

CHAPTER - III
DEMOCRATIC
DECENTRALIZATION IN
INDIA: HISTORICAL
PERSPECTIVE

DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION IN INDIA: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Democratic decentralization has remained a basic tenet of national policy ever since India attained her independence. Various committees have recommended local self-government, as the most suitable agency for participatory planning to bring administration and development programmes nearer to the people.

Democratic decentralization is a concept, which associates people with local administration through popularly elected bodies. It recognizes the right of the people to take initiative and to execute policy decisions in an autonomous way; therefore, it could be called both an end and a means (Datta Prabhat, 1994). The contemporary Indian policy has been striving for establishing democratic goals through modernizing its political and administrative institutions, which existed since 400 BC. Almost every village had a self governing body of its own pattern. The British Rule in India had slowly demolished the system of government introducing the RYOTWARI system and centralization of executive and judicial powers (Chitlang, BM 1998). Though some attempts were made to strengthen the local bodies by Rippon Resolution (1882), Royal commission on decentralization, 1907, Government of India Act, 1919 and 1935, but the result was not satisfactory. They were for entrenchment and maintenance of British Regime (Bhattachariya M 1991), Mahatma Gandhi believed that India lived in its villages and so decentralization of power was the best and perhaps the only way to ensure grassroot participation in democratic experiments. In fact, Article 40 in part IV of the Constitution, states that, the state shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with powers and authorities to function as units of self government (Singh SK 1994).

Decentralization: The Concept

The Latin root of the word “Decentralization” conveys the meaning ‘away from the centre’ (Mac Mohan, 1961). Also it means the transfer of authority- legislative, judicial or administrative - from a higher level of government to a lower level (White .D Leonord, 1959).

‘Decentralization may take any of the four forms (Meenakshi Sundaram, 1994);

- (i) Deconcentration: - Handing over some amount of administrative authority to lower levels.
- (ii) Delegation: - Transferring responsibility for specifically defined functions to organizations that are out side the regular bureaucratic structure and indirectly controlled by the central government.
- (iii) Devolution: - Creation and strengthening of sub-national unit of the government activities of which are substantially outside the direct control of the central government.
- (iv) Privatization: - Passing all responsibility for functions to non-governmental organizations independent of the government.

The word ‘decentralisation’, therefore relates to the devolution of powers resulting from the creation of bodies separated by law from the national center to local representatives (Meenakshi Sundaram, 1994).

Decentralization in Vedic Era:

The local government in India traces its origin to the hoary past. The Vedas (Rig) reveal that the ancient Hindus used to lead a corporate life.

Jayswal (1955), an historian has found from the Vedas that “the national life and activities in the earliest times on record was expressed through popular assemblies and institutions”. Another history scholar also referred the nature and composition of those assemblies and institution and lists a few terms like, ‘Kula’, ‘Gana’, ‘Jati’, ‘Puja’, ‘Vrata’, ‘Sreni’, ‘Raigama’, ‘Sumana’, ‘Parisat’ and ‘Carana’ (Mookerji, 1958).

The epics and other scriptures, such as the *Smritis* and the *Upanishads* and the *Jatakas* also refer to the existence of the village. According to Ramayana and Mahabharata, there existed two types of villages – ‘Ghosh’ and ‘Gram’, used to be administered by an official, known as ‘Gramini’. Though nominated by the king, he had to work on the advice of the village elders known as ‘Gram Vridhas’, ‘Samiti’, ‘Sabha’ or ‘Panchyat’ (Mookerji. R 1958).

Thus research of a number of Indian historians has brought out the fact that there flourished a well settled and more or less highly developed system of local government, enjoyed a state of splendid isolation, the central government on its part, did not unduly bother itself about the local affairs (Bhatnagar S, 1978). Village Panchayats had their roots in the ancient past and were backbone of the Indian rural social and economic system (Hansraj, 1992).

Re-emergence of Decentralization in Colonial Phase:

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the traditional “Village Panchayat” was about to vanish, if a few existed in a remote areas had practically no say in the matter of the administration.

The period following 1830 saw a revolutionary change sweeping the country in almost all walks of life. The means of communication, a network of roads, railways, telegraphs were laid out and the educational advancement in English was spread throughout the country. The imperial government also realized the need for providing the basic amenities of life. The post-Mutiny period witnessed acute financial stringencies overtaking the government. To alleviate the fiscal hardship, the government devised the policy of devolving more and more powers to the provinces (Bhatnagar, 1978).

