



Grass-Roots Democracy in Recent Indian Perspective: *Future Agenda*

KEYWORDS

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Participation of the people is a key element of the process of democratization and good governance. That is why aspirations for grass-roots democracy have acquired universal recognition during the past quarter century. In world scenario, socio-political movements in the second half of the twentieth century challenged the centralized state both in liberal democratic systems and in established socialist regimes. That was when the idea of grass-roots democracy emerged as a virtually universal value.

As democratic consciousness grew among all group and respect for the dignity of individuals and groups become a shared value throughout the world, democracy continued to acquire new meaning. Decentralization of powers and self-governance at every level of society and polity become an essential part of democratic theory, facilitating the realization of the creative potentiality of individuals and groups everywhere.

In recent years, grass-roots democracy, i.e. local self-governance has emerged as the new mantra of the forces of globalization and liberalization (Mohanty), however Indian perspective on local governance sees it as an arena transforming an unequal local society into a democratic community and evokes the idea of Gandhi, trying to reinvent the vision of Gramswaraj or village-level self-rule or villagers' self-determination in the course of people's struggle for freedom. The Gandhian approach is embedded in a framework of self management. Actually decentralization is the essence of the Gandhian concept of Gramswaraj. For Gandhiji the village was the appropriate organizational level for direct democracy. He wrote in Harijan in 1942 defining his vision of village panchayat in the following words:

"My idea of village swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others is which dependence is a necessity..... The government of the village will be conducted by the panchayat of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers, male and females, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. These will have all the authority and jurisdiction required. Since there will be no system of punishment in the accepted sense, the panchayat will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office. Any village can become such a republic today without much interference even from the present government whose sole effective connection with the village is the exaction of the village revenue. Here there is perfect democracy based upon individual freedom. The individual is the architect of his own government."

Recognizing the importance of democratic institutions at the grass-roots level, the Constitution of India, under its

Directive Principles of State Policy, states that, "the state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government. The need for popular participation in development tasks under the five year plans promoted the Nehru Government to look in the direction of strengthening the panchayat system. The Government of India felt that it was necessary to introduce a scheme of Community Project and National Extension Service to bring about rural upliftment which was one of the principal objects of the Directive Principles of State Policy. In 1957, the Balwant Rai G.Mehta Committee was appointed to study and report on the Community Development Project. Keeping in view, "economy of efficiency", and to assess the extent to which the programme had succeeded in utilizing local initiative and in creating institutions to ensure continuity in the process of improving socio-economic conditions. The Mehta Committee, officially designated as the "Team for the Study of Community Project and National Extension Service", felt that development cannot progress without giving responsibility and power to the community and recommended an early establishment of statutory elective local bodies and devolution to them of the necessary resources, power and authority.

Therefore, in order to encourage people's participation and to overcome the defects of community Development Programme, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) came into being in most of the states. Thus, the plan envisaged a three-tier system of decentralization, namely the Village Panchayat, the Panchayati Samiti and the Zila Parishad. The above scheme recommended by the Committee was endorsed by the National Development Council on January 12, 1958. Speaking on the occasion of the inauguration of Panchayati Raj in Rajasthan on October 2, 1959, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru expressed his faith in the capability of the people in managing their affairs in the manner considered best by them. It was in this context that he described panchayats as the "foundations of democracy" in India.

By the year 1961, Panchayati Raj had come to be accepted as a national programme. However, within a few years of its inception, Panchayati Raj Institutions came to be viewed with disfavor and very soon these began to crumble due to lack of resources, political will, bureaucratic antipathy and dominance of the rural elites, who cornered all benefits of the development schemes. Moreover, suspension and suppression of these bodies was a common feature. In terms of development activities, the Panchayats were by-passed and hardly played any role in decision-making and implementation of schemes. In 1977, the Union Government led by Shri Morarji Desai, finding that the

states had not managed the Panchayati Raj Institutions properly, set up a committee with Shri Ashok Mehta as the Chairman to review the working of Panchayati Raj Institutions and in particular, among other things to delineate their true role in the task of integrated rural development.

