CHAPTER V

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA

It is accepted by almost all that the Panchayati Raj has strengthened a participatory democratic culture. Undoubtedly, there is a lot of political awareness in the rural India and it is the Panchayati Raj which has made rural masses more articulated. Some of the thinkers opine that it has been useful as a socializing agent by imparting the values of democracy in the rural masses. Critics, however, may say that such awareness is exhibited only at the time of elections, but, this is no mean achievement in a country where the rural people suffer from political apathy.

As far as economic and social development goes, our discussion suggests that the performance of Panchayati Raj has been uneven and not dismal completely. For instance, in Punjab we have seen agricultural revolution. It is an admitted fact that much depends upon the nature of the soil, land system, productivity of human resources, and political leadership at the national and state level. But at the same time Panchayati Raj can be a conductive factor of economic development. In Maharashtra, according to Bongirwar Committee the Panchayati Raj Institutions have acquitted themselves creditably in this regard. It went to the extent of asserting that “without the assistance of Panchayati Raj Institutions the agricultural production programmers would not have succeeded to the extent they did”. Similarly, research studies in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat have shown that
these bodies have made significant contributions to agricultural development. But it does not mean that all is well in all the states. The performance on the development plane has not been impressive in the past in most of the states. Thus, there is an apparent gap between aim and achievements. It may be asked here what caused the gap. In fact, it can be attributed to several factors. In the following pages attempt has been made to highlight the same and suggest remedial measures so that these institutions are able to act as units of self-government rather than agents of state government.

The Panchayati Raj system has been working for over many decades now. However, the system has failed to sustain its initial charm or support. A number of factors may be pointed out leading to the dismal picture of Panchayati Raj. Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been suffering from the lack of faith on the part of political leaders and administrators.

Till recently the Panchayati Raj institutions have been suffering from the lack of constitutional recognition. The intention of the Constitution makers was to see the village panchayats as the units of self-government and not as agents of state governments, but because of the insufficient Constitutional support, the state governments continued to tamper with these institutions for their own advantage. Much of the state legislation was directed towards making these institutions as state agents only and not the real grass root institutions. However, with the implementation of the various provisions of the Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 by all the states, a congenial environment has been created. The future of these institutions is bright. We are sure that these institutions will act as full fledged units of self government in this millennium.
The gain sabha is the general body of the village panchayat and consists of all eligible voters in the jurisdiction of a gram panchayat. The sabha is established as a statutory body in most states. The gram sabha comes closes to the team’s concept of ‘participating democracy’ and constitutes the base of the Panchayati Raj system. The gram sabha has been conceived as an only institution where in we catch the glimpse of direct democracy. The institution reflects the idea of Prof. Maddick who says, “for long term success, there can be no alternative to popular participation and ultimately popular control”.

It is rather unfortunate that gram sabha has failed to act as an effective embodiment and instrument of grass root democracy. Many gram sabhas have not been able to summon up enough interest in their own responsibilities to justify even the minimum of two meetings in a year that legislation has generally prescribed and it has been suggested that “in almost every state, the role of the gram sabha is only ceremonial and formal”. Reviewing the progress of gram sabha, Shri. S.K. Dey had to confess publicly that in spite of statutory provisions, members of gram sabha are not taking interest in the deliberations of this body. This is the experience all over the country. The gram sabha is perhaps the only institution on the vast network of the Panchayati Raj that failed to function properly.

The gram panchayat, under the various Acts, has been entrusted with a wide range of functions, which are well beyond the capacity of the great majority of the panchayats. The lack of capacity has two facets, financial and managerial. The panchayats have been empowered to levy certain taxes such as taxes on the dwellings, vehicles and professions, realization of fees from the
periodical markets, if the village is large enough and sometimes a cess on the land revenue collected from the village. But there are problems regarding the evaluation of dwellings for the purpose of taxing. The local pressures have generally ensured that the rate of tax is close to the minimum. The share of land revenue made available to the panchayats by the state government has also not proved substantial in absolute terms. Thus, it is pity that enough resources have not been provided to the institution of panchayat and at the same time a considerable amount of confusion prevails in the distribution of financial resources among the three tiers. This is largely due to the multiplicity of tiers. There is also no end to the number of grants and channels through which these are received. For instance the Narsimham Committee in Andhra Pradesh (1970-71) observed that although the list of functions under gram panchayats is very large, but the per capita income for all the notified and non-notified gram panchayats was just Rs. 2.75. The Study team on Panchayati Raj in Punjab has also observed that in so far as the panchayats are concerned, it may be pointed out that these bodies have hardly any finance worth the name through which they can undertake development activities. Similar views are given by Rajindra Singh Team. Although these views were expressed long back yet these views hold true even today. Since then there has been no substantial improvement in their financial base.

