

Natural Resource Governance by Panchayati Raj Institutions: Issues and Opportunities

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Abstract

A concerted effort to mainstream natural resource management into local governance is gaining momentum through State-led devolution of powers to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) that represent the primary rungs of democratic governance in India. The strengthening of these institutions at the village level to enable them to function as local self-governing bodies has lent an impetus to participatory democracy in general and to decentralized governance of natural resources in particular. The chief external challenges to these institutions include reluctance to completely devolve powers to these institutions, callous bypassing of PRIs by project implementing agencies of government and civil society alike and inadequate capacity building support on good governance skills. These have in part been fed by the internal issues of corruption, continued proxy legacies of feudal structures and subservience to higher rungs of government and a traditionally strong bureaucracy.

This paper draws on the experiences of an ongoing project of management of common pastures by village level Panchayats. The attempt has been to help village Panchayats situate NRM within the ambit of local governance. The project shows how collective action for commons management can pave the way for better governance and therein facilitate an integrated perspective of natural resource governance at the level of local governments. The paper seeks to discuss the opportunities created for decentralization of natural resources by democratic devolution while identifying the issues that need to be addressed.

Key Words: *Panchayati Raj Institutions, Natural resource management, Commons*

INTRODUCTION

Governance of natural resources in India has been an area of contestation between communities and the government. This follows given the subsistence dependence of a significantly large part of the population on natural resources through agriculture and allied activities. A recent legislation on rights of forest dwellers has seen the polarization of opinion on the relative importance of forests as conservation sites or as living spaces for traditional forest dwellers. The debate comes in a long line of resistance to alienation of community rights from access to natural resources.

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Just under a half of the land area of the country is subject to degradation³, increase in forest cover is a matter of contention, declining water tables - a matter of concern across the country, area under agriculture has reached a plateau and for the first time in over two decades, agricultural production is on the decline. Alongside, populations on the fringes of the agricultural economy are being forced to move to the already-overflowing cities to find livelihoods in informal sectors.

This disenfranchisement of communities most dependent on their natural environment for their survival has not been without resistance. Across the length and breadth of the country, there are stories of communities standing up for the protection and conservation of their natural environment and their livelihoods embedded in it. However, natural resource governance in India has largely been an onus taken on by the Government with little or token participation by communities. Not until the 1990s, were spaces created in several programmes for community participation in State lead programmes - most notably the co-management of forests (popularly known as the joint forest management) arrangements lead by the government Forest departments. However, the huge financial investments involved raise questions about financial efficiency and sustainability of the programmes. (Lele, 2004)

A separate constitutional law was passed in the same decade that was to have widespread ramifications for the decentralization of natural resource governance. The legislation – the 73rd constitutional amendment- mandated the creation of local self-governing institutions called the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs hence forth) at the sub-State level. While the idea itself was neither new nor untested, the legislation ensured its adoption across the country. The PRIs refer to three tiers of local government – at the district level, at the sub-district level and the village levels. The situation of the PRIs in the State of Karnataka is in many ways representative of the dilemmas confronting the movement to devolve powers of governance to the PRIs. The State preceded the national legislation on PRIs with an Act that many believe was more progressive than the 73rd amendment. However, for various reasons, the earlier State legislation could not be implemented in its entirety and was replaced with the Karnataka State Panchayati Raj Act in 1993.

The PRIs represent the devolution of governance to local level elected organizations and have spurred renewed interest in the concept of bottom-up planning and local self-governance. However, there have been many concerns both real and imagined that have lead to the bypassing of the PRIs in developmental initiatives by the government and civil society alike. In this paper we focus on the potential role that PRIs can play in decentralized natural resource governance. We draw from an ongoing project on Common pastures in Karnataka to discuss some issues and challenges to natural resource governance by Grama Panchayats, the third tier of the PRIs. The paper is ordered as follows: In the first section we briefly describe the natural resource context in the State and outline the provisions of the Panchayati Raj in Karnataka; in the second section, we discuss the enabling provisions for decentralized natural resource management by the PRIs. In the third section, we describe the initiatives taken by the project and discuss the issues in and opportunities for natural resource governance by these institutions.

³ National Bureau of Soil Survey and Land Use Planning (2005)

KARNATAKA AND PANCHAYATI RAJ

Local governments comprise a State subject in India's federal scheme of governance and as such the Centre may only issue guiding principles with regard to State subjects. The salient details of the mandatory Constitutional provisions with respect to Panchayats are mentioned in the box alongside.

