



Impact of Conflict on the Panchayat Institutions in Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

One of the aims of transferring power from the central authority to local bodies was to mitigate conflict and weaken the separatist tendencies in the conflict regions. For example, power was transferred in Uganda and Belgium, which aimed to counter the separatist tendencies there, while in Sri-Lanka, the LTTE demanded local government but never was transferred, which actually led to conflict. Since Jammu and Kashmir is a conflict region, creating and establishing institutions of local institutions was a hectic job, and then transferring power to them was even more disastrous because it was believed that this might further spark separatist aspirations, despite the state having a long history of Panchayat institutions. Despite this, the government of the state from time to time conducted elections for these institutions, which led to the establishment of Panchayat institutions. But due to conflict and political instability, these institutions became powerless and without functionaries over a period of time. This exacerbated the institutions' predicaments. After the abrogation of 370, the government of India has taken a number of steps to improve the conditions of these institutions. The present study is the secondary study that aims to analyse the impact of political instability and conflict on these institutions.

Keywords: Conflict, Elections, Political Parties, Decentralization, Political Instability

Introduction

Over the years, there has appeared to be widespread agreement among political scientists, conflict theorists, and members of civil society that one of the most effective means of resolving disputes is the introduction of democratic politics where it is lacking and the strengthening of democracy where it already exists. Democracy can significantly reduce tensions and conflicts, especially in varied cultures, due to its ability to tolerate multiple points of view and include various groups in power-sharing

agreements. Democracy has evolved into the most practical type of government in the entire world due to its inclusive nature.

Democracy saw an unprecedented expansion during the 20th century, both in terms of inclusivity and geographic reach. It began with the expansion of women's voting rights in western democracies and culminated with the end of apartheid in South Africa. Democratic decentralisation has been acknowledged as a powerful tool for fostering a sense of community among the general populace at the local level and easing concerns about the absolute concentration of power in a few number of hands, particularly in plural cultures like India. In terms of its diversity, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is similar India and is called 'mini-India'. Decentralization or devolution of power is necessary for a democratic society so that the local population may actively handle its own concerns. It denotes a clear transfer of power from higher to lower levels in a way that local government units exercise their jurisdiction alongside local residents, with sporadic management and oversight from provincial and central governments. Therefore, democratic decentralisation seeks to actualize democracy by including the general populace in the operation of their representative government at the local level. As a result, it transforms into a "grassroots democracy" system that aims to connect the administrative divisions set up in the most isolated villages of a vast nation with the higher governmental divisions a smaller version of India; as a result, the best way to allay people's anxieties and preserve the state's unity is by giving them local power.

Objective of the study

1. To study people's perception of the impact of the conflict on the Panchayat Raj institutions in Jammu and Kashmir.
2. To study the local political parties' support for these institutions from the perception of the people.

Research Methodology:

The present study is a historical, descriptive, and analytical study. The data is collected through secondary sources viz. research articles, books, newspapers, online sources, online websites etc.

Impact of Political Instability on Panchayat Elections

Despite having a long history of local government, the institutions of Panchayat Raj suffered greatly due to political instability and conflict. In addition to this, the state witnessed many protest movements, particularly after the 2001 elections, which seriously impacted on the development of Panchayat institutions. The protest movements and insurgency have made these institutions meaningless, despite elections to these institutions. For a long time, the democratic processes at the local level remained closed. Despite conflict and destruction in the 90's, the inspirational representatives of the local government were courageous enough to carry out development initiatives in the rural areas that had suffered till now (Wani Aijaz, 2014). The 2001 Panchayat elections were held under the local Jammu

and Kashmir Panchayat Act 1989. It was expected that people would vote in large numbers, and elections were conducted despite the threat of calls from militant groups and separatist groups. There was enthusiasm among local parties that the elections would bring democracy to the local level and the needs and aspirations of the people would be fulfilled. It was also viewed that elections could mitigate conflict, which is one of the aims of democratic decentralization (Chowdhary Rekha, 2001).

