A strengthened democracy replaces a weak democracy and paves the way for good governance replacing weak governance. Though democracy as a system of government has been the concern of the scholars from very ancient times, and good governance came to the spotlight very recently, the implied demands of good governance and real democracy are not very much different, perhaps, because the defining concepts of good governance have been evolved from those of real democracy. A democratic institution is expected to respond to the people’s needs positively and constructively, effectively and purposefully; the same is expected from a system of good governance. Active and direct participation of the people in government is a prerequisite for ensuring liberty and equality to the people.\(^1\) Democracy as the ‘rule by the people’ is interpreted as a system where people are the sovereign and all citizens are politically equal.\(^2\)

Panchayat Institutions have been amongst the oldest political Institutions of India and the very use of this term has deeply nostalgic association tending to take the mind to the distant past. Panchayats are bases for popular government at all levels and in many respects. Literally, a Panchayat (from Sanskrit panca, “five”), consists of five members, but usually there are more; the Panchayat has a policy committee,

however, often numbering five. Most Panchayats have a permanent head (Sarpanch, “head of five”), who is a permanent member; the position is often hereditary. Non-hereditary committee members are selected on the basis of merit. Meetings are held on a ritual occasion, such as a marriage or funeral; by special summons, heralded by the caste summoner or, the caste barbar on certain occasions join themselves in the annual festival.

We get glimpses of local administration in Tamilagam from the literature of the Sangam Age. Two terms Manram and Podiyil are referred to Tamil works. Mandram has been explained as the open place in the centre of the village, where the people meet together. Perhaps it was the public place which was called ‘poduvil’ or ‘podiyil’ usually conducted under the Banyan tree. Social festivities and sacrifices were given to the gods.

The Vedic Age:

The village during the Vedic age was administered by a respected official, advised by a council of elders. The Ramayana cites a village leader of great prestige called Gramini, who was held in high esteem “so much so that when Rama killed Ravana, the happy gods, in singing praises to him, compared him to a general and a Gramini.” Gramani enjoyed high status in the village and can be noted furthermore that “at the royal consecration. One historian says:

---

3 Puranaur, V-34,128.
4 Puranaur, V-46,220.
6 Ibid.,p.47.Also: the Rigveda mentions very few government officers: only three of them are referred to, Senani, i.e.-general, gramani i.e. the village headman or military Captain, and Purohita i.e. the royal Priest, Altekar, op.cit, p.309.
“Gramani was probably the head of the village administration... The post
carried considerable prestige and is described to be the object of the highest
ambition of a Vaisya. The king exercised his powers over the village through
the ... Gramani”

Local Administration under the Cholas:

While the Central government concerned itself with external defence, the
maintenance of internal peace and order, the promotion of the general prosperity and
cultural advancement of the empire rested with the village assemblies which were
noted for their vigour and efficiency. One of the most striking features of the Chola
organization was the efficient local administration in villages, in the towns and the
districts. Ur and Sabha, denoting the village assemblies, were the common names by
which they were known and this is amply proved by the large number of Chola
inscriptions. The Sabha, was an assembly associated with the Brahmin villages, called
“Agraharams” or “Chathurvedimangalams”. Kudi and Perungudi, the Tamil
equivalents, refer to “Sabhas” and “Mahasabhas” respectively. The members of the
Sabha were called Perumakkal; and Tiruvadiyar was another term employed
honourifically for them.

Uttiramerur Inscriptions:

On the west wall of the Vaikuntha Perumal temple, a record of the Chola king
Madirai-konda Parakesarivarman, dated in his fourteenth year, contains a letter from
the king to the villagers regarding disqualifications for appointments. The inscription
is one of the most valuable documents in South Indian constitutional history. It throws

7 Altekar, op.cit, p.309.
a flood of light on the committee system of village government, the method of village administration by the assembly, the qualifications for membership, etc. Inscriptions on the south wall of the Vaikuntha Perumal temple, records the twenty-first year of the “Ganga-Pallava” king Dantivikramavarman, a resolution of the village assembly.  

Inscriptions on the same wall, recorded in the eight year of Chola king Raja Kesarivarman, a resolution of the village assembly. Inscriptions on the same wall, contains a record of the Rashtrakuta king Kannaradeva(Krishna-III), “who conquered Kanchi and Tanjai,” in his twenty-fifth year, and also a resolution of the village assembly, regarding fines.

The Ur or Sabha had an executive body known as Alunganam or the ruling group. There were learned Brahmanas or Bhattas among the ruling members of this body. The village assembly functioned through its committees called Variyam, a word with Varya as root, meaning ‘selected or chosen’. The numbers of the Variyams or executive committees of the Village Assembly differed according to the size of the village and its population. The Mahasaabhas carried out many functions- fiscal, ministerial and judicial. The members of the committees were not remunerated for their services.

