



WWJMRD 2018; 4(6): 47-50
www.wwjmr.com
International Journal
Peer Reviewed Journal
Refereed Journal
Indexed Journal
Impact Factor MJIF: 4.25
E-ISSN: 2454-6615

Dr.Santosh Kumar
(Political Thinker)
P.hd, M.Phil, M.A Political
Science, M.Phil (Edu) M.Ed,
B.Ed., Dept of Political
Science, Madurai Kamaraj
University, India

Panchayati Raj in India: An Institutional Failure?

Dr.Santosh Kumar

Abstract

"Democracy is not only the goal of development; it is the primary means of development."

For India to build a broad-based, solid foundation for economic and social progress, it must uproot the vestiges of feudalism and instill democratic values and practices. The people who live in India's 750,000 villages must become the authors of their own lives, and women must be respected and supported as equal partners in the process of development. Panchayati Raj is of the oldest system of governance in India. It has existed in India since Vedic times as there has several references of Panchayats in Vedas. The description of Panchayats was next picked up by Karl Marx and used to describe what he saw as one of the characteristic features of the societies that existed under „Oriental despotism“.i In this project the researcher has discussed the functions of the Panchayats and has looked into the system if the Panchayats are Performing its duty or not and the researcher has in the paper also discussed the evils done by the system of Panchayati Raj. The researcher also states the problem faced by the Panchayats and in the end the researcher has discussed the ways by which these problems can be overcome.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj System, Democracy, Development, Governance, Performance

Introduction

Panchayati Raj is of the oldest system of governance in India. It has existed in India since Vedic times as there has several references of Panchayats in Vedas. The description of Panchayats was next picked up by Karl Marx and used to describe what he saw as one of the characteristic features of the societies that existed under „Oriental despotism“.ii In this project the researcher has discussed the functions of the Panchayats and has looked into the system if the Panchayats are Performing its duty or not and the researcher has in the paper also discussed the evils done by the system of Panchayati Raj. The researcher also states the problem faced by the Panchayats and in the end the researcher has discussed the ways by which these problems can be overcome.

Research Methodology

This project looks to analyze and examine the concept of Panchayati Raj in India and its efficiency thereof. The researcher studies Panchayati Raj in great details, examining its methods, processes and the functions of Panchayat and checks if these functions are being performed. Finally the researcher suggests various ways how to bring various reforms in Panchayati Raj which will be useful to the society in general.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this project is to study whether Panchayati Raj have been used to their full potential and whether its help to the nation or whether it's a cause of more problems. The limitations of this project are certain aspects on the topic like details regarding the legislations have not been discussed in the paper but the researcher has made his best possible attempt to ensure that most of the available exhaustive material on the topic has been covered and all the details have been covered in the project and further analyzed.

Research Questions

1. What is the nature and significance of the Panchayati Raj in India?
2. What functions does it serve as an administrative body?

Correspondence:

Dr.Santosh Kumar
(Political Thinker)
P.hd, M.Phil, M.A Political
Science, M.Phil (Edu) M.Ed,
B.Ed., Dept of Political
Science, Madurai Kamaraj
University, India

3. How efficient is the Panchayati in performing these functions?
4. What are the evils that arise in the rural society stemming from the non-performance of the Panchayati Raj?
5. What are the constraints faced by the Panchayati Raj in performing its functions efficiently?
6. How can these constraints be overcome to ensure smooth functioning of the Panchayati Raj?

Panchayati Raj

Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation once stated, "Independence must begin at the bottom ... it follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs..." Even before we gained independence, the great revolutionaries like Gandhi were discussing the issue of self-sustenance of villages and Panchayat Raj was advocated by all of them to be a solution to this problem. The philosophy of Panchayat Raj is deeply steeped in tradition and culture of rural India and is by no means a new concept.

