

# Protection of Natural Resources and Proactive Role of Grassroots Institutions in Goa

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## Abstract

*Natural resources play a significant role in our lives; hence their proper governance becomes a pertinent issue. There are various approaches towards its governance. Some advocate complete control by state agency over natural resources, while some other propose on bottoms-up approach with community involvement toward natural resource management. The present study proposes a Model for State-Community Partnership, suggesting devolution of more powers to Panchayats and Gram Sabhas as these are community oriented institutions. This model is tested with a Case Study of Goa. Goa is today facing the crisis of resource exploitation and misuse. Can grassroots institutions check these trends by being alert and proactive? The paper attempts an answer.*

**Key words:** Natural resources, governance, Goa, community, Panchayat, Gram Sabha

## 1. Introduction

**‘Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s needs, but not every man’s greed.’**

**Mahatma Gandhi**

Natural resources form an integral part of any society. They are a source of income, industry and identity. They play a central role in the wellbeing of local community. The community is dependent on them for their livelihood. These resources are also a point of pride to them as a part of village patrimony. Besides its economic value, natural resources also have historical and cultural significance. People have attachment to these resources as they and their forefathers have invested labour and sweat in them. And therefore growing misuse and depletion of these resources is a matter of great concern. Natural resource degradation is not a new thing but it is now occurring at a much faster rate, therefore not leaving enough time for the environment to recover and regenerate (Gogoi, 2013). There are various reasons for this degradation. Some of these reasons are; demographic growth which has increased pressure on resources for consumption, penetration of market forces which linked local use of resources to larger network of demands, and conflict over ownership of these resources because of which onus of responsibility cannot be ensured (Agarwal, 1997). Conflict over resources depends on ownership, as well as how the resources are extracted, distributed and traded. The stakeholders are the state, local communities and outside actors. The conflict is all the more grave on revenue

producing resources. If the resources are scarce and non-renewable it discourages diversification, and increases volatility of prices and revenue. However sometimes even abundance of resources can lead to mismanagement and corruption. Lack of clear ownership and management of natural resources often lead to problems like environment degradation, human rights violations, lobbying by business houses and other powerful groups, lack of accountability, capture of resources in few hands which results in widening the gap between rich and poor, pushing the marginalized group to periphery. There is an opinion building which proposes that increasing inclusion, involvement and participation of local community (the major stakeholder), can reduce these conflicts over natural resources.

## **2. Why Community?**

In the last few decades, there has been a growing awareness that community has a larger role in ownership, preservation and management of resources. A wide range of policy makers and development and conservation practitioners have supported efforts to revive or bolster local natural resource management institutions in response to various economic, social, environmental and political pressures and increasingly, debates over local communities' ability to manage their lands and natural resources are a part and parcel of broader struggles over political and economic power and authority (Roe, 2009). Even though the earlier belief upheld was that people were major obstacle in management of natural resources (Ives & Merserli, 1989), thinkers like (Ostrom, 1990) strongly advocated community ownership and emphasized on bottom up approach.

The arguments in favour of community involvement are:

- Local populace is in need of these resources for livelihood, and would contribute in resource conservation as it is in their interest to do so.
- People from the locality possess time and place specific knowledge, which can be best used for resource utilization.
- People are aware of multiple uses of these natural resources and hence are in best position to explore ways of linking conservation and livelihoods.
- People are attached to these resources and have common territorial affiliation and communal bond with these resources.
- There are various customs, traditions, practices and guidelines evolved over a period of time about utilization of these resources, and the local people are aware and abiding these practices and therefore are in better position to manage these resources in a suitable manner.
- The natural resources also act as a binding factor, where the people in the locality get attached with each other and start sharing common experiences. These common experiences often give rise to the concept of

common good. Individuals give up some of their individuality to behave as a single entity to accomplish goals (Kiss, 1990). Common sharing of problems can result in awareness that problems are not personal/private but affecting the whole community (Miller, 1987). Active participation in deliberation, decision making and implementation process at the grass roots can pave way for benefit of many (Kothari, 1998).