The elections evoked different response from Jammu regions which was facing centralised power structure of the state, while in Kashmir region witnessed boycott to these elections. The Jammu division is asserted that they are being deprived of the power and development since independence, and were opinion that most of the power remains in Kashmir valley. By announcing elections the Jammu witnessed full-fledged politics around the issue of devolution of power (whether in the form of regional autonomy or trifurcation of the state); there has been a persistent demand for Panchayat election. The elections generated positive response in the region: however doubts were raised about the effectiveness of the elections, given the fact that the act governing Panchayat elections in Jammu and Kashmir is quite retrograde and does not conform to all – India scheme of Panchayats as provided by the 73rd amendment of the constitution (Greater Kashmir, 2001). The main political parties in the state viz PDP and Congress were of the opinion that political and security conditions prevailing in the state are not conducive for the elections and demanded that elections should be postponed. The people's Democratic Party demanded the elections will lead to more bloodshed and the time wasn't ripe for the elections. The party also alleged the government of sabotaging peace process. While the Congress party alleged that these elections are eye wash and alleged that in the existing hostile environment and political situation NC leaders are busy in misusing administrative machinery by creating a large number of candidates unopposed, mainly its nominees at various places under the garb of non-party basis. The chief of Panthers party Bhim Singh also described the elections as eyewash. However government refused to postpone the elections as the Minister for agriculture and rural development Chaudhary Muhammad Ramzan said that 'the government would conduct elections to all the Panchayats in the state', in addition he said that 80,000 officials would be deployed to ensure free and fair elections and 150 companies of security forces would be deployed to ensure safety of voters and officials (Greater Kashmir, 2001).

The government was firm in its stand to conduct elections, the anti- state and separatist launched anti-election campaign in the rural areas in a big way. Panchayats institutions were set on ablaze, party workers, political workers were killed and their houses were attacked. Posters were pasted in public places in different parts of the state asking people not to file nominations and desist from taking part in polls. Despite these threats and killings, the government conduct elections in 8 phases from January to June 2001, in a difficult situation, when security environment was not still conducive for the elections (Chowdhary Rekha, 2001).

After the elections government of Jammu and Kashmir transferred some powers to these Panchayats, but many views these are empty shell as these institution have no powers in them in real sense. Rekha Chowdhary asserts that these institutions exist in form not spirit. They clearly lack all powers and functionary. They Congress-PDP coalition during this period of time had promised in the many forms and conference, that government is willing to decentralize the powers, but in actually these promises remain in papers. At an event in Sher Kashmir institute of Srinagar, Prime minister Dr Manmohan Singh voiced strong in favour of grass-root democracy. He asserted that government of India is in completely favour to decentralize and implement 73rd amendment Act in order empower people at the grass-root level. In this period, Panchayat in Jammu division performed well as compared to Kashmir division and enough evidence can found for the development. Panchayat completed its term in 2006 and were dissolved subsequently, but elections were not conducted citing earthquake (2005) and instability as a reason. At the same time, the coalition government PDP-Congress led to breakdown, which further made it impossible for the state administration to conduct elections (Chowdhary Rekha, 2002). Many experts have analysed the causes of non- participation in these elections, most of the experts hold, that it was due to the threat calls from militants. Second, it was viewed that local Panchayat Raj Act which disallows the political Parties to participate in the elections. Third, it was believed that youth who have been disillusioned and disappointed from polices of state and center government (Wani Aijaz, 2014). Fourth, elections were conducted after the volatile decade of 1990 which had witnessed huge militancy and political killings, it was viewed conducting elections was not good. Fifth, people believed that these institutions might be used by local military as a tool of information or elected members felt that we are being seen through the prism of informers (Wani Aijaz, 2014).

Amarnath land Row (2008).

Before the completion of its terms, Congress- PDP break away over the issue of the Amarnath land row and during the government both PDP-congress were hand in hand in conducting the elections for the Panchayats, but due to the transfer of land to shrine board by government of Jammu and Kashmir, a huge peaceful protest movement swept the state which completely led to the failure of state administration and led to breakdown. The protest movement take almost six months which almost break the political processes in the state, Panchayats suffered heavenly because of this protest, it almost led to death decay of this institutions (Greater Kashmir, 2008).

In 2009, State assembly elections were conducted, there was wide participation of people in these elections, which led to National Conference to come into power, the party manifesto of National Conference clearly stated that if we came to power we will conduct Panchayat elections in the state (Rising Kashmir,2009). In the same period, a new crisis erupted in the valley, in which 14 year old boy Wamiq Farooq and at the same time Machil encounter broke out, which according to people and separatists were civilian. While government and military establishment asserted they were trained militants and have come from Pakistan, the controversy further led to destruction political processes in the state. In the meantime, the National Conference holding its promise announced Panchayat elections.

