

Smart governance – community participation is the pivotal force

Written by

Rohit Gupta, IAS

District Collector Udaipur

(Opinion expressed in this article is personal)

A few days back, I was watching the Hollywood movie 'amazing spiderman'. There is a scene towards the climax, where the super hero is in grievous pain due to a bullet wound and is unable to cast his web to reach the marauding villain in time. Seeing his predicament, all fire fighters of the city align their brigades in perfect angles, so that hero can then hop from one to another to reach his destination. A curious thought struck me then; that even a super hero needs the help and support of community to win the battle!

If we ponder over why some government missions succeed, whereas others fail to take off or not able to sustain in the long run; the answer would be same in majority cases – community participation. For years, government had been working on constructing toilets in a mission mode. I remember distinctly during my probation days in the verdant countryside of Jhalawar district in Rajasthan, we would go on inspection to cross check the toilets constructed by contractors. Invariably, structures were available, but they were being used for everything other than defecation!! I was district collector Churu when the concept of CLTS (Community Led Total Sanitation) dawned on us. The focus changed from construction to behavioural change; from talking about government subsidy to ill effects of open defecation in the village. Overnight, we abandoned the contractor driven construction system and started talking to villagers for the necessity of building and using toilets. Earlier the monitoring mechanism was built around number of toilets constructed, now the supervision changed to number of ODF (open defecation free) villages. Amazingly, not monitoring the construction actually led to more construction of toilets and the district was the topmost performer in state that year. One block completely became ODF, which was the first in the state. Later on, the district also bagged honour from Rural Development ministry for setting a new trend in construction of toilets through MGNREGA funds.

About 17 months later, I joined district Pali as the new collector. My outgoing incumbent had told me about his efforts to save the panther and wildlife in a remote place of district, Jawai. Jawai area is very rich in biodiversity, and boasts of a very good panther population. Amazingly, the wild cat in that area does not live inside jungles (as there are no such jungles in that area), but in caves on small hillocks amidst villages and human settlement. Every night, the panther prowls the streets of villages and devours goats, sheep and other small live stock of villages. Till date, no attack on humans have been reported. Before coming to Pali, I had only heard of man – animal conflict; both living in such harmony looked like a make believe story. So I went to the villages looking for signs for confrontation. However, the only discordant voices I heard were of those about which my predecessor had warned me about – mine lease owners. Unfortunately, since a large part of Jawai area does not fall under the ambit of forest land and is rich in mineral, some granite mining leases had been granted out. My predecessor had stalled the operation of mining on these leases and initiated the process of declaring the whole area as 'community reserve'. Community reserve is a lesser known way of protecting bio diversity habitat. General perception is that community is

antagonistic to protection of flora and fauna and it is the job of forest department to protect it. However, communities like Jawai have shown that reverse is also true. Since generations, natives have been protecting the panther families, not even minding the loss of their cattle or livestock to the wild cat. Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (via an amendment in 2002) provides for such kind of community led habitat conservation; although it has been sparingly used in the country. It goes to the credit of locals that despite the counter campaign by vested interests, state government acknowledged the reality of situation and cancelled all the mining leases in the area – classic example of David beating Goliath.

My third experience relates to my present posting as district collector Udaipur, where I joined about a year back. The Mewar capital is famous the world over for pristine beauty of its lakes, and local civic society is acutely aware about keeping the lakes unsoiled. Yet during the religious festival season all their conservation efforts go for a toss. Mass scale idol immersion happens during Ganesh puja, Durga puja and Taziya in the lake water, much to the disconcertment of nature loving citizens. Taking suo motto cognizance of a media report in a leading national daily, honourable High Court ordered a complete ban on idol immersion in lakes in 2015. The big question confronting the administration last year was – how to implement the court order and yet maintain peace, harmony without dampening the spirit of festivities. After all, decades old social practices cannot be changed overnight. Again, we went to the community. A number of rounds of talks were held between the religious organizers of both the communities and district and police machinery. We went into the meetings fearing lot of resistance on religious grounds. To our surprise, even though we did face stiff resistance, yet it were the change agents within the community itself who came to our support and persuaded others. They also suggested the administration the way out - how to satisfy the religious sentiments by symbolic gestures on lake ghats and then establishing the system to collect the idols. The result was a total change from earlier practice, not a single idol or Taziya was immersed in lakes. More than 5000 idols and hundreds of Taziya were collected from ghats amicably by Municipal Corporation and disposed of in a safe manner.

Today, Udaipur is preparing for the smart city mission. One thing which has given tremendous confidence to every stakeholder involved in the implementation of the mission is the enthusiastic support of lakhs of citizens who were involved at each stage of the program. In fact, the smart city mission has made citizen engagement as fulcrum of all decision making, whether at the selection stage or in the implementation stage through innovative competitions like 'make my city smart'. In the launch function of the project recently held in Pune, honourable Prime Minister pointed out that *the citizens of this country are already smart; it's just that their smartness has never been tapped by government*. He jokingly said that the most popular scheme of his government is Swachh Bharat Mission, ironically the only scheme where government is not focusing on subsidies to individuals but rather exhorting community to change its behaviour.

If one were to ask as to what is the secret of a successful public participation in a government scheme, there are a few key principles. One, community participation should be at each stage of scheme – conceptualizing, planning, execution, monitoring and evaluation. Two, public is more than forthcoming to play its part if it feels that government is working fairly, fearlessly and sincerely. Three, it requires courage and humility to be able to accept, absorb, analyse and learn from public criticism; and not get unnecessarily defensive or offensive. Honest admission of mistakes and genuine efforts to improve organisational shortcomings are vitally important to gain public trust. Also, the public participation does not mean just elected representatives like MLAs or MPs; though their leadership also plays pivotal role. True community mobilization would involve the grass-root workers and natural leaders in society who may not wish to be in active politics but would like to

bring positive changes in society. Smart City Mission has scored on all these fronts. Udaipur took feedback from its 1.25 lakh population (25% of city's total demography) before making the smart city plan, top performer Indore consulted 6 lakhs (30% of its citizens). This unique citizen participation exercise is happening for the first time in urban sector at such a large scale, and this is the major reason why the smart city project will succeed, where others have failed.