

# *Emerging Model Villages in India: A Study of Punsari Village from the State of Gujarat (India)*

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Although India does not live in its villages anymore, the rural population is still sizeable and, more importantly, it reels under the pressure of extreme poverty, pitiable basic amenities and dearth of livelihood opportunities. There is an urgent need to transform the rural landscape of India while retaining the soul of the rural life. The case of village Punsari from the Sabharkantha District of the state of Gujarat is unique as it stands out as a smart and model village. The paper argues that grassroots leadership, community participation, decentralisation of powers to local bodies in rural areas, and financial support in the form of various government schemes can bring far-reaching changes in the rural landscape of India. The paper also strongly advocates

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a view that there still exists a considerable gap in what we call a model village and what an ideal village should be.

*Keywords:* rural development, model village, grassroots institutions

## 1. Introduction

India is rapidly urbanising so much so that the 2011 census for the first time recorded greater absolute increase in urban than in the rural population of India. This is not much of a surprise, as since the onset of globalisation in the early 1990s, the urban bias has been declining and national and sub-national governments have increasingly been focusing on urban rejuvenation programmes like JNNURM and the latest flagship programme of Smart City Mission of the current government in India. However, one must understand that although India does not live in its villages anymore, the rural population is still quite large (68% of the total population) and more importantly, it reels under the pressure of extreme poverty, pitiable basic amenities, and dearth of livelihood opportunities. Therefore, an equal amount of attention should be directed towards rural renewal schemes, which China has been doing since the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Since independence, dedicated government programmes have been directed toward integrated development of rural areas. Nonetheless, the results and achievements of these development schemes have been disappointing. Series of other programmes have been announced since then, together with various committees to review the impact of these programmes. However, certain major issues still linger on as some of the major concerns of Indian rural areas such as uneven regional development, extreme backwardness of specific rural regions, increasing and continued migration to urban areas, dearth of employment opportunities, and sub-standard living conditions. Therefore, development of the hinterland is one of most important goals and challenges that India is facing today.

In this backdrop, the present paper purports to explore, analyse, and explain the concept of model village in India. This paper aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What is rural development in Indian context and what makes the idea of model village an important tool to achieve it?

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting account of rural rejuvenation programmes in China, s. Minzi (2009).

2) How did Punsari Village transform into a model village and what are its major achievements?

3) Is there a gap between model village and an ideal village and why is it so?

In order to seek answers to the above-mentioned questions, the paper focuses its study on one of the first model village in India – Punsari (Yagnik, 2014) in the state of Gujarat and endeavours to chart out its transformation.

There is an urgent need to transform the rural landscape of India and bring it on par with its urban counterparts while retaining the soul of the rural life. This is primarily needed to ease the galloping pressure on urban areas, decongest them, and restrict migration of rural population to urban dwellings. The case of Punsari Village from the Sabharkantha District of Gujarat is unique as it stands out as India's first model as well as smart village. Using descriptive analytical framework, the paper aims to argue that such smart villages are a ray of hope for rural revitalisation in the countryside of India. The paper maintains that grass-roots leadership, community participation, decentralisation of powers to local bodies in rural areas, and financial support (Crook, 1998) in the form of various government schemes can bring far-reaching changes to rural India, which is essential to deal effectively with rural distress. Punsari represents a classic example as well as an exemplar of concerted efforts of elected leaders, community people, and government support to bring transformation and make villages smart as well as sustainable. The paper also aims at strongly advocating a view that there still exists a considerable gap between what we call a model village and what an ideal village should be. The idea of ideal village is an alternative model that the author tries to construct and that shall be discussed later in the paper. The questions have been tested using the descriptive analytical method. The information is gleaned from primary as well as secondary sources. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with the former village headman (headperson is called a Sarpanch in India), current village headwoman and other members of the Punsari Gram Panchayat (rural local body in India), and observations from the field visits to the village constitute the core of the primary data of the present paper. Books, journal articles, government reports, and online sources have been used to substantiate the arguments made in this work.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part explains the concept of rural development and explores its trajectory in India. The second part tries to focus on the role of elected bodies i.e. Panchayati Raj Institutions that are considered the important vehicles of rural development. The third section draws heavily from the fieldwork conducted in Punsari and discusses in detail the process of transformation that took place in

this village. The final segment of the paper offers concluding remarks and argues that a lot is yet to be achieved since there is a gap between a model village and an ideal village.

