

## GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY IN INDIA: AN EVOLUTIONARY EXPERIENCE

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**ABSTRACT:** The emergence of Local Self Governing institutions like Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India signifies the reach of Indian democracy to the grassroots. The Constitution of India originally did not have any provisions for PRIs, albeit a mere mention in the DPSP, not even mandatory. It was only after the enactment of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Acts 1993 and 1994 respectively that the institutions of Local Self Government were firmly established in India. However, the highly centralizing tendency of the Indian state mars the real essence of grassroots democracy and effective people's participation in it. This paper will be an attempt at exploring the trajectory of evolution of PRIs in India from the post-Colonial era till the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Acts, 1993 and 1994 respectively. It will also try to see whether centralization has given way to effective decentralization post-amendment period and whether the perception of the political parties and people towards Local Self Governments has changed from perceiving it as a mere agent of central government to an institution of political power and development.

**Keywords:** Grassroots, Democracy, PRIs, Decentralisation and Development.

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**Introduction:**

Democracy has always been considered to be the best system of governance. But even Democracy will be a farce if it is not realized at all levels of the society; with all powers being centrally concentrated. Decentralisation and devolution of power to the grassroots is an effective way to ensure good governance in a democratic set up. And realizing the importance of this, the Indian state has come a long way from being a highly centralized system to encouraging the growth and development of self-governing institutions at the grassroots.

Grassroots institutions strive to enrich the process of democracy in a number of ways like expanding the scope of social and political participation (which in turn helps the democratic system become more accessible to the people especially the marginalized sections of society); making the system more accountable, responsive and transparent (this happens because of its closeness to the people); articulating and channelizing the people's needs, demands and opinions to the higher authorities; providing the people opportunity of collective decision making; and functioning as a nursery for upcoming leaders which prepares people to take up leadership at higher level institutions. . If democracy means people's participation in running their affairs, then it is nowhere more direct, clear and significant than at the local level, where the contact between the people and their representatives, between the rulers and the ruled is more constant, vigilant and manageable. Lord Bryce said: "The best school of democracy and the best guarantee for its success is the practice of local self-government". Decentralisation is a prime mechanism through which democracy becomes truly representative and responsive. The democratic ideals of decentralization, development, and increased, continuous and active popular participation in the process of nation-building can be secured only through the working of an efficient system of local government. Without a well organized system of local government, no democratic political system can be expected to become stable and really developed<sup>1</sup>. The Indian governing institutions at the local level are broadly divided into three categories –Village Panchayats,

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<sup>1</sup> Dash Siddhartha (2007); Panchayati Raj: Grassroots Democracy, *Orissa Review* , February-March 2007, p-11.

Urban Municipalities and Tribal District Councils.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the Village Panchayats will be our area of concentration.

### Evolution of Grassroots Democracy in India:

The evolution of Indian administration has witnessed many ups and downs. But its specialty of self-sufficient and self-governing village focused administration has continued since Vedic times. These self-governing institutions earlier known as Sabhas and later termed Panchayats used to perform a plethora of functions ranging from maintenance of law and order to planning and development and raising of resources through taxation and other measures to meet the expenses related thereto. But there came a gradual decline in their significance and functioning during the Mughal Rule which further degraded under the British Colonial policies with these institutions losing their autonomy.

According to Mahatma Gandhi, India 'lives in villages'. We can't see India as a developed nation unless our villages are developed and our farmers, farm labourers and poor are assured of quality life through access to employment, health, education and food. He wanted "village swaraj" and hence was a strong supporter of Panchayati System. It was Gandhi who for the first time in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century wished to revive the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) with democratic basis of their own and invest them with adequate power so that the villagers could have real sense of Swaraj. However Ambedkar, Father of the Indian Constitution opposed it saying that "village represented regressive India; a source of oppression". It was in this backdrop that the Constitution of India so formulated did not have any provisions of PRIs; albeit a mere mention in the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) under Article 40<sup>3</sup>, not even mandatory. But this article found a place of importance in the form of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report in 1959 which recommended that there should be three *tiers* of PRIs— gram panchayat, block samiti

<sup>2</sup> Rao, V. Venkata, Hazarika, Niru, A Century of Government and Politics in North East India Volume I (Assam) (1874-1980), S. Chand and Company, New Delhi, 1983, p. 193

<sup>3</sup> Article 40 – "The State shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as maybe necessary to enable them to function as units of self-governments."

