



PERFORMANCE OF PANCHAYAT RAJ SYSTEM AND VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

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Introduction

When India became independent in 1947, perhaps one third of the villages of India had traditional Panchayats and many of them were far from flourishing conditions. The government has made a determined effort to promote the creation of Panchayats and to make them effective units of local self- government. Article 40 of the Constitution clearly declares 'The state shall take necessary actions to organize village Panchayats and to endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government'. The aim was to foster democratic participation, to involve villagers in the development of the community and to reduce the burden of higher level of administration. Though various steps were taken by successive governments to revitalize the system, Gramswaraj through village Panchayats remained as a distant dream till 1992. Bureaucratic apathy, indifference of the people, lack of political will, lack of uniformity etc were the main factors behind the failure of the system. government introduced Panchayati Raj system in India through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992.

The 73rd Amendment Act has added a new Part in the constitution-Part Nine consisting of 16 Articles and the 11th Schedule .The functions of the Panchayati Raj institutions have been clearly spelt out in Article 243G of the Constitution, read with Article 243 ZD and the 11th Schedule. The PRIs are supposed to be genuine institutions of local self-government, not adjuncts to the implementing agencies of State governments. The constitution, which describes them as institutions of local self-government, says that this Gramsabha as the foundation of the PRI system to perform the functions of and powers entrusted to it by the state legislatures. The amendment provides for a three- tier PRI system at the village ,intermediate and district levels. Small states with population below 20 lakh have been given the option to not to constitute the intermediate level. The Act provides that the Panchayat bodies will have an assured duration of 5 years with mandatory elections after this period. However it might be noted that under the Act the establishment of Panchayat and the devolution of necessary powers and authority on the PRIs are vested in state governments.

Decentralization and Self Government

In India, the system of panchayats has a long history. Its structure however varied from time to time. In village India, the concept of 'Panch Parmeswar' is very old and very prominent. We also find references of Gram Panchayat in ancient and medieval literatures.

As we know, India is a caste-ridden society. Along with Gram Panchayats we also find Caste Panchayats in every caste to solve their social problems like marital discord and disputes. During the British period, an effort was made to revive the Village Panchayats but it could not make any success.

The present Panchayati Raj system is the result of the failure of the Community Development Projects (CDPs) a kernel programme of rural development launched in 1952 as an arm of five-year plans. The two successive plans had failed to not only produce desired results but also generate real enthusiasm among the people. It was felt that the scheme of CDP failed because of the lack of proper governance.

In the context of this crisis of governance (inefficiency, corruption, lack of accountability, mounting disillusionment of the citizens towards government institutions and officials), decentralization was widely accepted as a powerful means to instill confidence and revive trust of people in government programmes.

Democratic renewal through reorganizing the power structure would bring the government closer to people. It was seen as a means to deepen democracy, make governance accountable and responsive. Not only would it enhance the effectiveness of public policies and service delivery, but also give greater voice to citizens.

It is against this backdrop, the idea of 'democratic decentralization' emerged which was based on the Gandhi's cherished vision of 'self-governing' villages. This was a transfer of power and initiative for social and economic development of villages. The then government constituted a committee headed by Balwant Rai Mehta to review the CDP and suggest changes. Thus, the Panchayati Raj came into being.

Indeed, the prosperity of entire country depends on the prosperity and self-sufficiency of the villages. The Panchayati Raj system fulfils the long felt need of making the village administration truly independent and genuinely representative of the popular will, and putting village people in direct charge of their affairs.



It mainly aimed to foster democratic participation, involve villagers in the development efforts and ease the administrative burden on the states. This system was also considered necessary for the growth of a sturdy democracy in India.

This could be possible only when the villagers are able to organize themselves to think, plan, work and pay for the necessities and amenities for their welfare. To those, who have considered the villages the real India, the innovation is rational, overdue and beyond criticism.

It was hoped that the experiment of the Panchayati Raj will be able to harness and develop the better characteristics of the average villagers in spite of their illiteracy and restricted range of experience. It was also expected that this system will bring new aspiration and fresh stimulus to national self-respect.

In the present scheme of Panchayati Raj, the villagers have been held responsible for all-round improvement in the village life, including education, sanitation, medical relief curative and preventive, lighting, housing, maternity and child welfare along with the administration of civil, criminal and revenue justice. It was thought that this system would be powerful means for self-preservation in the arena of social life.

