Panchayat Raj in Karnataka

Dr. Shridhar. M. Mullal\textsuperscript{1} & Chandrakala. S. Halli.\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1}M.A, Ph.D. Dept. Of Sociology, Karnataka University Dharwad
\textsuperscript{2}Ph.D. Research Scholar, Dept. Of History and Archaeology, Karnataka University Dharwad.

Abstract: This paper discuss various aspects of Panchayat Raj in an important states of Indian i.e., Karnataka.

Introduction:

The history of Panchayats dates back to the time immemorial in India. Starting from the Vedic period to the end of the British rule, almost every village in the country had a self-governing body of its own. It has been observed by historical research that the “local self-government in ancient India was far more widespread, more real and more successful than in the days of British rule or even at present” (Venkataramaiya M and Pattabhiram M 1969). It clearly shows that in ancient times, the people enjoyed the advantages of the local self-government.

The environment and conditions existing in those days were favorable to the Panchayats to function freely and without interferences from the Central or Provincial Governments because the control and authority exercised by the Government over the village affairs were minimal. The Government works were within the purview of the village and the village authorities had the power to execute these works. The entrusted functions like the defense, the preservation of law and order, the settlement of disputes, the collection of revenues on behalf of the State, the maintenance of roads, famine relief, health facilities and others were under the control of the village panchayats. “The small amount of control over the village authorities by the Central and Provincial Governments was partly due to the ancient conception of the state and its relation to society and partly of the economic conditions of those days”

The self government was more real in those days and evidence were available to support this fact. The village assemblies consisted either of all the heads of households or of all adults. There was no “Mahasabha” operated through a variety of Committees and there were prescribed rules of debate and voting at the meetings of the General Assembly and the Committees. This clearly shows that the “the present system of government based on democratic principles owed its genesis to ancient village republics. Nothing could be more democratic than this”

In conformity with this, the assemblies had adequate finances to administer the numerous services and to undertake development works. The taxes were collected in cash or in kind. The available resources were utilized through effective devices. The homogeneous and integrated character of the society that existed in the past was responsible for the successful working of the Panchayats. And also, the community spirit that prevailed among the inhabitants of the villages had strengthened and boosted the morale of these institutions. There was no room for personal or group rivalries and the administration of these assemblies went on quite smoothly and this resulted in giving effective and efficient administration to the village as a whole. It has been observed that the “success of a governmental system depends not only on the kind of institutional machinery setup, but also on the public spirit, the honesty, the efficiency and the sense of responsibility of men-in-charge of the machinery. All these qualities were deep-rooted in those who handled the machinery of local self-government in the past. It was the great merit of a society based on immemorial custom and tradition

Panchayati Raj in Pre British Period:

The word panchayat is derived from the word pancha panchasvanusthitah, has references in to the existence of Grama Sanghas or rural communities. The institution of Panchayati Raj is as old as Indian civilization itself. It was in existence since ancient periods, having an effective control over civil and judicial matters in the village community. The Rigveda, Manusamhita, Dharmashastras, Upanishads, Jatakas and others, refer extensively to local administration, i.e. the panchayat system of administration. In the Manusmriti and Shantiparva of Mahabarata, there are many references to the existence of Grama Sanghas or village councils.

The earliest reference to panchayat is derived from the word Pancha, that refers to an institution of the five (pancha panchasvanusthitah) is found in the Shanti-Parva of Mahabaratha, pancha and panchavanustitah are semantically
close to panchayat. A description of these village councils are also found in *Arthashastra* of Kautilya who lived in 400 B.C. *Arthashastra* gives a comprehensive account of the system of village administration prevailing in his time. During this period, the village administration was carried under the supervision and control of Adyaksha or headman. There were other officials such as Samkhyaka [accountant], Anikitsaka [veterinary doctor], Jamgh karmika [village couriers], Chikitsaka [physitian]. The village headman was responsible for ensuring the collection of state dues and controlling the activities of the offenders. In Ramayana of Valmiki, there are references to the Ganapada (village federation) which was perhaps a kind of federation of village republics.

Self-governing village communities characterized by agrarian economies existed in India from the earliest times. It is mentioned in Rigveda that dates from approximately 200 B.C. The village was the basic unit of administration in the Vedic period. The most remarkable feature of the early Vedic polity consisted in the institution of popular assemblies of which two namely ‘Sabha’, and the ‘Samiti’ deserve special mention. A Samiti was the Vedic Folk Assembly that in some cases enjoyed the right of electing a king while the Sabha exercised some judicial functions. Both the Samiti and Sabha enjoyed the rights to debate, a privilege unknown to the popular assemblies of other ancient people. The office of the village head man (Grammani) indicates the emergence of the village as a unit of administration. In the later Vedic period, the Samiti disappeared as a popular assembly while the Sabha sank into a narrow body corresponding to the kings Privy Council.