SALIENT PROVISIONS MANDATED BY CONSTITUTION OF STATE LEGISLATURES

- ❑ Constitution of panchayats at the three levels of "village", "intermediate" and "district"
- ❑ Regular five-year elections to these Panchayats, with elections within six months if a Panchayat is dissolved for any reason
- ❑ Stipulated reservations for women and historically disadvantaged sections of society
- ❑ The constitution of District Planning Committees (DPCs) through the election of at least four-fifths of the members by, from and amongst the elected members of the district Panchayat and the Municipalities
- ❑ The obligatory establishment of State Election Commissions and State Finance Commissions, whose recommendations may be accepted, rejected or modified by the State legislature.

The Constitution also sets out a list of 29 subjects which might be considered by State legislatures for devolution to the Panchayats in respect of the planning of economic development and social justice as well as the implementation of "entrusted" schemes of economic and social development in such a manner as to ensure that they function as "units of self-government."⁴

FUNCTIONS TO BE DEVOLVED TO LOCAL GOVERNEMENTS

Agriculture, Land improvement, reforms, consolidation, and soil conservation, Minor irrigation, water management and watershed development, Animal husbandry, dairying and poultry, Fisheries, Social forestry and farm forestry, Minor forest produce, Fuel and fodder

Small-scale industries, village and cottage industries, Rural housing, Drinking water, Roads, culverts, bridges etc, Rural electrification, Non-conventional energy sources

Poverty alleviation programmes, Health and sanitation including hospitals, Family welfare, Women and child Development, Social welfare, Welfare of the weaker sections, Public distribution system

Education, Technical training and vocational education, Adult and non-formal education, Libraries, Cultural activities, Markets and fairs and Maintenance of Community assets

The Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act (KPRRA henceforth) was passed in 1993, in compliance with the constitutional mandate of establishing local governments at the sub-State level. However, it is important to note that even before the national mandate for local governments, Karnataka had a landmark law setting up a two-tier Panchayat system consisting of Zilla Parishads and Mandal Panchayats, that many believe was more progressive in terms of devolution of powers to local governments than the current KPRRA⁵. The legislation failed due to the lack of political will and was replaced by the current legislation. However, the discomfort over the provisions of the older legislation is illustrative of the threats perceived by bureaucrats and political

⁴ Part IX, Constitution of India

⁵ ref SALR Karnataka

leaders at various levels by the extent of devolution to Panchayats. This is discussed further below.

The KPRA constitutes Panchayats at three levels – at the district, sub-district level and the village level, these number 27, 176 and 5653 currently. While the legislation envisages a continuum of governance following principles of subsidiarity across these three levels, it has been a persistent criticism (ref) that there remains little clarity on what function is the responsibility of the local government at each of these levels.⁶

In this paper, we focus on the village level Panchayats also known as the *Grama Panchayats* and their role in natural resource governance. Grama Panchayats are constituted by State Government order and comprise of a cluster of revenue villages with a total population size ranging between 5000-7000. The Panchayat consists of wards constituted with about 400 populations. An elected representative from each ward makes up the Grama Panchayat.

The legislation recognizes the general body of the Grama Panchayat at two levels – one the Gram Sabha that comprises a body consisting of persons registered in the voters list of Grama Panchayat and two the Ward or *vasathi* Sabha means a body consisting of persons registered in the voters lists of each Grama Panchayat constituency. The latter was introduced by an amendment of the initial Act 'to have a Ward Sabha in respect of each Grama Panchayat constituency and a Grama Sabha for the whole Panchayat area and to entrust them with more responsibilities to ensure that participation of people at village level will be more meaningful and intense'⁷

Members are to be duly elected - on a non-party basis under the supervision of the state election commission that is to be appointed as per the law. There is reservation of seats for marginalized sections in proportion to their population, but not less than 18 per cent of the seats, and one-third of the seats are to be reserved for backward classes. Also one-third of the number of seats from all categories are reserved for women. Reservation principle is extended to the office of the chairpersons of all the three-tier governments and on the same scale for the elected members.

Grama Panchayats can levy taxes on property, entertainment, vehicles, and charge fees on markets etc. Each GP is entitled for an annual grant of Rs. 0.35 million to meet electricity charges, maintenance of water supply schemes, sanitation and other welfare activities. For all other support they are dependant on a variety of schemes. This has been the basis of the concern that Grama Panchayats represent a decentralization of central and State government schemes rather than local self-governments.

