Grassroots Democracy, as a concept and an idea, is a part and parcel of Indian cultural ethos and political tradition from the earliest times, even when Monarchy was the general form of polity. The self-governing autonomous village Panchayats were the institutional expression of the ancient concept of self-rule or grassroots democracy.

As a concept, grassroots democracy is an attempt or an experiment to broaden the democratic structure through an extension of democracy to the bottom-most layer of the society, so as to make the common-man a real partner in the decision-making process in order to make and shape his own destiny. Grassroots democracy, is essentially, therefore, a decentralised democracy, a small government approach, where people's affairs are managed through people's participating units in the local area through face to face inter-action.

As an idea, grassroots democracy in ancient India, had been the "Pivot of administration, the centre of social life, forum for justice, an important economic force and above all, a focus of social solidarity".¹

Setting of the Study

The self-governing autonomous village democratic bodies, later took the shape of panchayats (Council of five persons) and

were considered as the politico-judicial institutions, entrusted with the task of interpreting social laws and customs and awarding punishments to the offenders. Mention about these institutions was made not only in the Vedas, but even during the medieval and Moghul periods, these institutions survived with their democratic flavour.

During the almost two centuries of British imperialist rule, the autonomous institutions of village panchayats declined under a strong centralised system of administration. The national struggle for independence launched on a mass scale by the Indian National Congress under Gandhiji's radical and determined leadership, revived the idea of village self-government as an indispensable ingredient of a broad and comprehensive conception of 'SWARAJ' which was adopted as the goal of the national struggle to remove and replace the British Raj.

On the attainment of independence, the members of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constituent Assembly initially omitted to make any provision for establishment of village or Gram Panchayats as units of self-government and grassroots democracy. But, on November 22, 1948, K. Santhanam, a member of the Drafting Committee, moved an amendment (Art.31A) which as a part of the Directive Principles of State Policy enjoined on the state the duty of organising village Panchayats and "endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to
function as units of self-government". This amendment was accepted that very day after a brief discussion which expressed the consensus of the Constituent Assembly in favour of decentralised democracy or grassroots democracy. When the constitution was enacted and adopted in its final shape, Article 31A was renumbered as Art.40 and was incorporated in the text of the constitution as an important provision in Part IV of the constitution. Thus, we find that the concept of grassroots democracy was from the very inauguration of the present sovereign democratic republic of India an important component of the goals envisaged to be attained by the state which meant both the Union and State Government in independent India.

Against this backdrop the legislations pushed through in early fifties by the various state governments to establish grama panchayats as units of village self-governments and take necessary executive steps for the actual organisation and functioning of grama-panchayats can be easily understood and appreciated. In Orissa, however, the then elected Congress Government had taken significant steps even earlier than the inauguration of the constitution by enacting the Orissa Grama Panchayat Act of 1948\(^3\) for organising Village Panchayats as the most basic grassroots units of rural local self-government.

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The enactment of a plethora of statutes by the various state legislatures with a view to establishing and organising Grama Panchayats in order to enable the people to participate in the process of democratic government at the lowest level led in the decade of the fifties to the emergence of a Panchayat Movement for providing popular support to the strengthening of grassroots democracy in India. The late lamented Jaya Prakash Narain pioneered this popular movement by first starting in Bihar a Panchayat Parishad which he organised in 1958 as an All India Panchayat Parishad. But the focus of this movement was still on strengthening grassroots democracy only at the lowest level, that is, the village level. The question of its integration to higher levels of participatory democracy in between the village at the bottom and state at the top was still left overlooked.

Meanwhile, the Government of India adopted the policy of 'development through planning' and as a result, emphasis was given on Community Development Projects and Programmes for developing the rural sector in order to strengthen grassroots democracy. As a matter of fact, new institutions were installed, new administrative roles were introduced and new democratic experiments were carried on at the district level and the levels below it. But, since the programme was on non-institutionalised basis, people's participation was not coming forth and the programme failed to achieve far-reaching results. In order to generate more enthusiasm and to evoke active participation of the people in the process of rural reconstruction for strengthening democracy at the grassroots
level, an institutional device was thought proper and such an institutional arrangement was recommended by the Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report (1957-58).

The Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report was a landmark in the evolution of a full-fledged structure of grassroots democracy in India. After a thorough probe into the working of community development projects all over India, the committee found that the projects had failed to inspire, popular interest and enthusiasm for lack of institutionalised participation of the people in the identification of common community problems and needs and then getting involved in the process of taking decisions and implementing the various schemes of development. The committee, therefore, recommended a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj, comprising the Grama Panchayats and integrating these Panchayats to the elected Panchayat Samitis at the Block level and integrating these Samitis to Zilla Parishads at the district level. Thus, the committee recommended statutory bodies of democratic local government at the village, Block and District level of administration and integrating all the three through representation.

The recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee gave birth to a spate of state legislations, namely, the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Acts, which at the beginning of the Third Five Year Plan period (1962-66) gave birth to an all India pattern of grassroots democracy, commonly nomenclatured as the Three-tier
Panchayati Raj in all states including Orissa. Ever since the experiments carried out in the various states have yielded different patterns of results, such as notable degree of success in some states, medium extent of success in others, and a very negligible measure of success in still others. This varying degree of success in the experiment of democratic decentralisation or participatory democracy at the district and still lower levels produced a widely varying pattern of reaction of the state level representative governments. For instance, while Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh carried forward the experiment to the fourth and subsequent plan periods, states like Orissa deviated from the all India pattern of grassroots democracy as envisaged by Balwantrai Mehta Committee.