The state election commission which is an autonomous body to conduct elections notified through official notification that elections will be conducted in seven phases (<http://jkceo.com>).

In 2011 the first real Panchayat elections was held in the state after a gap of 33 years, 77.79 percent people exercised their franchise. In all 33,000 Panchayat representatives were elected to 4128 halqa (village) Panchayats. However, the real challenge was to transform these institutions into effective democratic institutions and make people stakeholder in the planning and decision making process to ensure participation in actual governance. After the election, government transferred powers to three tier Panchayat Raj institutions based on the recommendations of Madhev Lal Committee constituted during the elections and it submitted its report to the government in July 2011 (Wani Aijaz, 2014). By virtue of Cabinet Order the functions pertained to 14 line departments namely Agriculture, Animal husbandry, Food and civil supplies, Health, Rural Development, Forestry, Health Revenue, and Social Welfare. All field level functionaries were transferred to respective three tier Panchayats based on the activity mapping (Wani Aijaz, 2014).

Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) formed in 2011, completed their five years term in office in July 2016 and were subsequently dissolved. As per the section 9 of the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayat Raj Act, 1989 fresh elections to PRIs have to be held within six months in case Panchayat are dissolved or superseded. Panchayats should have been in place before July 2016 or by January 2017. However, whole summer of 2016 was appropriated by civil protests and freedom marches from every nook and corner of the Kashmir. The erstwhile state was at war with people and holding Panchayat election was beyond any possibility. The government could not even conduct the by-election for Anantnag, Lok Sabha Constituency due to mass protests and heightened militant attacks in the area (Greater Kashmir, 2016).

After facing a delay, Panchayat elections-2018 were held in 9 phases from 17 November to 11 December for 4,490 halqa (Village) Panchayat, 58, 12,429 electorates were eligible to exercise their franchise to elect 4,490 Sarpanches (in Jammu and Kashmir Sarpanch is directly elected people) and 35,096 panches. Although elections were held on non-party basis, however, both NC and PDP continued their boycott policy (citing assault on article 370 and 35-A that grant special status to the status, both these Articles were then sub- Judice in the apex court). In reality it was the grim ground situation that forced the two regional parties to stick to their boycott strategy. The Hurriyat Conference also urged people to stay away from the polls and observe a strike on polling day in poll bound areas. The militants issued threat calls to people against participating in the election either as contesting candidate or as a voter. The Chairman of Hurriyat Conference (M) Mirwaiz Umar Farooq said that “no one is averse to elections, as it is an accepted democratic practice across the globe, where people exercise their choice and decide how and by whom they want to be ruled. This, however, is not the case in Kashmir, where elections are used as a means to continue forced rule of New Delhi over the state. Elections he said will continue to be a futile exercise in Kashmir unless democracy is not restored and allowed to flourish in

the real sense.” Election to establish Panchayat Raj was sold as an instrument to bring development and change in these areas through flow of funds under various centrally sponsored schemes and funds earmarked for the erstwhile state under Fourteenth National Finance Commission(2015-2020) spent through Panchayat raj institutions. The governor administration gave a wide publicity to Panchayat elections in print and electronic media linking establishment of Panchayat Raj with flow of funds needed for the development. The election saw a positive response from Jammu and Ladakh regions with more than 80 percent participation by the people. However, in Kashmir it was a paper exercise as 60 percent seats (12,766 out of 21,208) remained vacant, around 30 percent candidates won unopposed election after people disowned the election and nobody turned to file his/her nomination papers. Also large numbers of candidates were brought from Jammu and other places under security, made to file nomination papers, declared elected and taken back to their respective places under security cover. Even in central Kashmir’s Budgam and Ganderbal district traditionally considered as high voting turnout districts there was near boycott which are traditional voting belt. The security situation since Panchayat election was held has further deteriorated making the job of Panchayat representatives in Kashmir even more difficult especially since 5 August 2019 following the abrogation of Article 370 and 35-A and bifurcation of State into two Union Territories (UTs), the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir and Union Territory of Ladakh (Kashmir Times,2018).

