

Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Rural Development in Particular Reference to Jammu and Kashmir

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ABSTRACT;

The Panchayat Raj System is playing an important role in rural development. The state of Jammu and Kashmir at that point of time was in the grip of economic and educational backwardness. Keeping literacy level and economic well-being of the voter as the yardstick for participation in Panchayat elections only helped the rural elite owing allegiance to rulers to use these institutions to their advantage. The study is crucial for evaluating the role of Panchayat and the impact of the same on the development of the state.

Key words; Panchayat Raj, Jammu and Kashmir, Rural Development

INTRODUCTION

After the independence the Panchayats Raj Institutions (PRIs) are expected to play an important role in rural development in India, (Kadam 2012, Thanikasalam and Saraswathy 2014). As per 2001 census, rural development assumes greater significance as 72.22 per cent of Indian population still lives in rural areas (Chauhan 2014). Plan documents of both the central and state governments and various committees have emphasized the importance of these bodies in the polity. The second five-year plan laid special emphasis on the role of Panchayats in rural developments. Second five year plan envisaged a Panchayat as responsible for village development keeping transformation of social and economic life of rural areas as its goal of development. It says that, the rural progress depends entirely on the existence of an active organization in the village which can bring all the people, including the weaker sections, in to common programs to be carried out with the assistance of administration. To achieve this objective the second Five year Plan entailed the Panchayats to perform civic, developmental, land management, land reform and judicial functions. Subsequent plans and policy pronouncements of national leader to emphasized the role of Panchayats in village development.

The role of Panchayati Raj institutions as instruments of rural reconstruction and development needs no emphasis. They have been reorganized with wider powers and financial resources not merely as institutions of political participation but institutions of social and economic development. Panchayati Raj has come to be associated with two broad images. First, it is a government by itself and second it is an agency of the state government. In the integrated exercise of planning for social and economic development, co-ordinate roles, the present set up is a three-tier representative structure of the government where the administrators, elected leaders and local population participate in the developmental effort. In fact the elected representatives play the key role in the decision making process, leaders are regarded as facilities of the process of development. Since the emphasis of rural development policies is bringing about people's participation in the development programs, it is possible to achieve this through the leaders. The administrators are accepted to participate with missionary zeal in the life and development of the villages and these institutions are to be galvanized to become effective instruments of social and economic change.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Rural development has been massively a government supported process rather than the people-led process in India. To formulate and implement rural development programs an appropriate institutional structure is required. This need was met by the establishment of Panchayat Raj Institution (PRIs) in India. Further, the PRIs, being local self-governing

bodies ensure, the opportunity for people's participation and involvement in the formulation and implementation of rural development programs. Thus, the PRIs are entrusted with the task of promoting rural development in India. Since Independence greater emphasis has been laid on the social, economic and planning policy of our country for creating an appropriate rural, economic and social infrastructure and to promote an overall development. The planning policy of our country accorded the highest priority to agriculture and rural development. The measures envisaged from the first five-year plan had considerable bearing for the growth of rural economy. The first five-year plan laid down that "development of agriculture, based on the utilization of man power resources of the countryside and the maximum use of local resources, holds a key to the rapid development of the country" (Kadam 2012).

In the words of Committee on Plan Projects, "so long as we do not discover or create a representative and democratic institution which will supply the local interest, supervision and care necessary to ensure that expenditure of money upon local objects conforms with the needs

and wishes of the locality, invest it with never be able to evoke local interest and excite local initiative in the field of development" and the team recommended a three-tier model of Panchayat Raj to serve as instrument of rural development in India (Committee on Plan Projects

Report 1957). Panchayats have been in existence for a long period. The present set-up clearly marks itself off from the past in respect of powers, functions and financial resources. The four main aspects of the present system are: (i) democratization of the constitution and universal establishment of Panchayats. (ii) transfer of more powers from the state to these bodies, (iii) expansion of the scope of and transfer of more functions to the Panchayats in regard to agriculture and allied activities, health and welfare and education and (iv) strengthening of the resource position of these bodies.

Rural development is generally conceived as a multi-sectoral activity which includes, besides agricultural development, rural industries, the establishment or improvement of social overhead

facilities or infrastructure, such as schools, clinics, roads, communication, water supply, markets, welfare sources, improved nutrition, literacy, adult education etc. The primary objective of rural

development is to enrich the quality of the rural masses, particularly the poorer and the weaker sections. The implementation of democratic decentralization through the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) was meant to give an opportunity for local initiative and participation in the

developmental activities. According to Gandhiji, "Indian independence must begin at the bottom. Every village should be a republic or a Panchayat having full powers. The greater the power of Panchayats, the better it is for the people" (Dayal 1970). To him "Swaraj" signified the vesting of the ultimate authority in the peasant and the labourer. True democracy cannot be worked from below by the people of every village. In this light, The Constitution 73rd (Amendment) Act, 1992 has provided a new dimension to the concept of Panchayati Raj. In other words, the concept of people's participation should be considered as an ideological commitment and, therefore, legislative and structural measures should be initiated to give legitimacy to people's participation (Vijaykumar 1999).

