

# Panchayati Raj: A Legacy of Indian Political System

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## ABSTRACT

Panchayati Raj Institutions have been playing a pivotal role for rural development in general and socio-economic upliftment of downtrodden section of the rural society in particular. The Panchayati Raj system is not a new concept and therefore is considered as one of the best ways of governance of the rural India. This work will be the narrative of a Panchayati Raj system. It will be the narrative of the inception and evolution of Panchayati Raj from the formative years of the Indian State and the consolidating years of the Indian Nation to the troublesome times in which the 72nd Amendment Bill became the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992. The study portrays how the present Panchayati Raj Institutions have the ancestral root in the historic past. It appears that the panchayati raj with effective local autonomy continued to exist even during the period of Maurya's and Gupta's, to which we call as the period of centralized sovereignty. Panchayati raj institutions existed all the way in one form or the other. Britishers gave these local bodies a new political touch. This philosophy later acted and reacted on the minds of the wise founding fathers of constitution. Mahatma Gandhi advocated panchayati raj as the foundation of India's political system, it would have been a decentralized form of government where each village would be responsible for its own affairs. The term for such a vision was Gram Swaraj ("village self-governance"). With the result that panchayati raj was thought to be adopted as a measure to concretize the dream of decentralization. 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act 1992 are the ambitious efforts made in the post-independence era to accomplish the goal of decentralization. Panchayati Raj Institutions – the grass-roots units of self-government – have been proclaimed as the vehicles of socio-economic transformation in rural India.

## KEY WORDS

Panchayats, panchayati raj, development, democracy, village, self government

## INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, the panchayats have played a key role on organising and maintaining social order in Indian villages. Panchayat is an old concept of democracy in the history of civilization. So, we can say democracy is not entirely new to India, for its roots could be found in our panchayats.

Panchayats have been in existence in India from very early times. While empire rose and fell, village panchayats continued to survive giving continuity to Indian village traditions. The concepts of five seniors in a village, a form of self-government of the organization to settle down matters of dispute of the community has not been found anywhere else in the world as recorded by Chinese travellers in their diaries. Actually the inspiration of panchayati raj is derived from the tradition of Panch Parmeshwar where God speaks through the five and the official publication speak of village republic. Traditional panchayats played the vital role of maintaining norms and order and dispensing justice. It also resolved

crises and disputes and took decisions on behalf of the village community for the villagers' welfare and development. In fact the process of decision-making was participatory and very often a 'democratic' consensus emerged due to the mediation of panchayats. Significantly the panchayats derived their legitimacy from the support of the village community and its decision were binding on all community.

Dynasty after dynasty tumbled down. Revolution succeeds revolution. Hindu, Pathan, Maratha, Sikh, English are all masters in turns but the village communities remain the same. In times of trouble they arm and fortify themselves. A hostile army passes through the country. The village community collect their cattle with their walls and let the enemy pass unprovoked. Basically panchayats were informal institutions responsible for regulating and governing village society according to the socio-political norms of the times.

Indian villages were remote and were disconnected from centres of state powers, initially decided their agenda of development and management of the society and its resources through these institutions, that is Panchayats.

## FLASH BACK

Panchayati Raj institutions(PRI) has a long history in the country. India has a distinction of having the largest saga of villages self-government in the world. As a matter of fact India has been the cradle of rural local government which continued to flourish from the time of Vedic civilizations to the advent of British rule. Although formally not known as Panchayati Raj system, but the elements did exist in the ancient period. In Vedic age, the village was looked after by a person who is known as 'Gramini'. In the time of Rigveda, near 17000BC, evidences suggest that-governing village bodies called 'sabhas' existed. During Maurya's and Gupta's period, reference are found of a village and district respectively. Right from the Buddhist to Gupta period, village never lost its importance. With the passage of times, these bodies become panchayats. These panchayats were functional institutions of grass roots of governance in almost every village. Panchayats had large powers, both executive and judicial. They use to council and supervise and interfere if necessary. Whatever the period may be, panchayats in general, beat any era, was an assembly of elders with hereditary rights to a great extent. Though casteism and feudalistic system of governance under Mughal rule in the medieval period slowly eroded the self-government in villages. A new class of feudal chiefs and revenue collectors, known as zamindars, emerged between the ruler and the people. And, so began the stagnation and decline of self-government in villages. These village bodies received a setback under this period and almost disappeared in their old form under the British, confining the authority only the social life of the village community. The annexation of the territory and over centralization of administration during the early British period brought about total extinction of traditional institutions of local self-government in India. The events of 1857, however, has an eye-opening and softening influence on the British rulers and subsequent years saw numerous steps being taken for decentralization and to usher in local government in the rural and urban areas.