2020 Bi-Poll Panchayat Elections and DDC elections

The Jammu and Kashmir Election Commission had conducted polls for the District Development Councils (DDCs), vacant seats in Panchayats and Municipal corporations. The elections had been conducted in eight phases — November 28, December 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16 and 19. Polling had been conducted in eight phases. This is the first election in Jammu and Kashmir after the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019(<http://jkceo.com>).

The last general elections to Panchayat were held in 2018. In that election, 33,592 Panch constituencies and 4290 sarpanch constituencies had gone to polls. Of these, 22214 panches and 2459 Sarpanch were elected. The state election commission says that vacancies accrued on account of death, resignation etc of the elected Sarpanch and panches. Also 307 seats of panches and Sarpanch fell vacant on account of elections of chairpersons of BDCs in October 2019.

In Kashmir Division, total number of blocks is 137 and Panchayat Halqas 2182. And the number of District Development Councils (DDCs) where elections were held is 140, Panchayat Halqas 935, vacant Panch constituencies 11814. In Jammu Division, number of blocks is 148 and Panchayat Halqas 2109. The number of DDCs where polls were held is 140, Panchayat Halqas 135, vacant Panch constituencies 339.

In total, the number of blocks is 285 and Panchayat Halqas 4291. The number of places where polling had been held is– DDCs 280, Panchayat Halqas 1088 and Panch constituencies 12153. Among the districts where elections were held are Kupwara, Baramulla, Bandipora, Ganderbal, Srinagar, Budgam, Pulwama, Shopain, Kulgam, and Anantnag in Kashmir Division. And Kishtwar, Doda, Ramban, Udhampur, Reasi, Kathua, Samba Jammu, Rajouri and Poonch are in Jammu Division.

The fight in J&K was among the BJP, Congress and the Gupkar Alliance — formed by all regional parties such as Mehbooba Mufti's PDP and Farooq Abdulla's National Conference (NC). The alliance was formed to jointly fight for the restoration of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. The NC and PDP had boycotted the previous local body polls held in 2018. But this time, both the parties entered the fray, saying they don't want to give the saffron party a free run in J&K. The BJP has deployed a barrage of leaders including ministers for campaigning in Jammu and Kashmir. The Congress too is contesting the polls but main contest is expected to be the BJP and Abdulla-led Gupkar Alliance ([http.thewire.com](http://thewire.com)).

The BJP has been targeting the Gupkar Alliance by raking up Roshni Act (now referred to as scam). The Roshni Act was introduced by then Congress Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad. The idea was that the state land that had been illegally encroached upon by people can be regularised by charging market rate. The cut-off date was 1990, but it was extended twice in 2005 and 2007. In the meantime, people kept encroaching the state land (Greater Kashmir, 2020).

It is alleged that the mainstream political parties and their leaders allegedly built their houses and office premises on encroached land. Even former Chief Ministers Dr. Farooq and Omar Abdullah have been named by the state authorities as illegal encroachers of land under (now unconstitutional) Roshni Act. Farooq Abdullah's sister Suraiya Matto has also been named as an alleged illegal beneficiary. The BJP has been raising corruption charges against Abdullah's.

On the other hand (Gupkar alliance) fighting the BJP over special status, and statehood issues. The Alliance had raised multiple issues Viz democracy, human rights, restriction on political leaders, and “unconstitutional abrogation of Article 370” to corner the BJP. In a tweet, Mufti recently said that for the BJP, J&K is not a political but a religious problem that can only be solved by changing the religious composition, by ensuring Muslims become a minority in the only Muslim-majority state (Kashmir Times).

How Kashmir's View These Elections?

Jammu and Kashmir has witnessed a prolonged period of violence which has obstructed the socio-political and economic development of the state. Despite the hostile environment, the Panchayat elections and DDC polls witnessed a turnout of nearly 80 per cent, signalling enthusiasm among the masses for the electoral process. These elections therefore bring with them a silver lining of hope.

The overall participation in these elections is a potential indicator of future polls with a similar level of turnout. These elections, held after a prolonged gap, beg the questions: Do the Panchayati polls possess the ability to positively influence the Kashmir issue? How do the Kashmir's view this election and what is the motive behind their massive participation? Opinions differ, and are divided into three broad categories – two within the mainstream and the third represented by the separatists.