The Panchayati Raj Institutions are statutorily elected bodies at the village, Block and District levels with powers of local government. The primary objective of Panchayati Raj is to strengthen the base of democracy at the grass roots and to enable the people of each village to achieve intensive and continuous development in the interests of the entire population, irrespective of caste, class, and creed. Panchayati Raj or local self-government is an exercise in democratic decentralization of administrative authority. The system is based on the following principles.

- There should be a three-tier structure of local self-governing bodies from village to district level, with an organic link from the lower to the higher ones.
- There should be a genuine transfer of power and responsibility to these bodies.
- Adequate financial resource should be transferred to these bodies to enable them to discharge their responsibility.
- All development programs at these levels should be channeled through these bodies.
- The system evolved should be such as to facilitate further decentralization of power and responsibility in the future. (Dahama 1993)

The future of the country really depends upon effective Panchayati Raj and people's participation or co-operation. It is the only effective instrument which can put speed and substance in our planning process and ensure the most effective use of the country's resources for productivity. In that lies the future of both democracy and development of the economy as well as of the people. In the years to come, Panchayati Raj will be a catalytic agent of integrated development of tribal mass in rural areas.

Development is a broad concept which encompasses every aspect of human life. It is essentially an activity carried out by state involving policy formulation and execution on the part of the government for the benefit of society. Rural development, on the other hand, means an overall development of rural areas in social, economic, political and cultural spheres so that people could lead a pleasant life (Pandit and Kulkarni 2012). It is a broad, inclusive term which takes in its consideration the socio-economic and political development of the rural areas. It includes measures to strengthen the democratic structure of society through the Panchayati Raj Institutions as well as measures to improve the rural infrastructure, improve income of rural households and delivery systems pertaining to education, health and safety

mechanisms (Mishra, Akhtar & Tarika 2011). The rural development programs propose to reduce the poverty and unemployment, to improve the health and educational status and to fulfill the basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing of the rural population (Panda and Majumder 2013). For this to realize, Government of India launched some developmental schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), etc. All these schemes are intended to lessen the gap between rural and urban populace which would help ease imbalances and speed up the development process.

The term 'Rural Development' is of focal interest and is widely acclaimed in both the developed and the developing countries of the world. There is however no universally acceptable definition of rural development and the term is used in different ways and in vastly divergent contexts. As a concept, it connotes overall development of rural areas with a view to improve the quality of life of rural people. In this sense, it is a comprehensive and multi-dimensional concept and encompasses the development of agriculture and allied activities -village and cottage industries and crafts, socio-economic infrastructure, community services and facilities, and above all, the human resource in rural areas. As a phenomenon, it is the result of interactions between various physical, technological, economic, socio-cultural, and institutional factors. As a strategy, it is designed to improve the economic and social well-being of a specific group of people, the rural poor. As a discipline, it is multidisciplinary in nature representing an intersection of agricultural, social, behavioral, engineering and management sciences (Singh 1995).

In Jammu and Kashmir Panchayats undertook the works of highest utility and material benefit under Hallashri system of labour wherein villagers participated in the work free of cost or on payment of nominal wages. The Department of Panchayats and Rural Development was reorganized and made responsible for enforcing the provisions of the 1951 Panchayat Raj Act. The department possessed the powers of superseding a Panchayat. The department had its staff at state, provisional, district, tehsil and sub-tehsil levels. There was one director, two provincial panchayat officers, seven assistant rural development officers, sixteen inspectors and sixty sub-inspectors. The director functioned at the state level as the controlling and coordinating head of the different provincial administrative units of the Panchayat department. Below the director there were two provincial officers. The provincial unit was further sub-divided for the purpose of administration into divisional units. Each unit was under the charge of a gazetted officer designed as assistant rural development officer. At some places the jurisdiction of assistant rural development officer extended over to an administrative district and at other places it was extended to over two districts or even more. Below the assistant rural development officer their was a Panchayat inspector whose jurisdiction extended over to fifteen Panchayats depending upon the density of population, area and topographical conditions. The sub-inspectors were responsible for supervising and guiding the works of village Panchayats (Riyaz 1990).