Very much aware, almost all the states have made the samiti a powerful and effective instrument of economic and social progress. Despite the competence given to them by law, few smithies have shown a readiness to levy tax to the extent that will result in the availability of funds adequate for the proper discharge of the functions they are expected to perform. The reluctance
to levy tax is mainly a reflection of local pressures which the samitis have, by and large, so far provide unable to resist. The process by which the Five Year Plans have come to be formulated has given the central government vast powers both in the spheres of programming and in the matter of financial resources. This has centralized the local financial resources in the hands of state governments.¹

As a result of these trends, some observers of Panchayati Raj have pointed out that the sphere in which the influence of Panchayat Samiti has been most marked is political rather than economic. “It had been expected that Panchayati Raj would primarily be a development mechanism and make up the shortfalls of the community development programme. In practice it has emerged primarily as a power mechanism.”² The local leader is developing strong links with the state leaders, particularly ministers who patronize him because they know he is more or less to serve as a vote bank for his area. The Panchayati Raj has brought about a political framework for the development of pattern of closer contact between the local and state leadership.”³

The major reason for decline of Panchayati Raj has been seen by the political leadership at the state level as a rival centre of power. Panchayati Raj Institution enactments by and large created weak institutions, and the manner in which the enactments were applied made the institutions weaker. Thus Haryana had Zila Parishads which were merely supervisory bodies, but presumably because they had the potential of being politically troublesome they were suddenly abolished in 1973. However, the same were revived in 1994 with the coming into force of the Haryana Panchayati Raj, 1994.
All state governments have shown lukewarm attitude towards their development. There has been widespread arbitrariness in superseding Panchayati Raj Institutions and elections have in many states not been held for years. Till 1992 when 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was passed by the Parliament, power jealous state politicians had been using the absence of a constitutional guarantee to cripple Panchayati Raj. By providing constitutional hurdle to the Panchayati Raj Institutions a major guarantee is over. Even then they may not desist from doing a mischief in the future. Thus, local leaders will have to resist any such move in the future.

The various studies have clearly demonstrated that there is a lack of commitment in these institutions. Uncertainty seems to loom large with regard to these institutions. It has been pointed out that in spite of the sympathy shown to them, there is still no conviction about the utility of these bodies in rural development. So long this wavering approach continues, the performance of these institutions is bound to be ineffective. The initiative taken by the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to strengthen these institutions was noteworthy. He asked all the chief ministers to hold regular elections to Panchayati Raj Institutions and to support them administratively and financially to make the “vibrant instruments of popular participation in the development process”. These proved to be encouraging sings for the future leadership. The National Government headed by Narashimha Rao renewed its interest in local government with the result that 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 was passed.

Ineffective performance of Panchayati Raj Institutions can also be attributed to the absence of cordial relationship between non-officials and
officials. In fact, one of the most difficult problems of Panchayati Raj is the relationship between non-officials. Writing on the relationship between the non-officials, Henry Maddick observed: “One of the most difficult questions in connection with local government and, in particular, a new local government system is what relationship should exist between officials and non-officials. Ideally the relationship should be one of popular leadership and the interpretation of the popular will by the elected or co-opted representatives, advising and counseling the officials with whom must rest the execution of the policy finally adopted. This is well established pattern in a number of systems, but is appreciated in India better in state government than in local.”

