

## LOOKING AT DECENTRALISATION FROM GANDHIAN ACTION PERSPECTIVE

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### Introduction by Editor

*Village at the centre and as the focus of governance has been one of the cornerstones of Gandhian thinking. This has been debated ad nauseum and today has acquired new relevance in the context of the global concentration on decentralisation as much as possible. While for the West, decentralisation has emerged from the necessity to reduce carbon footprint, in India, Gandhi articulated the decentralisation to place the interest of the villager in the centre of governance and planning. While the West has to of course arrive at decentralisation from the commercial platform through the accumulation or the non-accumulation of sense of guilt on consumption, it doesn't profess a real empowerment of the individual in the process of creating the decentralisation. Whereas in the Gandhian model of governance, the entire focus of the decentralised model of governance is to ensure that in every way the individual is provided the required strength to move forward in life. While one spoke of consumption and choice of consumption, other spoke of freedom as a responsible and empowered life with a unique Indian title to it, Swaraj. Conceptually, Swaraj is a fundamental challenge to the western thought process, and it continues to be so till date. Indeed, this could be argued as the core of the understanding of the Gandhi ideological struggle.*

*Ambedkar articulates it in his own inimitable style, "... if the Executive in India did not do certain things most conducive to progress, it was because by reason of it being impersonal and also by reason of its character, motives and interests, it could sympathise with the living forces operating in the Indian society, was not charged with its wants, its pains, its cravings and its desires, was inimical to its aspirations, did not advance education, disfavoured Swadeshi or snapped at anything that smacked of nationalism, it was because all these things went against its grain. In other words, the government not being of the people could not feel the pulse of the people '1".*

*Gandhiji, proposes Swaraj in the early days of his political articulation and his Hind Swaraj is seen*

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*as his testament by many and indeed he vouched by it till his end. In perhaps one of the last letters, he outlines how the Swaraj achieved will be able to help us with addressing the ever-pressing issue of caste, indeed, he feels that is the purpose of Swaraj! In his letter addressed to friends in Gujarat on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1948 he writes, "If we would see Panchayat Raj, i. e., democracy established, we would regard the humblest and the lowliest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land. For this, everyone should be pure. If they are not, they should become so. He who is pure will also be wise. He will observe no distinctions between caste and caste, between touchable and untouchable, but will consider everyone equal with himself. He will bind others to himself with love. To him no one would be an untouchable. He would treat the labourers the same as he would the capitalists. He will, like the millions of toilers, earn his living from service of others and will make no distinction between intellectual and manual work<sup>2</sup>".*

*While decentralised form of governance got a much needed strengthening by the enactment of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, the Panchayati Raj Act remains till date more on paper and less in implementation. As a consequence, caste issue abounds till date and has exacerbated with castes gaining open political party status and articulation at all local levels. Dr. Palanithurai, perhaps one of the most eminent Gandhian scholars on decentralisation today in India, outlines in the following article a need for a leadership model to emerge from the Gandhian framework of Swaraj and in the process articulates in detail the framework itself. The article carries several insights stemming from his work with Panchayats over decades across India.*

## Introduction

M. K. Gandhi as a man lived with the poor, and demonstrated to the world by evolving himself through experiments, and indicated that the society could be reformed, transformed and evolved by adopting a framework of development and governance which is unique in nature and character. The framework is indigenous in nature, and evolved by M. K. Gandhi based on his learning from the Indian society. It is popularly called "Gram Swaraj". Secondly, instead of evolving a philosophy or a theory, he has evolved a framework of action for the entire humanity, based on the knowledge of the past in India, to lead a harmonious, compassionate, peaceful, meaningful and decent human life filled with joy. All his ideational contributions are sharpened tools for application in human life to create a new social order. To create a new social order or better living conditions or to achieve a quality life, M. K. Gandhi's ideas can be practiced at a personal level by changing the attitude, behaviour and performance even without the direction of the State. This framework he had evolved in the context where the State took complete responsibility of achieving development for all. But now after seven decades of development initiatives of the State and the market, development experiment look for solution to achieve development not from the State or market, but from the communities. Against this background, M. K. Gandhi is looked at for solution to the present socio economic crises, not only in India, but also in the world.

