



THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN RURAL LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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Abstract: *History of decentralization in India is, as a matter of fact, the history of evolution of Panchayati Raj System in the country. The issue of decentralization was not in the agenda of the rulers, though local government institutions in the form of Union Boards, District Boards etc. were established as per law. In the course of the freedom movement it became clear that after independence India's nationhood would evolve within a democratic political and institutional setting. Mahatma Gandhi's development discourse hinged on a village based participatory democracy embedded in his vision of the Panchayati Raj. Gandhi advocated for a democratic polity that would have its foundation in thousands of self-governing village communities. Gandhi felt that real development of India can take place only through its political system of Gram Swaraj in which the State Government would only exercise such powers which are not within the scope and competence of the lower tiers of participatory governance institutions.*

Keywords: *Panchayati Raj, Democracy, Decentralization, Rural Governance, Political Parties.*

INTRODUCTION

In the Constitution of India, parties are mentioned only in terms of the anti-defection clause. The Constitution 64th Amendment Bill (introduced in the Lok Sabha in April 1989) had defined "Panchayat" as an institution of self-government. However, in the context of opposing schools of thought regarding political parties' participation in the 'governments' below the state level, this chapter attempts to discuss the 'route' of this debate and argue that without official participation of political parties, panchayats will be democracy in form only – without any significant content. The Sarvodaya idea, inspired by Gandhiji, was that PRIs should be "non-political", meaning that political parties should be kept out. Consensus was considered the best way of arriving at the whole of the panchayati raj programme and used decentralization for selfish party interests. Sarvodayees wanted to rebuild Indian democracy on the basis of Gram Samaj at the bottom and upper tiers at the block, district, state and national levels. Barring villages, representation at each level must be through indirect elections. They believed at each level must be through indirect elections. They



believed that by this, the principle of consensus, if not unanimity, will prevail in all levels of administration and electioneering, and party politics would be eliminated.

Of course, this argument had a fine moral and idealistic ignorant, the burden of the protagonists of this school was “to save them from becoming pawns in the contest for power by political parties and ambitions pressure groups”. Jayprakash Narayan was critical of political parties because he believed that they impeded self-government and liberation of local initiative. They impeded self-government and liberation of local initiative. For JP, local self –government cannot be created within a system with competing political parties. JPs Ultimate idea was “Party less democracy”. The all-India Panchayat Parishad (of which JP was chairman) in 1961 went to the extent of advising the states to work for uncontested elicitation giving rewards to villages electing their panchayats without contest. About 30 percent of all panchayat elections at that time were uncontested. The protagonists of the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy considered the Sarvodaya’s non-political, non-party system as utopian. They even suspected that it would lead to totalitarianism. The liberal democracy school opposed this concept and wanted political participation. S K Dey, for instance, characterized democracy without contest as that of dead people. “A self-sufficient village republic consisting of God-fearing people thinking, believing and acting all alike is a village dead before it is born. Life cannot spring from such inaction. Democracy demands ideology and ideals in the perpetual but healthy clash. Only dead people do not compete”. In a conference convened at Jaipur in 1964 to discuss the question of panchayati raj and democracy, there was a clash of these two viewpoints. S C Jain of the Rural Institute Vidya Bhawan supported the Sarvodaya view while C P Bhabri and others argued that involvement of parties in the Panchayati Raj System was both necessary and desirable. The parties would act as tools of modernization in the villages.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF PRIs

The Panchayati Raj Institutions provide a base for progressive parties to operate and fight against the forces of backwardness and tradition. The village people are to be politicized.... Political parties have to act as a great instrument for the politicization of the rural masses. The Santhanam Committee review of the subject showed that before the advent of Independence and after, there have been proposals for parties have stayed away from such elections but no resolutions to abstain have been kept for any length of time. During the



Nehruvian period till 1964, most political parties abstained from direct participation in election to panchayats. One reason was that in small wards with 100-500 voters, locally prominent men were likely to succeed. They did not adopt party labels but political parties used to enroll the elected members to their fold., however, in Tamil Nadu, the Congress and Communists fought the Panchayat elections directly in 1964 with 36.3 percent panchayat members in the state elected unopposed while Andhra Pradesh, this percentage was 45. The use of party symbols in panchayat elections was not permitted in states except Kerala, but even there such symbols were not used at the time of Santhanam Committee review. The Committee review. The Committee was of the opinion that while political party influences cannot be legally banned, it was wrong and unnecessary to encourage their entry into the village by the provision of party symbols. The Committee's recommendations merit our attention because it reflected the thinking of that time – the formative stage of panchayati raj in India. The recommendations were:

- There should be no provision prohibiting political parties from influencing panchayati raj elections
- No political party symbol should be issued in any election to Panchayati Raj Institution
- No representations from political parties should be entertained in relation should not be accorded to political party groupings among members of panchayati raj bodies.

