



RURAL POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION: PANCHYAT RAJ SYSTEM

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Abstract: *the establishment of three tier structures of the Panchayat Raj Institutions as envisaged in 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India was hailed as a great step forward. It sought to integrate the democratic process at all levels by formalizing a mechanism wherein people at all levels would have an opportunity to participate openly in matters which concerned them and their welfare and development. It provided the framework for mopping up of the local resources and wisdom for development from below. Further, it sought to bridge the gap between the people and the governments, unfortunately much of the hopes were belied. It's time that the Panchayat Raj Institutions are geared up to play a pro-active role in ensuring development in the rural areas. Decentralization should be used as a strategy for transforming the rural communities into models of development and for correcting the urban rural imbalance.*

Keywords: *PRI, Decentralization, Rural development, Political participation, Democratic.*

INTRODUCTION

In the recent times "Development" has been viewed by social scientists as a fairly broad concept embracing all aspects of socio-economic, political and cultural advancement of human beings, that is, "total human development". Such a view emphasizes the need to consider people as the "subjects" or the "creative agents" of development and stresses their need to be totally involved in the creation of just and participatory society (Kurian N, D). Viewed from this angle, the institutional form of democratic decentralization, namely Panchayati Raj, which is a political system that emphasizes people's participation in decision making, formulation, implementation and evaluation of development efforts, attains a lot of importance, panchayati Raj Institutions are visualized as local self-government bodies which enable people to participate in the process of development and governance.

Although the concept of participation gained importance in recent times, its origin can be traced to Aristotle the Greek scholar. Analyzing the city, states for the arrangements that would mostly contribute to human happiness and better life. Aristotle was of the opinion that participating in the affairs of the state as a citizen was essential to the development and



fulfillment of the human was essential level, Aristotle found clear relationship between the extent of participation and the creation of the good life. According to him, the best state was one where there was broad participation with no class dominating others. Aristotle's analysis showed some relationship between the participation and development. The relationship is complex, because participation has economic, social and political dimensions.

THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Cohen and Uphoff describe participation as "people" involvement in decision-making process about what would be done and how; their involvement in implementing programmes and decisions by contributing various resources or cooperate in specific organizations or activities, their sharing, in their benefits of development programmes, and/or their involvement in efforts to evaluate such programmes. Taken together, these four kinds of involvement appear to encompass most of what would generally be referred to as participation in development activities" According to Yadav, people's participation means "involvement of the people in the development process voluntarily and willingly. Such participation cannot be coerced". He states that people's involvement has to be understood in terms of participation in decision-making, implementation of development programmes, monitoring and evaluation of such programmes and in sharing the benefits of development. Moulik is of the opinion that" participation in development process implies stimulating individuals to take the initiative and mobilizing people to work for overall societal development"

United Nations social Development division defines participation "as a process of activities comprising people's involvement in decision-making, contributing to the development efforts shares equitably in the benefits derived there from". Verhagen is of the opinion that "Participation is generally presented as the active involvement of target groups in the planning, implementation and control of programmes and projects and not merely their passive acquiescence in performing predetermined tasks, not merely their exploitation in order to reduce the likelihood that programmes and projects will prove effective in meeting felt development needs and that participants share equitably in all benefits". Sharma views participation in two aspects, in the broadest sense, the term participation is used to refer to all those actions taken by people to take part in the process of social change. In a restricted



sense participation consists in a specific action by which the people participate for achievement of a limited goal.

In politics, casting vote is said to be participation and in the organizational set-up, membership and attending meetings actively or passively is taken as participation. The successive five-year plans have emphasized the need for promoting people's organizations for popular participation for rural transformation. The very first reason of Panchayati Raj was to ensure people's participation in planning for their development and implementation. Efforts were made in the sixties to bring about people's participation on an institutionalized basis through elected representatives. This led to the establishment of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Development is an integrated process. It cannot be achieved except through committed coordination between the entire nation building agencies on the one hand and the people as represented by their organizations and their institutions on the other.