The most significant step in this regard was taken by the historic resolution of the Government of Lord Ripon in 1882. Lord Ripon was the first to initiate what may be called decentralization discourse during the colonial regime. His resolution (1882) stood for decentralization of a large network of local self-governing bodies. He, though for (a) Training the Indians art of governance (b) enabling them to learn from experience, and (c) Opening up

avenues for political participation of educated people, urged for an early establishment of the local boards not only in cities but also in rural areas (Datta, 1995). But his proposals remained in cold storage because the successor of Lord Ripon considered them too radical to be implemented. Though, local boards came to be established, they failed to give any semblance of democratic institutions. What Ripon wanted to secure was not a presentation of the people of an European democratic type, but the training of the best, most intelligent and most influential went to take an interest and an active part in the administration. Ripon's aim was to advance and promote the political and popular education to the people and to induce the best and most intelligent men. But, Ripon's dream remained largely unfulfilled. Decentralization or local self-government did not become an active and stimulating agency for political education.

The government of India accepted the recommendations of the Royal Commission in principle and introduced "Panchayat" in a few selected villages. Though, the scheme did not succeed the idea of village Panchayat, got the imagination of government and people. In 1935, a new era of hope was looked in; efforts were made not only to democratize the constitution and functioning of the Village Panchayat but also to physically expand their way to work.

Gandhi on Democratic Decentralisation:

In February 1916, Gandhi appreciated the ancient Panchayat system. He referred to the Panchayat system as the right medium for securing cheap justice as well as for avoiding reliance on government for the settlement of mutual dispute. To Gandhi, a democratic policy involves decentralization in a way that the local affairs are managed by the local people. Without decentralization it is impossible to ensure individual liberty, and mental and moral growth of man (Raju MR, 1995).

Gandhi pleads for decentralization of both economic and political power. He rejects the power structure of the west on the ground of centralization of power. Though not absolute sufficiency but Gandhi's decentralization implies

the fundamental principal of self-sufficiency. He believes that, success of political decentralization depends on economic decentralization. He visualizes a social and political order based on decentralization of both economic and political power.

Gandhi wants to transform every region into a small Republic or a Panchayat. His approach to democratic decentralization is based on the principles of non-violence, truth, individual freedom, non-exploitation and morality of the Indian masses.

Gandhi argued that Indian Independence must begin at the bottom. He pleaded for decentralization as an essential precondition for the realization of the ideal democracy to enable each individual to participate in the decision making and implementation process, Vinobha Bhave extended the idea of Gandhian “Sarvodaya” and laid the major emphasis on economic transformation and development.

Decentralization after Independence:

Unfortunately, the Draft Commission in 1948 made no reference to panchayats. After good deal of thought and discussion, the issue was resolved through a move by K.Santhanam. Article 40 of the Constitution says, “the state shall take steps to organize will Panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government (Bhatnagar S,1978). The inclusion of the ‘Panchayats’ in Indian constitution gave a new life and nearly half of the Indian villages came to be covered by 1954.

First Phase of Panchayats:

The first phase of village self-government in the form of Panchayati Raj Institutions sprang up in India in the mid 20th century not as a part of the Art 40 of the Indian constitution, but as a sequel to the recommendations of Balwantray Mehta Committee.

Balwantray Mehta Committee:

In January, 1957, the Balwantray Mehta study team was appointed to evaluate the workings of the Community Development Programme (CDP) and the National Extension Service (NES), and submitted its report on the 24th November 1957, with a recommendation of three-tier-Panchayat system, namely, the village Panchayat consisting of directly elected member on the basis of adult franchise; Panchayat Samiti, the middle tier, would be directly elected by the village Panchayat at block level with the B.D.O., acting as the executive officer of the Panchayat Samiti, which will perform specific types of functions; Zilla Parishad, the upper tier with the power to approve the annual budget, co-ordinate plans, distribute government, funds and guide the activities of Panchayat Samiti (Sen Prontesh, 1998). The main thrust of the B Mehta Committee report was towards the democratic decentralization, an effort to shift decision making closer to people, to encourage people's participation and to put bureaucracy under local popular control (Mehta Report Vol-I). The B Mehta Committee Report was accepted by the government of India in 1958 and were made operative in different states according to the structure and pattern suitable to the conditions of each state. Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh were the first to adopt the Panchayat Raj form of Government in 1959.