The Ashok Mehta Committee submitted its report in August 1978, making 123 recommendations to revitalize Panchayati Raj Institutions as a living and integral part of the democratic continuum. But, all these suggestions and recommendations on the whole the performance of decentralized planning experiments has been rather dismal, barring a few exceptional cases. In 1985, the G.V.K.Rao Committee was set up to suggest ways of revamping rural local government. The L.M.Singhavi Committee recommended a constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions in 1986. S.K.Dey, a pioneer of Panchayati Raj System in India, considers two necessary things to be done. One is for the Government of India to change its policy on devolution of authority, resources and responsibility down below and the second to ensure proper implementation of the policy by the state. However, until 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1993 there was no constitutional binding on the part of the states to establish Panchayati Raj Institutions in India.

It is evident, therefore, that for decades, the Panchayats operated as formal bodies according to the whims and discretions of the state governments in India. There were some exceptions to this practice in West Bengal, Kerala and Karnataka. In the 1990s, after the new law came into force, through the 73rd Constitution Amendment the panchayats become representative institutions with constitutionally stipulated elections every five years and reservations of seats for women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Schedules Tribes (STs) and also other Backward Classes (OBCs) in some states.

No doubt that the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has empowered the Panchayati Raj Institutions as constitutional bodies. Following the enactment of 73th Constitutional Amendment in 1993, all State Governments in India are striving for strengthening people's participation in decentralized governance through the Panchayati Raj Institutions. However, it has always been problem as to how this concept can be practiced effectively in such a way that people could be closely associated in the decision-making process at grass-roots level.

However, the initial experiences of the new phase of movement towards grass-roots i.e. local democracy in India interesting indicators of social change. For example, the practice of women's reservation has produced a political dynamic of its own, dispelling substantially the myths of the "proxy woman" and showing the emergence of autonomous assertion of women's rights as well as feminist perspective on social development.

Competitive politics in India has percolated to the village level, making even small groups important for electoral politics even through, legally, party politics is not allowed in village elections (Siga). Wherever a political party or group is well organized and carries popular support, it uses the local institutions more effectively to pursue its objectives, as in West Bengal, Kerala and Karnataka.

But the question to ask is whether even after the new versions of the statutory panchayats come into being, did they nonetheless remain the main agencies for implementing the centrally-sponsored rural development schemes.

In other words, were the local bodies retained mainly as instruments for carrying out central plans or had they become a layer of democratic self governance exercising power in a defined sphere of activities at the local (Mohanthy). On the whole, we see in Indian perspective that local governance is being geared as a method of management of received resources while providing an arena of social representation and political completion albeit in a limited way.

Concluding Remarks

In present Indian scenario, the poor financial devolution to the Panchayats, traditional panchayats by their strong resource base, control the constitutional panchayats. Thought we are in a democracy, it seems our leaders have learnt that act of ruling the masses from the British. As a result, our representatives have earned the characters of rulers not leaders. One finds a lot of domination in every aspect of life. Actually they are not really true leaders leading the masses but they are ruling the masses (Ram, D.Sundar). This ruler culture has to be changed. They should really be leaders. A new leadership is needed for this country.

Primarily devolution has to start from the Central Government. The Centre should devolve some of the powers which are demanded by the State Governments. The Central Government should give up the practice of centralizing the powers.

Secondly, it has to reduce its size and then only it can give responsibility to State Governments.

Thirdly, the Central Government has got responsibility to oversee the devolution process and work for devolving powers from the State Governments to Local Governments. The Central Government has enacted a legislation and it is mandatory to devolve powers. The Central Government cannot say that local bodies are a state subject. When it was a State subject, local bodies were not strong. To change the scenario a Constitutional Amendment was brought in. After the amendment it cannot be proclaimed that it is a State subject.

Fourthly, compelling conditions have to create at the State powers. Many of the State Governments have come to the stage of managing the government in terms of finance and the local governments do not have the privilege of concentrating on development activities with their resources. They have to rely on the resources of the Central Government which finances development should decide and devolve financial resources to development activities through the local bodies.

Fifthly, the State government has to downsize the government and the responsibilities have to be handed over to the local bodies as per the framework of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India. Down below the district it was only bureaucratic raj. The bureaucracy had developed a practice of establishing dominance over the community and it had developed a mindset to subordinate the citizens. Citizens have been reduced to subjects. People have been kept away from the orbit of governance.

Sixthly, the local bodies should have the capacity and capability to digest the power devolved to them. For this their capability has to be enhanced.

Seventhly, people have to be sensitized on the new responsibilities of the citizens. Developing citizenry is a new task to be performed by the civil society organizations. Transforming the petitioners, voters and beneficiaries into informed citizenry is the responsibility of the civil society.

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