Orissa experienced first land settlement during the last decade of 12th century. The second settlement was initiated by emperor Akbar, when one-third of the produce was fixed as the tax. Maratha rule since 1751 introduced multiple tax system. The total revenue of Orissa was 11 lakhs. The State came under British rule in 1803. The year following, land settlement was further examined to raise further revenue. Zamindari was put to auction. This created Land Boards in the State. The Great Famine of 1866 was a severe blow to the continuing village administration.

Colonial administration set up a Commission in 1880 to investigate famine in India which understood the importance of rural local self-governance. This helped introduction of local self government. The Royal Commission (1907) laid emphasis on the establishment of Gram Panchayat. It recommended that the members of the village Panchayat should be elected by the villagers and village head be made Chairman of the Panchayat. The Reform Act (1919) provided that the provinces would legislate on Panchayats. Thus, among others the Bihar Local Self Government Act was enacted in 1920. Orissa was covered under this Act.

Orissa became a separate province in 1936. The only significant step in the decentralisation process came after independence in 1948 when the Orissa Gram Panchayats Act was passed. During the Chief Ministership of Sri Naba Krushna Choudhury a new innovative attempt was made through the Constitution of Anchal Sasan and Creation of Anchal Fund under the Orissa Estates Abolition Act of 1951. The Anchal Sasan Act (1955) intended to accord full powers to Anchal, a local authority which was at a higher level than the Gram Panchayat so that representatives of the villagers could have played visible role in the working of the system related to Public Health, Education, Agriculture, Cottage Industries etc.

The Anchal Sasan was designed to be a body corporate having fund raising out of land revenue, fees, tolls, cesses and taxes. Besides provision for Education Fund was made to finance educational programmes of the Sasan. The institutions of Anchal Sabha and Anchal Adhikari were made and it had its own cadre of officers to be paid out of Anchal Fund.

The Anchal Sasan Act was not implemented which prevented Orissa a pioneering role in the democratic decentralisation process much earlier to the Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report. But the painstaking role of Sri N.K.Choudhury cannot be forgotten.
The fate of Gram Panchayat during 1950s and early 1960s was under the mercy of several departments. Till 1956 it was under the Board of Revenue and the Revenue Department. There was a post of Superintendent of Panchayat which was abolished to facilitate an IAS cadre officer to become Director of Panchayats in the rank of Joint Secretary and later elevated to the rank of Additional Secretary. The auditing power was snatched away from Registrar and it was given to the Board of Revenue. The Panchayats came under the Department of Agriculture and Community Development in 1956 and then moved to the Political and Services Department which was under the Chief Minister. In December, 1959 it was placed under the Department of Planning and Coordination with a Secretary to head the Department.

The B.R.Mehta recommendations were given effect in the State. Both Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Acts were enacted. In July 1962 under the new, young and dynamic Chief Minister Sri Bijayananda Patnaik a new Department of Community Development and Panchayati Raj was created. The Panchayats, Samitis, Parishads and former District Boards came under its purview. The Panchayat wing was separated and it was kept under Commissioner, Panchayati Raj who also looked into functioning of the Community Development. Two posts of Directors from IAS cadre were also created. Afterwards the Commissioner post was abolished and the Departments were kept under one Secretary. Thus, the three-tier Panchayati Raj system introduced in Orissa took few years to get stabilised.

In 1967 Orissa came under Swatantra-Jana Congress coalition government. As a part of poll promise to end conflict between Parishad and Samiti, the State Legislature abolished the Parishad and a two-tier system was in operation. This enhanced the role and responsibilities of the Panchayat Samitis.

During late 1960s both plan regime and Panchayat dispensation were given low profile. Whereas the 5 year plan was given a holiday, there was visible stagnation followed by decline of the Panchayat system which was very dear to the people.

After the abolition of upper tier of PR system, the District Advisory Committees of which the Collector was the Member-Convenor started functioning. A non-official member is elected to preside in the DAC as and when it met. Besides the DAC there was district development committee presided over by the Collector. Both these bodies were largely attended by the district officers. In Orissa these were in violation of the B.R.Mehta Study Team observations.

The PR bodies in the State were criticised as inefficient and centres of nasty politics. They were replaced by bureaucratic wing of the government. According to analysts the PR institutions should not merely be judged by their efficiency in improving the administration but also by other factors such as instruments of political education and training in democracy. Efficient local government is one thing but efficient and representative local government is quite another. Even Jaya Prakash Narayan observed that the scheme of Panchayati Raj originally came not only from the motive of broadening the base of our democracy or laying the foundations of ‘participating democracy’, but also from the anxiety to obtain full public cooperation in the execution of development programmes.

Orissa, which introduced legislations on grassroot democratic bodies ahead of many states, could not retain the tempo. It somehow
relegated itself to the background for two decades including the second generation PR bodies suggested by Ashok Mehta.

Sri Bijayananda Patnaik, after a gap of 27 years, became Chief Minister in 1990. By that time attempts had been made at the national level to form a grassroots body so that the planning can operate from below. Ultimately, it was agreed that none other than the ageold Panchayat system with a new face and constitutional recognition can help twin objectives of equity and social justice to eradicate poverty and cause growth. The P.K. Thungon Committee recommended for such type of PR bodies. The governments under Rajiv Gandhi and V.P. Singh tried but ultimately it was PV Narasimha Rao's government which could initiate 72nd Constitutional Amendment Bill which became 73rd Constitution Amendment Act with effect from 24th April 1993.

But Orissa under Biju Patnaik acted ahead of the New Delhi initiative. 27 years ago a young Biju could create a pro-active government for democratic decentralisation. He had also introduced the concept of Panchayat industry and award to Samiti for visible industrial development. His short tenure prevented Panchayat System to get his dynamic vision and wisdom being translated into action.

He started a new slogan based action - work for village and respect for ladies. These were in-built into his democratic decentralisation model introduced and elections held in 1992. The three-tier PR body was in position with the restoration of Zilla Parishad. Three landmark legislations enacted in 1991 with many radical provisions and devolution of powers to the PR bodies to bring about rural development through people's participation and cooperation. Biju Babu realised that the devolution of power to the PRI's is a prerequisite for the development of rural Orissa.

He was a statesman with unbelievable optimion and always opined that the rural population's effective participation can change the face of Orissa. A new silent social revolution in village Orissa ushered under his able stewardship through one-third reservation for women in all the tiers of PR bodies. He also pressed for transfer of eight important departments like small scale industries, food processing, rural housing, poverty alleviation programme, women and child welfare, social welfare and public distribution system. Thus, the devolution of powers envisaged in the 73rd Amendment Act and the women empowerment scheme were already incorporated by visionary Biju Patnaik.

In Orissa, the 73rd Amendment Act and its important provisions were incorporated through conformatory legislation by J.B. Patnaik and fresh elections were held in 1997. Orissa has experienced regular elections for PR bodies in 2002 and 2007. The reorganisation of districts by Biju Patnaik increased the number of Zilla Parishad to 30. Now we have 314 Panchayat Samitis and 6234 Gram Panchayats in the State. Three State Finance Commissions have transacted their duties on devolution of funds to PR bodies. There is State Election Commission which impartially conducted elections to these institutions.

While making an analysis of origin and growth of PR Institutions, we cannot forget the seminal contributions made by late Naba Krushna Choudhury and late Biju Patnaik who not only realised the basic issues involved in the rural poverty, but also made serious attempts through institutional intervention to tackle the issue through people's participation and cooperation.

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