Evaluations:

In spite of many successes in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, Panchayat Raj had also generally failed to deliver the goods to the rural people. Structural inadequacy, subsidiary legislation to curtail decision-making power of elected bodies, meager source of income and the role of bureaucracy were the main causes of the failure. During the B.Mehta period the Panchayat Raj institutions were also denied a sound democratic basis and proper administrative nourishment. The devolution of administrative and financial powers to the grass-root level was mere a slogan. Iqbal Narain (1987) observes "Nothing has done greater harm to Panchayat Raj than the effort to bypass them institutionally in launching target oriented development programme (Narain

Iqbal, 1987). Ashok Mehta identified the ups and down of first phase of Panchayat in (i) Ascendancy period (1959-64) (ii) The stagnation period (1965-69) (iii) The period of decline (1969-77) (Datta P, 1995).

In reference to the Balvantray Mehta committee report, state governments decided to appoint some other committee in order to review the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions of their own states. The states like Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh appointed various committees in respect of their states as V.P.Naik committee, 1961, Sadiq Ali Committee, 1964, Hardayal Singh Committee, 1965, and Ram Murti Committee, 1965. These committees suggested that the zilla parishad should be placed at the prime position in the system of Panchayat Raj Institutions, and the district should be the central part in the process of development.

Second Phase of Panchayats:

Revamping of Panchayats was noticed with the change of Indian political scenario in 1977. New Janata Government appointed the Ashok Mehta committee to suggest for revitalization of Panchayat Raj institutions. The committee, in August 1978, submitted its report which initiated the second phase of Panchayats with emphasis on regular election, devolution of more powers to local bodies. Soon after that, three states, West Bengal, Karnataka and Kerala, injected a new life to the Panchayati Raj Institutions, and West Bengal emerged successfully.

Important Feature of Ashok Mehta Committee Report:

Out of 132 recommendations the most important findings of the committee was the functional necessity of decentralizing administration closer to the people. The committee observed that, where millions of people were involved and a lot of the poor was sought to be improved, decentralized administration was an unavoidable necessity.

The most important recommendations of A Mehta committee report was to introduce a two-tier Panchayat system in place of three-tier existing Panchayat

system. The Zilla Parishad sought to be made the executive body; below of that would be a Mandal Panchayat as a mark of decentralization below the district level. Another important recommendation was the provision for "open participation of political parties in Panchayati Raj affairs"(Yasin M., 1990).

Evaluation:

Majority of the state governments opposed the idea of party based election and Mandal Panchayat. The Chief Ministers in a meeting held on May 19, 1979, decided to appoint a drafting committee, comprising a number of Chief Ministers and Union Minister as its head. Some of the principles adopted by the Chief Ministers were: the existing three tier structure could be continued, the term of these office should be for five years.

The proposals recommended by Ashok Mehta committee were not adequate enough for the complete transfer of power to the local bodies in making decentralization a living reality. The Panchayati Raj Institutions failed to fulfill the characteristics of 'village-government' in the real sense of the term. The A Mehta committee recommendation for the abolition of block level body, the Panchayat Samiti, aroused indignation among the people. Being the creation of the Janata government (1977-80), the committee enjoyed a low credibility with the congress government (Maheshwari, 1979).

Other states either lagged behind with marginal achievements or stayed away from the movements after the governmental change took place. The most distinguishing feature of this second phase of Panchayats in West Bengal is the social composition of the leadership replacing the old patterned rural leadership by means of election (Datta, 1993).

VKRV Rao Committee, 1985, emphasized decentralization at the district level and all the developmental department should be brought under the control and supervision of Zilla Parishad. The budgets, non-plan and plan, of these departments and funds for other various schemes implemented at the district level or below should be transferred to the Zilla Parishad.

L.M Singhvi committee, 1986, felt that as the peoples participation in development process and decision making can not be achieved through bureaucratic structure and devolutionary strategies, the Panchayati Raj Institutions should be viewed as the institutions of self-government which naturally involve the people in decision making process and their development.

