

# CHAPTER- 1

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

It is said that for proper and perfect development of a society the participation of people from all sections is earnestly required for good governance. (1) In fact, the first sign of a healthy democracy is that collective decisions are made by you people who are at the receiving end. It is seen that right from the days of community development programme, people's role and their involvement in local self-government have undergone severe stress. Involvement of the people is necessary so as to make the people responsive to their own development needs and requirements. (2) The prime mechanism through which the democracy becomes truly representative and responsive. In fact, development has some socio-political facets. The Local Self-Governance efforts also cover the strategies for enhancement of the quality of life through appropriate development activities, infrastructure facilities, and provision of minimum basic needs and source of livelihood. Women participation in Self Governance encompasses structural

changes in the rural socio-economic situation in order to achieve the prosperity and welfare, which is the ultimate goal of all development programmes. (3)

It is rightly said that Democracy is never complete unless active involvement and participation of the people at all levels is assured. Particularly in the modern age of democracies, where it is said that the State, the government and power belong to people: the government is the servant and welfare agency of the people. (4) Yet the people, come in contact with the government only at local level. Because of high level of development and institutionalisation, in the developed societies, may be local government only signifies a collection of subordinate instrumentalities, restricted in both jurisdiction and geographical coverage and concerned with the provision of more or less routine services which, for one reason or another, are considered suitable subjects for administration by locally elected bodies.(5) In a developing country it signifies —or can signify—something of far deeper importance. Through local government institutions the new political elite, emerging from the process of independence,

makes an attempt to mobilise the masses, hitherto no more than peripherally involved in public affairs, for the nation-building tasks of economic and social development, and to commit them more actively to the maintenance of the political system of which they are now supposed to constitute an integral part. (6)

As such the local-level governmental institutions can be looked upon as an integrated system of political socialisation, communication and mobilisation both of political and socio-economic development. The proper functioning and actual role of these institutions depend on the institutional framework, social structure and above all the political will of the nationalist and state level leaders. A proper assessment of the functioning and state and national level'. Therefore almost all the political parties actually participated in Panchayat elections quite openly.

Panchayati Raj was a bold experiment in democratization and modernisation of rural India. By giving decision making power, initiative and adequate resources it was assumed that the Panchayati Raj institutions would bring about a revolution in the mental make up of the rural masses. (7) It was also conceived of as an institution for development with

decentralised administrations and voluntary popular participation. It was assumed that the proper functioning of the Panchayati Raj would result in creating a cooperative commonwealth assuring social justice to the hitherto neglected rural masses'.

These lofty declarations in practice, however, did not materialise. In practice the Panchayati Raj tended to become an arena for the play of power politics and there was an oligarchic control by the rural elite under the garb of party struggle. Most of the Panchayats were dominated by big landowners, money-lenders, merchants etc. These social groups looked after their own interests, which were often very different from the rest of the population's interests. The others became disgusted with the Panchayats.(8)

In fact right at the time of the introduction of Panchayati Raj many observers found evidence to suggest that its effects would be to confirm and, so to speak, legalise the dominance of those who were already dominant, and this indeed, often happened. Some studies indicate that in many areas—and not invariably in the more advanced ones—it assisted the rise of new elites usually described as neo-traditionalists rather than

modernising, composed of the younger and better educated members of those middle castes who had benefited both from land reforms of the 1950s and from the Community Development Schemes themselves. (9) In fact, in the rural situation, to expect that contest for power will be fought purely on programme and electoral platforms where there is no room for local village factions to intervene is sheer political naïveté. Village faction leaders are obviously not the poorer sections but the members of wealthy families who carry their family vendetta into the Panchayati Raj affairs as well, riot only because it gives them what in the seventies a feeling started developing that "Panchayati Raj is like a god that failed". In general the Panchayati Raj system suffered from following problems:

1. The State governments were not holding regular elections for P.R. institutions.
2. Even when elections were held, the PR bodies were superseded or dissolved on minor, sometimes false pretexts.
3. The P.R. bodies hardly had their own sources of revenue and State governments did not bother much to

finance them. Thus they were always starving for funds.

4. Often locally powerful groups, mainly based upon caste and economic status cornered these institutions using them for their self-interest.
5. There was either weak or negative administrative support.

**Panchayati Raj Institutions** are institutional vehicles for development. The PRIs (Panchayats Raj Institution) are considered as local self-government and meant for solving problems of the local community and initiate the development process at grass-root level which also include providing basic infrastructure facilities in villages. (10)The Panchyati Raj has been one of the most original and ancient system of local governance in rural India guaranteeing to the people the feel of the direct democracy in modern times.

The institution of Panchayats in India is as old as Indian Civilization. The Panchayats were fairly vibrant bodies but eventually various Socio-Political factors disintegrated these bodies. The Constitution of free India envisaged States to make provision for the

organization of village and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government. However, the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were constituted in several states which had passed through many vicissitudes and could not live up to expectation till now. (11)

The past experience of Panchayat Raj Institutions had been a state of neglect and impoverishment. Even after its existence for about four decades, it could not acquire the status and dignity of viable unit of self-government and a responsive people's body. Several factors are responsible to impede the growth of Panchayats, such as absence of regular and periodic elections within a stipulated period; prolonged super sessions; variation in structure, powers and functions from State to State; insufficient representation of weaker section like SCs/STs and women; inadequate devolution of powers; lack of financial resources and above all, lack of Political will. The Panchayats, being the potential centers of people's power aroused apprehensions in the minds of bureaucracy and elected representatives at the national and State level bodies so they were not quite willing to share power. (12)

It may be stated that the Rural Local Self government in India is known by the popular name Panchayati Raj. It has been in operation

since the early years of independence. It has the responsibility to satisfy the local needs and aspirations of the people living in rural areas i.e. villages.

The term Panchayati Raj indicates a wide range of meaning. Some regard it as an administrative agency for rural development; others as an extension of democracy at the grass-root level.

The word "Panchayat" possibly implies the 'council of five'. But there is no such evidence that their numbers have strictly been followed in future in the composition of Panchayat. The Panchayat is an organization of people for performing administrative activities and settling judicial disputes. It is the operational unit for popular representation as well as planned development. (13)

To be precise, the term Panchayati Raj means a statutory multi-tier institutional structure endowed with a corporate status by a competent legislature performing functions pertaining to local-self government as determined from time to time by the legislature and or the executive at the State or the Union levels.



## **RATIONALE AND PHILOSOPHY**

The rationale and the political philosophy of Panchayati Raj may be briefly summarized as follows:

During the British Rule of about 150 years, three developments completely transformed our rural economy to the rural poor, particularly the Kisan and the Artisan. Agriculture became commercialized. Industry became urbanized. Power became centralized. The commercialization of agriculture, urbanization of industry and centralization of power created a new class of exploiters in our rural areas. This new class soon established links with the trader in the town and the monopolist in the Monopolis. These three started manipulating the market forces of demand and supply to the detriment of the Kisan and the Artisan. They became the Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar of our economy.(14) One created, the other sustained and the third destroyed the market forces in such a way that they continued to gain from the exploitation of the Kisan and the Artisan. Many were there who thought of various ways of defeating this unholy trinity.(15)

It was the genius of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru who found the real answer to this basic problem.

He stated that the only way to give economic power to the rural poor is to strengthen the cooperative movement and the only way to give political power to the rural poor is to strengthen the Panchayati Raj System.