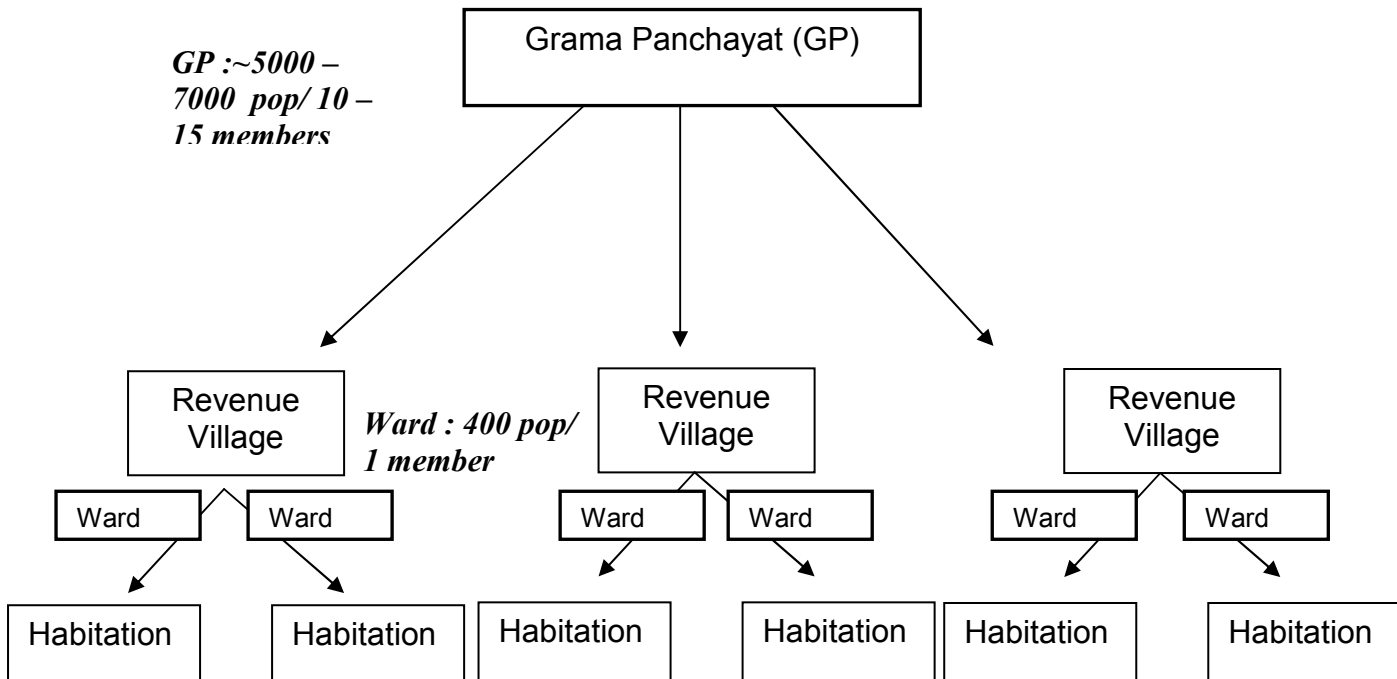
Grama Panchayats can have a full time Secretary who will be an officer of the government and draw salary and allowance from the Grama Panchayat's funds. The

⁶ Karnataka has been among the first States in the country to engage in 'Activity mapping' – a process to demarcate functions at each level, however, this is yet to percolate into actual functioning.

⁷ KPRA, Act 37 of 2003, Government of Karnataka

Grama Panchayat may, with the prior approval of the Chief Executive Officer appoint other employees of the Grama Panchayat and pay their salaries from the Grama Panchayat's funds.

SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF STRUCTURE OF GRAMA PANCHAYAT



DECENTRALIZED NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: THE PROMISE OF PANCHAYATS

There are many reasons why the Panchayat Raj Institutions are ideally suited for decentralized natural resource management. We explore some of these dimensions here:

1. Primarily, the Grama Panchayat is a democratically elected body at the local level signifying a level of broad based decision making with the active participation of local communities. Representation for marginalized sections is mandated by the Constitution. There is reservation of seats for these groups in proportion to their population, one-third of the number of seats from all categories are reserved for women. The reservation extends to members as well as chairpersons.
2. The Panchayat is held accountable to the general body it represents through elections every five years and there is provision for recall of the chairperson. Periodic meetings of the general body are necessitated to apprise the constituency of the rationale for decision-making and the follow-up action on earlier proposals.
3. The devolution of functions of natural resource management are broadly mandated by the Constitution (see section above) and each State further divides the functions between the three tiers of local government applying principles of subsidiarity through a process of *activity mapping*. While

formally, the *activity* mapping has been carried out by Karnataka this is an area of confusion since many of the functions transferred to Grama Panchayats are exercised concurrently by the State government (Aziz, 2005)