- Community participation can also reduce administrative and management costs due to proximity of local participants (Ribot, 2004).

### **3. Grassroots Democracy – Impetus for People’s Involvement**

There is growing emphasis on grassroots democracy for development. In grassroots democracy, state cannot impose on people unpopular or lopsided development programmes and policies. The state has to function with the consent of the ruled. And this is possible with Panchayats as mediator and Gram Sabhas as ‘hybrid communities’. This is a structure based entirely on people’s power, *Lokshakti* expressing itself in the form of village power, *Gramshakti* (Buch, 2012 ). Thus Panchayats and Gram Sabhas can be institutions which can mediate and facilitate better outcomes of resource utilization and conservation. Panchayats are democratically elected bodies. Panchayats can make necessary rules, implement them smoothly and also can exercise adjudicative authority to settle the disputes that may arise. In fact Art. 243(G) of the Indian constitution have made it mandatory that Panchayats have to take the responsibility of 29 subjects, which include important natural resources like fisheries, water, forests, mining etc. There is provision through 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment that interests of different marginalized sections are represented at Panchayat level. Panchayats can ensure outcomes of the decisions taken in Gram Sabhas. It can create data base which can help in mapping the achievements, and also aid in future decision making. It can also ensure accountability through periodic meetings.

Gram Sabhas are often referred to as fourth tier of Panchayati Raj. Effective Gram Sabhas possess the capacity to satisfy the desires and aspirations of the people. The much needed transparency at the grassroots is possible through these institutions. Gram Sabhas are described as ‘watch dogs’ and ‘a force to reckon with’ (Kothari, 1998), and as a soul of Panchayat. Gram Sabha is the pivot of functional participatory democracy. Gram Sabha provides basis for autonomy to the people and promote cooperation. It ensures distribution and effective control of power. It inculcates value of responsibility and moral obligation in people towards their village. Collective interaction creates incentives for individual to participate in collective actions. Initially there is every possibility that subjective/personal interest may motivate and direct behaviour when people respond, but over a period of time one cannot deny the possibility that they may be guided by substantive ends regarding justice and public good (Salgaonkar, 2013). (Chhatre, 2007) emphasized on strengthening ‘community agency’ that is

at the heart of natural resource management that is the Gram Sabha and Ward Sabha.

#### **4. Experiences from different states in India**

Studies conducted in different states to assess the functioning of Gram Sabhas in resource management and conservation has shown positive results. In Madhya Pradesh, Gram Sabha is entrusted with different functions and powers right from safeguarding and preserving the traditions and customs of the people, their cultural identity, community resources and the customary modes of dispute resolutions. In fact Gram Sabhas are so powerful that they exercise control over institutions and functionaries in all social sectors transferred to Gram Panchayat (Singh, 2002). In Karnataka, there exists a system of social audit called *Jamabandi* where officers and the members including the general public can participate in an open system of audits whereby they can visit even the work spots and can inspect the progress and quality of the work. The *Jamabandi* report has to be placed before the Gram Sabha along with action report, so that the transparency of the work is ensured (Bandopadhyay, 2000). In Tamil Nadu, Grama Sabha is an instrument through which public directly enjoy the power and feel the pulse of administration. Collective wisdom of Grama Sabha guides the Panchayati Raj Institutions in their planning and execution of developmental functions. Apart from this, social auditing is an integral part of Grama Sabha in Tamil Nadu, which ensures transparency in administration and accountability to all in the village development (Dwarakanath, 2013). In Kerala Gram Sabhas also undertake mass development works. Various committees are formed to incorporate the suggestions in the developmental programmes such as watershed, agriculture and related sectors, drinking water, women development, schedule caste development, etc. There is also a samiti established called the '*Karmasamiti*' of the ward members, retired engineers or technicians and the senior persons of that particular ward, to lend their help in the designing and implementation of development project. The Kerala experiment made a big impact on resource mobilisation and people's participation in planning (Ramakrishnan, 1997). These reforms represented the most ambitious effort to build local institutions of participatory democratic governance (Heller, 2007). In Odisha different legislative instruments have entrusted definite powers and functions to the Gram Sabha and different layers of Panchayati Raj for natural resources management and resource preservation. Odisha Forest Rights Act (2006) has endowed Gram Sabhas with Powers of important natural resource-forest(Rath, 2012). A study carried by NIRD in 2005 presented a hope for future by concluding that the institution of Gram Sabha has begun affecting the decision-making process at the Panchayat level and the elements of transparency and accountability are slowly and steadily creeping into the grass roots level democratic institution of Schedule V Area States of Indian Union (Buch, 2012 ).