In the State of Orissa, the bottom layer of the Panchayati Raj, the Grama Panchayat, had already been established by the Orissa Grama Panchayat Act of 1948. In pursuance of the recommendations of the Mehta Committee, the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act was passed in Orissa in 1959. The new structure of Panchayatraj was inaugurated on 26th January 1961 with much enthusiasm and with a cherished hope for the acceleration of grassroots democratic movement. But, very soon these high hopes were belied.

The Swatantra-Jana Congress coalition Government, which came to power in Orissa after the fall of ruling Congress party in

the Fourth General Elections of 1967, re-examined the policies adopted and the institutional experiments already introduced earlier by the Congress Government. In this process of re-examination, the axe fell on the Zilla Parishad, the top layer of the three-tier Panchayatiraj or grassroots democracy, and by legislative enactment, the Swatantra-Jana Congress coalition replaced the Zilla Parishad by an innocuous body, making the latter an auxiliary of the District Collector. Lack of interest by the State level representative governments and the very allergy of the bureaucrats dampened the popular spirit and enthusiasm.

During the seventies, a number of schemes were launched by the Central Government and such schemes were kept outside the purview of Panchayatiraj. As a result, not only the Panchayat bodies were sidetracked, but grassroots democracy was marginalised to a considerable extent. Gradually, bureaucracy got an upper hand; the centralising forces became too strong and during the period of last national emergency, grassroots democracy lost much of its vitality and significance.

The above scenario prompted the first Janata Government (1977-79) to set up the Asok Mehta Committee to probe into the working of the entire Panchayatiraj system and made recommendations necessary to empower and strengthen the

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5. The Orissa Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad (Second Amendment) Act of 1967 (Orissa Act 1 of 1968).
Panchayatiraj structure. Even though the appointment of Asok Mehta Committee marked a turning point in the concept and practice of grassroots democracy, its recommendations were not acted upon. However, this empowerment trend did not stop and the demand for giving constitutional status to grassroots democracy was gradually becoming too strong. Rajiv Gandhi's emphasis on the need of adequate empowerment of grassroots democratic institutions further strengthened this empowerment trend. The latest culmination of this empowerment trend is the 73rd constitutional Amendment which has provided ever since 1992-93 a constitutional basis to the Panchayatiraj system or grassroots democracy. The newly conceived system of governance by Panchayats is constitutionally recognised as an inevitable layer of rural government and the grassroots democratic bodies shall henceforward function as "Institutions of self-government" in accordance with the provisions of 73rd Constitutional Amendment, thus opening new possibilities for the creation of a 'third-tier of governance' in the Indian federal polity.

Significance of the Study

In view of this overview of the rise, decline and resurrection of the Panchayatiraj system, the present study is significant in making a critical study of the evolution, decay and resurgence of grassroots democracy or Panchayatiraj in Orissa. Considering the importance of new Panchayatiraj or grassroots democracy as an integral part of the organic law of the country
and as a third stratum in the Indian federal setup, the present researcher became interested in undertaking this critical study.

The aims and objectives of the study

Ever since the inauguration of the three-tier Panchayatiraj in Orissa (1961-62) the continuous evolution of these institutions has been hampered by political intervention as well as bureaucratic indifference. But in the year 1992, the Janata Government took steps to revive effectively the dwindled grassroots institution of democracy. Further, to secure conformity with the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1993, the Government of Orissa amended its 1991 Act relating to Zilla Parishads with effect from 1st November, 1993, while the new act for the Grama Panchayats and Panchayat Samities came into force on 18th April of the following year.

The aim is to explain on the basis of research the reasons of decay and the recent trend of resurgence of a more viable three-tier Panchayatiraj. It is proposed to make an humble attempt to show how far the conformity legislation passed by the Government of Orissa incorporated the spirit of the much discussed 73rd Amendment and to explain how far the political environment of Orissa in general and the very attitude of the people of Orissa, in particular, are congenial in making democracy more vibrant and pulsating in between the village at the bottom and the state so as to enable the democratic bodies in between to function as "Institution of self-government".
Method of Study

The method of study adopted in the present thesis is partly historical and partly analytical and to a limited extent hermeneutical. For a conceptual interpretation of 'grassroots democracy', we have followed the method of hermeneutic.

It is also historical so far as the growth and genesis of Panchayatiraj is concerned. For determining the rise, decline and resurrection of Panchayatiraj system, we have to depend upon such books or periodicals, relevant and necessary materials collected from University libraries of Orissa, National Library, Calcutta, National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad, Government Reports, Orissa Assembly Proceedings, articles and essays published in mass news media.

It is again analytical so far as the organisation and function of the three-tier Panchayatiraj system in Orissa is concerned. For analysing the structure, composition and functions of the three-tier Panchayatiraj system in Orissa, we have to analyse important primary sources the Act of the Government of Orissa and go through Reports of National and Regional Commissions, papers and documents prepared by the Panchayatiraj Department of Government of Orissa, official records, Important Circular Guard files and the proceedings of the meetings of Grama Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads.
In order to know and form a clear-cut idea about the functioning of these democratic bodies at levels below the State government we have relied upon a lively discussions with the officials associated with the running of the three-tier Panchayatiraj system of Orissa and also with the pro-Panchayatiraj analysts and academics of the state.

Due to the large size of these bodies and since the area of study is a vast one, it has not been possible on my part to take all the members of such bodies as the respondents of my study, nor also I have been able to meet and interview all the members of the present three-tier system of Panchayatiraj of the State in order to broaden the scope of survey. I have not been able to give a broader and detailed analysis of the three-tier Panchayatiraj of the State due to the paucity of published literature either by Government or by any scholar. These are the limitations of this study.