



Early History of the Local Self-Government in India

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Abstract:

The phenomenon of the Panchayath Raj system is not a new concept in Indian Politics. Since the ancient period, different branches of administrative forms were grouped under Indian Philosophy. Panchayath or village assemblies self-governing institutions were having a distinct and well-defined functions. The Panchayath Raj institutions were representing not only the collective will but also the collective wisdom of complete rural India. The very spirit behind the concept of village democracy has been to associate people at the grass-root level where the concept of 'Gram Swaraj' can exist. Thus, Gram Sabha has been the natural choice of people for building up an institutional structure to bring governance closer to the rural people. Panchayath Raj System occupies a major role in local self-governance. This ancient concept has a key role in bringing transparency and accountability to the effective functioning of the Gram Panchayath in ensuring equitable opportunities for all rural people irrespective of caste, gender, region, or religion. This article has tried to bring out the concept of ancient democratic and administrative structures were existed in rural India through Panchayath Raj System from a historical perspective.

Keywords: -Phenomenon, occupies, governance, equitable.

Objectives

- To know about the ancient Indian Political and administrative structure in India.
- To understand the historical background of the Panchayath Raj System in the post-Independent Indian context.

I. Introduction

For a proper evaluation of the Panchayat Raj institutions, it is essential to briefly refer to the history and development of these agencies since the Vedic period. India has the distinction of having the longest saga of local self-government in the world and India is the cradle of local self-government which flourished from the time of Vedic civilization to the advent of British rule.¹ In the history of the

concept of local self-government the village was the basic unit of government system whether the Central authority was monarchical, oligarchical or republican. These institutions were strong enough to withstand the rise and fall of all empires. They were not able to abolish this system. So the concept of democracy is not a new phenomenon in rural India. The evidence of Indian history explains that every village in India in the ancient period had a self-governing body of its own. These institutions were free to manage themselves and there was no interference of any external agencies in the functioning of local administration.

The inscriptions of the 9th to 11th centuries A.D. indicate that the village assemblies were the supreme authority in the village, and it was highly developed organisations. It was a select body consisting of the learned and other distinguished men of the village and it was the absolute proprietor of the village land, including amount of revenue to the government.²

In the Vedic period, Vedic state was essentially a country with villages as the basic unit of administration looked after by respected official, advised by a council of elders. The villagers themselves used to manage their local affairs. The "Gramini" or Grampal was the headman and leader of the villagers.³

Jayaswal, K.P. has found from the Vedas that "the national life and activities in the earliest times on record was expressed through popular assemblies and institutions. The greatest institution of this nature was the Samiti of Vedic times".⁴ Manu distinguishes along village, town and the city grama, pura and magara. In ancient India, society developed in a series of "ascending formations starting from the family which called griha or kula and gradually extending to the village as grama, people as jana and the country as rashtra. The villages had been under the supreme control of a village headman popularly known as 'gramini' who was elected by the janas or the people. Dr. Dube writes "through the Mahabharata, we get an outline of the system of village and inter-village organization".⁵ Jayaswal, K.P. has found in the



Vedas that “the national life and activities in the earliest times on record was expressed through popular assemblies and institutions.” The greatest institutions, according to the Valmiki Ramayana and Mahabharatha, were “Ghosh” and “Gram”. The former were bigger in size and the latter smaller. They were administered by an official called the “Gramini”. He was generally appointed by the king and enjoyed a very high status not only in the public life of the village but also at the court of the king.⁶ Kautilya, in his Arthshastra advised the king to constitute units of villages having either 100 or 105 families. There would be centres of ten villages, two hundred villages, four hundred villages and eight hundred villages. These centres would be respectively known as ‘Sangrahan’, ‘Karvatik’, ‘Drona Mukh’ and ‘Sthaneeya’, Town was termed as ‘Pura’. Its chief was ‘Nagrik’. Local bodies were free from any interference from the king’s side.⁷

In the Gupta administration the lowest administrative unit was village. According to historians under the Cholas “the largest administrative division the mandala which was subdivided into valanadus or into nadus and kottoms. The lowest administrative units were the Kurram (union of village) and grama, each under its own headman who was assisted by assemblies.

Under the Muslim regime the traditional face of Panchayat started changing itself. But the new ruling system did not change much outwardly. Tuglaks had instructed their men especially not to interfere in the working of Panchayat and also not to harm them.⁸ But in the Mughal period, because of battles and the exploitation by land revenue officials, there was a decline in the power of Panchayats. The system of providing justice directly by the Muslim rulers was another reason for the decline of this system. This was a very crucial time for the existence of Panchayats.

With the passage of time casteism and feudalistic system of governance under Mughal rule in the medieval period slowly erosion of the self-government in villages started. A new class of feudal chiefs and revenue collectors (zamindars) emerged between the ruler and the people. It was the main reason which ended up in the stagnation and decline of self-government in villages.

