

Local Government in Promoting Social Developments

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Abstract

The word “panchayat” is derived from the word “pancha panchasvanusthitah”, has references to the existence of Grama Sanghas or rural communities. In Vedic period village was the basic unit of administration. The most remarkable feature of the early Vedic polity was institution of popular assemblies of which two namely “sabha” and “samiti” deserve special mention. A samiti was the Vedic Folk Assembly. In some cases it enjoyed the right of electing a king. The sabha exercised some judicial functions. Both the samiti and sabha enjoyed the right to debate, a privilege unknown to the popular assemblies of other ancient people. The office of the village headman (Gramani) indicates the emergence of the village as a unit of administration. In the later Vedic period, the samiti disappeared as a popular assembly and the sabha sank into a narrow body corresponding to the king privy council.

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The Manusamhita, Dharmasastras, Upanishads, Jatakas and others refer extensively to local administration, (i.e.) the panchayat system of administration. The word “pancha”, that refers to an institution of the five (pancha panchasvanusthitah) is found in the shanti-parva of Mahabharatha, pancha and pancha vanustitah are semantically close to panchayat.

A close description of these village councils is also found in Arthashastra of Kautilya who lived in 400 BC. Arthashastra gives a comprehensive account of the system of village administration prevailing in his time. During this period, the village administration was carried under the supervision and control of Adyaksha or headman. There were other officials such as samkhyaka

(accountant), Anikitsaka, (veterinary doctor), Jamgh Karmika (Village couriers) and Chikitsaka (physician). The village headman was responsible for ensuring the collection of state dues and controlling the activities of the offenders.

In the Ramayana of Valmiki there are references to the Ganapada (Village Federation) which was perhaps a kind of federation of village republic. In the course of time, village bodies took the form of panchayats that looked into the affairs of the village. They had the powers to enforce law and order. Customs and religions elevated them to the sacred position of authority.

Under Mauryan rule, (3rd to 2nd century BC) village administration was effective. Village councils were nominated by consensus, and handled administrative, economic and judicial duties. The village council appeared to have evolved into regular bodies in the Gupta period. They were known as Panchamandals in central India, and Gramajanapadas in Bihar.

Further, inscriptions of the Chola Dynasty (900-1300 AD) show the primary assembly of the villages consisting of all the village residents. Elected five members who held office in an honorary capacity for one year and had important functions like collection of revenue, settlement of village disputes, negotiation with government for concessions in case of famines or other calamities, organization of public utilities, education, religious and cultural activities, etc.

In the Moghal period, the villages were governed by their own panchayats. Each panchayat comprised village elders, who looked after the interest of the people and village, administered justice and imposed punishment on defaults. The headman of the village, a semi government official, acted as a co-ordinator between the village panchayat and the higher administrative hierarchy. Akbar accepted this system and made it an indispensable part of civil administration. In this period, each village had its

own panchayat of elders. It was autonomous in its own sphere and exercised power of local taxation, administrative control, justice and punishment.

The Moghal local administrative system was existing over centuries. It was with the collapse of the Moghal strong hold, the British established their hegemony in India.

The pre-British period, panchayats lost their pre-eminence due to factors like the failure of kings to live upto the ideals of decentralization and their stronghold on power; disappearance of panchayat samitis; poor regulation of the functioning of the system, and high arbitrary taxation imposed by the government which the panchayats refused or were unable to collect. Between the collapse of the Mughal rule and the advent of British rule, the political confusion led to further decline of this rural system of leadership. Under the centralized British administration, the Panchayati system was totally destroyed. The District collectorate was established for collecting revenue, which later assumed other powers like judiciary on British lines.

The Bengal chowkidar act of 1870 marked the beginning of the revival of traditional village panchayat system in Bengal. The chowkidar act empowered district magistrates to set up panchayats of nominated members in the village to collect taxes to pay the chowkidars or watchman engaged by them.

In 1882, Lord Ripon abandoned the existing system of local government by the officially nominated people. According to his local self government plan, the local boards were split into smaller units to achieve greater efficiency. In order to ensure peoples participation, he introduced an election system for the local boards.

On 18th May, 1882 government made a resolution which stood as a landmark in the structural evolution of local self-governments. It provided for local boards consisting of a large majority of elected non-official members and presided over by a non-official chairperson. This is considered to be

Magnacarta of local democracy in India. This resolution proposed the establishment of rural local boards where 2/3 rd of whose membership was composed of elected representatives. But this remained merely on paper. Ripon introduced urban local government and there was no much progress in the rural local self-government.