The experiment of Panchayati Raj was started by Pandit Nehru in the 1960s. The Nehru Centenary year is the most appropriate time to review its working and suggest ways and means of improving its functioning. The initiative in this matter was taken by the Congress President Shri Rajiv Gandhi. He started a debate in the Party on how real and genuine decentralization and devolution of power can be achieved. (16)

This report makes an attempt to assess the working and functioning of our Panchayati Raj institutions. The basic question we have to ask ourselves is whether the present structure composition and powers of these institutions give real political power to the rural poor, particularly the Kisan and the Artisan as perceived by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.(17)

## **Evolution of Panchayat**

In the long past, the Panchayat system was introduced from the period of “Rig-Veda”, when the popular institution consisting of villagers emerged at the village level for the maintenance of law and order, fixation of taxes and other general welfare activities, namely, Sabha and Samiti. But in the later period of Rig-Veda, “Samiti” was abolished and Sabha was converted into a “Royal Court” or “Council”. It has been part of the Indian system for ages. Panchayati Raj system prevailed during the Chola period. It was seen as Gram Swaraj by Mahatma Gandhi. (18)

### **Some important Landmarks**

The history of local self-government in India is a long one. The *Panchayat* was part of the feudal system of governance even before British Rule.

During the British period, there were several experiments with systems of local self-government, including the *Panchayat* system. It was only after independence, however, that serious efforts were made to build an effective system of self-governance based on the *Panchayat*. Some of the important landmarks are listed below.

## **Colonial Period**

### ***Chowkidari Act:***

The *Chowkidari Act* was passed in **1870**. The *Chowkidari Panchayat* was established under this Act. Its power was limited to that of maintaining law and order and in a few cases to collecting '*Khajna*' (local tax).

### **Bengal Local Self Government**

According to the recommendations of Lord Ripon, the Bengal Local Self Government had two tiers:

1. The District Board. They had their own funds. They undertook development work with this money. Later on, during British Rule, this Board emerged as a powerful body.

2. A cluster of villages formed the Union Committee. They had power to collect taxes (Khajana). They too were given the responsibility of doing some development work. This Committee was a very weak organization.

For both these bodies, the District Magistrate was the main authority. It should be stated that they did not function on democratic lines.

### **Royal Commission of Decentralization:**

It was immediately after the *Swadeshi* movement of Bengal (1905), the Royal Commission of Decentralization was formed (1907-1909) under the guidance of Mr. Hobhouse (I.C.S). This commission tried to give some additional powers at the local level. It was decided that:

- There should not be two or more bodies at the same level;
- All the local bodies should undertake developmental work;
- In these bodies the elected members should get prominence.

As per recommendation of this Commission, the **Village Self Government Act** was passed in 1911.

### **Village Self Government Act (1911):**

In accordance with this Act, the *Chowkidari Panchayat* and the Union Committee were merged. **The Union Board** was formed at the village level and District Board at the district level. This two-tier system of local self-governance lasted till the 1950s. Both of them had

limited franchise. Everyone was not allowed to contest for election and neither was everyone allowed to vote. Only those who paid a certain amount of tax or above could contest for election. The Act also tried to introduce a third tier at the *Mahakuma* level called the Local Board to advance the three-tier system. But this experiment failed.

(19)

After independence, the Panchayati Raj system came into existence during the late 1950s with the implementation of Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team's Report. This committee recommended a three-tier structure of local government at the Village, Block and Zilla levels.

The Study Team also recommended for the co-option of two women in all the tiers of Panchayat. The revival started in the late 1970s with the appointment of Ashok Mehta Committee in December 1977. This committee recommended two-tiers of local governments at Mandal and Zilla levels. This committee also recommended the co-option of two women as members both at Zilla and Mandal levels. The Ashok Mehta committee was followed by G.V.K. Rao Committee (1988), which tried to make Panchayat Institutions more viable and effective. (20)

Finally, the revival of Panchayat culminated by giving Panchayati Raj the constitutional status. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment was passed on 24, April 1993. The 73rd Amendment Act. Allocated 29 subjects to the Panchayat, fixed five years' term, created the State Finance Commission and the State Election Commission and said that if the Panchayats were dissolved before the expiry of the term, then they are to be reconstituted within six months of dissolution. The Act further reserved 1/3rd of the seats for women at Village, Block and Zilla Parishad levels.

However, the different stages of development of the system of Panchayati Raj may be undertaken for scrutiny and analysis. (21)

### **Establishment of Panchayati Raj in India**

The Organization of Panchayati Raj in India came as a revolutionary step towards rural development. The launching of Community Development Programmes on 2nd October 1953, the National Extension Service was launched. These steps were designed to secure the involvement of the rural people in the process of rural people in the process of rural development. However, the inadequate success registered by these, necessitated the need for reforms. As already pointed out that in the year of 1954, the Government of India

established the Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team for suggesting some major reforms. In October 1957, the Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team submitted its report. It suggested the organization of Panchayati Raj in rural India. (22) It was to act both as an instrument of rural local self-government as well as an agency for community development. It recommended the creation of the three tiers Panchayati Raj - Panchayats at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level and Zilla Parishads at the district level. The National Development Council accepted the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team report in 1958. The Government of India then called upon all the states to implement these recommendations. On 2nd October 1959, Rajasthan came to be the first State to establish Panchayati Raj. Thereafter, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, West Bengal, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, Kerala,

J & K, Himachal Pradesh and in fact, all states introduced Panchayati Raj in their respective areas by passing necessary laws. The whole of rural India came under Panchayati Raj. It still continues to be in operation so that it can be operative in all the states of the country. (23)



## BALWANT RAI MEHTA STUDY TEAM

The Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team was appointed in 1957 to study the Community Development (CD) and National Extension Services (NES) Programme, especially from the point of view of assessing the extent of popular participation and to recommend creation of institutions through which such participation can be achieved. The study team recommended constitution of statutory elective local bodies with the necessary resources, power and authority developed on them and the decentralized administrative system working under their control. (24)

It also recommended that the basic unit of democratic decentralization should be located at the Block/Samiti level. The study team envisaged directly elected and co-opted members and an advisory body called **Zilla Parishad** at the district level constituted indirectly, mainly through ex-officio members from the lower tier and others with the Collector as Chairman.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team recommended some ways to increase rural women's income and improve the conditions of their children. Through its report on Panchayati Raj which deals with the direction of designing smokeless *chullhas*, providing for personal and

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environmental cleanliness, taking care of the cattle, developing kitchen gardens, learning poultry keeping, training in the elementary use of thread and needle, women could mend clothes for the family and organize cooking classes. This Study Team also emphasized the need for Women Social Extension Officers and Gram Sevikas for carrying out welfare programmes. (25)

The recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team gave a new lease to CD and NES projects. It also paved the way for a new era for Panchayati Raj institutions which was inaugurated by the then Prime Minister of India Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru on October, 2, 1959 at a national rally at Nagaur in Rajasthan. Nehru hailed it as **“the most revolutionary and historical step in the context of new India”**. (26)

### **ASHOK MEHTA COMMITTEE**

The next major landmark for Panchyati Raj is the Ashok Mehta Committee's Report that laid special emphasis on the need to recognize and strengthen women's constructive decision-making and managerial roles. This committee suggested that arrangements should

be made to provide financial assistance to women and to facilitate and promote self-employment. The committee also laid stress on the effective organizations of 'Mahila Mandals' as important components in the rural development programmes.

When it was observed by several state level committees as well as by regional studies that the PR system was suffering from a number of weaknesses, the Janata government, which had committed itself to decentralisation and Gandhian values, appointed in 1977 a 13-member committee headed by Ashok Mehta to inquire into the Panchayati Raj institutions and to suggest measures to strengthen them. (27)

In its report, the Ashok Mehta committee felt that except for Maharashtra and Gujarat PR institutions have been rarely given an opportunity to take up planning or implementational work on a sizeable scale. The essential idea that all developmental activities should flow only through the block level organisations lost ground. In practice, there was a movement in the opposite direction. (28) There have been structural weaknesses in the system whereby several developmental programmes were kept outside the orbit of these institutions.

The bureaucracy also played its role in the weakening of the Panchayati Raj. What is more there was no political will to support those institutions. The lukewarm attitude of the political elite at higher levels towards the strengthening of the democratic process at the grassroots was generally the root of the matter. There was a lack of conceptual clarity relating to the role of these institutions. Further they were dominated by economically and socially privileged sections of the society. Political factionalism was rampant in them. All these and several other factors led to erosion of faith in PR institutions.

