

# PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS: WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

B.H.PURNIMA

## Abstract:

In the preceding chapter an attempt is made to review the studies related to panchayat raj institutions in India and in Karnataka and finally an attempt is made to identify the research gaps. In this chapter an attempt is made to analyse the evolution of panchayati raj institutions in India. This chapter also deals with brief history of panchayath raj institutions, women's participation and its significance for democracy in India.

Key words: analyse the evolution of panchayati raj institutions in India

## Introduction

Panchayati Raj Institutions, the grass root units of local self government have been considered as instruments of socio economic transformation in rural India. Involvement of people at the grass root level is the most important means of bringing about socio-economic development. Panchayati Raj is identified as institutional expression of democratic decentralization in India. Decentralization of power to the panchayats is seen as a means of empowering people and involving them in decision making process. Local governments being closer to the people can be more responsive to local needs and can make better use of resources. The democratic system in a country can be ensured only if there is mass participation in the governance. Therefore, the system of democratic decentralization popularly known as Panchayati Raj is considered as an instrument to ensure democracy and socio-economic transformation.

Gandhi advocated that India lives in her villages. Indian independence must begin at the bottom, thus making every village a republic or panchayat, enjoying full powers. He remarked that true democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. It has to be worked from below by the people of every village. These dreams lead to the inclusion of Article 40 in the Directive Principles of the State Policy of Constitution of India. Almost

after five decades of independence, in the year 1993, the Government of India took a revolutionary step by making Panchayati Raj Institutions a part of the Constitution.

India has a long tradition of local governments, going back to more than 4000 years. This institution has survived numerous political changes and upheavals in the ancient and medieval periods till the advent of the British Raj. With the coming of the colonial administration, the patterns of the working of the local bodies underwent marked changes.

### 3.2 Panchayati Raj in Pre British Period

The word panchayat is derived from the word pancha panchasvanusthitah, has references in to the existence of Grama Sanghas or rural communities. The institution of Panchayati Raj is as old as Indian civilization itself. It was in existence since ancient periods, having an effective control over civil and judicial matters in the village community. The Rigveda, Manusamhita, Dharmashastras, Upanishads, Jatakas and others, refer extensively to local administration, i.e., the panchayat system of administration. In the Manusmriti and Shantiparva of Mahabharata, there are many references to the existence of Grama Sanghas or village councils.

The earliest reference to panchayat is derived from the word Pancha, that refers to an institution of the five (pancha panchasvanusthitah) is found in the Shanti-Parva of Mahabaratha, pancha and panchavanustitah are semantically close to panchayat.

A description of these village councils are also found in Arthashastra of Kautilya who lived in 400 B.C. Arthashastra gives a comprehensive account of the system of village administration prevailing in his time. During this period, the village administration was carried under the supervision and control of Adyaksha or headman. There were other officials such as Samkhyaka [accountant], Anikitsaka [veterinary doctor], Jamgh karmika [village couriers], Chikitsaka [physitian]. The village headman was responsible for ensuring the collection of state dues and controlling the activities of the offenders. In Ramayana of Valmiki, there are references to the Ganapada (village federation) which was perhaps a kind of federation of village republics.

Self-governing village communities characterized by agrarian economies existed in India from the earliest times. It is mentioned in Rigveda that dates from approximately 200 B.C. The village was the basic unit of administration in the Vedic period. The most remarkable feature of the early Vedic polity consisted in the institution of popular assemblies of which two namely 'Sabha', and the 'Samiti' deserve special mention. A Samiti was the Vedic Folk Assembly that in some cases enjoyed the right of electing a king while the Sabha exercised some judicial functions. Both the Samiti and Sabha enjoyed the rights to debate, a privilege unknown to the popular assemblies of other ancient people. The office of the village head man (Gramani) indicates the emergence of the village as a unit of administration. In the later Vedic period, the Samiti disappeared as a popular assembly while the Sabha sank into a narrow body corresponding to the kings Privy Council.

In the course of time, village bodies took the form of panchayats that looked into the affairs of the village. They had the powers to enforce law and order. Customs and religion elevated them to the sacred position of authority.

Besides this there was also the existence of caste panchayats. This was the pattern in Indo Gangetic plains. In the south, the village panchayats generally had a village assembly whose executive body consisted of representatives of various groups and castes. These village bodies, both in the north and south India, had been the pivot of administration, the centre of social life and above all a focus of social solidarity.

In the Mouryan period, the village was the basic unit of administration. Villagers used to organize works of public utility and recreation, settle disputes, and act as trustees for the property of minors. But, they had not yet evolved regular councils. The village council appeared to have evolved into regular bodies in the Gupta period. They were known as Panchamandalas in central India and Gramajanapadas in Bihar. These bodies negotiated with the government for concessions and settlement of disputes. The inscription of Chola dynasty shows the construction and functions of the village assembly and their executive committees. The village administrations were performed by the elected representatives forming village council.