4. Clarity and security of tenure is yet to be fully developed with respect to many resources, as contradictions with other laws and regulations have not been resolved. (Lele, 2004)
5. Finally, there are implications for the efficiency of natural resource management from decentralization. It increases the likelihood of positive outcomes for the natural environment –people are less likely to degrade their resource base if they feel a sense of ownership in decision-making and see positive returns from the careful use of available natural capital (Campbell, 2006). Thus, it can contribute to both environmental management and development of livelihoods. Further Ribot (2004) summarizes that there are implications for reduction in administrative and management costs due to the proximity of local participants, devolved decision making is better able to match services to needs through the active participation of communities in programme formulation.

PASTURE LAND DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE⁸

The initiative of management of Common Pastures by village Panchayats was envisaged in the context of a project of ecological restoration initiated by the FES in Karnataka in 2000. The paper draws on the experiences of the authors who have been associated with the project.⁹ The objective of the initiative was one of ecological restoration of the catchment of a seasonal river called the Papagni. The institutional design was conceived of to take advantage of the ongoing political momentum of decentralization and empowerment of the local governments. The institutional design that was evolved centered on village level Panchayats, whom the project would support. The objective was to strengthen processes of natural resource management within the village Panchayat and as a progression mainstream natural resource management in the decision-making processes by the local government. In this section we outline the broad natural resource contours of the project district and the situation of the Panchayats and then go onto discuss the key features of the initiative.

⁸ The initiative was initially supported by the CIDA from 2000 – 2003 under a bilateral funding agreement and thereafter for a period of three years by the British High Commission.

⁹ We draw on experiences with the six Panchayats of Ganjigunte, Dibburahalli, Mudimadagu, Rayalpadu, Gorthapalli and Thimmampalli.

Natural Resource Context of Kolar district

Land-Use : Kolar 2002-03 ¹⁰	
% Forest	8.63
% Wasteland	22.38
% Uncultivated land (pastures, groves, culturable wastelands)	15.33

Kolar is predominantly a rural district with 75% of the total population living in rural areas (Census of India, 2001). About 59% of the total geographical area is cultivable. About 15% of the total geographical area comprises common pastures. The district economy is mainly dependant on agriculture and dairying. Agriculture is mostly rainfed with about 20% of the total cultivatable land being irrigated. The number of marginal land holdings is on the increase forming 56% of all land holdings in 2001. Livestock density is 368 per km². Dairying is a common diversification and enhanced integration with milk markets has increased milk production in the district (Cotton, 2005). Sheep rearing

is also an important livelihood with the numbers of sheep increasing almost by a fourth 23% from 1966-2003. There is significant dependence on forests and grazing lands for fodder.

Rainfall is highly variable in both the amount and timing, resulting in frequent drought conditions. During the period 1986-2003/04 the average rainfall for the District was 752.89 mm with strong fluctuation from year to year. The traditional source of irrigation has been through cascades of tanks in a landscape to collect surface runoff. The village communities carried out management of the tank systems. However, over time a series of factors, including poor management strategy, change in property rights, support for groundwater extraction, siltation, and encroachment, have led to a decline in the use of tanks as a source of water (Raju *et al.*, 2003). Groundwater is gaining importance as a source of irrigation contributing to 92% of irrigated area in 2005-06. The State Water Policy notes that 9 of the 11 revenue sub-divisionss have exploited at least 65% of available groundwater.

Grazing or gomal lands are an important source of fodder and fuelwood. A study conducted by FES in Mudimadigu Grama Panchayat in Kolar district, shows that the biomass productivity of the gomal land is similar to that of degraded forest land and that forests and grazing lands contribute about 79% of fuelwood and 91 % of timber requirement of the communities.¹² Gomala in Karnataka have been long been an area of political contestation. The Land Revenue rules of 1966 stipulate that a o.12 sq km of gomal land be preserved per 100 heads of cattle¹³. However, successive government orders have sought to divert these lands for various other purposes. These lands were often seen as a vote bank by state politicians, and so encroachments were virtually encouraged and land grants eventually made (or regularized) to various categories of households. (Lele, 2007). In the 1980s, a

¹⁰ District Statistical Handbook

¹¹ Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Karnataka

¹² FES Working paper

community movement elsewhere in the State, successfully prevented an attempted takeover of these lands through the planting of eucalyptus and other fast growing species by a government owned corporation. However, between 1990 and 2003, there was a 16% decline in gomal land area (1177 km² to 989 km²) although exact data on the change in land use is not available (Cotton, 2005), some of it has been reallocated as land grants to landless groups.