## 2. Conceptualising Rural Development and the Idea of Model Village

Development<sup>2</sup> is a highly complex, relative, and multi-dimensional concept. The core focus of this term even today continues to be economic growth. However, some quintessential terms such as sustainability and inclusiveness have been added to broaden the scope of this concept. From a holistic perspective, development is directed to achieve goals in health, education, public infrastructure, and empowerment of the people particularly at grass-roots level. The term rural development represents improvement in the quality of life of the people in rural areas. As per Chambers (1983), “rural development is a strategy to enable a specific group of people, poor rural women and men, to gain for themselves and their children more of what they want and need”. According to Sreedhar and Rajasekhar (2014), rural development as a phenomenon can be viewed as the result of interactions between various physical, environmental, technological, economic, socio-cultural, and institutional factors in the rural areas of a nation. Sreedhar and Rajasekhar add that as a strategy, rural development is the approach or operational design to bring about the desired positive change in the socio-economic and cultural life of the people. Although development of rural areas has always been a priority of Indian government since independence, off late rapid urbanisation has diverted attention of the government onto urban areas. Equal attention needs to be paid to the goal of rural rejuvenation. In the following section, the trajectory of rural development programmes in India is briefly sketched.

## 3. The Trajectory of Rural Development in India

Following the Gandhian vision and dream of Gram Swaraj (village level self-governance) (Bardhan, 2007), rural development has always been given critical salience in the planning process of independent India. It began

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<sup>2</sup> For an interesting analysis of the concept of development s. Knutsson, 2009.

with launching of the Community Development Programmes (hereafter CDP) in 1952 followed by the National Extension Services (hereafter NES) in 1953. These two programmes had ambitious objectives and envisioned community participation but failed miserably due to their top-down development paradigm (see the works of Sreedhar & Rajasekhar, 2014; Patel, 2014; UNDP, 2000). Later, successive Five-Year Plans led to the creation of essential physical and institutional infrastructure to bring about socio-economic changes in rural areas (Patel, 2014). The Fifth Five-Year Plan proposed different approaches to rural development such as Area Development, Target Group Approach, and comprehensive development approach.<sup>3</sup> Schemes involving special financial and fiscal concessions, bank loans on soft terms, and capital subsidies were also introduced into underdeveloped areas to attract increased investments for development. (Patel, 2014).

The Integrated Rural Development Programme (hereafter IRDP) launched in 1976 aimed at alleviating rural poverty and at holistic rural development through self-employment opportunities. The IRDP was conceptualized as a programme oriented towards development of a given area rather than development of a specific sector. It was designed to alleviate poverty through local level planning, taking into account the development of local resources including human resources through formulating projects on scientific lines. IRDP also failed to realise its targets. “Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana” (SGSY) is a programme for self-employment of the rural poor and has been implemented since 1999, after restructuring and merging the erstwhile IRDP and its allied programmes. In 2011, the government announced National Rural Livelihood mission with an objective to further the cause of rural development. All these programmes have met with partial success but still much needs to be achieved. It is important to identify and understand specific concerns, needs, and challenges in different rural areas of the country and adopt specific policies rather than adopting a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Universal programmes need to be tweaked to suit local requirements so that their success is guaranteed.

Sreedhar and Rajasekhar (2014) have identified several general characteristics of rural economy which at times work against the successful implementation of ambitious government schemes. Some of the main features are pre-dominance of agriculture and its dependence on monsoon, high levels of poverty, unemployment, illiterate and unskilled work-

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of rural development in India, s. Sreedhar & Rajasekhar, 2014.

force, pre-eminence of small holdings, indebtedness, capital deficiency, lack of infrastructure and basic amenities, and low level of technological advancements. However, Sreedhar and Rajasekhar also believe that collective decisions and actions, visionary dedicated leadership and social consciousness can help to alleviate these problems. One reason for the failure of rural development schemes has been the lack of a holistic focus on the village as a unit. Separate flagship schemes targeting different sectors such as health (NRHM), education (SSA), and livelihood (NREGA, NRLM) have been launched in the past, but met with limited success.

Since 1990, the economic and political context in India changed in a paradigmatic manner. The New Economic policy of 1990 opened the earlier barricaded economy in India. Thus, the process of liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation was unleashed. This was followed by what the author calls a new polity policy in the form of two important constitutional amendments. These were the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act and the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of 1993. In short, the processes of globalisation and decentralisation happened simultaneously in India (Palanithurai, 2009). The above-mentioned two amendments appended one more tier of government to our two-tier federal polity. They also decentralised functions, functionaries, and finances to the local bodies at grass-roots level. The urban local bodies and rural local bodies now have a constitutional status and are democratically elected. They act as deliberative, participative, and decision-making agencies at the grass-roots level. These amendments enabled the local institutions to take charge of their challenges and resolve them with people's participation. Hence, in the last two decades the focus has not been only on general schemes of rural development. The government has been focusing on one particular village as a unique case and addressing the issues at the local level with involvement of local leaders and community. The "model village" as a concept has been gaining salience precisely because of its comprehensive and localised approach. It can address resource deficits in the sectors such as health, education, and growth with adequate focus on the special needs of every village. The idea of an "Adarsh Gram" or model village has been explored earlier as well, most notably through the Pradhanmantri Adarsh Gram Yojana (Prime Minister's Model Village Scheme), launched by the central Government in 2009/10. The scheme was implemented in pilot mode in a thousand villages of Assam, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu, with an allocation of Rs. 10 lakh per village. This limit was later raised to Rs. 20 lakh per village. The target villages under the scheme were those with more than fifty per cent of the population be-

longing to Scheduled Castes (SCs). Additionally, state governments have also taken steps in this direction. Himachal Pradesh launched a Mukhya Mantri Adarsh Gram Yojana (Chief Minister's Model Village Scheme) along similar lines in 2011, allocating Rs. 10 lakh per village.

