

ATAL INNOVATION MISSION ■ Efforts required for dignified life of persons with disabilities

Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) - NITI Aayog launched ATL Sarthi, a comprehensive self-monitoring framework to strengthen the ever-growing ecosystem of Atal Tinkering Labs (ATL).

Atal Innovation Mission is establishing Atal Tinkering Laboratories (ATLs) in schools across India to foster curiosity, creativity, and imagination in young minds; and inculcate skills such as design thinking mindset, computational thinking, adaptive learning, physical computing etc. As of date, AIM has funded 10,000 schools to establish Atal Tinkering Labs (ATLs).

AIM is continuously strengthening this ecosystem by developing tools and framework to enhance the performance of ATLs and achieve the desired objectives. ATL Sarthi is one such initiative in this direction. As the name suggests, Sarthi is a charioteer and ATL Sarthi will enable the ATLs to be efficient and effective. The initiative has four pillars ensuring the performance enhancement of ATLs through regular process improvements like a self-reporting dashboard known as 'MyATL Dashboard' and Compliance SOPs for schools to ensure financial and non-financial compliances, on-ground enablement of ATLs in collaboration with relevant local authorities through Cluster-based Approach and providing ownership to schools to analyze their performance through Performance-Enablement (PE) Matrix.

The ATL Cluster aims at providing a self-sustainable model for enablement and monitoring wherein the ATLs and local authorities work in tandem with each other on-ground to form clusters of 20-30 ATLs in a particular region. These ATLs can learn from each other through training, collaborations, events and best practices. As a pilot, AIM executed ATL Sarthi with different partners in regions like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat.

Mission Director Atal Innovation Mission (AIM), NITI Aayog said, "Atal Innovation Mission aims to foster millions of young innovators in India by setting up ATLs in schools. To further improve their performance, AIM has launched ATL Sarthi. It provides a Monitoring and Evaluation framework to enhance the performance of ATLs. We believe ATL Sarthi will add a very important element of self-sustainability to the ATLs which is the ultimate goal of AIM. We urge all Governments, private institutions, and innovation councils across India to be a part of it and help us in the implementation of the initiative."

The launch event was also attended by Suresh Kumar, IAS, Andhra Pradesh, Commissioner of School Education; B B Cauvery, IAS, SPD, Samagra Sikkhsha; Sudhanva, MD and Founder - Excel Soft; Yogesh Suri, Director - Vignyan Ashram; Sheshagiri K M Rao, Education Specialist, UNICEF; Brijesh Srivastava, Programme Manager, MGNF- IIM Ahmedabad and Hardik, MGNF who highlighted how they have adopted clustering approach in their respective regions to make the ATLs more efficient.

■ DR SATYAWAN SAURABH

Our education system is not inclusive. Inclusion of children with mild to moderate disabilities in regular schools remains a major challenge. There are many issues such as availability of special schools, access to schools, trained teachers and availability of educational materials for the disabled. Furthermore, reservations for the disabled in higher educational institutions have not been met in many cases, and even though many adults with disabilities are capable of productive work, adults with disabilities have much lower employment rates than the general population. The situation is even worse in the private sector, where very few people with disabilities are employed. As per the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, 'Person with Disability' means a person with a long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment who, with barriers, may interfere with, interact with, or participate in their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others hinders. Today there are crores of people with disabilities in India. The 2011 census pegs us at 26.8 million, which is 2.21 per cent of India's total population; But activists, academics and world bodies such as the WHO estimate it to be between 40 and 80 million. Article 41 of the Directive Principles of State Policy states that the State shall, within its economic limits, make effective provision for securing the right to work, education and public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement. The subject of 'Relief to the disabled and unemployed' is specified in the State List of the Seventh Schedule to the Constitution. It becomes the duty of the Centre, States and Union Territories to take up this matter. It is also important to ensure that all government buses are disabled friendly as per the relevant guidelines. Disability is defined based on an evolving and dynamic concept. The types of disabilities have been increased from 7 to 21. The Act covers a range of disabilities including mental illness, autism, spectrum disorders, cerebral palsy, mus-