Situation of Panchayats pre-project

At the time of initiation of the project in 2000, the Grama Panchayats had just entered their second term. There was much optimism at the level of the State government regarding the potential of these local governments. On the ground at the village level, the situation was different. Although the elections at the Grama Panchayat level are to be contested on a non-party basis many regional parties saw an opportunity to consolidate their vote banks through the newly formed local governments. The elections were keenly fought and villages were polarized on the lines of party affiliations on no particular development agenda. Even with the reservations in place, many positions in Panchayats were either occupied or controlled by the local elite.

There was a distinct distance between the constituent population and the Grama Panchayat. The meetings of the gram Sabha were rarely held with adequate quorum and there was little active participation by communities for various reasons including difficulties for distant habitation in reaching the place of meeting. The downward accountability that had been envisaged by the Grama Panchayat to the gram Sabha was neither felt by the former nor demanded by the latter. While functions had been spelt out there was yet to be clarity on the role of each of the tiers of the Panchayat Raj institutions in these. At the Grama Panchayat, most of the developmental programmes were designed and sponsored either by the Central or the State government rendering the institution at this level almost an implementation agency of higher levels of government.

The context of natural resource degradation was evident in the barren uplands, tanks silted with the high runoff, decreasing ground water levels. The Grama Panchayats contributed little to the strategies of redressal that many central and State sponsored schemes attempted. Deliberations within the Panchayat were perceived to be centering only on the distribution of programme funds among the members who in turn contracted them out. Even though civil society organizations worked in the region, there was widespread skepticism about engaging with the Grama Panchayat due to the corruption seen as widely prevalent within the system. Most of these initiatives worked with community based beneficiary groups with little or no linkages to the Panchayat.

Salient features of the initiative

1. Focus on the Common grazing lands

Common pool land resources at the Grama Panchayat level fall under several administrative categories. Among them are the *Gomala* or grazing lands, *gundu thopu*, culturable wastelands, a category held in reserve by the revenue department.

Gundu thopu are a remnant of the feudal *zamindari* system where the village landlords maintained woodlots. The bulk of the produce went to the landlord but other members of the village had some access to the produce. Apart from these three, lands under the forest category are also used by many communities as de facto Commons. The *gundu thopu* have declined in number and quality with the decline of traditional management institutions. Forest land is largely controlled by the Forest department with some co-management opportunities for communities but no role for the Grama Panchayat except for a token representative of the Panchayat in the forest protection committee. Under the current system, it is only the *Gomal* over which the Grama Panchayat has clear rights of custodianship. This is also a fragile tenure with the State reserving the right to supersede the decisions of the Grama Panchayat. However given the Grama Panchayat's legal right to manage, the initiative attempts facilitate the strengthening/evolution of common property regime institutions on the *Gomal*.

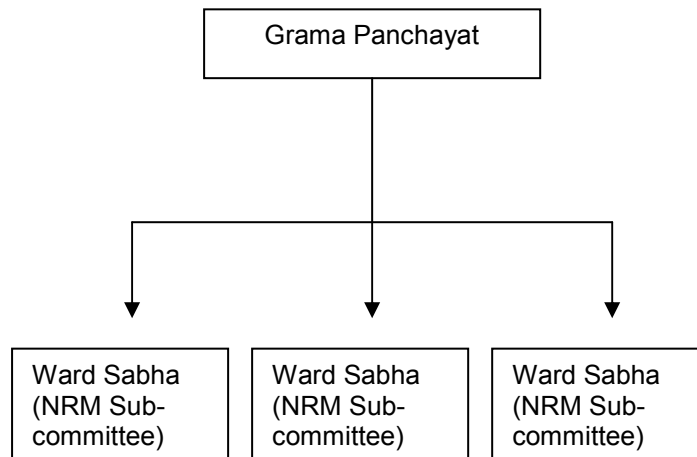
At the time of advent of the project, the *Gomala* in the area were under open access regimes. In the region, each habitation associates with patches of *Gomala* that have been traditionally used by the habitation. Typically the uplands, areas adjacent to the private holdings were vulnerable to privatization. Encroachments on *Gomala* at the time of project initiation were between 15-20% varying across the district. Privatization of benefit flows through stone quarries was also prevalent. These along with the livestock pressure resulted in a condition of poor regeneration. Among the first efforts was to centrestage the Commons in discussions both at the habitation level and the Panchayat level.

