

STUDY ON HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PANCHAYATI RAJ AT NATIONAL & STATE LEVEL

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Abstract:

Rajasthan was the first State to implement the scheme of democratic decentralization in 1959 and create a Panchayati Raj system broadly resembling the model suggested by Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team. But the Government of Maharashtra did not accept this model. It appointed Naik Committee in 1961 to suggest a suitable model. On the recommendations of this committee, the state decided to make the district level body-Zila Parishad-the unit of planning and implementation. All the developmental departments at the district level were put under its control. The Panchayat Samiti was made only a committee of the Zila Parishad. No changes were made regarding the Gram Panchayat. Instead of indirect, direct elections were to be held at all the levels. The Collector, the MPs and the MLAs were kept out of the Panchayati Raj system. Provision was made for the appointment of a senior IAS officer as the Chief Executive Officer of the Zila Parishad.

Although most of the states opted for the Rajasthan model for their Panchayati Raj system, others went in for a hybrid form. In fact, every state created a Panchayati Raj system of its own. But the study teams and the committee appointed by them to evaluate their Panchayati Raj system mostly favoured adoption of the Maharashtra model.

Key words: resembling, Zila Parishad, appointment, committee.

INTRODUCTION

Even after Independence, for a long time the rural women virtually remained unknown to politics due to religion, caste, traditions and the male-domination in panchayat that played a dominant role in the villages, ignoring the interest of women. The prevailing stratification of society, the authoritarian pattern of decision-making, limited channel of communication and the low literacy prevented them from being exposed to politics. After independence, with the introduction of new Panchayati Raj and community

development schemes, constitutional provisions were made for the upliftment of women. The spread of education, emergence of political parties, increasing urban contacts, fast means of communication and the impact of mass-media have brought in a rapid social change in the rural community which paved the way up to some extent, for the political participation of the rural women. The rural women herself has also started realizing gradually, the importance of participation in the democratic process of the country.

It is essential to explore its genesis and development for understanding its true character.

Review of literature

The pre-colonial period consists of the ancient and the medieval phases. During the ancient phase, village communities were administered by the general body, the Sabha, their council, Samiti and their representatives, gramins (senior persons of the village). A reference to these institutions has been made in the Vedas and other scriptures. The writings of Kautilya also contain evidence showing their existence in the ancient period. In due course of time, the village communities began to be governed by a council of five members, Panchayat. These bodies performed the functions of tension management and conflict resolution. The legitimacy of the authority of Panchayat was based on religion and custom. In addition to these Panchayats of village communities, there existed simultaneously, caste and sub-caste Panchayats to regulate the code of conduct of their members. Although Panchayats of village communities as well as of castes have been glorified as democratic institutions by those who have taken a romantic view of the rural society of the ancient era, these were dominated by the male landlords of the higher castes owing to its caste-base, patriarchal and feudal character.

Be that as it may, these institutions had complete hold over the rural people during the ancient period. The establishment of a centralized system of administration by the Mauryan dynasty, however, is reported to have reduced their significance to some degree. But their authority was fully restored as a result of decentralization of administration during the Gupta period. On the whole, the Panchayats remained autonomous institutions of local government in the ancient India.

Post-Colonial Period

The evolution of the Panchayati Raj system in the post-colonial period may be divided into the pre- Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team Report, post-Balwant Ray Mehta Study Team Report and the pre-73rd Amendment and the 73rd Amendment phases.

Material and method

The issue of the status of village Panchayats in the Indian political system became a matter of great controversy in the Constituent Assembly after independence in 1948 when the Indian Constitution was being prepared. While the Gandhians wanted India to be a polity with maximum powers at the Panchayat level and minimum powers at the central level, the chairman of the Drafting Committee, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, did not want to give any place to this institution in the Constitution. He perceived the village as “a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism.” He favoured the individual rather than a village as the unit of the Constitution. Being a Dalit, he feared that the Panchayats would be controlled by the landlords and the high castes who will use it for the exploitation and oppression of the weaker sections of the rural society. But the Gandhians ultimately succeeded in getting village Panchayat included in Article 40 of the Part IV of the Indian Constitution dealing with the Directive Principles of State Policy. This Article laid down: - “The State should take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.” Soon after the implementation of the Constitution in 1950, various states enacted Gram Panchayat Acts, which provided for the creation of democratically elected Gram Panchayats. These were given civic, developmental and judicial functions.

