

## GRAM SWARAJ OR RAMA RAJYA?

With the Panchayat Elections around the corner, and new local governments in the making, it is important for us, the voters, to be clear what 'form' our local bodies should take. Will we, the voters and members of the Gram Sabhas, really be able to exert the power we have given unto ourselves by our Constitution to plan programmes, allocate budgets and prioritise our concerns, or will we remain merely a rubberstamp for state and centrally designed schemes and list beneficiaries for them. Will we elect representatives who will demand and fight for our rights or chose 'yes' men and women who will do the State's bidding? Will we secure an undertaking that the candidate of our choice will pressure the State to ensure complete devolution of functions, finances and functionaries [3Fs] so our Panchayats will have all the 29 powers endowed by the 243 G of the Constitution or remain powerless and cynical?

There prevails a common confusion in the minds of most Legislators regarding 'decentralisation' and 'devolution'. Decentralisation is what we have now, the handing down of State and Central designed schemes to be implemented through the Panchayat Raj machinery while the Gram Sabha merely decides who should get the 10 toilets that have been allotted. Devolution on the other hand, as stated in the constitution, is when the Panchayats are "**endowed with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government**", similar to that of the State Governments, but appropriate to their tier.

Even Mahatma Gandhi's thinking on the subject evolved from his concept of Ramarajya to his ultimate vision of Gram Swaraj. In the early years of our struggle for freedom, 1929, Gandhijee used the metaphor of Ramarajya, as "one in which the meanest citizen could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure. Even the dog (shall) receive justice under Ramarajya<sup>1</sup>".

This may have been the case, but Rama was a King and though he was a benevolent monarch and it was still a monarchy with a feudal structure, and he was not elected. In 1937 Gandhi was a little clearer when he said; "I have described Ramarajya, as the sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority."<sup>2</sup>

By 1942 he had a definite vision and began to use the terms Gram Raj and Gram Swaraj of which the main elements were; [1] village Swaraj that is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own basic needs, yet interdependent on others for which dependence is necessary; [2] the Government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat, annually elected by the adult villagers. They will have all the authority and jurisdiction required; and [3] a perfect democracy based upon individual freedom with the individual as the architect of his own government.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, in 1948 Gandhi said; "If we would see our dream of Panchayat Raj, that is, true democracy realised, we would regard the humblest and lowest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land."<sup>4</sup>

The point of departure - and a critical one at that - is the ideological frame within which rural development needs to take place; the 'how' of rural development and therefore the political and sociological understanding of Panchayat Raj. There is an ideological divide between what our Constitution ensures and is spelt out by Rajiv Gandhi's vision and the centralised structure that our PR System has become.

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<sup>1</sup> The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi (Encyclopaedia of Gandhi's Thoughts); Compiled & Edited by: R. K. Prabhu & U. R. Rao; (YI, 19-9-1929, p. 305)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid (H, 2-1-1937, p. 374)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid (H, 26-7-1942, p. 238)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid (H, 18-1-1948, p. 517)

We have often heard the comment; “even after more than two decades and crores of rupees spent, we still do not have toilets in most villages of North Karnataka!” The real question is ‘why’. Is it because the people, especially the women, have other priorities that are greater and more urgent such as land to build a shelter, housing, access to water and fuel? Without having these, a toilet makes no sense!

It is a natural human tendency of people to improve their situation, and politicians need to trust people’s instincts and leave the choices to them, something they have not done since independence. People through their Gram Sabhas have the right to plan and determine their present and future and the Panchayat – especially the Gram Panchayat – a body elected to represent the people’s concerns, have to be allowed to exercise their constitutional powers to meet the needs of their constituents.

For that, the State needs to let go the powers they have usurped. A Rural Development blueprint designed by the State Government, however well intentioned it may be, is not in the spirit or letter of the Constitutional intent. If the State Government continues to hold the purse strings and ‘give people’ what they ‘think’ they ‘need’ using the PR administrative machinery as a delivery system, this is decentralisation and not devolution or Panchayat Raj as envisioned by Rajiv Gandhi and certainly not Gram Swaraj.

Only when each Panchayat has the autonomy similar to that of a State Government and holds the rights and responsibilities appropriate to that tier of governance – can true Gram Swaraj become a reality. A feudal approach, though benevolent, is against the spirit of Swaraj and can be a lethal tool in the hands of right wing fundamentalists.

If our State Government consists of benevolent democrats, they may design and implement ‘good’ rural development programmes that they see as beneficial, but if they are centralised and controlled by the State Government, a government that wishes to impose its right wing ideology on people can undo all this with ease and impose anti poor – pro corporate schemes instead.

However, if strong laws are put in place that ensure and protect the power and rights of people and their elected governments, people will have a strong stepping stone to reverse any adverse effects of an authoritarian regime. Most importantly, people will be able to decide for themselves and make the choices that are in their best interests and the roots of autocracy will not be able to flourish in such soil.

Panchayat Raj is the last vestige of democracy we have left in India and in the light of what our nation is going through, setting a strong foundation of *Gram Raj* as the foundation for *Swaraj* is the only way we can protect our democratic republic. Rajiv Gandhi did this through championing an amendment to the Constitution and we the voters in this Panchayat election need to ensure that the new body we are electing will demand that such amendments are made for which the Ramesh Kumar Committees Amendments titled ‘Gram Swaraj’, provides a comprehensive framework for this to become a reality.

In the coming election we are in a position to shape our local governments and change the course of Indian History. We, the people, have to decide whether we want ‘Ramarajya’ or ‘Gram Swaraj’.

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### **CHECK LIST FOR GRAM SABHAS**

- I. Provision of basic amenities for constituents:**
  - land for the landless,
  - housing,
  - access to drinking water and water,
  - fuel,
  - toilets and bathrooms
  
- II. Provision of basic amenities for constituents:**
  - sanitation,
  - waste management (new technology required for non-biodegradable waste)
  - crematoriums and burial grounds
  - community centres
  - health centres
  - schools
  - play grounds
  - street lighting
  
- III. Safeguarding rights**
  - special Gram Sabhas for ST/SC, women and children
  - environment that is safe for women, children and the elderly
  - crisis response teams
  - help lines
  - ombudspersons to prevent the violation of rights
  
- IV. Income and employment generating schemes for people and the panchayat**
  - production of eco-friendly energy
  - revision and collection of taxes
  - small and medium scale industries
  
- V. Accountability of elected representatives**
  - representing the needs of their constituents
  - declaration of assets in three months
  - right to recall
  - holding gram, ward and habitation sabhas
  - transparent reporting