CHAPTER VII

Committee System and the Panchayati Raj Bodies.

It is difficult for any local authority to function effectively without the Committee system. In fact the Committee system is one of the most distinctive features of local administration in all countries having a good system of local government.

People's participation in planning, administration and development is an indispensable condition of the Panchayati Institution. But most of the members of these local bodies are laymen who can render only part-time service. A large body is unable to look into the details of administration and maintain a continuous policy in every branch of administration. Efficient administration requires that the functions of government be distributed among different expert committees under the general supervision of the parent body consisting of people's representatives. Hence the Committee system. In England it is used by all types of local authority but in West Bengal, only by the Anchalik and the Zilla Parishads.

A committee may be appointed to examine in detail and make recommendations to the local authority and thereby help the latter to make a decision. It is given no authority to act on its own
initiative. Again, a Committee may be constituted for the administration of particular services with power assigned by the local authority. Thus it has full power to take executive action in regard to matters which have been delegated to it, and is required simply to report to the parent body from time to time on measures which it has put into effect. In short, the Committee may be either advisory in character or executive in character. The latter type has been adopted by the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963.

There is wisdom in the multitude of members. "A man seldom judges right," says John Stuart Mill, "even in his own concerns, still less in those of the public, when he makes habitual use of no knowledge but his own, or that of some single adviser." Moreover, a Committee is a safeguard against the abuse of power by an individual. The Committee system "does good also to the officials" who have to act with great care because they have to explain and justify their actions to the Committees consisting of different interests and capacities.

"The most important lesson that administration by Committee offers to the world is its unique feature of associating the opposition, not only with the process of policy formulation, but with decisions upon the details of administration. This enables a local Council to enjoy the best services of all its members, whatever their group affiliation. Here the job of the opposition is not only to criticize
the action of the majority group, but also to take part in administration. The opposition is, thus, more informed and in a better position to criticize the action of the majority. From this point of view, the Committee system offers a very democratic method of government by giving greater opportunity to the opposition to play their role properly and effectively.

The Committee of any local government may be of two kinds - statutory and non-statutory. Statutory Committees are those which are constituted by the Act itself or by the rules framed under the Act, and the functions of these Committees are prescribed by the Act itself. As examples of Statutory Committees we may refer to the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963 under which there is the provision for construction of a few Standing Committees at the Anchalik and the Zilla Parishad levels. On the other hand, non-statutory Committees are constituted at the discretion of the local authority, and their functions are determined by that authority, for instance, the Joint Committees of the Gram Panchayats and the Committees of the Anchal Panchayats. It is not obligatory on the part of the Gram Panchayats and Anchal Panchayats to form Committees.

With the previous approval of the Anchal Panchayat or the Anchal Panchayats concerned two or more Gram Panchayats may combine and form a Joint Committee for carrying out any work in which they
are jointly interested. The Committee shall consist of equal number of members to be nominated by each Gram Panchayat. The Panchayats may delegate to such committee the power to draw any scheme binding on each of the constituent Gram Panchayats regarding the execution of any joint work. Any difference of opinion between the constituent Gram Panchayats is to be referred to the District Panchayat Officer and his decision shall be final and binding on each of the constituent Gram Panchayats. But no such Joint Committee of the Gram Panchayats has been created in West Bengal up till now.

The West Bengal Panchayat Act provides that an Anchal Panchayat may constitute committees for facility of work, and may determine the number of members of each such committee. This is a new feature for the Anchal Panchayat in comparison with the old Union Board. But unfortunately no Anchal Panchayat in West Bengal has yet framed rules for the establishment of such Committees. Functional sub-committees established in a few Anchals could not achieve anything spectacular. It is only the Relief Committees of the Anchal Panchayats that still continue to function.

The Relief Committee of the Anchal Panchayat established under Section 29 of the West Bengal Panchayat Act has to look after the Relief Works (G.R., T.R., etc.) in collaboration with the Block Officials. The Committee draws up the priority list of the recipients of relief given by the government, and its members identify the persons who come
to receive it. In addition, the Committee recommends the names of the reliable paymasters who conduct the rural works programmes (T.R.) to provide employment to the cultivators who are otherwise forced to remain idle during the lean periods. Thus the Relief Committee upholds the image of the Government which may be described as an agency function of the local body. In a Welfare State relief is a short term welfare measure while development is a long term measure. In a densely populated State like West Bengal relief works are no less important than development works for the poorer sections of the society.

