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"DEVELOPMENT, STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS OF PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM IN INDIA"

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ABSTRACT

In the structure of the Panchayati Raj, the Village Panchayat is the lowest unit. There is a Panchayat for each village or a group of villages in case the population of these villages happens to be too small. The Panchayat chiefly consists of representatives elected by the people of the village. Only the persons who are registered as voters and do not hold any office of profit under the government are eligible for election to the Panchayat. The persons convicted by the court for criminal offences are disqualified from election of the Panchayat.

KEY WORDS: Gram Panchayat

There is also provision for co-option of two women and one member of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, if they do not get adequate representation in the normal course. The Panchayat as a body is accountable to the general body of the village known as Gram Sabha which meets at least twice a year. The Gram Panchayat must present its budget, accounts of the previous year and annual administrative report before the Gram Sabha. Furthermore, it has to secure the latter's approval of the village production plan, proposals for taxation and development programmes before they are enforced by the Panchayat.

INTRODUCTION

Every Panchayat elects a President or Sarpanch and a Vice-President or Upsarpanch. In some states the Sarpanch is directly elected by the Gram Sabha either through the show of hands or through secret ballot while in other states the mode of election is indirect. The Sarpanch occupies a pivotal position in Gram Panchayat system. He supervises and coordinates the various activities of the Panchayat.

He is an ex-officio member of the Panchayat Samiti and participates in its decision-making as well as in the election of the Pradhan and of the members of various Standing Committees. He acts as the executive head of the Panchayat, represents it in the Panchayat Samiti as its spokesman and coordinates its activities and those of other local institutions like cooperatives. The Panchayat Secretary and the Village Level Worker are the two officers at the Panchayat level to assist the Sarpanch in administration.

The Panchayat Secretary assists the Panchayat in recording decisions, keeping minutes, preparing budget estimates and reports, and does other sundry jobs like preparing notices, explaining circulars, organising Gram Sabha meetings etc. The Village Level Worker now called Village Development Officer assists the Panchayat in drawing up agricultural production plans, helps farmers in securing loans for agriculture, arranges the supply of inputs like seeds and fertilizers, and educates farmers about modern agricultural practices. He serves as the principal link between the Panchayat and the Panchayat Samiti.

He keeps the Panchayat informed of various development programmes and reports to the Panchayat Samiti about the progress of the schemes and achievement of targets. He is accountable to the Sarpanch at the Panchayat level on the one hand, and to the Block Development Officer and extension officers on the other hand at the Samiti level.

The Gram Panchayats can levy certain taxes and duties to meet their expenses. Some of the taxes which the Gram Panchayats can levy include tax on animals, vehicles, house, vacant lands and professions. They can also levy duty on transfer or property situated in the area under their jurisdiction.

The fees paid for presenting civil criminal cases before the Panchayats and fines on account violation of Panchayat laws are other sources of its income. But a, as the duties to be performed by the Panchayats are so onerous that they have to depend on the state government for further finances.

As regards the principal functions performed by the Village Panchayat, they include maintenance of roads, wells, schools, burning and burial grounds, sanitation, public health, libraries, reading rooms, community centre etc. The Panchayat also keeps records of births and deaths. It makes necessary provisions for the promotion of agriculture and animal husbandry, cottage CONTI industries, co-operative societies etc. The minor disputes among residents of village are also settled by the Village Panchayat. It seeks to ensure a minimum standard of cultivation for raising agricultural production. In addition, the Panchayat also acts as the agent of the Panchayat Samiti in executing schemes of development at the village level.

In 1957, the Balawant Rai Meheta Committee recommended for the introduction of three-tier Panchayati Raj System in India. Following the recommendations of this committee report the then government of India and the State Governments too took different measures to strengthen the Panchayati-raj system existing at that time. It was with this purpose the Balwant Rai Meheta Committee was appointed by the Central Government of India in 1957.

The committee recommended for the three-tire Panchayati Raj system in India. These three-tires are

- the Gram-Panchayats at the village level or at the bottom,
- the Panchayat Samiti at the block level or in the middle and
- the Zilla Parishad at the district level.

