



# The Past And Present Of The Panchayat System Of West Bengal In The Indian Context

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## Abstract

In the history of evolution of West Bengal and Indian governance system, the development of modern local governance system like 'Panchayat system' based on the participation of public representatives is a very important issue in the context of West Bengal and all Indian rural governance structure. The concept of Panchayat is associated with the five-member local village governance structure in ancient India. Hence the common meaning of the word 'Panchayat' is 'for five people'. But with the passage of time the numerical idea of the word Panchayat disappeared. In that case, in modern times, a collective idea has been associated with the word 'Panchayat'.

The public welfare and representative local governance system prevailing in West Bengal today is known as the 'Panchayat System' of West Bengal. This mature look of the 'Panchayat system' of West Bengal, however, did not develop overnight. Today's Panchayat system is the result of continuous progress of local governance in India through various experiments over a long period of time. The history of the evolution of the Panchayat system from ancient times to the last Panchayat elections in the 21st century can be divided into several parts; Namely – Panchayat System of Ancient India, Panchayat System of Medieval India, Panchayat System of Colonial India and Panchayat System of Post-Colonial India.

**Key-Word :** Concept of the word 'Panchayat'; Panchayat System of Ancient India; Panchayat System of Medieval India; Panchayat System of Colonial India; Panchayat System of Post-Colonial India; Panchayat System in West Bengal today.

The present local governing system of West Bengal, which is based on a beneficial and representative structure, is called the *Panchayat* System. The history of the evolution of the Governing structure of west Bengal as well as India, The Panchayat system is very significant in the sense that it is very modern in essence. It is based on the basis of representation of the elected representatives from the masses. As far as one can gather, the word *Panchayat* came from Hindi word '*panchayan*'<sup>1</sup>. In ancient India, five members were selected to govern a village as a body. The modern concept of *Panchayat* came from this idea. Thus, the meaning of Panchayat came to be known as "for five people". But with the passage of time, the idea of a number got removed from the concept of Panchayat. In the modern period, however, a collective idea has been associated with the word 'Panchayat'.

To put it in simple discussion, we can divide the history of the evolution of Panchayat from the ancient times to the last panchayat election in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a few phases. These phases are:

- The Panchayat system in Ancient India,
- The Panchayat in the middle age,
- The Panchayat system under the colonial rule, and
- The Panchayat in the post-colonial India.

### **The Panchayat system in Ancient India:**

In the ancient Indian texts like the Jain Scripture *Bhagawatisutra*, Buddhist scripture *Anguttarnikoy* and in the *Vedas*, we find the ancient Indian geographical maps, it seen from these texts that in ancient India, we had the city-states much like the ancient Greece instead of bigger nation-states. In this time, the local governing bodies became the normal system of the state administration. In the time of the *Maurya* Dynasty, there was the autonomous village administration, according to Kautilya's *Arthasashta*. The head of the village administration was called the 'gramik'<sup>2</sup>. The Gramik was in charge of maintaining law and order in a village on behalf of the king. He was responsible for the wellbeing of the villagers including their life and their properties; their freedom. He also collected taxes, protected the important government documents and presided over the meetings of the village committee<sup>3</sup>.

Pratihaar: While running the administration under Pratiharas, the '*Gram-pati*' took care of the law and order of a village with the help of the senior members of the village. In the history of the ancient India, under the Chalukya dynasty, there was a "gram-panchayat", and in the Chola dynasty too, there was a well-structured Local Self-Government. The panchayat was responsible for the development of the village and the justice delivered to the villagers. In the governing system of the Chola dynasty, the villages were almost independent in the matters of economy and administration. The *Gramin Parishad* controlled the administration of a village through its members, who were elected representatives. The control of land, measuring of the agricultural lands, collection of taxes, education, settling an argument – all these were handled by the *Gramin Parishad*<sup>4</sup>. In the Chola administration, in every village, there was one elected general administrative body, where the common villagers could join. The general administrative body was of two types- 'Ur' and '*Maha sabha*'. All the adult villagers were the members of this 'Ur'. The general administrative body of a village where the Brahmins resided, was called "Mahasabha". Although the village administration was almost autonomous in the Chola rule, the central government inspected all the activities of the *Gram Sabha*. They checked the financial transactions and administered punishments for a failure in executing the orders.

