



PANCHAYATI RAJ FOR GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS:

Panchayat Raj, rural development, Rigveda, Gram Swaraj, tradition, culture

The Panchayat Raj System provides the administrative apparatus for implementation of the programmes of rural development. These institutions are established in India as vehicles of socio-economic transformation in rural India. The British rule in India paved the way for the development of local-self government bodies in urban and rural areas. A new age of participatory governance and development was heralded in India in 1958 after the implementation of Panchayat Raj System. The 73rd amendment contains provision for devolution of powers and responsibilities to the panchayats to collect revenues, design development plans and implement various grassroots level development programmes in India. The Constitutional status is given to Panchayati Raj System by the Government of India. These bodies are permitted to launch many schemes and programme to improve the infrastructure, facilitate implementation of development programmes and improve the standard of living of people in the rural and tribal areas. The Millennium Development Goals emphasize the environmental sustainability and inclusive development of the marginalized sections of society. The effective involvement of the Panchayat Raj Institutions in the process of rural development is constrained by some difficulties facing these institutions. The social responsibility of Panchayati Raj Institutions, public and private organizations assumes profound significance from grassroots development point of view.

PREAMBLE

The Panchayat Raj System provides the administrative apparatus for implementation of the programmes of rural development. It is intended to evolve a system of democratic decentralization and devolution of people for the socio-economic progress of the rural and tribal people. In a vast sub-continent like India centralization of administration and developmental activities brings about the isolation of people from the national mainstream. Dr.B.R.Ambedkar had justified the need for creation of small states and Panchayat Raj Institutions to ensure inclusive development of rural and tribal people. He wanted the villages to become rural republics and independent centers of good

governance and development. He also wanted to eradicate feudalism in India and facilitate exploitation and backwardness free grassroots development in India. In this article, the role of Panchayati Raj in grassroots development with reference to India is primarily examined on the basis of qualitative research methodology.

EVOLUTION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ IN INDIA

Panchayat Raj is an ancient institution as antique as India. Panchayats are India's ancient autonomous democratic institutions. Description of panchayats is found in the ancient Indian text 'Rigveda' in the form of 'Sabhas' and 'Samities'. The philosophy of Panchayat Raj is deeply steeped in

tradition and culture of rural India. It is by no means a new concept. Panchayat Raj provided a system of self-governance at the village level.

Buddha was the founder of democracy in the world. Ashoka, the emperor established Panchayat Raj Institutions during his regime since he firmly believed in the concept of power to the people. Mahatma Gandhi was the great champion of democratic decentralization through the Panchayati Raj System in India. He strongly advocated that India lives in her villages and justified the need for grassroots development in India.

The word Panchayat means gathering or assembly of five elderly people who are chosen or selected or elected to resolve the dispute arising in the community or village or in habilitation in rural or remote area. Panchayats as institutional vehicles for development have been part of the Indian System for ages. Panchayat Raj Institutions is the grassroots unit of self governance and self development. These institutions are established in India as vehicles of socio-economic transformation in rural India. Panchayati Raj system prevailed during the Chola Period.

PANCHAYATI RAJ DURING BRITISH RULE

The British rule in India paved the way for the development of local-self government bodies in urban and rural areas. The British rulers were aware of the dynasty rule which had brought about backwardness in the rural areas. The British were aware of the fact that political education was the primary function of local government, of greater importance than administrative efficiency. A network of rural local bodies had come into existence according to Lord Ripon's proposal. Lord Ripon's Resolution (1881-1882) mainly focused on the development of local self government in India. The then Provincial Government was directed to establish local Boards in each district in 1882. A two-tier system was also created at the district level and block level to facilitate democratic decentralization in India. The British Royal Commission was constituted to ensure decentralized administration and development in 1907.