Despite acute poverty, ignorance and fear, poor had been mobilised to participate in the freedom struggle by M. K. Gandhi after he took the lead in the Indian National Congress. M. K.

Gandhi is a leader with immaculate judgments understood the psychology of the poor and thereby he started working with poor by removing the fear of British in the minds of the people. He evolved a framework of ethical conduct and sensitised the poor on the ethical principles, which ultimately were responsible for liberation of India. The whole process of liberation became a model for many societies and communities in the world to liberate themselves from the oppression of the dominant forces and it is called a non-violent liberation. It had been considered as a major achievement in the human history because of its uniqueness. The uniqueness lies in the methodological contribution made by M. K. Gandhi in evolving the liberation framework. Yet another contribution of M. K. Gandhi is the leadership which no other contemporary society has witnessed. It is transformational in nature and it is new to the entire world. He moved further to evolve a framework of development not only to India but also to the humanity as a whole. His major contribution lies in evolving a framework of development which is now called alternative model of development as the whole world moves in the western model of development, driven by the market and the other one, driven by the State.

M. K. Gandhi's model of development relies on neither the market nor the State, it relies on the people. His framework of development essentially lies in harmony with nature when humanity interacts with nature.

In the last seven decades, human societies have been liberated from the authoritarian yoke and established democratic regimes. At present, 80 per cent of the world population lives in democracy with varying intensity. In the same way, market

and State have been established and initiatives were on to achieve material advancement to alleviate poverty and advance prosperity. The market and the State have been in action through established democratic governance, enacting appropriate laws and evolving schemes and programmes for eradicating poverty and achieving economic development. In the last seven decades' development initiatives and activities, the world has recorded a remarkable achievement in material advancement through market. Hence, the decades' are called 'development decades'. But the economic growth achieved by the market has not enabled the people of all segments of the society to enjoy the benefits and as a result, the society has witnessed unprecedented inequality and crises. It has been established through research that both the market and the State have failed miserably in tackling the human crises, despite the unprecedented economic growth. Equally, the development model adopted by the market and the State have completely disrupted the harmony between human societies and the nature by exploiting the environment and ecology. The existing human conditions can be seen through the recently published The World Inequality Report, The World Hunger Report, The World Report on Ecology and Environment, World Human Development Report and The Report on Corruption in the World. All the reports brought to us a message that something is wrong in a civilised society in the process of achieving material advancement.

Thus, the whole of the world has come to a place where they could not advance the market and State-driven development, as both these ventures failed. Having seen the failures of the State and the market, series of initiatives have been taken to reform the market and the State. Yet, problems

are growing unabated. The search is on. It is to be noted here that M. K. Gandhi has predicted the fate of the market-led and State-led development even before the dawn of independence. Hence, he advocated a model of development which involves people in regulating the State and the market to act within the harmonious relationship between nature and humanity. Since the model is people-centric, it needs a new kind of leadership to mobilise the people for achieving development. Thus, M. K. Gandhi is more relevant to the present context to address the human problems through establishing a new form of governance, evolving a new model of development and providing a new kind of leadership to mobilise them to participate in governance and development. In this model, economy, polity, governance are evolved from below through an intensive engagement of people to achieve development.

It is important to seek as to what is available in M. K. Gandhi's repertoire to redeem the societies which are in deep trouble facing plethora of problems in environment, ecology, governance, natural resource management, poverty reduction, vulnerability reduction, climate change, unemployment, increasing inequality and so on? While searching for alternative path for development, governance and leadership, M. K. Gandhi emerges closer to solution which can be adopted by the humanity without much difficulty. It is much easier to put it into practice. More precisely, it could be carried out even without the intervention of the State, what is required is purity of mind and heart on the part of the individual to work with people to start the transformation at the grassroots among the people. Thus, many of the contemporary issues in development, governance and leadership

could be resolved through Gandhian framework.