In its suggestions for improvements the Committee did not lay down any rigid pattern for the whole country and made efforts at built-in-flexibility. It, however, proposed that the district should be the first point of decentralisation below the state. The block, which is the unit of planning in most of the states, was not to be the basic unit of devolution but merely an executive committee of the Zilla Parishad as in Maharashtra. (29) On the other hand, in view of higher forms of services expected in future for which the village will not be a viable unit, the Committee suggested for a grouping of villages to form Mandal Panchayats,

which should vest to the district. In its view the Mandal Panchayat will have to be the hub of developmental activities. In effect, the Committee was in favour of a two-tier system of Panchayati Raj.

The Committee suggested that there should be electoral divisions for the Zilla Parishad from which members should be directly elected. There should be reservation of seats for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in proportion to their population. Some members were to be ex-officio and a provision for co-opting the members to represent special interests in rural development, the others from universities and colleges from among teachers of Economics, Sociology, Political Science and Public Administration was made. The term of the representative was suggested to be four years. In the proposed system of elections the directly elected component was recommended to be larger than the ex-officio and co-opted elements. The Committee placed its full faith in direct elections. It is interesting to note that the Committee recognised the utility of political parties in Panchayati Raj institutions and wanted them to be allowed to participate in elections. (30)

The process of decline and stagnation became evident in the Panchayati Raj institutions because of a feeling of political alienation and indifference of the weaker sections and backward classes caused by the capture of the Panchayati Raj institutions by the dominant communities. Development programmes for increasing agricultural production became more bureaucratic with hardly any participation of the people. In view of this, a 13 member committee headed by Ashok Mehta was set up in 1977 to inquire into the Panchayati Raj institutions and to suggest measures to strengthen them.

A resolution, appointing the committee said, "The government accords the highest priority to rural development so as to increase agricultural production, create employment, and eradicate poverty and bring about an all-round improvement in the rural economy. The Government considers that the maximum degree of decentralization, both in planning and in implementation, is necessary for the attainments of these objectives".

The Committee recommended a two-tier set-up that is, district level and mandal level covering a population of 15,000 to 20,000 and suggested abolition of the block as the unit of administration. It also recommended holding of regular elections, compulsory items of taxation in their jurisdiction and transfer of land revenues collection to

them. It was felt that a constitutional provision was necessary to strengthen Panchayati Raj institutions. (31)

It is important to note that a Conference of Chief Ministers was held in 1979 to consider important recommendations of this Committee which did not accept the concept of mandal panchayats and favoured continuance of the existing three-tier system. The consensus was also against political parties taking part in panchayat elections. (32)

### **G.V.K.RAO COMMITTEE**

Taking into consideration the fact that an integrated concept for growth and poverty alleviation would continue to be one of the principal areas of emphasis in the Seventh Plan, the government appointed on March 25, 1985 a 12 member committee under the chairmanship of Dr.G.V.K.Rao, ex-member, Planning Commission to review the existing administrative arrangements for rural development and poverty alleviation programmes and also to recommend appropriate structural mechanism to ensure that they were planned in an integrated manner and was effectively implemented. (33)

The Committee recommended that the district should be the basic unit for policy planning and programme implementation. The Zilla Parishad should therefore, become the principal body for management of all development programmes which can be handled at that level. The Committee also called for regular elections to the **Panchayati Raj institutions.**

### **L.M.SINGHVI REPORT**

In order to review the growth and present status as well as functions of Panchayati Raj institutions and make them truly effective instruments in the constructive task of rural development and nation building, a national workshop was to be held. A concept paper was to be prepared for discussion at this workshop, for which an 8 member committee headed by Dr.L.M.Singhvi, Chairman, Balwant Rai Mehta Foundation Programme Committee, New Delhi, was constituted in June, 1986. (34)

The Committee recommended reorganization of villages for viable village panchayats, more financial resources for these institutions and setting up of jurisdiction tribunals in each state to adjudicate controversies in relation to the functioning of Panchayati Raj.(35)



## **SARKARIA COMMISSION**

The Sarkaria Commission on Centre–State relations started preparation of a model bill for the whole country to govern local self governing bodies on which state legislatures could enact their own bye laws.

A Sub-Committee of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee attached to the Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pension was set up in 1988 under the Chairmanship of **P.K.Thungon** to consider the “Type of Political and Administrative Structure in the district for district planning”. The Committee held that Panchayati Raj bodies should be constitutionally recognized. It also recommended a constitutional provision to ensure timely and regular election to these bodies whose term should be five years. (36)

## **GADGIL COMMITTEE REPORT /RECOMMENDATIONS**

An important milestone in the history of the development of Panchyati Raj is that of the **Gadgil Committee Report** and recommendations. It pointed out that we have carefully considered the reports of the various committees as well as the feedback from the discussions in the DCC’s and PCC’s.

Our views have been made clear in the main body of our study at each salient juncture. Nevertheless, it is important to put them all together to spell out the specific proposals. Hence we make the following recommendations:

1. The Panchayati Raj structure should be based on a 3 tier system, i.e. village block and district.

The Panchayati Raj bodies at all the three levels should be elected for five years. The elections to these bodies should be not only statutory but also mandatory. As soon as a block level or district level body is dissolved or dismissed, relevant notifications should be laid on the table of the Assembly. The Assembly should be there and there should be a constitutional mandate that fresh elections must be held within one year of dissolution. (37)

2. At the village level, both the members of the Panchayat and the head of the Panchayat should be directly elected. At block/district level, members should be directly elected but the President should be elected indirectly. However, the electorate for the election of the President at the block/district levels should be wide enough to include not only members of the block/district level organizations but also include the heads of all village Panchayats in the area.

3. Constituencies should be reserved for SC/ST and women so that adequate representation is given to the weaker sections. At the block/district levels, Chairmanship should also go by rotation to members of SC/ST and women. Where Zilla Parishads have statutory committees for finance, education, etc one of the Chairman should belong to SC/ST.

4. The constitution should itself provide for the role, authority and jurisdiction of Panchayati Raj institutions which will have the responsibility or preparation of plan for economic and social development as well as of implementing them.

5. The constitution should itself provide for the role, authority and jurisdiction of Panchayati Raj institutions, power to levy, collect and appropriate taxes and duties.

6. A State Finance Commission on the pattern of Finance Commission, established under Article 280 of the Constitution should be constituted by all States. Such a Commission should have an eminent public person as its Chairman and should have a judicial and accounts member. The State Finance Commissions should decide the allocation of funds for each district for five years.

7. A State Election Commission should be constituted in every State in consultation with the Election Commission of India to

supervise and conduct elections to all Panchayati Raj bodies. Such a Commission may have a retired Supreme Court or High Court Judges as its Chairman.

8. Members of Parliament and Members of Legislative Assemblies should be ex-officio members of the block/district level Panchayati Raj bodies. However, they should not have any voting rights.

9. The Panchayati Raj institution at the district level should have as its Chief Administrative Officer-a senior I.A.S officer. He should be of an equal seniority with that of the Collector and District Magistrate. The Collector should look after law and order, revenue and regulatory work. The development work should be assigned to the Zilla Parishad.

10. In order to facilitate the process of bringing about these changes in the structure, composition, powers and responsibilities of the Panchayati Raj institutions, a comprehensive Constitution amendment Bill should be introduced in Parliament. Such a bill should propose the addition of a new Chapter in the Constitution spelling out the above mentioned changes so as to strengthen the Panchayati Raj infrastructure and make it effective to cover a large number of rural women.

