

Paving the way for grassroots democracy

Conventionally, the political executive is expected to make policies and leave execution to bureaucracy.

This separation worked well as long as the primary role of the bureaucracy was to collect revenue, maintain order and administer justice. During the 1950s, community development programmes were initiated and a major role was given to locally elected representatives - samiti presidents. This experiment can be called India's first wave of grassroots democracy.

However, as community development lost its importance during the 1960s, the role and influence of the samitis dwindled and in the 1970s, bureaucracy started to directly implement burgeoning development programmes.

The increasing role of the bureaucracy in development programmes led to increasing tension with the elected representatives. The standoff was resolved by creating different types of structures at the district-level (e.g. planning boards, review committees) as

well as unique financial arrangements (e.g. funds for MLAs).

Over time, district in-charge ministers with legislators largely replaced the district officers in deciding what projects should be undertaken and how.

The political preference to participate in execution, as opposed to only policy-making, is vividly brought out in an apocryphal conversation between Pratap Singh Kairon, Chief Minister of Punjab and his Chief Secretary. On being told by the Chief Secretary that the role of CM is mainly to frame policies, Kairon is learnt to have replied that in such a case, he would prefer to implement programmes and leave policymaking to bureaucrats!

The second wave started during the 1980s, culminating in the 73rd and 74th

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Constitutional Amendments. Similar trends were visible in other parts of the world, too. Around the time when urban and rural bodies were given a Constitutional position in India, the Republic of South Africa (1996) drafted its own Constitution establishing a unitary state with three autonomous but interdependent spheres of government at the national, provincial and local levels.

A noteworthy feature was the creation of a separate list of exclusive subjects for local

bodies (e.g. water, sewerage, solid waste management, roads and electricity distribution).

At present there is a new trend in the world to permit people to manage their own affairs directly, and one example is the emergence of citizen assemblies in the USA, Britain, France, Canada and Netherlands. This swing towards a direct role for citizens can be imagined as the beginning of the third wave of grassroots democracy.

Presently, control and



DR. SAMEER SHARMA

monitoring in India is done vertically through the bureaucratic hierarchy. This leads to, in the words of Vincent Ostrom, Professor of Political Science at Indiana University, "remote, power-driven form of public administration" and citizens do not take interest in public administration because their preferences and

demands hardly count.

The way out is horizontal supervision by citizens. In other words, citizens would directly control and monitor the services that most matter to them.

Ostrom recommends devolving control and monitoring to several citizen groups (also called 'communities of interest') having interest in the provision of a specialised type of government service. As services are provided at multiple levels, these communities of interest could be set up at the locality level, citywide or non-geographically organised, depending on the government service.

The first step is to identify what services should be controlled by the citizens at different levels — village, block and the district.

For this, a preliminary

assessment of each type of government service has to be done, including the way control is exercised. Next, new service delivery arrangements would follow from this assessment where citizens would exercise control over the government functionaries as well as monitor its provision, with the help of digital technology.

To apply digital technology, each service would be broken down into inputs, activities and outputs.

Let's take the example of sanitation. The input would be attendance of workers and availability of materials. The activities would be workers sweeping streets and collecting garbage from households. The outputs would be clean streets and collection of garbage. All these could be monitored by street cameras and images shared with households interested in clean

streets and garbage disposal.

Effective control would take place by linking wage performance to a digital poll among citizens concerned to assess the performance of various activities and outputs.

Thus, the way forward to bring about 'real' grassroots democracy is to mutate to a model where citizens monitor and control services that matter to them. The public would directly guide the work of government agencies as they have a stake in the results. Once citizen preferences and demands count, there would be greater scrutiny, leading to efficiency and integrity of services.

(Author has a PhD from the USA and a DLitt from Kanchi University. The article is based on his research and practice and views are personal)