## 5. Goa: Increasing Scramble for Natural resources

Goa is the smallest state of the Indian Union. Small size of the state has its own benefits. Key decisions can be taken closer to the ground, it promotes easy administration, enhances accessibility between rulers and ruled and thus has potentials to promote good governance. Goa is a land of abundant resources. For Goa, natural resources mainly compose of land, water (drinkable as well as water bodies), minerals, forests, beaches, fish and wildlife. These resources are part of identity of Goa. People of Goa hold a powerful attachment to these resources as they have invested their labour and sweat in them for generations together. There are also religious and cultural traditions evolved over time and thus there is emotional bond established in the people of Goa over the natural resources of State. For example fishing community in Goa has developed elaborate cultural and religious traditions that accompany work. When we turn the pages of history of Goa, much before the advent of Portuguese colonial rule, there were ancient grassroots institutions called 'Gaunkari' (which later were referred to as Comunidades) that took the onus of looking after the natural resources and thus maintained balance between society and its natural resources. There was also the existence of concept of CPR (Common Pool of Resources) managed by these institutions.

However after Goa was liberated from Portuguese Rule in 1961, the political, demographic and economic changes that it was undergoing, began to affect the natural resources of the state. Goa, most sought after tourist destination, began to witness a dramatic change. The socio-economic changes, demography and development in this otherwise '*susegado*' (content) state began to have tremendous implications for its natural resources, both renewable as well non-renewable. Ruthless mining carried out in seven talukas out of twelve talukas of Goa adversely affected the natural resources in the state. Poorly regulated mining activities resulted in incessant removal of mud surface threatening the very demography of the village. Goa is occupying just 0.11% of India's total geographical area, and yet it produced over 50% of the country's iron ore exports. This was 460 times its geographical capacity of ore extraction. This is ecologically destructive.

Concrete jungles are coming to stay in this small state. These include massive residential projects, huge resorts, building of industries and companies. These mega projects are an immense strain on already inadequate infrastructure such as road, electricity, water, sewage and solid waste management. Due to massive cutting down of trees the villages give a deserted look besides ever reducing natural resources in the locality. To add to the agony the coconut trees which are an essence to the identity of Goa, are now given the status of 'palm' which makes it easier to axe them as and when concrete buildings are to be raised. Water resources in Goa also are polluted and drained. There is sand extraction, and shacks and other structures raised at every nook and corner of the beaches are

robbing the beaches of their pristinely beauty. Increasing influx of the migrants, capital centric development policies, and booming of tourism industry has resulted in strain on the natural resources of the state. Various stakeholders are asserting their claim on the rich natural resources of the state. The government, business houses, industry, landowners, NGOs, Comunidades, Church, migrants, and the local populace, everybody is involved in hoarding of access rights to resources. Today Goa has become a 'pie' or an 'egg' and there is scramble for its natural resources for revenue (e.g. mining) on one hand and destruction of resources (e.g. incessantly falling of trees) in the name of development on the other. The central question is who will control and manage the natural resources of Goa? Can the Panchayats and the Gram Sabhas play a proactive role in this endeavour?

#### **6. Research Objectives:**

The objectives of this study are twofold:

- i. To propose a Model for state-community partnership for management of natural resources, suggesting for devolving more powers to Panchayats and Gram Sabhas as these are community oriented institutions.
- ii. To test the practicality of this model with a case study of Goa.

