Book Review
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COMMUNITISATION
The Third Way of Governance
R S Pandey
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Pp 172; Rs 350.

‘Communitization is a process of decentralization and devolution of [Government’s] powers and responsibilities to the community where both partners [government and the community] contribute to the common good’ (P. 53).

In the aftermath of independence, the burden of running a newly emergent country, reeling under centuries of foreign rule, fell solely upon the government and the public sector, as the private sector was almost non-existent. The monolithic structure of the government carried inherent seeds of lethargy, indifference, and inefficient performance. Within a few decades, contemptuous but popular phrases such as, “Kuch Nahi Ho Sakta”, “Yeh Hai Mera Bharat Mahan!” reflected the governance-image of independent India. This became the widely prevailing scenario despite the fact that the Indian polity had adopted tiers of democratic governance - whereby popularly elected bodies from parliament to the state assemblies, down to municipal bodies and the panchayats, were provided with adequate powers and resources.

Lack and even absence of supervision and monitoring of the huge governance machinery, resulted in free blossoming of vested interests and innovative ways of corruption, lack of discipline and accountability, and political hijacking of government institutions. This, in particular, severely crippled the grassroots public administration. The governing bodies related to core social areas - water and power supply, child and public health care, elementary education, sanitation and hygiene - fell into a ‘moribund state’. A state where government functionaries largely chose whether to perform, or not to, or even, when to be present or absent, at will, in their workplaces. And the most intriguing part is that nobody could question this apathy towards public good, least of all its perpetrators.

In this backdrop of helplessness and powerlessness in the Indian society at large, R S Pandey conducted a
revolutionary experiment, picking up the state of Nagaland — where he was posted as Chief Secretary.

The instant experiment, limited to certain sectors, and confined to select areas of the state of Nagaland, is documented in this brief, but highly readable book. It holds aloft a theme, a conviction, whose relevance and appeal is not constrained by the limits of geography or time. The experiment comprised of adapting a theme from the hitherto reserved forte of private sector, i.e. ‘no work, no pay’ to the realm of public administration, apparently for the first time since the sixty-plus years of India’s independence. And this radical tool was placed in the hands of the general community. The concept of communitisation specifically meant that the user community would monitor working of government functionaries, resolve all related problems and, of course, receive funds and disperse expenses, including salaries of the employees. The impact was bound to be instantaneous and the message delivered, unimaginatively powerful.

In a scenario where absenteeism and indifferent performance of teachers, doctors, and functionaries of public works departments couldn’t be effectively tackled because of the government’s tardy penalty procedures, things suddenly brightened up under the communitisation process. For example, the application of no-work-no-pay principle, and the user community’s close watch & supervision of the functioning of government schools, resulted in virtual disappearance of absenteeism of teachers, substantial increase in the number of students attending schools, better maintenance of school buildings, and many parents pitching in their personal resources. Similarly, the energy sector showed unprecedented rise in revenue and much improved and qualitative delivery of power in villages. Similarly, healthcare programs were reported to span into hitherto ignored and unknown areas.

These apparently simple looking management tools, to be put in place, required fundamental changes and modifications in the existing government legal framework. And this was well done, and with great speed.

The book records comprehensive exercise undertaken, and the supporting data and findings as assessed by external agencies.

The gains of communitisation indeed are wider. Besides the expected fall in governmental corruption, and enhanced quality and efficiency in delivery of public services, the most valuable impact reflected in empowerment of the community. The hitherto passive and powerless general public woke up to its truly democratic, sovereign power and responsibility to decide on its fate and future. Further, freed from the strait jacket, inflexible government rules and procedures, the community, and their councils and committees, could adopt many innovative ways and incentives to improve public governance.

Does it all sound too rosy and platonic? Can the communitisation process be adapted to any situations of governance, and to any community? How will the councils and committees, constituted by a given community, be different from any other politically elected bodies? And will these councils not be hijacked by the usual petty political interests, since the general public is neither informed, nor interested in the governance process?

And, not the last, can the bureaucracy generate interest, initiative, and the perseverance to adapt the
communitisation process to varied situations and draft the required legal structure? Will the bureaucracy manage necessary political will and support to such initiatives?

These are many doubts and apparent obstacles. Pandey does anticipate most of these concerns and provide reasonably satisfying path lines. The detailed annexure in the book, carrying text of orders, enactments, and rules applied in case of Nagaland State, provide a practical manual and guidelines to help workout suitable alternatives.

The author also has no qualms in qualifying that the communatization is part of the process, and that this cannot replace government systems or the private endeavors. This process, based on tapping social capital of a community, has tremendous storehouse of potential in taking the public administration forward in its current journey towards transparency, accountability, and effective delivery.

To the last question on bureaucratic and political will, it can be safely vouched that the concept of communitisation would lead to optimal use of public resources and enhance good governance. Gurcharan Das in the Preface to the book says that ‘participation is a great motivator’. Indeed, the scale is already witnessing a great shift towards participation, social audit and so on in the anthology of governance, and this process can only go forward. The Right to Information Act, 2005 has already recorded a quantum leap in this direction. Even though bureaucracy will find it very difficult to replicate the communitisation process in newer situations and other states, but the process and its spirit can only be delayed, not prevented. R S Pandey has given a huge reason for more innovative direction to this movement. He aptly quotes Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of United Kingdom, “...the user has to be given real power and preference...The system needs proper incentives and rewards” (p106).

Pandey’s book, interestingly does not open with a hypothesis; it starts with a direct hit at the communitisation experiment. And then sort of draws inferences there from. It falls on logic that the author chooses theoretical framework of communitisation and its core - social capital, in the latter part of the book.

On the flip side, the book itself would have benefited much from some close editing. A large number of typographical as well as grammatical errors are jarring in an otherwise perfect text, and were easily avoidable. However, these can be taken care of in the book’s next edition. Of course, this in no way affects the power and energy of the concept of ‘Communitisation’ as enunciated by Pandey, which has made the literature on management of public sector richer. The release of this book puts Shri R S Pandey amongst the forerunners of the contemporary phase of changing India.

Sh R S Pandey has been bestowed with the first ever top civil service award ‘Prime Minister’s award for Excellence in Public Administration’ for his work on Communitisation of Public Institutions and Services in Nagaland. The programme has also won the coveted United Nations Public Service Award, 2008.