### **The Panchayat system in India in the Middle Ages:**

In the Middle ages, the much developed Panchayat system could be seen in the reign of Sher Shah. In his time, the village Panchayats got legal approval as the integral part of the central administration<sup>5</sup>. This village Panchayat was formed with the elders of the village. The chief of the Village Panchayat acted as the link between the village administration and the central administrative body. In a real situation, the government officials seldom came in contact with the common villagers except collecting revenues. Although, the Panchayat was pressurised with various responsibilities in an emergency situation<sup>6</sup>.

The Mughal emperor Akbar further strengthened and well organised the Panchayat system after Sher Shah. The Panchayat, which was made up of the elders of the village, was the main basis of the village administration. In the time of the Mughal emperors, the Panchayat was mostly independent of the central administration and this system ran for hundreds of years till the colonial rule. In the rural areas, the Panchayat independently collected taxes, took care of the development of the villages, and maintained law and order.

### **The Panchayat during the colonial rule:**

As the colonial rule became established in India in the latter half of the nineteenth Century, the idea of the Panchayat system changed entirely. In 1765, the British East India Company received the Dewani. For almost one hundred years after that, they did not attempt to reorganise the rural administrations. They only sporadically tried to develop the local self-government in the urban areas. These hundred years, their administration was completely centralised.

But in 1970, the Governor General Lord Mayo first noticed that in order to become a popular administration, the centre has to keep in contact with the local administrative bodies. In his Proposal (1870), Lord Mayo

ordered the provinces to create a list of their contributions towards the progress of the local self-government. As a result, a few provinces passed laws that included the subjects related to election<sup>7</sup>.

Next, Lord Ripon's proposals on the development of the local administration were very significant. Together these are called the Ripon Proposal (1882). In this proposal, the smallest unit of the local government in the rural areas was designated as 'taluk' or 'tehsil'. It emphasised the need of the financial support from the centre to the local administration for their development. In this proposal, the village board was mentioned as the unit of the local self-government that the village board would be formed with majority of local non-government members and as far as practicable, these board members would be chosen through election. Lord Ripon wished that the local rural governing bodies would be responsible for the development of that area. But before his proposals could be actualised, he was replaced by Lord Curzon as the Viceroy (1899).

Lord Curzon was absolutely in favour of a centralised administration. He did not consider the Indians worthy of a Democracy. Again, he vehemently opposed the system of local self-government under the British rule in India. So, the liberal proposals of Lord Ripon, who was follower of Utilitarianism, were not implemented by Lord Curzon. Still, one must mention that after the Ripon proposal, a few provinces in India passed the laws related to local self-government, like the Madras Board related law of 1884. After this, the Bengal Self-government Act was passed in 1885. Through this Act, three institutions were activated towards the rural self-government: the Union committee at the village level, the local *parishad* at the *Mahakuma* level and the *Zilla* board at the *Zilla* level. The Union Committee was formed for one or more villages. This was formed for the maintenance of the local schools, ponds and the roads. But the local Parishad at the Mahakuma level had no independent power of activities, they functioned as the committee of Zilla Boards<sup>8</sup>. In the Zilla level, the Zilla Boards handled a lot of responsibilities. The most significant among them were education, health and the maintenance of transport. These boards were active in West Bengal till there was modern Panchayat system developed after the Independence.

Lord Morley established the 'Royal Commission on De-centralisation' in 1907 to dismiss the previous system of centralisation which was initiated by Lord Curzon after accepting the responsibility of the Viceroy of the British India in 1899. This new Commission aimed at finding means to decentralise the administrative power. The commission submitted its report in 1909. In this report, the commission proposed to hand over the responsibility of chowkidaari and other local administrative responsibilities to a single rural unit; it also proposed upgradation of a few villages as the basis of the local self-government system.