#### **7. Research Hypotheses**

- i) Gram Sabhas can reduce the misuse of natural resources of the village.
- ii) There is positive relationship between attendance at the Gram Sabhas and trust of the people that Gram Sabha can protect the natural resources.

#### **8. Research Method**

The data for the research is based on both primary as well as secondary sources. The secondary data consist of newspaper reports, and reports of NGOs and other active groups. The primary data is collected by survey method where in a questionnaire was administered to members of Gram Sabhas across Goa. A total 900 respondents were interviewed. Case studies of some of the Gram Sabhas were also undertaken to substantiate the findings.

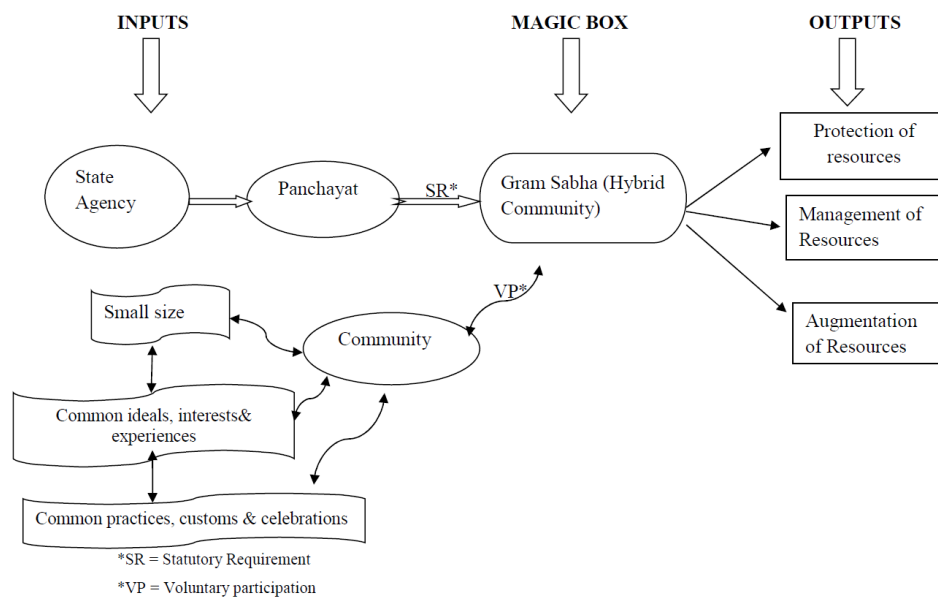
#### **9. Model for State-Community Partnership (SCP)**

The experiences of different states in India, as mentioned earlier, clearly reflect that the grassroots institutions, the Panchayats and Gram Sabhas, are emerging as effective institutions in managing the resources of the state. In fact there is statutory provision in the constitution of India for forming such institutions. The state agency can exercise control over natural resources through these institutions. On the other hand there is community with important features such as small size and population, common interests and experiences, and common norms, customs and practices. These features which are interrelated create core beliefs in the

community which results in voluntary participation of the people in the Gram Sabhas. This results in SCP model (State Community Partnership) between State and Community which has the capacity to ensure optimum utilization, conservation and management of natural resources. Gram Sabhas are Magic box of David Easton, through which important deliberations, decision making and governance of resources can take place. This can result in desirable output of management and conservation of natural resources. Thus this model proposes a proactive role to Panchayats and Gram Sabhas towards governance of Natural Resources. So instead of focusing only on community, focus on grassroots institutions that is Panchayats and Gram Sabhas (which can be described as hybrid community) one can ensure community based natural resource management. There are locally evolved norms and practices to manage these resources. These practices can get legal sanctity through approval in Gram Sabhas.

An attempt is made, by expanding David Easton’s input–output model, to explain the proactive role the grassroots institutions can play in protecting, maintaining and augmenting the natural resources of the village.

