

## Govt takes away people's power?

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PANAJI: The town and country planning (TCP) department's advisory to the directorate of panchayats on the powers of gram sabha has evoked a mixed reaction, as some termed it as anti-grassroot level governance while others asserted that the elected body's executive power cannot be surrendered to the gram sabha.

The TCP stated that there is no provision in the Goa Panchayat Raj Act, 1994, permitting the gram sabhas to grant approval to either construct or revoke or to interfere with the permission. The government had consulted experts to ascertain the legal position.

But social activists asserted that people have a right in a democracy to carry out planning in their own villages. "We, as NGOs, are trying to empower the people in deciding what they want for themselves for their betterment," John Philip Pereira, president of Village group of Goa (VGG) said.

Terming the policy "anti-people" at the grassroot level, he said the village planning committees, such as ward and supervisory committees should be dissolved, as the TCP has taken away the powers. "Forcing mega projects and other development haphazardly with narrow roads, excessive garbage, inadequate power and water, burdens the overall infrastructure, and will compel them to migrate or revolt against such decisions by law makers or the government," he said.

If at all such a policy exists then it has to be changed. "Otherwise, gram sabhas should condemn such a move to empower the TCP to suggest what the villagers want," he said.

But Premanand Mahambre, a former sarpanch pointed out that if gram sabhas, which comprise all the voters in the panchayat, start ruling, then it may result in chaos. "The local self governing bodies draw their powers from the constitution as well as the Goa Panchayat Raj Act and the Municipal Act," he said.

"You cannot surrender the executive power of the elected body, whether good or bad," he said.

Explaining further, he said that in situations when there is a certain quorum, a few members form the gram sabha and often decide what is not provided in the law. But gram sabhas have the power to advise the panchayat, he said.

Yatish Naik, legal advisor to Pilerne citizens forum said the voters (gram sabha members) are given due importance during elections.

"But after his vote is cast in the ballot, then the person becomes a problem child and creating this perception is totally wrong," he said.

The constitutional scheme defines gram sabhas, its powers and its role. "But instead of making them strong and ensuring constitutional mandate is observed in letter and the spirit through devolution of powers, the politicians are setting a dangerous trend," he said.

Conceding that every member's opinion may not necessarily be a sanctified proposition under the law, he said every gram sabha decision should be respected.