

# **Training of Panchayati Raj Functionaries — Distance Education Approach**

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## **Introduction**

The time has come when we must recognise and confront directly the complexities and inherent paradox of materialising democratic decentralization through the Panchayati Raj (Self/Local Governance) system. The rural community, irrespective of how we conceive it, has within its power to determine its own future. Any attempt at democratic decentralization should try to facilitate this process on a sustainable basis. A well conceived human resources development strategy will be a positive step in this direction. This paper argues that a strong component of training will go a long way in the democratic decentralisation through self-governance in India.

## **Training: Need for a Fresh Look**

With the increasing emphasis on Panchayati Raj, the availability of trained manpower with requisite orientation will continue to be a major constraint, unless serious attention is paid to streamline the training process. Although, a large number of training institutions are engaged to serve the varied and emergent training needs of the development functionaries, facilities for the training of Panchayati Raj functionaries in the process of Self-Governance are still scanty. It is therefore, necessary that a training strategy is designed to address the following two major areas.

1. To overcome the problem of lack of clarity in role perception, and the process of Self-Governance.
2. To evolve a viable training strategy and methodology to mobilise or to bring about socio-economic transformation through the Panchayati Raj system.

A well designed training strategy is not only expected to provide the desired direction to the training efforts but may also ensure that there is a meaningful impact at the end of the training. Although there is a vast network of training institutions

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1. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organization to which he belongs.

available in the country, the training imparted by them lack meaningful impact. The common experiences/inadequacies, among others, in most of these training institutions include the following major ones (Aslam, 1993):

- (i) The training institutions particularly at sub-national levels are understaffed and posting to a training institution is considered to be a punishment.
- (ii) There are limited opportunities for training of trainers in training methodology. The few trained find it difficult to apply the learnt methods and techniques in back-home situations.
- (iii) The attendance in long duration courses, except induction training, is not satisfactory. Most of the institutions, therefore, conduct a large number of short duration orientation programmes, which make no meaningful impact.
- (iv) The cost of training is increasing day by day making it increasingly difficult for various agencies to sponsor candidates.
- (v) The training programmes are not based on any scientific assessment of training needs but mostly on perception of the training faculty based upon a body of knowledge available resulting into ineffectiveness of the training.
- (vi) There is a lack of clear-cut training policy; as a result, training receives low priority in the development planning.
- (vii) Training is considered a one short exercise rather than a continuous process.
- (viii) The evaluation and the follow up do not receive serious consideration.
- (ix) There is a lack of interest among the training institutions to develop the methodology for undertaking impact evaluation of the training programmes.

It is, therefore, evident that there is a strong need, not only to address ourselves to these problems but also to look for alternate arrangements which can be used as complementary training interventions.

### **Training of Panchayati Raj functionaries — A New Challenge**

The institution of Panchayati Raj in its rejuvenated form seeks to realise the goal of democratic decentralization to accelerate socio-economic development and to bring about equality and social justice. This has been made possible through the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 which has endowed the Panchayats with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as effective institutions of self-governance (Govt. of India 1994-95). It is also expected that this Act and the subsequent legislations by the respective State Governments for devolution of power and responsibility upon Panchayats will enable them to

prepare and implement plans for economic development, social justice and other activities entrusted to them including those in relation to matters listed in the XIth Schedule.

The amount of equity and productivity associated with decentralization depends very much on how familiar the majority of the rural people have become with the institutions through which decentralized resource mobilisation and management are to occur (Uphoff, 1985). Lack of preparedness on the part of the elected functionaries can constrain this process of change. This lack of preparedness on the part of Panchayati Raj functionaries to shoulder new responsibilities may, among other things, also result from lack of clarity about the role they are expected to play in materialising the process of democratic decentralization. Therefore, the success of this bold initiative will depend on how familiar the majority of the elected functionaries have become with the concept of self-governance and to shoulder new responsibilities.

Training has to be recognised as a major input for facilitating this process by creating awareness, improving skills and bringing about a change in attitudes. The impact of this bold initiative on democratic decentralization cannot be felt by simply transferring sizeable inputs and capital resources into the rural economy. The real impact will be determined by how well the process of democratic decentralization is directed towards achieving the goal of self-governance by the people. It implies that a strong training component as a part of the overall strategy is needed to update knowledge, to reinforce existing skills, to add new skills, change attitudes and to create better awareness about the avenues for development. There are about 3 million people elected/likely to get elected at various levels of the Panchayats throughout the country. Any training strategy to cover such a large number will have to necessarily look for alternative arrangements, which can effectively be applied as complementary training interventions. It is a new challenge for training planners.