In the period of Seventh Plan, the basic approach was to improve the conditions of rural women and imparting to them new skills under the farmer's training, exchange of development, fodder production, post harvest technology, application of pesticides, budding and grafting, farmer's training in horticulture, fisheries, poultry, dairy, social forestry, etc. During the Seventh plan, it was also decided that importance would be given to achieve a larger coverage of women in the Integrated Rural Development Programmes. (38)

An exclusive scheme called '**Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA)**' intended for the social and economic uplift of women belonging to families below the poverty line was launched in 1982 as a subcomponent of **Integrated Rural Development Programme**. This scheme trained 15-20 women in each group about weaving, fish vending, broom and rope making, brick making, pickle making, candle making and baking. In addition to the above schemes, the Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme and the Minimum Need Programme were also intended to be of social significance to rural women who are the victims of drudgery. The Low Cost Sanitation Programme was also introduced

for women. The programmes aimed at promoting rural technology, which intended to relieve the drudgery of women in daily domestic and outside activities. Those schemes are: Science and Technology for women, development of smokeless *chullhas*, use of solar cookers and setting up of bio-gas plants and devices for improving the water purification system. (39)

Under social forestry programmes, it was decided to give 'Tree Pattas' in the name of women. The scheme of 'Krishi Vigyan Kendras' (KVK) (introduced in the Sixth Plan period) for bridging the gap between the farmer's knowledge and available technology also covered women. The programmes also included those concerning 'Functional Literacy for **Adult Women and Health and Nutrition**'. In essence, the focus in the programmes was shifted from welfare to development.

During the four decades (1951-91) several plans and programmes were introduced for women's development or empowerment. These were: "**Women Development Corporations**" (WDCs) which were set up for women's economic independence and self-reliance in 1986-87; "**Rashtriya Mahila Kosh**" (RMK) was established in 1993 for poor women's development; On 2nd

Oct.1993 “Mahila Samriddhi Yojana” (MSY) was launched for women’s empowerment and one of the successful event was lunched in 20th August, 1995, “Indira Mahila Yojana” (IMY) in both the States and the Union territory for women’s empowerment.(40)

It should be mentioned that the system of Panchayati Raj in India came into existence through a long process of evolution of institution frame work for development of rural areas. Panchayati Raj, denoting democratic decentralization has been the form of rule in the village communities since ancient times. This unique characteristic of the rural areas, where in they were self governed, provided them with the autonomy and self sufficiency, making them non-dependent upon others. In general, local authority with the power to act independently of external control, having the following attributes.

## **Territory**

Population bound together by a sense of community.  
Governmental organization which is responsible and responsive to the needs of the local community.

The modus operandi for this form of local self government has been through the directly elected Panchayat for a village or

group of villages, an elective body called the Panchayat for a village or group of villages, an elective body called the Panchayat Samiti for a block and an advisory body called the Zilla Parishad at the district level. These statutory elective local bodies were provided with the necessary resources, power and authority to initiate a decentralized administrative system and village planning for their own development, having complete control over financial and other resources. Over a period of time, the Panchayat has become the universally accepted centre of moral authority as well as administrative authority in the villages. Not requiring sanctions to enforce its decisions, it depends largely on the voluntary cooperation of all the villages. This form of government became the backbone of the Indian sociopolitical system, as the rural areas constitute 80 percent of the country's land. Symbolizing autonomy and national cohesion, the Panchayat functioned undisturbed by the central government until the advent of the British rule. However, the dawn of Independence and the prior freedom movement struggled to restore the Panchayat as units of local self-government for a more effective democratic functioning. (41)

Panchayati Raj system is a three-tier system in the States with elected bodies at the Village, Taluk and District levels. It ensures greater participation of people and more effective implementation of



rural development programmes. There is a Gram Panchayat for a village or group of villages, a Taluk Panchayat Samiti at block level and the Zilla Panchayat at the district level.

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..." Gandhiji's dream of every village being a republic and Panchayats having powers, has been translated into reality with the introduction of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system to enlist people's participation in rural reconstruction. All the three institutions will have elected representatives and there is no provision for nomination by the Government to any of these councils. It may be noted that Karnataka is the first in the country to enact new Panchayati Raj Act in 1993, incorporating all provisions of 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution. (42)

## **Aims of Panchayati Raj**

The main aim of the Panchayati Raj has been democratic decentralization, rural self – government, and rural development. Socio-economic development of rural India has been a major goal.

Panchyati Raj has been designed to encourage the people of rural areas in meeting their needs locally. It develops the habit of democratic living. It strengthens the foundations of Indian Democracy, make villages self-governing and self-reliant units, secure a sense to self-confidence among the rural people. It acts as a system of democratic education and training and to undertake rural development by involving the rural community and to satisfy Local needs, promote democratic living; provide political education and training, and rural development through local efforts. (43)

## **Main Issues of PRI Systems**

Panchayati Raj is a system of democratic governance. It is an integral concept to the Indian political debate since Independence, with fervent arguments made both for and against the system. Until 1993, it operated sporadically and was included in the Constitution only as a Directive Principle. In 1993, forty-three years after Independence, the Constitution was amended and Panchayati Raj became part of the democratic system. The Constitution specifies that there should be three tiers of local government: **the village, the block and the district.** (44) The XIth Schedule, which accompanies the

Amendment, specifies development areas over which Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) will be responsible.

The following main issues concerned with PRI's are:

1. Lack of strong political will and clear vision
2. Influence of Traditional leaders / local MLA in decision making
3. Lack of grass roots leadership – Women and marginalized.
4. Lack of committed leadership
5. Women participation.
6. Gram Panchayat Election: influence of money and liquor
7. Poor participation in decision making - revival of Gram Sabhas
8. Ombudsman
9. Fiscal Decentralization & Direct release of grants to Gram Panchayat.
10. Fund utilization / social audit
11. Lack of democratic decentralization in implementation of rural developmental programmes
12. Bureaucracy – lethargic attitude, nepotism and corruption
13. Low collection of Revenue hindering development works.

23. Department's works under Panchayats.
24. Lack of development governance rather than administrative governance
25. Lack of Transparency and Accountability
26. Conflict between sectors (NGO, government); within the government (centre, state and district); and between PRIs and the NGOs.
27. Lack of institutional alliances (NGO, Government, PRIs, and CBOs etc.)
28. Lack of local collective action

## **Working of Panchayati Raj (1959 – 1992)**

By 1959, almost all the States had introduced Panchayati Raj in their rural areas. They quite faithfully adopted the recommendations of Balwant Rai Mehta Study Team. Almost all the states adopted the three-tier system. But within it, some states like Maharashtra decided to assign the development functions to the Zilla Parishads and not to the Panchayat Samitis. However, other States decided to assign these functions to Panchayat Samities. (45) During 1959-92, Panchayati Raj

kept on working for achieving its objectives. However, its efforts were not fully successful. Its working brought to light several shortcomings which prevented it from becoming really successful. It virtually failed to produce a qualitative change in rural life of India. Rural Illiteracy, lack of funds, poverty, inexperienced representatives, corruption, government interferences, lack of continuity in the working of Panchyati Raj institutions and lack of interest taken by the rural people, all became responsible for an inadequate success of Panchayati Raj. (46)

An attempt has been made to study the aspect of decentralisation in India, and address three elements that are thought to have undermined the power and autonomy of village-level *Panchayats* – India's federalism, the 'resistant' bureaucracy and elite capture. A hypothesis has been developed to explain the conditions under which *Panchayats* can be made more responsive and accountable to the interests of groups traditionally marginalised by local political processes. An important theme that has been attempted is the apparent tension between the very formal process of decentralisation – in which the State lays out the legal terms and conditions under which power will be allocated within its boundaries

– and the very informal process of political economy, in which power – rooted in class, caste and gender – determines the informal functioning of local political institutions. Critical assessments of decentralisation have argued that formal processes, such as decentralisation, representation and democracy, matter less than informal processes of power and change in rural societies. In India, for instance, it has been argued that subordinate groups – backward castes, agricultural labourers, women, – will only begin to use and benefit from decentralisation when there is a genuine redistribution of land and other agrarian assets.

In other words, the formal mechanisms matter less than the informal institutions that underpin local political economies.

It should be stated that decentralisation – on its own – will not necessarily produce systems that are more effective or more accountable to local needs and interests. We identify four broad conditions under which local political bodies can be made more accountable to poor and politically marginal groups in society.

