

Historical Development of Panchayati Raj in India

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Abstract:-

Panchayati Raj Institutions are playing important role in Indian society from ancient time. The grass root units of local self government have been considered as instruments of socio economic and political transformation in rural India. Involvement of people at the grass root level is the most important means of bringing about socio, economic and political development. It is identified as institutional expression of democratic decentralization in India. Decentralization of power of the panchayats is seen as a means of empowering people and involving them in decision making. Local governments being closer to the people can be more responsive to local needs. The democratic system in a country can be ensured only if there is mass participation in the governance. Therefore, the system of democratic decentralization popularly known as Panchayati Raj is considered as an instrument to ensure democracy and socio economic and political transformation.

Keywords: - Economy, Social, Democracy, Panchayati Raj, Administration.

Introduction:

After independence, the concept of Panchayati Raj seemed to have disappeared permanently into the mists of India's romantic past. In the late twentieth century, however, the notion has returned once more to the political agenda, for a variety of reasons: strategic, practical, economic and ideological. This essay briefly traces the origins of the concept of Panchayat, offers some historical examples of the panchayat in use, and attempts an explanation as to why it should once again have assumed importance in the minds of politicians, NGOs and administrators.¹

Panchayat literally means an assembly of five people. They are elected by villagers. Panchayati Raj is a process of governance. The term was coined by Jawaharlal Nehru. It is distinct from Panchayat, which connotes government of a local body limited to a geographical area. Jawaharlal Nehru did not like the phrase democratic decentralisation for, according to him, "democracy means power springing from the people. By Panchayati Raj what was being envisaged was not a territorial government or administration; but rather an approach to administration guided by and vested in the people themselves"²

Historical Perspective of Panchayati Raj:-

Local self-government, in the words of Sydney Webb, is "as old as the hills". This can be truer of India than any other country of the world. There is sufficient evidence to establish the fact that the institution of local self-government is almost pre-historic, and the conception of local self-government is indigenous to the Indian soil. Municipal governments have flourished in India since times immemorial. While empires rose and fell, village panchayats which formed an integral part of the national life, helped to preserve democratic traditions in social, cultural, economic and political life, survived the onslaughts of centuries of political upheavals and saved Indian society from disintegration. The existence of local bodies in ancient India is a positive proof of the inherent genius of our people to manage local affairs efficiently and on a decentralized

basis. The decentralization of power in the kingdoms of the Maurya and the Gupta period was unique. Such a devolution of power was unknown to the western world until modern times. The local governments at different levels, performing many functions, though not very democratic, were sufficiently autonomous.³

Panchayati Raj under the Muslim Rule:-

Local institutions received a set-back in the reign of Muslim in India. "Mughal government was highly centralized autocracy. The king was the motive power of the entire administrative machinery. Where the government is absolute, the supreme authority concentrated in one hand, the territory larger, the means of communications between the districts slow and difficult, the transfer of local officers frequent, no political life or local initiative is left to the people."⁴

The muslim rulers recognised local chiefs and zamindars as the repositories of local authority, to the exclusion of the people. "The villages and towns of the Mughal empire enjoyed parochial self-government rather than local autonomy. A people who do not possess political freedom of self taxation for national purposes, cannot be said to enjoy local autonomy". The office of Kotwal was developed as the keystone of the municipal administration and "his functions in connection with the town in his charge were, at least in theory, the most comprehensive conceivable being in certain respects even wider than those of the municipal bodies of the present day"⁵

While the Mughals did not initiate any positive measures of encouragement to local institutions, wherever such institutions existed, they worked in co-operation with the official machinery of the rulers and in certain respects became a part of it.⁶

Panchayati Raj in pre-independence days:-

Panchayat has an ancient flavor as it is a good word. It represents the system, by which the innumerable village republics of India were governed. But the British Government, by its ruthlessly thorough method of revenue collection, almost destroyed these ancient republics, which could not stand the shock of this revenue collection. Congressmen are now making a crude attempt to revive the system by giving village elders civil and criminal jurisdiction. The attempt was first made in 1921 but failed. It is being made again, and it will fail if it is not systematically and decently⁷

