

DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT AT GRASSROOTS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to underscore the pattern of grassroots democracy and governance in India and the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the development of rural areas. The paper is concerned with the evolutionary perspective of the Panchayati Raj as well as the role of Panchayati Raj in socio-economic growth, socio-political awareness of rural people and the role of local leadership for strengthening the roots of democracy in India. The 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution (1992) unequivocally prescribes that the Panchayats should be institutions of self-government through which powers are devolved to the people as to the participation in the process of planning for economic development and social justice, and implementation of schemes and programmes for these purposes. To strengthen and enhance the efficiency of local governance, PRIs were structured and designed as three tier system. The bedrock of this pyramidal structure is the *gram sabha* (or village assembly), composed of all citizens eligible to vote, and so the foundation of grassroots democracy. Whatever the case, the grass roots level institutions are important instruments in the process of development to lower levels and these processes are accelerated as and when common people identify themselves as active partners. There are so many facets to the issue of grassroots governance and development in India and it is very important because of more than 65 percent of India's population is rural and its fate and future are determined by these PRIs.

KEYWORDS: Panchayati Raj, Democracy

INTRODUCTION

The grassroots governance is an important role in the process of democratic decentralization in the developing world. India has been a welfare state ever since after Independence and the primary objective of all governmental endeavors has been the welfare of its millions. Elimination of poverty, ignorance, diseases and inequality of opportunities and providing a better and higher quality of life were the basic premises upon which all the plans and blue-prints of development were built. India's democratic structure has three levels of governance - national, state, and local. The grassroots level called the Panchayati Raj System. If democracy means people's participation in running their affairs, then it is nowhere more direct, clear and significant than at the local level, where the contact between the people and their representatives, between the rulers and the ruled is more constant, vigilant and manageable. Lord Bryce said: "The best school of democracy and the best guarantee for its success is the practice of local self-government" (Rai 46). Decentralization is a prime mechanism through which democracy becomes truly representative and responsive (Dhaliwal, 2004). In the Panchayati Raj inaugural Speech Pt. Neharu said, "Local Self-government is must and must be the

basis of any true system of democracy. People have got into the habit to thinking of democracy at the top and so much below. Democracy at the top may not be a success unless you build its foundation from below” (Malviya, 1974). The democratic ideals of decentralization, development, and increased, continuous and active popular participation in the process of nation-building can be secured only through the working of an efficient system of local government. Without a well-organized system of local government, no democratic political system can be expected to become stable and really developed.

PANCHAYATI RAJ: AN EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE

Panchayats as institutional vehicles for development have been part of the Indian system for ages. In the year following the independence (1947), Prime Minister Nehru inaugurated the Community Development Programme (CDP) on the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi (October 2) in 1952. The CDP was followed by the National Extension Service in 1953. NES blocks were earmarked as the lowest unit of development of administration. But both the programmes had a flaw: neither of the two was free from the control of bureaucracy. This shortcoming prompted the government to appoint a committee headed by Balwant Ray Mehta in 1957. The committee recommended a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj from village to the district level – Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level and Zilla Parishad at the district level (Dash, 2007).

As per the Balwant Ray Mehta Committee, Panchayati Raj was launched on 2nd October 1957 in Nagaur district of Rajasthan. Andhra Pradesh and many state governments followed Rajasthan. Yet, by the mid-sixties the hype to strengthen the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) gave way to a growing tendency of centralization and the PRIs descended to ground zero. In course of further development, the L. M. Singhvi Committee (1986), recommended constitutional status for Panchayati Raj. In July-August 1989 the then Congress government introduced the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill with a view to streamline the Panchayati Raj (Dash, 2007).