Third Phase of Panchayats :

After the 73rd constitutional amendment act, 1992 the third phase of Panchayat emergence in India began. The concern for decentralization was technical to improve the planning process. Rajiv Gandhi government formulated a model of Panchayat bill in 1989 as a “controlled decentralization” but this bill was not passed in the upper house of the parliament. The National front government also presented this bill in September 1990 but the government, went out of power soon. Finally under PV Narasimha Rao government, the bill was again introduced in Parliament and was passed in December 1992 but was assented by President of India on 23 April 1993 and was brought as Act on 24 April 1993 (Mathew, 1994).

The Main Features of 73rd Constitution Amendment Act:

Until this amendment was made, the formation, structure, composition, power, functions, election matters were the responsibilities of state govt. With the effect of this 73rd constitution Amendment, the legislative and administrative and executive actions of the state govt. as regards Panchayats will have to come under the provision of part ix of the constitution (Ramachandran V, 1993).

To enlist (Mathew 1994) the main features in brief of this Act we find:-

- a) Panchayats will be institutions of self- government.
- b) There will be Gram Sabha for each village or group of villages.
- c) A three-tier pachayat system, at village, Block and District levels.
- d) Seats in Panchayats at all level shall be filled by direct election.
- e) Members of Parliament, M.L.A.s and M.L.Cs can be members of Block or District level.

- f) Reservation of seat in all tiers for S.C and S.T in proportion to their population, even offices of chairperson also to be reserved accordingly.
- g) One third of total seats will be reserved for women. One third of reserved seat for S.C and S.T also to be reserved for women.
- h) State Legislatures have the liberty to provide reservation of seats and offices of chairperson in favour of backward classes.
- i) Uniform five year term of Panchayats and elections to be held before expiry of present term. In the event of dissolution, election will be held within six months.
- j) It will not be possible to dissolve the existing Panchayats amending any act before the expiry of its duration.
- k) Person disqualified under any law for election to the legislature of any state will not be entitled to become a member of Panchayat.
- l) Independent Election Commission will be established in the state for direction and control of election process.
- m) Specific responsibilities will be entrusted to the Panchayats to prepare plans for economic development and social justice in respect of 29 subjects listed in the ix schedule.
- n) Panchayats will receive adequate funds to carry out these functions
- o) In each state a Finance Commission will be established to determine the principles on the basis of which adequate financial resources could be ensured for Panchayats.

Powers and Functions of Panchayati Raj Institutions:

Article 243 (G) of the 73rd constitution amendment has enabled state govt. to provide necessary powers and functions to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (a) to function as institutions of local self govt and (b) Plan and implement schemes for economic development and social justice including those 29 subjects enlisted in XI schedule –

1. Agriculture, including agricultural extensions.

2. Land improvement, implementation of land reforms, land consolidation and soil conservation.
3. Minor irrigation, water management and water shed development.
4. Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Poultry.
5. Fisheries.
6. Social forestry and farm forest.
7. Minor forest produce.
8. Small scale industries including food processing industries.
9. Khadi, village and cottage industries.
10. Rural housing.
11. Drinking Water.
12. Fuel and Fodder.
13. Roads, Culverts Bridge, ferries, waterways and other means of communication.
14. Rural electrification including distribution of Electricity.
15. Non- conventional energy sources.
16. Poverty alleviation programme.
17. Education including primary and secondary schools.
18. Technical training and vocational education.
19. Adult and non-formal education.
20. Rural libraries.
21. Cultural activities
22. Market and fairs.
23. Health and Sanitation including hospitals, primary health centers and dispensaries.
24. Family welfare.
25. Women and Child development.
26. Social welfare, including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded.
27. Welfare of the weaker sections and in particular of the scheduled casts and scheduled tribes.
28. Public distribution system.

29. Maintenance of community assets.

Panchayat and Women:

Women's empowerment is one of the objectives of the third phase of Panchayats in India. Gandhi found that, there is no justification for men to deprive women or deny them equal rights on grounds of illiteracy but education is useful for enabling women to uphold their natural rights to improve their knowledge (Gupta A 1994). Women in India as in many other countries awfully under represented in political institutions. National perspective plan for women (1988) was formulated on the question of women's political participation (Dutta P 1995).

Women's participation has been quite encouraging in Karnataka Panchayat election of 1994 where woman participants were 43.77 pc (Menon in P Dutta, 1995). Even before the reservation, women of Maharashtra came forward to submit women panels for Panchayat election (Gail 1987).

