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Panchayat Raj In India

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Abstract:

Panchayat Raj institutions which aim at democratic decentralization constitute the backbone to the democratic process. It is one of the cherished goals of the Constitution of India to reinforce Panchayath Raj system with a view to involve the people at the grass roots level in the governance. The ideal of democratic decentralization will ensure that the people living in villages take active part. Gandhiji reiterated that, for the attainment of liberty, self-government of the village is the ultimate objective. These prophetic words of Gandhi reflect the importance of public participation in administration. It is an undying fact that, Panchayat Raj is the only means to assure public participation.

Though the institution of Panchayat Raj has been introduced of India, still we have to go a long way in making the system fruitful and successful in achieving the ultimate goal of taking governance to the grassroots level. Though the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has introduced far reaching changes in the structural and functional inrepects of the Panchayat raj system, there are still many bottle necks in its functioning, which are to be over come l.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history reveals that during the period of Mauryan Empire, the local bodies like Sabha and Samithi were in existence. Kautilya's Arthashashtra and Megastanis's Indica explained about local bodies' existence. North Merur inscriptions tell us that the Cholas had given importance to local bodies. During the British Rule, Lord Rippon had suggested that there should be local bodies for welfare of rural people in India.

In 1957, Balwanth Rai Mehta Committee recommended for the establishment of Panchayati Raj institutions at three levels. He recommended for the introduction of three tier system of Panchayat Raj. As per recommendation of the Mehta Committee, the three-tier system with Gram Panchayat at village level, Panchayat Samiti at Block level and Zilla parishad at the district level were constituted. On the basis of these commendations, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradsh established Panchayat Raj system for the first time in 1959.

In 1977, yet another Committee headed by Ashok Mehta was formed by Janatha Government to look into the functioning of the Panchayat Raj institutions in India and make suggestions for improvement. The Committee recommended a two-tier system with Zilla Parishad as apex body at district level and mandal Panchayat at base level in place of Gram Panchayat. Other recommendations included: the programmes, redistribution of powers between Centre and states assignment of the work on planning at the lower level and to setup coordination in development programmes. The Committee had also recommended that the elections of PRI should be held on party basis².

In 1985, G.V. K Rao Committee recommended decentralization of planning and implementation of rural development programmes with national objectives and regional needs at the district level. Again in 1986, the L.M. Singhivi Committee had recommended democratic decentralization at three levels. It

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considered the gram sabha as a third tier of democracy, the first one being the Lok Sabha and second one the Vidhan sabha.

CONSTITUTIONAL STATUS OF PANCHAYAT RAJ

Panchayat Raj System has been incorporated in Indian Constitution. Article 40 directs the State to take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self- government. The object of the provision is to introduce democracy at the grassroots. These Panchayats are expected to be the training grounds for the development of democratic institutions.

The constitutional 73rd Amendment Acts 1992, provided constitutional sanction to democracy at the gross roots level by incorporating in the 'Constitution new parts — Parts IX and Part LX A relating to Panchayats and urban local bodies. The 73rd Amendment provides for a three tier Panchayat Raj system at the village.

With the enactment of this amendment the Panchayat Raj Institutions have been endowed with such powers and authority as may be necessary to function as institutions of self-government and contains provisions of devolutions

PANCHAYAT RAJ IN ANDHRA PRADESH

Andhra Pradesh is one of the first states which has taken the lead in introduction of Panchayat Raj system. The three tier system of Panchayat i.e., Gram Panchayat at district level had been introduced in the State in 1959. Elections were held in 448 blocks and 20 districts. Secret ballot has come into existence since 19643.

However, the functioning of the Panchayat Raj system in the State, over the years, has resulted in increasing malpractices in elections, such as bribery, whisking away of the elected representatives to distant places and hiding them in unknown places and resorting to threatening the representatives with dire consequences, defections after elections, etc.

In 1987, the Telugu Desham Government had introduced the institution of Revenue Mandals on the recommendations of Ashok Mehta Committee. The Panchayat Samithi system was abolished in the State and instead the Mandal system was introduced. 1104 Revenue Mandals were created out of 338 tehsils, thus giving way to far reaching reforms in the Panchayat Raj system in the state with a view to bring the administration at the threshold of people.

There are now 1125 Revenue Mandals in Andhra Pradesh. The institution of Mandals has resulted in increasing participation of the people in the political activities. With a view to overcome the evils of the indirect elections, in 1987 the NTR government had introduced the system of direct elections to Zilla Parishads, to municipalities and to Municipal Corporations.

CAPACITY BUILDING OF PRIS

The Constitution has placed vast responsibility on the Gram Panchayats to formulate and execute various programmes of economic development and social justice. In spite of the fact that the constitutional status was granted to the PRIs, they are still facing some challenges and problems.

They are dependent on the mercy of state government and bureaucracy. All political parties have supported decentralization of powers up to PRIs, but in practice, serious efforts have not been made in this direction⁴.

Other problems facing the PRIs include: lack of cooperation between administrative officers and elected representatives, political interference, lack of local leadership, mass illiteracy and poverty, lack of funds, social backwardness, party-politics and disputes etc. There are several gray areas relating to the Panchayats which demand revision of several of the existing Constitutional provisions, to further strengthen the efficacy of the Panchayat as units of local self-government in the Indian rural sector.

Another important factor for the success of the PRI is the need for transparency in the functioning of these bodies. Panchayat being closer to the people, their right to information and accessibility to the panchayats must be ensured. The elected members should be trained for enhancing their skill through appropriate orientation. This is considered to be the most important pre-requisite for the success of PRIs.

They have great potential for promoting development of masses. But this potential has not been fully exploited. Panchayats should be strengthened further and given functional, financial and administrative autonomy at different levels so that the elected representatives have full freedom to play their role effectively.

It is the ultimate goal of development to create a social order. This could only happen if proper

socioeconomic environment is created for holistic development of organizations which are not only close to masses but also have adequate representation of women and marginalized sections at village, block and district levels.

The 73rd Amendment Act has not given any legal framework at local level to settle disputes emerging in the implementation of the schemes and programmes relating to 29 subjects listed in the 11th schedule. Although some states have provisions for constituting Nyaya Panchayats, in most cases they are dormant and defunct⁵.

In order to provide opportunities to various sections of society, particularly, the backward sections of society, provision was made for reservation of seats to SCs, STs, BCs and women in the Panchayat Raj elections all the power is vested with the elected representatives of the Panchayat Raj and divested the authority of the government officials. Anti- defection law was passed to avoid elected representatives indulging party defections. Zilla Parishad chairmen were accorded cabinet rank for the first time.

The 73rd, 74th Constitutional Amendments to the constitution have come as a welcome relief and support and have accorded autonomous stature to the Panchayat Raj Institutions. But in implementation, they could not bring about any development. In 1995 even though innovative decentralization was introduced with ZPTC and MPTC members, the elected representatives are indulging in selfish activities and the party representatives are distributing the Panchayat Raj funds among themselves. In order to provide financial resources to the Panchayat Raj institutions, central and state governments have introduced Jawahar Rojgar Yojna, PMEY and CMEY.

During the 1990s, the State Government had introduced the pet project of Janma Bhoomi and allotted funds. But they could not yield the desired results. Misuse of funds is one of the common complaints, which plagued the functioning of the PRI institutions. It is needless to state that with the political will coupled with people's participation will the Panchayat Raj institutions continue their onward march on the path of rural development.

The Panchayat Raj system has completed 52 years of enactment, but it has not be so successful as expected to create new hope and confidence amongst the rural people. Central and State Governments should sanction more funds or allocate operational funds to these institutions so that they will be viable and function with great ease.

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