### Management of Natural Resources



### 10. Can Gram Sabha Protect Natural Resources?

The indiscriminate hoard for resources in Goa has posed a challenge to seriously think about the future of the state. Villages in Goa are small, both in size and population. Most of the village Panchayats is of nine or eleven wards. There is growing resistance by the people for various developmental projects, whether it may be Ingo’s flea market in Assagao, Bardez Taluka or Raheja Project in Benaolim, Salcete Taluka. The strength of Panchayats and Gram Sabhas was

witnessed by the state when various meetings were held across the state, and Government of Goa was forced to scrap the Regional Plan 2011. The Gram Sabhas which were so lackluster all this while, today are taunted as ‘Garam Sabhas’. A survey was conducted with 900 respondents who were the members of Gram Sabhas across the state to study whether the Gram Sabha can protect the natural resources of the village. The questions were closed ended questions with five point scale. The respondents were asked how often they attended the Gram Sabhas with five options of Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Regularly, and whether they agree with the statement that Gram Sabha is effective in protecting natural resources of the village with five options namely; Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree. Ten forms were rejected as they were incomplete and therefore analysis was done with the help of 890 replies. The analyses are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Protect natural resources and attendance at Gram Sabha**

		PRONATRES					Total
		1	2	3	4	5	
AttendanceatGS 1	Count	2	12	14	30	8	66
	% within AttendanceatGS	3.0%	18.2%	21.2%	45.5%	12.1%	100.0%
2	Count	0	4	0	4	2	10
	% within AttendanceatGS	.0%	40.0%	.0%	40.0%	20.0%	100.0%
3	Count	4	24	14	104	32	178
	% within AttendanceatGS	2.2%	13.5%	7.9%	58.4%	18.0%	100.0%
4	Count	12	38	26	238	110	424
	% within AttendanceatGS	2.8%	9.0%	6.1%	56.1%	25.9%	100.0%
5	Count	10	12	10	142	38	212
	% within AttendanceatGS	4.7%	5.7%	4.7%	67.0%	17.9%	100.0%
Total	Count	28	90	64	518	190	890
	% within AttendanceatGS	3.1%	10.1%	7.2%	58.2%	21.3%	100.0%

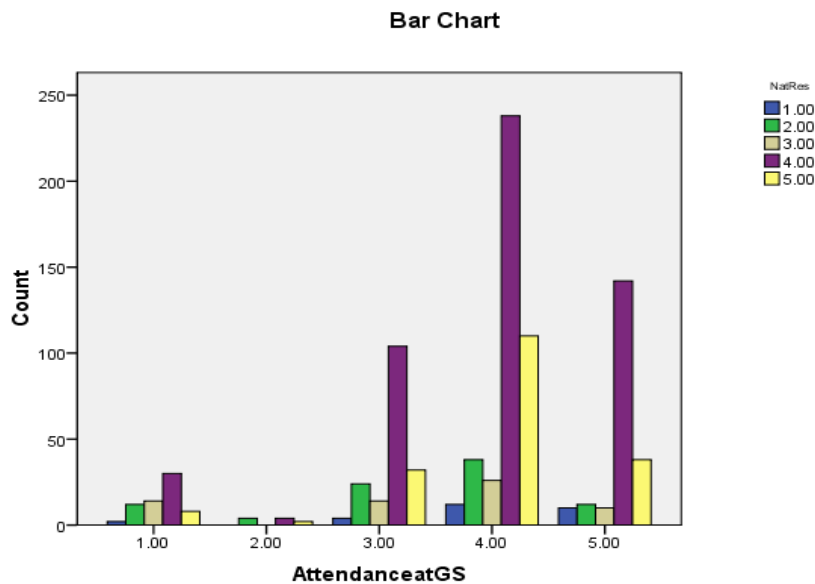
Attending GS: 1-Never, 2-Rarely, 3-Sometimes, 4-Often, 5-Regularly.