In West Bengal also the 1998 Panchayat election shows that inspite of 33 pc reservation for women, more than 35 pc women were elected which shows political awareness of women towards Panchayats. Though the 73rd Constitutional amendment enlisted participation of women in local govt but their roles have been actually performed either by husbands or any male member of the family (Mahipal, 1998). Millions of women Panchayat members will not all be capable of fulfilling their responsibilities, they may be proxies for men, who manipulate them from behind the scene (Narayan U 1996 & Sinha 1999).

Panchayati Raj Experienced in West Bengal:

Panchayats in West Bengal have a long history, inherited from undivided Bengal passing through different model of Panchayat system. Local self-government in West Bengal was established with the passing of Village Chowkidari Act in 1870, which was directly controlled and guided by the village body. As the members of these bodies were not directly elected by the people, it was not a village government in real sense of the terms (Village Chowkidari

Act, 1870). With the appearance of Lord Ripon's resolution on May 18, 1882, this Act became obsolete.

The Bengal village self- government Act, 1885 recommended local boards at each sub divisional level, depending on district for its performance and activities. By this act, the village government was established not from the below but from the top (Roy NC, 1936).

Under the provision of the Bengal village self-government Act, 1919, Union Board was formed. The Chowkidari Panchayat was abolished but Chowkidar and Dafadars were brought under the disposal of the Union Boards. New Panchayats in the shape of Union Board worked on village community affairs, roads, water works, public health and sanitation etc (Das P, 1991).

Thus, District Board at district level, local Board at sub-division level, and Union Board at village level were there in Pre independent Bengal. These Boards could not uphold the socio-economic status of the rural people. And the dawn of the independence brought an opportunity for the people of the country to stand behind the masses.

With the advent of independence in 1947, the old system of District Boards and Local Boards on the one hand and Union Boards on the other were found a dismal failure. With the passage of the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957, Panchayati Raj consisted of two tiers: Gram Panchayat and Anchal Panchayat. The four tier structure of West Bengal Panchayat system was formally inaugurated on Oct 2, 1964, after passing of the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act, 1963. These four tiers were Gram Panchayat, Anchal Panchayat, Anchalik Parishad and Zilla Parishad.

Structure, Composition and Functions of Four Tiers

Panchayat System:

Gram Panchayat:

According to the Act of 1957, Gram Sabha in West Bengal was a first step towards the formation of the Panchayat Raj structure. Gram Panchayat was

the executive committee of the Gram Sabha, and was elected by the members of the Sabha from amongst themselves. The Act of 1957, also provided for state nominated members possessing special qualifications. The elected members were to elect the Adhyaksha and Upadhyaksha from amongst themselves.

The functions of Gram Panchayats fall under three categories; obligatory, discretionary and delegated. First category included common municipal functions relating to public health, water supply and local public works. The other two categories consisted of development such as, construction, promotion of cottage industry, street lighting, cooperatives and so on.

Anchal Panchayat:

The second tier, placed above the Gram Panchayat, was the Anchal Panchayat, a unique which made the West Bengal Panchayat system a four-tier Panchayat. Under the Act of 1957, 8-10 Gram Panchayats come under Anchal Panchayat, all Adhyaksha of Gram Panchayats were the members of this tier and members to be elected by the members of Gram Sabha, keeping in view that at least one member was elected for every 500 members of the Gram Sabha. At the first meeting this tier would elect its Prodhan and Upa-pradhan (Diwakar, 1984).

This tier was made responsible for imposition of taxes, maintenance of law and order, and rural justice. The executive work of this tier was to look after by a secretary, appointed by State government.

Anchalik Parishad:

As per the recommendations of B.Mehta study team and West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act, 1963, Anchalik Parishad was constituted at block level.

This tier consisted of:

- a) All prodhans of that particular block area.
- b) One Adhyaksha elected, by the Adhyaksha of Gram Panchayat.
- c) M.L.A and M.P within the block area

- d) Two women and two person of backward community appointed by state government.
- e) Two co-opted members having experience in social work.
- f) The Block Development Officer.

This Parishad elects president and, vice president amongst its member. The B.D.O is executive officer of this tier.

The Anchalik parishad was entrusted with development work of entire block, was to act as a coordinating agency for plans and programmes. To be more specific, its function included the development of agriculture, livestock, cotton industry, cooperatives, rural roads, water supply and many other object of general public utility.