It was recommended that these three-tires would have to be related with each other. The committee also discussed about the philosophical basis of the Panchayati-Raj-system. Through the Panchayati Raj system acts as a link between the local leadership and the government. The local leadership always enjoys the trust of the local people and it is this local leadership which translates the governmental policies and decisions into action. That is why the Gram-Panchayat is considered as the lowest unit of the government.

It's aim is to use the panchayat as the means or medium for proper implementation of the governmental policies and programme. It may be mentioned in this regard that the basic idea of Mahatma Gandhi was to establish the Panchayati Raj as an independent self-government system or as independent republic. However, in course of time, the Panchayati Raj system lost much of its popularity and popular participation in it also became insignificant.

Singh (2004) found that in Haryana relatively younger women are replacing older women. Formal empowerment and women leadership in Panchayati raj is a result of reservation of women in local self-government. These women now enable to participate and decide in day by day's activities. Sharma (2000) also observed in Himachal Pradesh, that participation of women in Panchayat election has been increased in grass roots governance after the year 2000. The state government is also committed towards promoting leadership of women to share the power what they deserve and exercise authority in the decision making process.

Mandal (2003) Assesses Social and Political Background of Women Members in One District of West Bangal, evaluates various facets of their participation and role performance in PRIs, ascertains the nature, their social acceptability and informs both the positive and negative aspects of reservation policy for women. The study brought forth few exclusive and absorbing features: women members are not dummy or docile; their participation both at formal Panchayat process and informal levels is no less exalting.

Anupama Singh (2008), in a study conducted on Rural Women in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, reveals that full development may not be achieved unless women and the resources they represent are fully integrated into the development and women empowerment as a tool to sustain the development as an ongoing process. Dr. Singh also highlights the problems of the concept of PatiPanchayats or proxy rules by husbands.

But the studies of several distinguished scholars on the working of the Panchayat Raj in different States and the Status Report of the Ministry of Panchayat Raj (1996) lead us to the inference that the Gandhian ideal of Gram Swaraj remains an unfinished agenda even after six decades of the implementation of the Panchayat Raj on the recommendation of the Balwantraji Mehta Study Team on October 2, 1959. 73rd Amendment was implemented by various States in 1994. Therefore, concerted, systematic and sustained endeavors are needed on the part of those for whom Gram Swaraj remains a cherished dream for the empowerment of people and for making national development of India a participatory democracy.

PANCHAYAT SAMITI

The Panchayat Samiti is the second on joint tier of the Panchayati Raj. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee report has envisaged the Samiti as a single representative and vigorous democratic institution to take charge of all aspects of development in rural areas. The Samiti, according to the Committee, offers “an area large enough for functions which the Village Panchayat cannot perform and yet small enough to attract the interest and services of residents.”

Usually a Panchayat Samiti consists of 20 to 60 villages depending on area and population. The average population under a Samiti is about 80,000 but the range is from 35,000 to 1, 00,000. The Panchayat Samiti generally consists of- (1) about twenty members elected by and from the Panches of all the Panchayats falling in the block area; (2) two women members and one member each from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to be co-opted, provided they do not get adequate representation otherwise; two local persons possessing experience of public life and administration, which may be beneficial for the rural development; (4) representatives of the Co-operatives working within the jurisdiction of the block; (5) one representative elected by and from the members of each small municipality lying within the geographical limits of a block; (6) the members of the State and Union legislatures representing the area are to be taken as associate members.

The President of the Panchayat Samiti is the Pradhan, who is elected by an electoral college consist of all members of the Panchayat Samiti and all the Panchas of the Gram Panchayat falling within the areas. Besides the Pradhan, the Up-pradhan is also elected. The Pradhan convenes and presides over the Panchayat Samiti meetings. He guides the Panchayats in making plans and carrying out production programmes.

He ensures the implementation of the decisions and resolutions of the Samiti and its Standing Committees. He exercises administrative control over the Vikas Adhikari (BDO) and his staff. He is a member of the Zilla Parishad by virtue of his office as a Pradhan. He is the ex-officio chairman of the Standing Committees of the Samiti.