In the meanwhile, the Government of India launched the Community Development Programme in 1952. The National Extension Service Scheme that supplemented this programme was introduced in service areas in 1953 for covering the entire rural area of the country. These programmes aimed at creating a zeal for development in the rural masses. It was hoped that these would bring about a silent revolution in rural society. But this hope was belied as these programmes failed to enlist popular support.

The recognition of the failure of the programmes made the Government of India to direct the Committee on Plan Projects of the Planning Commission to conduct an enquiry into the causes of the failure of these programmes and suggest remedies for streamlining them. The Committee appointed a Study Team for this purpose under the leadership of Balwant Rai Mehta in 1957. The Team was asked to find out whether existing institutions of local government, the district boards and Gram Panchayats could be used to implement the Community Development Programme and the National Extension Service Scheme in a successful manner. It was directed to suggest not only the ways and means for this purpose but also an alternate system of rural local government.

After an in-depth study, Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team submitted its report in 1959. It found that these programmes had failed, as they could not get popular support. The Team expressed the view that the existing institutions of rural local government were not fit instruments for streamlining the development administration. It suggested a scheme of democratic decentralization for mobilizing human and material resources for this purpose.

To operationalized the scheme, the Team recommended the creation of a three-tier structure of democratically elected and organically linked bodies at the district level (Zila Parishad), block level (Panchayat Samiti) and the village level (Gram Panchayat). The Team recommended indirect elections for the bodies to keep the political parties out and to establish an organic link between the three tiers. It expressed the view that the block level institution, Panchayat Samiti, be made the unit for planning and implementation as it was neither as large as the district in which direct contact was difficult nor as small as a village where required human and material resources might not be available. The Team felt that Panchayat Samiti was an optimum sized unit in which developmental machinery was present. Moreover, it argues that the word “block” was associated with development in the rural psyche. Hence, the Team suggested that Panchayat Samiti be assigned developmental function. It could also be given the responsibility of implementing the schemes and programmes of the central and state governments. The Gram Panchayat be allowed to retain the civic, developmental and judicial functions, and also assigned the task of implementation of the plans and programmes of the Samiti. The Zila Parishad be made a supervisory and coordinating body. The Team recommended that association of the MPs and the MLAs in the Panchayati Raj Institutions for guiding their leadership and for establishing their link with the state legislatures and the union parliament. The Deputy Commissioner/Collector/District Magistrate and other officials are made a part of the Panchayati Raj system for ensuring cooperation and coordination between the District Administration and the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The National Developmental Council accepted the recommendations of the Team. However, it was of the view that the states be allowed to make alternations in the scheme in accordance with the needs of the local situations.

Post-Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team Report Phase

The working of Panchayati Raj system underwent three stages of evolution-development, stagnation and decay. In the 1960s, particularly during the Nehru era, the Panchayati Raj system witnessed development in almost all the states because of his strong commitment to it. In the post-Nehru era, it became stagnant, as his successor did not share the former’s enthusiasm for it. Later on, it lost its authority due to the hostility of bureaucracy and political leadership, poor quality of leadership in the Panchayati Raj institutions, gradual erosion of powers, lack of financial resources endemic factionalism, conflict between

officials and non-officials, apathy of the masses and the failure of the state governments to hold elections in time.

Conclusion

When the Janata government came to power in the Center in 1977, it appointed a High Powered Committee on Panchayati Raj under the leadership of Ashok Mehta, popularly known as Ashok Mehta Committee, for revitalizing the Panchayati Raj system. The Committee not only recommended constitutional status for the Panchayati Raj Institutions but also suggested its restructuring by establishing a two-tier system with the Zila Parishad (the district level body) at the top and Mandal Panchayat (for a group of villages) at the bottom. It recommended the abolition of Panchayat Samiti and village Panchayat. The Committee further recommended more powers and resources for the Panchayati Raj Institutions. In place of indirect elections, it favoured direct elections. But before the Janata government could take any action on the report of the Committee, it had to quit owing to split in the party in 1979. Indira Gandhi-led Congress government, which came to power in 1980, shelved the report, as it was not interested in rejuvenating the Panchayati Raj system owing to its preference for the centralization of powers.

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