Panchayati Raj System of Administration is the grassroots level or lowest level of administration empowering local bodies to achieve twin objectives such as local governance and grassroots development. Gandhi's political vision had reflected the concepts of Panchayati Raj and Gramswaraj for the development of the nation. In 1946, Gandhi had aptly remarked that the Indian independence must begin at the bottom and every village ought to be a Republic or a Panchayat with powers for the empowerment of people at the grassroots level. Gandhi coined 'Swaraj' and 'Suraj' which mean independence and good governance. He had called upon the administrators to facilitate rural development by implementing Panchayati Raj System and rural development programmes. The Panchayat Raj as postulated by Mahatma Gandhi, was given a place in article 40 of the Indian Constitution under the heading 'Directive Principles of State Policy'.

PANCHAYATI RAJ IN THE POST INDEPENDENCE ERA

A new age of participatory governance and development was heralded in India in 1958 after the implementation of Panchayat Raj System. The first Prime Minister of India Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru gave a serious thought to local self-governance in 1958 in the name of Panchayat Raj Institutions on the basis of the

recommendations of the Community Development Programme (1952) and the National Extension Service (1953) approved by the National Development Council. The Government of India accorded high priority for 'Gram Swaraj' (village self-governance) and established Panchayat Raj in India.

The objectives of Panchayati Raj include - assistance to the economically weaker sections of the community, cohesion and cooperative self help in the community, development of cooperative institutions, development of local resources including the utilization of manpower, production in agriculture as the highest priority in planning, progressive dispersal of authority and initiative both vertically and horizontally with special emphasis on the role of voluntary organizations, promotion of rural industries and understanding and harmony between the people's representatives and people servants through comprehensive training/education and a clear demarcation of duties and responsibilities. The specific objectives and responsibilities of Panchayat Raj Institutions are enumerated in the eleventh schedule and the Five Year Plans.

TYPES OF PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS

India has adopted a three-tier Panchayat system – Gram Panchayat at a village level, Panchayat Samiti at a block level, and Zila Parishad at a district level. The Gram Panchayat, is considered as the 'cornerstone' of the Panchayati Raj system in India. It is a cluster of villages which looks after local governance and developmental activities. The Gram panchayat is a village level administrative body, with a Sarpanch as its elected head. The members of the gram panchayat are elected for a period of five years by the members of Gram Sabha. The Chairman is assisted by the elected members and secretary for the delivery of goods and services at the grassroots level. Tax collection, infrastructural development and implementation of rural development programmes are undertaken by the Gram Panchayat.

The Panchayat Samiti functions at the block level. The President, Vice President, Members, Executive Officer and other officials work for the development of the block. The President presides over the meetings and supervises all developmental activities undertaken in the entire block. The MLA and MP also function as the facilitators of rural development at the block level.

The Zilla Parishad looks after the grassroots level administration and developmental activities in the entire district. It is headed by the President who is supported by the Vice President, Chief Secretary, elected representatives and other officials. The Chief Secretary is an IAS officer who is the administrative head. The Zilla Parishad implements various developmental activities such as education, health, agriculture and other sectors. The district level officers work under the guidance and supervision of the President and Chief Secretary. The MLAs and MPs also participate actively in the deliberations of the Zilla Parishad and extend support for the implementation of various rural development programmes. The Finance Commission is constituted in each state to review the financial position of the Panchayat and to make recommendations.

IMPORTANCE OF PANCHAYAT RAJ IN INDIA

Mehta (1957:12) recommended democratic decentralization in India and called upon the rulers to redistribute the power to the people through Panchayat Raj

Institutions. He suggested that the establishment of elected and organically linked democratic bodies at the village, blocks and district levels would entrust all planning and developmental activities to these bodies. The committee was also in favour of transferring of adequate resources to these bodies to enable them to discharge duties. The Panchayat Raj System was first adopted by the state of Rajasthan in Nagapur district on October 02, 1959. Andhra Pradesh was the second state which introduced this system in the country.

