



Local Government in India- An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Decentralization is a prime mechanism through which democracy as a form of government signifies the empowerment of people and grass root democracy ensuring that genuine participatory development process at the local level empower the local people. A grass root democracy is necessary decentralized democracy in which the management of public affairs operates through a wide network. Decentralization refers to the transfer of authority from higher level of government to a lower level. Today most of the democratic nations of the world have adopted this system. The concept of political decentralization is as old as the concept of Democracy. 'Bringing government closer to the people' is the theme behind the decentralization. 'Returning the power to the people' is the main slogan behind the democratic decentralization. The Indian Local Self System, which is known as Panchayat Raj System is an innovative mechanism to bridge the gap between the rulers and the ruled.

KEYWORDS : Decentralization, Panchayatraj, Democracy, Local governments

The concept of local government is well known in India since old days. Throughout the history some evidences of village panchayats are found in the form of village communities. Several dynasties ruled the nations from time immemorial and destroyed by invaders but the villages have retained their identities. Village was considered as an economic as well as administrative unit at the grass root level. During the Mughal and British period rulers confined their rule to cities and towns and village institutions were ignored. Lord Ripon's Resolution of 1882, the Royal Commission on Decentralization Report 1909. The Government of India Act, 1919 and the Government of India Act, 1935, etc. are prominent in establishing the local governments in pre independence period

Decentralization is a prime mechanism through which democracy as a form of government signifies the empowerment of people and grass root democracy ensuring that genuine participatory development process at the local level empower the local people. A grass root democracy is necessary decentralized democracy in which the management of public affairs operates through a wide network. Decentralization refers to the transfer of authority from higher level of government to a lower level. Today most of the democratic nations of the world have adopted this system. The concept of political decentralization is as old as the concept of Democracy. 'Bringing government closer to the people' is the theme behind the decentralization. 'Returning the power to the people' is the main slogan behind the democratic decentralization. The Indian Local Self System, which is known as Panchayat Raj System is an innovative mechanism to bridge the gap between the rulers and the ruled. Again it is the system which fills up the organizational gap between the master and the governing national elite. It is regarded as the foundation for the extension of democratic forms of government. After Independence several developments took place in the field of local self government particularly in rural local government. The Panchayats were established by most of the State governments in India after independence, but a major step in this direction was taken on the basis of Balwantrai Mehta Committee's report in 1957 which recommended three-tier Panchayati Raj system in India. During this period several measures were initiated to strengthen Panchayati Raj by both union and state governments in the country. Considering the past experiences the union government took steps as to remove the weaknesses of Panchayati Raj and result was the Constitutional (73rd) Amendment Act. It is argued that "this Act seeks to protect democracy at grassroots.

In the beginning PR system worked successfully in some States like Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, etc. but within 10 years of its working, it became apparent that their performance is not satisfactory as it was being painted' and studies showed that the benefits of development are being cornered by organized vested interest groups in these bodies at the cost of rural poor. Several studies conducted by scholars in various states and also by some state level and all India Committees,⁷ made it clear that the Panchayatraj did not fulfill the expectations of the rural people. The Karnataka and West Bengal's recent experiment of Panchayat Raj system are cited as a success story.⁸

It is said that the Zilla Panchayats in Karnataka are really emerging as a power centre below the State. But, the studies by George Mathew and Gurumurthy¹⁰ have shown that power in the districts is enjoyed mainly by dominant castes belonging to the top power groups, and the interest of the poor are sacrificed for strengthening the vested interests of the district leadership.

The West Bengal study also shows that Panchayatraj bodies do not allow its benefits to percolate down to the poor in the villages.¹² Another study clearly shows that the socio- economic power structure in rural areas does not allow the benefits of Panchayat Raj system do not reach the weaker sections.¹³ Most of the benefits are being taken away by dominant castes in the Panchayats. It is very clear that Panchayatraj is working for elite groups or for groups of big farmers and rich businessmen. The masses and the poor do not get much benefit out of the system but they are being exploited by the Panchayatraj leaders. On the whole, the performance of these institutions has not been satisfactory. Slowly the Panchayat raj Institutions have lost glamour and people's participation declined.

