India is a country of villages. Panchayati Raj system has influenced the village life extensively as one of the most important units of democratic decentralisation. Decentralisation of power is nothing but transfer of power from one tier of governance to another and, in same way, from one segment of population to another. Power moves from the dominant to the oppressed, men to women, caste Hindus to Dalits, upper castes to lower castes and bureaucrats to people’s representatives. Power will not move on its own. It has to be made move. So a driving force is needed. The task is not so easy as may be envisaged, particularly in an extremely unequal society.\(^1\) The 73\(^{rd}\) and 74\(^{th}\) Amendments to the Constitution of India have generated a discussion on the subject of ‘Decentralization of Powers’. Seventy-third Constitutional Amendment Act, “Empowering People for Prosperity”, brings out a significant change in the attitude, behaviour and performance of the rustic folk in India.\(^2\)

No programme and plan can materialize until and unless we make the villagers as partners of these programmes. More so, the people have been oriented towards developing syndrome of dependency, as a result of which they are expecting the government to interfere for each and everything. Peoples’ initiatives have almost come to a halt. In India, it is totally a forgotten factor. People were considered as a factor in the process of development.\(^3\)

Almost all states have enacted their Panchayat Laws to confirm the spirit and content of the 73\(^{rd}\) Constitutional amendments. Accordingly the new laws, elections have been conducted. Reservations has been provided to the excluded and marginalized groups. With these developments an impression has been created that the whole representative democracy has been transformed into a participatory democracy and the hitherto excluded have been included in governance and administration through the device of reservation of seats in Local Bodies.

The need of the hour is people’s awareness towards the changes that are brought about in the local bodies. They should understand the new opportunities for them through this act. The new act has come with new hopes. For the effective functioning of the new system, people are the masters of their destiny. The real sense of the bottom up planning has come true only now. District is the viable centre for planning. Panchayat leaders should be equipped in the art of planning, execution, monitoring and evaluation of schemes. Series of steps have been taken to popularize the new Panchayati Raj system among the masses. Training has been imparted to the officials in many national institutions.\(^4\)
It is observed that most states in India have implemented the new allowance only because pressure has been exerted on them either by the civil society or by the central government. So it has been perceived and termed as centralized centralization intended to weaken the state government. Many state governments perceived it as a policy to weaken the state government. Because already the power of the state governments are eroded despite fight against centralization of power. First, it reduced the power of the state government by empowering the local government in order to run the pressure from the State government to the central government and second, for effective delivery of services to the people. (5)

Due to this apprehension many states have reluctantly fulfilled the formalities to satisfy the Constitutional requirements. Beyond that, they have not looked at the spirit of the Constitutional Amendments. Hence, the functioning of Local Bodies could not take a concrete shape as envisaged in the Constitutional Amendments. Still it is in a budding stage. The Local Bodies have not been institutionalised as envisaged. It will take time to institutionalize the Local Bodies in India. Even this process of institutionalization will take place only because of the pressure from the society and the central government. In this regard, the central government has got this responsibility and equally the civil society has also got a responsibility to exert pressure on the state government to devolve powers. Further, people have not been mobilized to participate in the process of development and governance. Making the people participant in governance and development is the toughest task in developing countries. Making the poor participant in governance is unimaginable. So far the people have been oriented to think and behave as beneficiaries and if they are unable to get benefits from the government, they have to submit petitions to claim their benefits. It is in this way that people have been oriented. Necessarily people have to be engaged for development activities with a sense of responsibility. Further they have to claim their entitlements as rights for which they have to be empowered. The elected Local Body leaders have not been trained to have capacities to the level required. The bureaucracy has to be reoriented to the new assignment—"working with the elected representatives."

After the 73rd Amendment the objective of Panchayati Raj institutions has become multi-dimensional. Panchayati Raj institutions are playing an important role in social welfare, economic development, social life, political life and also religious and cultural life. They are also working for modernization and development-oriented village leadership. As a result, involvement of people in their programmes has increased.

The role of Panchayati Raj institutions in various fields in rural development can be described as follows:

(A) The importance of Panchayati Raj institutions in social life.

1. Social reforms
2. Panchayats are playing an important role in spreading education which has resulted in increase in literacy.
3. Panchayats are running a number of programmes for child welfare, providing mid-day meals in schools, sports, libraries etc.
4. To tackle the problem of bonded labour, Panchayats are playing an important role.
5. For the welfare of women, Panchayats are doing a lot of work.
6. Implementation of prohibition of liquor and other intoxicants
7. Settling of controversies and disputes.