In line with the recommendations and suggestions gleaned from various committees and works of scholars dealing with the area of rural development, the government of India has recently launched a programme named Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojna<sup>4</sup> (Member of Parliament Model Village Scheme). Under the new scheme, each parliamentarian is mandated to adopt three villages and ensure that the chosen villages are transformed into model villages. It is estimated that 2379 villages would be covered by the scheme by 2019. Village Development Plans will be prepared by the Gram Panchayat (rural local body) and approved by the Gram Sabha (rural local assembly). Sustainability, community involvement, technology, and connectivity are the four most important guiding principles of the proposed scheme. Villages will be backed up by the provision of basic amenities, which are often available only in urban areas, and with a social security system. "Sansad Adarsh Gram Yojana" of the central Government aims at involving members of parliament (MP) more directly in the development of model villages. By adopting a village(s) under this initiative, a member of parliament has an opportunity to benefit directly all sections of a village community in an integrated, efficient, and participatory fashion. Far beyond mere infrastructure development, SAGY aims at instilling certain values in the villages and their people so that they are transformed into models for others. The idea of model village aims to achieve the following:<sup>5</sup>

- i. Adopt people's participation as an end in itself – ensuring the involvement of all sections of society in all aspects related to the life of a village, especially in decision-making related to governance
- ii. Adhere to Antyodaya (development unto the last) – enabling the "poorest and the weakest person" in the village to achieve well-being
- iii. Affirm gender equality and ensuring respect for women
- iv. Guarantee social justice

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed account of the scheme look at <http://saanjhi.gov.in/>

<sup>5</sup> Taken from <http://support.saanjhi.in/support/solutions/articles/6000003506-3-values-of-saansad-adarsh-gram-yojana>

- v. Instil dignity of labour and the spirit of community service and voluntarism
- vi. Promote a culture of cleanliness
- vii. Live in consonance with nature – ensuring a balance between development and ecology
- viii. Preserve and promote local cultural heritage
- ix. Inculcate mutual cooperation, self-help, and self-reliance
- x. Foster peace and harmony in the village community
- xi. Bring about transparency, accountability, and probity in public life, Nurture local self-governance.

Rural development can never be a linear process. It faces challenges and issues at different levels and of various kinds. The SAGY has identified these issues so that they help the members involved to deal with them:<sup>6</sup>

- i. Inability to develop a shared vision of development over a longer period
- ii. Disconnection between development inputs delivered and the genuine needs of the community
- iii. Lack of participation of all sections of society, especially the marginalized and the aged
- iv. Focus on infrastructure and expenditure ignoring the social aspects and sustainable outcomes
- v. Reliance primarily on government grants and not emphasising community contributions and self-help
- vi. Absence of organic convergence of different schemes
- vii. Unfair decisions regarding the allocation of benefits to locations and households leading to alienation
- viii. Political partisanship – perceived and real
- ix. Disregard for socio-cultural values of different sections of the community
- x. Existence of multiple power structures and absence of a reconciling mechanism
- xi. Ignoring environmental concerns for immediate gains
- xii. Prevalence of social evils like drinking, dowry, casteism, communalism and discrimination against women

<sup>6</sup> Taken from : [http://saanjhi.gov.in/pdf/guidelines\\_english.pdf](http://saanjhi.gov.in/pdf/guidelines_english.pdf)



#### 4. Rural Development and Role of Grass Roots or Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) (Rural Local Bodies)

India has a chequered history of Panchayati Raj (rural grass-roots institutions) starting from self-sufficient and self-governing village communities to modern-day organized village governance system in the format of Panchayati Raj Institutions or PRIs. The informal village level council of five elderly men (traditional Panchayats) and the present day democratically elected Panchayats state a lot about the deep-rooted culture of self-governance in this country. Sir Charles Metcalf called the traditional Panchayats of India little republics. However, these informal Panchayats suffered the onslaught of Mughal and British imperialism and could never be revived through democratic means in the pre- independence period. The CDP and NES were the first failed baby steps taken in that direction. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1956) and Ashok Mehta committee (1966) recommended that a formal democratically elected structure had to be crafted at the grass-roots level in order to actualise the objectives of rural development programmes. Most of the other government committees<sup>7</sup> also recommended that people's participation in planning and implementation and grass-roots leadership is a key to fructify objectives of rural development. Rajiv Gandhi's contribution to realising the Gandhian dream of rural self- governance is unforgettable. However, his government's initiative in the form of the 65<sup>th</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment bills was defeated in the upper house of the Indian parliament. Finally, after the pronouncement of New Economic Policy in 1991, what followed in 1993 was a new polity policy in the form of the historic 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts, which added the third tier to the Indian federal polity. These two acts constitutionally recognised rural local governance and made it responsible for performing twenty-nine functions. These functions are exclusively to be performed by a three-tier Panchayati Raj Structure which begins with Gram Panchayat (local body at the village level), Panchayat Samiti (local body at the block level, i.e. above village) and Zilla Parishad (local body at the district level, i.e. above block). This has led to decentralisation of not only functions but also of functionaries and finances. It has widened the scope for people's participation in the process of rural as well as self-development. Joshi (2017)

