
Historical Development of Panchayati Raj in India:A Historical Analysis

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Abstract: *This article provides an overview on historical development of Panchayati Raj system in India. In my view that Rajasthan was the first state in India to implement a plan of democratic decentralization in 1959 and established the Panchayati Raj system in the rural areas closely resembling the model suggested by the Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team. But Maharashtra Government did not accept the B.R. Mehta team's report. It appointed the Naik Committee in 1961 to suggest a suitable pattern for the Panchayat system. Based on the recommendations of this committee, the states decide on a District-level body to make Zila Parishad the planning and implementation body. All developmental departments of Government at the district level are kept under its control. The Panchayat Samiti was made a committee of the Zilla Parishad only. I highlighted to this article that how the Panchayati Raj system in India are developed step by step.*

Keywords: *Amendment, Constitution, Development, Panchayati Raj, Rural Women etc.*

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Introduction

For a long time after independence, rural women remained virtually unknown to politics due to their religion, caste, tradition and the patriarchy of the Panchayat system that played a dominant role in the villages, ignoring the women's interests. The prevailing stratification of society, an authoritarian pattern of decision-making, limited means of communication and low literacy rate prevent them from exposure to politics. After independence, the introduction of new Panchayati Raj institutions and community development programmes, constitutional

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provisions were made for the upliftment of women in India. The spread of education, the rise of political parties, increasing urban contact, rapid communication, and the influence of mass media have brought about a rapid social change in the rural population which has paved the way for the political participation of the rural population to some extent. Rural women are also gradually realizing the importance of participation in the country's democratic process. To understand its true character it is essential to explore its genesis and development.

Review of Literature

The pre-colonial period consists of the ancient and medieval phases. In the ancient stage, village communities were governed by general bodies, Sabha, their councils, Samiti and senior persons of the village. A reference to these institutions is mentioned in the Vedas and other scriptures. There is evidence of their existence in ancient times in the writings of Kautilya. Over time, village communities came to be governed by five-member Panchayat Parishads. These organizations perform functions of tension management and conflict resolution in rural areas. In ancient times the legitimacy of Panchayat institutions and their authority was based on religion and custom. In addition, these village Panchayat communities, caste and sub-caste Panchayats existed simultaneously to regulate the code of conduct of their members. Although rural communities Panchayats, as well as caste, have been glorified as democratic institutions by those who embrace the romantic view of the rural society of the ancient period, they were dominated by upper caste male landlords due to caste differences, patriarchal and feudal character. Be that as it may, these institutions hold complete regime over the rural masses in ancient times. Their importance is said to have declined somewhat with the establishment of a centralized system of administration by the Mauryan dynasty. But the decentralization of administration during the Gupta period restored their authority completely. The Panchayats as a whole were autonomous institutions of local government in ancient India.

Post-Colonial Period

The evolution of the Panchayati raj system was divided into different phases the post-colonial period, the pre-Balwant Rai Mehta committee team report, the post-Balwant Rai Mehta study team report and the 73rd amendment phase as local self-government in 1992.

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Material and Method

The constitutional status of the Gram Panchayat in the Indian political system became a matter of great controversy in the Constituent Assembly after independence in 1948 when the Indian Constitution was being framed. Gandhi wanted India to be a state where local governance would have the highest power at the Panchayat level and the lowest power held at the Central level. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Chairman of the Drafting Committee did not want to give any place to Panchayat Institutions in the Constitution. Ambedkar at that time perceived villages as a sink of localism, communalism, ignorance and narrow-mindedness. He favored individual liberty rather than the village as the unit of the Constitution. Ambedkar being a Dalit feared that the Panchayats would be controlled by the village landlords and the upper castes would use it to exploit and oppress the weaker sections of the rural society in India. But the Gandhians eventually succeeded in including the Gram Panchayat in Article 40 of the Part-IV of the Indian Constitution which deals with Directive Principles of State Policy. This article mentioned: - all States should take steps to organize Gram Panchayats Institutions and provide them with the necessary powers, responsibility and authority to enable them to function as units of local self-government. Soon after the Constitution came into force in 1950, various States enacted Gram Panchayat Acts which provided for the formation of democratically elected Gram Panchayats in rural areas. These are provided with civic, developmental and judicial functions at the village level.

