



Mahatma Gandhi and Panchayat Raj system

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Abstract: The vehicle that was most ideal to initiate both political and economic democracy at the grassroots level was the Panchayat Raj system. Mahatma Gandhi's tours all across the country reinforced his convictions that India would benefit if the villages were governed by Village Panchayats based on the principal of "simple living and high thinking". These were village republics which were self-contained and self-reliant and having all that people want. These were the institutions where minimum standard of living could be accorded to all human beings. An individual had maximum freedom and opportunity to develop his personality to the greatest extent. In these republics there would be a diminution of the state and the roots of democracy deepened. According to him centralization cannot be sustained as a system without adequate force. The affairs are to be managed by Panchayats consisting of five persons elected annually. Gandhi aimed at the individual the centre of the local administration. People are expected to take personal interest and turn up in large numbers at the meeting to deliberate problems of common interest such as village industries, agricultural production, obligation and planning. In this research article the researcher will try to conclude the dream of Mahatma Gandhi in the form of Panchayati Raj institution. Secondary data will be used to conclude the research work. The working of Panchayati Raj and the composition will be discussed in this research article.

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Introduction: Democracy is considered as one of the best form of government because it ensures liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status and opportunity, fraternity as well as the right to participate in political decision making. Participation and control of governance by the people of the country is the essence of democracy.

Panchayati Raj Institutions are such an important political innovation of India, for the establishment of grassroots democracy and to ensure the greater people's participations in political system of the country. Panchayati Raj Institutions, the grass-root units of local self-government have been considered as an instrument of socio-economic transformation in rural India. Involvement of people at the grass-roots level is the most important means of bringing about socio-economic development. Panchayati Raj is identified as such an instrumental expression of democratic decentralization in India. Decentralization of power to the Panchayat is seen as a means of empowering people and involving them in decision-making process. Local governments being closer to the people can be more responsive to local needs and can make better use of resources. The democratic system in a country can be ensured only if there is mass participation in the governance. Therefore, the system of democratic decentralization popularly known as Panchayati Raj in India which is considered as an instrument to ensure democracy and socio-economic transformation in society. Panchayati Raj system is an age-old indigenous Indian politico-administrative institution. It owes its origin to the different traditional patterns of governance, in the phase of history in many parts of India. The term „panchayati Raj“ is relatively new, having originated during the British administration. „Raj „literary means „governance“ or government“.

Thus, panchayati Raj is a system of local rural government in India. Conceptually, panchayat can be described as an assembly of the village people or their representatives and the term “panchayat” is a Hindi word, which literally means assembly (ayat) of five (panch) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the local community.

Mahatma Gandhi equated panchayati with „village republic“. He explained his concept of village panchayat thus, “...the government of the village will be conducted by the panchayat of five persons annually elected by



the adult villagers, males and females, possessing maximum prescribed qualifications. These will have all the authority and jurisdiction required : since there will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined without much interference even from the present government whose sole effective connection with the village is the execution of the village revenuehere there is perfect democracy based on individual freedom. The individual is the architect of his own government. Thus, Gandhi had envisaged the vision of self-sustained and self-sufficient village republic capable of managing own affairs, as the foundation of India's political system. The term for such a vision was "Gram Swaraj" (village self-government). Philosophically, panchayati Raj is a multidimensional idea. It has its pluralistic definitions and wider connotations in the writings of different thinkers. Emphasizing the ideology of panchayati raj Gandhi viewed; "India lives in her village. Independence must begin at the bottom, thus making every village a republic or panchayat, enjoying full powers. He remarked that, "twenty men sitting at the centre could not work true democracy. It has to be worked from below by the people of every village."

Jaya prakash Narayan the advocate of total revolution had a different view of panchayati Raj. He was of the view that, "A proper balance must be struck between a state government on the one hand and organs of local-self-government, or panchayati raj institutions on the other. For this purpose, it may be necessary to provide for these Panchayati Raj Institutions in the Constitution itself and clearly short list their powers, so that they may exercise legitimate powers and remain answerable to their constituents.

