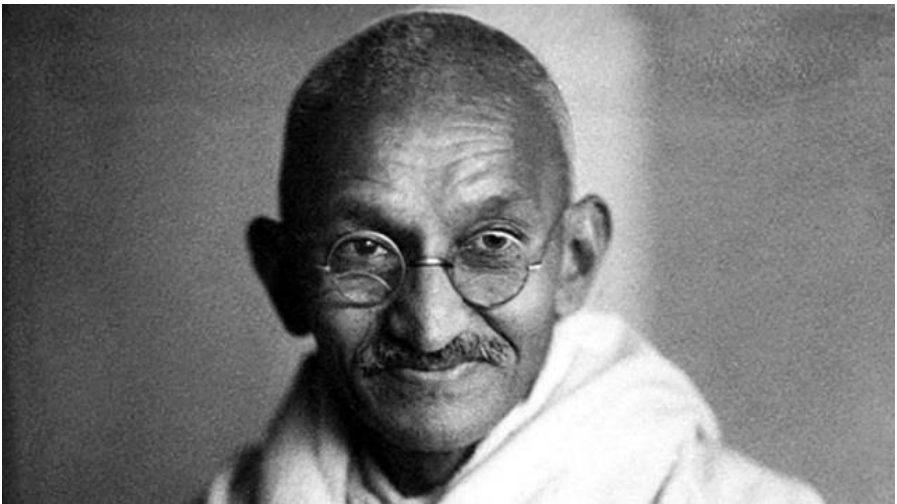


## **Gram Swaraj in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Atma Nirbhar Gram Panchayat**

***"The Soul of India lives in its Villages"***  
***–Mahatma Gandhi***



**T**he day was sun-drenched and promising as I visited the Gram Panchayat. As luck would have it, it was October 2nd, Gandhi Jayanti. Like every year, the local school arranged a commemoration ceremony. The Village Panchayat President, Sahukar Seenappa, along with his team of elected members, took part in the ceremony held on the school grounds.

The headmaster gave an impassioned speech about Mahatma Gandhi's homecoming from South Africa and his adoption of the path of non-violence during India's struggle for independence. He spoke

with great zeal about Gandhi's vision of every village in the Republic of India achieving self-sufficiency, fostering economic growth, and ensuring social justice. The students and the rest of the audience appeared captivated by the headmaster's speech. The experience sparked a nostalgic memory of standing in the gentle morning sunlight during middle school, as we absorbed the headmaster's eloquent speeches on such occasions. The ceremony concluded amid a thunderous round of applause from the attendees.

My visit included a scheduled meeting with the GP Adhyaksha and the Elected Representatives (ERs) after the ceremony. As Sahukar Seenappa, the Adhyaksha, exited the school with the ERs, I fell in step with them. As we strolled towards the GP office, we struck up a conversation. "The headmaster delivered a compelling speech on Gandhi's vision for our villages. What are your thoughts on it?" I was eager to discern whether Seenappa held Gandhi's ideals close to his heart.

"Sir, I must confess, I couldn't fully comprehend it all. It seems like an appealing idea, but the practical commitment to develop our villages appears to be lacking. Even now, we've been attempting to secure sanctions for the road repair for years without any progress. What can we do if there is no funding for development?" Seenappa replied, his tone laced with apology for his perceived hopelessness, despite the inspiring speech.

"Seenappa, that's precisely why I'm here today. I want to discuss how we can take the initiative to develop our villages ourselves without solely relying on government aid." As I spoke, Seenappa and his colleagues exhibited a keen interest.

In the meeting, I seized the opportunity to speak about Gram Swaraj. I presented the notion that Gandhi's dream of an ideal village remains

achievable, stressing the need for comprehensive development, with Adhyakshas and Elected Representatives in Gram Panchayats leading the transformation. By the meeting's end, we were all freshly aware of the potential that our villages hold, and how we could create the idyllic villages of our dreams.

