

Odisha: Transparency in Bureaucracy holds key to make Decentralised Planning a reality, 23 Nov

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"To make decentralised district planning a reality in the state of Odisha, what is primarily required is a change in the attitude of the bureaucracy and the people in power who design policies for the development of people. They mustn't rule over people but serve people and facilitate decentralised planning and development."

Basudev Mahapatra

Not only in Odisha but in India as well, people in power are always hungry and passionate for power. They don't want to share the power with anybody else. This is why decentralisation of Power is still a myth in Odisha and in most of India leaving only a small part in a relatively better state. This was what most of the resource persons highlighted in the workshop on decentralised district planning organised by Inclusive Media for Change, in partnership with the UNDP and the Planning Commission of India, in Bhubaneswar. The workshop brought afresh in my mind some facts I encountered while studying the status of PESA Act in Odisha.

Last year, in 2011 August, when I visited one of the poverty stricken, malaria prone, tribal populated block of Odisha, Thuamul Rampur in Kalahandi district, and talked to tribal people living in different villages in the Karlapat forest region, I found most of the people and even PRI (PanchayatiRaj Institution) members unaware of an Act like PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996) that vested maximum power in them to self govern. While schedule V areas were given a special status in accordance with PESA Act and the Gram Panchayats were given adequate power to resolve the disputes relating to community resources and land, tribals of the Block were struggling to get the revenue records for the land they were using for agriculture and were being harassed by the local administration.

I went to the Tahsildar's office where, incidentally, I met the district Collector and wanted to know the status of PESA, the collector came with a reverse question 'Does PESA as an Act really exist?'

However, a woman Sarpanch of Gopalpur Gram Panchayat, Draupadi Majhi, had a limited knowledge of PESA Act who at least understood that the Palli sabha (Village Meeting) and Gram Sabha (Panchayat Level Meeting) were mandatory annual events as per the Act.

After Kalahandi, I went to Keonjhar and to some of the tribal villages of Telkoi, Harichandanpur and Banspal Block where I saw the same ignorance of people about PESA Act. The situation was no better in Sundargarh district where I recently visited to

have a first hand account of displacement miseries of people, especially the tribal communities.

The other basic issue I found was serious lack of interdepartmental coordination when PESA norms require coordinated efforts from several departments including that of the Forest, Rural Development and Tribal Welfare. In fact, the field exposure was enough to convince that the power delegated to people and the PRI in schedule V areas were confined to papers only and the people in the areas were (and are still) living on the mercy of the administrative authorities.

The state PanchayatiRaj Department also had nothing much to tell about the status of PESA Act and achievements through PESA implementation. As his opinion about the status and implementation of PESA Act, the then Director of PanchayatiRaj, Ramakanta Dash, said, "PESA has been successfully implemented in the schedule V areas of the state. Necessary amendments have been affected into state laws to making PESA compliant. And, accordingly, elections have been held as per the amended provision of the PESA Act since 2002." So, to the Director also, holding elections in scheduled areas was a complete compliance of PESA Act!

After such a statement by the Director of PanchayatiRaj during end of last year, Chief Secretary of Odisha, Bijay Kumar Patnaik, said early this year, in January 2012, that though the PESA was already passed by the Parliament in 2005 and the State Assembly had also adopted the Act, it could not be executed due to the lack of rules. How could the department keep on saying, even in its annual reports, till last year that it implemented PESA Act successfully?

The whole episode says how bureaucracy in the state severely lacks in transparency and accountability even in regard to policy matters. That is why the results of PESA Act, as expected, are still a dream in the state. In spite of reporting of the related issues by media time and again, the bureaucracy, or the state administration as a whole, has been completely indifferent in resolving the issues and the decentralisation dream in schedule V areas is in a terrible state.

The PESA experience is just one example that only makes tip of the iceberg. Adamant and 'different-from-others' attitude of the bureaucracy are the bottlenecks in effecting decentralisation in Odisha. So, to make decentralised district planning a reality in the state of Odisha, what is primarily required is a change in the attitude of the bureaucracy and the people in power who design policies for the development of people. They mustn't rule over people but serve people and facilitate decentralised planning and development.