In the meanwhile, the Government of India launched the Community Development Programme scheme in 1952. The National Extension Service Scheme which supplemented this programme was introduced in 1953 to cover the entire rural areas of the country. These programmes were launched to stimulate development among the rural masses. It was expected to bring about a silent revolution in rural society. But this hope was belied as these programmes failed to enlist popular public support. The recognition of the failure of the programmes compelled the Government of India to direct the Committee on Planning Commission to investigate the reasons for the failure of these programmes and suggest remedies to streamlining them. The Committee appointed a research team under the leadership of Balwant Rai Mehta in 1957 for this purpose. The team was asked to find out whether the existing institutions of local governments, district boards and gram Panchayats in

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India can be used to implement Community Development Programme and National Extension Service schemes successfully. For this purpose, it was directed to suggest not only ways and means but also suggest an alternative system of rural local self-government. After an in-depth study, the Balwant Rai Mehta Study Group submitted their report in 1959. This shows that these programmes failed because they could not get popular support from the masses. The term expresses the view that the existing institutions of rural local government are not suitable instruments for streamlining development administration. It suggested a plan of democratic decentralization to mobilize human and material resources for this purpose.

To implement this scheme Balwant Rai Mehta team recommends the formation of a three-tier structure of democratically elected and organizationally linked bodies in Zila Parishad, Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayat. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee recommends indirect elections for local bodies. He wanted to keep political parties out and establish an organic link between the three levels of Panchayats Institutions. It opined that the block-level institutions (Panchayat Samiti) should be made a unit for planning and implementation as it was neither large like districts where direct communication was difficult nor as small like villages where necessary human and material resources were not available. The Balwant Rai Mehta team felt that the Panchayat Samiti was an optimally sized unit where the developmental machinery was present. Furthermore, it argues that the term block was associated with the development of rural mentality. Hence, the Mehta team suggested assigning developmental and judicial functions to the Panchayat Samiti. It may also be entrusted with the responsibility of implementing the scheme and programmes of the Central and State Governments. The Gram Panchayat will be allowed to retain civic, developmental and judicial functions and will also be entrusted with the responsibility of implementing the plans and programmes of the Panchayat Samiti. The Zila Parishad will be made a supervisory and co-ordinating body at the district level. The Mehta study team recommended that MPs and MLAs in the Panchayati Raj Institutions direct their leadership and link them with state legislatures and the Union Parliament. The Deputy Commissioners/Collectors/District Magistrate and other officers have been made a part of the Panchayati Raj system to ensure cooperation and coordination between the district administration and Panchayati Raj institutions. The National Development Council (NDC) accepted the recommendations of the study team. But it was felt that states would be allowed to make alternate options in the scheme as local circumstances required.

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After the Balwant Rai Mehta Study Group Report Phase

The functioning of the Panchayati Raj system has gone through three stages of evolution – development, stagnation and decay. The Panchayati Raj system witnessed development in almost all states during the 1960s especially the Nehru period because of his strong commitment to it. It stagnated in the post-Nehru era as its successor did not share the earlier enthusiasm for it. Later it lost its authority due to antagonism of bureaucracy and political leadership, poor quality of leadership in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, gradual erosion of power, lack of economic resources, local factionalism, conflicts between officials and non-officials, public apathy and failure of state governments to hold elections on time.

73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992

In 1993, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was passed by the Indian Parliament. This amendment gave constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions in India and left no prudence to the State Governments in several important matters relating to these institutions. Before the 73rd Amendment Act came into force Article 40 of the original Constitution gave a direction to the Government to organize Gram Panchayats Institutions and provided them with necessary powers and authority to enable them to function as a unit of local self-government. But in the mid-eighties, it was realized that the Directive for institutionalizing the Panchayati Raj system in India was not sufficient. The practice of Panchayati Raj institutions as per the directive principles of state policy did not satisfy the policy-makers. There were various reasons for this. One of the main reasons is that all the state governments being not followed the universal pattern of the Panchayati Raj system.