During the medieval and Moghal periods, village bodies were the pivot of administration. In the Moghal period, particularly in the regime of Sher Shah, the villages were governed by their own panchyats. Each panchayat comprised of village elders who looked after the interest of the people and administered justice and imposed punishment on defaulters. The head man of the village, a semi government official, acted as a coordinator between the village panchayat and the higher administrative hierarchy. Akbar accepted this system and made it an indispensable part of civil administration. In this period, each village had its own panchayat of elders. It was autonomous in its own sphere and exercised powers of local taxation, administrative control, justice and punishment.

The Moghals introduced elaborate administrative machinery with a hierarchy of officials, particularly in the field of revenue. The Moghal local administrative system lasted over centuries. It was with the collapse of the Moghal strong hold, the British established their hegemony in India.

### **3.3 The Depressed Classes in India**

The depressed classes constitute as one of the most disadvantaged groups in Indian society. They are stigmatized people and, on this account, suffer from numerous disabilities which are regulated through religious beliefs and practices. Some of the common features among them are low economic status, segregation, lack of political power, low level of literacy and social mobility. All together reinforce the wretched condition of the depressed classes of the society.

The condition of depressed classes in terms of residence, housing, health and standard of living is precarious. Firstly, majority of them are too poor to own any property. They live and build their dwellings on land belonging to landowners who engage them as agricultural labourers. This binds them to their jobs and makes it difficult for them to change their place or occupation or both. Secondly, they continue to suffer from segregation specifically with regard to habitation. India lives in villages, there are more than 5.76 lakh villages in our country. Naturally the development of the country depends on the development of villages. Every village should be a self contained republic. Panchayath Raj Systems are called grassroots level of democracy which are given and provided to share power of the administration of the government by the common man at village level. The

network of Panchayath Raj Institutions covers the length and breadth of the country today. The panchayath raj institutions declined because of lack of conceptual clarity, absence of political will and denial of national priority, lack of research, evaluation and feedback etc., 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act has opened a new chapter in the history of rural local self governing institutions. The Amendment provides for a three tier panchayath system. That is Grama Panchayath, Taluk Panchayath and Zilla Panchayath.

The Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs) are two groupings of historically disadvantaged people that are given express recognition in the Constitution of India. During the period of British rule in the Indian sub-continent they were known as the Depressed Classes.

The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 lists 1,108 castes across 25 states in its First Schedule, while the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 lists 744 tribes across 22 states in its First Schedule. Since Independence, the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes (all three categories combined together constitute about 60 percent of India's population) were given provision of "Reservation" policy. The reservation policy became an integral part of the Constitution through the efforts of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. He participated in the Round Table Conferences and fought for the rights of the Oppressed and Depressed Classes. The Constitution lays down general principles for the policy of affirmative action for the SCs and STs.

The Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs) are two groupings of historically disadvantaged people. From the 1850s these communities were loosely referred to as the "Depressed Classes". The early part of the 20th century saw a flurry of activity in the British Raj to assess the feasibility of responsible self-government for India. The Morley-Minto Reforms Report, Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms Report, and the Simon Commission were some of the initiatives that happened in this context. One of the hotly contested issues in the proposed reforms was the topic of reservation of seats for the "Depressed" Classes in provincial and central legislatures.

The term development view at alleviating poverty, elimination of unemployment, reducing inequalities and increasing productivity as well as consumption and literacy level etc. An efficient system of local organization is necessary for the development, improvement and welfare of the majority of the rural people. According to the Directive Principles of our Constitution, the state is required to secure equal pay for equal work for both men and women, right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement. This constitutional provision reflects the concern of the State to protect and promote the interests of weaker sections of the population. Weaker sections among industrial workers are those who are either unorganised or less privileged and whose economic and social needs call for special attention. We may include under this category, female labour, child labour, physically handicapped, contract labour, interstate migrant work men, casual labour, construction labour, bonded labour and agricultural labour that constitute a sizable segment of the workforce, both in formal and informal sections.

Article 41 of the constitution of India says that, "The state shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement in other cases of undeserved want". From the economic point of view, social security measures help a man to face the contingencies referred to above. When such contingencies arise, it is difficult for him either to work or to get work and support himself and his family. Social security thus provides a self balancing social insurance or assistance from public funds, or a proper combination of both.

Social security is a very comprehensive term and include in its schemes of social insurance and social assistance as well as some schemes of commercial insurance. Social insurance scheme protects an individual from falling to the depths of poverty and misery while social assistance is of the devices according, to which benefits are given as a legal right to workers who are eligible for such assistance.