Fear and vanity are perhaps the psychological factors behind the non-creation of the Committees both at the Gram and at the Anchal Panchayat levels. Most of the Adhyakshas and the Pradhans do not like to be guided by joint leadership and are apt to think that acceptance of joint leadership is detrimental to their personal prestige. These village leaders, except on ceremonial occasions, do not consider themselves as representatives and servants of the people. On the contrary, in most cases they behave like local autocrats whose decision is final. Hence the Adhyakshas or the Pradhans prefer to deal with the Gram Panchayats or the Anchal Panchayats collectively rather than through Committees for the purpose of making any decision for development programmes.
The village leaders apprehend that the Committee system might create delays and deadlock in the smooth functioning of the rural institutions. But this apprehension is not justified in all cases.

Secondly, they argue that being a small body the Gram Panchayat or the Anchal Panchayat does not require the help of the Committee system. The Gram or the Anchal Panchayats themselves are but Committees and their average membership hardly exceeds twenty-five. The amount of their business also is not very great. That might be true to some extent but these leaders should understand the importance of the functional committees in any democratic organization.

The Panchayati Raj in West Bengal has decentralized democracy but it has not inspired the people to solve their local problems on their own initiative. So there is the necessity for enlarging the sphere of people's participation by recognizing and constituting a number of functional sub-committees. Members from voluntary organization and professions must be given chances to serve these institutions. In a pluralistic society of ours "Voluntary organizations can and do contribute much to the democracy and dynamics of social action." As they are spontaneous in their growth, they need no stimulation and, therefore, they may be used most advantageously for rural development. They can promote a spirit of service in the people by offering instances of their own members.
Furthermore, in the villages there are many wise and well-informed persons who are willing to serve the community but unwilling to contest the election for the fear of failing to get elected. Arrangements must be made to co-opt these persons in the functional sub-committees. In this way people from all walks of life will be encouraged to work more for the welfare of the community. But in the lower two Panchayats, the virtual absence of the Committee system does come in the way of healthy development of the said institutions as democratic organs of the villagers in West Bengal. It is submitted, in concurrence with the views of the National Conference on Community Development held at Mysore in 1959, that the "functional sub-committees of Panchayats should be advisory in character".

In the functioning of the upper two Panchayats, unlike the lower ones, the Committees based on specialised subjects play an important role. It is indeed a significant feature of the Act of 1963. The Anchalik and the Zilla Parishads have been entrusted with manifold powers and functions. Really speaking, every aspect of the rural life and its planning and development depend to a great extent on the initiative, supervision and co-ordinating activities of these institutions. Moreover, they have large number of members. Hence for proper deliberations and decisions on the programmes they are required to sit in small committees.

The Anchalik Parishads and the Zilla Parishads have the identical types of Standing Committees for similar purposes. The Act originally
provided them with seven Standing Committees specified in column 1 of the Table No. 6 below to deal with the subjects specified in the corresponding entry in column 2 of the same Table:

**Table No. 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Public Works Committee.</td>
<td>Roads including bridges and culverts, construction and maintenance of public buildings, works and properties, rural housing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Agriculture and Irrigation Committee.</td>
<td>Agriculture, Food Production, Irrigation, Forest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Primary Education Committee</td>
<td>Primary Education.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By Government notification in 1969 the Standing Committee on Animal Husbandry was added to the already existing seven Standing Committees both in the Anchalik Parishads and in the Zilla Parishads.
It deals with Fisheries, Animal Husbandry, Poultry and Veterinary Services in the rural areas. Moreover, both the Parishads may constitute any other Committees subject to the approval of or under any general or special direction, of the State Government.

Unlike the Anchalik Parishads, the Zilla Parishad has not the Primary Education Committee of its own. The District School Board, constituted under the Bengal (Rural) Primary Education Act, 1950, was required to function as the Primary Education Committee of the Zilla Parishad. A District School Board consisted of a large number of ex-officio members (e.g., the District Magistrate, the Sub-divisional Magistrates, the District Inspector of Schools, the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman of the Zilla Parishad), a few indirectly elected members, and members nominated by the State Government. The District School Boards were, however, superseded in 1969. It is a paradox that an undemocratically constituted body had acted as the Standing Committee of a local body like the Zilla Parishad. However, the Standing Committees of the Zilla Parishad and the Anchalik Parishad, other than the Primary Education Committee of the Zilla Parishad, consist of elected members, two official members appointed by the State Government (Table Nos.7 & 8), two persons nominated by the Zilla Parishad of the Anchalik Parishad concerned for their experience in and knowledge of the subjects assigned to the Committee, and the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman of the Zilla Parishad, or the President and the Vice-President of the Anchalik...
Parishad concerned. In the case of the Anchalik Parishad 5 persons are elected to each Standing Committee from amongst the members of the Parishad. But in the case of the Zilla Parishad the number of elected members range from five to nine. No person except the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman in the case of the Zilla Parishad or the President and the Vice-President in the case of the Anchalik Parishad, shall be a member of more than two Standing Committees. As a result of it nearly every member gets an opportunity to serve the Committee. The Chairman of every Standing Committee is elected from among its members while the Chairman of the Zilla Parishad or the President of the Anchalik Parishad, as the case may be, is the ex-officio Chairman of the Standing Committee on Finance and Establishment.

