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IMPACT OF PANCHAYATI RAJ IN INDIA

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Abstract :

The study is based on the results of an impact of panchayati raj research survey conducted in state of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir to know about the various aspects of this system and record its impact on various social and economic parameters of the people of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. It was found that this system has caused various changes in the life of people of above mentioned states, but the aspiration of people were not fully fulfilled. People are wishing for reforms in this system. The people of the area are well aware about panchayati raj. 900 people were interviewed in this regard and from the information gathered, a total of 36 districts. Out of the 36 districts 18 from Uttar Pradesh, 13 from Madhya Pradesh and 5 from Jammu and Kashmir. The precious panchayati raj information is disappearing very fast. This study is useful in conserving this precious knowledge.

Panchayat as an institution has been functioning in rural India since time immemorial. While empires rose and fell, village panchayats continued to survive giving continuity to the Indian village community. Vedas and the Rigveda in particular reveal that Hindus in ancient India used to lead a corporate life. Valmiki's Ramayana and Vedvyas' Mahabharata have also described existence of such institutions. Actually the inspiration for panchayati Raj emanates from the notions of "Panch Parmeshwar" and village Republics. Ramayana and Mahabharata contain description of structure and composition of village Panchayats in early Vedic times. Institution of village Sabha or assembly continued till 18th century. Panchayats have been an integral part of the rural cultural heritage. Village councils and officials in India can be traced as far back as the Vedic age. These autonomous councils and their personnel controlled village administration, civic and judicial affairs during the Maurya, Gupta, and the Mughal periods. They played a significant part in ensuring the continuity of village life through the ages.

INTRODUCTION :

The panchayat raj is a south asian political system mainly in India, Pakistan, and Nepal. "Panchayat" literally means assembly (*ayat*) of five (*panch*) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the local community. Traditionally, these assemblies settled disputes between individuals and villages. Modern Indian government has decentralized several administrative functions to the local level, empowering elected gram panchayats. Gram panchayats are not to be confused with the unelected khap panchayats (or caste panchayats) found in some parts of India. (Rohit Mullick & Neelam Raaj). Panchayat, also spelled Panchayet, or Panchayat, Hindi Pancayat, the most important adjudicating and licensing agency in the self-government of an Indian caste. Literally, a Panchayat (from Sanskrit panca "five") consists of five members, but usually there are more. (www.britannica.com)

*"The best, quickest and most efficient
Way is to build up from the bottom. Every
Village has to become a self-sufficient republic.
This does not require brave resolutions. It
Requires brave, corporate, intelligent work"*

(Mahatma Gandhi)

Panchayati raj:

Panchayati Raj is a system of governance in which gram panchayats are the basic units of administration. It has 3 levels: village, block and district.

The term 'panchayat raj' is relatively new, having originated during the British administration. 'Raj' literally means governance or government. Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayati Raj, a decentralized form of Government where each village is responsible for its own affairs, as the foundation of India's political system. This term for such a vision was "Gram Swaraj" (Village Self-governance). It was adopted by state governments during the 1950s and 60s as laws were passed to establish Panchayats in various states. It also found backing in the Indian Constitution, with the 73rd amendment in 1992 to accommodate the idea. The Amendment Act of 1992 contains provision for devolution of powers and responsibilities to the panchayats to both for preparation of plans for economic development and social justice and for implementation in relation to twenty-nine subjects listed in the eleventh schedule of the constitution. (*India 2007, p. 696,*) Every village will be a republic or panchayat having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. It will be trained and prepared to perish in the attempt to defend itself against any onslaught from without. Thus, ultimately, it is the individual who is unit (Harijan, 28-7-1946) in the history of Panchayati Raj in India, on 24 April 1993, the Constitutional

(73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 came into force to provide constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj institutions. This Act was extended to Panchayats in the tribal areas of eight States, namely Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan from 24 December 1996. Now panchayati raj system exists in all the states except Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram. Also all the UTs except Delhi. The (*Panchayat.nic.in*)¹ Act aims to provide 3-tier system of Panchayati Raj for all States having population of over 2 million, to hold Panchayat elections regularly every 5 years, to provide reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women, to appoint State Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats and to constitute District Planning Committee to prepare draft development plan for the district. The 3-tier system of Panchayati Raj consists of a) village level panchayat b) block level panchayat c) district level panchayat.