cular dystrophy, chronic neurological conditions, speech and language disabilities, thalassaemia, haemophilia, sickle cell disease, deafness, blindness, acid attack victims and Parkinson's disease which were largely ignored in the first act. In addition, the Government has been authorized to notify any other category of specified disability. It increases the quantum of reservation for people with disabilities from 3 per cent to 4 per cent in government jobs and from 3 per cent to 5 per cent in higher education institutions. Every child with benchmark disability between the age of 6 to 18 years shall have the right to free education. Government funded educational institutions as well as government recognized institutions have to provide inclusive education. With the Accessible India Campaign, emphasis has been laid on ensuring accessibility in public buildings within stipulated time frame. The Chief Commissioner and State Commissioners for Persons with Disabilities will act as regulatory bodies and grievance redressal agencies to monitor the implementation of the Act. A separate national and state fund was created to provide financial assistance to persons with disabilities. Accessible India Campaign, a nationwide flagship campaign to create accessible environment for PWDs and achieve universal access to enable persons with disabilities to access equal opportunities and live independently and fully in all aspects of life in an inclusive society will be able to participate. The campaign aims to enhance the reach of the built environment, transport system and information and communication ecosystem. Under the Deen Dayal Handicapped Rehabilitation Scheme, financial assistance is provided to NGOs for providing various services to persons with disabilities, such as special schools, vocational training centers, community based rehabilitation, pre-school and early intervention etc Assistance to persons with disabilities for purchase/fitting of assistive devices: The scheme aims to help persons with disabilities by bringing suitable, durable, scientifically made, modern, standard aids and appliances within their reach. The objective

of the scheme is to enhance the opportunities for students with disabilities to pursue higher education. Under the scheme, 200 fellowships are given per year to students with disabilities. The National Trust has schemes for the welfare of persons with autism, cerebral palsy, mental retardation and multiple disabilities. A large number of disabilities are preventable, including those resulting from medical issues during birth, maternal conditions, malnutrition, as well as those resulting from accidents and injuries. However, the health sector has failed to respond actively to disability, especially in rural India, besides lack of affordable access to proper health care, d appliances, and poorly trained health workers in rehabilitation centers is another concern subject to Our education system is not inclusive. Inclusion of children with mild to moderate disabilities in regular schools remains a major challenge. There are many issues such as availability of special schools, access to schools, trained teachers and availability of educational materials for the disabled. Furthermore, reservations for the disabled in higher educational institutions have not been met in many cases, and even though many adults with disabilities are capable of productive work, adults with disabilities have much lower employment rates than the general population.

The situation is even worse in the private sector, where very few people with disabilities are employed. Physical access to buildings, transport, access to services, etc. still remains a major challenge. Negative attitudes of families of the disabled, and often of the disabled themselves, prevent persons with disabilities from participating actively in the family, community or workforce. People with disabilities face discrimination in everyday life. People with mental illness or mental retardation face the worst stigma and are subject to severe social exclusion. The lack of hard and comparable data and statistics further hinders the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Major issues with data collection and measuring disability are that

disability is difficult to define. Different purposes require different disability data. Reluctance to report a disability as a disability is considered a stigma in many places/societies. Poor implementation of policies and plans hinders the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Though various Acts and schemes have been laid down with the aim of empowering the disabled, they face many challenges in their implementation. Preventive health programs need to be strengthened and all children should be screened at an early age. Kerala has already started an early prevention programme. The Comprehensive Newborn Screening (CNS) programme seeks to identify deficiencies early in infants and reduce the state's disability burden. People with disabilities need to be better integrated into the society by overcoming stigma. Awareness campaigns should be conducted to educate and sensitize people about different types of disabilities. Success stories can be displayed. There is a need to empower adults with disabilities with employable skills. The private sector needs to be encouraged to employ them. There is a need to improve the measurement of disability to better understand the scale of disability in India. There is a need to prepare state wise strategy on education for children with special needs. There should be proper teacher training to meet the needs of children with disabilities and facilitate their inclusion in regular schools. Also there should be more special schools and ensure educational material for children with disabilities. Safety measures should be taken like road safety, safety in residential areas, public transport system etc. Also, it should be made legally binding to make buildings disabled friendly. More budgetary allocation for welfare of disabled. There should be a disability budget on the lines of gender budget. Proper implementation of the schemes should be ensured. There should be proper monitoring mechanism and counting of public money.

(The author is a poet, freelance journalist and columnist, All India Radio and TV panelist).

Empowering rural women through Panchayats

■ DR BANARSI LAL

The development in any society would be slow if women who constitute about 50 per cent of population are not facilitated to participate in the developmental activities. India with a female population of over 600 million possesses a vast reservoir of women power which exceeds the combined total population of South-East Asian countries. In the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution for the first time in the history of India, minimum numbers of seats were allotted to women in Panchayats. Meager representation of women in the state and national legislatures, reservation not less than one-third of the total number of seats and chairpersons of Panchayats should be considered a significant landmark in the process of political empowerment of women. Clause(3) of Art.243-D inserted in the Indian Constitution by the 73rd Amendment Act provides that not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat. Clause (2) of Art.243-D provides that not less than one-third of the total number of seats shall be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes or Schedule Tribes. Seats for these marginalized sections of the society should be provided in every Panchayat in proportion of their respective population in the total population in each Panchayat and such seats have to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in the Panchayat. Clause (4) of the mentioned Art. stipulates that the offices of the chairpersons in the

Panchayats at the village level or any other level should be reserved for the Scheduled Castes, Schedule Tribes. The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution has greatly contributed to the political empowerment of women and marginalized sections of society.