As the Chief Executive Officer of the Panchayat Samiti, the Block Development Officer is entrusted with the responsibility for implementing the resolutions of the Samiti and its Standing Committees. He prepares the budget of the Samiti and places it before the Samiti for approval. Preparing the annual report of the Samiti and sending it to the Zilla Parishad and State Government also comes within the purview of his responsibility. He is accountable to the President of the Samiti for his actions.

The principal function of the Panchayat Samiti is to coordinate the activities of the various Panchayats within its jurisdiction. The Panchayat Samiti supervises the work of the Panchayats and scrutinises their budgets. It also reserves the right to suggest measures for improving the functioning of the Panchayats. The Samiti is charged with the responsibility of preparing and implementing plans for the development of agriculture, animal to SU (husbandry, fisheries, small scale and cottage industries, rural health tropic etc.

On the face of things it may appear that the Panchayat Samiti enjoys enormous powers. But the reality is something different. It has no independence in instituting special programmes or development projects of its choice. It simply carries out the directives of the State Government pertaining to specific projects.

Furthermore, the primacy of the non-elected members of the Samiti over the elected members amounts to a mockery of democracy so far as democratic decentralisation is concerned. Despite all world these it cannot be gainsaid that the Panchayat Samiti serves as a launching pad for the political leaders for higher responsibilities at the district and state levels.

ZILLA PARISHAD

The Zilla Parishad stands at the apex of the three-tier structure of the Panchayati Raj system. Generally, the Zilla Parishad consists of representatives of the Panchayat Samiti; all the members of the State Legislature and the Parliament representing a part or whole of the district; all district level officers of the Medical, Public Health, Public Works, Engineering, Agriculture, Veterinary, Education and other development departments.

There is also a provision for special representation of women, members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes provided they are not adequately represented in the normal course. The Collector is also a member of the Zilla Parishad.

The Chairman of the Zilla Parishad is elected from among its members. There is a Chief Executive Officer in the Zilla Parishad. He is deputed to the Zilla Parishad by the State Government. There are subject matter specialists or officers at the district level in all the states for various development programmes.

The Zilla Parishad, for the most part, performs co-ordinating and supervisory functions. It coordinates the activities of the Panchayat Samitis falling within its jurisdiction. In certain states the Zilla Parishad also approves the budgets of the Panchayat Samitis.

The Zilla Parishad also renders necessary advice to the Government with regard to the implementation of the various development schemes. It is also responsible for the maintenance of primary and secondary schools, hospitals, dispensaries, minor irrigation works etc. It also promotes local industries and art.

The finances of the Zilla Parishad consist of the grants received from the State Government and share in the land cess and other local cess and taxes. Sometimes it has been allowed by the State Government to levy certain taxes or enhance the taxes already levied by the Panchayat Samitis subject to a certain limit

Reservations for SC/STs may not impact redistribution as much as they can alter social prejudices and hierarchies.

This year, India celebrates the 20th anniversary of the 73rd amendment. One of the most striking aspects of the modern Panchayati Raj defined by the amendment is the systematic reservation of political positions (pradhans, sarpanchs, and ward members) for villagers from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (SC/ST). In spite of strong initial opposition from traditionally dominant caste groups, these reservations have now been implemented during several electoral cycles in most Indian states and have guaranteed the election of tens of thousands of SC/ST candidates that would not have been elected otherwise.

While Dalit voters have gained importance as a force in national and state and federal elections, the election of SC candidates to local posts would have been unlikely without the intervention of the Indian state. Village institutions, and more generally speaking, rural India, remain centers of caste conservatism. In spite of slow but notable progress, recent empirical studies have shown that major discriminations persist. A 2006 nationwide independent study designed by leading Indian sociologists, titled "Untouchability in Rural India," suggests that members of the scheduled castes remain discriminated against in most of their interactions with others. Among dozens of other instances of daily discrimination, members of the SCs remain barred from entry into places of worship in more than 50 percent of the surveyed villages. They are denied access to water facilities in more than 45 percent of the villages, and denied seating among other villagers in 30

percent of the villages. Atrocities and physical violence against SC/STs also remain disturbingly common, including towards those SC/ST villagers serving in political office.