The word Panchayat comes from Devanagiri Dialect and it was —An Indian political system which groups five villages in a quincunx (four peripheral villages around a central one). Each has appointed tasks and responsibilities, such as cart-making or basket-weaving. The central village, usually the largest of the Panchayat, traditionally handles food storage and meeting-places for officials, as well as their residences. _Panchayat_ literally means assembly of five wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community. Traditionally, these assemblies settle disputes between individuals and villages.iiii The Gandhian principle of gram swaraj that is the village self-government was recognized at the time of India's independence, but it was never made a part of the constitution, never institutionalized and never fully put into practice. The constitution of India stated: —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 unit of self-government a system of local democracy through local councils known as panchayats. It gives responsibility and decision-making power in the hands of rural grass-roots people and also gives them a right to pick their representative every five years. The most important feature of this amendment was that for the first time it recognizes the distribution of power and it empowered the people at grass-root level. And in the researcher's opinion the most revolutionary aspect of the amendment was that one-third of all panchayat seats are reserved for women. —Rural women — who for centuries have lived in conditions of malnutrition, illiteracy and powerlessness — were now asked to take leadership roles in addressing these very issues.vii Article 243 G of the 73rd and the 74th amendment of the constitution deal with question of power authority and responsibilities of Panchayats but the implementation is left to the discretion of the state whereas the other features which are mandatory for the state government included are:

- Establishment of Gram Sabha at village level in all states and Union Territory.
- Establishment of three-tier system of Panchayat Raj at village, inter-mediate and district level in all the states and Union Territory
- Panchayats at all level should be chosen by direct elections from the respective territory.

- Not less than one-third membership and the office of Chairperson of each tier will be reserved for women.
- Reservation for SCs and STs in membership and the officers of Chairpersons at all levels will be provided based on their population in a Panchayat.
- All tier Panchayats will have a term of five years and if a Panchayat is dissolved earlier then fresh elections will be held within six months and all elections will be handled by the state election commission.
- There will be a state finance commission which will look into allocation of resources to Panchayat bodies, every five years.
- As mentioned above Panchayat Raj as a concept has always been in the lime light and has always drawn attention. After the Balwantrai Mehta Committee report time and again it has been in the line of fire and a topic of discussion. Jawaharlal Nehru including many more revolutionaries supported Panchayat Raj. He once said —...authority and power must be given to the people in the village...Let us give power to panchayats.¶

Gandhi had a unique idea of Panchayat. In his idea of an ideal panchayat is supposed to teach the villagers to avoid disputes; the researcher thinks this Utopian Concept does not exist today. The world in which we live today, we are bound to have differences because of complexities of the society in which we live today.

Agriculture His writing said that the panchayat's should help in increasing the quantity of foodstuff grown in the village which can be accomplished by properly maturing the soil; rather a nice idea but the important question is that is the Panchayat doing the same? Today an average villager has a very small holding, and implementation of advanced technology on these holdings is very difficult for two reasons; an average villager is too poor use these technologies and even if the panchayats help introducing these technology on the fields, the desired results will not be achieved because of the small size of the farm. Today in almost every village we see that either the landholding is very small or they are too large. The Zamindari System which is still prominent in the villages and no Panchayat has the authority to take actions against the Zamindari System which is the root cause of inequalities in the villages.

Banishing of Intoxicating Drinks

Another thing mentioned by Gandhi was banishing the intoxicating drinks and drugs. The banishing of intoxicating drinks and drugs are a very nice thing to do but the question which I want to ask is that which government body will stop the industry which is giving the largest

Political Constraints The main political constraints lie in the informal way of administration. The members of the panchayat do not represent the people. They merely run the panchayat as one would run his household. Their programmes and policies don't address the problems of the society. Rather they seek immediate satisfaction of their own personal requirements. If any administrative system is to run efficiently it must be run with a certain level of professionalism. The panchayats lack this professional and formal air. If the panchayat was a strictly administrative organization with fixed programmes and policies and checks on efficiency the half the problems mentioned in this chapter would not arise. The panchayats should take a

leaf out of the book of the urban local bodies which are run much more efficiently simply because of the strict rules of procedure. The panchayats must be made accountable for their decisions and be held liable for their mistakes.

