PANCHAYAT SYSTEM IN WEST BENGAL

(WITH A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SOME OF THE
PANCHAYATS IN THE DISTRICT OF BIRBHUM).

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This thesis is a study on the different aspects of
Panchayat system functioning in the district of Birbhum.
For the purpose of analysis and study of the subject
only a few Panchayats had been selected in the district
of Birbhum. Birbhum is one of the sixteen districts in
West Bengal and its area is about 1757 square miles. It
has a total population of about 1,444,158. It is a small
district compared to other districts in the state of West
Bengal and it is situated at a distance of about 200
kilometres from Calcutta, the metropolis of West Bengal.

The Panchayat system as found to exist at present
all over India was launched in the year 1957 in West Bengal
by virtue of The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1957. The new
enactment introduced three-tier system of Panchayats: Gram
Sabha, Gram panchayat and Anchal Panchayat. As a result of
this enactment West Bengal established 19,662 gram Sabhas
and an equal number of Gram Panchayats, 2,926 Anchal Pancha-
yats (the next higher organ) by 1966. With the passage of
The West Bengal Bengal zilla Parishads Act, 1963 West Bengal
had 15 zilla Parishads and 325 Anchalik Parishads by 1966 and
the five-tier system of Panchayats thus had covered the entire
state of West Bengal by the said year.

The district of Birbhum had 1 Zilla Parishad, 19
Anchalik Parishads, 153 Anchal Panchayats and 990 Gram
Panchayats and an equal number of Gram Sabhas by the year
1966. With the coming into power the United Front Government
in West Bengal contemplated to remodel the present Pancha-
yat administration in the year 1967 but the sudden dissolu-
tion of the Ministry and the imposition of the President's
rule in West Bengal in the month of November, 1967 halted the
move. But again with the victory of the United Front in the
mid-term poll in 1969 with a thumping majority in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly the time and circumstances prompted the party in power to make a renewed effort to introduce a system of Panchayat according to their will and wishes.

It is interesting to observe in this connection is that the Front after coming into power superseded all Anchalik Parishads and Zilla Parishads in West Bengal and handed over their powers to the Administrators and they drafted a bill which was known as the West Bengal Panchayat Bill, 1969 and the same was published in the Calcutta Gazette Extraordinary, on August 30, 1969. But unfortunately the bill could not be an Act as the Front was broken and consequently the Ministry was dissolved owing to the internal disturbances amongst them. However, the bill, in a nutshell, has been discussed in the Chapter on "Actual working of some Panchayats in the district of Birbhum" in this thesis. Though the present thesis will solely devote its attention to the study of the Panchayats in the district of Birbhum which was selected for study and investigation, the author would like to analyse the composition and functions of the Panchayat as laid down by the Acts of West Bengal. Occasional reference would also be made to study the different systems of Panchayats or rural self-govt. as found to operate in other states of India as well as in other countries.

The Panchayat system has a long history behind it. Thus in the first chapter of the thesis a
short history has been given and specially the system as it emerged in recent times has been analysed.

In the second chapter the present structure of Panchayat system i.e. Gram Sabha, Gram Panchayat, Anchal Panchayat, Anchalik Parishad and Zilla Parishad has been fully dealt with. The composition and functions of the said organs will be found in this chapter. The thesis has also studied the inter-relationship amongst them and suggested for the abolition of the redundant organs.

The third chapter will study the election of the Panchayat machinery in West Bengal. In order to write down this chapter rules and regulations relating to election have been fully discussed and the utility of the system of election for constituting a democratic machinery has been analysed. In this chapter a chart has been given to show how the system of election of the Panchayat machinery has aroused enthusiasm amongst the people of the rural areas in the district of Birbhum.

The composition of the Panchayats in some areas of the district of Birbhum has been analysed in Chapter IV of this thesis. To deal with the composition of the said Panchayats an attempt has been made to analyse facts like age, education, sex, caste, profession and property of the candidates in this chapter.

The fifth chapter is entirely based on field work and investigation and it has studied the actual working of some panchayats in the district of Birbhum. For the purpose of writing this chapter the author had extensively travelled the district of Birbhum and held consultations with Adhyakshas Pradhans, members and other personnel of the Panchayats and collected materials and data from them and tried to
incorporate them in his thesis as far as possible. In this chapter an attempt has been made to examine the efficacy of the Panchayat to solve the problems of health, education and to confer civic amenities to the people of the district of Birbhum and to undertake development projects of the area concerned.

The security functions of the village Panchayat is a controversial topic at the present moment because the capability of the Panchayats regarding the eradication of crimes, theft, robbery and other vices of the villages has been questioned in some quarters. Thus the thesis would discuss the said problems in its sixth chapter. In this chapter a chart has been given to show the organisation of the village watch and ward system in some Panchayats in the district of Birbhum and the problems thereto.

In the seventh chapter the committee system has been thoroughly analysed. In this chapter the utility of the committees and their relation with the officials and local councils have been discussed in the light of the committee system functioning in Great Britain.

It is a well known fact that no organ can perform its allotted tasks without sufficient resources at its command. Thus the financial resources of the Panchayat and their inadequacy at the present have been discussed in the eighth chapter.

The judicial function of the Panchayat and the question of retaining the village judiciary have been dealt with in the ninth chapter of this work. The district of Birbhum has not yet been fully successful to establish the village judiciary or the Nyaya Panchayat throughout
its jurisdiction. Only a few Panchayats have established the said system. The author has studied the working of those Panchayats and he has found that the judiciary (where the same has been established) is manned by the least qualified persons (e.g. the majority of the members have read up to class IX or X of the High School standard). Very few of the members have passed the School Final examination. The average age of the members also ranges between 30 and 50 years. But it is interesting to observe that the said organ (where it is functioning) has practically met the needs of the locality as it successfully adjudicated so many civil and criminal cases and the people have nowhere made any complaint against the same. In this chapter a chart has also been given to demonstrate the actual working of the village judiciary in some Panchayats in the district under study.

It is true that too much control exercised by the Legislature and the executive destroys the local autonomy and, ultimately, defeats the purpose of “democratic decentralisation”. The details regarding the problem of State control and local autonomy will be observed in the tenth Chapter.

Chapter eleven is devoted to a study of the problem of the Panchayat acting as an organ of rural welfare.

Chapter twelve is an assessment of the present system and analysis the extent of progress and the problems ahead.

In this work some suggestions have been made along different lines for reforming and invigorating
the present Panchayat machinery functioning in the
district of Birbhum as well as West Bengal.

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