A mix of factors explains why SC sarpanches are unable to significantly improve the lot of SC villagers. First, to the degree that Untouchability persists, SC sarpanches are often not provided with the authority and respect that is traditionally accorded the sarpanch. Second, the sarpanch's ability to aid SC villagers is limited by the local political context. Electorally speaking, successful SC sarpanches depend on a multi-caste coalition, and do not have a free hand in making decisions favorable to their own group. Indeed, SC sarpanches may become indebted to other groups, in extreme cases behaving as proxies for influential local strongmen. The most significant constraint faced by SC sarpanches may be the institutional structure of the panchayat system itself, in which ward members may play an outsized role, especially in the face of a sarpanch perceived as weak or "illegitimate." Finally, the potential for redistribution generated by the presence in office of an SC villager is limited by embezzlement and personal gains; there is no reason to expect this new breed of politician to depart from the norm in this regard. Incidentally, many of the villagers I interacted with described these gains for the family of the sarpanch as a positive aspect of reservation, implying that a rotation in corruption was preferable to entrenched corruption.

Even in the case of weak, incompetent, or manipulated SC sarpanches, reservation has two automatic consequences: it increases contact between villagers and at least one member of the village's main Dalit caste, and it provides members of that Dalit caste with a degree of linkage with local authorities. These structural changes, often dismissed as unimportant by villagers themselves, have the potential to impact two types of beliefs related to members of the scheduled castes: beliefs about the norms of interaction with members of the scheduled castes and beliefs about the level of protection enjoyed by villagers of the SCs.

According to responses to two audio surveys (one survey of members of the SCs and one survey of non-SC villagers), the experience of an SC sarpanch changes the psychology of caste relations among members of both groups. This psychological impact is subtle and specific: while villagers that experienced reservation retain overwhelmingly negative stereotypes about members of the SCs, they nonetheless perceive the emergence of new social and legal norms. In spite of persistent prejudice, the daily experience of a visible SC sarpanch increases the perception that society is evolving towards more tolerant norms, and that openly hostile behaviors towards members of the SCs will not go unpunished.

DEVELOPMENT OF PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM IN INDIA

Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, often emphasized that India lives in villages (at the time of independence, about 82.7 per cent population of India lived in villages) and unless the village life is revitalized, the nation as a whole cannot make progress.

These ideas and the Article 40 of the Constitution of India, which declared that 'the state shall take steps to organize Village Panchayats and to endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as the units of self-government,' paved the way for the introduction of Panchayati Raj—a scheme of 'democratic decentralization' in India.

In India, the system of panchayats has a long history. Its structure however varied from time to time. In village India, the concept of 'Panch Parmeswar' is very old and very prominent. We also find references of Gram Panchayat in ancient and medieval literatures. As we know, India is a caste-ridden society. Along with Gram Panchayats we also find Caste Panchayats in every caste to solve their social problems like marital discord and disputes. During the British period, an effort was made to revive the Village Panchayats but it could not make any success.

The present Panchayati Raj system is the result of the failure of the Community Development Projects (CDPs)—a kernel programme of rural development launched in 1952 as an arm of five-year plans. The two

successive plans had failed to not only produce desired results but also generate real enthusiasm among the people. It was felt that the scheme of CDP failed because of the lack of proper governance.

Democratic renewal through reorganizing the power structure would bring the government closer to people. It was seen as a means to deepen democracy, make governance accountable and responsive. Not only would it enhance the effectiveness of public policies and service delivery, but also give greater voice to citizens.

It is against this backdrop, the idea of ‘democratic decentralization’ emerged which was based on the Gandhi’s cherished vision of ‘self-governing’ villages. This was a transfer of power and initiative for social and economic development of villages. The then government constituted a committee headed by Balwant Rai Mehta to review the CDP and suggest changes. Thus, the Panchayati Raj came into being.

Indeed, the prosperity of entire country depends on the prosperity and self-sufficiency of the villages. The Panchayati Raj system fulfils the long felt need of making the village administration truly independent and genuinely representative of the popular will, and putting village people in direct charge of their affairs.

It mainly aimed to foster democratic participation, involve villagers in the development efforts and ease the administrative burden on the states. This system was also considered necessary for the growth of a sturdy democracy in India.