#### **4.1. Gram Swaraj – Mahatma Gandhi's Vision of Ideal Indian Villages**

"According to Gandhi, the concept of an ideal village is straightforward. An ideal Indian village comprises well-ventilated, sunlight-filled small houses constructed with materials sourced within an 8-km radius. Such houses have spacious backyards for growing household vegetables and fodder for livestock. The village is equipped with adequate sanitation facilities. Its roads and streets are free of garbage and dust. Each household has access to a well, according to the village's needs. The village incorporates a communal place of worship, temples, a meeting house for gatherings, pastures for cattle, cooperative primary and secondary schools. These schools primarily provide vocational education. Such a village would have panchayats for dispute resolution. The village produces its own grains, vegetables, fruits, and khadi cloth. [1] This is Mahatma Gandhi's dream of an 'ideal village' for every Indian settlement."



**Figure 4.1 Dharnai village in Bihar, the first Indian village to operate solely on solar power, has thereby achieved self-reliance for lighting. (103)**

"If we evaluate our current villages, most don't fulfil the most fundamental needs of their citizens. For instance, Sarojamma told me that she must rise early to fetch drinking water from the communal tap since the groundwater is unfit for cooking. She must arrive before the supply is exhausted, as water is distributed for only two hours each day. Is this accurate?" I asked. Seenappa and others nodded in affirmation.

Consider another case: Rangappa, a Gram Panchayat member, must travel 12 kilometers to the nearest town's bank to withdraw or deposit money. Despite having access to internet banking, Rangappa can't use it due to inadequate infrastructure. Seenappa and the others agreed with this example as well.

"Similarly, essential amenities such as housing, food, water, sanitation, health care, educational institutions, and other infrastructure remain unmet. As an Adhyaksha, isn't it your responsibility to ensure your citizens' needs are fulfilled, thereby elevating the quality of life in rural India?" I inquired.

The lack of schools in a village, for instance, results in a low literacy rate, which in turn negatively impacts many other aspects such as health care, sanitation, or economic development."

"We harbour a strong desire to contribute positively to our community. But we're at a loss about where to begin," confessed Sahukar Seenappa.

"The lack of affordable healthcare in rural India is indeed one of the primary factors that perpetuate poverty among our citizens. Only you and your team of ERs can initiate a change to end poverty and improve the quality of life in rural India. In thinking about how to achieve this, it would be beneficial to consider the application of tested and proven technology," I suggested.

## **4.2. Villages: The Future of India**

"India's soul has always resided in its villages. Even today, more than 70 years post-independence, villages remain the crux of Indian economy, society, and politics. The 2011 census indicates that 70 percent of India's population resides in villages. Currently, there are over 600,000 villages and more than 250,000 Gram Panchayats in India. Given these statistics, it is vital to integrate technology in our villages to transform rural India into 'self-reliant' India. Wouldn't you be exhilarated if the future digital evolution of rural India could be realized in a few villages within your gram panchayat under your and your elected members' purview?"

Seenappa and the others listened intently to my proposition.

"Traditionally, the majority of our villagers relied on crop cultivation, livestock, and manual labor for their livelihood, with agriculture being their primary income source. However, agricultural productivity has significantly dwindled in recent years. The soil is losing its fertility, and rapid climate changes often result in total crop failures for farmers."

As I spoke, Rangappa interjected, "What you're saying is true, Shankranna. Unexpected rains obliterated my crops; I suffered a severe loss." Rangappa expressed his sorrow.

"I relied on my crop income for sustenance. However, this year, the excessive rainfall led to a flood that destroyed everything. By the next monsoon, I aim to secure a small agricultural loan," Rangappa shared.

"We often proclaim that agriculture is the backbone of India's economy. But if agriculture continues to lose its significance as it currently is, how will our villagers prosper? Can you envision what you, as elected representatives, could do to enhance the livelihood of your villagers, particularly in agriculture?"