Table No. 7
Zilla Parishad: Official Members of Standing Committee.

1. Special Officer, Planning and Development | Finance and Establishment Committee.
2. District Panchayat Officer
1. District Health Officer | Public Health Committee.
2. Assistant Engineer, Rural Water Supply
2. District Engineer.
1. Executive Engineer, Irrigation | Agriculture and Irrigation Committee.
2. District Agriculture Officer
1. Assistant Registrar of Co-operative Societies
2. District Social Education Officer
2. The Special Officer, Tribal Welfare for the district and where there is no such officer, the District Publicity Officer.

1. One of the following officers, namely, (a) Superintendent of Livestock, (b) District Livestock Officer, (c) Project Officer of the Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Services.
2. District Fishery Officer.

Table No. 3
Anchalik Parishad : Official Members of Standing Committee.

1. Block Development Officer
2. Panchayat Extension Officer
1. Sub-Assistant Engineer, Public Health Engineering
2. Medical Officer in charge of nearest Primary Health Centre, and if there is no Primary Health Centre nearby, the Subdivisional Health Officer.
1. Sub-Assistant Engineer of the Block
2. Assistant Engineer, Public Works Deptt. in Charge of the Sub-division.
1. Sub-Assistant Engineer, Irrigation Section
2. Agricultural Extension Officer
1. Inspector of Co-operative Societies
2. Extension Officer, Industries

1. Social Education Organizer
2. Sub-divisional Publicity Officer

1. Thana Sub-Inspector of Schools
2. Muksha Sevika

1. One of the following Officers, namely,
   (a) Fishery Extension Officer,
   (b) Assistant Fishery Officer
2. One of the following officers, namely,
   (a) Artificial Insemination Officer,
   (b) Veterinary Assistant Surgeon in charge of Veterinary Dispensary

In the Act of 1885 there was no provision for any outsider being included in the Committees of the old District Boards. All its members were consequently chosen from among the members of the Board.

The Act of 1963 has gone a step further by making provision for co-option of two persons having knowledge of, and experience in, the subjects assigned to the Standing Committee of the Zilla or the Anchalik Parishad.

There were eleven members in each Standing Committee of the Anchalik Parishad and the number of members of each Committee of the Zilla Parishad varied from eleven to fifteen. The purpose for which the Committee system was introduced in the Zilla Parishad was considerably undermined because a large Committee, if properly attended, could
not look into the details of administration. Therefore, the membership of each Committee should be limited to ten.

Moreover, there is a controversy over the mode of constituting the Standing Committees. One group holds that the cause of justice, fair deal and member participation would be served if the opposition is properly represented on the Committees and for this purpose a system of proportional representation is more suitable than a plural majority system. The latter is defended by the other group on the ground that these Committees being executive bodies, the principle of popular responsibility would be defeated if the majority party in the Parishads loses control over the body.

Under the Act of 1885 the Committees played a minor role in the District Boards. There were only three Statutory Committees - Finance Committee, Education Committee and Public Health Committee, and the scope for the function of these Committees was strictly limited. As observed by Dr. N. C. Roy, "The Committees of the District Boards in Bengal do not occupy the same position and exercise the same authority in their administration as the Committees of the County Council in England. In the latter country the Committees fill a most important role in Local Government."