Untouchability Eradication of Untouchability is another important point that Gandhi mentioned; Untouchability is beyond doubts the most evil practice which has ever existed in the society. The Indian Constitution has also recognized untouchability as a punishable offence under Article 17 of the constitution since the formation of the constitution but still the problem of untouchability still prevails in the villages. This is an important problem which should have been solved by now but Panchayati Raj has not been very successful in eradicating it and one of the many reasons is said to be the unequal participation of the people of the backward caste in the democracy. The constitution as stated above, reserves seat for SCs and STs in membership and in officers of Chairpersons at all levels but these members are more often than not over-ruled by the dominating members of the higher caste who have the support of the majority and thus untouchability still prevails.

Gram Sabha If we take a look on the other issue, focus on Gram Sabha is another problem and a function which is not being performed. —The Gram Sabha is the fulcrum of the entire panchayat raj system as it enables each and every voter of the village to participate in decision-making at local level hence a strong strength to local people.^{lxii} Although the gram sabha is considered as the heart of the entire scheme of decentralization of power in governance, Article 243-A of the Central Act does not specify the functions and powers of it except to say that —All Gram Sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at village level as the legislature of a state may, by law, provide.^{lxiii} Now what it does is that it give birth to a body which function to endorse, to recommend or suggest and even consider the annual account and audit notes but when it comes to the implementation of the suggestions, the gram panchayat can ignore the suggestion of the gram sabha because the suggestion of the former is not binding on the latter. Thus there is no point having a body such as gram sabha.

Elections Fair Election is Gram Panchayat is another burning issue. Elections in India have been shrouded in controversies. They have been wrought with notorious activities of anti-social elements. Thus Indian elections have been a prey to the paradox of the instrument of democracy being anti-democratic. Even the Panchayat election is not left untouched with the corruption. A revealing factor in the panchayat elections are liquor and money greater than coercion and intimidation. Of late it has been observed that even the caste factor which has been the bedrock of Indian politics does not have the effect on the elections as much as Liquor and money have. Contestants buy votes of the weaker sections of the society at Rs. 300 to Rs. 500. It has been reported that in recent panchayat elections held in Uttar Pradesh, the State Election Commission had fixed the ceilings on election expenses for village president at Rs. 18,000 and for the president at Rs. 30,000, members of Zila Parishad at Rs. 50,000 and for the president at Rs. 1,00,000. It was reported that the candidate who won the election had spent about Rs. 2 lakh in purchasing votes.

Control of Powers

Panchayats in villages are still controlled by landlords, usurers and traders who are generally from the upper caste. They deliberately use the caste to their benefit and by securing legitimate powers; they preserve and expand their economic control. Many studies have proved that it is the economically powerful lot or the high class people who control the panchayats.^{xvi} And according to a recent study of panchayat leadership in 15 evaluation blocks spread over 14 states revealed that 88.1 percent of the members of the panchayats and 95.7 percent of the panchayat president are landlords, 32.5 percent of members and 89.4 percent of presidents belong to rich families, and 69.8 percent of members and 97.9 percent of presidents come from high castes.^{xvii} Emancipation of Women When panchayati raj was implemented in 1993, it was considered to be one of the most important steps towards the empowerment of women and increasing their participation in decision making by reserving 33% seats for women in panchayat raj institutions.

This paved the way for election of many women as members and even chairpersons. It was said that Panchayat will be an institutions which will be the grass-roots units of self-government and it would be the vehicle of socio-economic transformation in rural India but the present scenario, it doesn't look like a vehicle of socio-economic transformation but it looks like another institution failure.