These are:

- active participation among broad elements of society, including voting, campaigning, attending meetings, running for office, lobbying representatives, etc.;

- fiscal and political support from higher level authorities within government;
- the existence of competitive political parties whose legitimacy depends at least in part on the support of the poor;
- deeper economic transformations which embolden traditionally subordinate groups to challenge local authority structures.

## **Decentralisation: Concepts and Theories**

### **Terms and concepts**

Decentralisation can be usefully understood as a **political process** whereby administrative authority, public resources and responsibilities are transferred from central government agencies to lower-level organs of government or to non-governmental bodies, such as community-based organisations (CBOs), ‘third party’ non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or private sector actors. Conceptually, important distinctions can be made among:

**Deconcentration**, in which political, administrative and fiscal responsibilities are transferred to lower units *within* central line ministries or agencies.

**Devolution**, in which sub-national units of government are either created or strengthened items of political, administrative and fiscal power.

**Delegation**, in which responsibilities are transferred to organisations that are 'outside the regular bureaucratic structure and are only indirectly controlled by the central government,'

**Privatisation**, in which all responsibility for government functions, is transferred to nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) or private enterprises independent of government.

Such transfers can involve the power to decide the allocation and distribution of public resources, the power to implement programmes and policies and the power to raise and spend public revenues for these and other purposes. These three powers can be classified broadly as political, administrative and fiscal decentralization.

**Political decentralisation** transfers policy and legislative powers from central government to autonomous, lower-level assemblies and local councils that have been democratically elected by their constituencies.

**Administrative decentralisation** places planning and implementation responsibility in the hands of locally situated civil



servants and these local civil servants are under the jurisdiction of elected local governments.

**Fiscal decentralisation** accords substantial revenue and expenditure authority to intermediate and local governments.

However, democratic decentralisation implies more than the downward delegation of authority.

Crucially, it entails a system of governance in which citizens possess the right to hold local public officials to account through the use of elections, grievance meetings and other democratic means to capture the essence of this important idea. (47)

To be precise, Democratic decentralization can be defined as meaningful authority devolved to local units of governance that are accessible and accountable to the local citizenry, who enjoy full political rights and liberty. It thus differs from the vast majority of earlier efforts at decentralization.

A defining feature of any democratic system is that decision-makers are under the 'effective popular control' of the people, they are meant to govern. How this is accomplished, of course, constitutes a major dilemma for theorists and proponents of democratic development. (48)

Nevertheless, a number of defining features can be observed.

Mayo identifies four:

· popular control of policy makers, both by regular elections and by the pressure of social interest groups;

· the institutionalisation of all adult citizens in voting (i.e. one person, one vote);

· political freedom in the eyes of the state;

· policy decisions made on the basis of majority rule.

Beyond these very basic principles, democracy also implies a wide range of rules, norms and customs through which citizens can exercise 'effective popular control' over public officials.

Included here would be an independent judiciary, a free press, systems of transparency, and freedom of association and speech.

Attempt has been made to investigate into the intra-governmental transfers that fall within the spectrum of deconcentration and devolution, rather than extra-governmental transfers, such as delegation and privatisation. *Panchayati Raj* in India is primarily concerned with devolution, in which the 73rd Amendment confers constitutional status to a 'third stratum' that exists within the government system at district, sub-district and village levels. For the sake of brevity, we assess fiscal, political and administrative decentralisation in the states in terms of the extent to which the State

governments have devolved powers over *funds, functions and functionaries*. (49)

## **The case for decentralisation**

Assertions in favour of decentralisation are often founded upon a wider critique of central state planning, which holds that large and centrally-administered bureaucracies represent an inefficient and potentially destructive means of allocating resources (and generating wealth) within society. Three assertions are used to substantiate this claim. One argues that central state agencies lack the 'time and place knowledge' to implement policies and programmes that reflect people's 'real' needs and preferences. (50)

It is pertinent to note that **Decentralisation** is thought to create the conditions for a more pluralist political arrangement, in which competing groups can voice and institutionalise their interests in local democratic forums.

A second holds that states (based on principles of command and control) are qualitatively different from markets (based on competition and exchange) and voluntary organisations (based on some measure of altruistic motivation). Viewed in this way, states lack the flexibility and

reach to provide certain types of goods and services, particularly ones with large information requirements. Decentralisation, it is argued, creates institutions that are more amenable to local needs and preferences. These of course, imply a system of **indirect representation**, whereby candidates engage in competitive elections for public office. (51)

A third and related view argues that unchecked authority and inadequate incentives (reflected in salaries, rules of promotion and so on) encourage 'rent seeking behaviour' among government officials. In theory, decentralisation would undermine these opportunities by creating institutional arrangements that formalise the relationship between citizens and public servants, giving the former the authority to impose sanctions.

## **Decentralisation and poverty reduction**

The case for democratic decentralisation is also predicated upon the notion that greater participation in local political affairs will improve the quality and reach of government services, particularly ones aimed at improving the lives of poor and politically marginal groups in society. For proponents of democratic decentralisation, a

central challenge of improving the delivery of public services becomes one of 'crafting' institutions which can maximise participation in political life. In the context of poverty reduction, access to the (myriad) resources and benefits that governments provide is associated with systems of governance that empower poor and vulnerable groups in society.

Although, there is of course great variation among cultures, countries and regions, we can identify a number of roles that governments typically play in poor and predominantly rural areas:

- one is the provision of **public goods**, such as universal education and health care;
- second is the provision of **divisible goods**, such as irrigation, agricultural extension and credit;
- third is the **determination and enforcement of laws** regulating key economic inputs, such as land, labour and capital;
- fourth and critical element is the **recognition and protection of rights** allowing for organisation, association and entitlement in the eyes of the state.

All of these, it is worth emphasising, are problematic in the sense that they require systems of governance which ensure that public resources are being delivered efficiently and effectively. Indeed, it is

the misallocation or 'corruption' of these services that often justifies the strongest calls for public sector reform. (52)

Studies of decentralisation have shown that devolution of authority can enhance systems of local governance in a number of ways.

First, the establishment and empowerment of local resource user groups (delegation or privatisation) can improve the ways in which local people manage and use natural resources, thereby improving the resource base on which poor people are often disproportionately dependent. Such arguments are generally made in relation to the provision of local public goods, such as common pool resources or local credit organizations. (53)

Second, and related to this, collaboration between public agencies and local resource users can produce 'synergistic' outcomes, in which citizens and civil servants cooperate to provide goods that would be unobtainable were they act alone. Classic examples of this would include joint forest management (IFAD, 2001), fisheries co-management and participatory watershed management. (54)

Third, and most central to this is, the democratisation and empowerment of local administrative bodies can enhance participation in decision-making fora, particularly among groups that have

traditionally been marginalised by local political process. Studies from Africa, Asia and Latin America have shown that the introduction of elections, systems of transparency and rights of association can empower poor people, enhancing their ability to participate in local decision making and (crucially) encouraging them to hold public officials to account. As Blair points out, 'increased representation offers significant benefits in itself.' Framed in this way, participation in local, democratically elected bodies can lead to improvements in self-identity and worth, which can help to break down customs of inequality and discrimination.

Second, membership of local administrative bodies can provide important skills (e.g. bookkeeping, leadership, etc.) that can be transferred to other walks of life. (55)

However, the notion that improving *participation through decentralisation* will necessarily lead to improvements in people's well being is not entirely consistent with documented evidence. A recurring theme that emerges from a sizeable body of literature is the relatively weak correlation that exists between democratic decentralisation and poverty reduction. (56)

It should be stated that despite great strides at devolving power to local, democratically elected bodies, decentralisation efforts in

different countries of the world appears to have achieved little in the way of reducing poverty or improving regional disparities are equally pessimistic.