According to first group, these elections hold the possibility of achieving a positive change in rural Kashmir. In the absence of local institutions, the socio-economic development of rural Kashmir has been severely affected. In fact prevalent corruption at the higher political levels has crippled community level development. At this juncture, the devolution of governance from the centre to the grassroots will certainly embrace community-based development, which, if properly implemented will lead to a positive transformation of the situation. Devolution of power will empower the grassroots, making it self-dependent and enabling work towards the achievement of desired changes within the community. It will also help in identifying and working on local issues such as education, health, agriculture, employment and communication more effectively. Media reports maintain that the effective functioning of local governance has brought various constructive changes at the community level in other Indian states, such as in Himachal Pradesh and Punjab, irrespective of their past state of being. The Central government's initiative to introduce Panchayati Raj in the North-eastern states conveys the government's trust in the institution, and is a success story worth emulating in Kashmir (Peace Kashmir, 2011).

Other assessments suggest that these polls are just an issue of local governance, and the rate of participation should not be linked to the broader context of the situation. The people participate in the election process to achieve their rights through an elected representative. They hope that a local representative can perform to fulfil their aspirations is actually enhancing the participation rate. Although few critics have pointed out that with elected representatives there is always the possibility of being inducted into the corrupt political mainstream; one can still not deny the fact that this election has the potential to breed new leaders who are a better embodiment of rural Kashmir and will be able to personally identify with the problems that beset them. That these polls have been favourably looked upon by opposition leaders also indicates its positive bearing. In an April edition of Greater Kashmir, one of Kashmir's leading newspapers, Mehbooba Mufti, President of the PDP, has expressed her satisfaction with the turnout and has mentioned the enthusiasm of Kashmir's in ascertaining their own future. According to this opinion, although the election creates a feeling of hope, it does not hold any promises toward a resolution of the Kashmir dispute.

Conversely, the separatist view states that the election will not entail any specific change; it is just another attempt by the Indian government to deceive the Kashmir's. Past failures such as during the elections of 1987, which witnessed massive fraud and broken promises supports the views of the separatists. Adding to this is the notion that the existing corruption at administrative levels does not leave scope for any constructive socio-economic transformation. Punjab on the other hand provides a

positive story, where in spite of electoral deficiencies; the state limped back to normalcy and is now fully stable (Peace Kashmir, 2011).

Amidst these arguments, what remains unaddressed is the fate of Kashmir's in the aftermath of elections. In the various opinions on these elections that have been professed and recorded, one thing is certain: positive change in Jammu and Kashmir will be possible only with the effective functioning of local institution (Peace Kashmir).

Politics of State Parties and impact on Panchayat Institutions Elections

Views of Political Parties have always diverged with regard to conducting, Panchayat elections and establishing democratic politics at the grass-root level. On papers and during elections political parties have made huge claims that establishment of Panchayats will meet the need and aspirations of the people and it will bring enhance democracy and will bring development to the doors of the people. The claims of the political parties are context specific and for the purpose of party interest rather than to enhancing democracy and development to the grassroots.

National Conference: In 2001 National Conference was in power, and at that time it announced elections for the Panchayats, despite talks were going between government of India and Pakistan, and at same time ceasefire was extended. Separatist were also part of the talks, people were happy and peace has been restored after a long spell of destructions. Conducting elections would not be good, it casted apprehensions on the minds of people, but NC was desperate in conducting elections, viewing that the party is not in good position to win assembly elections, when state elections were due in next year, newly formed regional political party People's Democratic Party had made inroads in the state politics and was challenging the politics of dynasty and feudal (Rising Kashmir, 2001). While in 2011 National conference conducted historical elections, after a gap of 30 years, the elections were hailed all over the country and it was believed that people aspirations would be fulfilled. Despite conducting the elections, the government didn't transfer the powers to these institutions, in a survey conducted after 3 years of election, elected people voiced against the government that they have promised transfer but have not transferred, only in paper they are referring powers. One of the political commentaries asserted National conference conducted Panchayat election, with the purpose to rejuvenate party cadres and recruit new leadership for the people (Wani Aijaz, 2014). They have no concern in making these institutions at the grass-roots vibrant and enhancing democracy and development to the people .Other expert asserts that if you see ideology of National conference they are inherently against grass-root democracy (Wani Gull, 2011).