People's participation in the development process can come only through voluntary action. Voluntary action is an important vehicle of rural development. The ultimate aim of all activity should be to help people to help themselves. This is the only way to secure people's participation and achieve improvement in the quality of life of the rural poor. If people through their organizations at grass root level ride few hands who with the connivance of the officials will ride roughshod over the people and impose on them projects or programmes which may not have any relevance to their needs. This is where the snag lies, because imposition becomes counter-productive. In such a situation, people cannot be expected to participate. You can drag the horse to the water, but cannot make it drink, unless the horse itself is in need of water. This is the participation only when a project is based on their expressed on their own volition; participate in implementing it because of they know it is in their interest. The Act provides for the constitution of the basic institutions, the panchayat, for the area comprising a revenue village or group of revenue villages with a population ranging from 5,000 to 7,000.

As per the Act, villages having a population of not less than 5,000. The memberships of the panchayat include members not less than 11 and not more than 19, all of whom are directly elected from multi-member constituencies of two or more members on the basis of universal adult franchise. Seats are reserved for the representatives of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in proportion to their population in the area and for women, whose



membership in no case should be less than two. The members are directly elected and section 27 of the Act provides for the election of the chairman and vice-chairman of the panchayat from amongst its members. According to the Act (section 27), the members of a panchayat shall hold office for a term of five years. Section 80 empowers the government to appoint the Panchayat Development Officer, the Secretary (KPR Act (amendment) 2011) and the panchayat's executive. As provided in the Act, a panchayat shall meet for the transaction of business at least once in every month. There is also a provision for special meetings. Though, the term "Grama Sabha" as such is not used in the Act of 1959, it provides for a meeting of all the adults in the village once or twice a year to consider and approve the village panchayats "administrative reports and budgets".

"A panchayat shall convene, in such a manner and at such a time as may be prescribed, a meeting of the adult residents of the village and the statement of accounts together with the report of the administration for the proceeding year and the programme of the work proposed for the following year should be read out and explained at such meetings. Every panchayat is required to constitute three committees by election, to carry out the functions entrusted or delegated to it in respect of agriculture, public health and sanitation and promotion of village industries respectively, in all the areas within the jurisdiction of the panchayat".

CONSTITUTIONALITY OF THE PANCHAYAT SYSTEM

The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act widened the scope for people's participation by enhancing representation of women, poor and deprived sections of the society in all elected bodies. Mechanisms for the decentralization of administration and development works down to the village, block and district levels were created. Powers were vested in elected representatives enabling them to determine the needs and priorities, to initiate socio-economic development and to build a society based on democratic principles. The people were given an opportunity to enhance their capability and capacity to plan and execute development programmes, projects and schemes from below. For democracy to be successful the grassroots organizations have to be strong and the local authorities have to respond to the felt needs of the people. The citizens have to have faith in the efficacy and efficiency of the administrative system so that the distance between people and the government is reduced. The instruments of good governance have to be accessible to all



rich or poor, literate or illiterate, man or women. It is here that local governments can play a crucial role in strengthening democracy and bringing about a responsive, accountable, effective and people friendly administration at the local level.

In India a number of rural development programmes have been launched during the last decades or so, they did not however produce expected results. As a result a large number of people still live below the poverty line. Development has not trickled down to the needy. Evidences suggest that rural development programmes often missed their mark because of institutional and administrative weakness at the grassroots level. The people's participation in the programmes and policies mean for them has been lacking. Participation however does not mean getting mute approval of projects framed by higher authorities. It means promoting action of local communities to deal with their own problems, according to their own priorities. Local community participation in development has to be genuinely local and directly related to the people. The political and social climate must be such that it allows individual and group initiatives to trigger off change and prompts a democratic debate for action. In a large country like ours, where majority of the population is still rural, it cannot be denied that a strong, more competent and participatory rural government is one of the best basic pre-conditions for development.