Zilla Parishad:

Under the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act 1963, Zilla Parishad constituted of both the members and the associated members as

- i) All presidents of concerned Anchalik parishads, ex-officio
- ii) Two adhyakshas
- iii) MPs and MLAs elected within the district
- iv) Chairman of the Municipality
- v) President of the School Board, ex-officio
- vi) Two women appointed by State government.
- vii) The sub-divisional officers of the district

The Zilla Parishad was to elect one chairman and one vice chairman from amongst members in its first meeting (Government of West Bengal Act, 1963).

Zilla Parishads were empowered to undertake a wide range of functions similar to those of Anchalik Parishads. This parishad had additional responsibility of advising the state government. on the distribution of work among the lower tiers. State government had a number of officials at this tier as district Panchayat officer, Assistant Engineer etc.,

Assessment of the Four Tier Panchayat System in West Bengal:

The four tier Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal introduced through the Acts of 1957 and 1963 failed to evoke much expected enthusiasm and to enlist popular support.

The failure may be attributed to a number of related factors as:

- (i) This Panchayati Raj structure did not affect the traditional role, status and functions of the key functionaries like District Magistrate who rather remain aloof. Ineffectiveness of the control of the non-official member over the officials, was very much evident. The powers, status and the prestige of the elected members were there fore, circumscribed and restricted by the government officials.
- (ii) Elections in all the tiers were due every four years, However, elections were postponed due to political instability, President's rule, war and emergency resulting in the ad-hocism in the functioning of the local government.
- (iii) Another reason for the failure of that four tier PRIs was the paucity of funds, which is regarded as the institutional fuel for any agency.
Structural arrangements of Panchyati Raj bodies were the other factors coming in the way of healthy growth of the Panchyati Raj activities.
- (iv) The absence of direct election for the upper three tiers resulted in lack of initiatives and spirit of service of the members of upper tiers bodies.
- (v) Presence of MLA's and MP's discouraged the growth of local leader ship.

The Cumulative effect of these loopholes in the system of Panchayat Raj in West Bengal stopped the natural growth and development of people's organization and failed to live up to the rate of state field administration.

Three Tier System of New Panchayati Raj in West Bengal:

Replacing the earlier Act of 1957 and 1963, West Bengal Panchayat Act 1973 was the new dimension of Panchayati Raj. With this act West Bengal came on the same line of all India pattern of three tier Panchayati Raj system, Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad. But this Act was not implemented till 1977 and with the emergence of left front government in West Bengal, Panchayat Raj got a new life since 1978.

GRAM PANCAHYAT:

Gram Panchayat, under the new Panchayat Raj system, consists only of elected members. The member varies between seven and twenty five. In the first meeting it elects one Prodhan and Upa Prodhan from among its elected members. Official functions are looked after by the secretary, appointed by the state government.

There is also a provision for a job assistant as to assist in implementing plans and policies of the Gram Panchayat. The state government may send some officers and staff to act under the Gram Panchayat.

Functions:

The functions of a Gram Panchayat are mainly three types – obligatory, assigned and discretionary. The important obligatory duties are laid down in section 19 of the West Bengal Panchayat Act 1973. These are as:

Sanitation, Conservancy and Drainage and prevention of public nuisance, supply of drinking water, preventive measures in respect of malaria, smallpox, cholera or another epidemic.

The maintenance, repair and reconstruction of public tanks, burning ghats and public graveyards, the control and administration of the G.P. fund, the imposition and collection of tax etc,

Section 21 has laid down the discretionary duties.

These functions are those pertaining to the rural development and rural reconstruction and include maintenance and beautification of public streets,

sinking of wells, excavation of ponds and tanks, construction and regulation of markets; fairs and local exhibitions, establishment and maintenance of libraries and reading rooms, recreation centers, the introduction and promotion of cooperative farming, stores and other enterprises. And any other local work of public utility which is likely to promote the health, comfort, convenience, or material prosperity of the people.

Section 20 deals with the assigned functions.

These functions are assigned by the state government for execution with full financial support. They are primary, social, technical or vocational education, rural dispensaries, health center, child welfare centers, irrigation, promotion of waste land into cultivation, plantations, grow-more food campaign etc..

PANCHAYAT SAMITI:

The middle tier is the Panchayat Samiti that consists of the following categories of members :-

- i) All the prodhans of the G.Ps within the area of the Block.
- ii) All the elected members of each Panchayat Samiti.
- iii) All the MLAs, MPs within the block area.