The Uttaramerur inscriptions record the resolutions of the Sabha regarding the constitution of the Variyams or the Boards. We learn from these resolutions that severe qualifications were prescribed for membership of the committees. The village in this case consisted of thirty wards and members were selected to these wards on the

9 Ibid., p.394.
10 Ibid.,
11 Ibid., p.395.
12 Ibid, p.344.
basis of the prescribed qualifications, these qualifications related to the ownership of property, residence in the locality, age between 35 and 70, knowledge of the Vedas, etc., 13

Among the eligible persons the selection was made by placing their names written in separate strips of dudgeon leaves are put in a pot and a young boy picks up the leafs. The person indicated by the chosen strip was elected and this election was chosen by lot and not by the modern system of ballot. This system was called kudavolai. The Committees, were allocated to them according to their duties and they were called variyapperumakkal, relating to one function or another.

**Evolution of Local Self Government under British Regime:**

Although British government established its rule throughout length and breath of the country, it weakened the age old Panchayat system. But at a later stage, with a view to preserve and stabilize its political control over rural areas, an effort was made to devalue powers to local bodies because the autonomous village is best described by Metcalfe: “The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything wanted to be within themselves. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down, revolution succeeds revolutions,... but the village community remains the same... This union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has... contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the peoples of India... and the enjoyment of ... freedom and independence.” 14 In this regard, credit goes to Lord Ripon, though his efforts could not meet with success due to opposition of his

---

13 Ibid., p.13.
countrymen and other English civil servants working in India. But it was the beginning of a spirit which pervaded the future course of evolution of local self-government in India for the next half century.\textsuperscript{15} As Tinker remarked, "The most remarkable innovation proposed by Lord Rippon in 1882 was the establishment of a net work of rural local bodies"\textsuperscript{16} The non-cooperation in implementation killed Ripon's proposals because in these resolutions the ancient foundation of village system had been neglected and a super structure of the rural local government was imposed from above. As the Royal Commission on Decentralisation (1907) said, the foundation of any stable edifice which shall associate the people with the administration must be the village, as being an area of much greater antiquity than administrative creations such as these and one in which people are known to one another and have interests which converge on definite and well recognised objects like water supply and drainage.\textsuperscript{17}

**Panchayats and the Nationalist Movement:**

The Indian National Congress first recognized the important of the village Panchayat in 1909. The crucial issue of local self-government was taken up in 1907-1908 by a Royal Commission on Decentralization. The Secretary of State for India at that time regretted the non-implementation of the 1882 reservation on decentralization espoused by the then Viceroy Lord Ripon.\textsuperscript{18} The Congress party's 24\textsuperscript{th} session at Lahore, December 1909, passed the following resolution:

\textsuperscript{15} Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India* (New Delhi, 1963), pp.320-321.
\textsuperscript{16} B.Maheswari, *Studies in Panchayat Raj* (Delhi, 1963), p.3.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p.4.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p.21.
The Congress expressed its satisfaction that the Secretary of State has recognised that the Local Self-Government scheme of 1882 did what have a fair trial and has pressed on the Government of India the necessity of an ineffectual advance in the direction of making local, urban and rural bodies really self-governing and it expresses the earnest hope that the Government will be pleased to take early steps to make all local bodies from Village Panchayats upwards elective with elected non-official chairman and to support them with adequate financial aid.19

The same resolution was considered to be significant in the 25th Congress session at Allahabad, December 1910. At this stage, however, Panchayat revival did not arouse enthusiasm because “The reports of speeches on the Resolution at the Allahabad Congress had more in mind the affairs of municipal and district boards, and the references of Village Panchayats are only casual.” 20 The recommendations of the Decentralization Commission were not fulfilled so that at the 28th Congress session at Karachi, December 1913, a resolution regretting the non-implementation of the measures of the Commission was passed. The Congress urged a new measure with increased powers and resources for local units.21

**Gandhi’s Concept of Village Panchayat:**

In January 1915, Mahatma Gandhi arrived from South Africa after a revolt against racism and experiments in Ahimsa. On February 14, 1916, in a Madras Missionary Conference, Gandhiji for the first time referred to the Panchayat: Following the Swadeshi spirit, he observed, that the indigenous institutions and the

20 Ibid., p.21.
21 Ibid., p.22
Village Panchayats held for the future of India great prospects. However, Congress concern for swaraj (self-rule) and the decentralization relegated the Panchayat to the background for some time. The essential safeguard of real democracy as well as its real content according to Gandhiji was Panchayat Raj. He thought, that this was, after all, "self-government" or "Home Rule," which was demanded by the people for ever since the early days of the freedom movement. "Democracy required," he said, "that everyone man or woman, should realise his or her own responsibility. This was meant by Panchayat Raj. When Panchayat Raj was established, the public decided that, there should be no violence further. In the Panchayat Raj, the Panchayat will be obeyed and the Panchayat can only work through the law of its own making." Indeed, Gandhiji believed that what was good for the people could not be accomplished by legislation, or direction coming from the top. He said: "Such a thing coming from below is easy to swallow. Coming from above, it is liable to prove a dead weight." "The centre of power", Gandhi said, "is in New Delhi or in Calcutta and Bombay in the big cities. I will distribute it among the 700,000 villages in India. This means that there is no power.' Louis Fisher, who told this in 1942, was puzzled by the strangeness of this remark. To explain his point, Gandhi used symbolic language. He said: "I want Rs.700000 now invested in the Imperial Bank of India withdrawn and distributed among the 700000 villages. Then each village will have Rs.50 which cannot be lost." Gandhi meant that it could not be lost, if there was voluntary cooperation on which his new order would rest. Louis Fisher, pursuing the idea of the symbolic