Mehta (1978:11) committee of Panchayati Raj Institutions indentified three phases of Panchayati Raj in India such as the phase of ascendancy (1959 - 64), the phase of stagnation (1965 - 69) and the phase of decline (1969 - 77). The committee submitted its report in August 1978 and made 132 recommendations to revive and strengthen the declining Panchayati Raj system in the country. The committee suggested that Panchayat Raj Institutions should be constituted in every state at the village, intermediate and district levels Panchayats in a state having a population not exceeding twenty lakhs.

Jayaprakash Narayan, founder of total revolution movement during national emergency (1975-77) wanted to liberate Panchayat Raj Institutions from the clutches of political parties. He argued that political faction-fighting would result in self-ruination rather than self reliance. The Government of India had constituted another committee under the leadership of GVK Rao in 1985 to suggest the appropriate improvement in representative character and strengthening of capacity of the People's representative and administrative personnel in Panchayat Raj Institutions. Subsequently, in 1986 another Committee known as L.M. Sanghavi Committee of the Department of Rural Development, Government of India was constituted.

73rd CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

In 1992, the Congress Government enacted the 73rd Constitutional Amendment with main objective of strengthening the Panchayati Raj system. The Constitutional Amendment resulted in giving the Panchayati Raj Institution a Constitutional Status. The Panchayati Raj Act, 1992 was based on the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India. It provided the much needed constitutional sanction to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) for functioning as an organic and integral part of the nation's democratic and development processes. The 73rd amendment contains provision for devolution of powers and responsibilities to the panchayats to collect revenues, design development plans and implement various grassroots level development programmes in India.

According to the Act, a 3-tier system of Panchayati Raj for all States having population of over 20 lakh was created. Elections should be conducted regularly every 5 years. Certain seats were reserved for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women. The State Finance Commission was constituted to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats. The District Planning Committees were also established to prepare development plans for the district as a whole. The new act came into force with effect from April 24, 1993 and did not apply to the Schedule V areas of the nine states, Schedule VI Areas of the North-East and the District of Darjeeling in West Bengal as well as J&K.

The Constitutional status is given to Panchayati Raj System by the Government of India. These bodies are permitted to launch many schemes and programme to improve the infrastructure, facilitate implementation of development

programmes and improve the standard of living of people in the rural and tribal areas. The Act paved the way for streamlining the functioning of the PRIs in the country. In the beginning, the system had certain constraints and limitations such as lack of functional autonomy, financial freedom, official intervention and inadequate representation of marginalized and weaker sections.

In India, about 2,32,278 Panchayats at village level; 6,022 Panchayats at intermediate level and 535 Panchayats at district level were constituted. About 29.2 lakh elected representatives of Panchayats at all levels manage these bodies. About 12 lakh officials also serve in these bodies as the facilitators of grassroots development in the country. The Panchayat Raj Institutions practically constitute the broadest representative base that exists in any country of the world.

The Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 is regarded as a corrective legal measure to the 73rd amendment to extend the provisions of the Panchayat Raj to the Scheduled and Tribal areas falling under the Schedule Five areas of the nine States, namely Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan. The PESA Act, 1996 had come into force on December 24, 1996 and ensured radical governance powers to the tribal community. This act also recognized its traditional community rights over local natural resources.

The Panchayat Raj Institutions face certain constraints and limitations. They have not been fully equipped with the administrative and fiscal decentralization due to lack of political will. These bodies do not have powers for revenue generation and continue to suffer from limited functional and financial autonomy. The Gram Sabhas have not been empowered and strengthened to ensure greater people's participation and transparency in functioning of Panchayats as envisaged in the Panchayat Act.

The Gram Sabha is yet to become a self governing body with legal jurisdiction over the natural resources and forests. The Indian Forest Act, Land Acquisition Act, and other related Acts are not subjected to timely and suitable amendments to ensure ownership on minor forest produce, water bodies and land resources to the Gram Sabhas of the PESA areas. The Panchayati Raj Institutions have not emerged as the full fledged institutions of self-governance. The Gram Sabhas should have direct access to funds so that they can exercise their power rather independently.

