

“Sisters and brothers!

It is a matter of great pleasure that Ministry of Panchayati Raj is celebrating their ‘Iconic Week’ under the ‘Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav’ with the theme ‘Localization of Sustainable Development Goals’ at the core.

This week-long program has been quite aptly titled – ‘Panchayaton ke Navnirman ka Sankalpotsav’ in the context of the completion of 75 years of our Independence. Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav is a kind of resolution festival where we take a pledge to build a new and powerful India.

As a signatory to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, India is committed to achieving 17 Sustainable Development Goals, as you are aware.

Given that nearly 70% of India is rural India (68.84% as per 2011 census), and in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, the heart of India lies in the villages, attainment of Sustainable Development Goals at the national level will require actions at the grassroots of villages—that is at the Panchayat level.

Panchayats have a pivotal role to play in integrated rural development by focusing on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which are subsumed under nine themes to ensure poverty-free, clean, healthy, child-friendly, socially secured, well-governed villages. They must also ensure gender parity, adequate infrastructure and enhanced livelihoods by the target year of 2030.

Our biggest goal is to make the country free from poverty. Other equally important missions include providing education to all boys and girls, ensuring delivery of critical services like safe drinking water and creating adequate employment opportunities.

I am happy to learn that the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has conducted national conferences and also set up an Expert Committee for effective, action plan-based activities to attain SDGs at grass root level. I am told the Ministry also came up with a novel idea of Local Indicator Framework. I commend these efforts and initiatives of the Ministry.

As you all are aware, there are more than 2, 78,000 local bodies in rural areas across the country that are responsible for providing good governance, ensuring economic development and social justice to about 70 percent of the population in the country. I am also happy to note that women constitute 46 per cent of the 31.65 lakh elected representatives of the rural local bodies in the country.

While the Panchayati Raj institutions can plan and implement schemes and programmes in 29 subjects as per the XI schedule of the Constitution, it should be ensured that the grass-root local bodies have adequate funds and functionaries to meaningfully carry out their tasks. However, it must be noted that there has been substantial improvement in the allocation of funds to Panchayats in the wake of Finance Commission recommendations.

The fund allocation to the rural local bodies has increased from Rs.100 per capita per annum in the 10th Finance Commission to Rs.674 per capita per annum in the 15th Finance Commission. Besides, many Panchayats have been able to raise their own sources of revenue

by undertaking novel activities. This needs to be replicated, wherever feasible, by other panchayats to make them financially self-reliant.

At the same time, there has to be increased collaboration among the 18 Ministries and Departments that are critical for the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). I believe that the convergence of schemes and programmes is limited to a few schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme, Swachh Bharat Mission and PM Aawas Yojana to cite a few. Indeed, there is a vast scope to step up convergence activities and strengthen the efforts of the Panchayati Raj Institutions to deliver public goods and services.

Keeping in view the national development goals and the inclusive development motto of “Sab Ka Saath, Sab Ka Vikas, Sab Ka Vishwaas and Sab Ka Prayaas”, there is a need for concerted efforts from all the stakeholders to ensure holistic development of the Panchayats and enable them to achieve Sustainable Development Goals.

Dear Sisters and brothers,

Gram Sabhas play a crucial role in enabling direct participation of the people in local governance. I am happy to note that the Ministry of Panchayat Raj has taken measures to strengthen the institution of Gram Sabhas with the involvement of all stakeholders like the elected representatives, voters, Panchayat Standing Committee members, Ministry / Department officials, District authorities, Self-Help Group members and others.

I am told that it is proposed to make participation of the common citizens more intense in local self-governance, through the aegis of vibrant Gram Sabhas. However, participatory decision making through Gram Sabhas has not been up to the mark. I am informed that all States have not yet placed a definite legal framework on the number of Gram Sabhas to be held in a year and incentives to the elected members for participating in Gram Sabhas to make them vibrant. This being a powerful medium, I call upon all the States to pay greater attention to improving the situation.

Today, we need transparent, accountable and efficient governance at all levels. I am happy to note that the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has introduced time-tested digital solutions for smart and good governance in Panchayati Raj Institutions. I am told that e-Gram Swaraj application is being used for various aspects of Panchayat functioning like planning, budgeting and accounting. Also, the ministry has integrated e-Gram Swaraj with Public Finance Management System (PFMS) to ensure transparency, accountability and better financial management of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

I am told that 2.38 lakh Gram Panchayats have adopted e-Gram Swaraj for the purpose of accounting in the year 2021-22 and this is indeed a welcome development. There is a need to bring all Panchayats on to this platform to meet the digital mission of governance.

I also commend the ministry for having provided a platform to upload Citizen Charter document with the slogan “*Meri Panchayat Mera Adhikar, Jan Sevaayein Humare Dwaar*”. I am happy to note that about 1.97 lakh Gram Panchayats have prepared and approved their Citizen’s Charters which is 73% of the total Gram Panchayats. At the same time, there is a need to expand the scope of online services as only 25% services are provided online.

Other initiatives of the ministry like developing an application for online auditing of panchayat accounts, formulating 'Disaster Management Plan' document for the rural local bodies and implementing SVAMITVA Scheme throughout the country to provide the 'Record of Rights' to village household owners are commendable and will go a long way in improving the efficiency of Panchayati Raj institutions.

I am happy to know that the Ministry is planning to reorient the training requirement of the Panchayats under its revamped scheme of Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan.

Finally, let me conclude by saying that Panchayats are no longer institutions that are merely implementing schemes and programmes of the Centre or State Governments but have emerged as leaders, planners and policy makers at the grass-root level. I am sure that the aggregation of their achievements will enable India to realize the national as well as global targets in the true spirit of the transition from 'Local to Global'.

My best wishes for the success of the conference.

Jai Hind!"