### **An Introspection**

When M. K. Gandhi's framework of development, governance and leadership is suggested to the world to solve the problems faced by humanity, a basic question has to be addressed to bring more clarity. The question is, why is that India has not adopted all the above framework to demonstrate to the world. Unequivocally M. K. Gandhi's liberation framework and non-violent liberation had been accepted by many of the groups involved in freedom struggle and thereby it was considered as the way to achieve freedom and accepted his leadership. After India got Independence, the architects of modern India developed a strong belief that the existing framework of governance and administration, established by the colonial masters will enable them to keep India together, to transform the society and to alleviate poverty fast by using the forces of the market and the State. It is to be noted that to follow the path of Gandhi, all the existing institutional arrangements have to be changed. It was totally a new path. Pakistan's creation made the political parties to raise an argument that to keep India together, it is necessary that governance and administrative arrangements, established by the colonial masters had to be kept intact. To alleviate poverty and tackle unemployment problem, India needed industrialisation and the Western economic model. Our political class because of their liberal education background believed that the people's participation is necessary to liberate the country from the colonial yoke. But they refused to accept the argument that people have the capacity to participate in the 'development activities' and in the

process of governance. Yet some of the aspects of the development framework of M. K. Gandhi have been put into practice in a trial form, but, they have been weakened and marginalised by the main stream development practices. Hence, they have disappeared over a period of time. It is to be noted here that to put in to practice the development model enunciated by M. K. Gandhi, a policy and institutional architecture should be put in place, and to do it is not an easy task.

Gandhi has evolved the framework of development not drawing from the Western model of development. He had an extensive discussion with people, mostly with the poor in rural areas and had his own analysis of the observations of the people, and the knowledge created already on development in Indian soil enabled him to codify his framework of development. In his development framework, people should be at the centre. Having conceptualised the framework, he prepared the people for not only to liberate them from colonial yoke, but also to participate in the process of development and governance. In this process, he was keen in mobilising the rustic folk with a promise to reconstruct the society and to bring a new social order, based on the value profile, developed by him. That is why he gave priority to sanitation than to liberation. M.K. Gandhi laid a strong foundation in the Indian National Congress for social reconstruction through ideational and institutional framework.

His continuous engagement with people mostly poor is not limited to achieve freedom alone. His deep faith in the poor and their knowledge had enabled him to evolve the framework of development, governance and social reconstruction. While listening to the people, he never failed to

indicate the social ills that afflicted the society. He made them realise the ills of the rural Indian communities and prepared them to reconstruct the rural communities by evolving higher values of life. He prepared the poor to engage themselves in participating in the process of governance and development.

In the meanwhile, a State was created with the aim of reforming and reconstructing the society and to increase the economic activities through industrialisation so as to reduce poverty. The expected attention for rural industrialisation and rural reconstruction with the active involvement of the rural people was not encouraged, instead industrialisation and organisational expansion of the State were given a big push. Thus, the paradigm of M. K. Gandhi had derailed. The Western model of industrialisation and representative form of governance had been created, which relegated the base work done by M. K. Gandhi to the background and ultimately ended in creating a huge mass as onlookers, beneficiaries and petitioners, instead of proud participants in governance and development as citizens.

Within two and half decades, our political pundits have realised that they have moved in to the danger zone, because they have seen the growing social tension and inequality between the rich and the poor. Industrialisation has benefitted the rich. Society has developed aspiration to achieve material advancement without realising its consequences in ecology and environment. The wealth produced out of industrialisation was not enough to meet the requirements of the society. Till date, the State has not fulfilled its Constitutional

commitment towards the welfare of the people. The State was not systematic in tackling the problems of the poor, rather it had tried through giving some doles to pacify their anger. Despite the seventy years of "development" efforts, living conditions and livelihood conditions of the majority have not improved. The reports prepared by the government and the development agencies have brought to light the deplorable conditions of the majority in the world and in India.

Having seen the trend in deterioration of the living conditions of the poor, the UN agencies have constituted committees and groups, and in equal measure, intellectuals form study groups to investigate the current conditions of the societies and the initiative of the governments in achieving development. Series of actions and initiatives have been suggested at the global level to rectify the mistakes committed by the State in the process of achieving economic growth and development. Targets have been fixed to achieve development without disturbing the ecology and environment. While assessing the progress, it is found that the governments have not taken adequate steps to reach the target and hence yet another strategy has been found out that development could be achieved by State through partnership with market. In the whole process I once again, the State and the market are the major players. After four decades of the experience of the market, it has been declared that market has also failed. Hence, along with the State, the market has also failed. In this context, yet another significant initiative that gained prominence in the world is decentralisation of powers and democratisation of the societies.