In 2018, the state was under the administration of governor, the governor administration announced elections for the Panchayats which was earlier scheduled in 2016, but due to Burhan wani uprising and early dissolving of state assembly elections were not conducted. On august 2018, the Chief Electoral Officer notified elections for these elections, at this time, National Conference boycotted the elections and asserted and excused that prevailing conditions are not in favour of elections, they have sent strong warning to their party workers that nobody should participate in the elections, and if any party worker is

found in the activities of elections, he should be shown doors of party. Mustafa Kamal, additional General Secretary of the National Conference, described the upcoming elections as a superficial “patch-up exercise”. The hype around them, he claimed, was “only for public consumption” in the rest of the country. “Elections should be conducted when the situation is conducive,” (Rising Kashmir, 2018). While in Bi-elections of Panchayat 2020, the party again changed the mood and called the workers to participate vibrantly in these elections. By responding to query, why you were participating in these elections now? The party spokesperson asserted that BJP is hell-bent to de-legitimize party and want the National Conference should be eroded in the valley that is why we are parting in the elections in full-fledged manner, in order to counter the move (Kashmir times, 2020).

Peoples’ Democratic Party

The party came into origin in 1998, challenging the politics of National Conference, and the party believed in the self rule and regional autonomy of different regions. The party was in favour of strong democracy and believed that people should be given rights. It was making inroads into the state politics vehemently, but fearing the emergence and challenge from People’s Democratic Party, the National Conference announced Panchayat elections in order to make party strong at the grass-roots. The People’s Democratic party which was still in nascent stage at that time, boycotted the elections by pretending the conditions and political environment is not conducive for the elections, and also asserted that ceasefire has been extended there is no way to conduct elections (Greater Kashmir, 2001). The People’s Democratic Party conducting elections will lead to more bloodshed. The Party urged both the centre and state government to postpone the elections. It was of the opinion that the time wasn’t ripe for the elections. While in the state assembly elections in 2002 the party voiced strong in favour of elections and asserted that elections and Panchayat should be made vibrant institutions that it may help in mitigating the conflict and a part of government at that time, also promised that it may conduct elections for the Panchayat soon. Elections were not conducted due outbreak of Amarnath land row and volatile political atmosphere for 2/3 years. In 2011, the party vehemently participated in the elections and demanded that merely conducting elections are not solution in enhancing democracy and development process; these institutions should be transferred powers so they work autonomously (Greater Kashmir, 2011). Despite being in power in 2016, party could not conduct elections for these institutions citing security and volatile political atmosphere in the state and fearing the anger against the government. In August 2018, when the governor administration announced the elections, The People’s Democratic Party asserted its position, Tahir Syed, additional spokesperson of the party, said all parties should have time to work on the ground and calm tempers before polls are held (Scroll. In 2018). “There is no political activity on the ground right now,” he said, arguing that holding elections in the current situation would be counterproductive. While in 2020 Bi- elections the party participated in the local self elections, by saying BJP is delegitimizing the State party’s and we vehemently will oppose this move of the BJP by participating in these elections and will oust BJP both from Jammu and Kashmir divisions (The Hindu, 2020).

The Communist Party:

Legislative Assembly Member of Kulgam district, Muhammad Yousef Tarigami also did not support the initiatives taken by Centre Government and the Governor administration regarding the Panchayat elections. He said that the elections will have serious implications in the society as the conditions are not favourable and the participation of people is essential for the betterment of grass root democracy. He said that the anger of young people must be addressed and the law enforcing agencies should stop their excessive force, indiscriminate arrests, registration cases and slapping Public Safety Acts, only then the people would be ready for participation. Later engineer Rashid, Member Legislative Assembly of Langate constituency also supported the boycott call of political parties on the basis of the situation which seemed to him was not conducive for Panchayat elections. He also stressed on the talk of the Kashmir conflict (Greater Kashmir, 2018).

Democratic National Party: The Democratic National Party conducted its meeting on 19 September in order to review the current situation in the context of Panchayat elections under the chairmanship of Ghulam Hassan Mir. The party President said that we have a firm belief on the grass- root democracy and the participation would be welcome but the deferment of the case has raised fingers on the intention of the government of India through Article 35-A. So, our party has decided to remain with people and not to participate in elections (Kashmir times, 2020).

Jammu and Kashmir Bachao Tehreek:

The President of Jammu and Kashmir Bachao Tehreek Party, Abdul Gani Vakil said that the elections are not everything in the state. The first and most important thing in the state of Jammu and Kashmir is to create a peaceful environment and a sense of security in the people. He said that holding elections would bring fire back in the state. The previous government could not conduct the Lok Sabha elections and brought a type of shame for us. Now the situation in the state has not changed anything.