and zila parishad, all linked organically with each other. It also recommended transfer of real power and responsibility to these institutions and all rural development programmes to be channeled through them.<sup>4</sup> Rajasthan was the first state to implement the Committee Report followed by West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka *et al.* However, by the mid-sixties the hype to strengthen the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) gave way to a growing tendency of centralization under the regime of Indira Gandhi and the PRIs descended to ground zero. In 1977, the Janata Government tried to revive the PRIs and accordingly, a committee headed by Ashok Mehta was appointed to review the working of the PRIs. The Ashok Mehta Committee Report of 1978, a landmark in the history of PRIs put forward the first official recommendation for including the grassroots institutions in the Constitution. The committee also suggested a minor change in the Balwant Ray Mehta Scheme. The three tier system of PRIs was to be replaced by a two tier i.e. Zilla Parishad at the district level and Mandal Panchayat (consisting of a number of villages) below it. In addition, the committee also recommended the creation of Nyaya Panchayat<sup>5</sup>. In spite of all the efforts, these institutions could not acquire the status and dignity of viable and responsive people's bodies due to a variety of reasons including absence of regular elections, prolonged supersession, inadequate representation of weaker sections like the SC, ST and women, insufficient devolution of power and lack of financial resources.<sup>6</sup>

A solution came in the form of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act which came into force in 1993 and is an important milestone on the route towards establishing rural self-governance in the country. It awarded constitutional status to the PRIs and made them a third level of the governing structure next to the centre and states which provided them a status of respect. Now Panchayats are as much a constitutional authority as the Union Parliament or State Legislature is.

But how much viable is this new status accorded to the PRIs? The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment added the Eleventh Schedule to the Constitution incorporating Article 243-G which contains 29 subjects

<sup>4</sup> Sadana, Dr. B. L., Sharma, Dr. M. P., Public Administration in Theory and Practice, Kitab Mahal, New Delhi, 2009, p. 852

<sup>5</sup> Dash Siddhartha (2007); Panchayati Raj : Grassroots Democracy, *Orissa Review* , February-March 2007, p-11-12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, Pp. 855-856

assigned to the Panchayats. However, it was left to the states' discretion to decide which of the subjects of the schedule they would devolve to the PRIs. In many states, the governments can omit, add or amend any power by an executive order and there are many examples of functions being devolved sometimes with pomp and fanfare and then being quietly retracted in due course. The functioning of the PRIs is inhibited not only by this kind of state discretions, but also by the fact that Panchayats are for the most part resourced by central government schemes like *Swarna Jayanti Gram Swaraj Yojana* or *Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana* providing 'tied' funds attached to centrally hyphened plans, programmes and therefore unavailable for plans evolved at the local level.<sup>7</sup>

### Centre-state tensions:

Prior to the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment, the local level institutions were not taken very seriously by the government, political parties and common people. However, there was a change in this outlook due to the changes brought about by the Congress government at the Centre. Now the establishment of these institutions became mandatory all across the country except in the Scheduled areas. A great emphasis was laid on encouraging people's participation in these institutions and one of the most heartening aspects has been the inclusion of variously disadvantaged groups such as Dalits, Adivasis and women.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution has incorporated the Local Self-governing Institutions under the State List. This means the state governments have the power to constitute and invest powers to the PRIs. But the Union Government often plays the role of a big brother thereby initiating, guiding and coordinating several measures in the field of local governance. This attitude is being strongly resented by the state governments as they feel that this will cut down on their authority and make the local institutions agents of the Centre. However, the

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<sup>7</sup> Jayal, Niraja Gopal, "Introduction" in (ed.) Jayal, Niraja Gopal, Prakash, Amrit, Sharma, Pradeep Kr, *Local Government in India: Decentralisation and Beyond*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006, Pp. 7-9

performance of the state government, too, is not satisfactory in empowering these institutions in terms of holding regular elections, providing adequate funds *et al.*\* what is contributing to worsening the performance of PRIs with regards to political decision making and developmental functions is the political tug of war between the centre and the state combined with increasing corruption and red-tapism. Elected leaders and bureaucrats often behave like contractors while the poor are excluded from participation.

### **Devolution of power and the three F's:**

The devolution of power to the PRIs was made possible through the three F's – Functions, Functionaries and Funds. The status of these three is ambiguous and brumous despite intermittent pleas to the higher authorities, both at the state and the central level. The state government has the onus to demarcate the functional boundaries and to place the functionaries at the disposal of the PRIs. The central government on the other hand allocates the required funds to them through schemes like Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF), Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Yojana (RGSY) Panchayat Empowerment & Accountability Incentive Scheme etc. But, the tendency to accumulate more power on the part of both Central and State governments has brought them at odds resulting in more sufferings for the LSGs. It is seen that most often the positions of authority in the local govt. institutions are filled by state and central government officials who are not familiar with the needs and requirements of the local people resulting in improper functioning of PRIs. To cater to the aspirations of the natives and to make these institutions 'local' in the real sense of the term, local people should be placed in positions of authority. Another issue of concern is funds, which lie at the heart of successful implementation of the plans and programmes taken up for the development of the PRIs. But what we see today is gross anomaly in the allotment of funds by the central government.