While some states followed a two-tier system and other states followed a three-tier system. Further, few other states are not holding regular Panchayat elections. Since the Panchayat elections are being conducted by the state governments themselves their impartiality and independence were doubtful.

More important was the need for the empowerment of the people in the rural areas as well as the empowerment of women's participation. It has been observed that political power remains in the hands of socially and economically influential people and the participation of

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poor people in political decision-making in the society is low. The same was true for women, whose percentage in parliament after independence range from 4 to 7 percent. Political policy-makers then began to think of amendments to the constitution to empower the people of rural areas, particularly women, and to give constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. A Constitutional Amendment Act was passed in 1993 and the state governments were then required to enact the revised law of the Panchayati Raj system as per the amendment constitution Act. Before assessing the impact of the 73rd Amendment it would be useful to consider the provisions of this amendment. Part-IX of the Constitution Article 243-A to 243-O were newly added. The amendment is introduced across the three tiers Panchayati Raj system namely Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and District-level Zilla Parishad. The electorate at the village Panchayat level is called the gram Sabha which elects representatives to the Gram Panchayat through direct elections by the people. Further Article 243D Constitutional Act provides reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and women at all levels. Not less than 1/3rd of the total seats in all tiers shall be reserved for women, even if reserved for SC/ST as per the actual proportion of the population of the area concerned. Some states have reserved seats for Other Backward Classes (OBCs). States are empowered to reserve the office of the Chairperson at three levels. There are steps that are now being taken to increase the reservation for women up to 50 percent.

The Constitution provides that every Panchayati Raj Institution will duration for five years. States have been empowered in their respective legislative enactments to authorize the Panchayat system to levy, collect and appropriate various toll taxes. Through this Panchayat system all Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishads will be able to generate financial resources at the local level and spend them on desired areas as per locally felt needs. State laws may prescribe the procedure to be followed as well as the limits of such taxes. The State governments can also allocate several taxes and duties collected by Panchayats. The State Government shall appoint the State Finance Commission to review the financial condition of the Panchayati Raj Institutions and make recommendations regarding the distribution of net tax revenue between the State and Panchayat Institutions, particularly the distribution of certain taxes to the Panchayati Raj Institutions and grants-in-aid.

According to the constitutional articles 243G and 243H, the Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad have been entrusted with the responsibility and authority of preparing micro-plans for economic and social development from the grassroots level. These

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institutions are also responsible for implementation plans and programmes aimed at socio-economic development in rural areas as assigned in respect of 29 functional items bound in the 11th Schedule of the Constitution. These functional items are land improvement, fisheries, education, irrigation, animal husbandry, women, child development and others. The States have delegated these functions to Panchayati Raj Institutions in the spirit of the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992. Most of the States have taken necessary steps to implement the provisions of their own Panchayati Raj Act for local self-government. But at the local-level there are serious problems in actual practice. Though Panchayati Raj Institutions are functioning as per the Constitutional provisions most of the States. There are serious doubts about whether the objective of empowerment of people at the grass root level in rural society has actually been achieved.

Conclusion

When the Janata government came to power at the Center in 1977, it appointed a high Powered Committee on Panchayat system headed by the Ashok Mehta Committee for revive the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Committee not only recommended the constitutional status of the Panchayati Raj system but also suggested its restructuring by establishment a two-tier system with Zilla Parishad at the district level body and Mandal Panchayat at the village level. Ashok Mehta Committee recommended abolition of Panchayat Samiti in Local Self-Government. The committee also recommended more powers, authority and resources for Panchayati Raj institutions. A split in the party forced him to resign in 1979 before the Janata government could take any action on the Ashok Mehta committee's report. The Indira Gandhi-leadership Congress government that came to power in 1980 scrapped the report, as it was not interested in revival the Panchayati Raj system is due to its preference for Centralization of power.

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