2. Sub committee: Space within the Panchayat for deliberation of natural resource matters

The KPRA makes provision for the constitution of 3 standing committees at the Grama Panchayat level for focus on three key dimensions of village development viz. the Production committee to deal with matters of agricultural production, animal husbandry and other allied activities, the social justice committee and the amenities committee. Through an amendment in 1997, the Grama Panchayat may constitute a provision for the constitution of committees for any other specified function.¹⁴ The standing committees comprise elected members of the Panchayat and are constituted at the level of the Grama Panchayat. The constitution of the NRM Sub-committees was facilitated as part of the project intervention at the habitation levels. The actual process of constitution of the sub-committees comprises a two step procedure. The Panchayat member who represents each of the habitations presides over a meeting of all adult members of the habitation where formation of the sub-committee and its relevance for the development of *Gomala* is discussed. The habitation then proposes members to the committee through a consensual process overseen by the Panchayat member. Habitations are encouraged to decide on the size of the sub-committee depending on the number of distinct groups they want represented on the committee. Also, habitations are encouraged to propose women for half the number of positions. Usually sub-committees have 6-8 members.

¹⁴ Sec 61 A, Karnataka Panchayati Raj Act, 1993

The proposal by the habitation is then represented to the Grama Panchayat by the member of the habitation and after due consideration the Grama Panchayat constitutes the sub-committee at the habitation level. The sub-committee is roughly at the level of the ward Sabha although sometimes boundaries of wards and habitations do not coalesce. A habitation may comprise of more than one ward; in other cases smaller habitations may form part of a ward along with part of another habitation.



The NRM sub-committee is conceived of an executive body of the habitation level representing the ward Sabha at this level. The traditional boundaries of the use regime on the Gomal usually coincide with the boundaries of the habitation and because the habitation represents the most proximate user group of the Gomala, deliberation and management practices at this level become critical.

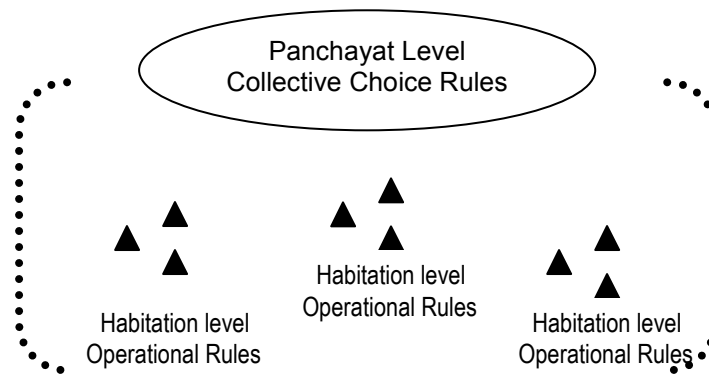
Traditionally, the Grama Panchayat has remained a body distant from the layperson at the habitation level. This is due to a host of factors. Primarily, the Panchayat is perceived to be a center of power that is not open to non-members or other influential members of the village. The overall perception of laypersons of habitations is one of corruption in the Panchayat with individual Panchayat members seen as operating to maximize their personal benefits from their position of power. This has been compounded by the lack of transparency and accountability of Panchayats to the general body.

In this context, the NRM sub-committee forms an important link between the Panchayat and the habitation. It allows for the participation of the gram Sabha in Panchayat decision-making in a sense extending the access of the general body to the Panchayat thereby increasing transparency and assurance for members of individual habitations. It also allows for the creation of a pressure group on issues of natural resources in each habitation that can influence the Panchayat from within.

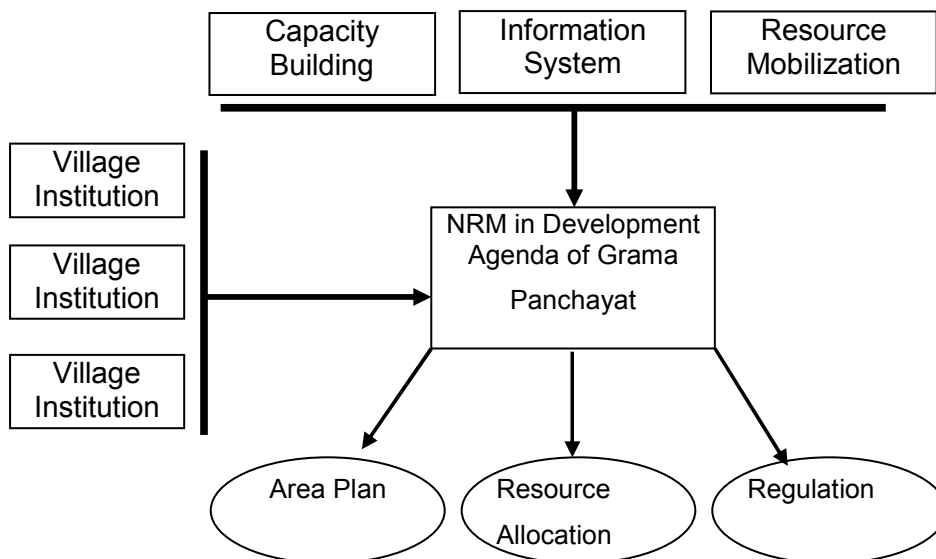
3. Parallel Foci at both levels – strengthening operational rules at the habitation level and collective choice rules at the Panchayat level