During the First World War, the British Government started to think afresh about the system of administration. The British Government started to involve the native Indians to the Governmental administrative duties in order to prepare them to handle the administration of the country itself in future. Meanwhile, in 1914, the Bengal Government formed a District Administration Committee. This committee recommended to establish both the Union Committee and the Chowkidaari Panchayat in the rural areas. It also recommended including a rural body of law in it. Based upon these recommendations, in 1919, the Bengal Village Self-government Act was passed. With the power of this Act, the Chowkidaari Panchayat and the Union Committee was abolished and their powers were transferred to the Union Board, which was made up of multiple villages. But it must also be mentioned that although, due to a shortage of fund and the officials, it failed to fulfil the minimum necessities of the rural people, it prepared the people of rural Bengal to a future Democracy. In that sense it remains significant.

### **The Panchayat system in the post-colonial era:**

During the freedom movements, the "Gram Swaraj" concept of Gandhiji was very popular among the ordinary countrymen. Gandhiji told that the freedom of India would start from the lowest tier of the society, so every village would become autonomous with a panchayat or a democracy<sup>9</sup>. But after the Independence in 1947, the draft constitution did not mention the rural self-administration. So, it was heavily criticised. Later, in the 40<sup>th</sup> section of the Constitution it was mentioned that the states would establish village Panchayats and the panchayats would be invested with sufficient power and authority so that they could act as the units of Local self-Government<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, in the post-independence India, the village Panchayat got the legal recognition; but in the section 40 it was included under the Directive Principles, so in the Indian federal system neither the state nor the centre was obliged to implement this. But still, some states including West Bengal, started to form Panchayat system under the Union board in an experimental basis. In West Bengal these areas were Saithia, Saktigarh, Nalhati, Guskara, Baruiapur, Jhargram, Fulia etc. The villagers used to gather in a place and raised their hands to elect



their members. In that time all the development was mostly done by the contribution of the villagers through cash and in labour.

After the independence, with the vision of the progress of the rural economy, increase of production and employment, the Community Development Programme was initiated in 1952. But it was a system which was thrust upon the villages, and it failed to get general acceptance, and so finally it was unsuccessful. In 1957, following the recommendations of the Balwant Rao Mehta Report, the three-tier panchayat system (village Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla parishad) was implemented in all states of the country<sup>11</sup>. In the report of this committee, they recommended the formation of the village Panchayat through direct election; and the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad was to be formed through indirect selection.

Still, in 1957, the two-tier Panchayat system was enacted through the West Bengal Panchayat Act. In the village level there was the Gram Panchayat and the old Union board, and in the place of the Gram Panchayat and the old Union board, there was to be formed the Anchal-Panchayat. Later, in 1963, the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act was passed. As a result, from 1964, Anchalik parishad was formed at the Block level and Zilla Parishad was formed at the Zilla level. In the 1960's, in the history of the Panchayat system of West Bengal, there was this four-tier Panchayat system -Gram Panchayat, Anchal Panchayat, Anchalik Parishad and Zilla parishad was formed. But, this four-tier system had its own faults. In this system, the development of the villages was the responsibility of the village Panchayat; but it got gradually weak due to a shortage of funds and structural weakness. So, later, in 1973 the West Bengal Panchayat Act was passed to reorganise the Panchayat system. Through this Act, the four-tier Panchayat system was replaced by the three-tier Panchayat system. The three tiers were: the Gram Panchayat at the lowest tier, Panchayat Samiti at the Block level and Zilla Parishad at the level of the Zillas.

In our discussion so far, we find that before 1977, the Panchayat system in West Bengal was at experimental stage. But, in 1977, the politics of India underwent a huge change. The Janata Party came to power at the centre. They formed a committee under Ashok Mehta (The Ashok Mehta Committee, 1977) for reforming the Panchayat System. The Ashok Mehta Committee submitted its report in August, 1978. The most important aspect of this report was the recommendation to allow the political parties to take part directly in the Panchayat election. However, after the Left Front formed the government in 1977 in West Bengal, a real and revolutionary change came to the local administration. In June, 1978, the three-tier democratic Panchayat election took place on the same day for the first time with the symbols of the political parties. From then on, the Panchayat election has been regularly happening every five years in west Bengal. The latest three-tier panchayat election took place in the year 2023.

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