(B) Public welfare
1. Improvement in public health;
2. Cleanliness related jobs;
3. Transport facilities;
4. Entertainment facilities;
5. Help during natural calamities;
6. Providing fresh water, construction of wells etc.;

(C) Importance of Panchayats in Economic Life
To improve the economic conditions and progress; Panchayats are contributing in many ways.
1. Improvement in agriculture;
2. Arrangement for irrigation;
3. Development of industry;
4. Improving condition of landless labour;
5. Improving breeds of animals;
6. Encouraging animal husbandry;
7. Developing cooperative institutions;
8. Development of handicrafts and small-scale industry;
9. Arranging fodder,
10. Afforestation;
11. Decide buying and selling;
12. Maintenance of public property;
13. Arranging markets and ghats.

(D) Roll of Panchayats in Political Life
1. Developing village leadership;
2. Political awareness among the people of villages;
3. Developing feeling of peace and security;
4. Helping administration;
5. Providing justice;
6. Explaining importance of vote and right to vote;
7. Educating people about the meaning of citizenship;
8. Training them to solve their problems themselves;
9. Creating awareness among villagers about democracy;
10. To see that leadership has representation from all sections of the society;

Impact of Panchayati Raj System on Rural Life.
Panchayati Raj System as a means of democratic decentralization has a deep impact on the rural life of India. The impact of this system based on various studies in the rural areas are given below:
1. Changes have taken place in the caste structure. Villages where all castes were living as separate groups in the past are now coming closer and with the lessening of negative aspects of casteism, a process of cooperation has started. Evelyn Wood has clarified that as a result of the Panchayati Raj System, villagers have now got the right to vote, and different castes now get many chances to get closer.

Dr. Srinivas has stated that in the early days of Panchayati Raj, lower castes, especially Harijans, experienced evaluation in their status and self-respect.
2. Power structure in villages is acquiring a new phase. Now the power structure in villages is not confined to older persons only.

3. Leadership in villages is now with the people who come from the middle class or those who have no traditional family background in the power structure. According to G R Reddy, village leadership is increasing in favour of younger people and political ambitions have weakened the traditional base related to caste, religion, and kinship.

4. Many studies reveal that a definite change is taking place in the criteria for leadership. Andre Beteille, in his studies, observes that political power in villages and outside villages is not connected with the ownership of land and, up to certain extent; it is also independent of any caste and group. Possibly the important factor in this charge is the numerical support.

5. Spread of education in villages is mainly taking place due to Panchayati Raj;

6. Panchayati Raj has lessened the importance of Caste Panchayats;

7. Villagers receive health and medical facilities;

8. Necessary arrangements have been made for housing for poor people;

9. Increase in groups in, confrontation and individualism;

10. Sense of responsibility has increased among the villagers;

11. Due to various programmes related to Panchayati Raj system; there is an improvement in the life style and per capita income has increased;

12. There is an increase in the movement (social and professional) of villagers;

13. There is a decrease in the exploitation of villagers by the landlords, money-lenders and upper castes;

14. Traditional professions now have no importance after the implementation of Panchayati Raj;

15. Host system now exists as a symbol only;

16. A new social and economic order has risen due to Panchayati Raj and new classes have appeared. As a result, social structure is also changing:

17. Participation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Backward Classes has increased in rural development. With the introduction of new Panchayati Raj system;

18. There is an increase of women’s participation in leadership;

19. Legal system has also improved;

20. There is an increase in the administrative power of the villagers;

21. Due to Panchayati Raj, the influence of bureaucracy has come down;

22. If the new Panchayati Raj system has resulted in increased participation of lower and backward castes on the one hand, it has also created discontentment among the higher castes on the other. They point out that what is the use of this system when all the powers are reserved for the lower castes. It has given birth to a new dimension of difference among different castes. It is now higher castes versus backwards, versus Scheduled Castes and Tribes and it has given rise to a new type of groupism in the villages;

23. With the greater participation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and Backward Classes and Women, there is increase in the participation of uneducated, untrained
people in power. Because of this, practically to a greater extent, the power equation is still in the hands of higher castes.

24. Role of political parties has increased in the village leadership;

25. The new Panchayati Raj system, which has increased participation of women in power, has helped in the breaking down of traditional joint family system.

With the passage of 73rd Amendment Act, 1992, which became law on April 24, 1993, peoples’ participation in the process of planning, decision-making, implementation and delivery system in rural India has been recognized. It is, therefore, worthy to note that the Government is now very keen to involve local people and Panchayati Raj institutions for implementing this scheme and make them responsible to achieve the underlying objectives. In India rural local government comprises 2,32,278 village Panchayats; 5,905 intermediate Panchayats, and 499 district Panchayats, making a total of 2,38,682 at all the three levels. Total number of elected representatives of Panchayats at various levels are 2.92 million of which about one million are women and a large majority of them are first-timers. Impact of the provisions of the 73rd Amendment Act concerning reservation for women and disadvantaged sections of the community has been that it has improved women’s awareness and perception and had created an urge in them to assert for their rightful share in the decision-making exercise at the local level. (6)

For the first time in the history of Post-Independence India, Panchayati Raj institutions are expected to be directly involved in this scheme in such a way that they would implement the scheme as an integral part of rural development plan. Gram Panchayats and Gram Sabhas would decide types of work to be undertaken in the village and use of funds earmarked under the scheme. Gram Sabhas would discuss and approve this plan. Gram Sabhas would also supervise and monitor the implementation of the programme.

