



## Origin and Development of Panchayat in Assam

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**ABSTRACT**

*India, being the world's largest democracy, needs people's participation as a must for its steady and healthy development. Assam has seen its panchayati raj budding since the ancient times of Pragjotishpur, Ahom Rule and British Rule after which its present position has come into being. The Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 was the response to the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Act, 1992 regarding village and urban administration. Consequently people at the village level started participating in the local affairs overcoming the hurdles and a huge change has been seen explicitly in rural participation and development.*

**KEYWORDS : Panchyati Raj, Rural Development, People's Participation**

People's participation in the affairs of the government is nowadays one of the crucial factors responsible for the healthy growth of democracy in the world. The larger participation always ensures the success of democracy in almost all the countries over the world. It is obvious that in order to trace the trajectory of the origin of the PRIs and rural development in India we have to go through the pages of ancient and modern history of Assam particularly the British period. A quick look these periods would help us to understand the very base of local government and Administration in Assam.

**Here we emphasis on the following :****Kamrupa / Prgjyotispur**

- Administration in ancient Assam
- Central Administration
- Local Administration
- Administration of Justice
- Revenue Administration

**Ahom Rule.****British Period**

- Local-self Government Act, 1926
- Assam Panchayat Act, 1959
- The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1972
- The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1986
- The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1994
- Discussion and Conclusion.

**Method :**

This paper has prepared by some secondary data like local and national research books, government records etc.

**Objectives :**

The main aims and objectives of this paper to study the origin and development of panchayatiraj of Assam and highlighted the different between pass and present panchayat.

**Kamrupa / Prgjyotispur**

Ramayana and Mahabharata had distinctively mentioned about Pragjyotisha. Epigraphs and literature mention "Assam" by this name. The capital city of Pragjyotisha was Pragjyotispur which was later known as Kamrupa in medieval period, and identified with modern Dispur, the capital of Assam at present, though often Pragjyotisha stood for both the country and the capital city.

**Administration in ancient Assam :**

S.L Borah says in her book 'A Comprehensive History of Assam' that

"A clear and precise account of the working of administration in ancient Assam is not possible owing to the dearth of materials. Our only source of information are some epigraphic references and the 'Kalika Purana', where there is a chapter on 'Rajnit' which too is only on the duties of the king and the ministers."

**1.02 Central Administration:**

In ancient times, the traditional policy pursued by the Kings of India was to maintain and project the 'varnasramadharma'. The responsibility of the rulers of Kamarupa in upholding this principle is indicated in the Nidhanpur grant (lines 34f), wherein it is stated that Bhaskarvarman 'properly organised the duties of the various classes and stages of life that has become confused'. The 'Rajnit' section of the kalika Purana also emphasise on the King's duty and responsibility to different 'varnas' comprises the subjects.

**1.03 Local Administration:**

In ancient Assam the administrative divisions similar to that of the Guptas. The 'bhukti' was probably the largest division and the term was used in the sense of a Province. During Vaidyadeva's time the bhukti pragjyotisha which included the mandala Komura, stood for the central unit or home province.

**1.04 Administration of Justice:**

The epics of the ancient period indicate that justice was administered according to Hindu law books and describes the rulers as the sole authority of justice. The land-grants contain ordinances broadcasted by the rulers which bound the officers and subjects concerned and violation of which resulted in punishment. These 'sasanas' had the force of law and they were expected to be in unison with the rules laid down in the Hindu law books. Hindu texts mention a 'Pradvivaka' or chief judge and other judges called 'dharmadhikarins'.

**1.05 Revenue Administration:**

Regular taxes, occasional taxes, commercial levies, fines, income from state properties tribute from feudatories were the primary sources of revenue. In those days land tax was called 'bhaga' and it was usually one-sixth of the produce on land. Inscriptions of ancient Assam mention 'kara' only. The land revenue was called 'kara' and could be paid in cash or in kind.

On the other hand officers associated with the administration included 'uparika' (officer in charge of collecting 'utkhetana' import) etc. Besides them there were other officers like 'Bhandagaradhikrita' and 'Kosthagarika', who were in charge of the royal store-house and the treasury, respectively.

**AHOM RULE:**

Assam was ruled by the Ahoms for nearly six hundred years, in the period between 1228-1826 A.D. An elementary form of panchayat for handling local matters could be founded within the social structure and a system of local administration built up by the Ahom rulers.

The panchayats were constituted by the chosen elderly and experienced villagers and these panchayats generally sat to settle local disputes. However the personal rule of the feudal nobles who constituted the top level of hierarchy of Ahom administration, as well as a system of monarchy left a clouded influence on such local bodies and their decisions. The 'mel' and 'khel' systems that were prevailed in medieval Assam and still found in Assam's rural society. The usual meaning of mel is a meeting, an assembly or a tribunal, in Ahom times, it meant a state dinner given by kings to their ministers and principal officers during which important political affairs were also discussed. Khel means a clan or fraternity.