It was in this context that the establishment of three tier structure of the Panchayati Raj Institutions as envisaged in 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India was hailed as a great step forward. It sought to integrate the democratic process at all levels by formalizing a mechanism wherein people at all levels would have an opportunity to participate openly in matters which concerned them and their welfare and development. It provided the framework for mopping up of the local resources and wisdom for development from below. Further, it sought to bridge the gap between the people and the governments, unfortunately much of the hopes were belied. It's time that the Panchayati Raj Institutions are geared up to play a pro-active role in ensuring development in the rural areas. Decentralization should be used as a strategy for transforming the rural communities into models of development and for correcting the urban rural imbalance. The rural community must feel the impact of developmental efforts of government having a bearing on their lives. Decentralization is linked with popular participation in making, implementing and evaluating the impact of decisions pertaining to local level. In this regard certain



institutional and structural safeguards have been made in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act; one of these is the provision of Gram Sabha.

Gram Sabha is the backbone of the Panchayati Raj System. It activates the rural governance system and enables democratic traditions and values to penetrate deep down the village, thereby strengthening the institutional mechanism of participatory development. The main function of the Gram Sabha is that of a “Watch dog” Incidentally it is also integral to the Gandhian concept of Panchayati Raj. Gandhi himself, for instance, held that “true democracy could not be worked by some men sitting at the top. It had to be worked from below by the people of every village”.

In accordance with the provisions of the constitution all State governments have provided for the institution of the Gram Sabha in their respective Panchayati Raj Acts. In the new dispensation, the Gram Sabha has become a constitutional reality vested with specific powers and functions. As per Article 243(B) Gram Sabha means a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of a Panchayat. To enable the Gram Sabha to meet and take decisions regarding development works the Act provides that the Gram Sabha has to meet twice in a year at a public place. All the members of Gram Panchayat attend the meeting of Gram Sabha. Secretary of the Gram Panchayat also acts as the secretary of the Gram Sabha as well. A meeting of Gram Sabha is presided over by the President of the Gram Panchayat. In the absence of the Gram Sabha, people’s participation cannot be enlisted.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND STUDY AREA

The state of Karnataka has 56,682 rural habitations including 27,017 Revenue villages. According to 2011 Census, about 6,11,30,704 was total population, out of a total population of 3,75,52,529 people live in these rural habitations. That constitutes about 61.43 per cent of the State's population and about 2, 35, 78,175 people live in Urban habitations that constitute about 38.57 per cent. 62 lakes households who live in the rural areas, depending mainly on agriculture. The distinguishing features of the State's rural society are the following (Census 2011 and Karnataka at a Glance 2009-10). Elected Members of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Karnataka Namely, Grama panchayats, Taluk panchayat samitis and Zila panchayats. There are in all 5,628 village panchayats, 176 taluk panchayat samitis and 30 zila panchayats, a total of 5,833 panchayati raj institutions. In them, in position, are 96,090



elected members in the three different tiers: 91,402 in grama panchayats, 3,683 in taluk panchayat samitis, and 1,005 in zila panchayats. Among the 91,402 elected GP members are: 16,999 scheduled caste members, 9,880 scheduled tribe members, 29,944 other backward community members and 34,581 from other communities. Women elected members to the GPs number 39,318, which is about 43 per cent of the total elected members in the State. As for elected TPs in the state of Karnataka, there are a total of 3,683 members, of whom 1,519 or 41.24 per cent are women. The community based elected members in place are: 678 The distribution of elected panchayat members in the three tier system of Panchayats, scheduled caste members, 347 scheduled tribe members, 1,841 other backward community members and 1,842 other community me A total of 1,005 elected ZP members are in position, with 373 women (37.1 per cent), 184 scheduled caste members, 84 scheduled tribe members, 245 members from other backward communities and 492 members belong to other communities.