Panchayati Raj after independence in India:-

Panchayati Raj had to go through various stages. The First Five Year Plan failed to bring about active participation and involvement of the people in the Plan processes, which included Plan formulation implementation and monitoring. The Second Five Year Plan attempted to cover the entire countryside with National Extensive Service Blocks through the institutions of Block Development Officers, Assistant Development Officers, Village Level Workers, in addition to nominated representatives of village panchayats of that area and some other popular organisations like co-operative societies. But the plan failed to satisfactorily accomplish decentralization. Hence, committees were constituted by various authorities to advise the Centre on different aspects of decentralisation.⁸

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957)

In 1957, Balwant Rai Mehta Committee studied the Community Development Projects and the National Extension Service and assessed the extent to which the movement had succeeded in utilising local initiatives and in creating institutions to ensure continuity in the process of improving economic and social conditions in rural areas. The Committee held that community development would only be deep and enduring when the community was involved in the planning, decision-making and implementation process. The suggestions were as follow:

- an early establishment of elected local bodies and devolution to them of necessary resources, power and authority,
- that the basic unit of democratic decentralisation was at the block/samiti level since the area of jurisdiction of the local body should neither be too large nor too small. The block was large enough for efficiency and economy of administration, and small enough for sustaining a sense of involvement in the citizens,
- such body must not be constrained by too much control by the government or government agencies,
- the body must be constituted for five years by indirect elections from the village panchayats,
- its functions should cover the development of agriculture in all its aspects, the promotion of local industries and others
- services such as drinking water, road building, etc., and
- the higher level body, Zilla Parishad, would play an advisory role.

The PRI structure did not develop the requisite democratic momentum and failed to cater to the needs of rural development. There are various reasons for such an outcome which include political and bureaucratic resistance at the state level to share power and resources with local level institutions, domination of local elites over the major share of the benefits of welfare schemes, lack of capability at the local level and lack of political will.

It was decided to appoint a high-level committee under the chairmanship of Ashok Mehta to examine and suggest measures to strengthen PRIs. The Committee had to evolve an effective decentralised system of development for PRIs. They made the following recommendations:

- the district is a viable administrative unit for which planning, co-ordination and resource allocation are feasible and technical expertise available,
- PRIs as a two-tier system, with Mandal Panchayat at the base and Zilla Parishad at the top,
- the PRIs are capable of planning for themselves with the resources available to them,
- district planning should take care of the urban-rural continuum,
- representation of SCs and STs in the election to PRIs on the basis of their population,
- four-year term of PRIs,

- participation of political parties in elections,

The states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal passed new legislation based on this report. However, the flux in politics at the state level did not allow these institutions to develop their own political dynamics.

G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985):-

The G.V.K. Rao Committee was appointed by Planning Commission once again to look at various aspects of PRIs. The Committee was of the opinion that a total view of rural development must be taken in which PRIs must play a central role in handling people's problems. It recommended the followings:

- PRIs have to be activated and provided with all the required support to become effective organisations,
- PRIs at district level and below should be assigned the work of planning, implementation and monitoring of rural development programmes, and
- the block development office should be the spinal cord of the rural development process.

L.M.Singhvi Committee (1986)

L.M. Singhvi Committee studied panchayati raj. The Gram Sabha was considered as the base of a decentralised democracy, and PRIs viewed as institutions of self-governance which would actually facilitate the participation of the people in the process of planning and development. It recommended:

- local self-government should be constitutionally recognised, protected and preserved by the inclusion of new chapter in the Constitution,
- non-involvement of political parties in Panchayat elections.