The Samiti at its first meeting elects one Sabhapati and saha Sabhapati from amongst the members. This tier required to meet at least once in three months. B.D.O. is the ex-officio executive officer Extension Officer Panchayats (EOP) is the secretary of this body.

For the proper functioning of the Samiti, it has the following standing committees:-

- 1) Artho-o-sanstha sthayee Samiti
- 2) Janasasthya sthayee Samiti
- 3) Purta Karya sthayee Samiti
- 4) Krishi sech-o- samabaya sthayee Samiti
- 5) Siksha sthayee Samiti
- 6) Khudra silpa, tran-o-janakalyan sthayee Samiti
- 7) Unnayan, Parikalpana o bhumi sanskar sthayee Samiti

- 8) Matsya-o-posupalan sthayee Samiti and
- 9) Khadya-o-sarabaraha sthayee Samiti.

Functions:

As per West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1993, Section 109 (i) (e) (f), the main functions of this tier are to coordinate and integrate the activities of the constituent G.Ps.

- (i) Undertake any schemes or adopt measures including the financial assistance relating to the development of agriculture, live stock, cottage industry, water supply, irrigation, public health and sanitation etc.
- (ii) Undertake management of any institution or organization entrusted to it by the state government or any other authority.
- (iii) Manage or maintain any work of public utility under its control and management (section 110).
- (iv) Make grants in aid of any school, public institution or public welfare organisation within the block (section 111).
- (v) Adopt measure for relief of distress.
- (vi) Co-ordinate and integrate the development plans and schemes prepared by G.P. in the block.(sec111).
- (vii) This tier may take over the maintenance and control of any road, bridge, tank, ghat, channel or drain belonging to a private owner or any other authority (section 112).

ZILLA PARISHAD:

Zilla parishad is the upper most tier of Panchayati Raj bodies based at the district level. As laid down in sec 140 of the Act of 1973, this tier consists of the following members:

- i) Sabhapatis of the Panchayati Samitis within the district as ex-officio member.
- ii) All the elected members of zilla parishad.

iii) MLAs, MPs within the district.

This parishad is headed by the Sabhadhipati and Sahakari Sabhadhipati elected from amongst its members. District magistrate is the executive officer of zilla parishad. One secretary from the category of civil service is appointed by state government. The secretary is to assist the D.M in discharging his duties. The executive officer, the D.M remains responsible for executing the policies of zilla parishad.

Zilla parishad also like Panchayati Samiti, has standing committees, may also constitute more with approval of the state government. These committees are :-

- (i) Artha O sanstha sthayee Samiti.
- (ii) Ganasastha sthayee Samiti.
- (iii) Purta karya sthayee Samiti.
- (iv) Krishi, sech O samabaya sthayee Samiti.
- (v) Shiksha sthayee Samiti.
- (vi) Khudra shilpa, tran O ganakalyan.
- (vii) Such other Samities as the zilla parishad may, constitute, subject to the approval of state government (section 171).

Section 153, 155, 157, 158 lay down the power of Zilla Parishads.

These are:

- (a) To undertake any schemes or offer financial assistance for the development of agricultural, livestock, industries, rural credit, water supply, irrigation, primary, secondary, adult education etc.
- (b) To undertake the execution of any scheme entrusted to it by the state government or any other authority.
- (c) To manage or maintain any work of public utility or any institution.
- (d) To make grants in aid of any school, public institution or public welfare organization.
- (e) To examine and sanction the budget estimate of the Panchayat Samiti.

- (f) To adopt measures for the relief of distress.
- (g) To perform such other functions as the state government may, by general or specific order, direct.

It is observed that, earlier the government officials played the main role in the matter of policy formulation and its implementation. Now the elected representatives, in the three-tier level of Panchayati Raj Institutions, formulate the policies.

WEST BENGAL PANCHAYAT: A New Experience

After Independence, West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957 was passed. West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act, 1963 was passed for remodeling the local government, bringing about democratic decentralization. In 1973, West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 was passed to give Panchayat Raj a new shape. In 1977, after the Left Front was voted to power in the state and having faced many social, structural, constitutional, and political constraints, has injected a new life to the Panchayats.