<sup>7</sup> E.g. GVK Rao Committee, Hanumantha Rao Committee, L. M. Singhavi Committee

calls these Panchayats the central processing units of Indian democracy. These grass-roots level units are the schools of Indian democracy. If they are fed with appropriate inputs, it will be easier to earn outputs that will strengthen democracy as a whole in India. These institutions have been strengthened through salient constitutional provisions such as reservation of seats for women and marginalised sections of the society, and constitution of state election commission and state finance commission. However, the ground analysis of these institutions reveals that they have not been honestly vested with the functions, functionaries, and financial resources in many states in India. This mars the spirit of decentralised democracy and hampers rural development programmes as well. In fact, it still remains a rubber stamp third tier of Indian federalism (Tremblay, 2001). Financial paucity is the biggest problem faced by the PRIs. If PRIs are to work as prime mechanism of development, they have to be given proper financial aid, especially in a global world. However, the situation is not so bad that it does not give us any ray of hope. Certain villages in India are growing exceptionally well. Hiware Bazar, located in the District of Ahmednagar, in Maharashtra, has transformed from a place fraught with issues to possibly the richest village in India. The sole reason for this fairy-tale change is one man called Popatrao Pawar. He banned all addictive substances to minimize expense and encouraged the villagers to invest in rainwater harvesting, etc. There are a record 60 millionaires in the village and barely any poor. From 168 below poverty line families in 1995, Hiware Bazar now has just three. The villagers continue to strive to see the day when not one person is poor. Mawlynnong, a small village in Meghalaya, was awarded the prestigious tag of 'Cleanest Village in Asia' in 2003 by Discover India Magazine. Located at about 90 kilometres from Shillong, the village offers a skywalk that can be taken as you explore it. According to visitors, you cannot find a single cigarette butt or a plastic bag lying around there.<sup>8</sup> Ankapoor is located in the District of Nizamabad in the state of Telangana. Ankapoor has been globally recognized as a "model agricultural village" for its achievements in introducing modern technologies in agriculture while ensuring the participation of all sections of the village community, particularly women. Organizations like the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR), International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), Manila and International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) have formally commended the developments in agriculture in the village. Kumbalangi is essentially a

<sup>8</sup> For more information about other model villages, s. Sengupta (2014).

fishing hamlet that has developed as a unique rural tourist destination in Kerala's Ernakulam district. The Kumbalangi Integrated Tourism Village Project was launched in 2004, focusing on eco-tourism, while offering tourists a glimpse of the rich and rustic life of the Indian countryside. The important attractions in Kumbalangi include organic farm produce used to prepare meals for tourists, toddy tapping, and crab farming. To keep the village clean and serve its energy needs, households are also provided with subsidies for setting up mini biogas plants in their households.<sup>9</sup> These villages in different parts of our country are guiding posts and give hope and optimism to work in the direction of holistic rural development.

## 5. Case Study of Model Village from the state of Gujarat- Punsari

"Swarajya (self-governance) to Surajya (good governance)" has been hailed as the mantra for rural development in the state of Gujarat. The good governance model of this prosperous state from western part of India has been a matter of study for quite some time now. A number of schemes have been launched in the past decade, such as Adarsh Gram, Smarash Gram, Tirth Gram, Sardar Awas, and Paawan Gram, to develop rural areas in Gujarat. The present paper adopts a constructive approach and aims to explore and understand the successful experiment of Punsari Village. The official document of the state government of Gujarat on smart and model village defines a model village as "a village which has foresight for the development and proper planning to keep the village clean, healthy, green, pollution free, crime free, and disease free with co-ordination of various community development and welfare schemes of Government. Smart village means a village which wishes to increase facilities for the citizen by taking decisions democratically. Smart village means a village in which the youth, women, farmers, village artisans, backward, and deprived people may get equal opportunity for development." (Sengupta, 2014). These guidelines aim to offer a design of rural development that focuses not only on improving economic indicators of development but also on bettering the social indicators of development such as health, sanitation, education, women's empowerment, inclusiveness, etc. In this process, the Gram Panchayat has to play a pivotal role. The present pro-

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.swaniti.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Model-Village\\_Brief.pdf](http://www.swaniti.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Model-Village_Brief.pdf)

gramme was inspired by the success of a small village from the District of Sabarkantha in Gujarat called Punsari. In the following section a detailed discussion on how this transformation took place is given. This is based on the information collected through semi-structured in-depth interview with the former village headman and current village headwoman.