24 Ibid.,p.28.
Rs.700000 asked Gandhi: “What will the villagers do with the rupees?” Gandhi replied: “Today the shareholders get no return. Intermediaries take it away. If the peasants are masters of their rupees they will use them as they think best.” Fisher remarked, “A peasant buries his money in the ground.” “They will not bury their rupees in the ground,” Gandhi argued, “because they will have to live. The rupees will go back to their own bank and they will utilise them under their direction for the purpose they think best. They may then build windmills or produce electricity or whatever they like. A central government will evolve and it will act according to the wishes of the people and will be broad based on their will.”

It seems that Gandhi was pulling his weight in one direction on the parallelogram of forces. I think that there was more than naivette in a remark he made in 1940: “Sometimes a man lives in his day dreams. I live in mind and picture the world as full of good human beings—not goody-goody human beings.”25

“Even before freedom was won, the Congress socialists had provided the counterweight against Gandhi’s anarchical ideas which had formed a consistent and coherent whole through the previous decades. In 1940, the controversy came to a head when doubt was expressed about the interpretation of the Independence pledge. As Dr. Rammanohar Lohia interpreted it, the Pledge was inclusive of the charka and the village industries; but it did not exclude other industries and economic activities, “Nevertheless, it was necessary that any one who took the Pledge must be ready to express his positive faith in the principle of decentralised economy.” Gandhi was inclined to generally agree with Dr.Lohia, but he chose to give his interpretation in his

25 Ibid., p.29.
own way as follows: “The Pledge is not exhaustive. It represents the limit to which I could carry the working Committee with me. If I can convert the country to my point of view, the social order of the future will be base predominantly on the charka and all it implies.” Having said this, he explained that the Pledge “will include everything that promotes the wellbeing of the villagers. I do visualize electricity, ship-building, iron works, machine-making and the like, existing side by side with village crafts. But the order of dependence will be reversed. Hitherto industrialisation has been so planned as to destroy the villages and village crafts. I do not share the socialist belief that centralisation of the production of the necessaries of life will be conducive to common welfare, when the centralised industries are planned and owned by the state.”

Gandhi probably succeeded in achieving a kind of resultant of forces, because, in a humorous vein, he said: “Like the fabled men who quarrelled over the division of the buffalo before it was bought, we argue and quarrel over our different programmes before swaraj has come.”

When swaraj seemed to be round the corner, Gandhi once more reverted to the day-dream of his own – a decentralised economy in a decentralised polity. Power politics had already revealed its ugly face in India. Dark and mighty social forces seemed to be heaving, and a strange fatality seemed to be hanging about them. He wrote the essay, Content of Independence – outline of a Social Order, in this murky atmosphere and in a mood of deep introspection. This essay was lost in the confusion of the times. It deserves better attention today than it received either in 1946 or soon after independence. In my view, this essay contains the quintessence of his social

---

26 Ibid., p.30.
philosophy. I shall quote some of his terse and luminous passages, in the order in which they appeared, with my humble running commentary providing a link in the chain of his rigorous reasoning.

Gandhi said:

1. “Indian independence must begin at the bottom. Thus every village will be a republic or Panchayat having powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its own affairs, even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. It will be trained to perish in the attempt to defend itself against any onslaught from without”.

2. Ultimately, it is the individual who is the unit. But this does not exclude dependence on the willing help from neighbours or from the world. It will be free and voluntary play of mutual forces. Gandhi was thinking of village republics, free to manage their own affairs, united by mutual aid to the extent of joint defence against any external aggression. The individual is the unit in an equalitarian organisation united mutual aid and willing cooperation. The relations of the individual as a whole with the outside world are to be governed by the same principles of solidarity. Such solidarity cannot obviously be established and sustained, unless the level of consumption is such as even the humblest individual can reach.

3. “Such a society is necessarily highly cultured in which every one knows what he or she wants, and, what is more, knows that no one should want
anything that the others cannot have with equal labour.” We find here a
definition of ‘culture’. The essence of culture, according to Gandhi, lies in
knowing what one really wants—not a senseless pursuit of wants created by
others. Also, the essential point is that if one wanted anything that others
cannot have with equal labour, there is exploitation and violence as well as
inequality that violence helps to create and sustain.

What pattern of a larger society would emerge the aggregation of village
republics? Gandhi was opposed to a stratified society, structured according
to the needs of concentration of economic and political power. This was
contrary to Gandhi’s humanist conception of freedom. Some of his
observations coming next have a combination of poetic imagery and a good
deal of sophistication.