Both democratisation and decentralisation have drawn the attention of the world as both enabled the people to participate in the process of development and governance. While assessing the process of democratisation and decentralisation, it is found out that there have been many stumbling blocks in the process and to move further, systematic efforts are needed to elevate the State and the civic society. It should become a people's movement for democratisation and decentralisation. By seeing the ongoing efforts to rectify the past mistakes in the development initiatives of the State, one could come to a conclusion that the development framework adopted by the State to achieve development has failed. The new initiative of the state towards achieving development through decentralisation indicates that it moves towards an alternative path of development. Against this background, one has to study deep into the framework of M. K. Gandhi on development, governance and leadership.

### **Back to Basics**

First, M. K. Gandhi's leadership has to be examined. He demonstrated a new kind of leadership in the world. It is transformative and transformational in character. A transformational leader demonstrates through his/her attitude, behaviour and activities that he or she is evolving. The leader has to live with people, listen to people and lead people. The leader should earn the trust of the people and speak the truth and facts on all issues and aspects of society to take the society further on the evolutionary path. Such leaders would evolve value framework for the conduct of the people in socio, political and economic domain. It is not only the responsibility of the leader to evolve value framework, but also to make and

convince the followers to adhere to the values. A transformational leader should have the ability to integrate the values into the emotions of the people. Transformational leaders have to treat themselves equal to ordinary citizens. He or she should respect everyone by listening to them. The transformational leader believes in the knowledge of the followers. Transformational leaders evolve themselves to new heights in leadership qualities and thereby he or she makes his/her followers to follow the leader. The leader is not commanding but demonstrates in his or her actions. Transparency in all actions of the leader will increase the trust of the people on the leader. There is no gap between the followers and the leaders in terms of understanding the path of development and the values of human conduct. The leader builds emotional bonds with the followers. The leader is constantly working for the elevation of the masses in their thought process from one level to another. The leader enables the followers to understand the evolutionary process. The followers should feel that they are working for a noble cause. The followers should have a feeling that they are also contributing for the noble cause, even though they are poor or less educated or less privileged. Such a feeling has to be created among the followers by the leader. All the activities have to be done consciously.

Secondly, his framework of governance is people-centric and evolutionary in character. His basic objective was to involve the people in the process of governance and development. When he considered the people for participation in the process of development, he unequivocally argued that there is a scope for economic activities in agriculture, villages and rural industries, including cottage industries. These are not growth-oriented

industrial economic activities, instead are meant for respectful, meaningful and decent livelihood to lead a happy and scientific life without causing damage to the ecology and environment. He considered a governance process which will liberate the rural masses from the exploitation of the rich and the urbanities. Indian masses (80 per cent), living in 7,00,000 villages had to be liberated through a new economy alternative to the exploitative economy introduced by the British. For this exercise, he wanted a village movement and a governance arrangement from below which he called Gram Swaraj. It is not decentralisation of powers as we see today. He advocated an economic democracy by increasing the income of the farmers. Through a process villagers have to get the due respect from every one due to them.