PANCHAYATI RAJ UNDER THE 73RD CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

At last P. V. Narasimha Rao's government enacted the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which was passed by Parliament on 23rd December 1992 and became effective on 24th April 1993. This Act has added Part - IX to the Constitution of India. It is entitled as 'The Panchayats' and consists of provisions from articles 243 to 243-O. The Act has given a practical shape to Article 40 of the Constitution and gives a constitutional status to PRIs. The Constitutional Amendment ensures, a three tier structure at the zilla, block and village levels, an election commission to hold election periodically, a state level finance commission to find out ways and means to increase resources for local bodies, reservation of 50% of seats in all the position of the three tier for women, reservation of seats for SC/ST in proportion to their population in all the positions of the three tiers, establishment of Gram Sabha for enhancing people's participation for their own development, and establishment of planning committee for local bodies; and an earmarked list of 29 items under 11th schedule (Dash, 2007).. Now, the world's most populous democracy has the constitutionally mandated 2, 37,539 village panchayats, 6,325 intermediate panchayats and 589 zilla panchayats. The three tiers of these elected bodies consist of as many as 27, 41, 973 village Panchayat members, 1, 64,271 members of intermediate panchayats and 15,137 members of zilla panchayats. This is the broadest representative base which exists in any country of the world (Ministry of Panchayat). Besides breadth, depth of these figures can be gauged from the fact that more than fifty percent of these grassroots representatives are from the downtrodden and marginalized sections of the society, namely women

(half of the total), the SCs, STs and OBCs (as per their proportion of the population) (Dash, 2007). Now the state has to perform its role as coordinator rather than service provider, steps for decentralization of power till the grassroots level is apposite steps in the changing scenario in which centralised state is replaced by the decentralized system (Sharda, 2010).

PANCHAYATI RAJ: THE HEART OF DEMOCRACY

India is large democracies characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity and inequality across the states. State governments form an important intermediate tier between national and local governments. States of India are larger than many other countries in the world in terms of population or area (Bardhan & Mookharjee 2007). In fact, 73rd amendment has created a scope for accomplishing development with social justice, which is mandate of the new Panchayati Raj system. The new system brings all those who are interested to have voice in decision making through their participation in PRIs. The Panchayati Raj system is basis for the "Social Justice" and "Empowerment" of weaker section on which the development initiative have to be built upon for achieving overall, human welfare of the society. The main claim of the Amendment Act relating to the strengthening of PRIs is that 'the participation of poorest of the poor in the process of development is ensured. It is doubtful whether the poorer sections could find their way to enter the PRIs through elections.

A democratic polity involves the decentralization of power in a way that the affairs of the local people are managed by means of their positive participation. There should be growing enlightenment of the people so that they properly understand the meaning of democratic decentralization and are able "to realise that people's participation in community development is the end; the devolution of power is the means". Democracy is never complete unless there is active involvement of the people and participation of the people at all levels is assured. The institutions of democracy at the national and state levels have gained considerable strength since independence. According to the makers of the Indian Constitution, democracy is never complete without the active involvement and participation of the people at all levels and the institutions of democracy have gained considerable strength since independence at the national and state levels. A lot in the area of education, health, family planning, land improvement, efficient land use, minor irrigation, recovery of wasteland, a forestation, animal husbandry, fisheries and sericulture, etc. can be achieved by creating, people's institutions accountable to the community.

Therefore, the focus of attention will be on developing multiple institutional options for improving the delivery systems by using the vast potential of the voluntary sector. A new direction is being given to achieve these objectives. So far, the approach to people's participation consisted in programme-based strategies. In addition to such programmes, the Planning Commission has now worked out institutional strategies which will mean creating or strengthening various people's institutions at the district, block and village levels so that they synthesize the purpose of investment envisaged in the plan with optimization of benefits at the grass-roots level by relating these programmes to the needs of people. These institutions are very weak, particularly in those states where they are needed the most for bringing about an improvement in the socio-demographic indicators. A genuine push towards decentralization and people's participation has become necessary for the success of Panchayati Raj (www.preservearticles.com).

ROLE OF PRIS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment was based upon a charming belief that progressive democratization was in itself sufficient condition for meeting rural India's welfare needs (Tiwari 2010). According to the 73rd amendment, PRIs can realize the dream of rural administration and rural development with complete coordination and transparency.

For this purpose the most of the state has provided a Citizen Charter. For the sake of public convenience and knowledge, this charter has been divided into 7 subjects:-

- Financial aid to Gram Panchayats.
- Rural Cleanliness Programmes.
- Responsibilities of the Panchayats- (Transparency in work, rural administration & development).
- Responsibilities of public towards Panchayat.
- Decentralization Programme.
- Control over the Gram Panchayats.
- Arrangement of Panchayat Help-line (Mishra 2011).

