



PANDIT JAWAHARLAL NEHRU: THE FOUNDING FATHER OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA

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Abstract

The genesis of the 'Panchayati Raj Institutions' (PRIs) is linked with the launching of the community development and National Extension Service Programmes immediately after the initiation of planned economic development by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. These programmes were viewed basically as "Peoples' programmes with government participation". The idea of PRIs is 'democratic decentralization' and this has been emerged based on the Gandhi's cherished vision of 'self-governing' villages. It also includes measures to improve the rural infrastructure, improve income of rural households and delivery systems pertaining to education, health & safety mechanisms. In a nutshell, the whole idea of this scheme is based on the dictum that 'rural development is for the rural people, of the rural people, and by the rural people themselves'. The department called 'Ministry of Rural Development' of Govt. of India has launched various development schemes through PRIs such as Sampoorna Swachhta Abhiyan, Gram Vikas Yojna, Farmer Market & Livestock Market, Underground Drainage System Construction Scheme and so on. Through these schemes Govt. of India seems to accomplish its dream of rural India's development. This paper attempts to elucidate the role of Nehru in laying the foundations of Panchayati Raj Institutions by initiating the process of rural development administration and also examines the legitimization of Nehruvian perspective of decentralized democratic rural self government by the legalization and institutionalization of three-tier Panchayati Raj Institution in India.

Key Words: *Panchayati Raj Institution, Rural Development, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru's Initiatives, Nehruvian Perspective, Three-Tier Panchayati Raj Institution, Rural Self-Government.*

Introduction

After independence, India has undergone tremendous modernization and change at a rate faster than most other countries of the world. The notable contribution in this regard has been made by Jawaharlal Nehru. Therefore, Nehruji has become the most important personality of Modern India.

Usually Nehruvian ideology is considered to be antithetical to Gandhiji. This is because prior to independence, Nehru took a lot of objection to Gandhian programmes and schemes. On the contrary Gandhiji himself had said that "When I am dead and gone, Jawaharlal will speak my language". This came to be true as Nehru blended his own ideology and that of Gandhiji after independence.

This is made explicit by the fact that Nehru, after independence operationalised Gandhian conception of Village self sufficiency through the programmes of rural development and decentralized administration. He introduced the Community development and the Tribal Development Block programmes. The multipurpose projects for irrigation, water supply, power generation and the construction of major dams which Nehru called 'Temples of Modern India' benefited the rural community. In fact because of development of large irrigation potential could the green revolution be possible in the 1970's.

Background

Panchayats have been the backbone of the Indian villages since the beginning of recorded history. Panchayat is an ancient Indian word that means, Five Persons (Headman)., 'Panchayat Raj' literally means Governance or Government.

Gandhiji, the father of the nation, in 1946 had aptly remarked that the Indian Independence must begin at the bottom and every village ought to be a Republic or Panchayat having powers. Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayati Raj, a decentralized form of Government where each village is responsible for its own affairs, as the foundation of India's political system. His term for such a vision was "Gram Swaraj" (Village Self -governance).

Gandhiji's dream was translated into reality with the initiative and efforts of Nehru to introduce the three-tier Panchayati Raj system to ensure people's participation in rural reconstruction. It was adopted by state governments during the 1950s and 60s as laws were passed to establish Panchayats in various states. It also received backing in the Indian Constitution, with the 73rd amendment in 1992 to accommodate the idea.

In this scenario, this paper attempts to elucidate the role of Nehru in laying the foundations of Panchayati Raj Institutions by initiating the process of rural development administration in India. This paper examines the legitimization of Nehruvian perspective of decentralized democratic rural self government by the legalization and institutionalization of three tier Panchayati Raj Institution in India.