The suggestion of giving panchayats constitutional status was opposed by the Sarkaria Commission, but the idea, however, gained momentum in the late 1980s especially because of the endorsement by the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who introduced the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill in 1989. The 64th Amendment Bill was prepared and introduced in the lower house of Parliament. But it got defeated in the Rajya Sabha as non-convincing. He lost the general elections too. In 1989, the National Front introduced the 74th Constitutional Amendment Bill, which could not become an Act because of the dissolution of the Ninth Lok Sabha. All these various suggestions and recommendations and means of strengthening PRIs were considered while formulating the new Constitutional Amendment Act.⁹

73 Amendment:-

The 73rd Amendment Act 1992 came into effect from the 24 April 1993. All states enacted legislation by 23rd April 1994. The Panchayats previously were a mere suggestion in the Directive Principles of State Policy whereas the 73rd Amendment resulted in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) being conferred constitutional sanction. This means that all activities of PRIs as stipulated by the Act have now legal and constitutional status and any violation of this by anybody and at any time would be punishable by law. Constitutional status vide Article 243 of Part IX of the Constitution which came into effect from April 24,

1993 made it mandatory for all States to promulgate their own new acts consequent to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act or amend their old ones by April 1994.

All states have done so by new. Keeping in view the provisions of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, State Panchayati Raj acts have been constituted which incorporate a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj, Consisting of Zilla Panchayats at the District level, Panchayat Samitis or kshetra Panchayats at intermediate level & Gram Panchayats at the village level.

1. Short title and commencement.

(1) This Act may be called the Constitution (Seventy – Third Amendment) Act, 1992. The Panchayats

243. Definitions. In this part, unless the context otherwise requires, -

(a) “District’ means a district in a State;

(b) “Gram Sabha” means a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of Panchayat at the village level;

(c) “Intermediate level” means a level between the village and district levels specified by the Governor of a State by public notification to be the intermediate level for the purposes of this Part;

(d) “Panchayat” means an institution (by whatever name called) of self-government constituted under Article 243B, for the rural areas;

(e) “Panchayat area” means the territorial area of a Panchayat;

(f) “population” means the population as ascertained at the last preceding census of which the relevant figures have been published;

(g) “Village” means a village specified by the Governor by public notification to be a village for the purpose of this Part and includes a group of villages so specified.¹⁰

243A. Gram Sabha. A Gram Sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the Legislature of a State may, by law, provide.

243B. Constitution of Panchayats.

(1) There shall be constituted in every State, Panchayats at the village, intermediate and district levels in accordance with the provisions of this Part.

(2) Notwithstanding anything in clause (1), Panchayats at the intermediate level may not be constituted in a State having a population not exceeding twenty lakhs.

243C. Composition of Panchayat:- All the seats in a Panchayat shall be filled by persons chosen by direct election from territorial constituencies in the Panchayat area and, for this purpose, each Panchayat area shall be between the population of each constituency and the number of seats allotted to it shall, so far as practicable, be the same throughout the Panchayat area.¹¹

243D. Reservation of seats. (1) Seats shall be reserved for

(a) the Scheduled Castes; and

(b) the Scheduled Tribes,

in every Panchayat and the number of seats so reserved shall bear, as nearly as may be, the same proportion to the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in that Panchayat as the population of the Scheduled Castes in that Panchayat area or of the Scheduled Tribes in that Panchayat area bears to the total population of that area and such seats may be allotted by rotation of different constituencies in a Panchayat.

243E. Duration of Panchayats, etc. Every Panchayat, unless sooner dissolved under any law for the time being in force, shall

continue for five years from the date appointed for its first meeting and no longer.

243F. Disqualification for membership. A person shall be disqualified for being chosen as, and for being, a member of a Panchayat, if he is so disqualified by or under any law for the time being in force for the purposes of elections to the legislature of the State concerned.

243G. Powers, authority and responsibilities of Panchayats. Subject to the provisions of the Constitution, the Legislature of a State may, by law, endow the Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government and such law may contain provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon Panchayats at the appropriate level.