The main objective behind the Panchayati Raj is that the people in the village should undertake the responsibilities of governing themselves. Pioneer rural sociologist A.R. Desai spelled the objectives of PR system as follows: 'Panchayati Raj is claimed as a real democratic political apparatus which would bring the masses into active political control from below, from the vast majority of the weaker, poor sections of rural India.'

People in the villages should actively participate in the development activities regarding agriculture, irrigation, animal husbandry, public health, education, etc. 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'.

This is democracy at the grassroots. It will 'decentralize' democracy. This system has got a very important role to play in the social, economic and cultural life of the village community of India.

Reservation of seats

Article 243 D provides that in every Panchayats seats will be reserved for the SC/ST population in accordance with their population in the village or Panchayat concerned. More over 1/3 of the seats in each level shall be reserved for women. The office of the Chairperson in the Panchayats at the three levels shall be reserved for SC, ST and women in such a manner as the legislatures of each state, may, by law provide. But the number of offices of Chairpersons reserved for the SCs and STs shall be in the same proportion to the total number of such offices in the Panchayats at each level in proportion to the total population of SC and ST in the state. However not less than 1/3 of the total number of the offices of Chairperson in the Panchayat at each level shall be reserved for women. The number of offices reserved under this clause shall be allotted by rotation to different Panchayats at each level.

District Planning Committee

Article 243 ZD provides for District Planning Committees [DPC] comprising representatives elected by the district Panchayat. It further says that the function of this DPC is to consolidate but not to prepare the district plan. They are to consolidate the plans that have been made by each village Panchayat for the village and, by each intermediary panchayat for the intermediary level, which is described differently in different States, as taluk or block or union. All these different plans are to be brought together in the DPC where they are to be "consolidated" into a draft district by the way of capacity building, Article 243 ZD provides for a large proportion of the members of the DPC to be nominated by the State government. But, if the State government draws upon local human resources, such as college teachers, ex-servicemen, retired civil servants, retired engineers or even serving ones, doctors, serving or retired, then the community and its best representatives, including businessmen, get involved in the process of developing their own district Panchayati Raj. Added to that are social challenges that work against the emergence of leadership from marginalized sections of society, such as women, Dalits and tribals. Further, there is a lack of role clarity among Gram Panchayats, Block Panchayats and District Panchayats.

The socio-political changes expected by the introduction of Panchayati Raj system remained largely unfulfilled for long. Particularly the objectives like social equality, gender equity and the change at grass-root level leadership envisaged as the main among the objectives of Panchayati Raj were not fulfilled in a meaningful manner. In this regard it was felt that the marginalized groups like the women and other backward castes in the society continue to face many hurdles and found it difficult to participate at the grass-root.



The Panchayati Raj system has many benefits. These can be summarized as under:

1. Panchayats can best carry out the uplift programmes, such as mending roads, terrace, and embank the fields, building bunds, digging drains, provide fresh drinking water, etc.
2. They are best constituted to organize voluntary labour for social uplift and economic amelioration.
3. Panchayats are the best agencies which can supply the political talent. They are the potential schools of political training for the rural masses.
4. They can also serve as the schools of social service, health care, popular education and social progress.
5. Panchayats can impart cheap litigation, speedy and substantial justice to the villagers.
6. Panchayats are best fitted to be representative and spokesperson of the villagers.

PRI and Development

Self-governing rural local bodies are described in Indian context as the institutions of democratic decentralization or Panchayati Raj. The story of Panchayati Raj has been a story of ups and downs.

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 bridged the gulf between the bureaucratic elite and the people.

Socio-culturally speaking, it generated a new leadership which was not merely relatively young in age but also modernistic and pro-social change in outlook. Finally, looked at from the developmental angle, it helped a rural people cultivate a developmental psyche' (Report of the Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions, Government of India, 1978).

However, it was felt that there were some shortcomings in the structure and functions of the PR system. The performance of PRIs had been vitiated by political factionalism, corruption, inefficiency, political interference, parochial loyalties, motivated actions, power concentration, arrogant attitude of bureaucratic officials, lack of feeling of service, etc. All these had made the common villagers averse towards the PR system.

People used to contest election on individual basis. The new Act allows political parties to enter into election fray. Second, the present system is not an implementing body of the development programmes. It is a decision-making body that rules over the governance of the village. One very conspicuous aspect of this Act is that the present system empowers the women and the weaker sections (SC and ST people) of village by giving them representation by a fixed quota at all three levels.