Effective and meaningful functioning of these bodies would have been possible only by involvement, contribution and participation of both male and female but it never happened. The main purpose for reservation of seats for women was to empower the poor, illiterate women living in the villages so that she can participate in the democracy and so that emancipation of women can take place has not achieved. The reason for the reservation for the seats in the panchayat was that women could be in a position where she could fight for their rights and help in the upliftment of women. Today in most of the panchayats, the women who are selected and are at some office of Chairperson or even those who are the members are from well to do family, and those who are educated and have a good position in society thus reservation is not serving any purpose. Even in the cases where poor women was selected as a panchayat member, it is easy to point out numerous examples of women who have work entirely according to what they were told by their husbands or other male members of their families. In some cases elected women remained at home while their husbands attended the panchayat meetings and carried out official transactions on their behalf. Some of the elected women were approached by men only when their signatures (or thumb impressions) were needed. Women's effective participation in the Panchayati Raj is thus subject to the way in which the Panchayati Raj operates. That is, if the Panchayati Raj system functions in principles, democratic and meaningful way, then and only then can women's participation.

Nehru, first Prime Minister of India once said that - "India is poor because the villages of India are poor. India will be rich if the villages of India are rich. Panchayats should be given greater power; for we want the villagers to have a greater measure of real swaraj [self-government] in their own villages." These words of the first Prime Minister of this country are undoubtedly the words of wisdom but the question is that are these words only words or has it materialized and if not will it materialize in the near future?

The way things are going, it does not look like a pretty picture. While researching for this paper the researcher went through a few articles which made the researcher to think: Is Panchayati Raj a boon to the society or is it a bane? In the newsmagazine *The Week* of Jan 26th 2003, issue titled *SOLD* had stories about panchayats in India, specifically about women being _fined, humiliated, and sold to the highest bidder

Fair Election is Gram Panchayat is another burning issue. Elections in India have been shrouded in controversies. They have been wrought with notorious activities of anti-social elements. Thus Indian elections have been a prey to the paradox of the instrument of democracy being anti-democratic. Even the Panchayat election is not left untouched with the corruption. A revealing factor in the panchayat elections are liquor and money greater than coercion and intimidation. Of late it has been observed that even the caste factor which has been the bedrock of Indian politics does not have the effect on the elections as much as Liquor and money have. Contestants buy votes of the weaker sections of the society at Rs. 300 to RS. 500. It has been reported that in recent panchayat elections held in Uttar Pradesh, the State Election Commission had fixed the ceilings on election expenses for village president at Rs. 18,000 and for the president at Rs. 30,000, members of Zila Parishad at Rs. 50,000 and for the president at Rs. 1, 00,000. It was reported that the candidate who won the election had spent about Rs. 2 lakh in purchasing votes.

Conclusion

The concept of Panchayati Raj is undoubtedly the stepping stone to the rural development. However this system is not being used to its optimum value due to the several problems plaguing the Panchayati Raj system. The constitution of India was drafted keeping in mind the bulk of the Indian population that lived in villages.

References

1. Anil Kumar Vaddiraju and Shagun Mehrotra, —Making Panchayats Accountable, 39(37), *Economic and Political Weekly* 4139, 4139-4141(2004).
2. Mahi Pal, —People-Oriented Panchayati Raj Framework, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(31), February 2002, p-700.

Books

1. Somjee, *Voting Behavior in Indian Villages*, Baroda, 1959.
2. Krishna Chakraborty and Swapan Kumar Bhattacharyya, *Leadership, Factions and Panchayati Raj. (A Case Study of West Bengal)*, New Delhi, Rawat Publications, 1993.
3. M.R. Biju, *Dynamics of New Panchayati Raj System*, New Delhi, Kanishka Publishers, Distributors, 1998.
4. Krishna Chakraborty and Swapan Kumar Bhattacharyya, *Leadership, Factions and Panchayati Raj. (A Case Study of West Bengal)*, New Delhi, Rawat Publications, 1993, p.93. xxvii Article 14 of the Indian Constitution