



Grassroots Level Democracy in India-an Overview

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KEYWORDS

Popular participation is the very backbone of democracy (Santha-1999). It is the Key concept of Self-governance (Rai Manoj 2002), because in one democracy, decision making process begins and ends with the people. In modern democracy, it rests in the hands of the elected representatives. Therefore essence of the democratic system prompted Abraham Lincon to say, it is of the People, by the People and for the People (Quoted by Santh, 1999)

Popular Participation in a one democratic system is ensured through four ways:-

- (i) Participation in decision making, in identifying problems, formulating activities and allocating resources.
- (ii) Participation in carrying out activities, making and operating their own programmes and partaking their own services.
- (iii) Participation in economic, social, political, cultural and other benefit individually and collectively.
- (iv) Participating in evaluating activities and of the outcome which should feedback all above three.

The successes of Popular Participation in a democratic set up can only be successful through democratic-decentralization. Without decentralization of powers, the dreams, hopes and aspiration of great multitude of people can not be realized. It had to be worked out from the below and by the people living in every village (Prasad, 2006), which means democracy and democratic governance must be started from the below of grassroots involving the people living in villages in the process of decision –making and running the democratic administration of scores of villages through elected bodies.

These grassroot institutions provide capacity to the people to elect their representatives and opportunities to resolve their regional problems. Grassroots democracy is not new to India. It is neither a new concept nor it is an experience of Western Political Thought operationalized in Indian Soil. (Mathew-2011) Though the Russian Mir, the German Mark and the medieval Manor of England could be considered as the counterparts of village communities in India named as Village Panchayats, yet they have been in existence in our country for over Centuries and became Integral Part of Indian Culture. (Saxena-1989). These institutions became the Pivot of administration, of social life, economic force and focus of social solidarity (Santh-1995). In Rig Veda, Aitaraya Brahman, Panini's Astadhyai Kautilya's Arthasatra, inscriptions of Ashokan Pillars, and writings of Buddhist & Jain Scholars. The available literature clearly points to the existence of Janapada, Paura Sabha, Gram Sabha in Ancient India. (Mathew-2011).

Moguls did not care for village set up. During the Medieval Period caste, by and large had become occupational and Feudalism made Matters worse. The new class of feudal Chiefs and Revenue Collectors (Zamindars) emerged between the ruler and the people. Village becomes sink of localism, den of ignorance, narrow-Mindness and Communalism. So there began the stagnation and decline of self govt. in villages.

Under the British Govt., local self govt. did not make much

progress. It was never the Priority of British Rulers. Rural development was not on their agenda only after 1857 uprising Policy Perceptive on local Govt., was taken to consideration as an suggestion of Samuel, a member of of the Vice-Roy's Council and that was only on four considerations.

- (i) Need for infrastructure development at local levels.
- (ii) Local Self govt. as a Convenient means of Resource Mobilization at local levels, relieving the Central govt. from a major and unbearable responsibility.
- (iii) Promoting the spirit of local help and guidance at the bottom.
- (iv) As an aspect of wise experience of beneficent Power promote good of less civilized people.

It was only from 1870 that Viceroy Mayo's resolution for decentralization of Power to bring about administrative efficiency got needed impetus . Lord Rippon made it a bench mark of govt. policy in his resolution on local government on May 18, 1882 and limited to the Urban areas only that to in large cities, , with the sole aim to meet their colonial interest. However, with the emergence of Gandhiji on the Political arena, grass roots level democracy slowly started regaining importance . Gandhiji's advocacy of village democracy brought the issue to the Centre stage and laid its foundation (Harijan-1942).His views were got reflected in the non-justifiable part of the constitution in article 40 of the Directive Principles of State policy. Soon after the independence both the Community Development Programme and National Extension Service were launched to address Rural reconstruction. On the recommendation of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1956) this three tier institutions at grassroot level democratic institutions were named as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) with Zilla-Parisad at the top level, Panchayat Samiti at middle and gram Panchayats at village level. Ashok Meheta Committee was appointed in 1978 to examine workings of these institutions who could categories their workings in three periods, -

(a) Period of ascendancy (1959-64) (b) Period of Stagnation (1965-1969) (c) Period of decline (1969-77). The Committee recommended the districts to be the unit of Planning, Co-ordination and resource allocation. The G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985) in its report in 1986 recommended for constitutional status to these PRI Institutions. The bold step of late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in introducing 64th Constitutional amendment Act with an object to give PRI institutions Constitutional Status . The bill could not get nod of the Parliament as it was defeated in Rajya Sabha because of the narrow Political Considerations of the Opposition. However these institutions could get constitutional status when 73rd Constitution Amendment Act was Passed in the Parliament in 1992.

Meanwhile, PRIs have become 55 years and 22 years have already been passed giving these institutions constitutional status. Yet the dream of Mahatma Gandhi to see these institutions as units and means "Gram Swarajya" could not be attained yet they are to overcome several weakness that are hindering the progress, prosperity and success of PRIs. Lack of political education and awareness, excess Politicisation, lack of adequate resources, corruption, excess-bureaucratic

Control, illiteracy, poverty, partisan attitude are the major factors which have made these PRIs ineffective, weak and handicapped struggling for success.

Not with standing these weaknesses it is a fact that the panchayatiRaj institutions has emerged as powerful vehicles for social transformation (Mathew-2011).

Despite various challengers, the PRIs has been playing a pivot role as institutions of local self government. In the changing scenario of rural development .some positive trends are noticed now –a – days which are as follows:

- (1) PRIs are increasingly recognized as the best available alternative to implement several developmental programs and of late GPS are made to play a pivotal role in the planning and implementation process. District funding is also being made available for speedy implementation of the programmes.
- (2) Social audits at PRI level have shown that people's participation is both qualitatively and effectively resolving local problems.
- (3) Performance of the PRIs is evaluated both by national and international agencies (Google) and they are given awards, which has led to increased motivation on part of PRIs. Due to this over the years one comes across several performing GPs who are recognized as Beacon panchayats and role models for others. They have been successfully in converging both human and financial resources and have been successful in promoting social and economic equity.

To conclude, grass root level democracy has come to stay in India through the instrumentality of 73rd and 74th constitutional Amendment. While on the one side of the spectrum there are very active and strong PR institutions, at the other end we have a large number of PRIs which are not in position to perform effectively. The performance level of the PRIs have been directly proportionate to levels of transfer of 3fs ' viz, functions, functionaries and funds. Since the devolution of the power and functions are within the ambit of the state governments and the Act does not make it mandatory for full-fledged transfer of power, the PRIs have not developed uniformly across the country. With the implementation of more rural development programmes through the PRIs and increase in the budgetary outlays, the resource base of the PRIs has increased. The efforts made by institutions such as the National institution of Rural Development and the state institutes of Rural Development and other agencies for capacity building of the PRI members as also showing positive result, in terms of improved delivery by the PRIs. Increased participation of women in PRIs resulting from higher percentage of reservation is slowly changing the face of village democracy.

The establishment of self-help groups in many states, the participation of NGO, and CBOs working together with the PRI institution is a promising trend which, if guided properly, can improve the delivery of governing systems at the grass root level, making rural india truly a participatory democracy.

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