“In this structure composed of innumerable villages there will be ever-widening,
ever-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with apex sustained by bottom.
But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual, always ready to
perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the
whole becomes one life composed of individuals never aggressive in their arrogance,
but very humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle, of which they are integral
units. Therefore, the outer most circumference will not wield power to crush the inner
circle, but will give strength to all within and will derive its own strength from it” A
republican village India was likely to be exposed to ridicule in a political atmosphere
in which the urban politicians were beginning to dream of the power politics and
power structures of the usual run of democracies. Who but Gandhi could at least
remind them of the rock-bottom reality of freedom? Gandhi understood the contradiction of the situation. He thought he must pull his entire weight on the side of his particular line of force in the parallelogram of forces. What he said clearly revealed his mind: "I may be taunted with the retort that this is all utopian and, therefore, not worth a single thought. If Euclid’s point, though incapable of being drawn by any human agency, has an imperishable value, my picture has its own for mankind to live. Let India live for this true picture, though never realized in its completeness. We must have a proper picture of what we want, before we can have something approaching it. If ever there is to be a republic of every village in India, then I claim verity for my picture in which the last is equal to the first, or, in other words, no one is to be the first and none the last."27

Panchayats after Independence:

India became independent on August 15, 1947. A Constituent Assembly was promptly organized to draft a constitution, for the new nation. In the first drafts of the constitution there was no mentioning of the village Panchayats. Mahatma Gandhiji deplored this omission and called for "immediate attention if our independence is to reflect the people’s voice. The greater the power of the panchayats, the better for the people."28. The framers of the Constitution drew inspiration from Gandhiji’s concept of self-rule. His idea is clearly expressed in the following words:

"My idea of village swaraj is that it is a complete republic independent of its neighbours for its vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which

27 Ibid., p.33.
28 John Matthai, Village Government in British India, and Radhakumud Mukerji, Local Government in Ancient India. (Delhi, 1953).
dependence is necessary. The government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat of five persons, annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing prescribed qualifications. These will have all the authority and jurisdiction required... Here there is perfect democracy based upon individual judgment.29

Accordingly, a Directive Principle was embodied in the Indian Constitution (Article 40, Part IV) that “the State shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.”

Balwantrai Mehta Committee, 1957:

The Balwantrai Mehta30 study team was appointed in January, 1957, to study and report on the Community Development Projects and National Extension Service with a view “to economy and efficiency” and among others for the assessment of the extent to which the movement had succeeded in utilising local initiatives and in creating institutions to ensure continuity in the process of improving economic and social conditions in rural areas”. The Community Development Projects envisaged the necessary inputs, co-ordinated action and provision of staff on the developmental side. They also sought additional changes. A schematic budget for the comprehensive development of the block was made available by the Government of India. It was also to be made operative at the block level, with the help of nominated advisory committees.

The Balwantarai Mehta team offered two broad divisional thrusts: first, it argued that there should be administrative decentralisation for the effective

29 Harijan, 21, December, 1947, p.4.
30 As quoted by R.L. Khanna, Panchayat Raj in India (Chandigarg, 1956), p.6.
implementation of the development programme and that the decentralised administrative system should be under the control of elected bodies.

The Balwantrai Mehta Committee felt that one of the less successful aspects of the CDP and NES work was its attempt to evoke popular initiative. Recognized that “So long as we do not discover or create a representative and democratic institution which will supply the local interest, supervision and care necessary to ensure that expenditure of money upon local objects conform to the “needs and wishes of the locality”, invest it with adequate power and assign to it appropriate finances, we will never be able to evoke local interest and excite local initiative in the field of development”. 31

The three tiers of Panchayats do not provide for direct democracy but continue with the practice of representative democracy. “Grama Sabha is the only forum which can ensure direct democracy. It offers equal opportunity to all the citizens of a village to discuss, criticize and approve or reject the proposals of the Panchayat executive and assess its past performance and is a watchdog of democracy at the grassroots level”32

The committee further argued that district boards might have served the purpose for which they were created, i.e., educating our people in self-government: but they had neither the tradition nor the resources to take up this work. They had also been handicapped by having too large a charge to receive their detailed attention. Hence it was argued that the time had come to replace all these bodies by a single representative and vigorous democratic institution to take charge of all aspects of

32 Godbole Madhav, Good Governance: A Distant dream, Economic and political weekly (New Delhi, 2004),pp.1103-1107.
development work in the rural areas. For this it recommended such a body if created, had to be statutory, elective, and comprehensive in its duties and functioning, equipped with the necessary executive machinery and in possession of adequate resources. But it contained that it must not be cramped by too much control of the government or government agencies. In the ultimate analysis, it must be an instrument of expression of the local people’s will in regard to local development.

The jurisdiction of the proposed local body should be neither so large as to defeat the very purpose for which it was created nor so small as to militate against efficiency and economy. Obviously, the Village Panchayat was considered too small in area, population and financial resources to carry out all these functions. Obviously, the next higher body would have to function with and through the Panchayats as far as possible, for the very reasons for which such a body would be created. The block on the other hand offered an area large enough for functions which the village Panchayat could not perform and yet small enough to attract the interest and service of the residents. The body at the Block level referred to as Panchayat Samiti should be constituted by indirect elections from the village Panchayats.

The Panchayat Samiti, it had been suggested, should have a life of 5 years and should come into being some time in the third year of the Five Year Plan period. Its functions should cover the development of agriculture in all its aspects, the promotion of local industries, supply of drinking water, construction and repair of roads, etc.