### **Distance Education Mode—A Complementary Training Intervention**

Distance Education as the basic approach in the Open University System has acquired considerable significance in promoting educational and professional well-being of the community through new communication technologies. This system has taken roots in the country. Its biggest advantage to date has been its potential to provide an alternate mechanism (other than conventional campus based instruction) to face the task of reaching a vast number of learners, through a well-planned carefully executed instructional package. This self-instructional package includes, in general, print, audio/video material as well as brief face to face counselling sessions.

The significant aspects of this system are :

- its ability to respond readily to individual, organisational and societal needs;
- its potential to reach a large number of learners simultaneously; and

- its flexibility to accommodate varying learner-pace, learning styles and convenience (B.N. Koul & P.R. Ramanujam 1989).

The inherent flexibility of the system enables it to cater to the needs of varied clientele (from basic awareness programmes to in-service training and professional updates). The financial requirements are considerably low as compared to the conventional system of training. However, *it has to be kept in mind that training through distance mode of learning has to play a complementary and reinforcing role rather than a competitive or parallel one, in supporting and furthering training programmes offered by the existing training institutions.*

### **Massive Awareness Programme**

Realizing the potential of distance education system on the one hand and the challenge of training millions of Panchayati Raj functionaries on the other, the Ministry of Rural Areas & Employment, Government of India, and IGNOU joined hands to launch a massive programme of education and training for the elected functionaries of Panchayati Raj institutions through distance mode of learning.

### **Objectives**

The main objective of the programme is *empowerment of rural masses through elected functionaries* for effective participation in the process to self-governance.

### **Instructional/Learning System**

The IGNOU has adopted a *Multi-media approach* to instructional/learning system in this programme. It includes (i) self-learning print material (SLPM) (ii) Audio-Video Programmes and (iii) the face-to-face Contact Programmes.

### **Self-Learning Print Material (SLPM)**

The SLPM consists of six blocks/modules divided into 22 units covering a wide range of subjects. The blocks/modules relate to

- (i) *Panchayati Raj - The Context*
- (ii) *Panchayati Raj and Decentralized Planning*
- (iii) *Self-Employment Programmes*
- (iv) *Wage Employment Programmes*
- (v) *Area based and Other Development Programmes*
- (vi) *Development with Social Justice.*

The SLPM has been prepared keeping in view the clientele group i.e. elected Panchayati Raj functionaries. *The language and presentation of the SLPM have been kept utterly simple* and the material can be accessed even by neo-literates. In order to make this material further interesting and relevant to the grass-roots level functionaries, *it has been extensively illustrated.* A sample of the material dis-

tributed during "All India Panchayat Adhyakshas Sammelan" (All India Panchayat Heads' Conference) received a high degree of acceptability. The material is being translated into *various regional languages to make it user friendly*.

### **Audio-Video Programmes**

Each block/module is being supported by one video and two audio programmes. These are specially produced for the purpose of facilitating learning (B.N. Koul, et al 1989). These audio-video programmes are *instructional in nature*. They add an interactive element to the package and are expected to help those who may lack literacy and study skills required for optimising learning from the SLPM. In essence, these audio-video programmes reinforce the learning goals.

### **Contact Programmes**

The SLPM and the audio-video programmes (to be broadcast/telecast from the various local stations) will be followed face to face contact sessions of *intensive counselling*. These contact programmes will be held at each Panchayat level through well trained Counsellors. The basic idea behind conducting such programmes is *to facilitate face to face interaction to clarify any doubts which may arise during the process of assimilation of the material*. A cadre of trained local Counsellors is expected to be generated as a result of training strategy designed for this purpose.

The cumulative impact of the above multi media package is expected to generate desired awareness among the elected functionaries.

### **Target Group/Programme Coverage**

The main target group for this programme are the *elected Panchayati Raj functionaries throughout the country*. To begin with, it is planned to introduce this programme in the state of Madhya Pradesh. It is reported that Madhya Pradesh has more than 500 thousand functionaries elected at Gram Panchayat level alone. On an average, there are more than 11,000 Panchayati Raj functionaries per district. It is planned to cover four districts initially and then to cover the remaining districts of the state. Simultaneous efforts are on to take this programmes to other states in the various regional languages.

### **Conclusion**

The Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, and the subsequent State legislations seek to realize the goal of democratic decentralization to accelerate socio-economic development and to bring about equity and social justice. Training has been recognized as a major input to facilitate the realization of the objectives of this endeavour. Keeping in view, the challenge of reaching millions of elected functionaries with education and training package, a constant search is on to iden-

tify alternative strategies. The distance mode of learning provides one such strategy. With the inherent flexibility of this system, it seems to be the right mode for a massive awareness programme for the elected members of Panchayats. We know the reasons for this choice. We shall soon review the end product of this choice.

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