This could be possible only when the villagers are able to organize themselves to think, plan, work and pay for the necessities and amenities for their welfare. To those, who have considered the villages the real India, the innovation is rational, overdue and beyond criticism. It was hoped that the experiment of the Panchayati Raj will be able to harness and develop the better characteristics of the average villagers in spite of their illiteracy and restricted range of experience. It was also expected that this system will bring new aspiration and fresh stimulus to national self-respect.

In the present scheme of Panchayati Raj, the villagers have been held responsible for all-round improvement in the village life, including education, sanitation, medical relief—curative and preventive, lighting, housing, maternity and child welfare along with the administration of civil, criminal and revenue justice. It was thought that this system would be powerful means for self-preservation in the arena of social life. The main objective behind the Panchayati Raj is that the people in the village should undertake the responsibilities of governing themselves. Pioneer rural sociologist A.R. Desai spelled the objectives of PR system as follows: ‘Panchayati Raj is claimed as a real democratic political apparatus which would bring the masses into active political control from below, from the vast majority of the weaker, poor sections of rural India.’

People in the villages should actively participate in the development activities regarding agriculture, irrigation, animal husbandry, public health, education, etc. In a nutshell, the whole idea of this scheme is based on the dictum that ‘rural development is for the rural people, of the rural people, and by the rural people themselves’.

It is based on self-help, as an old adage says, ‘God help those who help themselves’. This scheme of rural development confers on the rural people the power of decision-making regarding developmental activities. This is democracy at the grassroots. It will ‘decentralize’ democracy. This system has got a very important role to play in the social, economic and cultural life of the village community of India.

THE PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM HAS MANY BENEFITS

These can be summarized as under:

1. Panchayats can best carry out the uplift programmes, such as mending roads, terrace, and embank the fields, building bunds, digging drains, provide fresh drinking water, etc.
2. They are best constituted to organize voluntary labour for social uplift and economic amelioration.

3. Panchayats are the best agencies which can supply the political talent. They are the potential schools of political training for the rural masses.
4. They can also serve as the schools of social service, health care, popular education and social progress.
5. Panchayats can impart cheap litigation, speedy and substantial justice to the villagers.
6. Panchayats are best fitted to be representative and spokesperson of the villagers.

PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT

Self-governing rural local bodies are described in Indian context as the institutions of democratic decentralization or Panchayati Raj. The story of Panchayati Raj has been a story of ups and downs.

IT SEEMS TO HAVE PASSED THROUGH FOUR DISTINCT PHASES IN ITS SHORT SPAN OF LIFE

1. The phase of ascendancy (1959-1964)
2. The phase of stagnation (1965-1969)
3. The phase of decline (1969-1983)
4. The phase of revival (1983 onwards)

Revival and renovation of Panchayati Raj is associated with the government of Rajiv Gandhi (1985), the then Prime Minister. He infused a new blood in this institution by removing certain hurdles and handicaps. He constituted a committee under the chairmanship of L.M. Singhvi to write a concept paper on Panchayati Raj. About its revival there were two main schools of thought. One believed that Panchayati Raj is a God that had failed.

The other suggested that Panchayati Raj, in fact, had not been tried in its true spirit and as such the question of a final verdict on its success or failure did not arise. The Singhvi Committee found that the PR system was not functioning owing to the lack of political will, lack of proper evaluation and feedback, and indifference to corrective measures.

The apathetic attitudes of the bureaucracy and the elected representatives have crushed the spirit of the PR system. The official hierarchy failed to inspire confidence among the village people. Bureaucrats were unwilling to transfer power to elected representatives. They did not release funds in time.

The Janata Party government (1990) appointed Ashok Mehta Committee to enquire into the causes of decline of the PR system and suggest changes in the pattern of the PR system recommended by B.R. Mehta Committee.

This committee has offered a balanced appraisal of PRIs in the context of two schools of thought referred to above. It opined, 'Panchayati Raj should not be viewed as a God that has failed. It has many achievements to its credit, the more important of which may be identified here.

Politically speaking, it became a process of democratic seed-drilling in the Indian soil, making an average citizen more conscious of his rights than before. Administratively speaking, it bridged the gulf between the bureaucratic elite and the people.