However, local self-government, especially the urban one is essentially a British creation. The first attempt was made by British government to establish local self-government was in 1800. during British regime, however, the panchayat lost their autonomy. The traditional caste panchayat, for example, become ineffective because of the competition offered by the British Courts of Justice. The true spirit of local government can be traced to Lord Mayo's resolution of 1870 which proposed a sharing of revenue with the provinces. Lord Mayo's Resolution(for decentralization of power to bring about administrative efficiency in meeting people's demand and to add to the finances of colonial regime) gave the needed impetus to the development of local institutions. It was a landmark in the evolution of colonial policy towards local government. The real benchmark of the government policy on decentralization can,

however, be attributed to Lord Rippon who, in his famous resolution on local self-government on 18 May 1882, focused on towns, provided for local bodies consisting of a large majority of elected non-official members and presided over by a non-official chairperson. The famous resolution of Lord Rippon in 1882 for the first time stressed the educative aspect of administration. He said that it is not primarily with a view to improvement in administration that this measure is put forward and supported. It is chiefly desired as an instrument of political and popular education. This resolution met with the resistance from colonial administrators. Rural decentralization remained a neglected area of administrative reform. The Royal Commission on decentralization under the chairmanship of Sir H.W. Primrose recognized the importance of panchayats at the village level. The provincial autonomy under the Government of India act, 1935, marked the evolution of panchayats in India. But the system of responsible government at the grass roots levels was least responsible.

In spite of various committees such as the Royal Commission on decentralization, the report of Montague and Chemsford on constitutional reform(1919), the Government of India Resolution(1919) etc. a hierarchical administrative structure based on supervision and control evolved. The Indian National Congress from 1920s to 1947, emphasized the issue of all-India Swaraj and organized movements for independence under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.

## **NEW ERA OF PANCHAYATI RAJ**

Panchayati Raj , the system of local governments in India, is one of the most challenging topics when it comes to institutional change, a quintessential issue that underpins politics in changing societies. In the Indian case the period from independence in 1947 to the 73rd Amendment Act in 1992, which unified the relevant legislation .

The practice and implementation of decentralized local government is the best surety for the success of any democracy. A political democracy flourishes best when its root are planted deeply in the vital dynamic soil of local self-government. Post independence there was an emerging consensus on the necessity of decentralization for fulfilling democratic aspiration of the people. The policy makers has started realizing that a centralized policy is must for overall development of the country.

The architects of Indian Constitution, keeping in view the importance of rural polity, made a provision for the introduction of village ‘panchayats’. There was a lot of debate in the Constitution Assembly on this issue whether constitution should give primary place to village republics from which various tiers of representative institutions could be established to ensure grass root democracy. While persons like H.V.Kamath, Prakasan, Nehru and others supported the Gandhian idea of Gram Swaraj and the idea of village panchayats as the basis of Indian polity, persons like Dr.. Ambedkar, chairman of Constituent assembly opposed the idea of village panchayats as the basis of Indian polity. The supporters of Gandhian idea of Gram Swaraj held the view that Constitution should have been built up on the village panchayats and district panchayats. Some of the members wanted India to contain so many village government. After a lot of discussion, Mr. Santhanam moved the amendment saying that the self-government is not nearly political. It may be economic or spiritual. The framers of Indian Constitution have been influenced by Mahatma Gandhi on establishment of panchayats in village. After a good deal of thought and discussion on panchayati raj, the foundation stone of our ancient political philosophy, found a place in the constitution of the country. Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first prime minister of India has hailed it as ‘the most evolutionary and historic step’ in the context of new India.

## **GANDHI’S CONCEPT OF PANCHAYATI RAJ**

Indian independence must begin at bottom. Thus every village will be a republic or panchayat have full power. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self sustained and capable of managing its

affairs, even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. Gandhiji was always fond of the concept of 'Gram Swaraj' and 'Gram Vikas' and strongly advocated the establishment of village set up based on these doctrines. In his writings and statements he drew the attention of the people and the government to the urgent need for rebuilding the village as self-sufficient and self-reliant entity with the village panchayat play the central role in encouraging and supporting constructive and creative activities among the people.

According to him, 'greater the power of the panchayat, the better for the people as true democracy has to be worked from the below by the people of every village'. Gandhiji was so clear about the importance of villages that he declared 'if the villages perish, India will perish too'. He also said India is found in villages and not in its few cities and true democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. Real Swaraj will not come by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist the authority when it is abused. In other words, Swaraj is to be obtained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority.