The Panchayat Samiti would have two sets of officers, i.e., those at the block level and those at the village level. All of these officers would be drawn from the
corresponding state cadres and would be sent to the Panchayt Samiti by the state
government.

The committee felt that village Panchayat and Panchayat Samitis should be the
main local bodies. Having assigned to them functions in various fields, it felt that
there was very little left for any higher administrative executive body other than the
government to ensure the necessary co-ordination between the Panchayat Samitis.
The Committee suggested a Zilla Parishad of which the members would be the
Presidents of the Panchayat Samitis, all members of the State Legislature and of the
Parliament representing a part or whole of a district whose constituency lay within the
district and district level officers of the various departments. The Collector of the
district would be the Chairman of this Parishad and one of his officers would be the
Secretary. It might be necessary to have standing committees of the Zilla Parishad
to ensure rapid disposal of work. In particular a standing committee for finance,
consisting of the chairman and two non-official members and another for service
matters, consisting of the chairman, a non-official member and the district level
officer of the department concerned with any particular case, would be not merely
useful but necessary. There is no doubt that the establishment of the PRIs provided an
institutional framework for a working association between the elected representatives
of the people and government servants. It made it imperative for national and state
level political leaders to establish linkages at the local level and seek the support of
elected local leadership, thus, predisposing them to greater accessibility. It also
facilitated democratisation of the traditional village leader, the election of some

33 Report of the team for the Study of Community Project, National Extension Service (New
Delhi, 1957)
members from lower income group and underprivileged groups. Increased interaction of local leaders with higher level political leaders made them relatively more active participants in the national development process than was the case before the emergence of PRIs.

In spite of these features the strains were visible in the functioning of the Panchayati Raj and the desired results were not forthcoming. The involvement of the common man in the activities of the PRIs was limited. He did not identify himself with these institutions. Many Panchayats were superseded and elections were not held for many years. The whole process of development through Panchayats gave an opportunity to the rural elites to emerge as centres of power and there usually was an alliance between local political leaders and government functionaries at this level, which frustrated any effort on the part of the rural poor and disadvantaged groups to meaningful participation in decision making, implementation and benefits sharing. Moreover, the state government and the local political leaders did not allow these institutions to take roots. Therefore, in 1977 the Asoka Mehta Committee was appointed to review and make suitable recommendations.

Asoka Mehta Committee, 1978:

The Committee\textsuperscript{34} reviewed the structural and operational aspects of Panchayat Raj and came to the conclusion that the story of Panchayati Raj had been a story of ups and downs. It drew three phases of Panchayat Raj System: the first was the phase of ascendancy (1959-1964): second the phase of stagnation (1965-69): and third that of decline (1969-77).

\textsuperscript{34} Ministry of Agriculture, \textit{Report of the Committee on Panchayat Raj Institutions} (New Delhi, 1978).
The committee reasoned that a number of developments in the past had conspired to undermine the PRIs and made them ineffective. The PRIs had rarely been given an opportunity to take up planning or implementation work on a sizeable scale. Broadly speaking, the mini scale programmes which were part and parcel of the CDP were handed over to the newly elected PRIs. The essential idea that all developmental activities should flow only through the block level organisation lost ground, though Panchayat Samiti as a key unit of decentralisation was in most cases coterminous with the block. In practice, there was a movement in the opposite direction.

The committee identified certain structural features for poor performance of Panchayats. It came down heavily on the role of bureaucracy and was of the view that bureaucracy had probably its own role in dissociating the PRIs from the development process. Several factors seem to have conditioned their perception. The system of line-hierarchy would favour them as an organisational principle. The officers would feel that they were primarily accountable for results and financial proprieties to the state government. It stated that the officials knew no better than to trust their own fraternity. Lack of political will added to the problem. The state governments would postpone the holding of elections or supersede some of the democratic process at the grassroots. This was generally the crux of the matter. Of particular significance in this connection was the indifference of MPs and MLAs in some states towards Panchayat Raj, because they would perceive a threat from the Panchayati Raj leadership to their position in their respective constituencies.
Worst of all was the Committee felt, the lack of clarity in regard to the concept of Panchayat Raj itself and the objectives for which it should stand. Some would treat it just as an administrative agency; others as an extension of democracy at the grassroots level; and still others as a charter of rural local government. In general, there had been disappointment with the working of PRIs which was traced in stronger or milder terms to a number of inadequacies and failures. PRIs were dominated by economically or socially privileged sections of society. The performance of PRIs had also been vitiated by political factionalism, rendering developmental thrusts, either warped or diluted. Corruption, inefficiency, scant regards for procedures, political interference in day-to-day administration, parochial loyalties, motivated action, etc., seriously limited the utility of Panchayat Raj for the average villager.