"Isn't agriculture a profession pertaining to farmers, akin to trading? What can the Gram Panchayat do about it?" Seenappa questioned.

"It is possible, Seenappa. Today, technologies can be incorporated into agriculture as well. Allow me to elaborate:

"For instance, in developed countries, soil testing is done using sensors. These sensors furnish data regarding critical factors such as soil moisture, nutrient deficiency, and chemical composition, all of which greatly impact crop success. Another valuable technology in agriculture is the application of Predictive Analytics. Predictive analytics, using information or data stored in a data lake, can forecast

weather patterns or aid in selecting which crops to grow in the upcoming season."

These are merely some of the advancements that can be implemented in agriculture using technology," I clarified. "These are just two examples that we can realize through Panchayats."

"Post-independence, most towns and cities have expanded. The dependence on agriculture as the primary income source is gradually shifting with the emergence of industries, and the increasingly significant role technology plays today. However, in our zeal to develop India, our villages have been neglected. Some of our villages have seen little progress since Independence. While larger towns and cities have established self-reliant systems through economic means, our villages haven't been prioritized for development."

"I believe the creation of such systems should be the responsibility of the Union Government or State Government," Sahukar Seenappa remarked.

"Indeed, instead of solely relying on Central and State Governments, our Gram Panchayats hold immense potential to establish a self-reliant system, as Gandhi envisioned. But it is incumbent upon Adhyakshas and Elected Representatives in Gram Panchayats to initiate this transformation and make rural India self-sufficient. You must identify opportunities for technological applications that will generate local job opportunities for youths in your Gram Panchayat," I explained.

### **4.3. Building Self-Reliant Villages**

"Do Gram Panchayats possess the authority to govern as they wish?" Sahukar Seenappa inquired.

"Gram Swaraj implies 'self-reliance' or 'self-rule'. This concept, proposed by Mahatma Gandhi, envisions every village in India as a self-sufficient, autonomous entity equipped with all the systems and facilities required for dignified living. Gandhi also believed that an undue concentration of economic or political power would contravene the principles of participatory democracy and, by extension, Swaraj. As the governance of rural India is integral to building self-reliant villages, it's essential for an Adhyaksha like yourself to understand the workings of a Gram Panchayat, and your duties, rights, and responsibilities," I said.

"So, did Gandhiji envision each village as a self-governing entity?" Panchayat member Rangappa sought clarification.

"Gandhi envisioned each village in India as an independent entity, self-governing in nature. Given the number of villages in India, the aspirations of each are likely to be unique. Villages under your Gram Panchayat have their own challenges and priorities, and the developmental requirements may not always align with the schemes and programs dictated by the central government. Our villages form the foundation of the decentralised system of governance, and you are vested with the authority to decide for yourselves. Regrettably, Gram Panchayats across India have somehow overlooked the significant responsibilities and powers granted by this decentralised system. As the Adhyaksha, you possess the authority to identify your developmental needs and even collaborate with enterprises beyond government entities to foster the growth of your villages," I elaborated.

"Gandhiji believed that true Swaraj or self-rule would manifest only when the people could raise their voices and participate in the governance of rural India. Democracy signifies government of the people, by the people, for the people. When citizens have control over



the government, it results in a more responsive problem-solving administration." I continued:

#### **4.4. Resource Utilization & Job Opportunities for Locals**

"So, what steps should Gram Panchayats take to promote self-rule?" Sahukar Seenappa queried.

"Gandhiji advocated that Panchayats should strive to introduce industry to villages or identify local resources for development, especially in agriculture. A large segment of our population migrates from villages to cities seeking menial work. Due to the decline in agricultural productivity, our villagers are also relocating to cities for livelihood. But by improving the management of village resources through tax collection, enhancing agricultural practices, introducing industries, improving healthcare, education, and the utilization of technology in system management, etc., our villages can generate multiple job opportunities for local youth. Today, raw materials for various products are sourced from villages via middlemen. If we can provide adequate infrastructure for roads, telephone lines, internet, or even industries, our villagers will be able to sell their products at better prices. Or, with the advent of e-commerce and improved road connectivity, our villages could soon transform into manufacturing hubs," I elucidated.