Major amendments to the West Bengal Panchayat Act 1973, were made in 1992, 1994 and 1997, so as to conform to the 73rd constitutional amendments. It would be appropriate to highlight some important provisions of these amendments (Task Force of Panchayati Raj 2000)

- a) It provides for a Gram Sansad for each electoral constituency.
- b) The Gram Sabha is to meet once in a year. The Panchayat is required to be place before the meeting.
- c) The tenure of the three-tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions has been fixed at five years.
- d) The amendment also established the state Election Commission state Finance Commission and the District Council.
- e) Providing one- third seat to women by rotation (Pramanik SK, P Dutta 1994).

Literal meaning of self- government is autonomy without outside interference. Panchayats in West Bengal have survived for so long and provided

continuity of governance at the sub-state level. The constitutional protection now offered to them by 73rd amendment has enabled them to continue even if there is any change in Writer's Building (Mukherjee N, Bandopadhyay 1993). It has been observed that through Panchayat election, power has been decentralized and with the organized force of the village poor and middle class the task of establishing the power of poor curbing the power of the administrative officers in the villages has been carried out (Acharya P, 1993).

Gram Sabha in Panchayati Raj System:

Rural progress depends entirely on the existence of an active organization at village level, which can bring all the people of different sections into common programme. Panchayati Raj is a unit of governmental system and Gram Sabha is the most important basic institution in Panchayati Raj system. Gram Sabha is a village assembly of all adults men and women to look after its internal administration and development of village. This is a model for democracy at the grass root level based on direct participation by the people (Diwakar, 1984). Gram Sabha is an institutional approach to popular participation. It is a base of Panchayati Raj system having democratic decentralization at village.

At grass root level, the immediate task is to create a faith in the village people regarding the social utility of Panchayati Raj. To establish a vital link between the Gram Sabha and the Gram Panchayat, proceedings of the Gram Sabha should be recorded and approved by the Panchayat in their meetings. Gram Sabha would establish an active dialogue between the village people and their elected representatives at Panchayat level regarding development matters, agenda should cover the budget and earlier audit report and also to discuss the annual administrative report with progress report of the development work. This would result in developing the link between the common people and their Panchayat System. It is birth right of every village to conduct its own affairs. Gram Sabha should therefore take into its hands the management of village affairs or development (Narayanasamy S, 1998).

To enlist the people's active cooperation in the national campaign to secure the proper distribution and utilization of government sources, Gram Sabha being a primary body, would be face to face organ of direct democracy, not made up of representatives but all adult residents. Gram Sabha to which every voter in village Panchayat is a member, is a consultative body, a forum of thought.

Gram Sabha must be free from all social and political evils; it must have a spiritual fiber, which will unite all forces at the grass, root level. As we stepped into the 21st Century, grass root institution must be strengthened village assembly must be commanded by the poorest of the poor, and in this direction people have to dedicate themselves to strengthen Gram Sabha in the Panchayat system (West Bengal Panchayat Amendment Act, 1994 Sec 16 B). With effect from 1998, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad is working on the following Sthayee Samiti basis:

- a) Artha, Sanstha, Unnayan-o-Parikalpana Sthayee Samiti.
- b) Banaswastha-o-paribesh sthayee Samiti.
- c) Krishi-Sech-O-Samaboy Sthayee Samiti.
- d) Purta Karya-O-Paribhan Sthayee Samiti.
- e) Siksha-Sanskriti, Tathya-O-Kriya Sthayee Samiti.
- f) Sishu-O-Nari Unnayan, Janakalyan-O-Tran Sthayee Samiti.
- g) Bon-O-Bhumi Sanskar Sthayee Samiti.
- h) Matsya-O-Prani Sampad Bikash Sthayee Samiti
- i) Khadya-O-Saraberaha Sthayee Samiti
- j) Khudra Shilpa, Bidyut-O-Achiracharit Shakthi Sthayee Samiti

(West Bengal Panchayat (amendment) Act 1997)

Conclusion:

The Panchayats of West Bengal are today lively centers of activity. However, such decentralization is in the nature of 'de-concentration' type under which Panchayats serve as the implementing agencies of the state government.

Skewed distribution of benefits, failure to evoke popular support, inability to achieve common acceptance of the decisions, lack of spirit in leadership, dominance of rich farmers, undue political interference and paucity of funds are the deficiencies existing in the functions of Panchayats. Reservation to various sections has given them opportunities to articulate and fulfill their needs and aspirations. With the legislative support of the 73rd constitutional amendment, it is found that the process of democratic decentralization has gathered momentum.

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