The membership of the panchayat raj institutions is on the basis of caste communities and every broad community category gets its own share of elected membership in the institutions. There is also representation for women in these institutions. In order to understand the reasons for non-participation of the people in the meetings of the Gram Sabha and to create awareness among rural people regarding the role of Gram panchayat study of Honnebaagi Grama panchayat Channagiri taluk Gram Panchayat of Davanagere District of Karnataka State. On the basis of stratified sampling method 1500 households were taken as study samples out of the 3500 population. Data was collected both from primary and secondary sources. Observation and informal discussion with the villagers, elected representatives and the officials also helped a lot in finding out the ground realities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

- To assess the level of awareness of the people about the powers and functions of the Gram Sabha and the degree of their participation in it.
- To find out ways and means of enhancing the participation of villagers in the activities of the Gram Sabha.
- To study the effectiveness of Gram Panchayat in enlisting people's participation.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY



- Majority of the villagers are not even aware of the existence and role/purpose of the Gram Sabha. The participation of villagers in the Gram Sabha meetings is very poor. Only 150-250 out of the 25,000 members participate in the meetings of the Gram Sabha
- There is no timely and proper information about the Gram Sabha meetings. Dates and agenda of the meetings of the Gram Sabha are published in the local newspapers also. Pamphlets highlighting the agenda of the Gram Sabha were also distributed to the villagers. However, all this has not proved an effective method. Distant venue of meeting and apathy of the villagers also discourage participation of people in Gram Sabha meeting.
- To a large extent the members of the village panchayat are indifferent towards the Gram Sabha. Many villagers believe that elected representatives are corrupt and misuses the panchayat funds.
- In spite of reservation of seats for the women and the other deprived sections of the society, their participation and role in the meetings of the Gram Sabha has remained poor. Presence of women and members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes is almost negligible and those who are present do not speak out.
- Discussion on village development plans, approval of the budget, scrutiny of completed and ongoing works are not satisfactory. Gram Sabha members are rarely informed about the funds available with the Gram Panchayat for development projects. Mainly matters relating to selecting the beneficiaries are discussed in the meetings.
- According to our survey, Panchayat President, Members and Officials agree that people do not participate in the meetings of Gram Sabha. Further, constructive and healthy discussions are seldom held in the meetings of Gram Sabha

The findings suggest that the functioning of the Gram Sabha is not encouraging. In case grassroots democracy has to survive the Gram Sabhas have to play an effective role. A few suggestions given below may improve the situation

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

- It is necessary to educate and motivate people about their rights and duties. Intensive measures should be taken to publicize the dates, venue and timings of the



meeting. The Gram Panchayat should mobilize the people to attend Gram Sabha meetings. The college, school teachers and students can play an important role in creating awareness about the Gram Sabha. Rallies can be organized within the village highlighting the importance of the Gram Sabha. Pamphlets highlighting the agenda of the Gram Sabha may also be circulated to the villagers well in advance of the meeting. Wall paintings at important public places can also prove to be an effective medium.

- The State government meetings for the whole state and organize a special campaign to ensure attendance. Publicity may be given through Television and Radio. Chief Minister, Minister of Panchayati Raj and rural Development and other popular personalities may request the people through Television and Radio to attend Gram Sabha meetings. This would prove to be the most practical way of ensuring the regularity of the Gram Sabha meetings and enlisting people's participation.
- The relationship between the Gram Sabha and the Gram Panchayat should be the same as between the legislature and the governments. The panchayat should be accountable to the Gram Sabha in unequivocal terms. This is what Gandhi also suggested. This is possible only if the members of the Gram Sabha get the right to recall the inefficient and corrupt elected representatives of the Gram Panchayat.
- The Gram Sabha should not only have powers but should also exercise the power to determine the priorities in development. Prior approval of the Gram Sabha should be made mandatory for taking up any rural development work in the village. Certification of expenditure and also about propriety in financial dealings should be made mandatory and the Gram Sabha should be responsible for that.
- The Gram Sabha should not act merely as a recommendatory body or a debating forum of the people. The views expressed and decisions taken in the Gram Sabha should be respected by the Gram Panchayat as well as higher level Panchayats. If the decisions of the Gram Sabha cannot be implemented, the Gram Panchayats should give the reasons for non-compliance to Gram Sabhas.