In one respect, this reflects the difficulty of establishing a clear and rigorous link between changes in governance and improvements in well-being. It also suggests a more sober conclusion about the ways in which democratic decentralisation is thought to affect the quality and availability of local economic opportunity. As Crook and Sverrisson's cross-country comparison (2001) concludes, the notion that there is a predictable or general link between decentralisation of government and the development of more 'pro-poor' policies or poverty-alleviating outcomes clearly lacks any convincing evidence. Those who advocate decentralisation on these grounds, at least, should be more cautious, which is not to say that there are not other important benefits, particularly in the field of participation and empowerment.

(57)

Even the most successful forms of democratic decentralisation have been unable to overcome economic and political disparities, both within and among regions. This, in part, highlights the problem of raising public revenue in rural areas, in which economic surplus (and therefore taxable revenue) is typically poor.



Decentralisation can also pose new problems of co-ordination and planning. As the Kerala experience has shown too much devolution can lead to major duplications of effort and gaps among different government agencies. Without adequate training and support, the devolution of large sums of money can also over-burden local bodies whose members lack the resources and expertise to spend large and complex budgets. (58)

Finally, there is a problem of local elite capture. As many studies (e.g. Blair, 2000; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Drèze and Sen, 1996; Manor, 1999; Moore and Putzel, 1999: 15) have pointed out, one of the dangers of devolving authority is that it simply empowers local elites and worse, perpetuates existing poverty and inequality. Whether the introduction of democratic principles – on its own – would overcome the historical and cultural factors that perpetuate political inequality is somewhat doubtful. This, in turn, highlights the challenge of encouraging democracy in rural areas in which large numbers of people are dependent upon small numbers of local, powerful elites. It also highlights the challenge of encouraging ‘empowerment’ without addressing the rights and entitlements that underlie political structures in rural areas. (59)

Where the spoils of government intervention are particularly good, one can predict with reasonable confidence that the costs of ensuring equitable distribution and of discouraging local corruption will be high. This is notoriously true of rural infrastructure projects, such as road building or irrigation, in which markets for primary inputs, labour and public regulation are strong. Here the corruption of local administrative bodies will depend on a number of factors:

- . the ease of procuring spoils from the programme;
- . the ability to avoid detection and/or sanction;
- . the amount of money involved (i.e. some departments and programmes are more 'wet' than others;
- . **systems of accountability**, which would ideally expose and sanction behaviour of this kind.

This last factor is worth highlighting, both because it can be affected by public policy and because it is the misallocation or 'corruption' of public resources that often justifies the strongest calls for democratic decentralisation. Saxena and Farrington highlight a number of ways in which poor accountability and bad governance can undermine the interests of poor and marginal groups in society:

first, rent seeking behaviour on the part of the police, government officials, etc. can deprive the poor of resources they would ideally receive, were the corruption not taking place;

second, absenteeism, corruption and other forms of poor performance means that the government is spending social welfare resources which yield no benefits;

third, the widespread perception of corruption promotes feelings of distrust towards government, thereby undermining the potential for collaboration between the state and civil society organisations;

finally, a culture of corruption emerges within the public sector, encouraging officials further rent seeking behaviour and poor accountability. (60)

Perhaps the strongest argument in favour of decentralisation is the idea that the establishment of strong and accountable systems of governance will encourage a more equitable distribution of state provided resources, which can be directed towards poor and vulnerable groups. An underlying hypothesis here is that democratic participation will yield strong mechanisms of accountability, which in turn, will improve the distribution of benefits to groups that are traditionally marginalized by market and state.

An attempt has been made to explore this hypothesis by examining the conditions under which decentralisation has led to more accountable forms of local governance. The conclusion reached is that decentralisation – on its own – is far from sufficient.

First, however, it is important that we try to define more precisely what we mean by accountability. (61)

Agrawal and Ribot (1999) have argued that accountability implies a set of relations that depend on the exercise of a counter power to balance arbitrary action. Comparing decentralisation in South

Asia and West Africa, they draw a useful distinction between upward and downward accountability, in which the ability to hold decision making actors to account is dependent on the *upward* and downward relations between officials and their superiors and local citizens. Agrawal and Ribot (1999) argue that the most effective forms of governance are dependent on downward accountability, in which the power to make rules, decide access to the benefits provided by local bodies and enforce and adjudicate these arrangements is dependent upon the consent or support of local citizens. This, in turn, implies that local people have the power to hold officials in check.(62)

Brett's definition of accountability (1993) implies a more formalised set of expectations and responsibilities, on which the performance of public officials can be judged. Here the existence of clear and explicit rules, governing the duties, jurisdictions and standards of public officials is an essential part of accountability. As he argues in later work, (Brett, 2000: 41), 'Accountability works best when rewards (for good performance) depend directly on the quality of service provided – failures occur when there is no direct relationship between the two.'

Moncrieffe (2001) distinguishes between *ex-post* and *ex-ante* accountability. The former, she argues, implies a responsive process on the part of citizens, whereby rights-based mechanisms, such as the courts, grievance procedures and elections, can be used to keep public officials in check. The latter suggests that in order to act effectively in the citizens' interest, representatives must – as a general principle – know what these interests which are:

To allow for deliberation and consultation so that policies may be corrected where appropriate;

To keep the public apprised of policy choices and provide explanations and opportunities for public response, particularly where

it is not obvious that actions are in accordance with the public's expressed interests;

and provide the appropriate mechanisms and act in such a way that citizens are able to assess the quality of their representation.

This definition – and the relations it implies – comes closer to Judith Tandler's (1997) interpretation of good governance. (63)

To summarise, the most ambitious forms of decentralisation (i.e. devolution) constitute a substantive shift in power from national or regional levels to more local spheres of political life. (64)

Decentralisation empowers new actors (at local and non-local levels), and (in theory) creates conditions for new lines of participation and accountability. However, the notion that decentralisation will lead to improvements in poverty reduction is not well-supported. Moreover, there is little or no evidence to suggest that decentralisation – on its own – will necessarily produce systems of governance that are more effective or accountable to local needs and interests. In other words, local forms of accountability are dependent on more than just the devolution of political, administrative and fiscal power. (65)

In the following section, we consider arguments and evidence outlining the conditions under which local institutions can be made

more accountable. Here we define accountability as a relationship between public officials and citizens, in which the latter possess a means of challenging or counterbalancing the arbitrary use of power (Agarwal and Ribot, 1999) on the basis of a formal understanding of what constitutes appropriate behaviour on the part of public officials (Brett, 1993). In its most ideal form, accountability should be based on strong norms of communication and consultation between public officials and citizens (Moncrieffe, 2001).

## **Women's role in pre-independence period**

During the pre-independence period women lacked personality. They spent their life on home-works and they never got chance to participate in socio-political occasion. In that period, women's decision and thinking was dependent on their husbands. But during the freedom struggle, the situation and status of women changed to some extent. Through this movement, they could involve themselves into the socio-political happenings. This was the first opportunity when the Indian women, as counterpart to male, came out from home to participate themselves in the struggle for freedom.(66)

## **Women's role in post-independence period**

In the post-independence period, we noticed changes in the role of women to a greater extent. Women's participation in freedom struggle established the faith that they can share equally all the duties and responsibilities like male. After independence, the Constitution provided the opportunity to participate in politics and they were treated equally with male. On the other hand, several plans and programmes were undertaken and many commissions were set up, which helped the women's development and empowerment. The government passed several laws for equal status of women. Women belonging to different political parties were elected to the Parliament and State Legislatures. (67)

During the post-independence period, after the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, women made a significant beginning with 30% reservation in Panchayati Raj elections. In fact, this reservation changed the socio-political status of women in a significant manner. (68)

## **Women's Participation in Panchayat**

Panchayati Raj, one of the most important political innovations of independent India, is a channel for popular participation in the



process of development of women. After reservation of 1/3rd seats for women at the three-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions, women's participation in politics or Panchayat increased. Women's participation in PRIs at the present context includes attendance in membership and participation in the Committee of those bodies; moving resolutions; taking part in discussions; participation in the final point of decision-making and the activities relating to implementation of decision of the PRIs. (69)