As mentioned earlier, the 11<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution has allotted 29 subjects to the PRIs and the realization of these depends upon the functions, functionaries and funds. The performance of different states with regard to the three F's can be explained with the help of the following table:

Table 1:

**Status of Devolution of Departments/Subjects with Funds, Functions and Functionaries to Panchayati Raj Institutions-State wise.**

Sl	States/UTs	No. of Departments/Subjects Transferred to Panchayats with			No. of Departments/Subjects Yet to be Transferred to Panchayats		
		Fund	Function	Functionary	Fund	Function	Functionary
1	Andhra Prd	05	13	02	24	16	2
2	Arunachal Pradesh	-	-	-	29	29	2
3	Assam	-	-	-	29	29	2
4	Bihar	-	-	-	29	29	2
5	Jharkhand	-	-	-	29	29	2
6	Goa	-	-	-	29	29	2
7	Gujarat	-	-	-	29	29	2
8	Haryana	-	16	-	29	13	2
9	Himachal Pr	02	23	07	27	06	2
10	Karnataka	29	29	29	-	-	-
11	Kerala	15	29	15	14	-	1
12	Madhya Pr	10	23	09	19	06	2
13	Chattisgarh	10	23	09	19	06	2
14	Maharashtra	18	18	18	11	11	1
15	Manipur	-	22	04	29	07	2
16	Orissa	05	25	03	24	04	2
17	Punjab	-	07	-	29	22	2
18	Rajasthan	-	29	-	29	-	2
19	Sikkim	29	29	29	-	-	-
20	Tamil Nadu	-	29	-	29	-	2
21	Tripura	-	12	-	29	17	2
22	Uttar Prd	12	13	09	17	16	2
23	Uttranchal	12	13	09	17	16	2
24	W.Bengal	12	29	12	17	-	1
25	A&N Islands	-	-	-	29	29	2
26	Chandigarh	-	-	-	29	29	2
27	D&N Haveli	-	03	03	29	26	2
28	Daman&Diu	-	29	-	29	-	2
29	NCT Delhi	Panchayati Raj System is yet to be revived					
30	Laksha- dweep	-	06	-	29	23	2
31	Pondicherry	-	-	-	29	29	2

*The provision of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act 1992 are not applicable to the*

*States of Jammu & Kashmir, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland*

*Source: Ministry of Rural Development*

Hence it can be seen that while states like Karnataka has progressed in terms of development of grassroots institutions, states like Assam, Jharkhand, Orissa are lagging behind. Moreover a wide discrepancy can be observed in terms of allocating the three F's among states as well as within them. It is also observed that compared to the number of functions allotted, functionaries and funds seem to be inadequate. A possible reason behind such discrepancy in the status of PRIs might be related to the political ideology of the party in power in different states and their respective relationship with the central government apart from aforementioned causes like corruption, bureaucratic red-tapism etc.

### **Conclusion:**

Panchayats were formed to widen the scope of social and political participation. But has Gandhiji's dream of converting India into a union of village republics through PRIs, where even the poorest of the poor have a say in state building been truly realised?

Observing the position of the central and the state governments, we can infer that both of them are yet to come out of their apprehension to shed power and understand the actual substance of democratic decentralisation. Decentralisation of powers and functions will ensure effective participation and active voice to each and every section of the society which will enable democracy to penetrate down to the grassroots and establish itself firmly. In this process, the fruits of democracy will be truly realised and even the poorest of the poor will find a voice in state building.

Factors like boom in information technology, rising power of the middle class, growing political consciousness of the individuals as well as multiplicity of strong regional parties and their popularity among the masses have accounted for some positive changes in the scenario of local governance. Panchayats combine representative and direct democracy into a synergy. Transforming their nature as traditional cultural institutions they have today become an integral



part of the taken the modern Indian administrative structure with constitutional status. Panchayats are now mandatorily established across the country, signaling India's commitment towards strengthening grassroots democracy. At the end, we may suggest that democracy will be successful in the true sense of the term if all the three tiers of the government- central, state and local concentrate on performing their duties and responsibilities diligently without interfering in each other's sphere of activity.

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