Participatory rural development will remain a distant dream if the Gram Sabha is not able to discharge its assigned role and moreover, people accept them as their own institution. Mobilization and participation are the two key elements in activating the Gram Sabha. Once



the Gram Sabha is activated it is bound to ensure vibrant democracy with transparency and accountability. Since the introduction of Panchayati Raj System in India in a formal sense, the problem of non-participation of the people in the meetings of the Gram Sabha has drawn the attention of policy makers, planners, academicians and the government. A number of efforts have been made to overcome this problem from time-to-time. Gram Sabha which was considered as the primary body of the Panchayati Raj and intended to facilitate direct participation of the people in local activities and to act as a “watch dog” of the picture. However, if the above suggestions are adopted in true spirit, it is expected that the Gram Sabhas to a large extent will become vibrant centres of people’s participation and the pace of development of rural areas will be faster.

Despite shortcomings in the working of the Gram Sabha, it cannot be denied that it is the most representative institution of democracy and decision-making in a village where each and every voter can raise his voice. The accountability of the elected representatives of the panchayats to the electorate can be ensured through the Gram Sabha. It provides a platform for an organic link between various tiers of government. If the development in the rural areas is to be for the people, of the people and by the people, then people’s institutions like the Gram Sabha should function effectively at the local level. In a nutshell, it can be said that the grassroots democracy to be successful, the Gram Sabha will have to act as the fulcrum of the Panchayati Raj System.

The Panchayat Raj was expected to work at the grass root level involving the people of the village in planning and executing programmes to meet their felt needs. That was again considered as participation of the people at the grass root level for improving the situation of their village communities and themselves. But even within the limited achievement process and development activities. It is now accepted by all reasonable people that no country can make progress in nation-building work, unless people at large came forward with due enthusiasm to actively participate in developmental activities. Union and State governments are run through the elected people’s representatives. There is hardly any scope for people’s participation and initiative. People’s fundamental right to participate in the governmental process is to be recognized without any reservation. Sovereignty lies with the people, union and State Governments derive their authority from the people through the votes of the people. All funds that the Union Government or State Governments spend



come from the people, through direct and indirect taxes. So it is in the fitness of things that the people should exercise their right to oversee how governments are being run? Being associated in the lower levels, where everything is being implemented. The people should not arrogate to themselves a superior position above the people, to dole out relief to them and thereby in oblige them with the expectation of compliance to their dictates as indebted persons. They are the real builders of the nation. Ultimate sovereign power lies in their hand; they make and unmake all governments. As Gandhi said "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". So people should be treated with due respect.

To participate in decisions concerning one's immediate environment, with a bearing on one's own day-to-day life makes democratic common sense. It seems obvious that participating and involving oneself in the work of running one's immediate environment, with a bearing on one's own day-to-day life makes democratic common sense. It seems obvious that participating and involving oneself in the work of running one's own local community or village is at least as important as taking interest in higher levels of political participation and involvement. Like charity, democracy begins at home. The goal of the Indian freedom struggle was quite clear in this regard; it was self rule, "Swaraj". A demand and alienated by the experience of feudal and colonial domination, swaraj was seen as the birthright not only of the nation as a whole, but of every villager and town-dweller. To belong and to take part was to be free. Only swaraj could make growth or development possible. As Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru observed, "Panchayats should be given greater power. For we want the villager to have a measure of real swaraj in his own village. He should have power and not have to refer everything to big officials. We do not want the officials to interfere too much in the life of the village. We want to build swaraj right from the village up".

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