The Separatists:

The All Party Hurriyat which calls itself real representatives of people, always viewed elections from other perspectives; they believed that these elections are being conducted to show the international community that we are enhancing democratic rights to the people. In 2001 the all party asserted, that peace process is going on, conducting elections is nothing but deception on the part of government. They described the election as “Sham election” that was designed to sabotage the peace process and appealed the people to boycott the elections and foil these attempts of the government to undermine the freedom struggle” (Srinagar times, 2001).

In the 2011, Panchayat elections in the state, both the Hurriyat factions (Hurriyat G and Hurriyat M) have condemned the recent political killings in Kashmir. Even the Hizbul Mujahideen (Militant outfit) recently spoke up against killing of innocents in the Valley, calling these killing detrimental to the Kashmir cause. The statements come at a time when posters have appeared outside mosques and on lamp-posts in the Valley, warning people against participating in the Panchayat polls. The moderate

Hurriyat (M) has decided to keep away from the polls and is also urging people not to vote. The Hurriyat espouses democratic values. We believe everyone has the right to speak even if it goes against the freedom movement, the Mirwaiz Molvi Farooq said, “We condemn if a person is killed for his political belief”.

Terming elections as a military operation Hurriyat Conference (G) said that huge deployment of forces created an environment of suffocation in the state. In a statement Hurriyat said, The Hurriyat espouses democratic values. We believe everyone has the right to speak even if it goes against the freedom movement, the Mirwaiz said. “We condemn if a person is killed for his political belief”. “To ensure the peace, thousands of guns have been called in to control and harass the already suffocated population of Jammu and Kashmir”. He said that during the days of elections government do not show any respect to their democracy by keeping the political workers and separatists in cages and asserted “We believe that any electoral process in the state that India wants to conduct is nothing than a military drill to threat the common people thereby strengthening its illegal control in the occupied land, but we are indebted by the sacrifices of our nation never to even think of any compromise and we pledge to take this sacred movement to its logical conclusion”(Kashmir Times,2011).

The separatist leaders Syed Ali Shah Geelani, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, and Yasin Malik met Geelani’s residence to discuss the prevailing political situation in the state. They urged the people of Jammu and Kashmir to stay away from any type of polls. They stated that all powers rest with New Delhi and all decisions follow from there, “In 70-year Panchayat to Parliament has only been a means to further strengthen the Centre power and in turn, New Delhi steadily but surely weakens the sovereignty of the people of Jammu and Kashmir”. The Joint Resistance Leadership said that the people will once again show their complete rejection and disassociation with the election drama being enacted by New Delhi in the name of Panchayat elections. People must send a message to the rulers that they have nothing to do with the sham process being foisted to undermine Kashmir’s disputed status and the need to resolve it. People will also observe a complete protest strike in all poll-bound areas on the days of election. The Joint Resistance Leadership reiterated that holding elections in Kashmir “under the shadow of gun and by force is a meaningless exercise and nothing but another attempt to mislead the people of India and the world. Their exercise becomes all the more ridiculous “As their own pro-Indian political parties decide to stay away from this farcical exercise.”The Joint resistance leadership (JRL) statement said, adding that the recent massive rejection of urban local body polls has sent a crystal clear message to New Delhi as to where the people of Kashmir stand and what they want. But the government of India’s arrogance of military might and forcible control over Jammu and Kashmir makes them blind to nit and they continue to thrust this sham of so called election on the people to further harass and torment them. Enacting election drama in presence of lakhs of forces can befool no one and the world community knows the reality of democracy in Kashmir. The Joint Resistance Leadership said that the people of Kashmir know that any participation in any type of elections under the Indian constitution amounts to sell the sacrifices

of thousands of peoples, especially the youth. So there is no question of any participation (Greater Kashmir, 2020).