Only the first recommendation was at slight variance with the Sarvodaya stand, while all others were in conformity with the JP school. But on the question of unanimity in elections, it took a strong view against the Sarvodaya line, saying “no cash prizes or material inducements or incentives should be offered for unanimity in PR elections”. The Committee believed that contests were both healthy and educative and recorded having come across villages where anxiety for unanimity and consensus meant continuation of domination by the traditional authorities and the suppression of the new spirit of youth. An experience they had in Gujarat was illuminating. In Gujarat, we visited a village where the panchayat had been ominously elected for many terms without any change of personnel, when we put the question whether there were no other persons fit to serve in the panchayat and why the same persons were elected continuously for long periods, the only reply was that no one wanted a



change. The conclusion of the Santhanam Committee was important for that time and remains so even today “contests are both healthy and educative. Avoidance of contests on a large scale may mean the suppression of youth and it may stunt the growth of Panchayati Raj itself”.

THE COMMITTEES AND SAMITHIES FOR PRIs

We find a remarkable change after about four years of the Santhanam Committee Report. At an important conference on panchayati raj in 1969 at Hyderabad, the majority opinion was for political competitiveness on an ideological basis for both rural and urban India. But the dissenting voice at the meet still believed that the face-to-face community of the Indian village could be better served if it was insulated from political party rivalries. Soon, this theoretical and ideological debate more or less died out. After Nehru’s departure, the ruling party at the Central in collusion with the bureaucracy denigrated the Panchayati Raj Institutions, thus throwing out the baby with the bath water. Recalling those days, Govind Narain, wrote in *Yojana*, “A time came when phony leaders imposed by the political parties found in this programme a danger to their authority and influence and the word went round that some elections were lost by the ruling party in areas in which the (PR) programme was strong” The appointment of the Asoka Mehta Committee on December 12m 1977 was a watershed in the history of PRIs.

In its report submitted to Prime Minister Morarji Desai on January 21, 1978, it unequivocally said that political parties should be allowed to clearer orientation towards programmes and would facilities healthier linkages with higher level political processes. It is also necessary to provide constructive outlet to opposition parties, parties out of power of the state level may be able to chalk out achievement at the district level, direct elections coupled with programme-based contests would offer grater scope to weaker sections for availing the opportunities offered by the political system” The first state to put into practice the Asoka Mehta committee suggestion was West Bengal. After 19 years of inauguration of PRIs in the country, for the first time political parties were officially recognized in the local elections. But the two congress parties at that time pleaded for non-partisan panchayat polls. The Janata Party was dived on the issue- P C Sen strongly opposed party based contests while Sushil Dharia and Biman Mitra held a different view. The CPI (M) believed that direct involvement of political parties in the working of PRIs would make the panchayat leadership more



disciplined and responsible in managing these institutions and would put an end to the age-old tradition of rural coteries reaping the benefits for narrow, sectarian and caste interests. The left parties countered P C Sen's party less democracy' thesis with the argument that "party less candidates could not bring about social change and uphold and strengthen democracy because collective, organized efforts are needed for this: only political parties could bring them about"

POLITICAL MOVEMENT FOR PRIs IN KARNATAKA

The 1987 Karnataka elections to PRIs were held officially on party lines. For the first time, individuals, who dominated the village scene through their caste, family, money power and bullying tactics, were challenged by candidates put up by national or regional parties. Villages, which had seen several decades of domination of one particular family or caste, had to face challenges. The rural scene witnessed serious rifts and restlessness even in families because in one family, members were aligned on different party lines. Discussions and debates in tea shops and other public places were elevated to the level of political ideologies, assessment of balance sheets of political parties and track record of political leaders. The elections provided to be a churning process of ideas and action creating a high level of political awareness. There is no point in making a fetish about village harmony. As the late Abudl Nazir Sab, then Karnataka's Minister for Panchayati Raj, who worked tirelessly in ushering in a new era of PRIs in the state, used to say "anyway in the villages there is Ramana Bhimanna politics. It is a reality. Isn't it healthier that they align on Democratic Party lines rather than on caste, religions, etc?" The Institute of Social Sciences' study of the working of PRIs in Karnataka since the election has shown that involvement of political parties up to the Zilla Parishad level has generated healthy discussions and debates of definite policies and programmes. Following Karnataka, Andhara Pradesh and Kerala also permitted political parties to participate directly in local elections.

