



Panchayati Raj , Democratic Decentralization and Gandhian Concept of Rural Development:

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Abstract:

India lives in its villages. Unless we reconstruct, improve and develop them, India will perish. Gandhiji said, "If India is not to perish, we have to begin with lower rung of ladder. If that was rotten, all work done at the top or at the intermediate level was bound to ultimately fall." The same feeling has been echoed by Rabindra Nath Tagore when he said that the status of Mother India has been reduced to that of the maid servant due to draining of resources from villages to cities. Gandhiji maintained that the blood of the villages is the cement with which the edifice of the cities is built. His plea was for radical decentralization and liberation of the villages from exploitation. The village is the fundamental unit for the development of our country and the state, because the root has to be strong for growth of the tree.

Keywords: India, Village, Fundamental Unit, Democratic Decentralisation.

Introduction:

"In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever widening, never ascending, circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But, it will be an oceanic circle, whose centre will be the individual, always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of the villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance, but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integrated units. Therefore, the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle, but will give strength to all within and will derive its own strength from it."

Mahatma Gandhi

The constitution of India has established a parliamentary form of governance in the country. But the governmental system as established by Law has undergone radical changes with the passage of time, particularly after the collapse of one party rule at the centre and in a number of states. In the process of change a series of new trends have emerged in Indian politics. The electoral history of India since 1952 depicts upset wins and shocking defeats, but the dramatic results in the 1991, 1996 and 1998 elections went on to change the course of Indian polity. The 1998 elections mark a watershed in the history of democratic experiment in the country with the diversity and pluralism, which has tightened its hold on India's political process. But the rise of regional parties should not be viewed as a reason for worry, but it should be considered as a symbol of vibrancy of Indian democracy. Moreover, the Indian political system has developed enough maturity and resilience to cope with a fair amount of instability and internal conflict. This volume is an in-depth study of the interplay of the shifting paradigms of Indian polity. It covers some of the key aspects of India: government and politics, which confront our polity-viz.; electoral politics; electoral behaviour; electoral reform; women's participation; lokpal; urban local governance; rural planning

proces people's participation; Gandhian idea of decentralisation; National Agenda fi Governance etc. I hope the volume w provide sound academic atmosphere f all those who are genuinly interested studying contemporary problems beii faced by the national politics of India.

The success of any programme depends upon the involvement of the people and so is also true with the rural development programmes. It can be possible only if Agricultural people are involved in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programmes. Gandhijis dream of every village being a republic and panchayats having powers has been translated into reality with the introduction of the three tiers Panchayat Raj system and their participation in rural reconstruction. April 24, 1993, is a mile stone in the history of Panchayati Raj in India as on this day the 73rd constitutional amendment act ,1992 came into force to provide constitutional status to the panchayati raj institutions.

Democratic Decentralization:

Democracy is basically a decentralized system. A centralized administration however efficient it may be can never excel the basic idea of democracy, i.e. government by the people. In a vast country like India democratic decentralization is the method of making democracy real through Panchayati Raj institutions. 73 Amendment is a historic step to revitalize the PRIs in India. The new arrangements will certainly reduce the burden of the government and increase the responsibilities of the people. For the effective implementation of the system the people should be made well aware of it. The effort has been made in this direction in the present volume. It would be useful for the policy-makers, teachers and students of political science, economics and law.

The basic function of democratic decentralization is to ensure that the development planning is more responsive and adaptable to regional and local needs of the population. It ensures people's participation - the fact recognized by all for the success of developmental programmes. Further, it is also based on the premises that the people at the grass root levels have a better perception of their requirements. However, the system of local self- government goes a step further by ensuring delegation of political power. It also ensures involving objects of development in directing and executing the developmental activities an indispensable aspect to improve the effectiveness of programme. Therefore, planning and implementation of development programmes by people's participation in political and developmental processes constitutes a significant aspect of Panchayati Raj/Municipal bodies.

Democratic decentralization underlines a state which is more responsive to local needs and aspirations and produces systems of governance that are more effective. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) represents a mechanism for democratic decentralization. It is argued that rural development (RD) and the poverty alleviation programmes can be best achieved through democratic decentralization.

In India, during the 1950s, the desire of the Government to develop the local areas as per the local needs led to the launching of the Community Development Programme. However the failure of the programme to achieve the stated objectives led to the formation of Balwantrai Mehta Committee. The Committee was constituted to examine the reasons for the failure of the programme and to recommend measures for realizing the principles of democratic decentralization. Consequent upon the recommendations of the Committee the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were introduced as institutions of local self-government. The PRIs were to be so organized as to facilitate not only participation of the rural masses but also to enable them to participate in the micro-planning and implementation of the various developmental schemes.