In the course of time, village bodies took the form of panchayats that looked into the affairs of the village. They had the powers to enforce law and order. Customs and religion elevated them to the sacred position of authority. Besides this there was also the existence of caste panchayats. This was the pattern in Indo Gangetic plains. In the south, the village panchayats generally had a village assembly whose executive body consisted of representatives of various groups and castes. These village bodies, both in the north and south India, had been the pivot of administration, the centre of social life and above all a focus of social solidarity.

In the Mouryan period, the village was the basic unit of administration. Villagers used to organize works of public utility and recreation, settle disputes, and act as trustees for the property of minors. But, they had not yet evolved regular councils. The village council appeared to have evolved into regular bodies in the Gupta period. They were known as *Panchamandalas* in central India and *Gramajanapadas* in Bihar.99 These bodies negotiated with the government for concessions and settlement of disputes. The inscription of Chola dynasty shows the construction and functions of the village assembly and their executive committees. The village administrations were performed by the elected representatives forming village council.

During the medieval and Moghal periods, village bodies were the pivot of administration. In the Moghal period, particularly in the regime of Sher Shah, the villages were governed by their own panchayats. Each panchayat comprised of village elders who looked after the interest of the people and administered justice and imposed punishment on defaulters. The head man of the village, a semi government official, acted as a coordinator between the village panchayat and the higher administrative hierarchy. Akbar accepted this system and made it an indispensable part of civil administration. In this period, each village had its own panchayat of elders. It was autonomous in its own sphere and exercised powers of local taxation, administrative control, justice and punishment. The Moghals introduced elaborate administrative machinery with a hierarchy of officials, particularly in the field of revenue. The Moghal local administrative system lasted over centuries. It was with the collapse of the Moghal strong hold, the British established their hegemony in India.

**Panchayats under the Mughals**:

An entirely new phase of these institutions started with the coming of the Mughals; the period of anarchy following the collapse of the dynasty and the advent of establishment and consolidation of the British rule in India. The old system gradually started losing its grip with the interference of the Central Government in its affairs. “The Mughals had interfered very little with the ancient customs of village government. They incorporated the village as an unit for collection of revenue and policing purposes only. The state dealt through the headman who was held responsible for the maintenance of law and order and the restitution of theft within the areas of his authority. The judicial powers of the village council, the Panchayat, were considerably curtailed under the Mughals. Otherwise, local affairs remained unregulated from above and the village officers and servants were answerable primarily to the Panchayats.” In spite of the democratic nature of the village administration, the villages during the Mughal period were controlled by strong headmen and it was the rule of one man. The panchayat was
India (1869 to 1872), who felt the need to decentralize powers in order to bring about administrative efficiency and in the year 1870 continued to comprise nominated members with no elected elements what so ever.

The British widened their taxation power. This model passed, similar bodies were set up in other major towns and this model became prevalent, helping town council, this body was empowered to levy taxes for building guild halls and schools. As time passed, similar bodies were set up in other major towns and this model became prevalent, helping the British widen their taxation power. This model introduced the concept of elected representatives in the urban municipalities. The revolt of 1857 that had put the imperial finances under considerable strain and it was found necessary to finance local service out of local taxation. Therefore it was out of fiscal compulsion that Lord Mayo’s resolution on decentralization came to be adopted.

**The Bengal Chowkidar Act of 1870:***

The Bengal Chowkidar Act of 1870 marked the beginning of the revival of the traditional village panchayati system in Bengal. The Chowkidar Act empowered district magistrates to set up panchayats of nominated members in the villages to collect taxes to pay the chowkidars or watchmen engaged by them.

**Ripon Resolution (1882):***

Lord Ripon made remarkable contribution to the development of Local Government. In 1882, he abandoned the existing system of local government by the officially nominated people. According to his local self government plan, the local boards were split into smaller units to achieve greater efficiency. In order to ensure popular participation, he introduced an election system for the local boards. The government resolution of 18th, May, 1882, stands as a landmark in the structural evolution of local governments. It provided for local boards consisting of a large majority of elected non-official members and presided over by a non-official chairperson. considered to be the Magna Carta of local democracy in India. This resolution proposed the establishment of rural local boards where 2/3rd of whose membership was composed of elected representatives. He brought in the concept of self-government in urban municipalities. He is treated as the founding father of urban local government. Ripon’s resolutions followed a series of Committees, Commissions and Acts in this line. The Royal Commission on Decentralization in 1909 elaborated further the principles of Ripon resolution. But this remained merely on paper. Ripon’s scheme did not make much progress in the development of local self-government institutions.

**Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919:***

In this backdrop, Montagu Chelmsford reforms were passed in the year 1919. This reform transferred the subject of local government to the domain of provinces. The reform also recommended that as far as possible there should be a complete popular control in local bodies and the largest possible independence for them, of outside control. By 1925, eight provinces had
passed village panchayat acts. However, these panchayats covered only a limited number of villages with limited functions. 105 But this reform could not get much result as far as democratization of panchayats was concerned and lead to a lot of organizational and fiscal constraints.

Government of India Act (1935) :

This is considered as another important stage in the evolution of panchayats in British India. With popularly elected government in the provinces, almost all provincial administrations felt duty bound to enact legislations for further democratization of local self-government institutions, including village panchayats. Although the popular government in the provinces governed by the Congress vacated office following the declaration of Second World War in 1939, the position as regards local government institutions remained unchanged till August 1947, when the country attained independence. Even though the British government did not have interest in the village autonomy, they were forced to do so, in order to continue their rule in India and moreover to meet financial necessities. The Indian rural republic had flourished till the advent of British. It received a set back during the British rule. Self-contained village communities and their panchayats ceased to get substance. They were replaced by formally constituted institutions of village administration. In the highly centralized system of British rule, village autonomy seems to have lost.

Conclusion :

One of the greatest shortcomings of any centre-sponsored rural development programme is its inability to 'trickle down' to the true intended beneficiaries or the poorest of the poor. The introduction of the Panchayati Raj system through the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution tried to address this by prescribing a three-tier system of governance for the entire country, effective since 1993. The amendment mandates that responsibility, resources and decision-making authority be placed in the hands of elected local councils or panchayats. The Decentralization versus centralization debate can be better understood in a cost-benefit analysis framework. Centralization has the benefit that 'bureaucrats' who are in charge of planning and implementing are well trained with the required expertise and are in a better position to co-ordinate plans across different jurisdictions. Additionally, although this is debatable, they are relatively free from populist pressures. However, the shortfalls of such an approach include a lack of flexibility in terms of understanding changing local needs and the problem of accountability — in ensuring that those in the chair are motivated not by their own gain but by public interest. Decentralization, on the other hand, suffers from the reverse — it empowers the public to sensitize policies to their own needs but often the people who make and implement plans lack expertise.

One state that has stood out as a figurehead in the decentralization attempt has been West Bengal, "the first and the only major state which has had timely panchayat elections on a party basis regularly every five years since 1978, a year after the left front government was elected to power in the state." however, the above study reveals that the state often quoted for its great success in Decentralization has run into some glitches of late. The sample survey of villagers on the village constituency meetings across the state throws up some interesting observations. The meetings were extremely male-dominated with low participation by women in spite of the provision that one-third of the members have to be women. Relatively affluent persons stayed away from such meetings since they did not perceive any direct benefits from poverty alleviation programmes discussed in such meetings, political minorities stayed away since they felt they wouldn't be 'heard', scheduled castes and tribes did not feel encouraged to participate since political leaders were often from the higher castes.

The strong negative wealth bias, the gender and caste bias have thus had serious repercussions on the participatory nature of this system. The other important obstacles have been the extent of devolution of power and finances which has been left to the states' discretion, while devolution has happened in a considerable degree only in west Bengal, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Kerala, the political set up in these states have crucially determined their relative successes. For instance, decentralization in Karnataka under the centrist Janatha Party in late 80s "has led to political capture by middle peasants and rural elites." this brings us to the crux of the failure of decentralization, revolving around the psychology of power equations. Findings from this study point out that elected representatives feel threatened that their new-found status would get eroded by direct empowerment of the people, the former also being employers of the latter, typically wage labourers. But ironically, as pointed out in a paper titled women in Panchayati Raj: grassroots democracy in India, "grassroots democracy in India has been ushered in by an amendment to the constitution from the "top", This was not because of a mass movement by the people." this calls for some serious thought in the direction of why power
Imperial Journal of Interdisciplinary Research (IJIR)
ISSN: 2454-1362, http://www.onlinejournal.in

equations are perpetrated and consistently upset any attempt at moving towards greater development and empowerment of the poor.

References: