

**PANCHAYATI RAJ IN INDIA:
AN INSTRUMENT OF GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT**

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Mr. President, the Director of AGRASRI, distinguished academics, friends, elite of Tirupati town, ladies and gentlemen.

Today is Rajiv Gandhi's birthday and I am truly honoured to be invited to deliver the First Bharat Ratna Rajiv Gandhi Memorial Lecture-2002, at AGRASRI, Tirupati. This is also a somewhat emotional moment for me, because it was thanks only to Rajiv that I was able to have the opportunity of being associated with what, I regard, is the single most important and revolutionary development in the country since we proclaimed our Constitution in 1950.

It would have been much better if we were to celebrate today among the people of India rather than within this rather small group of the elite of Tirupati. Nevertheless, a beginning has to be made somewhere and it has just taken us ten years to make this beginning. Ten years after the passage of Part IX of the Constitution, if we are able to inspire about 150 people to think about Panchayati Raj on Rajiv Gandhi's birth anniversary, then you have clearly got a very, very long way to go. And what is more, I don't think we can rely at all upon the intelligentsia here, in whom Dr.Sundar Ram places so much trust, to do any of this work. It will have to be done by the people who dwell at the grassroots. It will have to be done. It will have to be done by people who do not share your cultural values or your moral values either.

Panchayati Raj will be a truly grassroots institution or it will remain a subject of seminars. So long as it remains the subject of seminars, I do not see much future for it. What we need to do is to get it instituted at the grassroots. Have we got it instituted the grassroots? The answer is a thundering yes. If we leave aside the one state of Arunachal Pradesh which is an exception for a reason, every other state of India has held at least one set of Panchayat elections, most two sets of Panchayat elections under Part-IX of the Constitution and others have had Panchayati Raj institutions of one kind or another for many years before the Constitution Amendment.

Indeed, Rajiv Gandhi would be the first to acknowledge, he was the first to acknowledge it and he did not hesitate to say that he was deeply influenced by what Sri N.T.Rama Rao did here in Andhra Pradesh, what Sri Ramakrishna Hegde and Abdul Nazeeb Saab did in Karnataka, what Sri Jyothi Basu and others did in West Bengal. He was the first to acknowledge the contribution of non-Congress leaders to Panchayati Raj. But, at the same time, he was not willing to buy the Left Front myth that only the non-Congress people have got good ideas and all Congressmen are rogues. He pointed out that in Gujarat and in Maharashtra, we have continuously, since Independence, had very effective structures of Panchayati Raj.

- *Text of the **First Bharat Ratna Rajiv Gandhi Memorial Lecture 2002**, delivered by **Shri Mani Shankar Aiyar**, the then Hon'ble Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) and CWC Member, New Delhi, on 20th August, 2002 at Hotel Bliss (Darbar Hall), Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, organised by Academy of Grassroots Studies and Research of India (AGRASRI), Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh.*

And there are parts of India, of which very little is known, most tragically, which have demonstrated in their own way what is truly meant by grassroots development. For, I cannot think of better example grassroots development in India than a state that is exempted from Panchayati Raj and is allowed to have its own system. I refer to Nagaland and its very effective Village Development Councils.

Therefore, I think what we need to ask ourselves is not how to despair but how to go forward. Rajiv said in 1989, when he was introducing the 64th Amendment in the Lok Sabha, that we may be the world's largest democracy, but, without Panchayati Raj we are also the world's least representative democracy. We have approximately 500 elected Members of the Lok Sabha, about 300 so called indirectly elected Members to the Rajya Sabha, and approximately 4500 M.L.A.s in the country as a whole. Approximately, some 6000 people to represent a billion human beings. When we look at the House of Commons in U.K., we find that for a country of 55 Million people that is 120th the size of India, the number of elected M.P.s is 100 more than in the Lok Sabha.

In my constituency I only represent about a million people, but there are countries in this world which have less people than I have in my constituency. We have some very big one's too, the whole population of Norway is equal to three Indian constituencies. The whole population of Denmark is equal to five Indian constituencies. The whole of Sweden is equal to eight Indian constituencies. The whole of U.K., and this applies also to France, is approximately equal to 55 Indian M.P.s. The U.S.A is equal to just about 200 M.P.'s. So, when we are talking about democracy in India, we are not only talking about democracy for Indians, we are also talking about democracy for 1/6th of humanity. Now, who can say how much blood has been spilt, how many billions of people have been killed so that Germany could be freed from Hitler, Italy could be freed from Mussolini, Japan could be freed from Tojo and Vietnam could be freed from the French and then from the Americans. When you think of how much struggle there has been in the world to attain a small measure of freedom, you will understand what a remarkable country you are living in.

Today, we are the most representative democracy in the world. There are now 30 lakh elected representatives. We are the only country in the world that has ensured that 10 lakh of them are women. In the U.S.A., until Hillary Clinton gets elected sometime in the 21st century, they are never going to see one woman leader. Apart from Margaret Thatcher who has been a woman Prime Minister in U.K., till today they have not had a woman as the President of France or Chancellor of Germany, but the longest serving Prime Minister of India has not been a man, it has been a woman.

I could have delivered this lecture on the basis of going through every one of the Articles that are numbered 243, from 243A to 243Z, and then because we ran out of letters, to 243ZN. I could easily base my lecture on these matters, but for one thing. You are all sufficiently highly educated and sufficiently interested in the subject to be able to read those Articles of the Constitution yourself, and in the light of the literature on the subject, as well as your personal experience, to see what is the degree of success that we have attained in implementing Panchayati Raj.

I would also commend to your attention a document that has recently been made public, copies of which are under print and will be available to any one who cares to ask by the end of this month. This is the 37th Report of the Standing Committee of Parliament on Urban and Rural Development on the implementation of Part IX of the Constitution, that is, what was called the 73rd Amendment. I have stopped using this phrase because the bill was the amendment. It was passed ten years ago and if we are still thinking in terms of the Bill, then when are we going to think in terms of the Act. So, since the Constitution is now sanctified with Part IX and Part IXA which deals with the municipalities, I prefer the expressions Part IX and Part IXA to the expressions 73rd and 74th Amendments. This is for a substantive reason, not a reason of form. In this Standing Committees Report, you will find analysis of a very detailed kind, and data which is both official and substantial and conclusions which I hope the nation will progressively come to accept. So, I am not going to allow myself to get lost in the nitty-gritty. I would be very happy to meet with anyone of you who is more interested in specifics and talk to you about it. Alternatively, after you have read my article in the 'Economic and Political Weekly' which does go through actually virtually every Article, you can get back to me, and I would be very happy to correspond with you and share views with you. But lets look at what our Panchayats can do and understand it sequentially.

The single most important thing about Panchayats, and without that we cannot even begin to go further, is to understand the expression that is used in article 243G which defines panchayats as 'institutions of local self government'. They have to be, seriously, institutions of local self government and until they become that, what you are left with is the shell. It is coming to the panchayats, the reservation for the weaker sections and the women, that's all there, but you have to fill the shell, and for filling the shell you can stand back and say it's the right coconut only when they really become institutions of local self government. But, when we use the expression local self government, we have limited it to local self government for two purposes. The first purpose is for the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice, and second, it is for the implementation of programs of economic development and social justice.

So, the panchayats, as far as the Constitution envisages, are instruments of economic development and social progress. Traditionally, they were institutions for dispensing justice, within a framework which was extremely unjustifiable, and unfortunately, there are panchayats still, today, which think their job is to grab hold of a girl from a Brahmin family who has married a boy from a Harijan family and then burn both of them together, while the villagers dance around the fire; or to drag some unsuspecting widow onto the fire and watch her burn with her husband and say 'Oh ma sati, Oh ma sati'. This is not the panchayat's job nor is the job of the panchayats to handle law and order. Maybe, that should be their job later, but at the moment it is not the job of the panchayat to deal with law and order. To begin to solve the problem of poverty, the measure that Rajiv Gandhi devised and put in place was constitutional sanctity to panchayati raj institutions defined as institutions as local self government for planning and implementation.

Therefore, now that it has taken us the better part of 10 years to arrive at the stage where panchayats actually exist, what we next have to ensure is that they are given something to do. And what is it that they are supposed to do? It's a full agenda. We will think of everything they

should do. If they are allowed to do planning and implementation for the 29 subjects that are listed in Schedule XI of the Constitution, that is really more than enough, much more than enough. Now, these 29 subjects are not mandatory, they are optional. But most state governments and state legislatures have been far too lazy to apply their own minds, and therefore wholesale, or virtually wholesale, those 29 subjects have been incorporated in the state legislations, and this is happening in Andhra Pradesh as well.

Everyone knows if we look at the law, what are the subjects that are supposed to be devolved to the panchayat, but what one doesn't know is whether they have been devolved or not, for the process of devolution involves the 3 Fs, functions, functionaries, finances. The functions have been devolved in the law, because it says the following subjects are devolved to the panchayats, and the matter is over, its been devolved. But, if the functionaries remain with the state governments line departments, then where are the personnel available to do either planning or implementation at the grassroots? And then, if the funds are not made available for the functions that had been devolved to the institutions to which devolution has taken place, the devolution remains on paper, it doesn't become a ground reality. So, after having first asked yourselves what are the subjects to be devolved, and I really don't care for all 29 to be devolved, if you feel happy, take two, but devolve them, and devolving means you must not only devolve the function on paper. You must supplement it with the devolution of functionaries and finances.

Andhra Pradesh desperately requires primary education because primary education in your state is a disgrace. Tamil Nadu, next door, has moved far ahead to the point where, today, birth rates are the same or actually even less than in Scandinavia. How? because all girls go to school. When I say all girls, I don't mean 100% but I mean something like 97% - 98%, there are some more that get left out. They all go to school, but please remember they don't go to school to study, they go to school to eat the noon-day meal. It was Kamaraj who started it and M.G.Ramachandran who spread it, and all economists said that this is rubbish, but the minute there was a reliable, cooked, noon-day meal, all the mothers who were insisting that their elder daughter must remain at home to look after the younger child found that it was more economical to send their girl to school than to keep her at home and the little one had to also be sent.

The headmaster also arrived on time because he was illegitimately eating the food and somebody had to open the cupboard to take out the contents, the rice. They had to be given to the lady who was doing the cooking in schools. Tamil Nadu has become the owner of the biggest source of employment for distressed young widows; they have found a job which they can do, and there, it takes time to cook, it takes about four hours to get the food ready. So, in those four hours, pass your time by doing something called studies. But, if in four hours, in some way or the other, a young girl is exposed to some form of study for 6 or 7 years, at the end of it she knows enough Tamil and has picked up enough English to learn the 7 letters that are at the heart of the Tamil Nadu revolution, 'Copper T'. And every girl by the time she is getting married, knows she can control the number of children that she is going to have and it doesn't matter which is the idiot she is going to marry, she has the good sense to know how to control the number of children, and because she has got the education, she generally tries to get some kind of job. Where, in the marriage market of 30 years ago, if a girl was employed, she

couldn't find a husband, the revolution today is that unless the girl is employed, she can't find a husband. So in many areas, many of them have only one child and the root of that is the mid-day meal scheme.

In Kerala, the revolution started early when the Nayar Service Society brought to the entire Nayar community the benefits of education which the Brahmins reserved for themselves. Then came Sri Narayana Guru who ensured that girls went to school. Today Kerala has the highest literacy rate in India. Look at Goa, it is not too far away; they have, I think, outstripped even Kerala and Tamil Nadu. So, why is Andhra Pradesh so backward? One of the main reasons is that primary education, which ought to be done at the primary village level, is administered from Hyderabad. All the teachers belong to the state cadre. The school buildings are built by the state governments and the head master is sent from Hyderabad. His main job is to keep the local M.L.A happy so that the local M.L.A writes to Dr.Kesava Rao or his successors, to keep me here or transfer me there, whichever the case may be, and whether the teacher or the headmaster come to school or not is not the business of the local community. The Parent Teacher Association has no role in it. The village gram sevak, what a funny name, the one thing that he doesn't do is 'seva', but the so called gram sevak is the one who files the report which says the headmaster is a wonderful man, the children love him. Of course they love him, they never seen him and the primary teachers on time at 7 o'clock in the morning. You will have to be there at 7 o'clock to see whether that man is there or not. The children are there but the children are not writing the report. That is why you have such a poor rate of literacy and education in A.P. Just compare it to your neighbours.

Now, primary education according to your state act is a devolved subject. According to the law, it belongs to the panchayats. But who is actually running it in the absence of functionaries? There are the teachers. There are the cooks for the mid-day meal. These are the functionaries. Unless the functionaries come under the control of the village panchayats, how is the primary school going to be properly guided? And funds, do you need the funds to build an extra classroom, to get two more teachers, to do the playground, to build a compound wall or to put in a lavatory for the girls? We found through experience that this is a very, very important thing. If the mother feels that her 13 year old girl is going behind the bushes and some naughty boy is trying to peek at her through the bushes, she takes the child out of school. But, if she knows that there is a toilet to which the child can go, then she will ask the child to remain, it's a crucial element for stopping dropout rates for girls and ensuring the education of India. People think in these terms, so if you have got a limited sum of money, who is going to decide what is the priority? What is happening now is that whatever the sum of money in Hyderabad, they say so many classrooms will be built, so many toilets will be built, so many compound walls will be built and then it goes down to the district level. Then the politicians say, we can't build compound walls everywhere, so we will give one wherever somebody votes for the Telugu Desam. It's a systemic rot.

What you need to do is to send the money. Say, I don't have more, Rs.20,000 is available, you take it, we will try to make it Rs.30,000 next year but if you want to make it Rs.30,000 this year, collect Rs.10,000 from the teacher, from the village community, and do what you like with it and let the village decide whether those 30,000 are going to be used for classrooms or kitchens or lavatories or sports grounds or compound walls or more teachers or raising the

salary of the teachers. If you do this, then you will get local control. It applies to primary schools, it applies to everything else that matters. Our President referred to the Ashok Mehta Committee Report in which he correctly declared that the Centre is doing many things the state should do. But the Ashok Mehta Committee Report is very outdated. It is now 20 years or more and what we know is that the villain of the piece is generally the state government. The Centre has proved through Part IX and Part IXA, that it wants Panchayati Raj; it is the state governments that are holding back. If primary education is entirely transferred to the Panchayat budget, then what will the Minister of Primary Education do and why should any M.L.A. go to the Minister any more, and in the state those people will have to go and sit at the door of a harijan who has become President of the Panchayat, and that this is why Panchayati Raj is not getting its due. You need to transfer the functions, you transfer the functionaries, put all the school teachers under the charge of the Panchayat. You allow the Panchayat to decide what salary is going to get paid then we will see competition among the Panchayats.

If this country has to have a solid Panchayati Raj system, that's the way to do it. So, if we can pick these 29 subjects, fine, they are the model but you prioritize. If you can't do all the 29 at one go then, say at least some of these in this year 2004; we are going to fully devolve all three functions, functionaries, finances. 5 in this year only. For another 5, only functions, and functionaries but not finances and then say by next year finances for these 5 also. It truly requires political will to do so. It is important, and this is a point that our Report has stressed, and I hope we will pay more attention to it. It is not enough that you have a three tier Panchayati Raj system. You also have to decide what is to be devolved to which tier, because if you devolve it all only to the Zilla Parishad, then the Zilla Parishad Adhyaksha will become more powerful than today's Minister and therefore the problem will be doubled and the solution will not be found. In Karnataka, they have stipulated in great detail, which part of the devolved function is to go to which tier of the Panchayati Raj system.

And the most obvious example to give you is that there are in this country five kinds of roads. There are the National Highways which are the responsibility of the national government at the Centre. Then there are State Highways which are the responsibility of the State Governments. Then you have the major district roads, those are obviously the responsibility of the Zilla Parishad. Then you have the other district roads which should be the responsibility of the Mandal Panchayats working together within districts, and then you have roads and link roads which should be the responsibility of the Village Panchayats. So, if you have got 100 crores of rupees available for road development, the state government should say that out of 100 crores I am keeping 50 crores on state highways, then I am dividing the remaining 50 crores on basis of 1crore per district. Of the remaining 20 crores, I want to give 10 crores of these for maintaining other districts roads to the taluka panchayats, that is mandal panchayats. And the last 10 crores, I am not asking for much, it goes directly to the village panchayats, for these are village roads and link roads; give it to them to build it. They can easily say that this money is enough for one kilometer, but we need it for two. Then we say it is very simple. You get Shramadana done in the village, you know all the basics of laying a road for 2 K.M. through Shramdana. You have enough money left to do the tarring for one of the 2K.M. You leave it to them, you allow them to raise any funds they want, on the basis of what the Constitution, Part IX, says is 'appropriation'.

That's a special word we put, 'appropriation' means you raise revenues which you don't send to the state consolidated fund but use it yourself. Now, let me give you an example. Lets say that village panchayats decide that every person who owns cattle must give so many rupees tax per head of cattle. Now, the rich man in the village says, what is this rubbish, I have to pay more and this fellow does not have a single cow, he is going to get away free, why should I pay then? You say that all the money we raise, we will use for a veterinary centre in the village, then the same rich landlord says that the biggest beneficiary of the veterinary centre will be me, because I have got the largest number of cows and if the Harijan doesn't pay, what does it matter, he doesn't have a cow anyway.

So, there are techniques that are available, appealing to the self interest of villagers as well as the self interest of individuals, by which you devolve, and clearly say which function is to be done at which level. If you can, you start getting a logical system of administration, and then you say that the assistant road engineer shouldn't get posted in the village, what's he going to do there. He must be posted at the district headquarters and his junior engineer, may be let him go to the Mandals. But as far as the village thing is concerned, let us have a job, not in the village, how many roads get built in the villages, let it be in the Mandal head quarters. This job will be to travel to all the village panchayats and help them with construction of their roads and it applies to everything else. Agricultural extension, irrigation, maintenance of culverts, bring every subject under this. But, if you have to do this successfully, you have to identify which part of which function is going to be performed at which level, and then devolution of finances must follow that pattern, and the devolution of functionaries must follow that pattern. Once you do this, then the panchayats at all 3 levels actually get empowered.

And that brings me to what has agonised A.P. The answer to 3 tier, 5 tier, ZPTC, MPTC which is the nonsense argument promoted entirely in this state and no other state of India because you made a mess of what you needed to do. You imposed the new Panchayati Raj system on the old Panchayati Raj system, the Mandal came into existence as the alternative to the village. Now, under our 3 tier system, since you have to have village panchayats you should do away with the Mandal and how can we do away with the Mandal? In two ways. You are welcome if you want to define village panchayats as Mandals, nobody stops you, in which case you go back to your Mandal system but your Mandal is your lowest tier. Either the Mandal is the lowest tier, or it doesn't exist here.

The other way is that you can also constitute your intermediate panchayat at a much higher level than the village, and call it a Mandal if you like. I have no objection, you can use any word you want, but that is the only way of getting away from the A.P. sickness, which is that this is the only state of India which has defined the constituency of a directly elected Village Panchayat President as being exactly the same as the Mandal Panchayat representative and then defined the constituency of the Zilla Parishad member as the constituency of the President of the Mandal. It's a completely self inflicted wound, and then you call this a 5 tier system, where are the 5 tiers? One tier is the village Panchayat, one tier is the Mandal Panchayat and one tier is the District Panchayat. Please tell me where are the other 2 tiers? You call members of the Panchayat a tier, this is an abuse of the English language and it is a gap of logic and common sense. It is like saying that we have got a 500 tier Parliament system because there are 500 Members of Parliament and yet amazingly everyone in A.P. from your

Chief Minister and M.L.A., including Congress M.L.A's down through to the smallest journalists in Tirupati, they all say 5 tier without asking themselves, where are the 5 tiers? There are only 3 tiers and if the rest of the country is happy with 3 tiers, why are you not happy with 3 tiers? You won't be happy with it, because the Z.P.T.C and the M.P.T.C member look like tiers, because their constituency is the same as the President of the lower level. Where else in India do you have this system? Nowhere. It is only Andhra Pradesh that has this system, and that is because you don't know whose children you are. Are you N.T.Rama Rao children or Rajiv Gandhi children, make up your minds. You can't be both, and I said at the start here that Rajiv Gandhi was deeply influenced by N.T.Rama Rao because the mandals that he envisaged were instruments of development.

