

Panchayat Raj System: Strengthening the Foundation of Democracy

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of the Panchayat Raj system reflects India's journey towards decentralized governance, aiming to empower local communities and enhance democratic values. The paper focuses on democratic decentralisation through the effective participation of locals with the help of well-planned programmes. The Panchayat Raj Act is landmark legislation in India that aims to provide a three-tier system of decentralized self-governance in rural areas. The paper covers the established under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, PRIs play a crucial role in grassroots democracy, rural development, and local governance. The paper enhances a three-tier structure that empowers local self-governance. It has been established in all the states of India by the acts of the state legislature to build democracy at the grass root level.

Key words: institutions, Constitutional, democratic, amendment, reservation, development and system

INTRODUCTION

If India lives in her villages there cannot be any real development of the country if the villages are marginalized in the process of the different facts of development. Likewise there can be real democracy only when the villagers have a say in moulding their future. Right through the corridors of time India has had a unique institution called panchayat that took care of the development of every village. In the good olden days the Aryans evolved their village system which was a blending of the old Dravidian village and the new Aryan ideas. These villages were almost independent and were governed by their elected panchayats. In his book *Glimpses of the World History*; Nehru describes the panchayats as “The village republics of ancient India.” In the centre of the village there was the panchayat ghar, where the village elders used to meet. In small village instead of this panchayat ghar there would just be a big tree. Every year all the adult men and women of the village would meet to elect their panchayat.

Independent India took every possible step to revive the panchayati raj institutions in order to involve the villagers in their socio-economic development. The British regime, by its ruthlessly thorough method of revenue collection, had almost destroyed these ancient republics. In his magazine *Harijan* (July 22, 1946), Gandhiji observed “independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or panchayat having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every villages have to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs.” Gandhiji went a step further saying that the Gram Panchayats should be entrusted with the dispensation of justice. The poor peasant needs not go out of his village, spend hard-earned money and waste weeks and months in towns on litigation. “Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated Panchayat at Nagaur on 2 October 1959. The day was selected on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's birthday. Gandhi wanted Gram Swaraj through Panchayati Raj” (Sharma, Shakuntla 1994: 131)

Article 40 of the constitution of India lays down that the state shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of local self-government. “Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayati Raj as the foundation of India's political system, as a decentralized form of government in which each village would be responsible for its own affairs” (Sharma, Manohar Lal 1987:44)

According to the constitution, panchayats shall be given powers and authority to function as institutions of self government. The powers and responsibilities to be delegated to panchayats are: (a) preparation of a plan for economic development and social justice, (b) implementation of schemes. For economic development and social justice in relation to the 29 subjects

given in the Eleventh Schedule of the constitution and (c) to levy, collect and appropriate taxes, duties, tolls and fees. "Many Panchayats have been successful in achieving their goals, through cooperation between different bodies and the political mobilization of previously underrepresented groups in India. There is an obstacle of literacy that many Panchayats face for engagement of villagers, with most development schemes being on paper. However, homes linked to the Panchayat Raj System have seen an increase in participation for local matters" (Singhal, Vipin: 2015:3)

A new part relating to the panchayats has been inserted in the constitution to provide for, among other things, Gram Sabha in a village or group of villages; constitution of panchayats at the village level; direct elections to all seats in the panchayats at the village and intermediate levels; reservation of seats for the scheduled-castes and scheduled-tribes in proportion to their population for membership of panchayats and office of chairpersons in panchayats at each level; reservation of not less than one third of the seats for women; fixing tenure of five years for panchayats and holding elections within a period of six months in the event of suppression of any panchayat.

In 1952, Pandit Nehru launched his ambitious Community Development Projects and NES (National Extension Service) blocks covering over three lakh villages by 1959. In January 1957 the Mehta study team was appointed to study and report on the Community Development Projects and NES blocks to assess the success of the programme. The story of Panchayat Raj has been one of ups and downs in different states; a phase of ascendancy during 1959; a phase of stagnation during 1965-69 and a phase of decline during 1969-77. A number of factors conspired to undermine the Panchayat Raj structures and made them ineffective. In fact except in Maharashtra and Gujarat, the Panchayat Raj institutions were rarely given an opportunity to take up planning or implementation work on a sizeable scale:

Bureaucracy sought to dissociate the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) from the development process. It felt that it was primarily accountable for results to the state government and were averse to working under the supervision of elected representatives of the panchayats. In all, the activities of the PRIs were meager, their resource base weak and the overall attention given to them niggardly. As if this was not enough, some of the state governments went on postponing elections to the panchayats. "The Panchayats, throughout the years, have relied on federal and state grants to sustain themselves economically. The absence of mandatory elections for the Panchayat council and infrequent meetings of the Sarpanch have decreased the spread of information to villagers, leading to more state regulation" (Dwivedi, Ritesh 2013:51)