It should be stated that preference was not given to women in Panchayats immediately after independence. The National Committee on status of women has helped to some extent in involving women in Panchayats. A look into the political process of India reveals the fact that the entry of women into Panchayats has been slow and a gradual process. The 1993-94 elections in India brought about some 80,000 women into active politics as a result of 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74th Amendments of Constitution. This was definitely a land mark incident. (70)

It was the 73rd Constitutional Amendment which has paved the way for women to participate in the local self-

governance and created a favourable situation for women to get involved in the decentralized development activities. Under the new Panchayati Raj System, in many parts of our country, the elected women have exhibited their leadership in solving some of the local problems and creating facilities for the betterment of the rural society. (71)

## **73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment : An Important Milestone**

### **Reform of Panchayati Raj (73rd Amendment Act 1992)**

The Panchayati Raj, an enigmatic and elusive concept, has undergone a topsy-turvy change in its role, shape and function after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. In short, the Constitutional Amendment ensures, a three tier structure, 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 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 subjects under IIth schedule of the Constitution.(72)

In fact, for removing the defects of Panchayati Raj as well for strengthening in institutions, the Parliament passed the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. Its purpose was to improve and strengthen Panchayati Raj. Through it a good attempt was made for securing a more regular, active and efficient working of Panchayati Raj. On April 23, 1994 all the States of India completed the process of enacting fresh laws for strengthening the Panchayati Raj Institutions in accordance with the rules laid down by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. Thereafter, an amended and reformed Panchayati Raj system came into existence. So After the passing of 73rd Amendment Act 1992, a reformed Panchayati Raj has been in operation in all parts of India.(73) The enforcement of 73rd Act marked the beginning of the process of a bigger grant of power to Panchayats and other rural institutions. Now an important and strong drive towards the strengthening of the democratic development process in the rural areas of India got initiated. In the main, the 73rd Amendment Act provided for:

1. Reservation of seats for SCs and STs in proportion to their populations.

2. Reservation of the posts of chairpersons for the SCs and STs in state. Reservation of not less than 1/3rd of the elected seats in each Panchayat for women

and

3.reservation of 1/3rd posts of chairpersons for rural women.

It also directs elections of Panchayats and chairpersons of Panchayats. It provides representation of MPs and MLAs in Panchayati Raj institution and continuous and active presence of Panchayati Raj institutions.

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 Panchayati 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. Otherwise, true development will remain a far cry. (74)

In 1993, the Government of India passed a series of constitutional reforms, which were intended to empower and democratise India's rural representative bodies – the *Panchayats*. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution formally recognised a third tier of government at the sub-State level, thereby creating the legal conditions for local self-rule – or *Panchayati Raj*. Since this time, the process of decentralisation has been highly variable, ranging from ambitious attempts at *Gram Swaraj* (or village self-rule) in Madhya Pradesh to political *re-centralisation* in Karnataka. Early experiences have also revealed considerable uncertainty and confusion about the precise political, administrative and fiscal powers, *Panchayats* have in relation to the States, line ministries, and local user groups. This, in part, reflects the fact that the 73rd Amendment gave the State governments considerable autonomy to interpret and implement the constitutional reforms. (75) India, of course, is not alone in this process. Decentralisation has emerged as a dominant trend in world politics. In 1998, the World Bank estimated that all but 12 of the 75 developing and transitional countries with populations greater than 5 million had embarked on a process of political devolution (cited in

Crook and Manor, 1998 :). At the heart of this transformation, are a number of complex, yet inter-related themes. One is an ideological shift, in which the legitimacy of central state-led development has been challenged on the grounds that it produces systems of governance that undermine national economic performance and effective public policy (Gore, 2000; Johnson and Start, 2001).

A second is a political agenda, which asserts that the decentralisation of public administration and the introduction of locally elected bodies will produce systems of governance that are better able to meet the needs of poor and politically marginal groups in society. (76)

A third and related theme suggests that democratic decentralisation is a political strategy that national elites have used to maintain legitimacy and control in the face of political disintegration. Here it can be argued that economic liberalisation, political regionalism and the rise of powerful inter- and sub-national actors have weakened the traditional nation state and created the conditions under which more local identities could emerge (Giddens, 1998).

Assertions in favour of decentralisation are often founded upon a wider critique of central state planning, which holds that large and centrally-administered bureaucracies represent an inefficient and

potentially destructive means of allocating resources (and generating wealth) within society. Two assertions are generally used to substantiate this claim. (77)

One argues that central state agencies lack the time and place knowledge to implement policies and programmes that reflect people's 'real' needs and preferences.

A second and related assertion is that time and place gaps give local official's unlimited ability to distribute resources and extract 'rent' as they see fit. Such outcomes are believed to be particularly prone in poor countries, where government represents a vital source of wealth, and mechanisms to ensure accountable governance are often poorly enforced. (78)

In theory, decentralisation would undermine these opportunities by creating institutional arrangements that formalise the relationship between citizens and the state, giving the former, the authority to impose sanctions (such as voting, recourse to higher-level authorities) on the latter. Decentralisation is also thought to create the conditions for a more pluralist political arrangement, in which competing groups can voice and institutionalise their interests in local democratic forums. (79)

Finally, it is argued that decentralisation creates institutions that are more amenable to local needs and preferences.

However, a problem that is well-recognised in the literature on decentralisation is that the devolution of power will not necessarily improve the performance and accountability of local government. Indeed, in many cases, decentralisation has simply empowered local elites to capture a larger share of public resources, often at the expense of the poor. Reflecting on these relatively long-standing problems, an important strand of scholarship in the decentralisation literature has argued that the underlying distribution of assets and entitlements will have an important bearing on the extent to which marginal groups are able to take advantage of the mechanisms and opportunities created by decentralisation, and improve their ability to gain access to the (various) resources provided by the bureaucratic state. Within rural areas (which are often the central focus of decentralisation), such assets and entitlements would include land, land tenure, formal property rights, and full rights of citizenship. An important hypothesis that emerges from this is that societies in which the distribution of assets and entitlements is relatively equal will produce more effective and accountable forms of governance. (80)



A central dilemma that this study seeks to address is the gap that often exists between the organisations that plan, manage and implement poverty reduction strategies (governments, NGOs and so on) and the needs and preferences of their intended beneficiaries. An underlying assumption here is that a more informed understanding of these needs and preferences, and an understanding of the ways in which governments, NGOs and other development organisations can narrow the gap between their activities and the needs of their beneficiaries, will yield better policy. Because of its size and its relatively ambitious efforts to devolve government, India provides an important context for understanding the ways in which decentralisation can improve the performance and accountability of local government institutions. The States of AP and MP provide an important context for understanding the ways in which decentralisation can affect informal institutions governing the quality and reach to poverty alleviation programmes. Both States have respected the basic stipulations of the 73rd Amendment, holding two rounds of *Panchayat* elections since 1993. Both have great variation and diversity, reflecting their own unique mix of colonial administration, feudal legacy and agrarian transition. Finally, both

States have taken very different approaches to the question of 'self-government,' particularly at the village level. (81)

### **Salient Features of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act.**

The Salient features of the Seventy-Third Constitution Amendment Act are given below:

The Amendment stipulates for certain compulsory provisions which are obligatory on the part of the State Governments to incorporate in their respective Acts. Some aspects have, however, been left at the discretion of State legislatures to make suitable provisions in their Act.

The mandatory provisions are:

- (A) Establishment of 'Gram Sabha' at the village level comprising of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of Panchayat (Article 243(b)). The State, where Gram Sabha does not exist, will have to make such provision.
- (B) Establishment of a three-tier system of Panchayat, at the village, intermediate and district levels, in all the States and Union Territories (UTs) except in those having a population of less than twenty lakhs where Panchayats at intermediate level need not be constituted. The States which will fall under this

category as per 1991 census are Goa, Sikkim, all the North Eastern States and UTs.