PANCHAYATI RAJ AND GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj was established in the year 2004 to empower Panchayati Raj Institutions and ensure efficient delivery of services and inclusive development of the nation. The Government of India constituted the 13th Finance Commission under the Chairmanship of Vijay Kelkar (2007:10) to examine the sharing of financial resources in the country. The commission recommended share of Panchayats in the Union Revenue Divisible Pool.

The concentration of authority and power only in the hands of the federal unit would be anathema to the whole system (Chatterjee, 2007:04). About 29 subjects are listed in the 11th schedule of the Constitution of India for planning and implementation of various social and economic development programmes at the grassroots level. The planning commission and the Ministry of Rural Development have repeatedly impressed upon the state governments. The Panchayat system

has enabled the active participation of the rural and tribal masses in the processes of governance and development at the grassroots level (Sinha and Kumar, 2007:16).

The Eleventh Five Year Plan had identified the empowerment of Panchayati Raj Institutions as a key challenge. The Plan document asserted that States should not delay or sidestep the devolution of functions, funds and functionaries to Panchayat Raj Institutions to facilitate the empowerment of the disadvantaged sections of society. It was particularly emphasized that the strengthening of grassroots level self- government was in itself a public good recognized and highlighted by the Constitution of India (Aiyar, 2008:01).

The Government of India provided 50 percent reservation for women in Panchayat Raj Institutions on August 27, 2009. Several states have implemented 50 percent reservation for women in these bodies. Government of India has taken many initiatives for rural development. It has setup the Ministry of Rural Development. This Ministry is a nodal department for the two international organizations viz., the centre on Integrated Rural Development of Asia and the Pacific and the Afro-Asian Rural Development Organization (Alok, 2011:02).

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has given a new dimension to the process of rural development in India by providing reservation for SCs, STs and women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. It has created a salient resolution in the country (Kaur and Dhindsa, 2012:09). Panchayati Raj institution as integral, both to democratic self-governance and democratic decentralization in grass root level in India (Gogoi, 2013:07). These institutions have also remained accountable to the people. This system has bridged the gulf between the central government and the people in the rural areas (Shubhojit, 2014:15).

The Panchayat Raj Institutions are involved in the grassroots development process through their participation in planning and execution activities. There is no substitute to local governance for meeting the needs of the local population. The 73rd and the 74th constitutional amendments recognized the need for decentralized governance and development in the countryside. The Gram Panchayats are directly in contact with the citizens and Gram Sabhas are the fora for making decisions on various grassroots level development activities.

Panchayat Raj Institutions are involved actively in fulfilling the most cherished goal of development with social justice bringing the aspirations of the Indian people for their participation in the development process of the country. A clear cut role for Panchayat Raj Institutions in rural development was envisaged subsequent to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. Government of India and the state Governments provide financial system to the Panchayat Raj Institutions for the implementation of various schemes as well as poverty alleviation programmes.

According to 2011 census, rural India has 68.84% population while the urban India has 31.16% population. Several rural development programmes are implemented in the country to eradicate poverty, develop infrastructural facilities, ensure gainful employment opportunities and facilitate inclusive development of the marginalized sections (Banashankari, 2017:03). Adequate funds are not earmarked for the implementation of rural development programmes. The Panchayat Raj Institutions do not have the qualified and competent elected representatives and officials to implement

various rural development programmes to the best of the satisfaction of the rural and tribal masses.

The National e-Governance Programme was implemented in the country to make Panchayats more efficient, transparent and accountable. The information and communication technologies were used to improve the status of self governance. The software applications were also developed and applied to strengthen the e-governance and provide people – friendly governance and development at the grassroots level.

Overall development of country is primarily dependant on agriculture, industry, communication, education, health and allied sectors in the rural areas. The Panchayati Raj Institutions came into existence to improve the rural infrastructure, improve income of rural households and delivery systems pertaining to education, health and safety mechanisms. The Panchayats are required to play an important role in grassroots development (Ramya, 2014:13).

The Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Yojana, a Centrally Sponsored Scheme was implemented with the objective of assisting efforts of the State Governments for training and capacity building of elected representatives of PRIs (Gaikwad et. al. 2015:05). The Rural Business Hubs, another Central Sector demand driven Scheme is also implemented for promoting businesses using raw materials/skills available in the rural areas.

The Panchayat Raj Institutions are entrusted with the tasks of poverty alleviation, self employment programmes, infrastructural development and integrated rural development. The prominent programmes implemented by these organizations include – Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Gramodaya Yojna and Sampoorna Gramin Rojgar Yojana, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes, Indira Awaas Yojana and My House, Gopabandhu Gramin Yojna and Backward Regions Grant Fund, Aam Aadmi Bima Yojana, Bachat Lamp Yojana, Deendayal Disabled Rehabilitation Scheme, Gramin Bhandaran Yojna, Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana, Integrated Child Development Services, Integrated Rural Development Program, Janani Suraksha Yojana, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, Kishore Vaigyanik Protsahan Yojana, Trial Area Development Programme, Samagra Awas Yojana, Livestock Insurance Scheme, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme, Antyodaya Anna Yojana, Midday Meal Scheme, National Literacy Mission Program, National Social Assistance Scheme, Pooled Finance Development Fund Scheme, Pradhan Mantri Adarsh Gram Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana etc.

The rural masses are not fully aware of the democratic decentralization and political participation for grassroots development. The party politics, specifically, the ruling party interference and dominance over the PRIs violate the very essence and philosophy of democratic decentralization and grassroots governance (Geeta and Mishra, 2016:06). The main deficiency was the lack of adequate administrative and technical manpower at the block and GP levels. The lack of manpower adversely affected the preparation of plans, scrutiny, approval, monitoring and measurement of works, and maintenance of stipulated records at the block and GP levels. Besides affecting the implementation of the scheme and the provision of

employment, this also impacted adversely on transparency, and made it difficult to verify the provision of the legal guarantee of 100 days of employment on demand. Planning was inadequate and delayed, which resulted in poor progress of works. Systems for financial management and tracking were deficient, with numerous instances of diversion/ mis-utilization, and delay in transfer of state share. The maintenance of records at the block and GP levels was extremely poor and the status of monitoring, evaluation and social audit was also not up to the mark (Reddy, 2016:14).

The need for evolving a comprehensive concept of panchayati raj to facilitate active social and political mobilization for the prevention of the exploitation of the poor and weaker sections of society assumes great significance in India (Guru et. al, 2017:08). They have suggested that institutional, structural and functional contours of Panchayati Raj should be in conformity with the Constitutional norms, distributive justice and inclusive development of all sections in the rural areas.

Studies have reported that the representatives of women and weaker sections have not played a crucial role in the management of Panchayat Raj Institutions and achievement of the goal of grassroots development due to lack of literacy, awareness, efficiency and leadership qualities. The state has not undertaken serious measures for the leadership development of Panchayat Raj elected representatives through constant workshops, training programmes, brain storming sessions and other constructive intellectual exercises.

The legal framework of PRIs helps the Government of India and State Government to decentralize various functions and governance issues over the years. Many of states have succeeded in decentralizations of decision making and implementation of the various schemes through Panchayat Raj Institutions at grass root levels.

CONCLUSION

The Millennium Development Goals emphasize the environmental sustainability and inclusive development of the marginalized sections of society. The development debate has taken a paradigm shift in the new millennium. The country has seen a gradual transformation with the advent of Panchayat Raj Institutions. A new age of inclusive development has been ushered in India. The effective involvement of the Panchayat Raj Institutions in the process of rural development is constrained by some difficulties facing these institutions. The problems largely relate finance, management and organization. The Panchayat Raj Institutions are not provided with adequate powers and resources though the states have thrust lot of responsibilities on these. The challenge facing the society today is how to empower the rural people in every respect. It is here that the social responsibility of public and private organizations assumes profound significance from grassroots development point of view.

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