Factors responsible for the decline of Panchayatraj Institutions:

On the basis of the literature available on the operational aspects of Panchayatraj the factors responsible for the decline are many. Important among them are, the political repercussions of electoral competition between state and Panchayatraj representatives were largely responsible for the decline of Panchayatraj institutions. The state level leaders began to see their rivals in these institutions and out of fear. Secondly they began withdrawing important functionaries specially the officials from these bodies and dumping of state cadre administrative officers. Most of the extension and development functions were taken away by several amendments in the relevant acts. For example, development of land, water, forests, grazing lands, animal husbandry, rural health, etc. should be in the hands of Panchayatraj bodies, but these are controlled by State governments. Such an irrational approach in functional distribution has diminished Panchayatraj system. Thus, these bodies remained only Panchayats and not institutions of Raj. Added to this Panchayatraj elections were repeatedly postponed on one or other flimsy grounds. The result was lack of people's faith in these institutions because of their functional non utility.

Political considerations played a major role in patronage distribution in these institutions and Panchayatraj bureaucracy, particularly, B. D. Os were not allowed to take free and fair decisions in running and distributing annual grants to various Panchayats. A number of overlapping committees at district level comprising of MPs, MLAs are functioning and various lead banks provide finance for different schemes and a multiplicity of departmental organizations are also existing side by side. In practice, the plethora of rural development programmes and schemes implemented under the control of central/state governments has minimized the scope for the functioning of Panchayatraj bodies.

The capacity of Panchayatraj institutions is further hampered due to inadequate finances. Most of the finances come from state government. Not only state governments but even the Central government is keen to spend its own sources through its own organizations and this has added to the miseries of Panchayatraj bodies and the people have developed apathy and lost faith in the Panchayatraj institutions. The problems of Panchayatraj has further been compounded by the penetration of state authority by the use of stringent controls like dissolution and suppression of Panchayatraj institutions. Even Sarpanchas were suspended or removed by government on flimsy grounds. The bureaucrats serving in these institutions do not want to be subordinated by Panchayatraj leaders and this has created obstacles in smooth working of these bodies. The result was administrative chaos and politics without any moral. The state level elected representatives of the area belonging to the party in power pose that in power hierarchy they are above Panchayatraj institutions. Their proximity and linkages with concerned Minister and Chief Minister provide them ample power to create psychological environment in their favour to increase their following. This nature of our political elite certainly requires immediate rectification otherwise Panchayatraj will not be able to gain people's faith which is an essential requirement at present. Moreover the elected representatives of Panchayatraj institutions need to be trained properly

to govern. In the backdrop of these the question arises how to make Panchayatraj institutions more effective is a challenge. Panchayatraj institutions have to function as an agency of decentralization and must encourage mass participation and self governance. Further, the planning process has to be strengthened at the grass root level (micro level) for overall rural development. The concept has to provide opportunities to the poor rural masses for decision making in these bodies. Such a concept will require many steps such as multi level planning along with micro level planning and integration of Panchayatraj institutions in planning and administration of local areas. The present rural power structure exploits the poor, therefore, some steps are required to check this. The Panchayatraj institutions must arrange for social security, loan facilities from banks, effective public distribution system of food grains, clothes and other basic needs for rural poor for daily consumption are important factors to reduce the dependency of them on money lenders and exploiters. Continuous employment for rural poor in development work programmes. Panchayat Raj, one of the best political innovations of free India and is a channel for popular participation in the process of development. Democratic values can be ensured through good governance. Even after the adoption of 73rd and 74th amendment act things have not achieved the expected results. Still much has to be added to the successful functioning of Panchayat Raj Institutions.

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