Early history

During the time of the Rig-Veda (1200 BC), evidences suggest that self-governing village bodies called 'sabhas' existed. With the passage of time, these bodies became panchayats (council of five persons). Panchayats were functional institutions of grassroots governance in almost every village. The Village Panchayat or elected council had large powers, both executive and judicial. Land was distributed by this panchayat which also collected taxes out of the produce and paid the government's share on behalf of the village. Above a number of these village councils there was a larger panchayat or council to supervise and interfere if necessary. (Jawaharlal Nehru) Casteism and feudalistic system of governance under Mughal rule in the medieval period slowly eroded the self-government in villages. A new class of feudal chiefs and revenue collectors (zamindars) emerged between the ruler and the people. And, so began the stagnation and decline of self-government in villages.

During the British rule, the autonomy of panchayats gradually declined with the establishment of local civil and criminal courts, revenue and police organisations, the increase in communications, the growth of individualism and the operation of the individual Ryotwari '(landholder-wise) system as against the Mahalwari or village tenure system.

During British rule

The panchayat had never been the priority of the British rulers. (George Mathew) The rulers were interested in the creation of 'controlled' local bodies, which could help them in their trading interests by collecting taxes for them. When the colonial administration came under severe financial pressure after the 1857 uprising, the remedy sought was decentralisation in terms of transferring responsibility for road and public works to local bodies. However, the thrust of this 'compelled' decentralisation was with respect to municipal administration..

"The panchayat was destroyed by the East India Company when it was granted the office of Diwan in 1765 by the Mughal Emperor as part of reparation after his defeat at Buxar. As Diwan the Company took two decisions. The first was that it abolished the village land record office and created a company official called Patwari. The Patwari became the official record keeper for a number of villages. The second was the creation of the office of magistrate and the abolition of village police. The magistrate carried out policing functions through the Darogha

who had always been a state functionary under the Faujdar. The primary purpose of these measures was the collection of land revenue by fiat. The depredations of the Patwari and the Darogha are part of our folklore and it led to the worst famine in Bengal. The effects of the famine lingered right to the end of the 18th century. These two measures completely disempowered the village community and destroyed the panchayat. After 1857 the British tried to restore the panchayat by giving it powers to try minor offences and to resolve village disputes. But these measures never restored the lost powers of the village community."

From 1870 that Viceroy Lord Mayo's Resolution (for decentralisation of power to bring about administrative efficiency in meeting people's demand and to add to the finances of colonial regime) gave the needed impetus to the development of local institutions. It was a landmark in the evolution of colonial policy towards local government. The real benchmarking of the government policy on decentralisation can, however, be attributed to Lord Ripon who, in his famous resolution on local self-government on May 18, 1882, recognised the twin considerations of local government: (i) administrative efficiency and (ii) political education. The "Ripon Resolution", which focused on towns, provided for local bodies consisting of a large majority of elected non-official members and presided over by a non-official chairperson. This resolution met with resistance from colonial administrators. The progress of local self-government was tardy with only half-hearted steps taken in setting up municipal bodies. Rural decentralisation remained a neglected area of administrative reform.