I recalled what Lakkamma, a farmer from the neighboring village, had shared with me a few days ago.

"Lakkamma is a sugarcane farmer and she told me about the hardships she faced due to a lack of proper road access. Heavy rains had caused landslides, suspending road traffic for three days, causing her to lose half of her sugarcane crop as the lorry didn't arrive in time. She mentioned her friends in another nearby village had a small

sugarcane factory and they were at least able to sell their sugarcane at a reduced price," I recounted.

"Now consider, if you were an active Adhyaksha, you would discuss issues such as Lakkamma's with your Gram Panchayat members and seek a permanent solution, initiating appropriate actions. From my experience, if you wait for external forces or organizations to address your village problems, it could take decades to enact even minor changes. However, if a President like you acknowledges these developmental needs and takes an interest in the growth potential of rural India, you and your team of elected representatives could become the most significant driving force in realizing this vision." I elaborated on the potential of Gram Panchayats in promoting self-sustainable governance.

#### **4.5. Insights from Diskit GP in Leh**

"Self-rule in Gram Panchayats requires financial resources. How can we obtain these resources?" Sahukar Seenappa inquired.

"Your line of thinking is common, Seenappa. Allow me to share an experience from the Leh district. Are you familiar with this district?" I asked.

They all replied in unison, 'No.'

"Leh is a district located in the Union Territory of Ladakh in Northern India, a popular tourist destination. During a recent visit, I had an opportunity to interact with the Sarpanch of Diskit Gram Panchayat. The Sarpanch, a retired Indian Army Jawan, was primarily responsible for GP affairs. One conversation was particularly enlightening, as I discovered that the Gram Panchayat's powers were underutilized. I asked him about tourist taxes, considering Leh's popularity among tourists.

"Can we levy taxes? We don't collect any taxes currently," a member of the Diskit GP Office queried, looking surprised.

I responded, "Absolutely. You have the authority to collect taxes on all businesses, properties, and trades within your jurisdiction to manage the Gram Panchayat." The realization that such a scenario existed was quite startling for the GPERs.

This insight about the village panchayat not collecting taxes was an eye-opener. The Adhyaksha further added that the Gram Panchayat would need approval from the hill council to tax the land it owned and the services it provided. The sand dunes around Diskit were also under the control of the sand mafia. Due to these issues, the Gram Panchayat had no income sources, making it entirely reliant on government grants for maintenance and development.

"This situation exemplifies the outcome of unfamiliarity with the Panchayat Raj Act. The act permits each Gram Panchayat to collect taxes as a source of revenue, which can then be utilized for office maintenance and other developmental activities. A Gram Panchayat has the power to levy various types of taxes, including property tax, vehicle tax, water tax, tax on agricultural land, business tax, and pilgrim tax. The revenues collected can be directly used for the development of the Gram Panchayat," I continued.

"Only with this knowledge can you proactively collect taxes from the citizens for the administration of your Gram Panchayat. This tax revenue can be used to establish basic facilities like health centres, educational institutions, road maintenance, water supply, and optical fibre.

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## **4.6. Establishing Village Republics in Rural India**

"Oh, so Gandhiji's dream was quite expansive. Could you elaborate on that?" Sahukar Seenappa asked.

"Indeed, the model village that Gandhiji envisioned was a complete republic, autonomous in making decisions about all its developmental needs, only relying on others where necessary. Gandhiji suggested annual elections for men and women by the village elders. Further, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has issued guidelines for forming Gram Sabhas. These Gram Sabhas serve as powerful platforms for driving the social and economic development of villages in a planned and transparent manner. They empower villages to make their own decisions. As an Adhyaksha, your duty is to lead the Gram Sabha, ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens to participate in decision-making and planning," I explained.