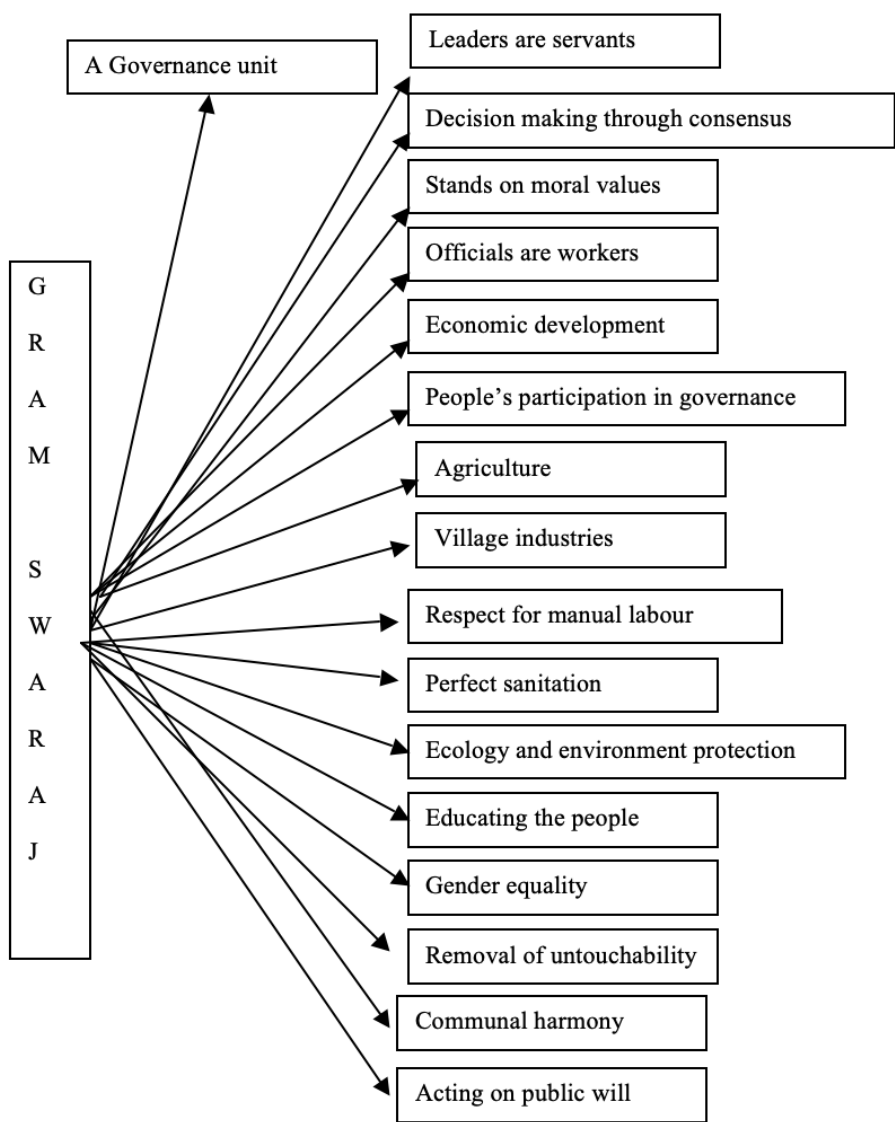
It is totally an integral process of economy and governance. Gram Swaraj is a total governance arrangement built from the villages to the top. The economic activities will engage the people in seven lakh villages and they will also be involved in rural reconstruction activities. The edifice of governance built on the foundation of the Gram Panchyat, ethical and moral values are guiding principles for governance. Gram Swaraj envisioned by M. K. Gandhi is broader, integral and holistic, and it is for the whole of the country as a system. It was an evolved vision based on his interaction with villagers and his intuitive analysis of the historic past. It is multi-dimensional in nature which includes political, economic, ecological, environmental, spiritual, moral, integral and organic aspects in nature. The whole system depends on individuals who are supreme subject to moral values. Public will is the deciding factor.