### 5.1. Model Village: Punsari

Punsari is located approximately 80 kilometres away from the state capital of Gandhinagar in Gujarat. It has had phenomenal success in the past decade under the leadership of a visionary and missionary Sarpanch (village headman) Mr. Himanshu Patel (who served as the Sarpanch from 2006 to 2016). The village has received several awards from the state as well as national government for its outstanding achievements and has become extremely popular across the country. This was the most important reason that motivated the author to visit and study this model village personally, to understand and explore how this transformation was made possible. The village has 23 communities with a population of 6000, including only 350 people living below the poverty line. Most of the people in the village are dependent on agriculture and milk production for livelihood. The major crops cultivated in the village are cotton, wheat, and potato. The trajectory of development can be broadly divided into five headings.

*Infrastructure Development.* The most important concern in rural development is to provide basic amenities to each person living in the rural area. Punsari stands out in this regard as it has constructed a reverse osmosis plant and since then provided house-to-house piped connections to supply chlorinated water. It also has its own 66 KVA substation for electricity generation and 100 per cent coverage of all streets with LED streetlights. A public address system with 120 waterproof speakers for announcing information and spreading messages has been another striking feature of this village. The village headperson uses this public announcement system to share what s/he thinks, plans, and is doing at the gram Panchayat. The entire village has been put under CC TV surveillance, which has helped to bring down crime rate to almost zero per cent. Each household has a personalised lavatory and the whole village has a well-designed drainage and storm water disposal system. Atal Express is a free bus service available for commutation to all the villagers. Punsari is the first fully Wi-Fi-covered village in India. There are also plans to do GIS mapping for the better im-

plementation of many government schemes. Some of the popular national banks and their ATM centres are now available as well.

*Education.* Education for all and free for all is the mantra this village has aspired to adopt. Punsari has five primary schools and four secondary schools. The class rooms in these schools are fully equipped with CCTV cameras, LED screens used for teaching, mineral water plants, separate toilets for girls and boys, computer labs, and well-stocked libraries. Mid-Meals programme of the central government has been successfully implemented. Availability of these basic amenities within the premises of schools has also helped to reduce the dropout rate to zero.

*Health, Sanitation & Women Empowerment.* Punsari has a 24/7 primary health centre equipped with a pharmacy and a library. It also has a 24/7 maternity ward to encourage institutional deliveries in the village. In fact, the village has been successful in achieving the goal of 100% institutional deliveries. It has also been able to materialise the objective of 100% immunisation and zero per cent infant and maternal mortality rate. The waste collection system offers door-to-door collection service. The street polluters are heavily fined. There are 109 women self-help groups in the village, which has helped and changed the lives of more than 1200 women involved in them. They provide vocational training in order to make women self-reliant.

*Democratic Governance.* A team of 22 full-time and 47 part-time employees along with the elected officials of the gram Panchayat under the leadership of village headperson run this local unit. The village has developed an effective mechanism to redress grievances through a toll-free number. A complaint register is maintained in order to ensure timely grievance redress. A co-ordination committee involving elected representatives and government officials works tirelessly to achieve the goals of good governance.

## 5.2. One Man, Many Schemes and Multiple Hands That Made Punsari a Model Village

Traditionally, rural development looked as a top bottom process. This view was further reinforced through centrally funded poverty alleviation and rural development programmes. In 2006, a young man, Himanshu Patel, was elected as village headman of Punsari. He hails from Chaudhary Patel Community. There was no model in front of him at the time of

his election. He began with performing mundane and routine functions of the gram Panchayat. While doing his work, he realised that the village required urgent attention and a plethora of existing government schemes that were available could be a useful source of finance for development projects. He was clear that he would not beg for funds from corporate entities under their corporate social responsibility schemes or funds from non-resident Indians (NRI). He knew that the revenue generated by the Panchayat was not the only source of finance. It was also not adequate for such programmes. Hence, it was necessary to rely on the funds coming from the state and federal governments. The only challenge for him was how to establish a link between gram Panchayat and various existing government schemes. Currently some eighty-two different schemes for rural development are in operation in India. Himanshu Patel thought of joining the village system with these existing schemes and benefit from them. For example, under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Scheme for Education for All) central government gives funds to construct rooms, toilets, and buy educational material in primary schools. The task of the leader at the local level and the gram Panchayat is to mobilise the gram Panchayat members and village folks, to prepare a proposal, and apply for such schemes so that the money is granted to the village and that it can be used for the purpose of development in the field of education. Similarly, he consistently thought of identifying such schemes and ministries and departments which were already offering financial assistance in a variety of programmes for rural rejuvenation, and he declined to exhaust money generated by Panchayat through taxes.