The Royal Commission on Decentralisation (1907) under the chairmanship of C.E.H. Hobhouse recognised the importance of panchayats at the village level. The commission recommended that "it is most desirable, alike in the interests of decentralisation and in order to associate the people with the local tasks of administration, that an attempt should be made to constitute and develop village panchayats for the administration of local village affairs". (Report of the Royal Commission on Decentralization, 1907) But, the Montague-Chemsford reforms (1919) brought local self-government as a provincial transferred subject, under the domain of Indian ministers in the provinces. Due to organisational and fiscal constraints, the reform was unable to make panchayat institutions truly democratic and vibrant. However, the most significant development of this period was the 'establishment of village panchayats in a number of provinces, that were no longer mere ad hoc judicial tribunal, but representative institutions symbolising the corporate character of the village and having a wide jurisdiction in respect of civic matters'. 1 By 1925, eight provinces had passed panchayat acts and by 1926, six native states had also passed panchayat laws.

The provincial autonomy under the Government of India Act, 1935, marked the evolution of panchayats in India. Popularly elected governments in provinces enacted legislations to further democratise institutions of local self-government. But the system of responsible government at the grassroots level was least responsible. D.P. Mishra, the then minister for local self-government under the Government of India Act of 1935 in Central Provinces was of the view that 'the working of our local bodies... in our province and perhaps in the whole country presents a tragic picture... 'Inefficiency' and 'local body' have become synonymous terms. (Venkatarangaiah, M.) In spite of various committees such as the Royal Commission on Decentralization (1907), the report of Montague and Chemsford on constitutional reform (1919), the Government of India Resolution (1918), etc., a hierarchical administrative structure based on supervision and control evolved. The administrator became the focal point of rural governance. The British were not concerned with decentralised

democracy but were aiming for colonial objectives (Ibid) The Indian National Congress from the 1920s to 1947, emphasized the issue of all-India Swaraj, and organized movements for Independence under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The task of preparing any sort of blueprint for the local level was neglected as a result. There was no consensus among the top leaders regarding the status and role to be assigned to the institution of rural local self-government; rather there were divergent views on the subject. On the one end Gandhi favoured Village Swaraj and strengthening the village panchayat to the fullest extent and on the other end, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar opposed this idea. He believed that the village represented regressive India, a source of oppression. The model state hence had to build safeguards against such social oppression and the only way it could be done was through the adoption of the parliamentary model of politics (World Bank) During the drafting of the Constitution of India, Panchayati Raj Institutions were placed in the non-justiciable part of the Constitution, the Directive Principles of State Policy, as Article 40. The Article read 'the State shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government'. However, no worthwhile legislation was enacted either at the national or state level to implement it.

In the four decades since the adoption of the Constitution, panchayat raj institutions have travelled from the non-justiciable part of the Constitution to one where, through a separate amendment, a whole new status has been added to their history (Bajpai and Verma)

Post-independence period

Panchayat raj had to go through various stages. The First Five Year Plan failed to bring about active participation and involvement of the people in the Plan processes, which included Plan formulation implementation and monitoring. The Second Five Year Plan attempted to cover the entire countryside with National Extensive Service Blocks through the institutions of Block Development Officers, Assistant Development Officers, Village Level Workers, in addition to nominated representatives of village panchayats of that area and some other popular organisations like co-operative societies. But the plan failed to satisfactorily accomplish decentralisation. Hence, committees were constituted by various authorities to advise the Centre on different aspects of decentralisation.

The Balwantraji Mehta Committee (1957)

In 1957, Balwantraji Mehta Committee studied the Community Development Projects and the National Extension Service and assessed the extent to which the movement had succeeded in utilising local initiatives and in creating institutions to ensure continuity in the process of improving economic and social conditions in rural areas. The Committee held that community development would only be deep and enduring when the community was involved in the planning, decision-making and implementation process.(Government of India) The suggestions were for as follows (Anirban Kashyap)

- An early establishment of elected local bodies and devolution to them of necessary resources, power and authority,

- That the basic unit of democratic decentralisation was at the block/ samiti level since the area of jurisdiction of the local body should neither be too large nor too small. The block was large enough for efficiency and economy of administration, and small enough for sustaining a sense of involvement in the citizens,
- Such body must not be constrained by too much control by the government or government agencies,
- The body must be constituted for five years by indirect elections from the village panchayats,
- Its functions should cover the development of agriculture in all its aspects, the promotion of local industries and others
- Services such as drinking water, road building, etc., and
- The higher level body, Zilla Parishad, would play an advisory role.

