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Let's vote to empower ourselves

Team TOI

Every time an election comes around, we vote in a new set of representatives with great hope. And after every five years, we vote them out in a state of great disillusionment and try someone else. Political pundits call this anti-incumbency. But the real problem is that no matter who assumes office, the public remains disempowered. The only way for voters and politicians to attain salvation from this endless cycle of hope and disillusionment is for citizens to be empowered to participate in governance.

That was the thought that inspired the launch of Sahabhagi by Times Foundation. It takes forward the formula of public-private partnership to bring about citizens' participation in, and ownership of, development processes at its basic unit. The motto of Sahabhagi is 'Together We Can, Together We Will'.

The idea behind Sahabhagi is to set up an inclusive Ward Panchayat with intellectuals from various fields such as government, citizens' groups, corporates, academics, NGOs and the media. This urban grassroots citizens' initiative draws its inspiration from the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi and the Panchayati Raj institution. At the heart of this movement is the belief that citizens' participation is vital in every sphere of governance; whether it is internal security, healthcare, drainage or any other important aspect of peoples' lives. The common man in the arrangement has been put at the centre of development and decision-making mechanics of the government at all levels, but beginning with the most basic unit -- the ward.

Why is Sahabhagi needed? As social activist and Magsaysay Award winner Arvind Kejriwal points out, governance in India is a complete mess. But when people complain to authorities, they simply do not listen. Ordinary citizen feels completely helpless before the government on an everyday basis.

People helplessly watch government funds being squandered away on things, which are not needed. But when people approach government for anything, the standard reply is that there are no funds.

Lofty schemes, often unrelated to people's priorities, are devised by the state and central governments and thrust upon the people. The priorities for 100 crore people living in seven lakh villages, towns and cities are decided by a few politicians and bureaucrats sitting in Delhi.

Most of the funds reaching villages are tied. Data from MP and UP shows that almost 90% of the funds available with panchayats are tied to some or the other scheme, which may not even be relevant to the specific area. For example, a central government scheme under which financial assistance of around Rs 50,000 would be provided if a village constructed civil structures to conserve water. The Collector of a district called all the sarpanches and announced this scheme. One sarpanch returned to his village, called the whole village and announced this scheme. On hearing this, everyone in the meeting started laughing! This village faces floods every year. They desperately wish to divert water, not conserve it.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of such examples through the country. It has become obvious that the country cannot be run from state and central capitals. There are no effective platforms at the lowest levels, where people can meet, express their priorities collectively and for the government to ultimately accept and approve.

Information obtained under Right to Information in several parts of the country reveals ghost roads, non-existent hand pumps, motors etc. When people complain to authorities, no action is taken. And people have no control over government employees.

The way out is to work towards the goal of swaraj, or creation of effective local selfgoverning institutions at the grassroots level, through the process of Sahabhagi. We need to give complete

control over funds, functions and functionaries to people's assemblies at local level. We need to create effective platforms in both rural and urban areas, where people can collectively meet and take decisions, which should be binding on the local bureaucracy.

Panchayats in rural areas and municipalities in urban areas were designed to act as institutions of local self-governance, to handle local issues. However, they have been rendered ineffective by successive governments.

There is an immediate need to make panchayats and municipalities effective institutions of local self-governance. This would enable people to solve their day-to-day problems themselves. They would also be able to voice their opinion on state and central matters. Then they would not be so helpless. This is the surest way to deal with many of the fissiparous tendencies in our country including Naxalism.

The most important precondition for success of any institution of local self-governance is that the power should lie with people's assemblies rather than elected representatives. Necessary rules could be laid down for conduct of such meetings. That is the case in US, Brazil, Switzerland and many developed countries. Interestingly, this was also practised in ancient India

The key to improving local governance is to give complete control over functions, funds and functionaries to the people's assemblies.

The following are the most critical conditions required for the success of any local selfgoverning institution:

Power should lie with people's assemblies and not with elected panchayats. People should take all decisions in their Gram Sabha meetings every month. Sarpanch and other panchayat representatives should only implement them. In urban areas, such people's assemblies do not even exist. All powers in urban areas are concentrated primarily with bureaucracy and to some extent with elected representatives. Each municipal ward consists of more than 40,000 voters. Obviously 40,000 people cannot meet regularly. Each ward should be broken up into smaller areas or mohallas consisting of about 1000 families. Powers should be given to people's assemblies namely mohalla sabhas or area sabhas.

All functions related to that village or mohalla should lie within the jurisdiction of Gram Sabhas or mohalla sabha. The principle should be that whatever can be done at the level of mohalla sabha or Gram Sabha should be done at that level. What cannot be done at that level should be done at Ward or block level. What cannot be done at that level shall be done at municipality or district level. And what cannot be done at that level should be done at state level.

Presently, the state is engaged in micromanaging the affairs of each village and mohalla. Under the new arrangement, the state would have the time to put its energies on bigger projects.

Complete powers should be given at each level to take all decisions with respect to subjects transferred to them. Presently, subjects have been transferred to panchayats without any powers. For instance, in UP, theoretically Panchayats have been given powers over schools. However, if a teacher does not come on time, the panchayat cannot do anything.

In most Panchayati laws, whatever decisions are taken by Panchayat or Gram Sabha, the bureaucracy has been given veto powers to accept, modify or reject their proposals, thus rendering them ineffective. Gram Sabha or mohalla sabha decisions shall be final unless they are technically flawed or they violate any law.

If people are dissatisfied with the performance of their elected Panchayat or municipal representatives, they should have the power to recall them. Some states like MP and UP have already given this power to their citizens.

Local officials should get their salaries through either Gram or Block or district Panchayats. In urban areas, they should get it from the mohalla or ward or municipality. If they do not perform, the Gram Sabha should have the power to withhold their salaries or impose penalties upon them. Madhya Pradesh has taken some steps in this direction. In 2002, it empowered Gram Sabhas to withhold the salaries of government officials who did not perform satisfactorily. In three villages where school teachers were not attending to their duties, the village assembly withheld the salaries of the teachers and they immediately started turning up to take classes.

Given a chance, local selfgovernance works. It's time to give it a chance nationwide.

Times View

Run your eye through the list of parties that fight elections in India or those that populate the Lok Sabha and what strikes you is just how many of them claim to speak for the 'people' of this country. The words janata, lok, jan, gana (as in the AGP's name), makkal (the Tamil word for people), loktantrik, democratic and so on — each a specific invocation of the people — are present in the

names of more than a dozen of the parties that had MPs in the fourteenth Lok Sabha. But few parties bother to actually involve the janata in figuring out what issues should be the priorities or what must be done about these issues. This is a violation of the democratic spirit in its truest sense. Democracy cannot be reduced to just the right to vote once every five years. It must mean that the people have a say in how their affairs are managed. It's time parties recognised this and acted on it. The Janata Dal (United) has incorporated the idea of sahbhagi in its manifesto. Others have not, but they can still do so, perhaps by way of supplementary manifestoes. As the prime minister said in a different context, we could then say: "der aayee, durust aaye" (better late than never).



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