PRONATRES (Protection of natural resources): 1- Strongly disagree, 2- Disagree, 3 – Neutral, 4 – Agree, 5 – Strongly Agree

It was amazing to note that 708 respondents (79.5%) agreed that the Gram Sabha is empowered to protect the natural resources of the village. In fact this trust in the Gram Sabha has led to increase in participation at Gram Sabha as 528 respondents from 708 respondents said that they attended Gram Sabha regularly or often (See Table 1).

**Figure 1** clearly reflects that in general people felt that Gram Sabha can protect the natural resources of the village. In any category of attendance viz. ‘Never’, ‘Rarely’, ‘Sometimes’, ‘Often’ and ‘Always’ it can be seen that the ‘agreed’ category is more, and in the category of ‘often’ and ‘regularly’ the ‘agreed’ and ‘strongly agreed’ is definitely more. Therefore it can be concluded that people are attending Gram Sabha as they trust that Gram Sabha can be active in protecting natural resources of the village. The study reflected that the people in Goa, who are the components of Gram Sabha, strongly believed that the Gram Sabhas can protect the natural resources of their village.

**Figure1**  
**Protect natural resources and attendance at Gram Sabha**



Attending GS: 1- Never, 2- Rarely, 3- Sometimes, 4- Often, 5- Regularly.

PRONATRES: 1- Strongly disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Neutral, 4- Agree, 5- Strongly Agree

## 11. Case Studies

Some case studies are presented below as to how Gram Sabhas have tried to protect the natural resources in the state and have even been successful in thwarting certain projects which were harmful for the demography of the village.

- In Velim, Salcete, South Goa, Gram Sabha called on February 8<sup>th</sup> 2009, the members opposed any move to convert water bodies and asked the authorities to retain economically sensitive zones and save the village hills and paddy fields.
- Gram Sabhas of Benaullim as well as Ambelim, from Salcete, South Goa, vociferously voiced the need to retain identity and demography of the village. They also demanded protection of beaches, sand dunes, paddy fields and water bodies.
- Special Gram Sabha called by Navelim Panchayat in August, 2012 called for 12 hours bandh on 13<sup>th</sup> August, 2012 to protest against the pollution allegedly caused due to activities at Sesa Goa's pig iron plant at Amona. People complained that thick particulate matter had filled the air, and dust had settled on their houses, vehicles, vegetation all around. Villagers, numbering hundreds voiced concern over the project, which they claimed had no permission from Goa State Pollution Control Board or the Central Ministry for Environment and Forest.
- Socorro Gram Sabha, Bardez Taluka, in almost every Gram Sabha have requested Water Resources Department not to issue any more permission for sinking of bore or tube wells in the village as this had led to depletion of ground water level and it is affecting the existing open wells.
- The Gram Sabha of Carmona village thwarted the ambitious real estate project worth crores of rupees. In its 88,000 square meter area project on the banks of river Sal, Construction Giant, Raheja, had divided the area in 15 plots of 2,000 sqmt. and 6,000 sqmt. and was intending to build 700 flats. In the village of 300-400 houses, such a mega-housing project would not only change the demography of the place, but would also create water, electricity and other infrastructure issues. A study of all the subsequent Gram Sabhas held in these villages reflected that the villagers have consistently raised their voice against mega projects.
- Bhirondhe Gram Sabha from Sattari Taluka held on August 17<sup>th</sup> 2012 took a unanimous decision that not even an inch of land of the village will be sold to any outside party, and if any such deal was struck by any party, Panchayat would not give any NOC for such sale or purchase. The villagers felt that such resolution was necessary to secure the lands of the farmers of their village and also that of other people.