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 has added a new part IX consisting of 16 Articles and the Eleventh Schedule to the Constitution. The 73th Amendment envisages the Gram Sabha as the foundation of the Panchayat Raj System to perform functions and powers entrusted to it by the State Legislatures. The amendment provides for a three tier Panchayat Raj System at the village, intermediate and district levels. Article 243A provides that the Gram Sabha may exercise such power and perform such functions at the village level as the Legislature of a state may by law provide. The 73rd amendment thus envisages the Gram Sabha as the foundation of Panchayat Raj System. "Gram Sabha" means a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls comprised within the area of Panchayat at the village level. In the Panchayat Raj System Gram Sabha is the only permanent unit. Duration of Panchayat i.e. Mukhiyas and other members of Panchayat continue for 5 years only from the date appointed for the first meeting, but the villagers do not change. Empowerment of Gram Sabha means strengthening of the Panchayat Raj Institution (PRIs). Success or failure of this system depends upon the strength of the Gram Sabha. The eleventh schedule of the constitution created by the 73rd Amendment contains 29 subjects on which the Panchayats shall have administrative Control, Article 243H empowers State Legislature to make by law provision for imposing taxes etc. by the panchayat. Obviously these panchayats before imposing any levy or tax in the village would be required to get clearance from the respective Gram Sabha. Drafting and implementation of development plans for the uplift of the villages would be vested and monitored by the Gram Sabhas.

### **3.4 Panchayat Raj Institutions and Political Empowerment**

Panchayat Institutions are the vehicles of political empowerment of people at the grass root level for shaping their own destiny. A vast majority of people are living at the grassroot level in the rural and remote areas without any touch of modern day. A large section of such deprived people belong to Scheduled castes, Scheduled tribes and other Backward casts as also women in general at the grass root level.

Panchayats have been the backbone of the Indian villages since the beginning of recorded history. Gandhiji, the father of the nation, in 1946 had aptly remarked that the Indian Independence must begin at the bottom and every village ought to be a Republic or

Panchayat having powers. Gandhiji's dream has been translated into reality with the introduction of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system to ensure people's participation in rural reconstruction. 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 marks a new era in the federal democratic set up of the country and provides constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Consequent upon the enactment of the Act, almost all the States/UTs, except J&K, NCT Delhi and Uttaranchal have enacted their legislation. Moreover all the States/UTs except Arunachal Pradesh, NCT Delhi and Pondicherry, all other States/UTs have held elections. As a result, 2,32,278 Panchayats at village level; 6,022 Panchayats at intermediate level and 535 Panchayats at district level have been constituted in the country. These Panchayats are being manned by about 29.2 lakh elected representatives of Panchayats at all levels. This is the broadest representative base that exists in any country of the world developed or underdeveloped. The main features of the 1992 Act are . (i) a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj for all States having population of over 20 lakh; (ii) Panchayat elections regularly every 5 years; (iii) reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women (not less than one-third of seats); (iv) appointment of State Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats and (v) constitution of District Planning Committees to prepare development plans for the district as a whole. As per the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, the Panchayati Raj Institutions have been endowed with such powers and authority as may be necessary to function as institutions of self-government and contains provisions of devolution of powers and responsibilities upon Panchayats at the appropriate level with reference to (a) the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice; and (b) the implementation of such schemes for economic development.



## References

1. Yamuna.A.Konesar (2013) in the study of Panchayat Raj Institutions as an Instrument for Women Empowerment-A Case Study" IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 8, Issue 4 (Mar. - Apr. 2013), PP 06-09
2. Bhadria, P.B.S., and Bose A.N., Decentralisation for Faster Rural Development, Yojan, July 1 - 15, 1986.
3. Bhoopendra Hooja, Panchayat Raj Vs. Decentralisation of Administration, IJPA, IIPA, XXIV, July September 1978.
4. Bohra, O.P., Decentralisation and Devolution of Powers and Functions of Panchayats, Journal of Rural Development, Vol. 19, April - June 2000.
5. Dey, S.K. Faith in the Panchayat Raj, Kurukshetra, Vol. IX, No.3, August 1961.
6. Dubhashi, P.R., Democratic Decentralisation in Mysore State, quarterly Journal of Local Self Government, Vol.XXXIII, No,1, July - September, 1962.
7. Gangadhar Reddy, K., Panchayat Raj - Issues and Challenges, Kurukshetra, April 1995.
8. Gupta Madhukar, Employment Programmes - Need Proper Directions, Journal of Rural Development, vol. 10, No.5, September 1991.
9. Iyer, Shekhar, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, Jobs at Doorsteps, Kurukshetra, July 1989.
10. Iqbal Narain, Decentralisation, Development and Democracy, Political Science Review, October, 1966.
11. Kothari, Rajni, Perspectives on Decentralisation, Journal of Rural Development, September 10, 1991.
12. Kumar D.S., People's Participation in Rural Development Programmes, Kurukshetra, January 1995.
13. Manoranjan Mohantray, On the Concept of Empowerment, Economic & Political Weekly, Vol 30, June 1995.
14. Mathur, P.C., Rural Local Self Government in India, Journal of Rural Development, X, September 1991.
15. Mathur Kuldeep, Challenges of Decentralisation - The Policies of Panchayat Raj, Social Change, Vol.47, No.1, January 1997.