

**"Panchayati Raj – Local Self Government- A need of an hour"**

**Dr. Kranti Deshmukh,  
Assistant Professor, Shankarrao Chavan Law College, Pune  
Affiliated to Savitribai Phule Pune University**

**ABSTRACT**

*The concept of Panchayati Raj is unquestionably Indian in origin. Panchayati Raj bodies which are genuine and effective democratic decentralized institutions, provide ample opportunities for a large number of rural people to take genuine and effective participation in the development and democratic decision-making process and to infuse in the minds of the rural people a spirit of self help, self dependence and self reliance and to obtain the experience in the art of local self-government. Panchayati Raj institutions have been playing an important role in order to monitor these rural development programmes. These institutions have been helpful in identifying real beneficiaries in order to get maximum benefits out of these schemes. A number of hurdles and constraints and deficiencies are also responsible for failure of these rural development programmes. There is a need to examine various issues, aspects and dimensions related to Panchayati Raj Institutions in India. It has been sought to analyze changes in the rural society and its impact on socio-economic transformation due to panchayat, political participation and political mobilization etc. There are number of factors responsible for created hurdles in performing the role of PRIs. These are castism, groupism and factionalism, which resulting to bitter infightings, allegations and counter allegations, mutual suspicions and rivalries etc.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Assertions in favor of democratic decentralization are often founded upon the notion that the democratization and empowerment of local political bodies will create institutions that are more accountable to local citizens and more appropriate to local needs and preferences. However, international experience has shown that even the most ambitious attempts at decentralization have failed to overcome regional and local dimensions of poverty and inequality.

Moreover, the power to decide local development initiatives is often highly dependent on a state apparatus that respects the autonomy of local political institutions. After the independence, Panchayats were included in the Article 40 of the Indian Constitution which reads, "The states shall take steps to organize village Panchayat and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government".

Many committees including the committee headed by Balvant Ray Mehta in 1957, Ashok Mehta in 1978, G V K Rao, L M Singhvi in 1986 observed the absence of local self governance and need of strengthening it further. Hence in 1992, 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of the Indian Constitution was done to revive the Panchayati Raj Institution and it was implemented by other successive Governments.

Economic reforms and setting up and strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions have been the two major policy level achievements since the early 1990s. Both of these are very crucial for development in each perspective as both are moving towards reform process and contributing towards easy access of services by the common people. For a long time our planning has been done in the headquarters and office rooms far away from grassroots level conditions. That is why, local self governance is badly needed in today's environment. We have adopted this structure way back through the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments.

Any development process can take its due course in systematic governance structure which is already envisioned through our three tiers of governance structure at – Centre, State and local level. In last 20 years so much has been said or committed for strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions but only cosmetic developments are there, decentralization of power has not been done in true letter and spirit.

In the absence of measures to strengthen public systems at the local level, panchayats are facing an uphill task of promoting development due to existing malaise of bureaucracy and politics which hinders effective implementation of programmes. The actual progress of decentralization has been uneven across States. In the absence of adequate financial clout, functioning of the Panchayati Raj Institutions have been severely constrained<sup>1</sup>.

Role of the Panchayati Raj Institutions becomes very important because they can provide an opportunity to villagers to participate in their own development as well as implement different welfare and poverty alleviation programmes in coordinated action at the grass root level for the benefit of the disadvantaged sections of society.

## The Constitution & Panchyat Raj

The Constitution of India recognizes Panchayats as 'Institutions of self government'. There are 2.51 lakh Panchayats in our country, which include 2.39 lakh Gram Panchayats, 6904 Block Panchayats and 589 District Panchayats. There are more than 29 lakh Panchayat representatives. Under the 14<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission for the period 2015-20, more than 2 lakh crore Rupees is being allocated to Gram Panchayats for 5 years to undertake physical and social infrastructure projects in the villages.

Though the Panchayati Raj Institutions have been in existence for a long time, it has been observed that these institutions have not been able to acquire the status and dignity of viable and responsive people's bodies due to a number of reasons including absence of regular elections, prolonged super sessions, insufficient representation of weaker sections like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women, inadequate devolution of powers and lack of financial resources.

The Constitution (73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment) Act, 1992 that came into force with effect from 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1993 has vested constitutional status on Panchayati Raj institutions. This date thus marks a defining moment in the history of decentralization of political power to the grassroots level. The impact of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment in rural India is very visible as it has changed power equations irreversibly. Accordingly, the Government of India decided in consultation with the States to celebrate 24<sup>th</sup> April as National Panchayati Raj Day.

The commemoration is being anchored by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. The National Panchayati Raj Day (NPRD) is being celebrated on 24 April since 2010. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj is a branch of the Government of India looking after the ongoing process of decentralization and local governance in the States. In a federation the powers and functions of the government are divided among two governments.

In India it is the Union Government and the various State Governments. However, with the passage of 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendment act of the Constitution of India, in 1993 the division of powers and functions have been further trickled down to Local Self Governments (Panchayat at Village levels and Municipalities and Municipal Corporations in towns and large cities). As such India now has not two but three tier of Governments in its federal setup.