The PRI structure did not develop the requisite democratic momentum and failed to cater to the needs of rural development. There are various reasons for such an outcome which include political and bureaucratic resistance at the state level to share power and resources with local level institutions, domination of local elites over the major share of the benefits of welfare schemes, lack of capability at the local level and lack of political will.

S K Dey: The first Minister for panchayati raj in India

Late Mr. S. K. Dey (Jawaharlal Nehru)(1905–1989) piloted and steered the course of community development and Panchayati Raj in the challenging, formative period of India's independence as Cabinet Minister of Cooperation and Panchayati Raj under the prime ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru. After Nehru's death he took leave from Ministerial responsibilities to dedicate himself fully for the cause of Panchayati Raj as long as he lived.(George Mathew)

K. Santhanam Committee (1963)

One of the prime areas of concern in this long debate on panchayati raj institutions was fiscal decentralisation. The K. Santhanam Committee was appointed to look solely at the issue of PRI finance, in 1963. The fiscal capacity of PRIs tends to be limited, as rich resources of revenue are pre-empted by higher levels of government, and issue is still debated today. The Committee was asked to determine issues related to sanctioning of grants to PRIs by the state government, evolving mutual financial relations between the three tiers of PRIs, gifts and donation, handing over revenue in full or part to PRIs. The Committee recommended the following.(Mahoj Rai) panchayats should have special powers to levy special tax on land revenues and home taxes, etc.,

- People should not be burdened with too many demands (taxes),
- All grants and subventions at the state level should be mobilised and sent in a consolidated form to various PRIs,

- a Panchayat Raj Finance Corporation should be set up to look into the financial resource of PRIs at all levels, provide loans and financial assistance to these grassroots level governments and also provide non-financial requirements of villages.

These issues have been debated over the last three decades and have been taken up by the State Finance Commissions which are required to select taxes for assignment and sharing, identifying the principles for such sharing and assignment, determine the level of grants and recommend the final distribution of state's transfers to local authorities.²⁰

Ashok mehta Committee (1978)

Main article: Ashok mehta Committee With the coming of the Janata Party into power at the Centre in 1977, a serious view was taken of the weaknesses in the functioning of Panchayati Raj. (Ashok Mehta Committee) It was decided to appoint a high-level committee under the chairmanship of Ashok mehta to examine and suggest measures to strengthen PRIs. The Committee had to evolve an effective decentralised system of development for PRIs. They made the following recommendations (Anirban Kashyap)

- The district is a viable administrative unit for which planning, co-ordination and resource allocation is feasible and technical expertise available,
- PRIs as a two-tier system, with Mandal Panchayat at the base and Zilla Parishad at the top,
- The PRIs are capable of planning for themselves with the resources available to them,
- District planning should take care of the urban-rural continuum,
- Representation of SCs and STs in the election to PRIs on the basis of their population,
- Four-year term of PRIs,
- Participation of political parties in elections,
- Any financial devolution should be committed to accepting that much of the developmental functions at the district level would be played by the panchayats.

The states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal passed new legislation based on this report. However, the flux in politics at the state level did not allow these institutions to develop their own political dynamics.

G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985)

The G.V.K. Rao Committee was appointed to once again look at various aspects of PRIs. The Committee was of the opinion that a total view of rural development must be taken in which PRIs must play a central role in handling people's problems. It recommended the following (World Bank)

- PRIs have to be activated and provided with all the required support to become effective organisations,
- PRIs at the district level and below should be assigned the work of planning, implementation and monitoring of rural development programmes, and
- The block development office should be the spinal cord of the rural development process.