Rural Development Initiatives in Nehruvian Era

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru took considerable interest in the organization of Panchayats to genuinely make them people's institutions. Nehru launched Community Development Programme (CDP) on 2nd October 1952. Its objective was to assist each of India's 600,000 villages in developing effective local government, cooperatives, and schools. Through these institutions, activities were carried out in the areas of agricultural production, crafts and industries, health services, education for children and adults, recreation, housing, and programs for women and youth. Multipurpose village –level workers were backed up by specialists at the block headquarters, and the Panchayati Raj political -administrative unit was democratized to give people the opportunity to voice their needs to government representatives. It is asserted that the forces of community development, the increasing penetration of modern ideas through the mass media, and the working of the Panchayati system have given India's lower strata greater voice in local affairs.

One of the important initial moving forces in community development was Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's interest in the programme. Nehru felt that one of India's most important undeveloped resources was the people, living in its some six hundred thousand villages. Nehru saw in community development the way to involve the village people in building a new India. He visualized that through their involvement in self-help oriented programmes, would come development of the people and people's institutions—both essential ingredients in moving India towards one of its most clearly stated objectives, that of developing into a viable democracy.(Katar Singh, 1999, p156). Thus, Nehru envisioned rural development with people's participation in independent India.

The introduction of the community Development Programme in the First five year plan gave a new dimension as well as impetus to the participation of people in development. Nevertheless, since CDP was not attached with the people; it couldn't prove to be a success story. People took it as a burden put on them by the government. Evidently, the Second Evaluation Report on Community Development and National Extension Programme by Evaluation Division of Planning Commission (1954) pointed out: "An emphasis on organization compliance and official responsibility is threatening to turn a state induced popular movement of rural regeneration into an official programme of task in which the people were asked to participate" Nehruji appointed a team, under the leadership of Balwantrai Mehta to find out the cause for the failure of this programme and came up with the inference that there should be an organization at village level, which would select the true beneficiaries and implement various government programmes and schemes. This organization would act as the representative of all the villagers and should ensure the development of the village as well as participation of villagers. In this way Nehruji tried to achieve local self-government through Panchayats (the organization). This concept of local self-government was the right step towards decentralized democracy.

Panchayati Raj Initiatives in Nehruvian Era

The Indian Constitution deals with government at the centre and state levels, and does not foreshadow Panchayati Raj as a form of political organization, except that states are directed in the Directive Principles to 'take steps to organize village panchayats. To enable them to function as units of self government.' In the absence of constitutional mandate, Nehru 1.brought in the rural administrative structure of Panchayati Raj in India. 2. but he was constrained in making it compulsory in all the states. The declared aim, then, was the decentralizing of democracy. There was also a more practical, immediate reason.

The main consideration which prompted their introduction seems to have been the need for provoking public co-operation and participation in national construction and development, in view of the slow momentum of economic growth compared with such countries as Israel, Yugoslavia and China.

Soon after the creation of the new Ministry of Community Development in January 1957, the Government of India appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Balwantrai Mehta to study the working of the CDP, and suggest how best it could be maintained and implemented. The committee recommended a three-tier system of local government, christened 'Panchayati Raj 'by Jawaharlal Nehru. At the grassroots or village level were to be formed Village Panchayats, at the middle or block level were to be Panchayat Samitis, and at the apex or district level, Zilla Parishads were to be formed.

Nehruvian Perspective of Panchayati Raj

Nehru's concept of Panchayati Raj is that the villagers should think, decide and act for their own socio-economic interests. Thus Panchayati Raj is related to village self-governance, where the people in the form of an organization will think, decide and act for their collective interest. Self-government allows the villagers to decide by and about them without hampering others interest.

The three-tier structure of Panchayati Raj institutions was brought into existence after the Mehta Committee Scheme was approved by the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in January 1958. The objectives behind the introduction of



democratic institutions at the district and block levels, and suggested that each state should work out the structure which suited its conditions best.

The new system of Panchayati Raj institutions was first adopted in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh in 1959, followed by Assam, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in 1960, Maharashtra in 1962, and Gujarat and West Bengal in 1963 and 1964 respectively. The new system was implemented without any reservations whatsoever in Gujarat and Maharashtra, and with some reservations in Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Assam. In the rest of the states, the response varied from reluctant implementation to dilution, diarchy and ritualism in the system. With the operationalisation of the 73rd Constitution Amendment, a three-tier structure of Panchayati Raj institutions has been adopted all over the country.