## STEPPING STONES OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

Economic growth and social justice within the framework of parliamentary democracy and secularism raised new issues apart from giving new dimensions to the old problems. 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 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 organizations like co-operative societies. But the plan failed to satisfactorily accomplish decentralization. After independence, to bring the rural people in the main stream of nation-building and to create in them a sense of involvement in national schemes of economic planning and social transformation and the need to take steps to organize village panchayat and endow them with necessary powers to enable them to function as units of self-government was felt, the scheme of Community Development Program was introduced in the country in 1952. It was a broad based programme, covering all the aspects of village life, including agriculture, health rural industries, communication and social welfare of women and children. The main emphasis was on the development of self-reliance in the individual and initiative in the community for achieving desired goals.

Post independence, the panchayati raj system of self-government had received much coverage and attention. Notably three committees, (B.R.Mehta Committee, Ashok Mehta Committee, and G.V.K. Rao Committee) had gone into its structure, concept and approach. At least in part to provide the Gandhian goal of direct political participation of people at grass root level, in 1956, the National Development Council appointed a committee under B.R.Mehta, which submitted its report in 1957. The most important of the recommendations of B.R.Mehta Committee was termed 'democratic decentralization'. The committee had arrived in India when the Government of India and the State Governments must response greater faith and trust in the people for their own welfare.

So in brief we can say that PRIs in post-independence in India owes its origins to the Community Development Programme in 1952. but it was clear recommendations of B.R.Mehta Committee's report that in 1959, PRIs, were established with a lot of excitement and euphoria. The structural pattern of the three tier system of panchayati raj, based on B.R.Mehta recommendation, designed to make devolution of authority and effective popular participation in decision making at the grass root level. Thus the establishment of democratic institutions was envisaged to facilitate fundamental and far reaching changes in the structure of distinct administration and there by in the pattern of rural development.

The village panchayats in India has been the pulse beat of our democracy. An ideal democracy can blossom only when the monopolists and racketeers of state power at the central and state level agree to invigorate village units of government operated by the popularity elected surrogates of the weaker segment of grass root society and endow with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as people's administration without bureaucratic inhibition. Though PRIs have seen in existence for a long time but with time it was losing its importance for many reasons.

Even after the recommendations of B.R.Mehta and other committees these institutions have not been able to acquire the status and dignity of a viable and responsive people's bodies. Due to a number of reasons including absence of regular elections, prolonged suppression, insufficient representation of weaker sections, especially the SCs, STs, and women, inadequate devolution of powers and lack of financial resources. The development at grass root level cannot be separated from political processes. For India, where nearly 70% of the population lived in villages, the village constituted a basic unit of social as well as political life in India. The local self-government as a conscious process of administrative devolution and political education was realized and championed by Rajiv Gandhi and it was his proposal and work that gave birth to a superabundance of legislation on local self-government.

The belief that panchayats were a primary mechanism to allow for people's participation in administration, planning and democratic process was finally realised. The heart and soul of decentralised model of government, our panchayati raj, took with the efforts of late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. It was in August 1989 that the former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi introduced the constitution amendment(64th amendment) bill in the Lok Sabha for strengthening and revitalising PRIs in India and enable them to function as effective units of self-government. 'Power to the People' was his dream manifested in the form of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act, making April 24, 1993 a landmark day in the history of India. Mahatma Gandhi had first championed the idea of little village republics but it was under late Prime Minister P.V.Narsimha Rao that 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act became effective.

The amendment assured representation to devolution of funds and decision-making right down to the village, making India, the largest democracy, the 'Representative democracy'. The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to Constitution of India not only gives a constitutional mandate to the panchayats, it also provides the uniformity and formal structure to these traditional institutions of self-governance necessary for effective functioning.

The new PRI have the potential to start a new era of change and development in accordance with people's needs and priorities to revitalize a deeply trouble system of democracy. The system is also a great tool for social empowerment. The amendment has crated on the whole a positive impact though may may not be uniformly in different sections of society. Present panchayati raj is a process of government: it refers to a system originally linking people from gram sabha to lok sabha.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of panchayati raj is not alien to the people of India. It has been the pulse beat of our democracy since time immemorial. It has served as the backbone of our democratic institutions around which the entire fabric of social and economic activity of the village rested. Panchayats have been playing an important role in order to monitor rural development programme. These institutions have been helpful in identifying real beneficiaries in order to get maximum benefits out of various schemes. Politically speaking, it became a process of democratic seed drilling in the Indian soil, making an

average citizen more conscious of his rights than before. Administratively speaking, it generated a new leadership which was not merely relatively younger in age, but also modernistic and pro-social change in outlook also. Finally, looked at from the development angle, it helped in rural people cultivate a developmental psyche. So it may be summed up that panchayats which has a history of decentralization of powers in India has not been a matter of political gift but a political necessity as true and effective decentralization requires even the restructuring of constitution itself.

To conclude, local self-government, our panchayats is one of the most innovative governance change processes our country has gone through. The noble idea of taking the government a country into hands of the grass root level is indeed praise worthy.

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