L.M.Singhvi Committee (1986)

L.M. Singhvi Committee studied panchayatiraj. The Gram Sabha was considered as the base of a decentralised democracy, and PRIs viewed as institutions of self-governance which would actually facilitate the participation of the people in the process of planning and development. It recommended (Mahoj Rai) local self-government should be constitutionally recognised, protected and preserved by the inclusion of new chapter in the Constitution,

- Non-involvement of political parties in Panchayat elections.

The suggestion of giving panchayats constitutional status was opposed by the Sarkaria Commission, but the idea, however, gained momentum in the late 1980s especially because of the endorsement by the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who introduced the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill in 1989. The 64th Amendment Bill was prepared and introduced in the lower house of Parliament. But it got defeated in the Rajya Sabha as non-convincing. He lost the general elections too. In 1989, the National Front introduced the 74th Constitutional Amendment Bill, which could not become an Act because of the dissolution of the Ninth Lok Sabha. All these various suggestions and recommendations and means of strengthening PRIs were considered while formulating the new Constitutional Amendment Act.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act

The idea that produced the 73rd Amendment (Seventy Third Amendment Act, 1992) was not a response to pressure from the grassroots, but to an increasing recognition that the institutional initiatives of the preceding decade had not delivered, that the extent of rural poverty was still much too large and thus the existing structure of government needed to be reformed. It is interesting to note that this idea evolved from the Centre and the state governments. It was a political drive to see PRIs as a solution to the governmental crises that India was experiencing. The Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, passed in 1992 by the Narasimha Rao government, came into force on April 24, 1993. It was meant to provide constitutional sanction to establish "democracy at the grassroots level as it is at the state level or national level". Its main features are as follows. (TM Thomas Issac)

The Gram Sabha or village assembly as a deliberative body to decentralised governance has been envisaged as the foundation of the Panchayati Raj System.

- A uniform three-tier structure of panchayats at village (Gram Panchayat — GP), intermediate or block (Panchayat Samiti — PS) and district (Zilla Parishad — ZP) levels.
- All the seats in a panchayat at every level are to be filled by elections from respective territorial constituencies.
- Not less than one-third of the total seats for membership as well as office of chairpersons of each tier have to be reserved for women.
- Reservation for weaker castes and tribes (SCs and STs) have to be provided at all levels in proportion to their population in the panchayats.
- To supervise, direct and control the regular and smooth elections to panchayats, a State Election Commission has to be constituted in every State and UT.
- The Act has ensured constitution of a State Finance Commission in every State/UT, for every five years, to suggest measures to strengthen finances of PRIs.
- To promote bottom-up-planning, the District Planning Committee (DPC) in every district has been accorded constitutional status.
- An indicative list of 29 items has been given in Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution. Panchayats are expected to play an effective role in planning and implementation of works related to these 29 items.

Rural Local Self government in India is known by the popular name Panchayati Raj. It has been in operation since the early years of independence. It has the responsibility to satisfy the local needs and aspirations of the people living in rural areas i.e. villages.

Working of Panchayati Raj (1959 – 1992)

By 1959, almost all the States had introduced Panchayati Raj in their rural areas. They quite faithfully adopted the recommendations of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee. Almost all the states adopted the three-tier system. But within it some states like Maharashtra decided to assign the development functions to the Zilla Parishads and not to the Panchayat Samitis. However, other States decided to assign these functions to Panchayat Samities. During 1959-92 Panchayati Raj kept on working for achieving its objectives. However, its efforts were not fully successful. Its working brought to light several shortcomings which prevented it from becoming really successful. It virtually failed to produce a qualitative change in rural life of India. Rural Illiteracy, lack of funds, poverty, inexperienced representatives, groupies, corruption, government interferences, lack of continuity in the working of Panchayati Raj institutions and lack of interest taken by the rural people, all became responsible for an inadequate success of Panchayati Raj.