The Committee was of the view that the institutional design for Panchayat Raj should take into account the functional necessity of propelling the on-going developmental thrusts, built upon the intricacies at the appropriate levels and transmit the impulse to the people through location-specific involvement. The emerging scenario of the dynamics of development necessitated that the technical expertise of a high order be made available at levels below the state to sustain the momentum of rural development, which in many cases, had been already administratively decentralised at the district level. The inescapable conclusion, therefore, was that the district should be the first point of decentralisation, under popular supervision, below the state level.\(^{35}\)

Below the district level the balance between technological requirements and possibilities for meaningful participation by the people in development management could be best achieved by grouping a number of villages to constitute Mandal Panchayats. These would not only ensure an economic viability but would enable the people’s representatives to exercise democratic supervision over the large number of micro-projects which were to be implemented at the local levels. Such Mandal would cover a population of 15,000 to 20,000 and would also facilitate the forging of necessary linkages with schemes for development of focal points and growth centres and would ensure efficient management of the growing rural-urban linkage.

The Committee envisaged that the block level Panchayat Samitis, where they existed now, would be converted into non-statutory executive committees of Zilla Parishads and when the Mandal Panchayats became active, most of their functions were taken over by the Mandal Panchayats.

Regarding the composition of the various tiers of Panchayat Raj, the Committee only suggested a broad pattern and that the directly elected element must preponderate over the others at all levels. In the elections, the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes should get representation on the basis of their population. The Chairman of the Zilla Parishad would be elected indirectly. The President of the Mandal Panchayat might, however, be elected directly or indirectly as the states might decide. The terms of all the elected tiers should be four years.

The entrustment of development functions to PRIs however remained incomplete for these PRIs were not vested with the authority to take their own decisions and plan according to their own requirements.
The functions of the Mandal Panchayat were viewed from a new angle. They would be responsible for implementation of the schemes and projects assigned by the Zilla Parishad. They would have to play a promotional role in activating community action, build up organisation and project formulation. The Mandal Panchayats would have to be suitably integrated with growth centres.\textsuperscript{36}

As regards to planning, the committee was of the view that with the district as the strategic level for economic planning, the Zilla Parishad should be made responsible for planning at the district level. A professionally qualified team should be stationed at the district level for preparation of district plans. The composition of this group would be on the lines suggested by the Expert Group on block-level planning. District Level planning should take care of urban-rural linkages. The District Plan should also analyse data on growth points and growth centres in order to provide for the necessary economic flows.

The Committee also recommended that with the decentralisation of the functions of the state government all the district-level officials would, therefore, have to be placed under the Zilla Parishads and lower tiers. A separate development administration functioning on a decentralised basis would, thus, develop along with a composite Zilla Parishad Secretariat. The constitution of the elective organisation to supervise and direct development programmes would certainly upset the existing administrative routines but the various problems of personnel management and personal adjustments should not be allowed to stand in the way of this change-over. The administrative apparatus would have to adopt itself to this fundamental change.

\textsuperscript{36} Shriram Maheswari, \textit{Indian Administration} (New Delhi, 1996), p.605.
Even after the decentralisation of district level functions to PRIs, the state government would continue to maintain some district-level staff for the execution of its schemes but the extent of dualism of staff would be restricted to state functions which would be determined at the time of decentralising the powers to the Zilla Parishad.

The Committee also analysed the current situation in the flow of funds to PRIs from diverse channels. It was of the view that any proposal for financial devolution or functional decentralisation should not emanate from the traditional approach but from our basic commitment to the logical imperatives of the dynamics of development which clearly postulate the entrustment of a great deal of development functions at the district level, with the Mandal Panchayat playing a key implementation role.

G.K.V.Rao Committee, 1985:

After the Ashok Mehta Committee, another Committee known as the G.K.V.Rao Committee\(^\text{37}\) of 1985 looked at various aspects of functions of PRIs. The Committee felt that the time had come to take a holistic view of rural development. It had to encompass all economic and social development activities handled by different agencies at the field level. It was of the view that PRIs have to be activated and given all the support needed so that they can become effective organisations for handling people's problems. It suggested that elections to these bodies should be held regularly for this was not held periodically. It recommended that the Block Development Office should be the sheet-anchor of the entire rural development process. But the district should be the basic for policy planning and programme implementation. The Zilla Parishad should, therefore, become the principal body for the management of all

\(^{37}\)Committee to Review the Existing Administrative Arrangements for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation Programme (G.K.V.Roa Committee).
development programmes which can be handled at that level. Treating development administration at the district level as a major activity involving significant responsibilities, the committee recommended that a post of District Development Commissioner (DDC) be created to look after and co-ordinate all the development activities in the district. Along with the establishment of the office of the DDCs significant restructuring of planning and implication machinery at the district level should also be affected.

L.M.Singhvi Committee, 1986:

The committee for the Concept Paper on Panchayat Raj Institutions popularly known as the L.M.Singhvi Committee was constituted by the government of India, Department of Rural Development in 1986. The committee took the Indian Villages and the Gram Sabha as the republican base of our democratic nation. It considered the Gram Sabha as the embodiment of direct democracy.

The committee felt that PRIs should be organised as a part of the process of democratic decentralisation for building up the constitutional edifice from the grassroots upward and not wait for revolution to bring a change process. The committee was of the view that the PRIs have to be viewed as institutions of self-government which would naturally facilitate the participation of the people in the process of planning and development flowing from and as a part of the concept of self-government. The Committee also felt that bureaucratic structures and devolutionary strategies cannot achieve people's participation in a meaningful manner.