Citizen Charter is an important instrument and continuous process which will change periodically according to the feelings, recommendations, experiences and reactions of the public. The 'progress from below' is the significant phenomenon for implementation of the scheme as well as rural development. This becomes important when one considers the role of government and administration in development (Mishra 2011).

Rural Development is a strategy designed to improve the economic and social life of a group of people especially rural poor. It involves extending the benefits of development to the poorest among those who seek a livelihood in the rural areas. The group includes small farmers, tenants and the landless (Gupta 1995). Despite making spectacular progress in various fields, India still faces poverty, unemployment, ignorance, and socio-economic inequality. New economic forces are bringing with them new opportunities for development and for contributing to nation-building. It is, however, important to ensure that our growth is inclusive and that we do not leave anyone behind, and that the benefits of development reach everyone, particularly the rural masses that have not been effectively touched by the efforts of six decades of freedom (Chatterjee 2008). Hence, development of rural poor is emerging as the main target of PRIs and it is seen as a relative, continuous, and complex process of positive change to be set in motion guided towards the objective of eradicating hunger, disease, injustice, exploitation, and related ills that affect vast sections of rural India population.

PRIs are the driver of rural development at grassroots level, serving various civic and development activities. They are involved in the upliftment of rural masses in various dimensions. It was thought that PRIs would become an important instrument to fulfill the dream of rural development, as they were equipped with organized administrative agencies which were to be aided by local representatives who would voice the aspirations of the rural community. It was expected that these institutions would play a vital role in planning and development of rural areas. They are the backbone of rural planning and development. Though the PRIs had been in existence for a long time, but they had failed to acquire the status and dignity of viable and responsive people's bodies due to absence of regular elections, prolonged super sessions, insufficient representation of weaker sections like SCs, STs and women, inadequate devolution of powers and lack of financial resources.

On the basis of the last sixty years' experience, to give a boost to the system and to ensure its effective functioning, it became necessary to amend the constitution. The introduction of the 73rd constitutional amendment was a revolutionary step towards rural development in this country. It was expected that the PRIs would bring a change in the

entire rural life of India, thus changing the traditional backward society into a modern democratic society. It was expected that these institutions would prepare the village plan in such a manner that their backwardness could be effectively halted and the villages would develop a progressive outlook and mode of life. But after seventeen years of experience it has been found that much has remained to be achieved.

In Maharashtra, most of the development areas (like agricultural, education, social welfare, health, animal husbandry etc.) are transferred to the PRIs, which are now responsible for preparing, and implementing development plans for their own districts. As all the aspects of rural life are inter-related, no lasting results can be achieved by dealing with an individual aspect in isolation. This does not mean that no particular problem should be given prominence, but all the problems are equally important. The details of various problems should be an aid towards the formation of a total picture and an integrated plan.

The PRIs in India is suffers from deficiency in staff having expertise and specialization. The system also lacks the much needed participative culture and therefore neglects effective communication, joint consultation, democratization and decentralization. Hence, it continues to suffer from favoritism, nepotism, overlapping, corruption etc. Therefore, to meet this challenge, it is essential to strengthen administrative system pertains to training of different stakeholders. Otherwise the quality of administration could not be maintained. But, the problems affecting the quality of rural administration appear to evolve around issues of population, spatial relationships, service demands, resource scarcity and deficiencies, community characteristics, organizational disparities and relationships, and a continued national focus on urban problems (Zody, 1980).

For this the requirements of specific training at all levels, particularly at the local level and rural focused perspective is needed for the rural development. Because local governments are closer to the people, they have better information about preferences of the local population and are able to respond to the variations in demands for goods and services (Asthana 2008). The rural poor can derive benefits from welfare and development schemes only when they get administrative support. We have witnessed over the last fifty years that our system of administration has not been effective in establishing a link with the masses and that it has miserably failed to deliver the goods. Thus, what is needed is to harmonize of different approaches to facilitate the development process and improve the administration of PRIs.