DURING BRITISH RULE

Regarding to the ancient Panchayat system, Sir Charles Metcalfe, a British Governor in India during the 19th century, called them ‘Little Republics’ having nearly everything they want within themselves and almost independent of foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing

else last.⁹ During the period of British colonial rule, the district collector and district administration was identified to be the effective unit of decentralised administration in the last quarter of the 18th century. After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 a major revolt of the Indians against British colonialism, the direct rule of the British Crown over India was formalised in 1858.¹⁰

When Indian nationalists were demanding autonomy and democracy at the lowest level, the colonial government sought to meet this demand by offering concession at the lowest level, by giving powers of self-government to Panchayats in rural areas and, Municipalities in urban areas, under various enactments. In this way Viceroy Lord Mayo’s Resolution in 1870 gave impetus on decentralisation of power to bring out administrative efficiency in meeting people’s demand and to add to the finances of colonial regime. It was a mile stone in the evolution of colonial policy towards local self government. In his resolution Lord Mayo said: “Local interest, supervision and care are necessary for success in the management of funds devoted to education, medical charity and local public works. The operation of this resolution in its full meaning and integrity will afford opportunities for the development of self-government, for strengthening municipal institutions and for the association of natives and Europeans to a greater extent than before, in the administration of affairs.”¹¹ But there was no comparable development of a local self-governing institution in rural areas up to the year 1871. This scheme was having stimulating effect on the development of local self-governing institutions in both urban and rural areas. It was implicit in decentralisation as then conceived that the importance was given to the ‘local’ rather than ‘self-government’. In this way the rural areas were ignored and the development of local government institutions was basically to provide relief to the imperial finances and serve the British interests.

The next remarkable step in the development of local self-government was Lord Ripon’s Resolution of 1882. This resolution recognised the twin considerations of local governments (a) political education and (b) administrative efficiency.¹² The resolution makes use of intelligent class of public-spirited men whom it is not only bad policy but sheer waste of power of fail to utilize. Mathews called them the Magna Carta of local democracy in India.¹³ The Ripon Resolution which focused on towns provided for local government consisting of a huge majority of elected non –official members and presided over by a non-official chief person. This resolution met with



resistance from colonial administrators. The development of local self government was reluctant with only half-hearted steps received in setting up municipal bodies. Rural decentralization remained a neglected area of administration reform.

Later on the Royal Commission on Decentralization (1909) reassessing the working of the Local District Board in the different provinces in the nation and realised the defect of the boards. According to the commission unrepresentative character and inadequate powers of these bodies had not been a success, "The want of success of the existing system" said the report seems have hitherto not possessed real powers, secondly that lack of due representation of minorities and genuine reluctance of large land-owners and other persons of high social position to submit themselves to the vote of an ordinary territorial constituency.¹⁴

In its opinion the Royal Commission to remove the defects of the board's constitution suggested creation of a genuine electorate consisting of the members of the village Panchayats and recommended the formation of village Panchayat and reconstitution of the local boards where they had been eradicated, so that local self-government might be grown up from the bottom. These recommendations were accepted by the Indian government in its resolution on local self-government of 1915 and to avoid the slow progress of strengthening the local bodies the Government of India passed another resolution in 1918.

The resolution states: "The object of local self-government is to train the people in the management of their own local affairs and the political education of this sort must, in the main, take precedence on considerations of departmental efficiency. It follows from this that local bodies should be as representative as possible of the people whose affairs they are called upon to administer, that their authority in the matter entrusted should be real and not nominal and that they should not be subjected to unnecessary control, should learn by making mistakes and profiting by them."¹⁵

The following characteristics were enshrined in the resolution

- Revival of Panchayat in the village
- Larger elective mainstream for local government bodies.
- Requisite of extension of franchise, for providing broad-based local bodies.
- Provision of an elected president of the local government by the public.
- Power to entail taxes and sanctioning of works as well as budgetary

- Powers should be vested in the local bodies.

The constant development of the local bodies suffered a set back with the outbreak of the Second World War and the entire powers of the provinces were vested in the hands of governors and they were exercising them till 1946. The most important conclusion that materialises from this survey of local government is that these were the creation of the Government. They did not rise out of the ancient village communities. The new local bodies, created as an agency of the government for a different purpose and these were not voluntary through any compulsion imposed by religion, caste, and local usage. In reality until 1947, nothing real was implemented as the British were not concerned with decentralized democracy but they were aiming for colonial objectives. An important off-shoot of this influential trend was that spates of legislations were witnessed in the wake of the Montague-Chelmsford reforms establishing village Panchayats, from 1919-1940. In this period the most significant development was the 'establishment of village Panchayats in number of provinces mainly by 1925 eight provinces had passed Panchayats acts by 1926, six native states had also passed Panchayats acts. The provincial autonomy under the India Government Act, 1935 created the evolution of Panchayats in India. Popularly elected governments in provinces enacted legislations to further democratize institution of local self-government.¹⁶ Whatever the committees or their recommendations a hierarchical administrative structure based on supervision and control evolved, in spite of the British working towards centralization rather than decentralization.

II. Conclusion

India has identified itself as the greatest democratic country all over the world by instituting the concept of decentralization of power through the Panchayath Raj system which has strong roots in its ancient history. The administrative system of local self-government still impacts more on the legislature, and executive today. Even our father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhiji highly influenced by the ancient concept Gram Sabha whose approach to India's rural development is holistic and is an integral part of his philosophy of respect for a human being, and dislikes exploitation and injustice. on this basis of historical background our government system established Panchayati Raj System all over the country which strengthen the Gandhiji vision that "independence must be at the



bottom”, Thus every village can have republic having full power to rural people by its existence.

END NOTES

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