**BRITISH PERIOD**

Many Acts regarding the local self government were passed during the British rule in India, such as the Road Cess Act of 1871, Assam Local Rates Regulations 1879, etc. In 1881, the government of India proposed certain reforms for local boards, including an increase in strength of non official members from one-half to two-thirds. Then the Assam local self government act, 1915 was passed. The major act passed thereon are discussed below:

**Local Self government Act 1926:**

In 1924, to suggest amendments to the Assam local self government Act, 1915 the Assam legislature Council appointed a committee. The main features of the Act were that the members of the board should be elected, government might nominate officials to supply expert advice, the chairman of the local board should normally be elected or the board might request the govt. to appoint chairman, official or non-official.

**Assam Panchayat Act, 1959:**

The Assam Panchayat Act 1959 significantly induced a three tier organization. At the village level, the existing Primary panchayat would be named as Gaon panchayat. In between the gaon panchayat and the Mohkuma parishad, the main executive agency was created. This was the Anchal Samiti, whose area was overlapped with that of the existing community Development Block. It would consist of representatives of the gaon panchayat within its jurisdiction member of the Assam Legislative Assembly representing the area concerned and also representative of cooperative societies.

**The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1972:**

After the adoption of the Assam panchayati Raj Act, 1972, the act of 1959, amended in 1964, was reversed, which was enforced in April of the following year. The statement of objects and reasons adjoined to the bill (the Assam panchayati Raj Bill 1972) had pointed out that it had been found convenient to amend and amalgamate laws regarding the self-government for the rural areas of the districts which were located in the plains. The existing three-tier bodies were to be reorganized into a two-tier system with gaon panchayats at the base and mohkuma parishads at the sub-divisional level.

**THE ASSAM PANCHAYAT RAJ ACT, 1986:**

The act of 1972 was replaced by the Assam panchayati raj act, 1986 which was 'adopted' with effect from 5 September 1990 only. With this new act the state again reverted to a three-tier set up gaon panchayat, Anchalic panchayat and the mohkuma parishad.

**THE ASSAM PANCHAYATI RAJ ACT OF 1994:**

The act of 1992 stood repealed with the enactment of the Assam panchayat act, 1994, excepting for the two autonomous districts under the sixth schedule of the constitution (Karbi Anglong and north Cachar Hills district) this act extends to all the rural areas of Assam.

The Assam panchayat (constitution) rules, 1995 came to be enforced consequent upon the introduction of three-tier system of panchayati Raj, consisting of the gaon panchayat, anchalic panchayat and the zilla parishad. Gaon panchayat at the village level, Anchalic Panchayat at the Block level and Zilla parishad at the District level. The present Act has replaced the mohkuma parishad by the Zilla parishad .

**Discussion and Conclusion:**

Active participation of people in governance is one of the basic concepts of democracy. Therefore, the panchayati raj system has played the most important role in people's participation. Until the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment act 1992, the rural development has not fulfilled its objectives in true sense of the term. These provisions of the amendment gave tremendous hope regarding the participation of democracy at the grass root level with active participation of people in the local affairs. In Assam the new panchayat system was established in 2002 and completed its one full term and the second is in the ongoing process. Panchayats are really doing wonders as people's problem solving institution. But it is found that control over the panchayat by superior authorities, bureaucrats and ruling parties etc are some of the defective features in the working of panchayati raj system of Assam.

In ancient period, the village (gram) was the smallest administrative unit. According to Kautilya it consisted of 100 to 500 families. Another feature of the village government was the panchayat, consisting of five members. There were other functionaries also to look after the village administration. There included the headman, the accountant, the watchman, the superintendent of tanks, priests, astrologer, village artisans etc. Thus the village panchayat was an active institution before the advent of Britishers, in the very true sense. The villages were enjoying a well balanced social, economic and political system. During the medieval times also the panchayats continued to flourish. But with the advent of the Britishers and the adoption of policy of centralisation by them the panchayats suffered a setback. Before 1947 when we were under British rule, the people did not enjoy any share in the administration of the country. But independence the people got share in the administration of the country at national, state as well as local level.

The panchayats had to play a vital role in the enforcement of national plans after the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of the constitution. The Assam panchayat rules came to be implemented resulting upon the introduction of the three tier system. The rules related to conduct of panchayat elections, election of members to represent district planning committees, delimitation of constituencies in panchayat areas, determination of constituencies for the different tiers of the panchayats, determination of constituencies reserved for STs, SCs and for women and other matters. The 11<sup>th</sup> schedule provides 29 subjects for Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Thus from the above discussion we can say that the present panchayat system is very wider than the past in terms of its powers and functions. Introduction of more power and functions to the present panchayat system leaves us a ray of hope that the panchayati raj system will play an important role in rural development in the near future.

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