Socio-culturally speaking, it generated a new leadership which was not merely relatively young in age but also modernistic and pro-social change in outlook. Finally, looked at from the developmental angle, it helped a rural people cultivate a developmental psyche' (Report of the Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions, Government of India, 1978).

However, it was felt that there were some shortcomings in the structure and functions of the PR system. The performance of PRIs had been vitiated by political factionalism, corruption, inefficiency, political interference, parochial loyalties, motivated actions, power concentration, arrogant attitude of bureaucratic

officials, lack of feeling of service, etc. All these had made the common villagers averse towards the PR system.

To revitalize the PR system, the Rajiv Gandhi's government (1989), V.P. Singh's government (1990) and Narasimha Rao's government (1991) proposed some amendments in it. As a result, the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1993 was passed.

After this, PRIs have got the constitutional legitimacy. It was, therefore, adopted by all the states. The present Panchayati Raj differs from the B.R. Committee's pattern mainly in two respects. First, the earlier PR system was not a political institution but only an implementing body. In the previous system of Panchayati Raj there was no role of political parties.

People used to contest election on individual basis. The new Act allows political parties to enter into election fray. Second, the present system is not an implementing body of the development programmes. It is a decision-making body that rules over the governance of the village. One very conspicuous aspect of this Act is that the present system empowers the women and the weaker sections (SC and ST people) of village by giving them representation by a fixed quota at all three levels.

CHANGES BROUGHT OUT BY THE ACT ARE

1. Establishment of panchayats at two or three levels and a Gram Sabha is made mandatory in each village.
2. Tenure of PRIs is fixed as five years. Direct elections of all members in all the three tiers are made mandatory. The elections have to be conducted regularly.
3. Elections of chairperson at intermediate and district levels are to be indirect.
4. At least one-third of the total seats at all levels are reserved for SCs, STs and for women separately.
5. PRIs are given powers to impose taxes, duties, and fees and were given share in taxes collected by the state government.
6. The reservation of OBCs and association of MPs and MLAs in panchayats is made discretionary.
7. The Act also provides for the constitution of District Planning Committee.
8. It is obligatory on the part of Centre as well as the states to provide adequate funds for the PRIs to enable them to function properly.
9. Some states like Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Karnataka have also made provision for Nyaya Panchayats to settle the disputes at all the three levels. But this is not obligatory as per the provisions of this Act.
10. States like Haryana, Orissa and Rajasthan have debarred the candidates, having more than two children, from contesting elections, with a view to contain population.

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

As said before, the structure of Panchayati Raj (PR) varies from state to state. Some states have three-tier structure (Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at block level and Zilla Parishad at district level), whereas some have two-tier structure (Gram Panchayat at village level and Panchayat Samiti at block level). A few states have only single-tier structure at the village level.

In Rajasthan, the Panchayati Raj model is of three levels, viz., Gram Panchayats (village level), Panchayat Samitis (block level) and Zilla Parishads (district level). The chairperson of Gram Panchayat is known as Sarpanch, of Panchayat Samiti, Pradhan and of Zilla Parishad, Zilla Pramukh. Their nomenclature, composition and tenure vary from state to state. The structure and functions of the PRIs in terms of Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad are spelt out as under:

THE MAIN FUNCTIONS OF THE GRAM PANCHAYAT ARE

1. Law and order:

Maintenance of peace and harmony in the panchayat circle.

2. Civic:

Construction of wells, ponds, water reservoirs and distribution tanks; construction of public streets, public latrines and maintenance of roads, etc.

3. Welfare:

Famine and flood relief work, welfare programmes for women, children, handicapped and weaker sections.

4. Administrative:

Collection of funds, maintenance of records, budget and accounts, registration of births and deaths, etc.;

5. Commercial:

Supervision of community orchards, grazing ground, etc.

6. Developmental:

Preparation and execution of plans for the promotion of agriculture, irrigation, co-operatives, cottage and small-scale industries. The main sources of income of panchayats are the grants from government, taxes on buildings, vehicles, etc., octroi on goods and animals, pilgrim tax, etc.