---

38 L.M.Singvi Committee (New Delhi, 1986).
The Committee was of the view that the operational dynamics of Panchayat Raj should be directed to achieve community and social mobilisation, transcending the barriers of caste, religion, sex and disadvantages of wealth and surmounting social disabilities and secularisation and socialisation of national ethos.\(^3^9\)

Perhaps for the first time, the committee envisaged and recommended that local self-government should be constitutionally recognised, protected and preserved by the inclusion of a new chapter in the constitution. Local self-government and more particularly, PRIs should be constitutionally proclaimed as the third tier of the government. This was a revolutionary proposal.

The Committee also viewed with concern the peculiar phenomenon of elections to Panchayat Raj bodies not being held for years after the expiry of their statutory terms in most of the states. The magnitude of delay in holding elections was shocking and staggering in many cases. Without the renewal of their mandate, the PRIs became empty shells or mere wire pulling mechanisms. It realised that an electoral mandate was evidently the life and breathe of a democratic institution. To deprive the PRIs of that life and breath was to suffocate and asphyxiate them. Hence it recommended that elections were to be made mandatory.

The committee dealt with another crucial aspect in detail – the question of political parties’ participation in PRIs. It was felt that it is neither practicable nor desirable to inject the participation of individuals associated with political parties in PRIs by law. If a consensus is not reached and if elections are held, it does not decisively change the situation merely to provide by law that no party symbols will be

allotted in the elections, so long as parties in fact remain active in the electoral arena. It felt that the role of political parties or a self-denying, self-restraint by political parties in that respect has to be evolved by a consensus among the political parties rather than making it a subject-matter of legislative prohibition.

Sarkaria Commission, 1988:

The Sarkaria Commission on Centre State Relationship (1988) did not favour the idea of L.M. Singhvi Committee to confer Constitutional status to the PRIs. The Commission advocated that the power of enacting any law on the Panchayats vests under entry exclusively with the states. Of course it recognised that uniformity in these aspects of the law throughout the territory of India is essential. But the uniformity could be secured by adopting in the following order of preference any of the alternatives given below:

1. By law with respect to this matter by all the State Legislatures in accordance with a model bill prepared on the basis of consensus at the forum of the inter-state council, recommended by us to be established under Article 263.

2. By a law on this subject made by parliament under Article 252 (1) with the consent of the Legislatures of all the States.

3. By a Parliamentary law uniformly applicable throughout India containing provisions analogous to Article 172 and 174 of the Constitution.

---

*Sarkaria Commission on Centre-State Relations, 1988.*
In spite of number of committees being appointed to suggest ways and means to revitalise PRIs, these institutions could not acquire the status and dignity of viable and responsive people’s bodies due to a variety of reasons including absence of regular elections, prolonged suppression, inadequate representation of weaker sections like the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and women, insufficient devolution of powers and lack of financial resources.  

The state governments viewed the Panchayats with suspicion and this only accentuated their decline. Having exhausted all the remedies to revive and revitalise these grassroots institutions, the course suggested by L.M.Singhvi of conferring constitutional status to PRIs gained favour during the late 1980s and it goes to the credit and foresightedness of the then Prime Minister Shri Rajiv Gandhi to have made an effort to confer Constitutional status to PRIs in the form of the 64th Constitution Amendment Bill, in 1989. He said in parliament that, “A wide chasm separated the largest body of the electorate from a small number of its elected representatives. This gap has been occupied by the power brokers, the middlemen and vested interests….. With the passage of this Bill, the Panchayats would emerge as a firm building block of administration and development…as an instrument in the consolidation of democracy at the grassroots.”

64th Amendment Bill:

The 64th Constitution Amendment Bill was criticised on various grounds and the opposition parties termed it as a direct attack on the federal structure of the Indian

---

Constitution. The objectionable provisions were: a rigid three tier system, entrustment of elections to the Election Commission of India and audit of accounts by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India. Even this Bill could not become a Act for various reasons. Yet it marks an watershed in the history of PRIs for it was a major attempt to institutionalise Panchayats as a system of rural local government in India by conferring Constitutional Status to them.\(^\text{43}\)

**Fresh Initiatives:**

In 1990 the issues relating to the strengthening of the PRIs were considered afresh. It was brought up before a conference of Chief Ministers held in July, 1990, presided over by the Prime Minister. The conference endorsed the proposals for the introduction of a fresh Constitution Amendment Bill. Consequently, the Constitution (74\(^{th}\) Amendment) Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha on 7\(^{th}\) September, 1990. This Bill, however, was not taken up for consideration.