In the past ten years, more than seventeen crore of rupees have been transferred in the form of financial assistance under various government schemes and programmes to this single village. Generally, criticism is levelled against our three-tier federal model in which government units at the grass roots have the biggest problem of financial crunch but this village stands out as an exemplar. The village head disproved the myth that money does not come from the state and central governments. He rather made a point that local level committed leadership, activism, and vision for rural development were required. Self-governance begins with first owning your work and responsibilities. Finance is just one aspect of rural reconstruction. The bigger challenge is to take the team of elected representatives at the grass-roots level together and generate consensus amidst difference of opinions and actions. Himanshu Patel has successfully handled this situation as he sees village headman not merely as an elected representative but visualises him as a Chief Executive Officer of a

particular village. He believes that a village headman should be available to his people 24/7. The rural transformation is not merely a process of changing the village physically but also changing the way village headman has to function. His model focused on a change in the people's beliefs and attitudes. A model village first needs to have a model Sarpanch (village headperson) who regularly comes on time to the gram Panchayat office and spends considerable quality time at work. Sarpanch's role is to ensure that the citizens' charter is taken seriously by the Panchayat and that people's issues are resolved on priority basis. Maximum communication with villagers, officials of the village level bureaucracy, and other interested parties guarantees minimum frictions and disagreements. This is the most striking feature of the village which garnered stupendous public support for most of the work done by the Panchayat. For Patel, it was essential to reinforce connections with people and that was the biggest advantage for smooth operation and execution of various functions and tasks. The village headman of Punsari talked, discussed, and tried to resolve the issues of at least a hundred people on a daily basis. In fact, he believed that if a hundred people did not come to visit Panchayat office every day, Sarpanch, i.e. the leader, actually failed to garner their confidence and consequently failed to represent them as a village headman. People may come with small and petty issues but headman's involvement in resolving these issues actually helps to strength people's confidence in the Panchayat system. In most of the villages in India, the village headperson almost disappears in the post-election period. After winning the election these headpersons fail to own responsibility and build a connection with their village folks, which is the main reason behind increasing disconnection and distrust between people and headpersons. Himanshu Patel was able to overcome the differences and criticisms levelled against him because of a strong connection that he had established by constantly being in touch with people. He did not hold grudges and biases against people who did not agree with him but rather tried to accommodate them and absolve their differences.

Himanshu Patel has set an example to other villages that committed leadership and community support are key elements that make rural development possible. He has many more plans like GIS mapping of people, resources in the village, generating sources of livelihood within the boundaries of the village, change people's mindset in order to transform this model village in to an ideal village. For him, the development of infrastructure and use of sophisticated technology is not the only sign of development. This leader believes that it should include communal har-

mony, social justice, improvement in some essential social indicators of development like zero maternal/infant mortality rate, hundred per cent institutional deliveries, zero dropout rate, hundred per cent immunisation etc. A holistic development model is the attractive feature of this village. The village Panchayat has established a skill development centre which focuses on enhancement of skills that are required for locally available livelihood opportunities. Village headman of Punsari repeatedly indicated that it was essential to link rural development process with local culture, available resources, and local needs. Punsari comes quite close to what Ash (1994) recognises in his work as a double movement of globalization on the one hand and devolution, decentralization, and localization on the other, which has been called glocalization. In the field of women empowerment Punsari goes beyond the conventional idea of empowerment where women are seen as working in high profile positions, are highly educated, or are dressed in so-called modern avatar. This village under the able leadership of Himanshu Patel believed in empowering their women by re-establishing, re-connecting, reviving, and recognising their role in the village life. Their role was undermined by imposing upon them outdated and orthodox customs and rituals. The process of empowerment had to be in the direction where these orthodoxies had to be fought and women could come out and contribute to not only their development but also to overall development of their village. Therefore, the Panchayat offered those women credits, loans, provided them with land, or offered skill improvement programmes so that they could come out of their traditional shells and be part of the progress of their village. This has not broken their connections with rural life. Rurbanisation is a term that has become quite popular in recent times. The concept centres around the development of global villages that preserve and nurture the essence of rural community life without compromising on facilities perceived to be essentially urban in nature, thus creating altered 'Rurban' forms. Gujarat government has already rolled out a scheme for the purpose of rurbanisation under which selected villages shall be transformed to provide them with urban amenities and yet preserve their rural soul. The Government of India launched a similar scheme titled Provision of Urban amenities in Rural Areas (PURA) in 2010.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed information look at Scheme for Provision of Urban Amenities in Rural Areas (PURA), Final Report of Working Group, by Ministry of Rural Development, [http://planningcommission.nic.in/aboutus/committee/wrkgrp12/rd/wgrep\\_pura.pdf](http://planningcommission.nic.in/aboutus/committee/wrkgrp12/rd/wgrep_pura.pdf)



### 5.3. Future Plans of Punsari Village Headman

After successfully serving for two terms as village headman, Himanshu Patel stepped down from the post since this time it was reserved for a female candidate. He now wants to focus on preparing a team of young local level leaders who are not only from his own state but from across the country. He has already networked with a thousand such young village headmen from different corners of India, cutting across party ideologies. The aim of such a group is to share experiences of rural development among themselves. Nonetheless, what is important to note here is that Himanshu Patel does not intend to replicate the model of Punsari in other parts of the country. He rather believes that every village should be a unique example rooted in its own ecology and environment. He has been appointed programme officer to overlook the implementation of Nandgram project which is based on a PPP model. Vedanta Company is contributing 1000 crore rupees under its CSR initiative. The proposed programme focuses on nutrition of infants and children and fights against under- and malnutrition in India.