- Hundred and twenty villages came together and formed ‘Village Group of Goa’ and demanded for constitution of local Committees and taking local people into confidence while drafting the new regional plan 2021 and they opposed any move to convert water bodies and asked the authorities to retain economically sensitive zones, Khazan lands, and save the village hills and paddy fields. They opined that it was necessary to retain identity and demography of the village. They also demanded protection of beaches, sand dunes, water bodies and protecting the agriculture and orchard lands from settlements.
- In a classic case of Ingo at Assagao, Mapusa, a foreign national named Ingo, wanted to set up a flea market in this area. He began with clearing the mountains for this purpose. People were not aware of this project. On seeing that their village hills were brought down with bull dozers the villagers got together and opposed this project tooth and nail till the project was shelved.
- Efforts at various Gram Sabhas in mining affected villages (Rivona, Cavrem, Vagurme, Usgao, Pilgao etc) proved very successful in pressuring the state to put a ban on mining activities in Goa. Though mining has resumed again in the state, but hopefully with some stringent rules and regulations. But the fact remains that mining has left irreversible impact on resources in the state, and further deterioration can be checked only by proactive Panchayats and Gram Sabhas.
- Colva is located on the coastal belt of south Goa. Tourists flock to this place, and as a result this place faces hazards like garbage problem, water shortage, clogging of drainages, huge mega projects and tourist resorts etc. Cutting of hills and trees is affecting environment. People from this area have been agitating for cleaner and greener Colva for a long time now. In one Gram Sabha, issue came up on one such resort which closed down the traditional access to beach to the locals, and as a result it became difficult for people to have access to sea and to carry out their traditional fishing activity. The Resolution was adopted that the access to beach would be opened to locals with an immediate effect.

Thus the data analyses supplemented with various case studies gives a ray of hope that the State Community Partnership can be best realised by giving more powers to the grassroots bodies i.e. the Panchayats and Gram Sabhas. These bodies have statutory standing as well as are integral part of the community. The Gram Sabhas are rightfully addressed as ‘hybrid community’. The small size of the villages in Goa, the social affinity among the people, smaller distance between the ruler and the rule, peer pressure can be a guiding force for the grassroots institutions in protecting the natural resources of the state.

## **12. What more can be done?**

The Panchayats could implement the following policy options and actions towards better preservation and augmentation of natural resources:

- **Policy of Inclusion**

The Panchayat should strive towards policy of inclusion, where different sections of the village community are involved in resource management. The NGOs, women, Women Self Help Groups etc. can play very proactive role in management of resources.

- **Identify Common Property Resources (CPR)**

The main role of the Panchayat should be to identify the resources which can be categorised as CPR. These can be forests, mountains, water bodies etc. The Panchayats should make the community realise the significance of these CPR through Gram Sabhas and need for their preservation and effective utilization.

- **Capacity building**

The Panchayat should focus on capacity building to manage and develop natural resources. There can be major projects undertaken, such as watershed programmes. The schemes like MGNREGS can be effectively implemented in this direction. This will also provide employment to the people in the villages. It will create durable assets for socio-economic development too. Common guidelines can be framed, and committees can be formed from among the Gram Sabha members for monitoring and evaluation.

- **Promote cooperation and symmetrical growth**

The Panchayat should promote cooperation between various stake holders in the natural resources. Promoting symmetrical growth can arrest and reverse the trend of degradation of natural resources.

## **13. To conclude**

Natural resources play a significant role in our lives; hence their proper governance becomes a pertinent question. There are various approaches to it, while some advocate complete control by state agency, there is also a large pool of research that emphasizes on importance of bottoms-up approach toward natural resource management. The recent trends in the country reflect an interesting shift in management paradigms from strict agency control to collaborative management. Excellent example could be state-people partnership, and this is possible by devolving more and more powers to Panchayats and Gram Sabhas. These are community oriented institutions and therefore needs to be strengthened. Interaction and decision-making regarding the use of natural resource requires developing a solution that is fairer and more effective and equally acceptable by all and therefore such decisions may be rested in grassroots bodies. It can also

reduce evils like corruption, nepotism, ambiguous policies, lack of proper policy implementation and unequal resource distribution which often result due to centralized resource governance. A proactive Panchayat body can overcome these evils. Goa is today facing the crisis of resource exploitation and misuse and therefore fear of resource degradation and depletion looms large on this beautiful state. Proactive and alert Panchayat and Gram Sabhas which are hybrid communities can check these trends and therefore a very active role to these bodies is proposed.

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