Bharitya Janta Party

Bharatiya Janta Party's (BJP) Secretary Ram Madhav said, ' that his party would contest the Panchayat and Urban Local Bodies polls in the state and accused the Peoples Democratic Party and National Conference of making excuses to stop the democratic process in the state. He added that his party will put forth its strategy once the poll schedule is announced. While referring to the decisions of Peoples Democratic Party and National Conference of boycotting the Urban Local Bodies and Panchayat polls Ram Madhav accused that these parties are feeling inconvenienced. These parties give some false excuses as both the parties are running the family rules and are trying to stop the democratic process but the government is committed to bringing the democracy close to the doors of people. Later, Dr. Jitendra Singh, Union Minister of State in Prime Minister's Office blamed the Peoples Democratic Party and National Conference that they do not have any issue in contesting the Assembly Election. He added that there could not have been a more blatant exposure of the duplicity of these Kashmir centric political parties than the fact that National Conference and others are loudly opposing the holding of local body and Panchayat elections in the state but are equally vociferously demanding immediate dissolution of State Assembly and holding of Assemble Elections at the earliest. He also claimed that these political parties are ready to Assembly polls but sacrifices Panchayat elections for political interests and uttered that his party and workers will expose these political parties before the people with their dual policies (Hindustan times, 2020).

On the other hand, the ruling BJP has for the last two years have been openly saying that it wants to create a "new leadership" in J&K to counter the dynastic parties (NC and PDP), whom they blame for the rise in militancy, corruption and mis-governance in the erstwhile state. In an article in a national daily in August last year, BJP's then national General Secretary Ram Madhav wrote that "Kashmir needs a new leadership, built not on the separatist narrative of the 20th century but on the development narrative of the 21st century. The district development council elections (DDC) are the right platform for experiment for the National party (BJP) before the first Assembly polls of the Union Territory. However, the reality is that the leadership cannot be invented or manufactured. Those elected in 2018 are living in secured places as they fear they may be killed by militants if they go back to their homes (India today, 2020).

People's Conference.

In the Handwara area of Northern Kashmir, People's Conference Chief Sajad Lone, who is also the PAGD spokesperson, said: "I was taunted and told that my journey has ended. Now my honour is in your hands. Tell them where we stand, where the People's Conference stands.

Jammu and Kashmir Apni Party

On the other hand, a new political entity Jammu and Kashmir Apni Party, this consists of some former ministers and legislators. This new entity is led by Altaf Bukhari, the former finance minister and the leader of Peoples' Democratic Party, this group has presented a memorandum to the governor for the restoration of the statehood of J&K, domicile rights and other significant demands. So far, the central government has shown little interest in this proposal. Infact that the group is overtly and covertly backed by Bhartiya Janta Party, while many experts apprehended that this proposal was just eyewash to people. This party had its own vested interest. They party has keen interest in fighting DDC and Panchayat polls keeping in consideration parties interest in deepening the grass-root levels. They found opportunity in these elections to strength the party and had not kept the security of the state in mind (Kashmir times, 2020).

District Development Elections and PAGD

When the DDC polls were announced, the two regional parties opposed it and claimed that the creation of these councils is aimed to further "disempower" the J&K Assembly. They termed the establishment of the DDCs as part of the "systematic pattern of disempowerment of the people of J&K which started on August 5, 2019." However, after a few days, they reluctantly joined the elections in fear or bid that to stop the BJP entering the party in a valley. They contested on the issue that they fear these elections are existential crisis to these parties (Greater Kashmir, 2020).

Conclusion

Seen in the above context of historical and political support to processes of democratic decentralization in Jammu and Kashmir and the fact that the state's own constitution under section 16 too provided support to it, Panchayat Raj ironically suffered immensely in the erstwhile state there were some reasons responsible for it. First, the state of Jammu and Kashmir remained politically highly unstable since independence and issues of grassroots democracy remained quite distant from people's involvement. The political culture of authoritarianism and meek surrender to undemocratic regimes had impacted on the growth of self-government institutions. Second, undermining of special constitutional position of the state under article 370 unilaterally since 1953 generated an atmosphere whereby local political elite too became sceptical about the devolution process. This happened despite the fact that the state experienced single line administration of making districts as separate units of planning quite successfully. Third, both election machinery and electoral process have suffered crisis of credibility in the state at different times and Panchayats too were manipulated. Fourth, political party always viewed these elections on the basis of party interest; they never looked these as a way of development and as tool of conflict management. Fifth, political party's always fear that they institutions may breed new leadership which may challenge structure of power. Sixth, approach of Political Parties to these was always context specific, if conditions favour them, they had gone for elections and blamed always for center for the mess they have created in the state. Seventh, local government were vocal for the Panchayat elections, but never were interested in the decentralization of power.

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