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Gram Swaraj

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KEYWORDS:

Although the Father of Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, advocated for 'a village based political formation fostered by a stateless, classles s society' for the creation of Gram Swaraj, the idea of Panchayati Raj did not find a place in the Draft Constitution of India. This happened because the Congress Constitution Committee rejected the idea 'believing that the Congress could neither forgo its political role nor become so utterly decentralized' as envisaged in the Gandhian concept of Gram Swaraj. (Granville Austin, The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation, 1966 p. 29) So much so that the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution and the Minister of Law, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, did not care to reply to the letter dated May 10, 1948 from Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the President of the Constituent Assembly, as to why the Draft he had circulated did not even use the two words 'Panchayati Raj'. Instead, the reply came four months later in September 1948 from the Secretary of the Law Ministry saying that the Draft had already been circulated and that it was far too late to make any changes and if any amendments were desired, the same could be moved on the floor of the House.

Not only this, Ambedkar response to the criticism by Gandhians like H.V. Kamath, Arun Chandra Guha, T. Prakasam, K. Santhanam, Shibban Lal Saxena, Alladi Krishnaswamy Ayyar, N.G. Ranga, M. Anathsayanam Ayyangar, Mahavir Tyagi, K.T. Shah and others was : Village Republics (Panchayats of Village Communities) were a cause of the "ruination of India". They were nothing but "sing of localism and of ignorance and communalism" and "I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit". His stance on Panchayats was perhaps based on this apprehension that the Panchayats shall be dominated by upper castes and exploit and repress the Scheduled Castes. But, the then Prime Minister of India and the leader the Congress Parliamentary Party, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, chose to remain silent on this issue; perhaps, he favoured acentralised polity for making India a modern and developed state.

But, the passionate pleas of the Gandhians like Prof. N.G. Ranga and others virtually forced Ambedkar to accept an amendment moved by K. Santhanam which later on got incorporated into Article-40 of the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Constitution of India. It directed the state to set up Village Pancyayats and endow them with the authority of function as units of self-government.

This did lead to the enactment of Gram Panchayat Acts by various States; these were no more than half-hearted attempts of the creation of rural local government institutions. But the failure of the Community Development Programme, which had been launched for bringing a silent revolution in rural society by awakening the dormant forces of progress, led to the appointment of Balwantray Mehta Study Team. It was the scheme of democratic decentralization suggested by this Team (1957) that led to the creation of the Panchayati Raj which was inaugurated b the then Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, at Nagur in Rajasthan on October 2, 1959.

It was the Panchayati Raj that set up local democracy at the district, block and village leaves in the form of Gram Panchayats, Pan-chayat Semites and Zila Parishads respectively. However, the Pancyayati Raj proved to be the proverbial God that failed on account of several reasons. The main among these was the hostility of political leaders and the bureaucracy. Consequently, the Panchayat Raj, developed during 1959-1964, became stagnant during 1964-1971 and the decade thereafter. The Attempt of the Asoka Mehta Committee (1978) failed to revitalize the Panchayati Raj Institutions. However, the States of West Bengal, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh did take the lead in this direction.

But the real rejuvenation process started as a result of the moving of the 64th Amendment Bill in Lock Sabha in 1090 by then Prime Minister of India, late Rajiv Gandhi, who appears to have been inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj. It was passed by the Lock Sabha by two-thirds majority but failed to get the same in The Rajya Sabha and was rejected in the Upper House. This vision was, however, subsequently institutionalized in the form of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992). This led to the establishment of the new system of the Pancyatati Raj in the States in 1994 through the enactment of conformity legislations.

But the studies of several distinguished scholars on the working of the Panchayati Raj in different States and the Status Report of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (1996) lead us to the inference that the Gandhian ideal of Gram Swaraj remains an unfinished agenda even after fifty years of the implementation of the Panchayati Raj on the recommendation of the Balwantray Mehta Study Team on October 2, 1959 at Nagaur in Rajasthan and even 17 years after the enactment of the 73rd Amendment and 15 years after its implementation by various States in 1994 through conformity legislations for several reasons. The foremost among them is the lack of political will in most of the governments of the States. Even the concerted efforts of the former Union Minister of Panchayati Raj, Mani Shankar Iyer (2004- 09), have failed to make much difference. Therefore, concerted, systematic and sustained endeavors are needed on the part of those for whom Gram Swaraj remains a cherished dream for the empowerment of people and for making India participatory democracy.

This ideal of decentralized democracy or Panchayati Raj should not be regarded as a sentimental proposition based on medieval notions. A study of modern economic and political thought in the West would indicate that decentralized institutions are now regarded as crucial to the establishment of democracy on stable foundations. The best for human species survival is worldwide Village Swaraj the independent self sufficient Village Republics envisioned by Mohandas Gandhi. Without this, we will destroy the earth and humanity. If the villages of India cannot survive, humanity cannot survive. Far from being our savior, technology is our mortal enemy, acting as a graveyard spiral with never ending promises to save us from the never ending problems that it has itself created.

At a time when we are endeavoring to establish pancyayati Raj in India on the basis of wide decentralization of political and economical power, this paper is bound to be of great value to a large number of official as well as official workers. The government of the village will be conducted by the panchayat of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers male & female possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. Although Gandhiji's ideal life is an enlightened unselfish ethical life of plain living & high thinking. A constructive programme without resistance leads to a sense of futility and resignation that no amount of effort will change the system.

Gandhi's alternative to modern western form of development is his Village Swaraj, a non violent from of development, the core of which essentially consists of villages with a critical ethical culture of Truth and non-violence. Mahatma Gand hi strongly pleaded for decentralization of economic and political power through the organization of Village Panchayats. He was of the definite view that Pancyayat system in India, if worked on scientific lines, could not only build up the social and economic strength of the country side but also strengthen the forces of national defense against the risk of foreign invasion.

Gandhian philosophy is not only simultaneously political, moral and religious; it is also traditional and modern, simple and complex. It embodies numerous Western influences to which Gandhi was exposed, but being rooted in ancient Indian culture and harnessing eternal and universal moral and religious principles, there is much in it that is not at all new. This is why Gandhi could say: "I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and nonviolence are as old as the hills." Gandhi is concerned even more with the spirit than with the form. If the spirit is consistent with truth and nonviolence, the truthful and nonviolent form will automatically result.

COCLUSION:-

The word swaraj means self-rule, Gandhi gave it the content of an integral revolution that encompasses all spheres of life. "At the individual level swaraj is vitally connected with the capacity for dispassionate self-assessment, ceaseless self-purification and growing swadeshi or self-reliance." Politically swaraj is self-government and not good government (for Gandhi, good government is no substitute for self government) and it means continuous effort to be independent of government control, whether it is foreign government or whether it is national.

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