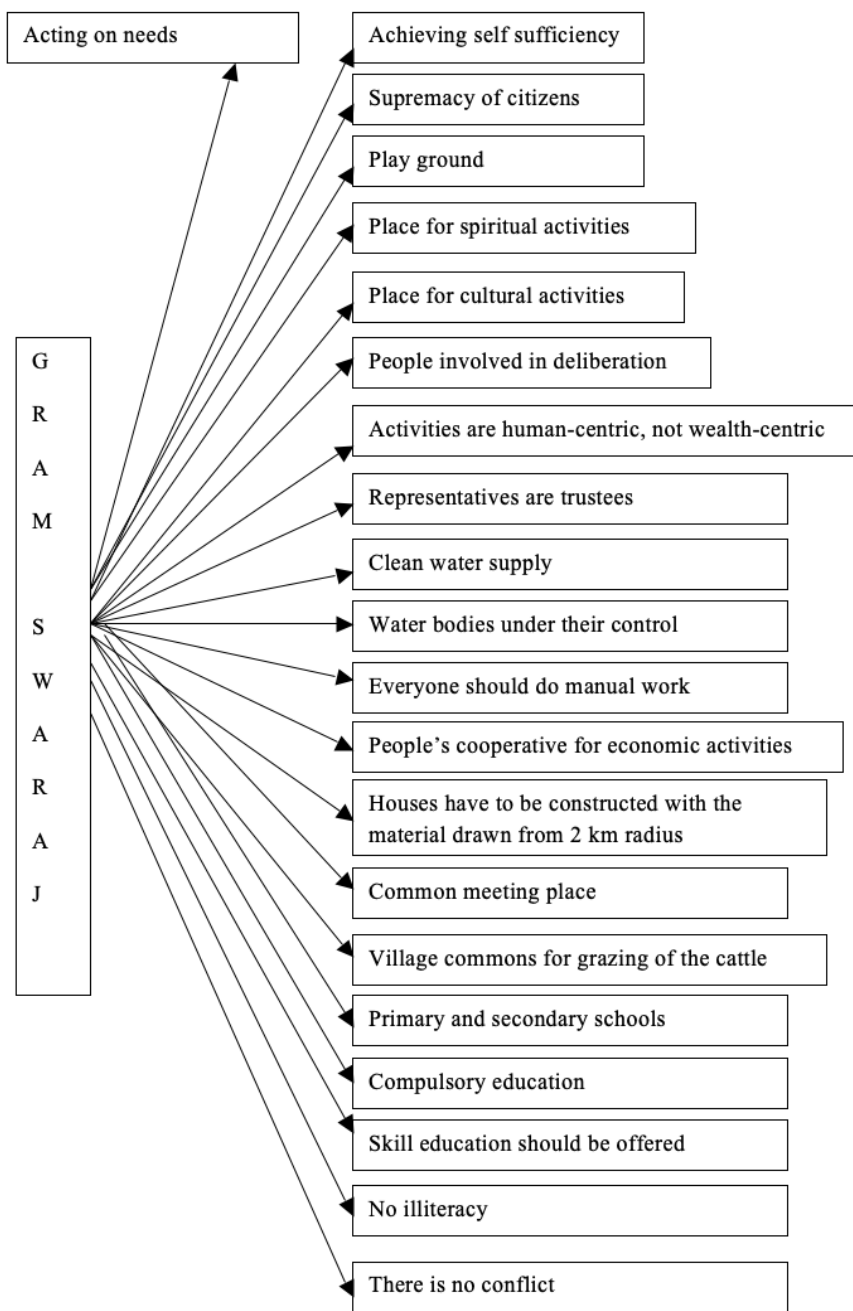
The whole life in the social setting revolves around ecology. It requires public education to awaken the masses to follow a path to achieve a balance between individualism and society. All the activities are governed through a combination of political and economic democracy. It is a deliberative and consensus democracy. There is no majority and it is only through consensus, based on fairness and justice. There is no hierarchy and untouchability. The village should have an economy and it has a market also. It has to work for fulfilling the needs of the villagers. It is totally an autonomous unit to work for itself sufficiency. It is independent of its neighbours for vital needs and wants. All the economic activities are integrated with a cooperative society. The cooperatives will be managed only by the stakeholders and not by officials.

The panchayat is a fundamental (and central) unit of governance. It needs well-qualified and well-trained humble leaders. They are the servants of the people and not the masters. The governance mechanism envisaged by M. K. Gandhi has got three dimensions namely legislative, executive and judicial. The elected representatives have to be leaders with sound moral background. They have to act very transparently in discharging their roles and responsibilities. They are the trustees. It has to value and respect the manual labour as part of the culture. It has to work for achieving gender equality, communal harmony, ecological balance, environmental protection and sustainability. All its activities are not wealth-centric, but human-centric. It has to work for removing fear from the poor and they should be enabled to resist the State when it abuses the power. To carry out the activities envisaged by M. K. Gandhi for rural reconstruction



what we need is not power or money or government order, it needs only leadership. The leadership what M. K. Gandhi has envisaged will bring everything required to transform villages and communities. They are given below in a diagram for easy understanding.