After a prolonged stagnation the PRIs received fresh life in the early 1990s. April 24, 1993 could be hailed as red letter day in the history of the panchayats in India as on this day the constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 came into force to provide constitutional status to the PRIs. The salient features of the Act are: (a) to provide three tier system of panchayati raj for all states having a population of over 20 lakh; (b) to hold panchayat elections regularly every five years; (c) to provide reservation of seats for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women (not less than one third of total seats), (d) to appoint state finance commissions to make recommendations regarding financial powers of the panchayats; and (e) to constitute district planning committee to prepare a draft development plan for the district as a whole. "The 73rd amendment was also resisted because reservation of seats meant that high caste people had to accept marginal caste women into the political empowerment system. Indirectly, this leads to corruption when the government devotes funds to the grassroots panchayat where resources and funds are exploited by bureaucratic channels" (Tiwari, Nupur 2008:34)

In the 1990s we also tried to revive the Gram Sabha or the village assembly. The constitution (73rd Amendment) Act gives constitutional status to the gram sabha. As per article 243 B. of the constitution of India gram sabha means a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls of a village within the area of gram panchayat. According to article 243, 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; accordingly, all villagers above the age of 18 years have an inherent right to determine their own destiny. Here is a forum where the poor villagers can make their presence felt. The Gram Sabha has a key role in bringing about transparency in the functioning of the gram panchayats, in ensuring equitable distribution of benefits, in creation of community assets where these are needed and in bringing about social cohesion.

The Panchayat network has now been extended to the tribal areas of the country. The provisions of the panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled areas) act, 1996 extends panchayats to the tribal areas of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan. This provision came into force on December 24, 1996. "In 1992, the 73rd amendment was passed, transforming the role of women in Panchayati raj. The 73rd amendment established reservation of one-third of seats for women in basic village councils. This reservation had led to a significant increase in women's participation in local governance. Women are now serving as elected representatives in various positions, including as sarpanch (village head) and panchayat members. Women also demonstrated their positive and enlightened thinking in the panchayat to respond to the government's expectations of women" (Kaul, Shashi; Sahni, Shradha 2009: 38)

The ministry of Rural Development extends limited financial assistance to the states to impart training to create awareness among the elected representatives of the panchayats and the concerned government functionaries. The ministry provides financial assistance through the Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART) to the Non-Government Organization (NGOs) for conducting training and awareness generation programmes on Panchayati Raj. "The sarpanch (head of five) is its elected head. The members of the gram panchayat are elected directly by the voting-age village population for a period of five years. The Gram Panchayat President, also known as Sarpanch often presides over the Sabha meetings" (Seetharam, Mukkavilli 1990:34)

A conference of minister of Panchayati Raj of the state was held in New Delhi on July 11, 2001 to analyse the poor progress in respect of devolution of powers upon panchayats and to determine the steps needed to make the panchayats emerge as real "institutions of self-government". The conference wanted time-bound and regular elections to panchayats, completion of devolution of powers with regard to 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule and the constitution of the district planning committee.

Women are bound to play a leading role in the Panchayati Raj institutions in the country after the historic constitutional amendment made a few years ago. The participation of women in the PRIs is considered essential of not only for ensuring their political participation in the democratic process, but also for releasing the developmental goals for women. "The supportive actions from their families are encouraging women to attend every PRI (Panchayati Raj in India) meeting. Even though the bureaucracy was all male dominated, Gandhi hoped that Panchayati raj could be the framework for a free Indian political order. As a promoter of liberalism, he proposed gram *Swaraj*, or self-contained and autonomous villages, to give women the most rights" (Kaushik, Anupma; Shaktawat, Gayatri 2010:22)

There are over 2,17,300 village panchayats in the country covering over 96 percent of about 5.79 lakh inhabited villages and 92 percent of the rural population of the country. On an average, a panchayat covers of about 2400 villages. There are 4.526 panchayat samitis at the block, Tehsil level covering 88 percent of the blocks in the country. On an average a Panchayat Samiti covers about 48 gram panchayats. There are 330 Zilla Parishads covering about 76 percent of the districts in the country and each Zilla Parishad has on an average 13-14 panchayat samitis and about 660 gram panchayats. Once all these grassroot bodies are galvanized into action, India will earn a niche in grass-root democracy.

CONCLUSION

It encompassed almost all activities of rural development which were to be implemented with the help of village panchayats along with the participation of people. The system increases democratic participation, to better articulate local needs and priorities, and to ensure a more efficient use of local resources along with greater accountability and transparency. The Panchayati Raj system in India faces several significant challenges that hinder its effectiveness. These challenges can impact the overall governance and development in rural areas. It was established in all of India's states by state legislature acts to foster democracy at the grassroots level.

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