According to Census 2011, total 68.84 per cent of population of India lives in rural areas. This indicates that the India's development has no meaning if the vast rural masses are not taken into consideration. Apparently, much effort has been made for the betterment of rural society in the every possible way. Priority has been given in every Five year plan to the development of the rural masses. But in reality very little has been achieved in practice as this large part of our country still continues to remain in poverty and ignorance.

The agricultural sector has a crucial role in the working of the Indian rural economy. 25.7 per cent of India's population below the poverty line lives in rural areas, and is directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture. Thousands of villages face the problems of drinking water, housing, watering and sanitation facilities. Millions of rural people are roofless and hungry. Malnutrition, disease, starvation and idleness are on a high scale. They do not have medical or health facilities. The villages have remained isolated because of the lack of a proper road transport system and communication. Comparing to rural scene, the urban center is growing rapidly. The development process was, however slow and uneven over the vast rural areas for a variety of reasons and this created dangerous imbalance in the country.

India badly needs rapid progress in the vast countryside by changing all undesirable conditions the great poverty and rapid population increase ruled out gradualness.

CONCLUSIONS

India has the largest concentration of rural population than any other country in the world. Development of villages is development of country. It is the dream of every Indian to see a developed India. But it is hard to build a developed India if we ignore the 70 percent of rural India and keep them away from the fruits of development. Panchayati Raj has changed drastically after the 73rd amendment. It is especially the founding values and specific objects of the new constitutional amendments that had an unprecedented impact. In the welfare state like India and in the wake of introduction of various development programmes, administration is expected to function as a catalytic agent of development and change. It is more so at the grassroots level; it becomes highly relevant in items of redress and amelioration of grievances of the common-man, and proper use of resources, so that the ideal of bridging the gaps among various sections becomes possible. It is a matter of common belief that the administration at the grass root level has not measured up to the expectation of the general masses. It is so, because of the fact that either it is under heavy influence of political leaders or it treats itself as the top brass of the society and fails to develop confidence among masses for a rural development.

An assessment of the role of administration is important in more than one way in this context. The founding fathers of Indian Constitution have laid solid ideological foundations sovereignty, democracy, socialism, secularism, equality and justice. Though at the level of performance, there are certain deficiencies therein. Eventually, there are questions about the viability and role of administration as instrument of development. However, it is important to analyze whether rural bureaucracy has acquired the status of a new class in itself or it is successful in contributing to development administration.

To deal with these issues, we have to pay particular attention to both the content of what can be called development and to the interpretation of democracy. The assessment of development cannot be divorced from the lives that people can lead and the real freedom that they enjoy. Development can scarcely be seen merely in terms of enhancement of inanimate objects of convenience, such as rise in personal incomes, or industrialization— important as they may be as means to the real ends. Their value must depend on what they do to the lives and freedom of the people involved, which must be central to the idea of development (Sen, 2009).

To reach a viable Panchayats three hurdles have to be overcome. These have remained what they always have been. First, is the domination of the bureaucracy over the PRIs. The agent for implementation of all major programmes has been the bureaucracy. Various parallel bodies such as the DRDA have grossly undermined the importance of the PRIs. Either they have to be disbanded or made accountable to the PRIs. Second is the lack of adequate financial resources to carry out the administration. A grant-in- aids is the major component of the PRIs revenue. This need to be supplemented with the adequate collection of taxes by the PRIs and a compulsory transfer of some of the state government's revenue on the recommendation of the state finance commission duly established for the purpose.

The last hurdle is related to the lack of training programmes for the participants of the PRIs. Without proper training, they lack the direction of the administration. To conclude, admitting that the PRIs in India are weak and assuming that it will not be smooth sailing for them even after the 73rd Amendment, they do have an important role to play in India's

development. Already, the PRIs have several achievements to their credit. These institutions have enhanced the political consciousness of the people and initiated a process of democratic seed drilling in the Indian soil. What the government should attempt now is gradually to delimit the role of bureaucracy, to promote local leadership, to remove structural deficiencies, encourage PRIs to strengthen their financial resources, bring in effective coordination among these institutions and between PRIs and the state governments and give them effective powers in relation to planning and its implementation. For this, the will to decentralize and delegate, on the part of the state governments, is a prerequisite.

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