But the Committees of the Anchalik and the Zilla Parishads, unlike the Committees of the Boards, play a positive role in these
organizations. They, like the Committees of the County Council and the Non-County Borough, occupy a substantial position and exercise a substantial authority in the administration of the Parishads. The framers of the Act have tried to follow the example of England where "the Committees are the real workshops of local government." The Act, however, does not specifically mention the powers, functions and the mode of functioning of these Standing Committees. They have been laid down in the Rules. The Committees can exercise only such powers, perform such functions and discharge such duties as are prescribed by the Rules or assigned to them by their respective parent body. Every Standing Committee exercises the powers and performs the functions of the Anchalik Parishad or the Zilla Parishad, as the case may be, and is responsible for the implementation of the works and schemes of the Parishads placed under its charge. It decides the policy, passes the resolutions either for immediate action or for the approval of the Anchalik or the Zilla Parishads, as the case may be, and prepares the estimates of the expenditure for the relevant departments. It has been provided in the West Bengal Zilla Parishads Rules, 1964 that the members of the Anchalik Parishad or the Zilla Parishad should meet once in every three months and those of the Standing Committee at least once a month. But the Parishads do not meet more frequently than they are required to do. In view of this fact, except certain important
questions, all the rest of business is disposed of on the authority
and responsibility of the Standing Committees. But most of the
Standing Committees of the Anchalik Parishads and the Zilla Parishads
failed to hold minimum number of meetings required by law. (Vide Tables, pp. 137-8). The average attendance of the members of those Committees was also very
poor. This was probably due to the fact that the work of the Committees
was not sufficient enough to necessitate their frequent meetings.

The Rules have, however, imposed certain limitations in regard
to financial competency of the Standing Committees. They are to
exercise their powers and perform their functions within the financial
limits imposed by the State Government. They are to work in close
collaboration with the Standing Committee on Finance of the Zilla
Parishad or the Anchalik Parishad, as the case may be, in matters
like the expenditure involved in a scheme, administrative approval and
financial sanction. 18

Every Standing Committee is to submit to the Zilla Parishad,
or the Anchalik Parishad, as the case may be, a copy of the proceedings
of every meeting and a quarterly review of the progress of works and
schemes dealt with by the Standing Committee. Therefore, the presentation
of the Committee reports is a regular item on the agenda of the
Parishads. As a parent body the Anchalik Parishad or the Zilla Parishad
may review the legality and judicial propriety of a decision made by
a Standing Committee. But the Act and the Rules are silent over the
question whether the parent body can override the decision of a
Committee.

Of the eight Committees of the Zilla and the Anchalik Parishads
the Standing Committee on Finance and Establishment is by far the
most important and occupies a superior position. The Finance Committee
in contrast to other Committees exercises certain special powers.
In addition to the general subjects assigned to it the Finance and
the Establishment Standing Committee has also the powers:

(a) to recommend creation of posts under the Zilla Parishad
or the Anchalik Parishad, as the case may be;
(b) to recommend appointment and transfer of staff of the
Zilla Parishad or the Anchalik Parishad, as the case may be;
(c) to frame budget and supplementary budget of the Fund of
the Zilla Parishad or the Anchalik Parishad, as the case may be;
(d) to prepare and submit the annual administration report
to the Zilla Parishad or the Anchalik Parishad, as the case may be;
(e) to consider budgets of Anchal Panchayats or the Anchalik
Parishads, as the case may be;
(f) to maintain accounts of receipts and expenditure of the
Zilla Parishad or the Anchalik Parishad, as the case may be;
(g) to recommend grants to and contributions from lower Panchayat Bodies;
(h) to recommend levy of rates, fees and tolls;
(i) to recommend transfer of properties, schemes and works;
(j) to recommend the granting of licence under the Act. 19

It is obligatory on the part of the Finance and Establishment Committee to submit to the Zilla Parishad or the Anchalik Parishad its recommendations under items (a), (b), (g), (h), (i) and (j). Moreover, it has to submit to the Zilla Parishad or the Anchalik Parishad a monthly account of receipts and expenditure, a quarterly review of the general financial position, and the annual administrative report containing every item of expenditure sanctioned by a Standing Committee.

Thus the Standing Committee on Finance has become a very powerful organ of the Anchalik Parishad or the Zilla Parishad. Since finance is the most important consideration in all vital decisions of the Committees, the Committee on Finance and Establishment plays an important role in bringing about co-ordination.

The Finance and Establishment Committee of the Zilla Parishad and of the Anchalik Parishad has another important duty to discharge. It has to audit accounts of the Parishads at the end of every quarter of a year. 20 In practice, the Finance and Establishment Committees rarely audit the accounts every three-months as prescribed by the
Rules, and even where they do, they leave it to the Chairman, which, of course, is an irregular action. "In any event this rule does not appear to have been followed by most Zilla Parishads."