**Constitution (73\(^{rd}\) Amendment) Act,1992: A Historic Enactment:**

“The Constitution (73\(^{rd}\) Amendment) Bill, 1991 was introduced on 16\(^{th}\) September, 1991, which was subsequently referred to a Joint Select Committee of Parliament in December 1991 for a detailed examination. The joint select Committee presented its report to Parliament in July, 1992. The Constitution(73\(^{rd}\) Amendment) bill was finally passed by the Lok Sabha on 22\(^{nd}\) December, 1992 and by the Rajya Sabha on 23\(^{rd}\) December, 1992 which was notified by the Central Government through official Gazette on April 20, 1993 as it got rectified by the State Legislatures. Seventeen states ratified the Act in a record time. The President of India accorded his assent on 20\(^{th}\)


Considering the wide range of expectations that the term ‘decentralization’ gives rise to, it is important to note the remit of the Indian project of decentralization, in the amended Article 243-G of the Constitution:

The Legislature of a State may, by law, endow the Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government and such law may contain provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibilities...with respect to-

(a) The preparation of plans for economic development and social justice.

(b) The implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to the matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule. (Constitution of India)

The most striking aspect of the experience has undoubtedly been the election of large numbers of women, and members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

The first round of elections saw the creation of

- 226,188 village Panchayats, with 3,198,554 members;
- 5736 intermediate Panchayats, with 151,412 members; and
- 467 district Panchayats, with 17,935 members.

---

Ibid., p.29.
In terms of representation, it brought to the Panchayats at all levels close to
million women, a large number of members of the Scheduled Castes and
Scheduled Tribes, and in some states—which provided for such reservation in
their conformity Acts—members of the OBC category as well.45

Salient features of 73rd Amendment Act:

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act provides for establishment of three-
tiers of Panchayats as units of local self-government. It also contains provisions
regarding regular elections to Panchayat bodies, setting up of a State Election
Commission and a State Finance Commission, reservation for SCs, STs and women,
 enabling provisions for reservation for Backward Classes of citizens, etc. Adequate
powers and responsibilities will have to be developed upon these institutions at
appropriate levels to enable them to prepare and implement the schemes for economic
development and social justice. The salient features of the Act are as follows:46

1. Gram sabha

The Gram Sabha has been envisaged as the foundation of the Panchayati Raj
system. It shall perform such functions and exercise such powers as may be entrusted
to it by the State Legislature.

2. Three-tier System

There shall be three-tiers of Panchayats at the village, intermediate and district
levels. Only States having population not exceeding 20 lakhs have the discretion not

45 Niraja Gopal Jayal, Decentralization in India: precept and practice, Local Governance in
India (Delhi, 2006), p.7.

46 Ibid., p.30.
to constitute the Panchayats at the intermediate level. Under Article 243-(1), the President can make special dispensation for Union Territories.

3. Direct Elections

All seats in a Panchayat at every level are to be filled up by direct elections from territorial constituencies demarcated for this purpose, with the ratio between the population of such constituency and the number of seats allotted to it being the same throughout the Panchayat area.

4. Reservation of Seats

There shall be reservation of seats at every level for SCs/STs in proportion to their population in a given Panchayat area and for women to the extent of not less then one third of the total number of seats. Similarly, office of the chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women, to the extent of not less than one-third of the total number of office of chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level, and, for SCs and STs in proportion, to the total number of chairpersons of Panchayats at each level as the population of SCs/STs in the state bears to the total population of the state. In addition, the legislature of any state can make provision for reservation of seats in any Panchayats or office of chairpersons in the Panchayats at any level in favour of the Backward Classes. 47

5. Five Year Term

The term of office of Panchayats at every level shall be five years and if dissolved earlier or on expiry of the term, elections must be completed within six months from the date of dissolution or expiry.

47 Ibid., p.31.
6. Finance Commission

Within one year from 24th April, 1993 i.e. of the coming into effect of the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 and thereafter, at the expiration of every fifth year, a Finance Commission shall be constituted in every State to go into the principles governing the distribution and devolution of financial resources between the State and the Panchayats at every level and the measures to improve the financial position of the Panchayats. To provide for Finance Commission, Article 280 of the Constitution has suitably been amended.

7. State Election Commission

The direction and control of the preparation of electoral rolls and the conduct of all elections in the Panchayats shall be vested in a State Election Commission, to be constituted by the State concerned.

8. Eleventh Schedule

Finally, the XI Schedule comprising 29 items has been added to the constitution which ought to provide an effective role to the PRIs in the planning and implementation of works of local significance ranging from drinking water, agriculture, land and water conservation, communication, poverty alleviation programmes, family welfare, education, libraries and cultural activities, maintenance of community assets, etc.

Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act, 1994:

Tamil Nadu Rural Local Body Act of 1994 is a bulky volume in archaic Tamil and legalistic English. Common man cannot either understand nuances of this Act, in English or Tamil. Further the Act has been operationalised through the rules framed
by the bureaucracy. Both the act and rules are dry and people would find it very
difficult to understand. Of course, to circumvent these difficulties, there are a few
institutions which have brought out simplified version of the Act with notes and
explanations. These organisations are Gandhigram Rural Institute, Dindugul, Legal
Resources for Social Action, Satyamurthy Centre for Democratic Studies, Shanti
Ashram and few other NGOs.

Summation:

Thus the Panchayat Raj System is the oldest institution that had passed through
various travails and tribulations. After independence our Indian government has come
to realise its importance and re-vitalise it for the efficient local governance through
various committees. Primarily set up it as a administrative apparatus for
implementation of programmes for rural development, it now attempts to encompass
all aspects of social life of the people at the grass root level.