Our first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru favoured the idea of village republic. He said, "India will progress only, when the people living in villages become politically conscious. The progress of our country is bound up with the progress in our village. If our villages make progress, India will become a strong nation and nobody will be able to stop its onward march, if you flinch from your determination and get involved in mutual quarrels and petty factions, you will not be able to succeed in your mission."

Gandhi's dream for "Gram Swaraj" has been translated into reality with the introduction of threetier Panchayati Raj System to insure people participation in the great task of rural reconstruction and democratic decentralization at grass-root level. Thus, the Panchayati Raj Institution is Indian system of political institution at grass-root level, which gives power to rural people to manage themselves. Therefore, the relevance of Panchayati Raj is greater for rural development. In a way, these institutions are often refers to as extension cords of democracy to the villages.

In the present scenario, the concept of Panchayati Raj has come to be accepted as an extension cord of democracy upto the village, and has found favour amongst politicians. The present Panchayati Raj Institution was come into existence as per the recommendation suggested by Balwant Rai Mehta committee Report (1957). The committee came out with the suggestion of a three-tier system of rural local government which would be given statutory status and upon which the various developmental functions performed by blocks were to be devolved. "Democratic decentralization" was the name given to this process. Subsequently, the same began to be called as "Panchayati Raj" in popular speeches and literature a name which is also synonymous with the term-"Rural Local SelfGovernment in India" The Constitution of 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 marks a new era in the federal democratic set up of the country and provides constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions in its part-(IV) under the Directive Principle of State Policy. Article 40 herein says, "*The state should take steps to organize village panchayat and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self- government.*"

Evolution of Panchayati Raj In India: Historical roots of the local self-government in India can be traced from the ancient past. In fact, India has been the cradle of rural local government, which continued to flourish from the time of Vedic civilization to the advent of British rule. The village in India has been considered as the basic unit of the local self-administration since the Vedic times¹ . The term for the village was the "Grama"



which is an immemorial unit. There was little interference by the state in their activities. It indicates that there was some method of self-government in those periods. In the Rig-Veda, there is a mention of Sabha, “Samiti and „Vidath“ as local self-units. The concept of „Panch - Parweshwar“ or Panch - the god existed in the ancient age. There was a description of Sabha and Samiti, which were the democratic bodies at the local level. The king used to get the approval of the Sabha or Samiti regarding certain functions and decision.² So, the village communities were enjoyed with self-sufficient, self-reliant and independent autonomy. The autonomous village describe by Sir Charles Metcalf:

References to such a highly organized system of local government can be found in the Vedas, in the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, Manu Smriti, in the Kautilya’s Arthashastra. The epics of the Ramayana indicates that administration was divided into two parts – „Pur“ and „Janpad“ and the village people were called the „Janpada“ . It has mentioned the importance of the decentralization of the functions of the state. During the reign of Chandragupta Maurya’s dynasty the policy of decentralization of powers was adopted. The village was considered as the smallest unit of governance body. A person elected by the people of the village was the „Gramik“ (Head of village) entrusted with wide power and functions. In the medieval period, the Sultans of Delhi knew that it would be impracticable to govern a vast country like India from the centre directly. Hence, they divided their kingdom into provinces called „Vilayat“ „Amir“ or vali was the head of a province. They were given an ample power and functions like management of finance, collection of taxes and selection of judicial officials. For governance of the village, there were three important officials – Mukkadam for administration, Patwari for – collection of revenues and Choudrie for decision on disputes with the help of the Panch.