There is much to learn from the British experience. The London Country Council from its inception in 1889 has had clearly defined party divisions among its members. Elections are frequently consisted on party lines. In the local governments in England, political party organization brings greater coherence and definition into the policies of the governing body. Eric Jackson in his study of local governments in England concluded. Political organization in local government affairs does have the undoubted advantage, as it does in Parliament, of



bringing greater coherence and definition into the policy of the governing body. Where the parties are well organized and disciplined, it is possible to get a decision. The leader of a political group in power or a representative who can speak with authority on behalf of that group can be much more sure of his touch when concluding such discussions, and those with whom he is discussing, can feel that what he says is more likely to be adopted by the council than when discussions are conducted by a representative who has no such backing.

On the other hand, participation of political parties in local governance is resisted by Canadian voters. However, it cannot be claimed that the system is entirely free from party politics, NDP, a major political party, has been regularly fielding its candidates in municipal elections. Its success has been limited because the Liberals and Conservatives, instead of nominating their candidates directly, have been supporting like-minded independent candidates, giving rise to local coalitions of individuals who are opposed to the political philosophy of NDP. There is another phenomenon, too- domination of what are known as 'civic' parties, professing different lines in civic matters. A study in 1969 revealed that twenty-four of twenty-eight cities had at least one such party. However, there has been a consistent demand for allowing political parties to participate in municipal elections.

WESTREN POLITICAL THOUGHTS ABOUT PRIs

Richard C Tindal and Susan Tindal write: Organized political parties provide the potential for not only strong leadership but also more effective scrutiny of the municipality's activities through an organized opposition or alternative governing group. As a result, there is a group within council pledged to scrutinize and criticize municipal activities, an important role which is normally left to everybody – nobody. The two authors put forward an argument in support of political parties, which can hardly be contested. There is no political way to build a road, claim proponents of this viewpoint which reflects the lingering notion, that local government activities are administrative – not political in nature, yet if the actual construction of a road is a matter of engineering not politics, the decision where to locate a particular road is certainly political. The decision on whether the traffic problem in question should be solved through building a road or providing an alternative form of public transit is also clearly political. The decision on whether the scarce financial resources of the municipality should be used on transportation or some other pressing need is again political. Of course, one can argue that party discipline will necessarily limit the freedom of its members, that the real power would



tend to drift into the hands of the leading politicians and that the party organization, instead of the elected panchayats, may become the real governing body. There are complaints that the CPI (M) in West Bengal, Janata in Karnataka and Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh have betrayed these tendencies. But this is not a serious problem because of the fact that to endure, parties and politicians must be sensitive to public criticism. They have to observe the rules of the game called democracy.

In our particular social and political situation, there may be a tendency for ruling parties to adopt an ostrich-like policy about official contest of parties in local elections. These elections, at any point of their tenure, will be seen as a verdict on their performance and popularity. More often than not they would like to shy away than face the test. This is one more good reason for bringing in political parties in the Panchayat sphere. A usual fall-out of non-political panchayat elections is domination of independent candidates of all hues and shades without any internal control and accountability to the people. They may claim support of one party or other in a free-for-all situation. Some of them may be motivated by public good, but many of them belong to the class of political lumpiness who are fast for capturing the rural political scene. For them, panchayats are new source of social power and unbridled corruption. They are self-appointed guardians of social status quo and representatives of oppressive forces. These luments are impeding the growth of democratic spirit at the grassroots. The sooner they are replaced by official candidates of political parties, the better. Some political parties may also behave in a similar fashion. Yet, since they also contest Assembly and parliamentary elections, their representatives in panchayats cannot afford to ignore the dynamics of wider politics.

THE PARLIAMENT AND THE PRIS

In fact, PRIs should be seen as nurseries for political leadership. Young blood will be attracted if elections are based on political currents – if not ideology, and inspired by the state-level as well as national leadership. A recent study revealed that as many as 104 members of the present Lok Sabha and 37 members of Rajya Sabha have come from local body background. However, it is a matter of concern that only 57 of these 140 MPs have a panchayat background. India remains a country of villages which are represented by panchayats, and yet our mainstream political leadership is city-centric. The result Parliament and Assemblies seldom discuss the questions that agitate the minds of 74 crores of rural population. If



panchayat elections are contested on political lines, one can hope for the emergence of grassroots leaders who may change the very face of our legislatures.

