

Panchayati Raj and Biju Babu

Dr. Tushar Kanta Pattanaik

Panchayati Raj in Orissa has a hoary past. Orissa had the tradition of community organization in different forms since very ancient times. The Moghul and the British administrations were mostly responsible for the deterioration of the traditional community organization in the State. After independence, the Constitution of India in the Directive Principles of State Policy declared "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." In Orissa, village panchayat, District Boards, and Local Boards were formed as the first stage of democratic decentralization. The land Revenue Committee in their



report to the state government in 1948 recommended a scheme of "*Anchal Sasan*" as the process of democratic decentralization of administration after working of the Gram Panchayats Act. *Anchal Sasan* was the plan of

setting up a local authority at a higher level than the Gram Panchayats so that popular representatives would have a decisive voice in the activities in the different fields of development.

The Orissa Anchal Sasan Act was passed covering the recommendations of the Land Revenue and Land Tenure Committee in 1956. This Act provided to divide the entire state into certain administrative units called Anchals. Each with an Anchal Sabha as the administrative authority consisting of Anchal Sasan and Anchal Adhikari. During the Chief Ministership of Naba Krushna Choudhury, the Anchal Sasan Act was passed. He was very enthusiastic to implement this progressive scheme but to his bed luck in the same

year 1956, when the Anchal Sasan Act was passed, Mehta committee appointed by the Central Government submitted their report of a scheme of decentralization of administration. It was a three-tier scheme-Zilla Parishad, Panchayat

Samiti and Gram Panchayat and started working successfully in an auspicious note.

Arrival of Biju Babu

When Biju Patnaik took over the reign of administration in sixties, he strived passionately for vitalizing the Panchayati Raj System, which according to him is the basis of Indian democracy. He described each Sarpanch as Chief Minister of his Panchayat. His policy had been to progressively delegate more and more functions and to fully assist the three tiers of the system of administration to develop into effective popular institutions for implementation of various development works, schemes and programmes. On November 20, 1961, Biju had given a historic speech in Orissa Legislative Assembly on Panchyati Raj which was highly applauded by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In his monumental speech he said. ... "This is a movement of building up leaders of men from the lowest rung of our society and it is not going to be easy. It is almost a people's movement, we are only trying to give it some hope, some other direction or some authorities. But the movement can only succeed if we give that authority to the people right down from the bottom of our social ladder who can exercise effective leadership. It is a big question and we have in this house got to think with far greater sympathy and prospective looking at a distant future and planning from now how you want the future to be built."

Works started with feverish zeal and renewed vigour to restore Panchayati Raj in Orissa under dynamic leadership of Biju Patnaik. He made sincere efforts to vitalize Panchyati Raj. The implementation of the Community Development Programme was fully entrusted to the Panchayat Samitis in 210 blocks. The management of primary schools including sevashrams of the Tribal and Rural Welfare

Department was transferred to Panchayat Samitis. Other programmes entrusted to the samitis include grain golas, local development works, rural communications and drinking water supply. Even under loan scheme like "Pisciculture" and "other remunerative scheme" of the Gram Panchayat Department, the Parishads and Samitis had been associated for distribution of funds allotted under this scheme. First and second prizes of Rs.50,000 and Rs.25,000 respectively were awarded by the Government to 34 Gram Panchayats every year and the prize money was meant to be utilized as the share in the Industrial Co-Operative for starting Panchayat Industries. Shares had been given to the three-tiers of Panchayati Raj Administration for maintenance of their administration.

One of the most novel experiment introduced by Mr. Biju Patnaik was the concept of Panchayat Industry in 1962 for rural Industrialisation. The State Government initially started 48 Training-cum-Production centers which were being maintained under block programmes and converted them into Panchayat Industries. These industries include tile units and small crystal sugar units. It was related to the scheme known as Gram Panchayat Prize Competition, which was introduced by the State government in 1962. But unfortunately, after his exit, his vision on Panchayati Raj was not emulated by successors.

More Pragmatic in Second Tenure

Biju in his second spell as Chief Minister of Orissa was more determined and exhibited sheer self confidence and unremitting zeal to streamline Panchayati Raj. Recalling his abortive bid for rejuvenating Panchayati Raj in sixties, he once said "32 years back, when I was the Chief Minister of the State, I got incredible support from them. At that time I tried to assimilate every people

of village into democratic ideals. For this numerous steps had been taken and various new laws were passed. Unfortunately the political storms of the sixties could not able to accomplish this noble mission. So when I am ruminating about the past I feel hapless and realized a lot has remained to be done".