Ministry of Panchayati Raj looks into all matters relating to the Panchayati Raj and Panchayati Raj Institutions. It was created in May 2004. The Panchayats are expected to play an important role in rural development in India, particularly after independence. In the Indian context rural development assumes greater significance as around 70 per cent of its population still live in rural areas. Plan

documents of both the central and state governments and various committees have emphasized the importance of these bodies in the polity.

Five-year plans, specially the second five year plan, laid special emphasis on the role of Panchayats in rural developments. Second five year plan envisaged a panchayat as responsible for village development keeping transformation of social and economic life of rural areas as its goal of development. It says that the rural progress depends entirely on the existence of an active organization in the village which can bring all the people, including the weaker sections, in to common programmes to be carried out with the assistance of administration.

To achieve this objective the second five year plan entailed the Panchayats to perform civic, developmental, land management, land reform and judicial functions. Subsequent plans and policy pronouncements of national leader to emphasized the role of Panchayats in village development.

The role of Panchayati Raj Institutions as instruments of rural reconstruction and development needs no emphasis. They have been reorganized with wider powers and financial resources not merely as institutions of political participation but institutions of social and economic development.

Panchayati Raj has come to be associated with two broad images. First, it is a government by itself and second, it is an agency of the state government. In the integrated exercise of planning for social and economic development, co-ordinate roles, the present set up is a three-tier representative structure of the government where the administrators, elected leaders and local population participate in the developmental effort.

In fact the elected representatives play the key role in the decision making process, leaders are regarded as facilities of the process of development. Since the emphasis of rural development policies is bringing about people's participation in the development programmes, it is possible to achieve this through the leaders. The administrators are accepted to participate with missionary zeal in the life and development of the villages and these institutions are to be galvanized to become effective instruments of social and economic change.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The Panchayat system has fragmented the rural society in India. It has created cleavages and generated tensions leading to castism, groupism and factionalism. This leads to bitter infightings, allegations and counter-allegations, mutual suspicions and rivalries which generally result in clashes leading to long drawn out litigations.

The factionalism starts with different groups among panchayat leaders. The ex-leaders and defeated *panches*, *pradhans* and *up-pradhans* play an important part in fomenting groupism. This generally happens within the members of same economically dominant castes and classes. It can be further concluded that the activities of village panchayat have been indicated useful and helpful about rising political awareness, feel political power, expectation for good life, fight for the rights, take interest to participate in village work and develop new horizon at village level to justice and welfare for rural people in the society.

It is also revealed that the majority of the respondents have been consulted and influenced by different categories of the people like caste leaders, local panchayat leaders, party works, friend and relatives. Finally, it is imperative to note that rural people are not at all conscious about democratic further duties and they are yet to learn to act as development participants in the PRIs and even they have been taught to think themselves as part and parcel of the grassroots governance.

Panchayati Raj Institutions have been playing an important role in order to monitor rural development programmes. These institutions have been helpful in identifying real beneficiaries in order to get maximum benefits out of various schemes. Under the schemes priority has been given to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, women, weaker sections and the upliftment of backward areas. A number of hurdles and constraints and deficiencies are also responsible for failure of these rural development programmes.

Further, in order to strengthening the Panchayati raj institutions in India, there are need to the elected representatives of the panchayats should exercise superintendence and control over government officials, i.e. serving the Panchayats instead of playing a subordinate role.

Thus, there is an urgent need to educate local leadership about their legitimate role in nation-building and the governance of the country.

The Gram Sabhas should be fully involved in the plan formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the development works to be undertaken by the Gram Panchayats. The NGOs of repute

may be assigned the job of creating awareness among the members of Gram Sabha. The presence of the women should also be ensured in particular.

Since women for the first time have entered into Panchayati Raj politics at a large scale, proper training for them is highly essential. In this connection it may be recommended that for women representatives two types of training be given, i.e. one exclusively for them and another a combined one with their male counterparts.

There is an urgent need of empowerment, enablement and accountability of Panchayati Raj Institutions to ensure inclusive development with social justice and efficient delivery of services. The implementation of rural development programmes through the Panchayat Raj Institutions has brought a radical change in the socio-economic conditions of the rural tribal people in the study village. The implementation of rural development programmes has affected even the social and political affairs of the people. In the economic sphere, these programmes have shaped an improvement in economic position of the village. As a result, most of the tribal villagers have acquired an added income.

Programmes like DeenDayalAntyodayaYojana (DAY); National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) and other government schemes for enterprise development; Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS); DeenDayalUpadhyayaGrameenKaushalyaYojana (DDU-GKY); the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013; State-sponsored schemes; other department schemes, youth welfare schemes have produced various gainful activities for villagers to be placed above the poverty line.

Furthermore, the activities mentioned above conform to the subjects of the Panchayats as per the 11<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of the Constitution of India – Small scale industries, including food processing industries, Khadi, village and cottage industries, Technical training and vocational education, Minor forest produce, Fisheries, Animal husbandry, dairying and poultry, Agriculture, including agricultural extension. Above all, one of the objectives laid out in the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the constitution is local economic development!

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