243H. Powers to impose taxes by and Funds of the Panchayats. The Legislature of a State may, by law, -

(a) authorize a Panchayat to levy, collect and appropriate such taxes, duties, tolls and fees in accordance with such procedure and subject to such limits;

(b) assign to a Panchayat such taxes, duties, tolls and fees levied and collected by the State Government for such purposes and subject to such conditions and limits;

243J. Audit of accounts of Panchayats. The Legislature of a State may, by law, make provisions with respect to the maintenance of accounts by the Panchayats and the auditing of such accounts.

243K. Elections to the Panchayats.

The superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of electoral rolls for, and the conduct of all elections to the Panchayats shall be vested in a State Election Commission consisting of a State Election Commissioner to be appointed by the Governor.¹²

Problems in Panchayati Raj Institutes:-

One of the greatest shortcomings of any centre-sponsored rural development programme is its inability to 'trickle down' to the true intended beneficiaries or the poorest of the poor. The introduction of the panchayati raj system through the 73rd amendment of the Indian constitution tried to address this by prescribing a three-tier system of governance for the entire country, effective since 1993. The amendment mandates that responsibility, resources and decision-making authority be placed in the hands of elected local councils or panchayats. The decentralization versus centralization debate can be

better understood in a cost-benefit analysis framework. Centralization has the benefit that 'bureaucrats' who are in charge of planning and implementing are well trained with the required expertise and are in a better position to co-ordinate plans across different jurisdictions. Additionally, although this is debatable, they are relatively free from populist pressures. However, the shortfall of such an approach include a lack of flexibility in terms of understanding changing local needs and the problem of accountability — in ensuring that those in the chair are motivated not by their own gain but by public interest. Decentralization, on the other hand, suffers from the reverse — it empowers the public to sensitise policies to their own needs but often the people who make and implement plans lack expertise. One state that has stood out as a figurehead in the decentralization attempt has been West Bengal, "the first and the only major state which has had timely panchayat elections on a party basis regularly every five years since 1978, a year after the left front government was elected to power in the state." However, the above study reveals that the state often quoted for its great success in decentralization has run into some glitches of late. A survey of a sample of villagers on the village constituency meetings across the state throws up some interesting observations. The meetings were extremely male-dominated with low participation by women in spite of the provision that one-third of the members have to be women. Relatively affluent persons stayed away from such meetings since they did not perceive any direct benefits from poverty alleviation programmes discussed in such meetings, political minorities stayed away since they felt they wouldn't be 'heard', scheduled castes and tribes did not feel encouraged to participate since political leaders were often from the higher castes. The strong negative wealth bias, the gender and caste bias have thus had serious repercussions on the participatory nature of this system. The other important obstacles have been the extent of devolution of power and finances which has been left to the states' discretion. While devolution has happened in a considerable degree only in West Bengal, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Kerala, the political set up in these states have crucially determined their relative successes. For instance, decentralization in Karnataka under the centrist Janata Party in late 80s "has led to political capture by middle peasants and rural elites." This brings us to the crux of the failure of decentralization, revolving around the psychology of power equations. These findings from this study point out that elected representatives feel threatened that their new-found status would get eroded by direct empowerment of the people, the former also being employers of the latter, typically wage labourers.¹³

Suggestions:

Major suggestions for making Panchayati Raj successful are as under:

1. There should be change in present social structure.
2. N.G.Os should initiate to eliminate social evils as untouchability, castism, communalism, child marriage, dowry system and veil system etc.
3. Panchayati Raj Institutes should emphasize improvement in Health, Education and Roads.
4. Transparent Audit Agency should be established to eliminate corruption and red tapism.
5. Panchayat members should be trained by state govt. especially women.¹⁴

Panchayati Raj Institutes are playing important role to achieve grass root level democracy in India. But it could not achieve their goals. Actually, there is no real democracy at grass root level. In Panchayats election, Voters cast their vote on Castism, Communalism, kinship, and money matters. These social evils create big problem in the way of local self government. So, if we want success of Panchayati Raj Institutes, we should create a healthy atmosphere in the society. It will be a big step for Panchayati Raj Institutes.

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