

Panch Parmeshwar

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A RECENT study by the National Council of Applied Economic Research found bribery rampant in Panchayats, with households being forced to pay extra to access their entitlements.

But, this is common even outside panchayats and cannot be expected to change at the lower level on its own. There was once the romantic version of the Panchayat — as seen through the eyes of writers such as Premchand — where it was all powerful with judicial powers (Panch Parmeshwar). Now, there is the corrupted version as seen today in Premchand's own state of Uttar Pradesh and most parts of the country. There is also the model version as it exists in the southern states such as Karnataka and Kerala.

Recently, the Centre made efforts to make it visible by allocating funds to construct Rajiv Sewa Kendras for Panchayats. But, such cosmetic changes cannot be enough.

The Panchayats in most

states are merely the implementing agencies of the Centre, the state, the district and the Block administration.

Individual initiatives of the Panchayat are often at the mercy of the Block Development Officers (BDOs). There are a lot of heroes who have fought all the odds and found ways to get things done. Veena Devi, a former Sarpanch in a village in Bihar, was proactive enough to drag women to attend Gram Sabhas and force Dalit children to school. However, she says till the point she complained to the then Panchayati Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyer, the BDO did not even allow her to hold Gram Sabhas.

Imagine the Speaker of the Lok Sabha not being allowed to hold a session by a higher authority!

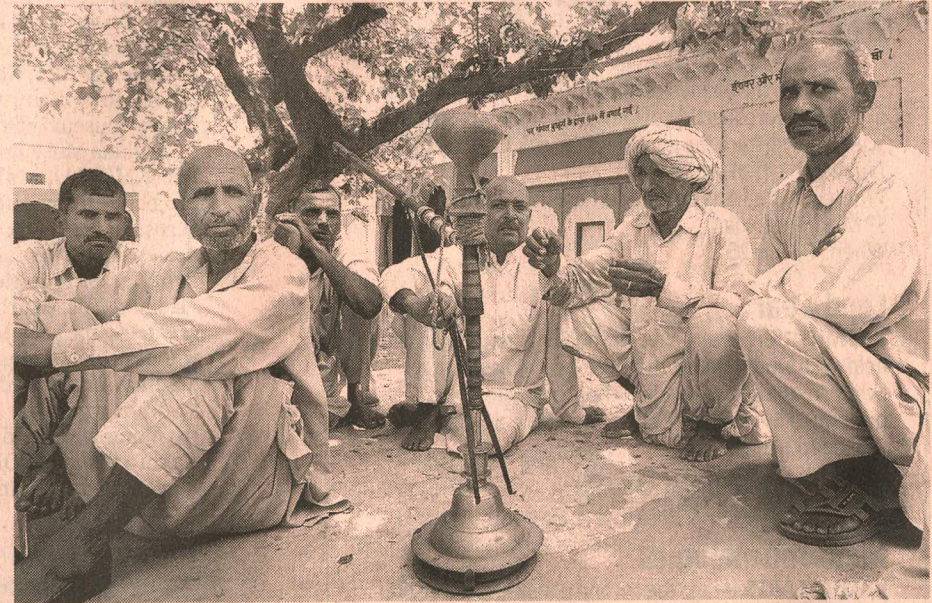
Kerala is one of the states which has seen wisdom in sharing powers at all levels. The Panchayats have not only Plan funds from the state, they have also been given enough avenues to raise their own funds.

Adath Gram Panchayat in

the Puzhakkal Block of Thrissur district in Kerala, for instance, gets ₹1.5 crore from the state as Plan funds and maintenance grant, according to former Panchayat president Anil Akkara. It then raises about ₹50 lakh as building tax and ₹20 lakh as professional tax. Money also comes from issuing licences to shops, offices, registration of buildings, etc.

The state has now taken a ₹1,000 crore loan from the World Bank, from which the Panchayats get about ₹26 lakh a year. The Panchayats earn between ₹30 lakh and ₹1 crore in the state, says Akkara.

In the Erumappatti Panchayat in Vadakkancheri Block, Thrissur, the Panchayat building is like a district administration building in any other state, though slightly smaller. There are 12 employees, engaging members of the public on the payment of house tax, licences, birth and death certificates, and sundry other things. Will the Rajiv Sewa Kendras reaching other villages also be as fortunate?



The Centre had tried to empower the Panchayats by ensuring direct payment of a large proportion of funds. PHOTO: REUTERS

The Bihar government may have made a beginning towards a similar state of affairs. All its districts have approved their own plans and next year, according to the state officials, the planning would be activated at the Block level, and at the Panchayat level the following year.

The Centre tried to em-

power the Panchayats by ensuring direct payment of a large proportion of funds for schemes such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. But, in Rajasthan, when social audits were planned, the Sarpanches blocked these with all their might. They said it was not fair to target them for spending

funds when they had no powers to plan the spending. Hence, funds without functions are of little use.

With a new Rural Development Minister and a new Panchayati Raj Minister taking charge at the Centre, there are hopes now the states would be persuaded to see the gains of devolution of power.