There were skeptics who were favourably disposed to the proposition of women leadership. Guided by their traditional dominance in a patriarchal society, the males used to cite some of the disabilities of women like illiteracy, family responsibilities, experience, poverty and communication skills etc. as the inhibiting factors for effective participation of women in the decision-making process at the local level. The upper caste males were frantically in search of methods through which their traditional hold in the rural sector could be retained. The women from marginalized communities in the rural areas were not initially very confident of their abilities to assume their leadership in the Panchayats. The male-dominant rural power structure did not like to lose its traditional grip over the rural institutions.

This led to the nomination of women members of their families or relatives for the non-SC/ST political seats in the Panchayats. Many of these women who never left their homes had to contest the polls with the support of their husbands. Caste, money and muscle power were also used by the dominant males to ensure their victory in several cases.

There were many instances where the elected women in the Panchayats had to depend on their family members to perform their official duties. Most of these women

did not know the nuances of the Panchayat administration and they used to depend on their husbands for transaction official business. In many cases husbands or the brothers of elected women presided over the Panchayat meetings and deliberations in absence of the elected women. The elected women in the Panchayats were not so literate, aware, experienced etc. and in many cases they were depending on their male counterparts in decision-making. In regard to the elected Sarpanches and Panches in the village Panchayats they had to depend on their masters who were the traditional power-holders. The officials working at the village level were not reconciled to work under the control of women Sarpanches. With the few exceptions, women members of marginalized communities who are relatively literate and have political ambitions or family history of political participation, volunteered to contest elections in the Panchayats. These women also depend on their own family members and relatives for electioneering. It should be emphasised that there is nothing wrong if the women seek the support of the traditional male leadership as a learning process. The significant achievements of 73rd Amendment Act concerning reservation of seats and political offices in favour of women and the disadvantaged sections of the rural community is that it had improved their awareness, perceptual levels and rightful share in the decision-making exercise. A brief spell of five to eight years is not enough in the history of nation to judge the rationale of political empowerment of women and other weaker sections of society. Social change in the rural India is already percep-

tible. Thanks to the mass media and the urge among the weaker sections to improve their educational, social and economic status. The influence of electronic media and the improvement in education, income, knowledge and awareness are affecting the value system, attitude expectations and aspirations of the rural disadvantaged sections in recent years. Political improvement holds the key for their social and economic improvement. There is need to be cynical about the prospects of the Constitutional safeguards provided to the women and weaker sections to ensure their effective participation in the decentralized democratic decision-making process. The disabilities suffered by these deprived sections of society are bound to disappear in the long run. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment could be considered not only the historic but radical for the first time in the history of India. It has made mandatory provisions for the reservations of a minimum number of seats and offices of chairpersons to women as well as to the marginalized sections of the society. All states have introduced these Constitutional imperatives in their respective Panchayat Acts. In the context, many rural women entered the political arena for the time due to persuasion of their family members' caste and political leaders. The male-dominant rural power is not reconciled to their socialisation in politics. This does not deter them from actively participating in the democratic decentralized developmental process at the local level. The male-dominant rural power should desist from applying social pressure on women aspirants who possess the necessary enthusiasm and ability to

assume political leadership. The village males should rather encourage and offer support to them. The men folk should develop a positive attitudinal changes and mental make-up in favour of women. The elected rural women and weaker sections should be educated and trained by which they can get the knowledge and understanding. Special training programmes for the elected women members in Panchayats should be organised. The State Institutes of Rural Development and the Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) may be required not only to prepare appropriate curriculum for them but also to organise the programmes for them. The training programmes for the elected women members in Panchayats should be organised at state/UT, district and block levels respectively.

The teaching methods for these women's should be simpler as possible. Group discussions, success stories and case studies should be the part of training. Electronic media and audio-visual aids should be utilized in the training programmes. State/UT government should introduce incentives for the Panchayats headed by women of marginalized sections of the society for good performance and attendance rather developmental activities taken up. Ultimately the improvements in the literacy among women and weaker sections hold the key factor for their AIYJIEe participation in decision making process and involvement with the developmental activities in the rural areas.