### 5.4. Punsari is a Model Village and Yet Struggles to be an Ideal Village

Punsari model village definitely has an excellent record in terms of fewer people living below poverty line, availability of schools, water facilities, free Wi-Fi facility, roads, proper solid waste management etc. The village has proved itself on important development indicators like health, education, social services, women empowerment, which have already been discussed in the previous section. However, during the field work the author observed that mere physical indicators of development are at times misleading. A model village is not necessarily an ideal village. An ideal village in author's opinion is the one that has been able to transcend social inequalities, reduce subordination of women, develop true community spirit, and work tirelessly to respect and recognize constitutional values. Villages in India are notorious for the caste divide, communal tensions, social injustices, and, at times, instances of violence. Punsari has performed exceptionally well in providing basic amenities, reducing inequalities among different social groups, and improving some major social indicators of development. However, it has yet to accomplish its goal of becoming an ideal village where every citizen hailing from different socio-economic

background has a voice and choice. This was observed by the author while interacting with the current Punsari village headwoman. Interaction with her has revealed certain issues that are conveniently overlooked under the grand saga of village development. These are discussed in the following paragraph.

Sunanda Patel, current village headwoman, hails from the dominant caste called Chawdhary Patel. Interestingly but not surprisingly, Himanshu Patel also comes from the same caste group. Ms Patel did not have any experience in governance and was never involved in any political activity, yet she was fully supported and backed by Himanshu Patel (former village headman) so that she could be successfully instituted as the Sarpanch of Punsari Village. At the time of rural local body election in 2016, the post of village headperson was reserved for a female candidate (according to the provisions of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act). Himanshu Patel had to step down, but he wanted to institute a woman from his own caste group. Hence, it was necessary to prevent women from other caste groups from winning the election in the village. However, the fact was that women from other caste groups also stood for election. In order to prevent these other (read lower caste) women from becoming the village headperson, Himanshu Patel not only mobilised his resources but also the influence that he had earned in the past ten years. This was a strategic decision taken by this previous headman to enable him to continue his influence on village politics. Therefore, Ms Sunanda Patel was supported and eventually won. The author asked this new puppet-like female Sarpanch about her future plans – what strategies she would adopt to implement her plans, etc. The answers were imprecise and inefficient. In fact, within few minutes after the interview began, her husband joined her in the office and made sure that Ms Patel answered as per a pre-determined design. She was blowing the trumpet of development achieved by Himanshu Patel and could not say anything concrete about her plans and programmes. This interview has reinforced the fact that (in most cases barring few exceptions) a woman merely plays a role of a rubber stamp and real governance is in the hands of dominant village men. It also exposes the way rural democratic institutions are actually working in India (cf. Kumar, 2006). Another important fault line found in this village is that the Gram Sabha (village assembly) meetings are not conducted on regular basis. Article 243(b) defines the Gram Sabha as “a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of the Panchayat at the village level”. Gram Sabha is an integral part of the Gandhian concept of village Swaraj (rural self-government).

The objective of Gram Sabha is to enable each and every voter in a village to participate in decision-making at the local level. It is a constitutional body consisting of all persons registered in the electoral rolls of the village Panchayat. It provides a political forum to people in the village where they can meet and discuss their common problems, and consequently, understand the needs and aspirations of the community. Thus, the Gram Sabha is expected to be an epitome of participatory, deliberative, and direct democracy. It is the body that should provide valuable inputs to the Gram Panchayat to lead local government effectively. The Gram Sabha is also to act as a watchdog in the interest of village communities by monitoring the functioning of the Gram Panchayat. However, the effectiveness of Gram Sabha has been marred by issues like social exclusion, dangerous information gap, political apathy on part of villagers, dependency syndrome, and political culture of patronage. Furthermore, Joshi (2017) stresses low participation in Gram Sabha meetings and irregular and informal ways of its conduct as some of the major concerns at the grass roots. These field observations gleaned from the model village Punsari help us understand the fact that the physical development of a village does not necessarily promise change in its social environment. The author argues that unless a village is able to transcend social inequalities and develop social cohesion, a model village is far away from being an ideal village.