Party-wise Break-up of Members of Parliament with Local body Background

	Parliament 1999 (161)		Parliament in 2004 (140)		
Rajya Sabha 40 Lok Sabha 121	BJP	59	BJP	42	Rajya Sabha 36 Lok Sabha 104
	INC	40	INC	33	
	CPI(M)	10	CPI(M)	14	
	SP	6	SP	11	
	Others	45	Others	34	

Now, of course, there is a dearth of political leadership at the lower levels. No wonder that when national parties had to put up candidates at mandal elections in Karnataka in 1987, they found it difficult to identify enough party activists. The organic link from Gram Sabha to Lok Sabha can be achieved effectively only through political parties working with the people. Absence of this link has brought about a pathological decay in our democratic system. Wherever official parties were involved in PRIs, the enthusiasm unprecedented. For instance, it has been established that in the PR elections in West Bengal and Kerala, one of the most important reasons for wider popular participation was the political parties were officially participated in the elections. No doubt, this decision (party participation) went a long way in making West Bengal’s rural for very much politically conscious, giving elected panchayat bodies a political standing of their own¹⁶.

Paradoxically, even after political party participation in local government elections has become a norm, when a party or a coalition comes to power in a state, it is wary of holding the elections on the or ties to avoid contest in the panchayat and municipal elections, Karnataka stands out in the first category where the State Election Commission had to go to the Supreme Court against the “games” of the State Government to postpone the elections, which were due early this year. Gujarat under B.J.P. is the best example of the second category. There is nothing strange about it. BJP stands as a singular party which seeks to deny the essential pluralism of Indian society. When the panchayat elections were notified in Gujarat in 2001, the State government announced on incentive of Rs 60,000 for villages with a population below 5,000 and Rs. 1 lakh for villages with a population below 15,000 of the Gram Panchayat was elected unanimously. These panchayats were termed as ‘Samras’ (harmonious) panchayats. But people know better. Election results showed that there were



few takers for Samras panchayats as the number of unanimously elected panchayats came down as compared to the 1995 panchayat elections.

Two basic questions must engage our attention. The first question relates to the nature of our panchayats. Are they a mere extension of the executive arm of the Indian state as being practiced or instruments of planning for 'economic' development and social justice' as the Constitution Article (243G) asserts? If panchayats are seen as sheer implementing agencies for various government-sponsored schemes and programmes – without any will of their own, then, they may, remain apolitical as is expected from the administration. However, if they are envisaged as the third tier of government and basic units of our democratic edifice, they are destined to be political in a multi-party democracy. After all, 'economic development' and 'social justice' are not apolitical terms – devoid of any ideological orientation; these terms have definite political connotations. For example, one point of view may favor free markets as the engine of economic growth, while a competition view point may like to replace the market with collective will and government intervention. Some may support the caste system and the Brahminical order while others may crave of casteless society offering equal options to everybody. These questions are essentially political and need to be address on a political plane from panchayats to Parliament.

Another equally important question relates to the isolationist view of panchayats. When JP and others pleaded for negation of political parties in panchayati raj, they also dreamt of party less democracy at the level of State and Central governments. However it has been impossible to achieve the ideal in any system except military dictatorships. Currently, Pakistan is passing through local body elections. One can read comments after comments in Pakistani newspapers and periodicals and also on the Internet, bitterly criticizing the absence of political parties from the scene. Tanvir Ahmed writes: People who have studied the original devolution plan and some crucial amendments made just before the current elections have started questioning the wisdom of keeping political parties away from the local government set-up. They think that this 'philosophy' will create a political void and ultimately lead to parochial factors like biradari, ethnicity, groupism, etc., to penetrate into the system. Not those national-and-provincial-level elections are free from these factors, but over the years the impact has visibly lessened.



CONCLUSION

This is an important question. If the whole nation is ruled by political parties, how can panchayats exist and grow in a non-political set-up? It should not be forgotten that all governance is local or the local is inextricably linked with the national or even global. Nobody can be really aware of national questions unless she or he is conscious of local issues. One example is the Perumatty Gram Panchayat of Kerala fighting an international soft drink giant such conviction comes only from a political reading for the present situation where water is going to be a life-and-death issue for millions. Moreover, can a panchayat engaged in crucial struggles without support from the political class? Let's not treat politics as a villain. In right hands, it can be a maker of history. And, what is democracy if not a laboratory for bringing about qualitative changes in the exercise of state power? And, which other body of governance represents the state to the people more closely than panchayats? Whether and to what extent political parties should participate in panchayati raj elections is a question that has occupied the centre-stage of the discussion on panchayati raj in the country even before Independence. In fact, Santhanam Committee (1964) on panchayati raj elections had stated that one of the most controversial issues they had to deal with was the above question. The question had added significance because of the two prominent, at the same time sharply divided, schools of thought on the subject of political parties; participation in local bodies elections. One major line of thought advocated apolitical panchayat bodies and the other was against the "wooly idea of having local bodies' elections on an apolitical basis."

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