- (C) All levels of Panchayats will consist of persons elected directly from the territorial constituencies in the Panchayat area. The territorial constituencies shall be carved out in such manner that the ratio between the population of each constituency and the number of seats allotted to it should be uniform throughout the Panchayat area as far as practicable.
- (D) All members of the Panchayat, whether or not directly elected shall have the right to vote in the meetings of the Panchayats.
- (E) The chairperson of a Panchayat at the intermediate and district level shall be elected from among the directly elected members representing the territorial constituencies.
- (F) Reservation of seats for SCs/STs in proportion to their population in the Panchayat area and seats may be allotted by rotation.
- (G) One-third of the total number of seats, both in reserved and unreserved categories shall be apart for women in every Panchayat and seats may be allotted by rotation.
- (H) The chairperson of each level of Panchayats shall be reserved for SCs/STs in proportion to their population on rotation basis.

Similarly, one-third post of chairpersons of each level of Panchayats shall be reserved for women on rotation basis.

- (I) A fixed tenure of five years for Panchayats from the date appointed for its first meeting and the tenure cannot be extended. However, if a Panchayat is dissolved before the expiry of its term, election is to be conducted within a period of six months of the dissolution to reconstitute the Panchayat for the remainder of the terms provided the remainder of the period is not less than six months. The Panchayats shall be constituted before the expiry of its tenure of five years.
- (J) Amendment of law to dissolve the Panchayats at any level is also prohibited.
- (K) A person who has attained twenty one years of age is eligible for a membership of a Panchayat.
- (L) Constitution of a Finance Commission in the State within one year from the commencement of the Constitution Amendment Act initially and thereafter every five years to review the finances of the Panchayats and recommended the principles on the basis of which the taxes to be appropriated by, or assigned to the Panchayats as also grant-in-aid to the Panchayats from the consolidated fund of the State. The action taken on the

recommendation of the Commission shall be laid before the Legislature of the State.

- (M) Audit of the accounts of the Panchayats to be done.
- (N) A State Election Commission has to be constituted for the superintendence, direction and control of the Panchayats at all levels. The State Election Commissioner, however, shall be removed in the manner and on the like grounds as a Judge of a High Court.
- (O) The Act is applicable to all States and Union Territories. Exemption is being granted to certain states and tribal areas and other territories from the application of the provisions of part IX of the Constitution and powers to the President and the Governor to modify the provisions of the part IX in their application to Union Territories and Scheduled areas, respectively.
- (P) The existing laws relating to Panchayats which are inconsistent with the provision of the Act shall continue to be in force until it is amended or repealed within one year. The existing Panchayats shall continue till the expiration of their terms unless they are dissolved by the competent authority.

(Q) Courts are not to interface in the electoral matters such as delimitation of constituencies, allotment of seats and election to any Panchayat. Petition challenging the election of any Panchayat can be presented.

Besides these mandatory provisions, the State Legislatures have been empowered to have legislation in respect of a wide range of subjects, including on such matters as functions of the Panchayats and so on.

To Sum up:

1. After part VIII of the Constitution, a separate part IX has been added to the Constitution with the addition in Article 243 A to 243 D and a fresh Schedule called Eleventh Schedule enumerating the powers and functions of Panchayati Raj Institutions has been incorporated.

2. There will be a uniform pattern of PR institutions. Panchayats shall be constituted in every State on the basis of a three tier system that is at the village, intermediate and district not exceeding 20 lakhs have been given the option of not having any Panchayat at the intermediate level.

3. Elections in respect of all members of Panchayats at

all levels will be direct. Elections in respect of the post of chairpersons at the intermediate and district levels will be indirect. Elections will be mandatory and regular on the basis of universal adult suffrage for a period of five years. If PR bodies are dissolved before five years terms the fresh elections will take place within six months from the date of dissolution.

4. Reservation of seats for SCs/STs has been provided for each level in proportion to their population. Not less than one-third of the total membership has been reserved for women and these seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies. Similar reservations have been made in respect of the office of chairpersons too.

5. Apart from the functions listed in the Eleventh Schedule the State legislatures, by law, may assign the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice and their implementation to Panchayati Raj institutions.

6. The State legislatures have been given the power to authorise the Panchayats to levy, collect and appropriate suitable local taxes and also provide for making grants-in-aid to the Panchayats from the consolidated Fund of the State. In addition, a

Finance Commission has to be constituted once in every five years to review the

Financial position of the Panchayats and to make suitable recommendations to the State on the distribution of funds between the State and the local bodies. The Central Finance Commission shall also suggest measures necessary to augment the consolidated Fund of a State to supplement the resources of the Panchayats in the State. Thus more of assured funds will flow to the Panchayati Raj bodies.

7. For the audit of Panchayati Raj institutions, the Act says that the state machinery will audit the accounts. Similarly, State Election Commissioner will hold Panchayat bodies elections.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment on Panchayati Raj, thus, provides constitutional guarantee to basic essential features including regular elections, reservation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women and devolution of financial and administrative powers.

Commentators, however, also point out some weaknesses in the Bill. First point made in this regard is that the amendment attempts to bring about a uniformity in the PR system, whereas each state has its own history, traditions and consequent structures of local



government. Nirmal Mukarji, therefore, raises a question, "Is implementing decentralisation below the state level desirable through the most centralist conceivable instrument, that is to say, a constitutional amendment"? To him new Part IX seems, in some ways, to be a more detailed imposition of "unitary" India on "federal" Bharat at the *Panchayat* level than Part VI already is at the state level."(82)

Second, it is pointed out that the representation of members of Parliament and state legislatures, though in an ex-officio capacity and without voting rights, may prove counterproductive. There is likelihood of clash of interests between legislators and PR representatives particularly for getting votes.

Another weakness is pointed out by S.N. Mishra, that is the Act has not clearly defined the role of political parties. No where it mentions that political parties can enter into election arena in their formal capacity. Similarly it is completely silent over the relationship between PR institutions and local

Finally, the Act does not spell out specific grounds for dissolution of PR bodies whereas states can dissolve these. It means state can use the power of dissolution on political

considerations. In this context, it is pointed out that earlier PR institutions by and large failed because of irregular elections and frequent supersession and suspension. (83)

These weaknesses, notwithstanding, Panchayati Raj system for the first time has become mandatory by the constitution. The Gram Sabha has found its legitimate place in the basic law of the country. L.C. Jain points out that the Constitutional argument for decentralisation has been fortified by the needs of development and equity. We have a whole body of studied opinion which argues that if you want to optimise on your resources, if you want to put some economic efficiency and speed in terms of the satisfaction of the community, you have to shed over centralisation and add decentralisation. L.C. Jain further points out that a notion which has not been even conceded in the past — that decentralisation will also promote equity — is now being substantiated. He, therefore, suggests that when we evaluate the chances of whether what is being proposed today, will go forward or whether it will meet the same fate as in the past, we should pay some respect to the past but we should not become its prisoners, at least not to the extent to believe that

there is no other possibility."

Here it may be mentioned that even in the past with all its defects in the PR system the very fact that the leaders had to approach the people and to be in close touch with them has certainly sowed the seeds for greater democratic participation. Consequently Panchayati Raj has tended to make rural politics a more continuous occupation as local leaders have started mobilising voters not only for the occasional election to a far removed legislative body but also to share in the day to day Panchayat decisions and development problems effecting their constituents. Panchayat leaders have gained the importance as one of the major props which MI-As have for their effective and political support."

As a result, the decision making power in the local political system has also shifted significantly. Formerly, the decisions about the development of the district were taken at the state level by ministers and bureaucrats having a strong urban base.

With the passage of 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, 1992, India is at a crucial structure in the evaluation of Panchayati Raj

institutions, the Indian brand of rural local-self government. It has envisioned people's participation in the process of planning, decision making, implementation and particularly the delivery system.

The Panchayat Acts of state governments have subsequently been amended to incorporate the stipulations of the central Acts. Thus the constitutional mandate has heralded uniform pattern throughout Indian states

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