Structure and Functions of Panchayati Raj Institutions:

As said before, the structure of Panchayati Raj (PR) varies from state to state. Some states have three-tier structure (Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at block level and Zilla Parishad at district level), whereas some have two-tier structure (Gram Panchayat at village level and Panchayat Samiti at block level). A few states have only single-tier structure at the village level.

Gram Panchayat

Gram Panchayat is the base or bottom tier of the PR system. It is the first executive tier having jurisdiction over a village or group of villages. The members of the Gram Panchayat—the Panchas and Sarpanch (chairman)—are directly elected.

Their number in each panchayat varies from 5 to 31 according to population of the concerned village (s). In addition to the elected Panchas and Sarpanch, there is a provision for co-option of two ladies, and one SC and ST member each, if they have not been elected as Panchas.

The main functions of the Gram Panchayat are

1. **Law and order:**Maintenance of peace and harmony in the panchayat circle.
2. **Civic:**Construction of wells, ponds, water reservoirs and distribution tanks; construction of public streets, public latrines and maintenance of roads, etc.
3. **Welfare:**Famine and flood relief work, welfare programmes for women, children, handicapped and weaker sections.
4. **4. Administrative:**Collection of funds, maintenance of records, budget and accounts, registration of births and deaths, etc.;
5. **5. Commercial:**Supervision of community orchards, grazing ground, etc.
6. **Developmental:**Preparation and execution of plans for the promotion of agriculture, irrigation, co-operatives, cottage and small-scale industries. The main sources of income of panchayats are the grants from government, taxes on buildings, vehicles, etc., octroi on goods and animals, pilgrim tax, etc.



Empowerment of Rural People

The process of decision-making has come close to the rural people. It has also helped in the emergence of a new democratic leadership at the local level. But, the competitive elections have politicized the environment of all villages.

This spirit has even entered into the family circles also. It is alleged that panchayat elections have given birth to caste politics (casteism), communal politics (communalism) and groupism and factionalism in the villages.

It is also alleged that due to panchayat elections, a 'cold war' atmosphere prevails among various sections of the village people. Some studies made on the PR system revealed that functional tensions are on the increase and this can be seen during elections and panchayat meetings.

The so-called harmonious relations of the villages have almost vanished. People did not extend full cooperation from the core of their heart to the panchayats and as a result developmental activity has slowed down. Theoretically, the decisions had to be taken by the non-officials at all the three tiers of the PR system, but in practice, it was the government officials who used to take the decisions.

The non-officials (Panch or Sarpanch) being illiterate and uneducated could not wield their power. Most of the benefits of development programmes initiated by PRIs were cornered by the high castes and big peasants. The poor segments of society remained neglected as before. There was a great lack of coordination among the three tiers.

Gram Sabha:

In most of the states, each constituency of the members of the Gram Panchayat is called the **Gram Sabha** and all the voters of the same constituency are members of this body. However, in some states this is called Ward Sabha/Palli Sabha etc. In West Bengal it is called *Gram Sansad* (village parliament). Gram Sabha in West Bengal has a different meaning. Here all the voters of the Gram Panchayat as a whole constitute the Gram Sabha. Under the Constitution there can be only three tiers of the Panchayat. *The Gram Sabha is not a tier of the PR system.* It does not have any executive function and operates as a recommending body only.

Gram Sabhas hold meetings normally 2 to 4 times a year, but can meet as and when necessary. In some states dates of these meetings are fixed (Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat etc.) while in others dates are fixed by the Gram Panchayats. Issues to be discussed in the meetings can be wide ranging but the essential agenda should include: Annual Action Plan and Budget, Annual Accounts and Annual report of the GP, selection of beneficiaries for different social service programmes (Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), Pension Schemes etc.), identification of schemes for preparation of Annual Plan for development programmes (e.g. MGNREGS) of GP, consideration of the Audit reports, analyses of GP's performance etc.

Conclusion

Thus, to conclude, it can be stated that the devolution of power to the people without requisite development of character, training and capacity had been found to be a curse in the functioning of democratic institutions in our country and there were apprehensions that this new step in democratic decentralization, designed to be blessing, would turn out to be a curse to the people in the villages. The success of the step more than anything else depended on the quality of elected representative Panchas and Sarpanchas of these institutions. Reservation for women, SC, STs and OBCs in Panchayati raj bodies has acted as a catalyst in the process of political empowerment. The Introduction of Panchayatraj system and constitutional validity definitely helped vulnerable sections to empower and villages also developed with the performance of the Panchayatraj in the country.

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