While it is laudable that Panchayati Raj institutions are now roped in the implementation of the scheme which concerns to them. It is worthwhile to understand the present status of their functioning and initiating the most desired and essential components viz, participation, empowerment and capacity building of Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayats through need based training and evolving human resources development policy. Following studies pinpoint the immediate need for this.

Political decentralization does not mean participation only in the electoral process. It calls for active involvement of elected functionaries, Gram Sabhas, women and other marginalized groups in the functioning of rural local self-government institutions and pursuit of collective decision-making process, and their own transparent governance.

Effective planning at the grassroots level can only be envisaged if a large number of Gram Sabha members actively participate in the planning process. At present 50 per cent members (women) are virtually remaining outside the Gram Sabha meetings because they are not allowed to participate by their male family members and another big chunk mostly SC/ST and other weaker sections do not attend due to some compulsions. These members are less motivated to attend meetings because they do not except any gain from such meetings but lose their one-day wage.

No doubt 73rd Amendment Act has given a new role and responsibility to the Panchayati Raj institutions in India. However, the most crucial
and significant drawback/deficiency in the Act has been that, the functions and powers of Panchayati Raj institutions have been left to the discretion of the state governments, instead of having been clearly specified and defined. In fact the Article 243G should have been like this “the legislature of a State should, by law, endow the Panchayats with such powers and authority as shall be necessary to enable them to function as institution of self-government and should contain provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon Panchayats at the appropriate level with respect to the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice and the implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to the matters listed in the 11th Schedule. Thus, the Article 243G of the Constitution should have envisaged Panchayats as “institutions of self-government” and should have given full functional, financial, and administrative autonomy in their working.\(^7\)

Underlying the possible role of Panchayati Raj institutions in effective implementation of Bharat Nirman Programme at grassroot level, we strongly feel that the proposed objectives of the programme could be achieved in the stipulated time if Panchayats be made as institutions of self-government i.e. they should enjoy functional, financial and administrative autonomy at their level and the plan formulation of these components should emerge from the Gram Sabhas for onward consideration in the Gram Panchayat. Gram Sabha is very important to decide projects under the six components of the Bharat Nirman and their proper monitoring and evaluation.\(^8\)

The very character of our democracy can be changed from representative only through the direct participation of people in the Gram Sabha. Gram Sabhas have been bestowed with enormous power in the decision making process. The evidence from the state suggests that people’s participation has remained low. Efforts to make the grassroot level institutions viable and significant have remained a mere formality. Nevertheless, a process of political socialization has begun within the society. The bureaucratic resistance is visible in many matters. The stereotype and routine mindset of local bureaucracy has understood that the Panchayat will remain forever and the bureaucracy has to work within the changed scenario. The process of financial devolution from the states could not get momentum despite creation of State Finance Commissions to allocate funds to Panchayats. Panchayats are still dependent on state governments for funding. The untied funds are very limited and the resource generation at local level is also not very encouraging. A perusal of a decade of functioning of Panchayati Raj has put forward a mix scenario with enough evidence of positive movement and several hurdles. Nevertheless, a hope for the best can be expected at this juncture.\(^9\)

In the post 73rd Amendment phase, Indian States have responded with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Orissa responded with innovativeness and remarkable commitment to making the system sustainable and successful. The State’s effort to institutionalize the system is evident in the number of amendments that were effected by the Government to the State Panchayat Act as a dynamic response to the problems at the ground level. During the implementation of the Panchayati Raj system, Orissa has faced several opportunities and difficulties. The experience of the State is extremely rich and provides vital insights into the process of institutionalizing Panchayati Raj. In the negative side, the major
impediments include the bureaucratic resistance, functional problems, political and institutional challenges, financial inadequacy, and mismatch of capacities and roles. On the other hand, it involves the grassroot level people in a democratic and participative governance system, an involvement that unleashes the stored energy of the people.\(^{(10)}\)

**People’s Participation through Grama Sabha: the Direct Democratic Device**

Participation cannot be imposed on the people from above; it should be voluntary and based on will to participate. Here by participation we mean direct involvement of people and not indirect involvement through their representatives. This is because of the existing socio-economic and political structure of the society in most of the developing countries. The so called “representatives of the people are most likely to represent the rich, rather than the interest of the poor majority. However, in such a large country like ours, direct participation of the people is possible only at local level and as such our focus of discussion is limited to direct participation at local level. This is also in consonance with the assumptions that an equitable sharing of the benefits of development by poor is possible only when there is equitable participation by them in the process of development. By doing so, people can influence the decisions at the higher levels through their joint efforts and common voice. This may be termed as “bottom up approach to integrated rural development.”