The British came to India as traders. The primary focus of the British Raj was much to do with trade and little to do with governance and development. In fact, until the advent of the British rule in India, the rural republic had flourished and thrived. With the emergence of the British Raj in India panchayat ceased to play a role that it once played. But, local self-government as a representative’s institution was the creation of the British. The first local authority created by the British in India was the municipal corporation of Madras in 1887 . This body was empowered to collect taxes in local areas. It was Lord Mayo, the then Viceroy of India (1869 to 1872), who felt the need to bring about administrative efficiency. The year 1870 was landmark when Lord Mayo passed a resolution suggesting the decentralization of powers and the necessity of associating Indians in administration. He introduced the concept of elected representation in the urban municipalities and making them more powerful¹² . In 1880, Lord Ripon came as the Viceroy of India and he made a remarkable contribution to the development of local government. In 1882, he introduced an important Act Self – Government Resolution. It provided for local boards consisting of a large majority of elected nonofficial members and presided over by a non-official chairperson. This is considered to be the “Magna–Carta” of local democracy in India.

The first organized effort to tackle the problem of rural India was made through Community Development Programmed (CDP) in 1952 and National Extension Service in 1953. Community Development Programmed was first launched on October 2, 1952. The programmed aimed at improving the standard of life of the rural people in all spheres by providing an integrated package of services. The objectives were to promote self-help and self-reliance among the rural people, to generate a process of integrated Social, Economic and Cultural change with the aim of transforming social and political life of the villagers. First President, Rajendra Prasad hailed this programmed as “The small seed which will grow into a huge and mighty tree”.

The recommendation of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee came into effect on 1 April 1958. The first states to go for full stream with the scheme of democratic decentralization were Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh. Then the Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated the Panchayati Raj measures in Rajasthan on October 2,



1959 in an impressive ceremony at Nagaur district. The Nehru in his inaugural address called Panchayati Raj as a revolutionary and a historical step towards the democratic decentralization in India.

In May 1989, the constitution 64th Amendment Bill was moved by then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, with the intention of transferring “power to the people” which was passed by the Lok Sabha. However, the Bill could not be enacted, as the Rajya Sabha did not approve it. Immediately, after assumption of office by the next government, Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, decided to draw up a fresh constitutional status to the Panchayat Raj bodies as well as to strengthen them. The Loksabha put the seal of its approval on the bill on 22 December 1992 and the Rajya Sabha passed it on the next day and came into force on 24 April 1993.²⁷ This Act is popularly known as 73rd Amendment Act, 1992.

India's Development policy about Panchayat Raj: Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayat Raj, a decentralized form of Government where each village is responsible for its own affairs, as the foundation of India's political system. The term for such a vision was Gram Swaraj ("village self-governance"). Recommendations of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was a committee appointed by the Government of India in January 1957 to examine the working of the Community Development Programme (1952) and the National Extension Service (1953) and to suggest measures for their better working. The recommendations of the committee were approved by NDC in January 1958 and this set the stage for the launching of Panchayat Raj Institutions throughout the country. The committee recommended the establishment of the scheme of 'democratic decentralization' which finally came to be known as Panchayat Raj. (i) Establishment of a 3-tier Panchayat Raj system. This system was adopted by state governments during the 1950s and 60s, as laws were passed to establish panchayats in various states. It also found backing in the Indian Constitution, with the 73rd amendment in 1992 to accommodate the idea. The Amendment Act of 1992 contains provision for devolution of powers and responsibilities to the panchayats both for the preparation of economic development plans and social justice, as well as for implementation in relation to 29 subjects listed in the eleventh schedule of the constitution.

Conclusion: But the studies of several distinguished scholars on the working of the Panchayat Raj in different States and the Status Report of the Ministry of Panchayat Raj (1996) lead us to the inference that the Gandhian ideal of Gram Swaraj remains an unfinished agenda even after six decades of the implementation of the Panchayat Raj on the recommendation of the Balwantrai Mehta Study Team on October 2, 1959. 73rd Amendment was implemented by various States in 1994. Therefore, concerted, systematic and sustained endeavors are needed on the part of those for whom Gram Swaraj remains a cherished dream for the empowerment of people and for making national development of India a participatory democracy.

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