## 6. Conclusion

The paper has attempted to explore the development journey of a smart and model village called Punsari. The author argues that grass-roots leadership, community participation, decentralisation of powers to local bodies in rural areas, and financial support in the form of various government schemes can bring far-reaching changes in the rural landscape of India. Punsari represents a classic example as well as an exemplar of concerted efforts of elected leaders, community people, and government support to bring transformation and make villages smart and sustainable. The paper has highlighted the role played by a local leader whose vision and mission can achieve the impossible. However there still exists a gap between a model village and an ideal village. The gap can only be filled with the persistent efforts for rural revitalisation not only by the government but also with effective involvement of the local leaders and village folks. Economic progress has to coincide with social progress which is inclusive, sustainable, and sensitive not only to its environment but to its people as well.

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## EMERGING MODEL VILLAGES IN INDIA: A STUDY OF PUNSARI VILLAGE FROM THE STATE OF GUJARAT

### Summary

*Although India no more lives in its villages, the rural population is still sizeable and, more importantly, it reels under the pressure of extreme poverty, pitiable basic amenities, and dearth of livelihood opportunities. Urbanisation and urban growth has captured the attention of government and policy makers especially in the post liberalisation period. However, much needs to be done to improve the conditions of the people living in rural areas. Strengthening of village democracy was considered as a possible solution to resolving issues at the grass-roots level. This paved way for the historic 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) in 1993 which sought to empower people at the base of India's federal polity. Encouraging people's participation in the process of development, policy making and its implementation was the fundamental objective of this legislation. Twenty-five years have passed since the adoption of the 73<sup>rd</sup> CAA in 1993 but still much needs to be done. There is an urgent need to transform the rural landscape of India and bring it on a par with its urban counterparts while retaining the soul of rural life. The case of village Punsari from the Sabharkantha District of the state of Gujarat (India) is unique as it stands out as a smart and model village. All the modern amenities found in an urban area are available in this village. Using descriptive analytical framework, the paper aims to argue that such smart villages are a ray of hope for the rural revitalisation in Indian countryside. Semi-structured interviews with the local leaders, officers, and stakeholders form an important part of the research used to generate insights and conclusions. The paper argues that grass-roots leadership, community participation, decentralisation of powers to local bodies in rural areas, and financial support in the form of various government schemes can bring far-reaching changes in the rural landscape of India. Punsari represents a classic example as well as an exemplar of concerted efforts of elected leaders, community people, and government support to bring about transformation and make villages smart as well as sustainable.*

**Keywords:** rural development, model village, grassroots institutions

## POJAVA MODELSKIH SELA U INDIJI: STUDIJA SLUČAJA SELA PUNSARI U SAVEZNOJ DRŽAVI GUJARAT

### Sažetak

Premda stanovništvo Indije više nije prevladavajuće ruralno, broj ljudi koji žive na selu još je uvijek vrlo velik, i što je važnije, indijsko selo slama se pod pritiskom ekstremnog siromaštva, žalosnog stanja temeljne infrastrukture te nedostatka mogućnosti za poboljšanje životnih prilika. Urbanizacija i urbani rast zaokupili su pozornost vlade i političara, osobito u razdoblju nakon početka liberalizacije. Potrebno je učiniti mnogo toga kako bi se poboljšali uvjeti života ljudi u ruralnim područjima. Smatralo se da bi jačanje demokracije u seoskim područjima moglo biti jedno od rješenja za probleme na lokalnoj razini, što je omogućilo donošenje 73. ustavnog amandmana 1993. godine kojim se željelo dati nove demokratske mogućnosti ljudima u temeljnim zajednicama u Indiji. Temeljni cilj ovoga zakona bio je poticanje participacije građana u razvojnim procesima te stvaranju i provedbi javnih politika. Prošlo je 25 godina od njegovog donošenja, a ciljevi još nisu ostvareni. Ruralno područje Indije potrebno je hitno preobraziti i dovesti na razinu usporedivu s urbanim područjima uz istovremeno očuvanje ruralnog života. Slučaj sela Punsari u okrugu Sabhar-kantha indijske savezne države Gujarat jedinstven je jer se ono izdvojilo kao takozvano selo model i pametno selo. Sve suvremene pogodnosti i infrastruktura urbanih područja postoje i u ovome selu. Koristeći opisno-analitički okvir, autorica tvrdi da su takva sela glavna nada za ruralnu revitalizaciju u Indiji. U istraživanju su korišteni polustrukturirani intervjui s lokalnim čelnicima, službenicima i drugim ključnim akterima, da bi se dobili uvidi i moglo zaključiti o stanju stvari. Lokalno vodstvo, sudjelovanje zajednice, decentralizacija ovlasti na lokalna tijela u ruralnim područjima te financijska potpora u obliku različitih vladinih pomoći može omogućiti dalekosežne promjene u ruralnim područjima Indije. Punsari je klasični primjer koji pokazuje kako zajednički napori izabranih lokalnih čelnika, zajednice i vlade dovode do transformacije ruralnih područja te ih čine pametnim i održivim.

Ključne riječi: ruralni razvoj, modelsko selo, institucije lokalne demokracije