The presence of the NRM sub-committee allows for a parallel focus on institution strengthening for management of the Gomala, at two levels. One at the level of the habitation where operational rules are important and the other at the level of the

Panchayat where collective choice rules feed into larger planning for natural resource governance at the Panchayat level.



The process however has necessarily been slow. While the operational choice rules are seen as nested within collective choice rules, in many Panchayats it has been necessary to strengthen the habitation level to build the sense of the collective at the Panchayat level. This has essentially been due to the sense of mistrust at the habitation level in involving Panchayat in habitation level processes. Therefore the strategy has been to strengthen processes at the habitation level and leverage space for representation of these processes in the Panchayat through the NRM sub-committees. The sharing of habitation level experiences at the Panchayat has contributed to building the NRM agenda at the Panchayat. The next phase is one where the role for Panchayats is evolved in mutual discussion between the Panchayat and its sub-committees. This role is envisaged as spanning functions of arbitration across habitations, resource allocation and the important function of planning for planning of natural resource governance across habitations. In some Panchayats, where habitations across Grama Panchayats are part of the same user regime, a common forum for deliberations is emerging.



4. From contracted labour to self-help and volunteerism

An important dimension of involvement of habitations in the process of natural resource management has been the shift in the location of village members vis-à-vis the process of resource development. The rural poor have mainly valued largely decentralised NRM programmes as a source of wage labour even though they do not necessarily increase access by the poor to natural resources. (Ramakrishna, et al., 2002) The standard procedure for implementation of natural resource programmes has been the 'contractor' approach in which the agency approaches an influential member of the community and 'contracts' out the task to him. This individual then proceeds to enlist other village members as 'labour' and completes the task. The idea of a collective engaging in a consensually evolved activity to enhance a collectively owned resource is reduced to one of wage seeking in a 'government' programme. This does not build a sense of ownership of the resource at the habitation level. The process of habitations being involved in matters of management of the Gomala through the interface of the NRM sub-committee have increased the access of the Gomal for the poor and opened up a space for their participation in the development of the resource. This includes planning for resource development activities such as soil and water conservation measures or revegetation measures. The actual implementation of the activity is also overseen by the general body of the habitation making for an internal monitoring mechanism. The process builds a sense of ownership that is integral for the sustainability of CPR institutions.

5. Informed decision making – planning and rule making

Many of the functions related to natural resources that are devolved to Grama Panchayats require a significant amount of information for the Panchayat to make meaningful decisions. In the absence of this, functions such as 'wasteland development' or 'fuel plantation and fodder development' are reduced to stand alone activities rather than contribute in an integrated manner to natural resource management practices that are responsive to the natural resource based livelihoods in the Panchayat.

While various agencies of the government collect information related to say rainfall, soil quality, ground water levels, ground water recharge potential these are at geographical scales larger than the Panchayat. While these contribute to the larger picture, there is a dearth of information regarding the status of natural resources within the Panchayat boundaries

Natural Resource Related Functions: Grama Panchayat *

- Preparation of annual plans and budget development of the Panchayat area
- Promotion and development of agriculture and horticulture, Development of wastelands and grazing lands and preventing the unauthorized alienation and use of the latter.
- Promotion of dairy farming, poultry and piggery including improvement of breed and grassland development.
- Development of Fisheries:
- Social forestry : Minor forest produce, fuel and fodder, Planting and preservation of trees on roadsides and other public lands, promotion of farm forestry and development of social forestry.
- Construction, repairs and maintenance of drinking water wells, tanks and ponds.
- Fuel plantation and fodder development.

* Schedule I, Constitution of India

and the nature and extent of human pressure on the natural resource base.

The attempt has been to make available information on some of these parameters to Panchayats to facilitate informed decision-making. This is coupled with a capacity building approach to strengthen systems perspective to Natural resource management with a focus on the role of the Commons, and an overview of the functions and powers of the Grama Panchayat with respect to natural resource management. The efforts have been focused at both habitation and Panchayat levels focusing on the NRM sub-committees so as to build up capacities across a larger group that will help in ensuring that the process towards sustainable management of the resources would be an inclusive one.

ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR NATURAL RESOURCE GOVERNANCE

The Panchayati Raj institutions offer a valuable template for the institutionalization and consequent scaling up of decentralized natural resource management. This is especially pertinent in a country like India where the imperative of basing governance in decentralized systems derives from the sheer diversity of socio-ecological contexts and their varied demands from the governance structure. In summation of this paper we highlight some issues pertaining to the role of Grama Panchayats in natural resource governance, drawing from our experience of working with these institutions in Karnataka.

First, the need to support and strengthen 'community agency' that is at the heart of decentralized natural resource management. (Chhatre,2007). The gram Sabha and the ward Sabha provided for in the PRI design, create a space for the participation of communities in deliberatory decision-making and the structure for downward accountability of the Grama Panchayat to the gram Sabha and thereon to the ward sabha. However these remain among the most neglected of the PRIs. Low levels of literacy combine with years of subservience to bureaucratic structures to weave a web of silent complacency regarding the quality of governance. The ward Sabha (at 400 population) was recognized through an amendment to specifically increase the participation of communities in deliberations at this level. The ward sabhas have the potential to be the fourth tier of local self-governance by extending the deliberations on various aspects of resource governance to the localized context of a ward and vice versa building the agenda of governance from the wards upwards. There is a need for strengthening investments for awareness at this level about their rights and role in natural resource management. This also contributes to the strengthening of the positions of marginalized groups and their ability to assert their rights and entitlements and be able to challenge elite control within local resource groups and committees. (Campbell, 2006)

Second, the necessity to construct the agenda for sustainable management of natural resources at the level of local governments Often, it is local rural communities who first bear the brunt of natural resource degradation. Currently the issue of natural resource management is splintered across various schemes and programmes. The Working group on Decentralization(2002) commissioned by the government of Karnataka holds that that the planning process should move away from sectoral planning to a system of integrated area planning. The Grama

Panchayat offers a platform for the convergence of various projects into an integrated plan but this is an area that needs to be strengthened.

A related issue is that of discretionary power which is critical to the success of devolved natural resource management. Aziz (2005) notes that of the outlay on 30 major schemes implemented by the rural local governments in Karnataka, Grama Panchayats have absolute discretion over only five per cent leaving hardly any autonomy in determining their allocation priorities. Grama Panchayats in Karnataka and many other States of the country have the power of taxation but their inability to raise resources from the sources assigned to them adds to the problem of inadequate resource transfer from the state government. Adequate financial support must accompany devolution of functions. A newly introduced rural employment programme¹⁵ now operational across the country offers some hope in this direction. The programme combines the objectives of provision of minimum employment with that of creating productive assets (with a focus on natural resources) to strengthen rural livelihoods. A critical role is envisaged in the programme for Grama Panchayats who carry the responsibility of planning and implementation. The programme offers the opportunity for local employment avenues and harnessing these for development of collectively held assets.

Finally, even as we describe processes of strengthening deliberations on natural resources within individual Grama Panchayats towards mainstreaming natural resource management within their governance agenda, it is clear that these individual Panchayats need to be seen in a context of cooperation among each other and with other actors in the landscape. This is inherent in the nature of varying claims on common pool resources and the span of several of these resources across administrative boundaries like that of the Panchayats. This points to the necessity of a polycentric resource governance system with multiple governing authorities at different scales. These authorities could include governments at various levels, private associations, research institutions, civil society organizations. Larger regimes can facilitate local self-organization by providing accurate information about natural resource systems, providing arenas in which participants can engage in discovery and conflict-resolution processes, and providing mechanisms to back up local monitoring and sanctioning efforts. (Ostrom, 2007). In this context, there is a growing consensus on the role that civil society organizations can play a role in revitalising decentralised governments – in motivating people to participate in the decision-making process, providing information to people on various aspects of local government and planning. (Aziz, 1999); they can help to bridge divergent views between local people and government agencies and manage conflict within or between communities. (Campbell, 2006) and can influence outcomes through advocacy for the poorest resource users (Shackleton, et al., 2002)

CONCLUSION

This paper describes a process of facilitating a system of management of Common pastures by Grama Panchayats. Based on our experiences of working with these local governments, we explore the opportunities for decentralized natural resource management offered by the PRIs. While there remain several difficulties of

¹⁵ State schemes base on National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2006

inadequate devolution of powers, we build a case for engaging with these institutions in the interests of strengthening community involvement in natural resource governance.

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