At the state and central levels, the civil servants are not expected to come in close contact with the politicians except at committee sessions. Largely their dealing is with the minister in day to day working and are somewhat insulated from political pressures such as those to which the secretary of the Zila Parishad or the block development officer of a Panchayat Samiti is normally exposed to at the district and samiti levels. Thus, political pressure tends to be more intensive at the lower levels and maintains correct and cordial relations with non-officials without violating the rules prescribed by the government, is all the more difficult in Panchayati Raj Institutions than in the comparatively refined environment of state or central institutions.

On the whole, the situation does not seem to be satisfactory in most of the states because different opinions prevail amongst the officials and non-officials about their respective roles and responsibilities and each of these groups has stereotyped images of the other which has affected the proper functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Such a state of affairs can be
corrected if we are able to bring about a change of out-look among the officials and non-officials. Raghubir Sahai opines that the elaborate machinery supervision, a well through out raining programme would be necessary to restructure some of the personal habits in thinking and behaving. Similar views have been given by Ram. K. Vepa and C.V.H. Rao. Ram K. Vepa thinks that in the success of attempts to train the corps of rural leadership lies the hope of the future.\(^6\)

Leadership Training Programmers should be geared to the task of preparing the leaders in accordance with the goals of democratic decentralization. However C.V.H. Rao opines that the need for holding orientation courses for the benefit of the members and presidents of panchayats in training institutes would enable them to perform their duties efficiently and effectively.\(^7\) The assertion of Raghubir Sahai is that a non-official with a will and requisite ability would be able to play his party very well and make the officials move in the right direction.

The various studies have indicated that casteism and communalism stand in the way of the proper operation of Panchayati Raj administration. The influence of these factors has been baneful to development. One important and serious aspect of Panchayati Raj Institutions is the interference of the political parties in their administration. To avoid this, the political parties should be recognized at the panchayat level, but, at the same time every thing possible should be done to eliminate the evil consequences of the petty party politics in the administration of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Ashok Mehtra Committee too opined that participation of political parties in Panchayati Raj elections would ensure clear orientation towards development programmers.
and facilitate healthier linkages with higher level political process. Direct elections coupled with programme based contests would offer scope to weaker sections for availing of the opportunities offered by the political system.

Besides, the above mentioned factors affecting the performance of Panchayati Raj Institutions, the Panchayati Raj Institutions have been under constant review in some of the states. For instance, the Administrative Reforms Commission (1966) and subsequent committees thereafter, reported that the following factors have contributed to the ineffective performance of the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

**Panchayats:**

1) Limited financial resources for a vigorous and constructive role.
2) Local factions
3) Too much political interference.
4) Police hostility
5) Defective methods of elections.
6) Too many elections
7) Inadequate cooperation between the officials and non-officials.

**Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parisads:**

1) Inadequate finances
2) Non-cooperation from the departments placed at the disposal of panchayati samiti
3) Element of dual control and lack of coordination at the block level.
4) Three tier system adopted by the state government had no practical and effective administrative links.

5) Government’s lack of faith in these institutions.

6) Policy hostility and

7) Faulty methods of elections.

From the preceding discussions and available studies it is evident that the performance of Panchayati Raj bodies has not been encouraging. The causes mentioned above are known, but the same have never been looked into seriously. There is no doubt that the developmental programmers have not been channeled through them fully, but it must be understood that it has many achievements to its credit (as already explained) in introducing a process of democratic seed drilling in the Indian soil, in breaking the gulf between the bureaucratic elite and the people and in generating a new leadership, not relatively young, in age but pro-social change in outlook.

Further, Panchayati Raj, like democracy at the national and state levels, is both an end and a means. As an end, it is an inevitable extension of democracy; as a means, it would continue to be responsible for discharging obligations entrusted to it by the central and state governments in the areas not yet transferred to its exclusive jurisdiction. Thus, both as an end and a means, Panchayati Raj should contribute to the philosophy as well as practice of a rich rewarding life in rural India. Greater dynamism in rural areas will increase capabilities of the political system as a whole which, in turn, will increase the effectiveness of Panchayati Raj, as an instrument of modernization including economic development.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2. M.V. Mathur and others, Panchayati Raj in Rajashthan, New Delhi, Impex India, p. 280.