The works undertaken by Panchayats varied from region to region. In Kashmir division, improvement works undertaken included improving irrigation facilities, construction of flumes, construction of dams and retain walls to strengthen the banks of khuls (streams). In Jammu division the works mainly comprised improvement of ponds, construction of tanks and water supply works in Kandhi areas. Works of general nature such as construction of roads and latrines were undertaken at places where Panchayats had funds. Before the Panchayati Raj system could be introduced in the whole country, the Jammu and Kashmir state took the lead by passing the Jammu and Kashmir Village Panchayat Act of 1958 and repealing the earlier Acts and envisaged a two-tier Panchayati Raj system – Gram Panchayat at the village level and Block Panchayat Board at block level. The Act empowered the state government to establish by notification a panchayat in every village or group of villages and to define territorial jurisdiction thereof (Vijay Kumar 1970). This Act of 1958 did not differ much from 1951 Act. Although the Act was passed primarily to make better provisions for the administration of village Panchayats in Jammu and Kashmir state, the manner of its implementation made it open to manipulation by various vested interests. Under this Act, the government had the powers to suspend, supersede or dissolve a Panchayat on the grounds of default in the performance of duties or abuse of power and make alternative arrangements for carrying out the work of the Panchayat for a period not exceeding six months. For example, under this Act any Punch, Sarpanch or Naib-Sarpanch could be removed from office in case his conduct in office was 'undesirable' or his removal was desirable in the interest of the public (Pandit, A.S. and B.V. Kulkarni. 2012). The Act also provided for establishment of 'Panchayat Adalats' apparently to decentralize administration of justice. The government could move any member elected to the Panchayat Adalat if he was found to be either guilty of mis-conduct in the discharge of his duties or incapable of performing any of his duties (Singh, K. 1995). No Panchayat Adalat should entertain or hear a suit or a case in which any member of Panchayat Adalat is party to the suit. The Act also talked about the prescribed authority who were to determine the number of panchs to be elected or nominated. The number of panchs to be fixed from time to time as determined by the competent authority which could have been less than 7 and not more than 11. The Panchayat boards had to advise in the development of the block in respect of communication, irrigation facility, government dispensaries, veterinary dispensaries, schools, local industries, medical relief and drinking water. By 1962 the entire rural population and inhabited villages numbering 6956 were covered by the Panchayats and average population per Panchayat worked out to be 3,098. The number of Gram Panchayat increased from 936 in 1962 to 1483 in 1977-78, covering all the inhabited villages. Average population per Gram Panchayat decreased

from 3,098 in 1961-62 to 2,543 in 1967-68 but in 1990 this figure again increased to 3,218 compared to 2,386 at the all India level. The number of villages per Gram Panchayat works out to 4.7 in 1990 compared to 2.8 at the all India level (Mohammad Sultan, 1995)." Between 1952 and 1969 two developments of far-reaching consequences took place. First, at the national level the focus on the Community Development Programme was overshadowed by the grow more food campaign originating out of the report by the Ford Foundation Expert Group on "India's food crises and steps to meet it (1959)". To overcome the problem of food shortages several programs were introduced in the subsequent years. Agriculture development received top priority and the concern for "grow more food" became the main driving force behind the new seed-water fertilizer technology. The results of this new package were encouraging and instant. It helped to reduce the pressure on the food front to a large extent. But the gains were not only region specific but were disproportionately garnered by the rural elite. The pattern of benefits aggravated the regional and interpersonal inequalities of income and assets. Though nobody could find fault with the policy of growing more food. But agricultural development becoming synonymous with rural development was a development fraught with serious consequences (Dubhashi, 1970).

LIMITATIONS

The Panchayati Raj in India has not been an absolute success. Its functioning all these years has demonstrated numerous shortcomings. The Panchayati Raj scheme is defective in so far as the distribution of functions between the structures at different levels has not been made along scientific lines. The inadequacy of funds has also stood in the way of successful working of the Panchayati Raj. The Panchayati Raj bodies have limited powers in respect of imposing cesses and taxes. Introduction of the Panchayati Raj aimed at securing effective participation of the people. But in reality this hardly happens since the key administrative and technical positions are manned by the government officials. Various Panchayati Raj Institutions are constituted setting aside democratic norms and principles. The indirect election of most of the members to Panchayat Samiti only increases the possibility of corruption and bribery. Even the Zilla Parishad consists of mainly ex-officio members. They are, for the most part, government officials. This negates sound democratic principles. The performance of Panchayati Raj Institutions has been vitiated by political cum caste factionalism, rendering developmental projects into chimeras. Corruption, inefficiency, scant regard for procedures, political interference in day to day administration, parochial loyalties, motivated actions, power concentration instead of true service mentality- all these have stood in the way of the success of Panchayati Raj.

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