Therefore, Nehru found that self-governance is the base for success of democracy, and for self-governance Panchayati Raj System is a must. Thus, Nehru laid the foundation for the Panchayati Raj institutions in India.

Implementation of Panchayati Raj during Nehruvian Era

Nehruvian concept of Panchayati Raj has been an extension of the Gandhian idea of village autonomy. Nehru, while incorporating the perspective of rural self government of Indian tradition and Gandhian thought, had formulated the organizational hierarchy and multiple sphere structure of rural administration under the rubric of 'Panchayati Raj system'. Nehru named the modern three-tier structure of rural development administration formulated under his stewardship by the appellation — 'The Panchayati Raj'. Hence, Nehruji appointed the Santhanam Committee to look solely at the issue of PRI finance in 1963. One of the prime areas of concern in this long debate on Panchayati Raj Institutions was fiscal decentralization. The fiscal capacity of PRIs tends to be limited, as rich resources of revenue are pre-empted by higher levels of government, and issue is still debated today. The Committee was asked to determine issues related to sanctioning of grants to PRIs by the state government, evolving mutual financial relations between the three tiers of PRIs, gifts and donation, handing over revenue in full or part to PRIs. The Committee recommended the following:

- Panchayats should have special powers to levy special tax on land revenues and home taxes, etc.,
- people should not be burdened with too many demands (taxes),
- all grants and subventions at the state level should be mobilized and sent in a consolidated form to various PRIs,
- a Panchayat Raj Finance Corporation should be set up to look into the financial resource of PRIs at all levels, provide loans and financial assistance to these grassroots level governments and also provide non-financial requirements of villages.

Panchayati Raj System in Post-Nehruvian Era

After the demise of Nehru Panchayatraj system had been in vogue in different forms structures in different states with varying outcomes in India.

Second Generation Panchayats

In 1977, Ashok Mehta Committee was set up to review the working of Panchayats. The committee found out that Panchayati Raj is the soul of democracy and therefore it should be empowered with more authority. Those Panchayats which formed after 1977 are known as Second Generation Panchayats.

Legalization of Panchayats

During the decade of 1990, it was realized that without constitutional power, the self-government or Panchayati Raj couldn't be fruitful; therefore the Central Government passed the 73rd constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992, which became effective from 20th April 1993. The basic concept of Panchayati Raj is that the villagers should think, decide and act for their own socio-economic interests. Thus, it is related to village self-governance, where the people in the form of an organization will think, decide and act for their collective interests.

Constitutional Status

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was passed in 1992 but became effective from 20th April, 1993 after being published in the Gazette of India. This was included as Part IX of the Constitution of India. The rights and duties of the Panchayats have been included in schedule XI of the Constitution.

Three Leveled System

The Legislature of a state may, by law, make provisions for three leveled system - village level, intermediate level and district level.

In the history of Panchayati Raj in India, on April 24, 1993, the Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 came into force to provide constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj institutions. This Act was extended to Panchayats in the tribal areas of



eight States, namely Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan from December 24, 1996.

The Act aims to provide 3 -tier system of Panchayati Raj for all States having population of over 2 million, to hold Panchayat elections regularly every 5 years, to provide reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women, to appoint State Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats and to constitute District Planning Committee to prepare draft development plan for the district.

Powers and responsibilities are delegated to Panchayats at the appropriate level:-

- Preparation of plan for economic development and social justice.
- Implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice in relation to 29 subjects given in Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution.
- To levy, collect and appropriate taxes, duties, tolls and fees.

Village Level (Panchayat)

Panchayati Raj is a system of governance in which gram Panchayats are the basic units of administration. It has 3 levels: village, block and district. At the village level, it is called a Panchayat. It is a local body working for the good of the village. The number of members usually ranges from 7 to 31; occasionally, groups are larger, but they never have fewer than 7 members. The block -level institution is called the Panchayat Samiti. The district -level institution is called the Zilla Panchayat.