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Are we passing through an era of democracy?

■ MAHADEEP SINGH JAMWAL

Peep into the gallery of events during past some years carries us to a new form of 'Democracy' that we can easily re-christen as 'Dictatorial Democracy' that is gradually replacing the 'Participating Democracy', a best possible way for delivery to the common man. This all is possible only if there is a majority of a political party in representation and the credit of that majority is attributed to a single politician. When all the decisions about what, where, when, why, how things will be done, where all decision-making power rests with a single person, does not allow others to question decisions or authority only to get his way, it speaks of dictatorial style of leadership. It would be not an exaggeration to say that the whole of the period of present dispensation can be summed up in terms of this conflict. There appears to be a systematic preparation to establish a dictatorial attitude in a very democratic show off. Well established that to check the government from becoming authoritarian and to restrict its powers, the opposition parties' keeps a watch over them. The opposition has the right to check the expenditure of the government. But the 'Congress Free India' slogan by the present ruling political party and always on the lips of the Head of Government is nothing but to demolish the structure of democracy and to transform 'Participating Democracy' to 'Dictatorial Democracy.' Many may have forgotten that the first glimpse of dictatorial attitude surfaced in June 2014 just at the outset of new dispensation when

Prime Minister Office (PMO) struck down proposal of ministers for the appointment of their private secretaries and approval was necessitated for appointment of minister's personal staff including private secretaries and officers on special duty. Adapting to the practice of previous governments, just in July 2014 itself, the Modi government placed Governors of its choice in four states and continued the process in later days also. Subsequent attempt was directed towards the Supreme Court of India when the Modi government's intentions of getting the appointments of apex court judges also politicized in the form of 'National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) Act' of 2014 and the 'Constitutional Amendment' was rejected by the Supreme Court.

The vendetta politics started its uprising in March 2016, when a high voltage drama was orchestrated by the union government and similar act in Arunachal Pradesh, whereby democratically elected non-BJP governments were dismissed from two states. With the Supreme Court driving the return of non BJP governments in both states in less than three months, it earned the dubious distinction of having been pushed back on the imposition of President's Rule in perhaps the quickest succession in Indian judicial history. Further how BJP managed governments in Goa and Manipur even after getting lesser seats than other main contestants set another example of its intentions towards dictatorial democracy.

Our constitution provides that Governors are

required to invite the party having the largest number of elected candidates. But in these two states these requirements were turned down and BJP having less seats but majority in center the constitutional requirements were overlooked by those responsible to maintain its sanctity and facilitated the BJP to form the government in a dictatorial style. The Apex Court's observation on doing away with ministers (31%) having criminal cases of serious nature brushed away by the Modi government and it also tilted towards dictatorial attitude.

The way the announcement of 'Demonetization' on TV channels was made by the PM stand remarked as disregard for democratic institutions. The one man decision not even known to his other ministers and without taking 'Lok Sabha' highest democratic institution into confidence was not less than a dictatorial order that claimed hundreds of innocent lives and zero result on ground proved that how the writ of one man is followed in new form of Dictatorial Democracy.

We remember the three 'Farm Acts', of 2020 legislated by present dispensation, how they were protested as not being discussed in Parliament, how shamelessly defended by treasury benches, how protests claimed hundreds of life and ultimately a were withdrawn after shedding dictatorial attitude only when fear of losing elections in some states that were due.

The public apology tendered was nothing more than crocodile tears. When we talk of J&K, how it has been downgraded from a State to a UT status and has been

fragmented and such decision is not less than dictatorial orders, when a man of such attitude felt of his non-acceptance in valley after enjoying power for some time with a party that was always targeted as anti-national by the same person.

Hero worship is the first indicator of someone to tilt towards a dictatorial attitude and most important thing is to have unquestioned and blind support from his followers and PM has it from the majority Hindu community.

The BJP has no real or credible opposition in the country, which is an alarm in a functional democracy and this has led to move unbridled towards dictatorial democracy. This situation was expected to be under real exposure from the fourth pillar of democracy, the media, but influential news channels have shifted from journalism to becoming propaganda machinery for the present dispensation. We well remember the words of Prime Minister that he would always be ready to give an account of the work being done by him spoken on June 04, 2014 during a meeting with all secretaries of GOI and then in later period to such questions of non-BJP party MPs and leaders he had been kidding by challenging the status of those asking questions that those who had looted country for 70 years are asking question what he has done? If it is not a dictatorial attitude then how can it be termed at? So rightly we can conclude that Participating Democracy is transforming to a new system of governance and that is 'Dictatorial Democracy'.