And Rajiv said, anybody who takes the development process to the grassroots level is to be emulated, not to be criticized, so N.T.R was one of his gurus but like every good 'shishya' is supposed to not just repeat what the guru teaches but think about it, Rajiv said, if you have a Mandal Panchayat without a Village Panchayat then how do you get a proper gram sabha going. In a Mandal you have got several thousand inhabitants, and if these inhabitants are supposed to constitute the gram sabha, there's no way in which you can gather all these people together, so what do you have left? You have a panchayat, an executive body, but with no legislature to check it. That is called dictatorship, and today if the Sarpanches of A.P. are a set of dictators, if the Mandal Panchayat Presidents are a bunch Pervez Musharaffs and if the District Panchayat Presidents in A.P. are a collection Hitlers, it is because at the village level this gram sabha is not empowered. And in the Mandal, the M.P.T.C man has no work to do because he is given no work to do, and in Z.P.T.C and Z.Ps members have no work to do because they are given no work to do. What you have created are 3 little dictators who want to be on the right side of government servants, all of whom are named by the Chief Minister.

There is an unholy nexus which has developed between the Village Panchayat's elected President and the nominated gram sabha. Then, the other nexus is between the Mandal Panchayats elected presidents and the B.D.O. And at the top another nexus - elected Zilla Parishad President and the Collector or the B.D.O. These 3 sets of dictatorships have ruined the name of Panchayati Raj, because for most people it is even worse than it was in the past. Not only that, this empowerment, re-empowerment of the bureaucracy in A.P. goes by the name of 'Janmabhoomi'. All those who did not take 'Janma' in this 'Bhoomi' have been empowered. And the bane of this country is that in Delhi we have Ramajanmabhoomi and in Hyderabad Janmabhoomi; between these two there is a complete ruination of the Panchayati Raj process that is going on. We can only solve it if we get back to the spirit of N.T.R. I am pro father-in-law and anti son-in-law. N.T.R. was a genius in saying, lets us have elected representatives at the grassroots. His definition of grassroots may be different to mine but the concept was the same.

Let us have elected representatives at the grassroots who will deal with the problems of people who live at the grassroots. Now, I don't know whether N.T.Rama Rao ever actually read the Sarkaria Commission Report, but in this Sarkaria Commission Report, there's one little line that fascinated me when I came across it, which says something to the effect that most people spend most of their lives concerned with the problems of their neighbourhood. The Iran-Iraq war is not of deep interest in the villages in Tirupati. Nor is the battle between Sonia Gandhi and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a very serious matter in the local village. What is the problem in the

local villages is what in Tamil Nadu we call scarcity of water and electricity. Is there a street light, is there a water handpump; is it functioning; can we ride up to the main road. These are the problems of the people and only the people know what the solutions to those problems are. If you give them the authority to solve them, they will solve them.

I have a very personal example on this, which I would like to share with you. I was a Member of Parliament from Tamil Nadu constituency of Mayiladuturai from 1991 to 1996, and it was after I was defeated in 1996 that the first set of Panchayati raj elections were held there and when I got re-elected in 1999, we had had three years of Panchayati Raj. Then elections were held to local bodies in 2001. So we now got a second set, and it is my practice to wander from village to village. That's about all I do, and when I go to a village I do my best to avoid the agraharam, partly because for no fault of mine, I was born a Brahmin and largely because there are no Brahmins left in agraharams because they all fled to California. But I avoid the agraharam. I avoid the more prosperous parts of the village and I head straight for the dalit basti which is mostly Hindu dalits but sometime Christian dalits.

So, I concentrate when I visit the villages, I actually visit the Harijan basti's in village after village. When between 1991 and 1996 I was an M.P., the standard complaint before I got out of the jeep was "no light, no water". So much so, that if the villagers were feeling a little shy about speaking, my own chaps would say for them "no light, no water". It did become a ritual that in every village there would be neither light nor water. And this I found extraordinary because Tamil Nadu is very highly developed with regard to infrastructure for light and water.

There is not a village in my constituency which does not have a street that is not connected with electric poles. There is electricity everywhere, I mean, at any rate there is infrastructure for electricity everywhere. And although the situation has worsened somewhat owing to the dog in the manger attitude of Karnataka which is not giving us our share of water, at that time 10 years ago, with the handpump in almost every village, you could get water, and there were handpumps everywhere and there were overhead tanks everywhere. Every side I looked around me, thousands of crores spent by a very development conscious state government under successive development conscious Chief Ministers.

There is provision everywhere for light and water and yet everywhere you go "no light, no water". So I started trying to examine why this was, and then I discovered the truth of the matter, which I use to often speak about in explaining why we need panchayati raj. There was no light because the tubelight in the village street would burn out. But nobody in the village had the right over the funds, government funds, to replace that tubelight. So they couldn't buy it because the government had not given them the money and if they bought it from their own funds, the government would ask why have you touched government property. So, the village officer, we call them village officers what you call gram sevaks, used to make an account every year, budget how many tubelights were needed and forward it to the B.D.O at the middle level, what we call the 'union' and what you call the 'mandal'.