### Can We Contextualise the Gandhian Framework?

It is to be noted here that when M.K. Gandhi evolved this framework for governance and development, the whole world passionately was committed to building and strengthen the State to create a new world social order and to achieve economic wealth through industrialisation and modernisation. After four decades of experience, narratives have emerged that the State has not achieved what it promised to achieve. In a twisted consequence today, the responsibility of achieving development has been entrusted to both market and the State. New narratives are emerging today, after two decades of market experience that this has failed as well. For many of the ills afflicted with the society, solution is not with market or the State-driven models. It lies in the society by involving people in the process of governance and development through an institutional mechanism. The new institutional mechanism is decentralisation of powers. In India, this has been operationalised by amending the Constitution of India. As a result, 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the constitution of India have been passed in the Indian Parliament and thereby local bodies are made as governance institutions as per part IX of the Constitution of India. It is historic in nature as it provides new opportunity to the people to experiment M.K. Gandhi's framework of governance and development. Through the new Panchayati Raj system, all the basic activities envisaged by M.K. Gandhi in the villages can be carried out. By doing so, people will be enabled to lead a decent and dignified human life. This could be achieved, provided the system is understood properly and operationalised systematically with a

sense of commitment at all levels from the central government to local government.

It is a holistic governance arrangement, meant for economic development and social justice. It should be done through a participatory approach, planning for development as a constitutionally mandated activity. To achieve the above, all segments of society have to participate in the process (for which due reservation has been given to women and SC and ST in the elected bodies). To establish a consensus and deliberative democracy, Gram Sabha has been created. The last man's voice could be received and heard in the Gram Sabha. Through the planning exercise done at the Gram Panchayat level, all the activities envisioned by M.K. Gandhi could be achieved. To achieve the above, broad guidelines have been prepared by the central government.

What needs to be done is to have a visionary as a leader of Gram Panchayat. The leader should be a trustee of the people and she or he should have adequate capacity and skill to build a vision for a village with the people by sensitising and orienting the people. There are two guidelines issued by Government of India reflecting the Gandhian framework of development and governance. They are: the guidelines issued for implementing the Sansaad Adarsh Gram Yojana and the guidelines issued to States to prepare Gram panchayat Development Plan as per the recommendation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Central Finance Commission. If the two guidelines are adopted and activities are carried out as per the guidelines, Gandhi's vision on rural transformation could be achieved.

### **A New Leadership**

To achieve M.K.Gandhi's Gram Swaraj, even today, we have institutions, resources and social capital and what is required is a new leadership called transformational leadership. The leadership should create a trust among the people and the leader should have skill and capacity to mobilise and educate the people in the new vision of building a new social order through the new mechanism. As Gandhi trained leaders for liberalising India through non-violent struggle, the grassroot level leaders have to be trained and they have to be oriented continuously in the transformative process of the rustic communities.

This training has to be done not in ordinary training institutions with officials or teachers. This has to be done in an extraordinary training setting in such a way that the individuals who attend the training should transform themselves and stand up before the community as a new trustee or a sevak to build the trust among the people. Trained leaders are to work for transformation with people by conducting themselves in a transparent way. A transformational leader has to mobilise the people to build a movement for rural transformation. The leader should have the capacity to lead and guide people to participate in governance and development activities. The leaders should have the capacity to manage the institution, finance and bureaucracy. The leader's attitude, perspective, behaviour and performance matter much in transforming the communities. In such a

way, leadership training has to be conducted and through a process, transformational leaders have to be prepared.

### **What is to be Done?**

In the twenty five years' experience in decentralisation of powers, it is observed that wherever leaders are prepared with all seriousness, those leaders have achieved tremendous transformation in rural areas. Powers, functionaries and finance are secondary and the leaders have worked on the assumed functions not on assigned functions only. They are the real change makers and they are the real leaders and they are transformational leaders. In India, only a few institutions have conducted leadership training. Even among the few, a few select institutions concentrate on transformational leadership training for the elected representatives of the rural local bodies. From among the trained representatives, only a few emerged as exceptional leaders and they are transformational leaders.

There are exceptional leaders who transformed themselves and they worked for community transformation in some aspects. They are visible at present. They are alternative to the existing political leadership. Such kind of leaders have to be trained in grassroots governance and transformation in the backdrop of Gandhian framework of governance and development. These kinds of activities have to be initiated in the Gandhian transformational leadership school. This is the need of the hour.

## NOTES

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2. To Gujaratis, letter dictated from fast, New Delhi, January 14, 1948. [from Gujarati, Harijanbandhu], 18 Jan 1948. CWMG: Vol 98, pg. 230
3. Raghuram Rajan, the former head of Reserve Bank of India too has mentioned this in his recent book called the "Third Pillar" – Editor

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