Frankly speaking, work of auditing is not congenial to the members of the Finance Committee. A member of the Finance Committee of the Zilla Parishad in the District of 24 Parganas, who happened to be the President of an Anchalik Parishad, confessed that most of the members had no aptitude for such work, and hence, wanted to avoid it. Some of them even act under malice and perhaps believe that their only duty is to criticize. It is submitted that this work of auditing should be withdrawn from the Standing Committee on Finance and Establishment and assigned to a "wholetime Budget and Accounts Officer whose exclusive responsibility will be to maintain the finances and accounts satisfactorily." In the case of Anchalik Parishad this responsibility may be discharged, as is being done now, by the Accountant of the Block. But in the case of the Zilla Parishad, a member of the Subordinate Accounts Service in the Auditor General's establishment may be taken on deputation to do this work.

The functions of the Standing Committees are greatly interrelated and the existence of numerous executive Committees creates the serious problem of co-ordination because every Committee tends to develop an esprit de corps of its own. Sometimes they become semi-independent organizations. The West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act,
1965 does not suggest any method for securing proper co-ordination between the Zilla Parishad or the Anchalik Parishad, and its Standing Committees and the District level officers. But the Rules prescribe a few simple methods.

The Standing Committee on Finance and Establishment coordinates the policies of the different Committees since, as has been mentioned earlier, finance is the most important consideration in the decisions of the Committees. But "coordination through financial control is a wholly mistaken principle unless the view is taken that there is a definite upper limit of desirable expenditure." Therefore, every Standing Committee has to exercise the powers and perform the functions of the Zilla Parishad or the Anchalik Parishad, as the case may be, in relation to the subjects assigned to it within the financial limits fixed by the State Government. In Local Government as in Central Government co-ordination and control can come through finance as effectively as anywhere. But it is not enough. It is a limited approach to common problems. Something more comprehensive is needed.

The Chairman and the Vice-Chairman of the Zilla Parishad is the ex-officio member of all the Standing Committees. This arrangement encourages co-ordination. The Executive Officer also plays an important part in securing the same. He has to attend all meetings
of the Zilla Parishad and its Standing Committees, and he is responsible for securing co-ordination between the Zilla Parishad, and its Standing Committees and the district level Officers in all matters relating to the execution of schemes and works approved by the Parishad and its Committees. But the most effective provision is that it is the duty of the Executive Officer of the Zilla Parishad and the district level Officers who are ex-officio members of the Standing Committee to maintain co-ordination in all matters relating to the planning, execution and administration of development work.

These Rules are applicable, mutatis mutandis, to the Executive Officer of the Anchalik Parishad and its Standing Committees. Since the Executive Officer is to attend the meetings of the Zilla Parishad and its Standing Committees, he can bring any case of conflict to the notice of the members. But he cannot reconcile the conflicting views of two or more personalities or Committees. Since most of the members belong to some political party, the party meeting is the best channel to resolve the difference.

The position of the Zilla Parishad or the Anchalik Parishad depends upon the speed and efficiency of the Standing Committees with which they function because they make decisions on behalf of their parent bodies. The plural Committee system of executive is, however, plagued with certain difficulties partly arising out of the circumstances in which it is placed and partly because they are
inherent in its structure. The Standing Committees are required to meet at least once a month and, therefore, any decision for execution may have to wait till the Committee meets, and that causes delay in execution. Moreover, co-ordination becomes a problem when there is discord among the members of the Committees, and that generally reflects the State politics. Again, the executive responsibility is confused because it is divided among the Standing Committees, Executive Officer, B.D.O., Chairman, President of the Zilla Parishad or the Anchalik Parishad, as the case may be.

In the Zilla Parishad or the Anchalik Parishad, a Standing Committee plays two roles: partly as an adviser to the Parishad and mainly as an agent of the Parishad. As counsellors and critics the Standing Committees are better, but as agents they suffer from great disadvantages compared to a single committee type of executive bound by collective responsibility. "It would, therefore, be in consonance with the basic structure of the country's polity, if the Standing Committees as executive bodies are co-ordinated by a single executive Committee, with the leader of the parent body as its Chairman."
REFERENCES:


3. Ibid, P. 172.


6. Section 39, Ibid.

7. Dr. Carl Taylor quoted by B. Mukharji, Community Development in India, Orient Longmans, 1961, Calcutta, P. 52.


10. Sections 33(viii) and 79(viii), The West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963.

11. Section 6, The Bengal (Rural) Primary Education Act, 1950.


13. Sections 33(2) and 79(2), The West Bengal Zilla Parishads Act, 1963.

14. Sections 34(2) and 80(2), Ibid.
20. Rule 100, Ibid.
22. Ibid, Para 8.6.
27. Rule 42, Ibid.
28. Rule 30, Ibid.