Then all the requirements of the village streets would be added together for the block and it would be sent to the district. The District Collector would then add up all the tubelights that were needed in the district and send it to Chennai, where they would count up all the requirements of all the districts, which would be a nice big some of money. At this point, the

Secretary in the Ministry concerned, would go to Bangalore or somewhere and hold negotiations with Mysore Lamps about how many tubelights to buy at what price. By this time, it was lakhs of tubelights. And the negotiations would move forward, maybe on the telephone to Chennai, telling the Minister who had said, 'Not one rupee more than 50', that those fellows were saying 'Not one rupee less than 60'. So, the negotiations would continue, it would come down to, '54 is the maximum we are ready to pay' and those people would say, 'No, no, no, 56 is the least at which we can give it'. At which point the Minister would telephone his Secretary and say 'You come back, I will handle the negotiations myself'. And he would carry with him 2 suitcases, one of which would be full of his clothes and the other would be empty, and he would arrive there and sit down and have a discussion. And, when this discussion ended, the price would be fixed at 55 per tube light and the Minister would return with his clean clothes having become dirty and his empty suitcase having become full. Somebody had to pay for that full suitcase, so what he would do is, 'O.K., two lakh tube lights, send them one and a half lakh, who is going to sit and count one by one how many there are'. So, so many tubelights have got left behind in Mysore Lamps. The remaining were distributed district wise. When they had been distributed district wise, the Collector would then distribute whatever he had received, block wise.

After they have been received by the B.D.O. he allocates them for the Panchayats where he has his own village gram sevaks. And, he gives to each of them 2 tube lights. This gram sevak says to himself, 'Who knows how many have been given to me?' So, he sells one in the bazaar and takes one with him to the village. He puts it up in the village, there is wild excitement because light has returned after one year. But, there is one little boy who has forgotten completely as to what it was like to have a tubelight in the street. So he gets up, he looks up at night, he sees there is a huge tower in the sky and to check out if this is true, he picks up a stone and he flings it and the tube light goes and for the next one year there is no light.

Now, Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu is much worse than in Andhra Pradesh because they never had an N.T.Rama Rao there, but one of the rights that has been given under Panchayati Raj, is the right to the village Panchayat President to buy tubelights. The other right that has been given to the village Panchayat President is to buy 5 rupee washers for hand pumps. In this term as an M.P. from the same constituency of Mayiladuthurai, going to the same villages, and visiting the same dalit bastis, nobody is saying "no light, no water". Now, because of this drought, I heard again for the first time in 3 years some concerns being expressed about water, but 'no light' is not being said anywhere.

To my mind it proves that if you endow the panchayats with powers of the kind that they should be exercising, then you will secure the results that you are looking for. So, this devolution of the 3 F's must be made with a full recognition of what it is the Village Panchayat should be endowed with. There are some things which should not be endowed. There are, for instance, environmental considerations.

Recently, 'The Hindu' has a story which breaks my heart, because after having been involved with Panchayati Raj for 12 years, I do not know the answer to that problem. There is a woman village panchayat president in some village in Tamil Nadu who wanted to increase the revenues of the village panchayat. She discussed it with her fellow panchayat members and

they decided that certain trees that they believed were not of much use them be cut and sold, and that money should be used for panchayat development activities. So armed with this resolution, she made arrangements with contractors for those trees to be cut and for the proceeds thereon to be credited to the panchayat account. The Collector has now come to know that these trees were cut. Infuriated that the environment was wrecked, he has dismissed this lady. She was removed from her position. There is no politics in this because she is an A.I.A.D.M.K. Panchayat President. The collector is serving in an A.I.A.D.M.K. government, so we are not talking politics. He is fulfilling his responsibilities to the environment and she is fulfilling her responsibility to the panchayat, and for the 32 trees that have been cut, she has lost her job whereas most Prime Ministers of India have kept their jobs after having cut or drowned 32 lakh trees for every dam. Nor, do I as an opponent of non-sustainable development believe that trees should be felled.

I am therefore opposed to what this lady did. But, I, as a Member of Parliament, am in favour of letting the village decides whether a tree should be cut down or not cut down. And I don't know how to resolve this. But, back to the story that is given in 'The Hindu', I was reading it just before coming down here. I think it's on page 3. The Collector is saying she has to know what the rules are. And she says, 'But there are 84 government orders, which am I supposed to obey?' Now you ask yourself, do you want an elected panchayat president to be a bogus I.A.S officer who understands 84 orders but does not know 84 words or do you want somebody who understands 84 words but cannot read what your 84 orders are.

These are things we have to think of and say very strictly, for example, that the preservation of trees is the responsibility of the Collector, not the responsibility of the Panchayat President, and that, if, therefore, the Panchayat decides to cut the trees, it is the job of the gram sevak to tell the Collector that they are about to cut the trees and the Collector can come there and stop them from cutting trees. But the Collector does not implement his own order. The poor woman cannot read that order. She takes a decision which is entirely in concurrence with views of all the elected panchayat members, and for all I know the money raised by 32 trees being felled is much more important to the village than the shade that the 32 trees give.