Gram Sabha

Gram Sabha is constituted by all members of a village over the age of 18 years. It elects the Gram Panchayat a council of elected members taking decisions on issues key to a village's social, cultural and economic life. The Panchayat acts as a linkage between the local government and the people. Decisions are taken by a majority vote . It is said that in such a system, each villager can voice his opinion in the governance of his village. Decisions are taken without lengthy legal procedures and the process remains for the most part transparent. The representatives are elected for 5 years by the electorate of a Panchayat area.

Reservation of Seats

Some seats in the Panchayat shall be reserved for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women. The number of reserved seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes will be proportionate to the ratio of population of SCs and STs to total population of the Panchayat area. One third of the total seat will be reserved for women. It will include the reserved seats for SCs and STs.

Responsibility

Panchayats have two main responsibilities

- a. To plan for economic development and social justice.
- b. To implement these plans.

Powers and Authorities

The Legislature of the State may authorize a Panchayat to levy, collect and appropriate taxes, tolls and fees. It may also provide the Panchayat for making grants-in-aid to form the Consolidated Fund of the State. These funds can be used for implementing the plans.

Constitution of Finance Commission

Finance Commission has to be constituted in every state to review the financial position of the Panchayats and to make recommendation to the Governor regarding the allocation of fund to be Panchayats.

The Amendment Act of 1992 contains provision for devolution of powers and responsibilities to the Panchayats to both for preparation of plans for economic development and social justice and for implementation in relation to twenty-nine subjects listed in the eleventh schedule of the constitution.

Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension Scheduled Areas) Bill 1996

Salient Features

State Legislations that made shall be in consonance with the customary law, social and religious practices and traditional management practices of community resources.



Every village shall have a Gram Sabha, which shall be competent to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs of the people, and shall be vested with the powers to approve the programmes and projects for social and economic development as also identification of beneficiaries under such programmes.

Panchayats at the appropriate levels shall be endowed with ownership of minor forest produce.

The Gram Sabha or the Panchayat at the appropriate level shall be consulted for granting prospecting licenses or mining lease for minor minerals and their prior recommendation obtained for acquisition of land in the Scheduled Areas for development projects or for resettlement of project affected members of the Scheduled Tribes.

Panchayats at the appropriate level and the Gram Sabha shall have the power to prevent alienation of tribal lands and to take appropriate action to restore any unlawfully alienated land of a Scheduled Tribe, have powers to regulate money lending to the members of the Scheduled Tribes, to manage village markets and to enforce prohibition or to regulate or restrict sale and consumption of any intoxicant.

State Legislations shall endow the Panchayats at the appropriate levels with specific powers and provide safeguards to prevent Panchayats at the higher level from assuming the powers and authority of Panchayats at the lower level or of the Gram Sabha.

The offices of the Chairpersons in the Panchayats at all levels shall be reserved for the Scheduled Tribes.

The reservation of seats at every Panchayat for the Scheduled Tribes shall not be less than one-half of the total number of seats.

Institutionalization of Panchayati Raj in India

A New Ministry of Panchayati Raj has been created w.e.f. 27th May 2004. As per the amended allocation of Business Rules, "all matters relating of Panchayati Raj and Panchayati Raj Institutions" are being looked after by the newly created Ministry. Ministry of Panchayati Raj is made responsible for the work of advocacy for and monitoring of the implementation of Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 and the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, hereinafter refer to as said Acts to ensure that the State Panchayati Raj Acts adhere to the provisions of the above mentioned two Acts and are implemented in letter and spirit.

States/UT administrations at present are at varying degrees of the implementation of said Acts. The Ministry, inter-alia, would ensure that they hold timely elections, set up State Finance Commissions and implement their recommendations, constitute District Planning Committees and empower them suitably to ensure grass -root level planning to feed into State and Central level Planning effectively. One major task of the Ministry will be to ensure that the State Governments/UT Administrations devolve funds, functions and functionaries on the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the spirit of the Constitutional provisions.

