

There have been innumerable articles, books and doctoral dissertations on the legacy of the Panchayat system in India, the history of the adoption of the Panchayat system by various states in independent India, their formation, elections, the functioning of the elected members and the Panchayat Raj Act, 1983. Along with this, government sponsored workshops and seminars have been held to make the Panchayat Raj system effective. Training centers have been started to impart training to the elected members of the Panchayat system and the ruling classes. In the last two decades this work has been going on to such an extent that it seems almost impossible to say anything new about the Panchayat system without repeating what has already been said.

But Dr. Shankara Prasad's Book "**Rebooting Democracy in Gram Panchayats**" does not do any one of the above but all of them. In other words, this work is an excellent handbook on how to effectively implement the aspirations of decentralised governance in today's digital age. When we read this work, we will be exposed to the magical world of what wonders today's advanced digital technology can achieve in the daily life of common people. Dr. Shankara K. Prasad is qualified to explain it as simply and efficiently as possible. He has studied the subject for nearly twenty years in renowned universities abroad and has experience working in companies such as Intel in the US and Bosch in Germany. While working like that, he has developed friendships with the local government officials and representatives of the Local Government Bodies there. He has returned to India with all these experiences.

Shankara Prasad is not just introducing us to his deep digital technical expertise here. That is not his intention either. After his return to India, he thought deeply about how the Technology expertise he had acquired could be used for the betterment of the common people in the present situation of India and the

establishment of the organization 'Sampoorna Swaraj Foundation' was the result of it. When I met him at Kuvempu University about fifteen years ago, he heard what I had to say about the programs our department there had undertaken to empower village panchayats, and he felt that this would be an excellent field for him to exercise his Technology expertise. As a result, an experiment was conducted to implement 'Workflow Automation' for Tavaraghatta Gram Panchayat, which falls under the jurisdiction of the University. Hearing about its success, the Karnataka Government's Panchayat Raj Department asked them to extend the same experiment to the five panchayats of Davanagere. Later it was extended to 25 Gram Panchayats. Shankara Prasad has been continuing his work since then. In the background of vast experience gained from such experiments, the Sampoorna Swaraj organisation has been working day and night in an effort to make technical expertise more people-friendly by building a team of technical experts. As a result, the most advanced 'Navigated Learning Technology' has been invented. Earlier experiments had to resort to computers and internet. But now this new technology makes it possible for people and elected representatives and officials to do all the panchayat related work from their mobile phones. This is a kind of revolution in the rural administration system. All this needs to be said to convey how the hard work behind Shankara Prasad's work and the lessons learned from it have worked.

This work, "**Rebooting Democracy in Gram Panchayats**" has two main dimensions: First is to educate the masses on how gram panchayats or local government bodies can realise the basic aspirations of decentralisation by adopting modern technology. The second, and I think another very important dimension, is to raise awareness of the nature of the problems in implementing decentralisation and how this new technology can help overcome them. So, this book is important for common voters too as it is important for the elected representatives and officials of Panchayat Raj. This is a valuable handbook especially for the youth who want to be actively involved in the new panchayat system. As I mentioned

earlier this is not just a technology designed by a technical expert sitting between the four walls for the convenience of administration. This book is imbued with the experience and feedback from experiments of such experts, from Gram Panchayat Secretary, elected representatives (from Members of Parliament to illiterate members of Gram Panchayats), as well as voters from all walks of life living in villages. In other words, the author of this work is a technologist as well as a social science researcher who has done extensive fieldwork. In the case of India, it is very rare that both experiences combine in one person. Because of that it is a unique Book.

Excluding reference and index, this book has 39 chapters. Each chapter is also in dialogue form like in Gandhiji's 'Hind Swaraj'. This style of writing not only helps in easy reading but also anticipates various doubts and clarifications that the reader may have and gives accurate answers to them. The total chapters in this book can be classified into four groups:

(1) on the use and application of digital technology in panchayat administration (Six Sigma, Internet of Things, Navigated Learning Technology etc.); (2) creating awareness about the potential of Gram Panchayats (e.g. education, health and sanitation, agriculture, poverty alleviation, social change etc.); (3) on how village panchayats can play a role in national level programmes; (4) Awareness of how the role played by Gram Panchayats should complement the objectives of international organisations such as the United Nations (e.g. the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals). That means, when reading this book, the readers will realise that Gram Panchayat is not an organization limited to only a few villages but its range is very wide.

It is a tradition when writing about any book to mention some of its shortcomings. Some may complain that the size of this book is intimidating to the general public. But this is not a story, a novel, or a philosophical treatise that can be read in one go. Instead, it is a manual of how Panchayat Raj administration or any administration can be effectively implemented through digital technology, which

should be kept with you and read from time to time. Although this issue may bother the reader to some extent at the initial stage, I have no doubt that over time this will become a favorite book for those interested in decentralization of governance. The biggest objection raised by many members of Parliament about the introduction of mobile technology in India is whether it is necessary to spend so much money to bring such technology in an educationally backward country like India. What is the use of this for the masses? Then Sam Pitroda, a pioneer of this technology, said prophetically: "You all feel that way now, but believe me, it will be necessary for even a person who owns a pushcart in ten to fifteen years." Even if it sounds like an exaggeration, the same words apply to this book too.

Heartiest congratulations to Dr. Shankara Prasad.

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