The answer to the problem, obviously, is that if she wants to cut 32 trees to raise so many thousands of rupees, and you want to preserve those trees, then give out those thousands of rupees then she won't cut those trees. That's true Panchayati Raj - but the way it is being implemented, is by an English speaking Collector who knows how to put on a tie, has passed out first in Mussoorie and has all the qualifications that are completely irrelevant to the job he is doing. And this woman, just a woman, has become President, who has made her President? That, partly on one hand, is Rajiv Gandhi, because he reserved the seat. But the second hand is hers, because there must be any number of women who wanted to become the President of that Panchayat. She has beaten them all. She has become the President of the Panchayat. And, what do I care whether she is educated or uneducated, what do I care whether she is a literate or an illiterate. What do I care that she probably came to that village when she was 13 or 14 years old, having been illegally married to some drunkard. At that stage, she came there and she lived there. She has now reached the age of 40, God bless her, I hope she will go till 80, but she would live all her life not knowing much more than the courtyard of her home, the street

on which she lives. And the direction which she gives, goes up to the panchayat. Does she know that village or does the M.P. for Mayiladuturai ? What do I know about that? What can Mr.K.C.Pant sitting in Delhi know about it? What can Prof. Hanumantha Rao sitting in Hyderabad know about it? So this devolution is also of mindset. Against your 3 F's - I want to add an M to it - it is the mind. You trust them, you say, they can do the job better which you have given to them. And to assess them, I think, we must progressively get the I.A.S and the provincial service out of the district and levels below that.

In each district let us have a District Panchayat Service, where the typical career path will be a boy or girl of age 21 or 22 becoming a Village Level Officer and at the end of his or her career, one of them, like one of us in my batch, becomes a Foreign Secretary and the others do not. Like that, one of their batches becomes the District Collector.

Now, you don't have this sickness in Tamil Nadu as you have it in Uttar Pradesh, but I don't know what the situation here is. There is a huge transfer industry in Uttar Pradesh, they are constantly transferring their officers, because it's a big state and today you are sitting in Muradabad, you have just put your child into school, five minutes later you are told to go to Robertsganj, before you can reach Robertsganj, you receive your transfer orders to Gorakhpur. For the sake of your family, you turn to the Chief Minister to say, 'Anything you want, Sir', or 'Madam'. You ask, 'What do you want?' and you are told, 'I want you to do the following illegal things, and your child can continue with its education', or you say, 'I am going to beat the system by putting my child in Nainital in the boarding school'. And your wife is crying that she can't see the children, and she can't see you, because you are wandering around the district. So you say, 'OK, let the wife go and sit in Nainital'. And what does this man do, sitting in a village without family, without friends, with nobody there who speaks his language. So the whole system is breaking down.

We need to have a District Panchayat Service, so that this evil of transfer based political corruption is controlled, if not abolished. Because, if you threaten a man with transfer from one panchayat to another, within the same district, he is not going to be concerned. Also, by the time he becomes the District Collector, he will know the district like the back of his hand. Now, the British system was, 'If he knows it like the back of his hand then, because he is an Indian, therefore he can't be relied on. Let us have an Englishman who does not belong to this, who is not a Hindu, not a Muslim, not a Brahmin, who is not a dalit, who is therefore 'nispaksh'. He is above the whole system and he will evenhandedly mete out justice'. After what all of you have suffered with these I.A.S District Collectors and the PCs, B.D.O.s and all these corrupt fellows at the Patwari level, is this the way to run this country? I would much rather have an elected Sarpanch doing corruption, than have a non elected village patwari doing corruption.

However, this can be solved if you have a gram sabha that functions like a legislature to which all decisions have to come. Lord Mountbatten was Governor General in Council. He had to get his Council, at least, to agree. That Council is the panchayat. All panchayat members must be involved in all decisions and all decisions taken by panchayat as a whole must be ratified by gram sabha. Then only you will get democracy at the grassroots. And to have a gram sabha that is reasonable the village panchayat has to comprise say 300, 400 adults. If it is bigger than that, if you start having a Mandal Panchayat as your lowest level where you have

2000 members, how can you have a meeting of 2000 people? So, if you do have a Mandal Panchayat at the lowest level and I am not going to stop you if that's what you prefer and that's what Karnataka have said they have preferred because of the Ashok Mehta Committee report it was Ashok Mehta who introduced this Mandal concept. But I would say, whatever the size of your Village Panchayat, if it's too big, follow the Kerala example of neighbourhood sabhas, that is a ward sabha. In Kerala, every ward has a gram sabha. Now, this is an ingenious answer to the problem, because I was astonished to learn from a Panchayati Raj expert from Kerala that these are altogether less than 1000 village Panchayats in Kerala. And I was astonished, because in my own constituency I have 451 Panchayats. So, if in one Parliamentary Constituency, I have 451 and in an entire state, they have only double that number, obviously, their village panchayat populations are very, very large. But, they have solved this by saying that the Panchayat President and the village panchayat, with the bureaucrats concerned, will go from one neighbourhood sabha to the other, one ward sabha to the other. And the same system is being implemented in Rajasthan also.