In fact under his leadership Orissa became the first state to streamline the Panchayati Raj and Local-self Government Institutions to make democracy Participatory and not the aristocracy of a few nitpicking intellectual. For him "Let the people rule themselves, let them check out plans/schemes for the improvement of their respective areas and let them execute their plans" was the hallmarks of Panchayati Raj administration. According to Biju Babu the goals of Panchayati Raj cannot be fructified unless there is proper devolution of financial powers to Panchayats. His Government made concerted effort for appointment to a special finance commission to look after the domain of devolution of financial powers.

Biju was most emphatic about the participation of women in the Panchyati Raj system. He announced that for the first time in the history of independent India, women will be given 33% reservation in the three-tier Panchyati Raj institutions. And true to his word, he saw to it that the Orissa Zilla Parishad Act of 1991 and the Gram Panchyat Samiti Amendment Act of 1992 were passed by the Orissa Assmebly that provided for 33% of reservation for women including SC and ST women. So for the first time, more than 28 thousand women were elected to various Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishads. It was further provided that one third of Zilla Parishads would have exclusively women chairpersons. In the case of the Panchayat Samities and the Gram Panchayats, one of the

two office-bearers, i.e Chairpersons or Vice-Chairpersons must be woman. Biju also emphasised that all the elected representatives of the PRIs should receive adequate political and administrative training. It must be pointed out that Biju Patnaik's policies on reservation for women were followed by many other state governments in India that culminated in the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts to the Constitution of India, which provided for similar provisions for rural and urban local bodies respectively. Under his leadership, the Orissa Gram Panchayat Act, 1964 and the Orissa Panchyat Samiti Act, 1959 were amended on 1991, 1992 and 1993. The Orissa Zilla Parishad Act was also enacted in 1991 to constitute Zilla-Parishads at the district level. This Act was extensively amended to bring it in conformity with the provision of the Constitution Amendment Act, 1992. It also adds to the credit of Mr. Patnaik that after a lapse of eight years, it conducted elections to Gram Panchayats in the year 1992 for 5264 Gram Panchayats in the State. Some salient features of Gram Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishad deserve mention as these were the out come of the amendment made during Biju's Chief ministership. In case of Gram Panchayat three mentionable points are:

- a) 'The post of Naib Sarpanch is reserved for the women members, if the Sarpanch is a male'
- b) 'One third of the total wards are reserved for women candidates including S.C and S.T candidates.
- c) Gram Panchayats have been vested with the power of supervision of women and child welfare programme, social forestry, rural housing, small scale industries and public distribution system to other normal functions.

As regards Panchayat Samities the following feature deserves mention:

- a) One third of the total seats are reserved for women members including women members of S.C and S.T. category.
- b) Provision has been made to reserve the office of the Vice- Chairman for a woman in case the chairman is male.

The Zilla Parishad ceased to exist in the state with effect from 1968. The state government enacted the Orissa Zilla Parishad Act, 1991, in order to transfer the power of planning, control and supervision of developmental activities to Zilla Parishads at the district level. Obviously, credit is due to Biju Patnaik for reviving Zilla Parishads and endowing them with power in district level. After the enforcement of the Constitution Amendment Act, 1992, it became necessary to amend the Orissa Zilla Parishad Act, 1991. The following important necessary changes were made:-

- a) Reservation of seats for S.C and S.T members has to be done on the basis of their ratio to the total population of the districts.
- b) One third of the seats are to be reserved for women members including S.T and S.C. women.
- c) The post of Vice-President should be reserved for women if the president is not a woman.

The State Law has provided that no person having more than two children will be eligible to contest in the election to Zilla Parishad. Similarly persons having more than one spouse have been disqualified from contesting the election. The government headed by Biju Patnaik also set up quite a few commissions of finance for the Panchayati Raj institutions in order to offer methods and mechanisms for resources funding thus unleashing some genuine purpose to the decentralization of power.

Thus Orissa under Biju Patnaik made meteoric progress in the field of Panchayati Raj, whose contribution was prodigious. When his government held elections after a lapse of eight years, it shows Biju's commitment to restore status and dignity for this valuable unit of self-government at the grass-root level. Biju's inspiration, no doubt rejuvenated the Panchayati Raj and local self-government institutions to function as meaningful units of self-government by endowing them with power and authority in the process of development.

Dr. Tushar Kanta Pattanaik is the Guest Faculty, Utkal University of Culture, Bhubaneswar.