Reform of Panchayati Raj (73rd Amendment Act 1992)

For removing the defects of Panchayati Raj as well for strengthening in institutions, the Parliament passed the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992. Its purpose was to improve and strengthen Panchayati Raj. Through it a good attempt was made for securing a more regular, active and efficient working of Panchayati Raj. On April 23, 1994 all the States of India completed the process of enacting fresh laws for strengthening the Panchayati Raj Institutions in accordance with the rules laid down by the 73rd Amendment. Thereafter, an amended and reformed Panchayati Raj system came into existence. So After the passing of 73rd Amendment Act 1992, a reformed Panchayati Raj has been in operation in all parts of India. The enforcement of 73rd Act marked the beginning of the process of a bigger grant of power to Panchayats and other rural institutions. Now an important and strong drive towards the strengthening of the democratic development process in the rural areas of India got initiated. In the main, the 73rd Amendment Act provided for Reservation of seats for SCs and STs in proportion to their populations. Reservation of the posts of chairpersons for the SCs and STs is in state. Reservation of not less than 1/3rd of the elected seats in each Panchayat for women and reservation of 1/3rd posts of chairpersons for rural women. It also directs elections of Panchayats and chairpersons of Panchayats. It provides representation of MPs and MLAs in Panchayati Raj institution and continuous and active presence of Panchayati Raj

Total No. of District Panchayats : 586 Total No. of Block Panchayats : 6312 Total No. of Village Panchayats : 250001

State Name	District Panchayats	Block Panchayats	Village Panchayats
ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS	3	9	67
ANDHRA PRADESH	22	1098	21852
ARUNACHAL PRADESH	16	155	1756
ASSAM	21	191	2205
BIHAR	38	534	8474
CHANDIGARH	1	1	17
CHHATTISGARH	18	146	10033
DADRA AND NAGAR HAVELI	1	0	11
DAMAN AND DIU	1	0	14
DELHI	0	0	0
GOA	2	0	190
GUJARAT	26	223	14145
HARYANA	21	119	6279
HIMACHAL PRADESH	12	77	3241
JAMMU AND KASHMIR	22	143	4100
JHARKHAND	24	257	4464
KARNATAKA	30	176	5631
KERALA	14	152	977
LAKSHADWEEP	1	0	10
MADHYA PRADESH	50	313	23028
MAHARASHTRA	33	352	27971

MANIPUR	4	0	160
MEGHALAYA	0	0	1463
MIZORAM	0	0	0
NAGALAND	0	0	0
ORISSA	30	314	6235
PONDICHERRY	0	10	98
PUNJAB	20	142	12800
RAJASTHAN	33	243	9201
SIKKIM	4	0	163
TAMIL NADU	30	385	12617
TRIPURA	4	23	511
UTTAR PRADESH	72	821	52021
UTTARAKHAND	13	95	7555
WEST BENGAL	18	333	3352



Gram Panchayat

Conclusion:

Panchayat as an institution has been functioning in rural India since time immemorial. While empires rose and fell, village panchayats continued to survive giving continuity to the Indian village community. Vedas and the Rigveda in particular reveal that Hindus in ancient India used to lead a corporate life. Valmiki's Ramayana and the Vedvyas 'Mahabharata' have also described the existence of such institutions. Actually the inspiration for Panchayati Raj emanates from the notions of "Panch Parmeshwar" and village Republics. Ramayana and Mahabharata contain description of structure and composition of village Panchayats in early Vedic times. Institution of village Sabha or assembly continued till 18th century. Panchayats have been an integral part of the rural cultural heritage. Village councils and officials in India can be traced as far back as the Vedic age. These autonomous councils and their personnel controlled village administration, civic and judicial affairs during the Maurya, Gupta, and the Mughal periods. They played a significant part in ensuring the continuity of village life through the ages.

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