Rural Development, meaning and definition:

Rural development has today become an objective not only of the local and regional concern, but a pragmatic objective fully backed by national government and international organizations like the United Nations, the International Bank for reconstruction and Development, World Bank and the International Fund for Agricultural Development. Rural development is advocated today as a basic strategy for economic development all over the world. No country can achieve the desired goal if a large section of its population is living under unhygienic and destitute conditions. India, being a developing country needs to pay special attention to the improvement of the economic, social and educational conditions of rural masses as large population is located in rural areas. Though a few steps were taken before Independence for rural development, these are too few to tackle the problem. The concept of development assumed strategic importance only after the independence. Hence, the rural development occupies a significant place in our economic planning. Our rural area represents real India. Hence without uplifting rural masses, one cannot accelerate the pace of overall economic development of our country.

Thus, rural development is the means to the process of improving basic needs, increasing productivity and employment opportunities and developing potentials of rural resources through integration of spatial, functional and temporal aspects. Fundamentally, development of rural area means development of the people living in rural areas through implementation of various rural development schemes. The objectives of development include sustained increase in per capita output and incomes expansion of productive employment and greater equity in the distribution of the benefits of growth and development of infrastructure.

Rural development has been defined as a strategy to improve the socio-economic life of rural people with special emphasis on rural poor. Rural Development experts have defined the term in several ways. Lele defines Rural Development as an improvement in the living standard of the masses of low income population residing in rural areas and making the process of self-sustaining. According to Enswinger rural development seeks to involve a process of transformation from traditionally oriented rural culture towards an acceptance and reliance on science and technology.

Gandhian Concept of Rural Development:

Any discussion on the history of rural development remains incomplete unless Gandhiji's ideas regarding rural development are mentioned. During the freedom struggle Mahatma Gandhi laid great emphasis on the development of villages, and the subsequent attainment of self-sufficiency for the villages of India. Gandhiji always said that India lives in her villages and for the development of the country as a whole, dire importance should be given to its villages.

Gandhi believed in decentralization of social and political power. According to Gandhiji, democracy cannot be realized without the Panchayat working as the basic and effective unit of government. It has to be worked from below by the people of every village. The Gandhian philosophy of the village as being the nerve centre of the people's universe gave shape and commitment to a new programme popularly called community development programme, with the village as the nodal point. Gandhian concept of decentralization of political authority was manifested in the institution of Panchayat Raj, introduced during the Second Five-Year Plan.

Gandhi's concept of rural reconstruction

Gandhi's idea to develop the Indian society was based on his understanding of the society and hence based on the village system. Talking about the importance of village, he wrote in 1936, **"I would say if the village perishes, India will perish too."** He was aware of the realities of the village life and knew the plight of half starved masses of India. He often acknowledged the same in his vivid descriptions of Indian villages. He wrote, "instead of having graceful hamlets dotting the lands, we have dung-heaps. The approach to many villages is not a refreshing experience. Often one would like to shut one's eyes and stuff one's nose, such is the surrounding dirt and offending smell". His understanding of the plight of the people has been extremely well brought out in his writings, identifying his emphasis on removal of poverty over aesthetics. ***His concept of rural reconstruction*** is a comprehensive one, emphasizing on the economic, political, social, educational, ecological and spiritual dimensions. He ceaselessly insisted on a pattern of village life, which will be

man-centered and non-exploiting. The decentralized village economy should provide full employment to all on the basis of voluntary cooperation and work for achieving self-sufficiency in its basic requirement of food, clothing and shelter. In short, it can be said that rural reconstruction, according to Gandhi should not be merely concerned with raising the standard of living of village folk, though that was important. Talking specifically about an ideal village, where in he outlined the objectives of rural reconstruction: - he said,

“My idea of an ideal village is that of complete republic independence of its neighbor for its own vital wants, and yet dependent for many others in which dependence is necessity. Such village will contain intelligent people. First concern of the village should be to grow its own food. Then only all communities will live together in harmony. The curse of untouchability, intoxicating drinks and drugs will not exist. Women will enjoy the same right as the men. People in villages will not live in dirt and darkness as animal. No one will wallow in luxury. The village community should take up the responsibility for providing work to all able bodied people and every one will have to contribute his quota of manual labour.”

Gandhiji mooted the idea of Panchayat Raj with a concept of self -sufficient and self-reliant villages functioning as Republic. In his dream, every village in India should be characterized by a direct and participating democracy, endowed with all the powers that enable it to function as a government in the true sense of the term. This is what Gandhiji meant by "building from below". That is one aspect. On the other, republican village shall be self-sufficient and self-reliant in respect of its basic necessities like food, clothing, shelter, employment, education, health, social security etc.

Recognizing the importance of democratic institutions at the grassroots level, the Constitution of India, under its Directive Principles of State Policy, states that, “the state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.” Our rural democracy has reached the stage where people participation has been assured by the introduction of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in India. Those who decry Panchayati Raj as an election stunt are only those whose feudal interest has been overthrown by the power reaching to the people. Our late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said, “We trust the people. We have faith in the people. It is the people who must determine their own destinies and the destiny of the nation. To the people of India let us ensure maximum democracy and maximum devolution of power. Let there be an end to the power-brokers. Let us give power to the people.”

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