their own. The responsibility is given to the Gram Panchayats themselves for selection of probable GPFT members following that broad criterion.

The exposure visit helps probable GPFT members build their awareness as well as confidence. After the exposure visit probable GPFT members are allowed to take up some voluntary initiatives in their own village as entry point activities like minor road repairing, tube-well platform cleaning and repairing, awareness campaign on public health and sanitation, mainstreaming the dropout students, campaign for kitchen garden in every household etc. which requires minimal or no fund support. This exercise works as a test of tenacity and willingness to work voluntarily for the development of their own villages. It is made clear to the Gram Panchayat that GPFT members will not be paid any remuneration or honorarium. Those who are willing to provide voluntary service they will be selected only.

After around one month, Gram Panchayats are again asked to finalize the GPFT members making some addition or alteration in the existing probable GPFT. Gram Panchayats are given the freedom for final selection considering their suitability for the mission.

Finalization of the team is followed by a visioning exercise. A brainstorming session is conducted with GPFT members where they are asked how they want to see their village. Since they have visited a village where participatory planning process has already been initiated that helps them open up their mind. At the end of the session their expectations are summed up and question is raised before them whether this development necessary or not; if necessary it is possible or not and if it is possible then who will take the responsibility. The objective of this questioning is to motivate them, nurture a sense of responsibility and develop leadership among themselves. It has to be inculcated in their mind that no outsider can develop their village. Outsiders can only help them, share new ideas and facilitate the process. They will have to take the onus. Finally, roles and responsibilities of the GPFT members and their immediate task are made clear.

¹ *Gram Unnayan Samiti or Village Development Council is a Gram Sansad (ward) level permanent body headed by GP Member from that Gram Sansad. It is responsible for ensuring active participation of people at grass-root level in implementation and equitable distribution of benefits of Rural Development programmes. This body does not exist at present.*

Functioning of GPFT: GPFT members are oriented to perform the following task for the purpose of mobilizing the community to ensure voluntary participation of people in the participatory planning process -

- Sending letter to all household on behalf of Gram Panchayat inviting them to participate in the decentralized participatory planning process. Letter should mention the name of all the family members including children to manifest unconditional sincerity as well as sensitivity of the Panchayat and also build ownership on the participatory planning process. The task of distribution of letter should be shared among the GUS members.
- Generating mass-initiative by the help of Gram Unnayan Samitis (GUSs) for wall writing, poster writing, rally, folk song on the theme of participatory planning. Local clubs and SHGs must be involved in this process.

GPFT members are then oriented in using different PRA/PLA tools like social mapping, natural resource mapping, conducting transect walk etc. for participatory planning process. Gradually, they are oriented step by step in collecting household level data, identifying village level needs, analyzing the needs with villagers, prioritizing them, identifying their own available resources in terms of materials, money or labour and preparing their plan by using different participatory tools. When they implement those participatory tools at their own villages it really works very well to ensure participation of all section of people.

The logic behind the formation of GPFT was that at least 3 - 4 active members from each Gram Sansad (apart from GP member and Secretary of GUS) would be part of the team. The basic strategy of formation of Facilitating Teams at GP levels was to create a congenial environment for Elected Representatives (ERs), Functionaries and representatives of NGOs/CBOs to work together under the umbrella of Panchayat for capacity building, and for monitoring and supervision of the planning process. Another strategy was to expand the ambit of the GP beyond ER and Functionaries. They worked as a link between GUS and Gram Panchayat. They were oriented by the Programme Professionals at GP level. They went back to their own villages (Gram Sansad) and oriented concerned Gram Unnayan Samitis and rest of the villagers for participatory planning process. They acted as 'frontline facilitator' in the entire participatory planning process involving all section of people round the year.

Findings from Relevant Studies to Substantiate the Efficacy of this Model: A number of studies have been conducted from time to time by independent agencies or by the department itself though there is no study to measure the efficacy of this model directly. All those studies show a clear positive picture and underscore the role of GPFT in ensuring participation of people in the planning process at GP level. A sample study on the level of participation in planning (2007) done in 15 villages from three districts (Purulia, Murshidabad and Dakshin Dinajpur) after two years of initiation of the programme concluded that a structured planning framework introduced at the Gram Sansad had established a planning process rooted in local actors of a village and in alignment with the planning structure of the Gram Panchayats. Thrust on capacity building had resulted in production of micro-plans of a consistent form and quality.