"In a village republic, the local government has the authority to initiate developments in villages according to their needs. For instance, with digital transformations rapidly occurring globally, if your village lacks basic internet access, it becomes crucial for you to recognize the importance of establishing robust networks beyond your village for the benefit of your Gram Panchayat. The Estonian government, as I mentioned before, is a worldwide consultant for e-governance. I suggest forming alliances with well-established entities such as the Estonian government or other similar enterprises to implement solutions tailored to your village panchayat's needs," I added.

Rangappa, who understood the importance of the internet, had also heard about TV White Space.

"TV White Space refers to the unused frequencies in the television spectrum. In several countries, it's used to deliver internet access to remote areas. It provides high-speed internet connectivity in many foreign countries. We want to use it for fast internet connectivity in our village, but unfortunately, it's not legal in India," Rangappa shared.

He further explained that neither the government nor private companies were willing to provide internet access to the village due to the limited number of users.

#### **4.7. The Role of Adhyakshas and Elected Representatives in Realizing this Dream**

"But many people believe that Gandhiji's village Swaraj model isn't applicable today, correct?" Sahukar Seenappa asked.

"Gandhiji proposed his dream of an ideal village in the 1920s, post his return from South Africa. He envisioned our villages becoming self-sufficient by developing a system where the villagers could acquire everything they needed within their villages. He believed that your team of elected members should collaborate with industries beyond your village boundaries for the development of your villages, wherever dependence was necessary," I answered.

"Indeed, almost a century later, the world has changed dramatically. Some might argue that Gandhiji's village Swaraj model is outdated. But if we examine Gandhiji's Gram Swaraj principles, many ideas such as bridging the rural-urban gap, job creation, environmental conservation, and others are still relevant today. Even if we can't implement the Gram Swaraj model in its entirety, we can certainly learn from its fundamental principles like decentralization, self-sufficiency, and job creation," I added.

"Does the idea of Gram Swaraj complement the United Nations' development goals that all countries aim to achieve within a decade?" Seenappa asked.

"When you and your team of elected members transform your villages into self-supporting and self-governing units, our villages will achieve Gram Swaraj. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

(UNSDGs) provide a comprehensive framework for attaining self-reliance in villages. Thus, these two concepts indeed complement each other," I clarified.

"As I have previously mentioned, technology is being used effectively to drive development campaigns worldwide. With automated workflows, Gram Panchayats can become even more efficient, providing citizen services through internet access. Villages can discover new development opportunities in fields such as agriculture, education, healthcare, planning, and even start initiatives like global networking. Gram Swaraj is a genuine contribution to India, and our villages can serve as excellent role models for village development across the globe," I explained.

"Today, we must seek comprehensive solutions that ensure all-around development for your villages. This is similar to how a car needs to have all of its parts connected to function. Likewise, we need to integrate all systems such as agriculture, education, healthcare, sanitation, and public distribution to create self-sustainable environments in our villages. The absence of any one of these systems disrupts the smooth functioning of the community. Technologies for integrating such systems have already been successfully tested. Now, the decision to implement the best technologies for your villages lies with you," I stated.

"As former Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh said, 'Our vision is not just of economic growth, but also of growth that would improve the life of the common man.' You are not only the closest friend of the common man but also his confidant. As an Adhyaksha and an elected representative, you are in a position to greatly impact the lives of more than 5,000 citizens in your villages. It is your duty to usher your Gram Panchayat into a new era and meet the needs of the common man. Gandhiji planted the seed of his ideal village dream nearly a century ago. Now, as an Adhyaksha or an elected

representative, you can bring about a digital transformation to realize Mahatma Gandhi's dream of 'Gram Swaraj'," I continued, then posed a question to the gathering:

**"Can you be the digital Gandhi to bring digital transformation and create ideal villages in the 21st century? Are you prepared to build an Atma-Nirbhar Gram Panchayat?"**