So, we need to move towards effective people's control, and for effective people's control, there is a model Act which we already have. It is meant only for 5th Schedule areas and Andhra Pradesh has one of those areas where you have the 5th Schedule, but is not being implemented there, like it is not being implemented anywhere else. But the Act exists. That Act, which was passed by Parliament is called the Provisions of Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act, 1996. It was passed in 1996. It gives three functions to the gramsabhas, which, I think, we should be made universal, not just for Scheduled Areas but for everyone. One, it says that no plan can be implemented unless it is approved by the gram sabha. So the plan is implemented after the approval of the gram sabha. This applies also to the drawing up of projects and programs. So, anything you want to do, you first go the gram sabha, you say, "I intend to do this", and if the gram sabha says "Yes", you can go ahead and do this. Second comes beneficiary identification.

Now, this can also be extended to area beneficiaries, not just people. If there is going to be a well dug, where should it be dug, that kind of a thing, plus the usual beneficiary identification for an anti-poverty program. That this self help group should get the money, not that one; this Harijan widow should get the money, not that zamindar's wife, that kind of a thing,-beneficiary identification. And third, authorisation for the issue of utilisation certificates. Now, this is to take care of the fact that the money which has been sanctioned and released to build a road is not then pocketed by the village patwari, the sarpanch and the contractor between them and the road doesn't get built. The gram sabha says that yes, the job has been done, it has been done well, so we authorize the issue of the utilization certificate, without which they cannot get additional funds. If these 3 functions are given to gram sabhas everywhere, you will get meaningful results.

Now, under the Janmabhoomi, you have a gram sabha. But it is convened by the bureaucrat, it is not convened by the politician. It is convened for huge numbers, there is nobody there to check whether the resolution was passed or not, and the bureaucracy certifies that at the gathering came all the S.Cs, S.Ts. and women, where all of them unanimously applauded. This is called Janmabhoomi. Why have a Janmabhoomi program run by the bureaucracy when you have got a Panchayati Raj program that is to be run by the panchayats.

It is a complete lack of sincerity in implementing not only the Constitution of India but the Act passed by the A.P.Legislature.

And, I felt, when I first came across Janmabhoomi, which was in a hotel in Hyderabad, that this is not going to work, because when the ad came, what did you see, you saw a bullet train, you saw a skyscraper, you saw an aeroplane flying in the sky and this beautiful song was being sung, which I couldn't understand. It said that this Janmabhoomi is going to bring all this to you. You go to any village in A.P., and you ask them is your top priority a bullet train, they all ask you what is a bullet train. And you tell them about building a skyscraper, they will give you the answer that was given to me in my constituency, when I was trying to develop it as a tourist area.

In Tryankybar, Tarangambadi, Sonia Gandhi had come to unveil the statue of Rajiv Gandhi, and I made a speech in which I said, you see that ground there, we are going to develop it into an airport and the planes will land directly, I said, from Delhi and Chennai. And somebody in the audience said, 'Just get the Porayar bus to run on time, that's enough'. I learnt Panchayati Raj at that time. So its not skyscrapers, bullet trains and aeroplanes in the sky what we are looking for, it is drinking water, electricity and teachers in the schools, doctor's in the PHC's and somebody to look after the cows in the veterinary centre, a culvert that is broken, to get it repaired, that is what the people of India are looking for. They are not asking for the moon, they are asking for the earth and we can't give them the earth. And why do we have to give it to them? Let them take the earth, by empowering them to take it from us.

I have only finished about 5% of my lecture. I think I have taken too much of your time already, and therefore instead of continuing this talk, I will bring it deliberately to a conclusion, but keep myself open to any specific questions that you might have to ask about any other matter. Since you have been such a good audience and have been listening so attentively to what I have said, I request all of you to arm yourselves with greater information about this by reading this article in the 'Economic and Political Weekly' which is translated into Telugu for all of you. And also, get hold of the 37th Report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Urban and Rural Development, try to see whether at least the recommendations given in bold letters, you can put those together and translate it in Telugu and make those available. Then, we will see what is in progress? how far we have come and how much further we have to go. I would have given up in despair if we had not succeeded in anything; it is because we have succeeded up to a point, that I have not given up hope and I still see a bright future.

But, I recall, and this is where I end with what Rajiv Gandhi talked to me about, referring to a book on the Soviet Revolution in 1917 by John Reid which had the title 'Ten Days that Shook the World'. Rajiv said that ours is not a ten day revolution, its going to take an entire generation. So, I will admit defeat 15 years from now, if after 25 years we haven't succeeded, but, until then I live in hope. I am sure our villages will truly become the source of the prosperity of India, because, Bombay Stock Exchange Sensex going up is a complete irrelevancy. One little child getting a full belly, going to school and being able to find a doctor in case it falls ill, that is what I regard as prosperity, that is what I think Gandhiji meant, when he said, 'India lives in our villages.'



Shri Mani Shankar Aiyar, the then Hon'ble Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha), delivering the ***First Bharat Ratna Rajiv Gandhi Memorial Lecture*** on 20 August, 2002 at Hotel Bliss (Darbar Hall), Tirupati, under the aegis of AGRASRI.