Another study conducted by Praxis (2007) also finds that "The SRD Programme initiated across 304 Gram Panchayats of West Bengal has definitely succeeded in deepening decentralization beyond the Gram Panchayat level. This is clearly indicated by successful completion of micro-planning process at the Gram Sansad level within less than 15 months of programme implementation, achieved in over 90 % of Gram Sansads visited in the course of that independent evaluation. The study emphasized the role of the GPFTs in making the process successful. On the other hand the same study identified a problem in the role of GPFT. The report quotes, "While the guidance extended to GPFT members with regard to choice of plan priorities has ensured inclusion of interventions that would normally not be expected to emerge as aspirations of villagers, e.g. awareness camps focused on public health issues, one wonders if the tight process of producing plans of standardized nature achieved through an intensive and dominant role of the GPFTs could have pre-empted many innovative ideas or pressing locality-specific issues".

An assessment of the capacity building component of SRD (2007) done in select Gram Panchayats from the six Phase-1 Gram Panchayats found that training infrastructure has been strengthened, and an enabling situation created at the grassroots level for making participatory planning possible. This

study indicates the role of GPFT in taking planning process at the grassroots level and ensuring inclusion of socially excluded groups in the process after strengthening training infrastructure by the programme. The same study mentions, 'one of the most significant contributions of SRD to date is that it has taken planning to the household level. The earlier methods of planning and those used in the non-SRD Panchayats are restricted primarily to the GP level and hence incomplete in terms of outreach, consultation and the analysis undertaken. Planning disaggregated to the level of Gram Sansad has triggered involvement of the poorest of the population inhabiting different 'Paras' (localities) and increased the accountability of the entire system of plan development and actual intervention'.

A recent study has pointed out that strengthening of grassroots-level institutions (mainly the Gram Sansad and the GUS) can encourage greater devolution of funds to these bodies from the tier immediately above them, i.e., the Gram Panchayat. The study considers the role of GPFT as prerequisite to take forward the entire planning process. The programme has also proved that even if modest amounts of money provided directly to grassroots-level institutions of self-governance can greatly improve their functioning and enhance involvement in local development issues. The study has shown that the devolution of fund to the lower tier enhances the judicious expenditure pattern, makes the system more transparent, wins the confidence of the people at grass root level and ensures the efficient service delivery.

Conclusions: Qualitative as well as quantitative analysis of secondary source of data from relevant studies show that the role of GPFT was very instrumental in creating a linkage between GP and GUS as well as common villagers. Compared to non-SRD GPs, the number of participants increased and discussions and deliberations prolonged and deliberations yielded more positive quality outcomes. Sometimes, proactive role of GPFTs and its rigidity to programmed outcomes have been criticized. It increased the participation of people in the decentralized planning process. Phenomenally, it increased the participation of people in Gram Sansad Sabhas. It also ensured inclusion of socially excluded groups like women, SC and STs in the planning process. Overall, the presence of GPFT in between GPs and common villagers helped in developing vision, building trust, bringing in transparency and ensuring quality of participation of people in the process. This model worked so well in selected GPs that later on the same model was replicated in other Gram Panchayats and yielded overwhelming results.

References:

1. PRAXIS (2007); Interim outputs of the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation Programme of the Govt. of West Bengal.
2. Remakantan, N. et al (2007); SRD Programme in West Bengal: A Quick Review of Capacity Building Strategy, KILA.
3. Sambodhi (2009); "Poverty Impact Assessment of Critical Support for Poverty Reduction" – Study of SRD Programme of Govt. of West Bengal.
4. TARU (2009); Planning in PRIs: Capacity Assessment and Recommendations for Improvements.
5. Panchayat & Rural Development Department, Govt. of West Bengal (2010); Effect of Decentralisation policy and practice on the poor people in West Bengal — Contribution of DFID-supported SRD approaches.
