India's democratic structure has three levels of governance - national or federal, state or regional, and the grassroots level called the Panchayati Raj and Nagar Palika systems. The Panchayati Raj system covers the village, the tehsil and the district, and the Nagar Palika system serves towns and cities. If democracy means people's participation in running their affairs, then it is nowhere more direct, clear and significant than at the local level, where the contact between the people and their representatives, between the rulers and the ruled is more constant, vigilant and manageable. Lord Bryce said: "The best school of democracy and the best guarantee for its success is the practice of local self-government". Decentralisation is a prime mechanism through which democracy becomes truly representative and responsive. The democratic ideals of decentralization, development, and increased, continuous and active popular participation in the process of nation-building can be secured only through the working of an efficient system of local government. Without a well organized system of local government, no democratic political system can be expected to become stable and really developed.

**Panchayati Raj : An Evolutionary Perspective**

Panchayats as institutional vehicles for development have been part of the Indian system for ages. In ancient times, Panchayati Raj system prevailed during the Chola period. In fact, Rippon's Resolution of 1881 and 1882 can be taken to be the origin of modern local government in India. It was seen as Gram Swaraj by Mahatma Gandhi. Interestingly, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was not in favour of the Panchayati Raj institutions; yet, he agreed to give it a place in the Constitution of India in Part IV through Directive Principles of State Policy.

In the year following the independence (1947), Prime Minister Nehru inaugurated the Community Development Programme (CDP) on the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi (October 2) in 1952.

The CDP was followed by the National Extension Service in 1953. NES blocks were earmarked as the lowest unit of development of administration. But both the programmes had a flaw: neither of the two was free from the control of bureaucracy. This shortcoming prompted the government to appoint a committee headed by Balwant Ray Mehta in 1957. The committee recommended a three-tier system of Panchayati
Raj from village to the district level - Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level and Zilla Parishad at the district level.

As per the Balwant Ray Mehta Committee Scheme, Panchayati Raj was launched on 2nd October 1957 in Nagaur district of Rajasthan. Andhra Pradesh and many state governments followed Rajasthan. Yet, by the mid-sixties the hype to strengthen the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) gave way to a growing tendency of centralization and the PRIs descended to ground zero.

In 1977, the Janata Government tried to revive the PRIs. Accordingly a committee headed by Ashok Mehta was appointed to review the working of the PRIs.

The committee suggested a minor change in the Balwant Ray Mehta Scheme. The three-tier system of PRIs was to be replaced by a two-tier i.e. Zilla Parishad at the district level and Mandal Panchayat (consisting of a number of villages) below it. In addition, the committee also recommended the creation of Nyaya Panchayat.

However, owing to the disintegration of the Janata Government in 1980, the recommendations of the Asoka Mehta Committee could not be implemented. (Though Karnataka Govt. established mandal Panchayats). For the next five years or so, no progress was made.

One committee under the chairmanship of G.V.K. Rao reported in 1985, suggesting appropriate improvement in the representative character and strengthening of the capability of the people's representatives and administrative personnel in the PRIs. In 1986, the L.M. Singhvi Committee of the Department of Rural Development, Government of India, recommended constitutional status for Panchayati Raj. In July-August 1989 the then Congress government introduced the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill with a view to streamline the Panchayati Raj. However, the bill was defeated in the Rajya Sabha. V.P. Singh government also tried to push a bill in 1990 on Panchayati Raj, it lapsed with the dissolution of the Lok Sabha.

**Panchayati Raj under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment**

At last P.V. Narasimha Rao's government enacted the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which was passed by Parliament on 23rd December 1992 and became effective on 24th April 1993. This Act has added Part - IX to the Constitution of India. It is entitled as 'The Panchayats' and consists of provisions from articles 243 to 243-0. The Act has given a practical shape to Article 40 of the Constitution and gives a constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Constitutional Amendment ensures, a three tier structure at the zilla, block and village levels, an election commission to hold election periodically, a state level finance commission to find out ways and means to increase resources for local bodies, reservation of 1/3 of seats in all the position of the three tier for women, reservation of seats for SC/ST in proportion to their population in all the positions of the three tiers, establishment of Gram Sabha for enhancing people's participation for their own development, and establishment of planning committee for local bodies; and an earmarked list of 29 items under 11th schedule.

Now, the world's most populous democracy has the constitutionally mandated 2,32,332 village panchayats, 6,000 intermediate panchayats and 534 zilla panchayats. The three tiers of these elected bodies consist of as many as 27, 75, 858 village Panchayat members, 1,44,491 members of intermediate panchayats.
and 15,067 members of zilla panchayats. This is the broadest representative base which exists in any country of the world. (India Panchayati Raj Report, 2001, NIRD). Besides breadth, depth of these figures can be gauged from the fact that more than fifty percent of these grassroot representatives are from the downtrodden and marginalized sections of the society, namely women (one third of the total), the SCs, STs and OBCs (as per their proportion of the population).

This kind of constitutional provision has created a scope for accomplishing development with social justice, which is mandate of the new Panchayat Raj system. The new system brings all those who are interested to have voice in decision making through their participation in Panchayat Raj Institutions. The Panchayati Raj system is basis for the "Social Justice" and "Empowerment" of weaker section on which the development initiative have to be built upon for achieving overall, human welfare of the society.

Problems and Prospects of Panchayati Raj Institutions

To reach a viable Panchayat three hurdles have to be overcome. These have remained what they always have been.

First, is the domination of the bureaucracy over the PRIs. The agent for implementation of all major programmes (CDP or IRDP, to name a few) has been the bureaucracy. Various parallel bodies such as the DRDA have grossly undermined the importance of the PRIs. Either they have to be disbanded or made accountable to the PRIs.

Second, is the lack of adequate financial resources to carry out the administration. Grant-in-aids is the major component of the PRIs revenue. This need to be supplemented with the adequate collection of taxes by the PRIs and a compulsory transfer of some of the state government's revenue on the recommendation of the state finance commission duly established for the purpose.

The last hurdle is related to the lack of training programmes for the participants of the PRIs. Without proper training, they lack the direction and know-how of the administration.

To conclude, admitting that the PRIs in India are weak and assuming that it will not be smooth sailing for them even after the 73rd Amendment, they do have an important role to play in India's development. Already, the PRIs have several achievements to their credit. These institutions have enhanced the political consciousness of the people and initiated a process of democratic seed drilling in the Indian soil. What the government should attempt now is gradually to delimit the role of bureaucracy, to promote local leadership, to remove structural deficiencies, encourage PRIs to strengthen their financial resources, bring in effective coordination among these institutions and between PRIs and the state governments and give them effective powers in relation to planning and its implementation. For this, the will to decentralise and delegate, on the part of the state governments, is a prerequisite. Action on these lines is the least that is expected of the rulers proclaiming their faith in and loyalty to Gandhian principles.

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