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj will also be responsible for formulation and implementation of an Action Plan for seeing PRIs to emerge as "Institutions of Local -Self Government" securing economic development and social justice in their respective areas.

Empowerment of Gram Sabhas by holding regular Meetings and social audit through Gram Sabhas so as to enable them to emerge as foundation of Panchayati Raj will be pursued vigorously with States/UT administrations. Depending upon the local situation, States/UT Administrations will be encouraged to institute Ward Sabhas and Mahila Sabhas and make them functional.

The Ministry has attached great importance to the capacity building of elected representatives and officials of PRIs as well as functionaries involved in the Rural Development Programmes. It is estimated that about 3 million elected Members and the Staff assigned to the Elected Bodies needs training to enable them to discharge their functions effectively. The Ministry will also be funding research studies, workshops and seminars for development of Panchayats. The Ministry will implement the scheme of "National Awards for Best Panchayats" to encourage PRIs in discharging their role of "Institutions of Self-government" to be able to enforce economic development and social justice at the local level.

Role of State

Where the Panchayats end their activities the state government takes them up. The state government plays their major roles.

- To support the village Panchayats
- To co-ordinate the village Panchayats



- To ensure the implementation of this system.

Thus, for integrated rural development decentralization of power and resources to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is an essential element. It has been also realized that Panchayat can play effective role through drawing local people's participation in sustainable harvesting and management of local resources. If financial and technical assistance is provided to them, they will certainly take positive initiatives in solving local environmental problems. Agriculture, land improvement, forestry, tree planting, animal husbandry, village and cottage industries, drinking water, poverty alleviation programmes, health, sanitation, family welfare etc. are necessarily the concern of the village Panchayats.

Panchayati Raj States' Act in India

S. No	Name of the State	Act	Year
1	Andhra Pradesh	The Andhra Pradesh Panchayat raj Act	1994
2	Assam	The Assam Panchayati Raj Act	1994
3	Bihar	The Bihar Panchayati Raj Act	1993
4	Gujarat	The Gujarat Panchayati Raj Act	1994
5	Haryana	The Haryana Panchayati Raj Act	1994
6	Jammu & Kashmir	The Jammu & Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act	1996
7	Karnataka	The Karnataka Panchayat raj Act	1993
8	Kerala	The Kerala Panchayat raj Act	1994
9	Madhya Pradesh	The Madhya Pradesh Panchayat raj Act	1993
10	Maharashtra	The Maharashtra Panchayats Act	1996
11	Manipur	The Manipur Panchayati Raj Act	1994
12	Punjab	The Punjab Panchayati Raj Act	1994
13	Rajasthan	The Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act	1994
14	Tamil Nadu	The Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act	1994
15	Uttar Pradesh	The Uttar Pradesh Panchayat raj Act	1994
16	West Bengal	The West Bengal Panchayati Raj Act	1994

Thus, Nehru's initiative in the first decade of independence has culminated in the legalization and institutionalization of Panchayati Raj in the first decade of twenty first century in India.

It has been envisioned that, once the democratic institution in the villages and towns becomes strong, the people's representatives can express the problems of their constituency in a better way. This will help in policy determination for national interest.

Conclusion

Nehru is credited for resurrecting the traditional foundation of Indian villages by initiating the system of Panchayatraj after independence. He is celebrated for translating the Gandhian thought of rural self -governance through the programme of rural development via Panchayati Raj.

As the first Prime Minister of independent India, Nehruji implanted his idea of socio- economic development in terms of a. socialism b. community development c. agriculture and irrigation development d. non -alignment and e. peoples' participation together laid the foundation on which Indian Nations State was erected and consolidated. These seeds sowed by Nehruji have grown with several branches organized under the rural development administration in the form of Panchayati raj.

Indeed, Nehru's initiative in the first decade of independence has culminated in the legalization and institutionalization of Panchayati Raj in the first decade of twenty first century in India. Thus Nehru can be rightly acclaimed as the "the founding father of modern Panchayati Raj Institutions in India".

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