However, under the existing social system, equitable participation of the poor in the process of development can be regarded as a gradual process. The process can be accelerated only when the poor become conscious on their rights and privileges and build up strength to achieve justice for themselves in the sharing of benefits of development.

**Peoples’ participation or involvement can better be understood as:**

1. participation in Decision-Making;
2. participation in implementation of development programmes and projects;
3. participation in monitoring and evaluation of development programmes and projects and
4. participation in sharing the benefits of development.

Presently there is no actual participation of the rural poor in any kind of decision-making at the village, block, and district levels. The government planning is defective as the normal procedure is that the guidelines for resources utilization, budget allocation to different sectors and regions and the programmes and projects for area development are prepared by central government. However, direct participation of the poor in decision making is possible only at the village level. Even at the village level, discussion regarding community development projects such as drinking water, social construction etc, are confined in the hands of small caucus of so called village elites. These schemes must be discussed freely in the open assemblies in the presence of all the villagers so that poor sections have some say in the decision-making and execution of these schemes.

The legislative empowerment of the Gram Sabha in India is a political development of utmost importance because it marks the clearest break from the most dominant political orthodoxy of this century. This recent faith in Gram Sabha is based on the belief that the objective conditions of the poor are directly involved in the process of formulation and implementation of decisions affecting their lives.\(^{(11)}\)
At least two meetings of Gram Sabha should be held in a year. But in some States like Orissa, frequency of holding meetings of the Gram Sabha four times in a year. More specifically, most of the SC representatives are facing the problem of non-cooperation from the official and upper castes / dominant sections of their Gram Panchayats. These problems have not only been obstructing developmental works but also not enabling elected representatives to participate in the Panchayats. This problems are not confined to Orissa only but exists everywhere in different degree of intensity. (12)

However, experiences gained so far also show that the affirmative action for women and marginalized group in local governments has resulted in social identities and political awareness among them and created an urge to become a part of mainstream - political, economic, and social life. After initial clashes between higher castes and lower castes, there are no indications of social cohesion at local levels. The political space given to marginalized sections has to some extent dealt a blow to the asymmetrical social structure and given greater space for their participation and involvement in decision-making at the local level. (13)

On the basis of the above, it may be said that the Panchayats at village, block, and district levels are close to the masses and provide ample opportunities to local people to solve their problems collectively in a participatory manner and thereby strengthen the process of human development. The successful experiment of participatory planning through mobilization of several thousand of people in the implementation of the Ninth Five Year Plan in Kerala is an unique example of these and become household name across the country. Similar sorts of experiments have to be initiated by other States also for making Panchayats the effective vehicle for fulfilling expectations and aspirations of the people.

The State government transferred nearly all the powers previously exercised by Gram Panchayats to Gram Sabhas through the introduction of Gram Swaraj on 26th January 2001. It has thus gone from representative democracy at the grassroots to direct democracy. More than 60 countries worldwide have experimented with some sort of democratic decentralization over the last 15 years or so. But evidence currently available indicates that none has gone for direct democracy at the local level to the extent that West Bengal has now done. Gram Sabha or People’s Forum has always been an integral part of the concept of a Gram Panchayat.

The significance of Gram Sabha has not as yet rubbed upon the villagers. Their eyes are still focused on the Gram Panchayat as the hub of all activity. Not only this, even Panchayat officials and the local elites have evinced little interest in the functioning of the Gram Sabha. After Gram Swaraj, all the powers are transferred to Gram Sabhas instead to Gram Panchayats. At Gram Sabha, committees are formed to look into different issues. A Gram Kosh is also constituted which will include both cash and kind. Conceptually the Gram Swaraj system is a form of direct democracy where the people are directly held accountable and responsible to deal with all local issues. Though it is the beginning of an experiment, the evidence suggests that it has all the potential to perform the roles assigned to it, provided the people at local level are made aware and understand the multifaceted role of Gram Sabha.

Conclusion

The whole exercise of decentralization of powers is equivalent to that of transfer of power
from the British to the Indians. The task of doing such an exercise is not so easy as it has to be carried out internally within our society. It requires a movement of the masses. For mobilizing the masses for the new task, the leaders are to be trained. Different stakeholders are to be prepared perceptively. Without support of the civil society organizations, the full potentials of the decentralization of powers can not be harnessed and hence preparing the civil society is the need of the hour.

References:
2. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
6. Ibid.

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