PANCHAYAT SAMITI

It is the middle tier of the PR system—between Gram Panchayat and Zilla Parishad. This tier was coterminous with the tehsil or taluka. This is composed of Sarpanchas (ex-officio members) of all the Gram Panchayats within a block along with MLA of the area (without right of vote). In addition to these ex-officio members, there are some co-opted members—two women, one SC and ST representatives each, if they have not already been elected as primary members.

The chairperson of the Panchayat Samiti is called Pradhan. He is elected by the members of the Panchayat Samiti amongst themselves. At certain places, such as in Rajasthan, Panchas of Gram Panchayat also take part in the election of Pradhans.

THE MAIN FUNCTIONS OF THE PANCHAYAT SAMITI ARE

- (i) Agriculture—formulation of plans of development of agriculture, tree plantation and soil conservation;
- (ii) animal husbandry;
- (iii) health and sanitation;
- (iv) education—running primary schools;
- (v) communication—construction and maintenance of inter-panchayat roads, etc.;
- (vi), co-operation—promotion of co-operative societies;
- (vii) development of cottage and small-scale industries; and
- (viii) miscellaneous work.

The main sources of income of Panchayat Samiti are annual grants by state government, share from land revenue, proceeds from taxes, fees and loans, contributions, etc.

ZILLA PARISHAD

It is the apex body of the PR system located at the district level. It is also known as District Development Council in some states (such as Tamil Nadu).

IT IS COMPOSED OF

- (i) Chairpersons/Presidents of Panchayat Samitis within its jurisdiction;
- (ii) MPs, MLAs, and MLCs of the area;
- (iii) members representing women, SCs and STs are co-opted if they are not otherwise members;
- (iv) representatives of co-operative societies, municipalities of the area; and
- (v) some persons having experience in the field of administration, public life or rural development are also co-opted.

The membership of the Zilla Parishad remains in the range of 40 to 60 persons. The elected head of Zilla Parishad is known as Zilla Pramukh (President). He is elected either directly or indirectly from amongst the

members of the Zilla Parishad. Zilla Pramukh works through committees which look after specific works like education, planning and finance. The main sources of income of the Zilla Parishads are grants-in-aid from the state government, share in the land revenue and other taxes like the cess.

The above structure and functions of all the PR bodies have been changing over the years. It has aroused a spirit of self-help and popular participation to some extent among the rural people. The process of decision-making has come close to the rural people. It has also helped in the emergence of a new democratic leadership at the local level. But, the competitive elections have politicized the environment of all villages.

This spirit has even entered into the family circles also. It is alleged that panchayat elections have given birth to caste politics (casteism), communal politics (communalism) and groupism and factionalism in the villages. It is also alleged that due to panchayat elections, a 'cold war' atmosphere prevails among various sections of the village people. Some studies made on the PR system revealed that functional tensions are on the increase and this can be seen during elections and panchayat meetings. The so-called harmonious relations of the villages have almost vanished. People did not extend full cooperation from the core of their heart to the panchayats and as a result developmental activity has slowed down. Theoretically, the decisions had to be taken by the non-officials at all the three tiers of the PR system, but in practice, it was the government officials who used to take the decisions.

The non-officials (Panch or Sarpanch) being illiterate and uneducated could not wield their power. Most of the benefits of development programmes initiated by PRIs were cornered by the high castes and big peasants. The poor segments of society remained neglected as before. There was a great lack of coordination among the three tiers. Thus, to conclude, it can be stated that the devolution of power to the people without requisite development of character, training and capacity had been found to be a curse in the functioning of democratic institutions in our country and there were apprehensions that this new step in democratic decentralization, designed to be blessing, would turn out to be a curse to the people in the villages. The success of the step more than anything else depended on the quality of elected representative—Panchas and Sarpanchas—of these institutions.

No institutional change can bring about climatic change or strengthen the roots of democracy in this country, if it is divorced of the spirit behind it. In the absence of this basic change, which is a sine qua non to all other changes, we doubt, if institutional changes alone will take the country very far. In the beginning, responsibility for the planned development of the country through CDP and cooperative institutions was imposed on the people who were expected to discharge them in PRIs who were mostly uneducated and untrained mass of people. But there is a great change now in this condition. Obviously, such a step, though basic and pregnant with great possibilities to strengthen the roots of democracy, was fraught with grave risks, disappointments and failures in its traditional phase.

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