In this backdrop, Montagu Chelmsford reforms were passed in the year 1919. This reform transferred the subject of local government to the domain of provinces. The reform also recommended that there should be largest possible independence for them. By 1925 eight provinces had passed village panchayat acts. However, the panchayats covered only a limited number of village with limited function.

Government of India Act (1935) is considered an important one in the evolution of panchayats in British India. With popularly elected government in the provinces, almost all provincial administration felt duty bound to enact legislations for further democratization of local self government institutions, including village panchayats. Although the popular government in provinces vacated office following the declaration of second world war in 1939, position of local governments remained unchanged till 1947.

Panchayati Raj in Independent India

After Independence, village Panchayats were re-vitalized by assigning them important functions of local government. It is that panchayats find a place in the Directive principles of the state policy. Article 40 of the constitution, in the Directive principles, states that “the State shall take steps to organize village panchayat and to endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government”.

Balwant Rai Mehta Committee

Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was the first committee set up in 1957 to look into the problems of democratic decentralization in independent India.

The first organized effort to tackle the problem of rural India was made through Community Development Programme in 1952 and National Extension Service in 1953. The programme was based on an integrated approach to the various aspects of rural development. The objectives were to promote self-help and self-reliance among the rural people, to generate a process of integrated social, economic and cultural change with the aim of transforming social and political life of the villagers. Community Development Programme was launched in 55 selected blocks. The programme was based on an integrated approach to the various aspects of rural development. The programme made provisions for appointing Block Development Officers (BDO) and Village Level Workers (V.L.W). This programme was intended to bring socio- economic development of the rural masses on democratic lines, but failed to take off along the expected lines due to the absence of an effective instrument for people's participation.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee found that the CDPs when came at the Gram Panchayat level were considered as programmes of the government and not programmes of the village people. The village self-sufficiency could not be attained without the active partnership of the village people. The Mehta Committee, therefore, suggested that the villagers should be given power to decide about their own needs and implement the programmes accordingly. Bidyut Mohan, while explaining the recommendations of the Mehta Committee, observes.

“In 1959, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee suggested that an agency should be set up at the village level which would not only represent the interests of the village community but also take up the development programmes of the government at its level. The Gram panchayat which was to constitute this agency was, therefore, perceived as an implementing agency of the government in a specific, namely, developmental sphere”.

The committee laid down five fundamental principles:

There should be three tier structures of local self-government bodies from village to the district level and these bodies should be linked together. Panchayat raj system has three-tier system namely village panchayat or gram panchayat, panchayat samiti and zilla parishaid.

Village panchayat or gram panchayat: It acts at village level. It is the executive committee of the gram sabha. A panchayat generally caters to a population of about 2000. Thus there could be one panchayat for a village or group of small sized villages.

Panchayat Samiti: It represents the intermediate level in the panchayat raj system. It functions at the block level. Each district is divided into several blocks and each block has one panchayat samiti.

Zilla parishaid: It is the apex body in the system of democratic decentralization. It works at district level. In Tamil Nadu it is called district development council.

There should be genuine transfer of power and responsibility to these bodies to enable them to discharge their responsibility.

Adequate resources should be transferred to these bodies to enable them to discharge their responsibilities.

All welfare and developmental schemes and programmes at all three levels should be channeled through these bodies.

The three tier system should facilitate further devolution and disposal of power and responsibility in future. The committee envisaged three tier system of panchayats known as Zilla Parishad, Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayat and recommended encouragement of people's participation in community work, promotion of agriculture and animal husbandry, promoting the welfare of the weaker sections and women through the panchayats.

The Panchayati Raj, which came into existence following the recommendations of Mehta Committee, had the following major

Objectives:

1. To represent the felt need of the village community.
2. To give power to the non-officials for the development of village communities.
3. To give power of implementation or execution of programmes to the people.

Thus, the Balwantrai Mehta Committee legislatively made the villagers active partners in the task of village development. The responsibility of the execution of development programmes was left to the elected members of the panchayati raj.

Conclusion

The Panchayati Raj, as suggested by Mehta Committee, was first implemented in the state of Rajasthan. It was an irony of fate that the state of Rajasthan which experienced feudal rule throughout the medieval period was first to implement the Panchayati Raj. The experiment was further taken over by Andhra Pradesh and other states. The Mehta Committee suggested a three-tier structure for Panchayati Raj. These tiers could be altered vis-à-vis the needs of the state. The bottom tier consisted of Gram Sabha which was constituted on the basis of population size. Sometimes it included a big village but generally two or three villages on the strength of their population size constituted a Gram Sabha.

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