HISTORICAL-INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF PANCHAYAT SYSTEM IN INDIA

Evolution

Rural local self-government is mostly referred to a system of panchayats engaged in to settle local disputes, to administer local affairs and to dispense with local social functions through the panchas -local wise persons and widely prevalent in the collectivities such as villages, castes, religious groups and tribes in the past and even today. It is a distinct, cultural as well as structural feature of Indian Society. The notional term for a panchayat, the panch parmashwara meaning the God speaks through the Five (Gray 1987:535), coming down since antiquity of the civilization to manifest cognitive-structural attributes of traditional Indian panchayat, connotes two things; viz., first, the very notional number of panch, i.e., the Five (wise persons), carries a collective character/multi-member composition of a panchayat wherein the number of the panches, in practice, could deviate in either side of the idyllic construct of the Five and, second, the traditional collective wisdom encapsulated in the local customs (Parmeshwar) guided the body of panches in the state of deliberations and discussions (Panchayat), which significantly differed from an arbitrator with his individualistic neutral attitude, i.e., equilibrium towards both the parties agreeing to appoint him to decide their dispute. Structurally, the village panchayat, besides caste and joint family, is a basic unit of Indian social structure which strengthened collective orientation of individuals in social life, exercised legislative, executive-administrative and judicial powers over the villagers in their daily affairs, protected and defended villages from external aggressions and acted as a bridge between the larger state and the microcosms of villages. They faring although political upheavals to be defunct under thrust of the British empire were later resuscitated through statutory efforts by the British and are constitutionally working in the post-Independence
period. Thus, the village panchayats, from a systemic sociological perspective, have evolved as a tradition and a structure as well in the annals of Indian society. The panchayat evolving since the pre-historic age went through a long drawn gradual process of adaptations in the past to the sea-change of today in continuous casting of its relations with the state during the evolution of Indian civilization.

The Antiquity

The little republic village communities, the foundation stone of every empire in India, preserved themselves amidst successive dynasties and revolutions as free, independent and self-sufficient communities (Metcalfe 1932:33; Majumdar 1970:556). The Vedas signifying the earliest record of corporate life into assemblies and institutions referred to samiti, meaning meeting together (Jayaswal 1955:2) and sabha and vidatha (Altekar 1958:140) which carried out socio-political activities like communal safety and deciding of villagers’ disputes. The old inscriptions of the 9th and 10th centuries A.D. testimony to existence of the village assembly of highly developed organization -consisted of all adults in some places whereas of select learned and distinguished persons of the village in the others-enjoying supreme authority in affairs and absolute proprietorship of village land including the amount of revenue to be paid to the government (Majumdar 1969). In the post-Vedic period these bodies were succeeded by pauras and janpadas (Altekar:Op. Cit). Gramni or grampal -headman and leader of the village (Mishra 1980:30)-alongwith the other officials -appointed by and accountable to the villagers (Bannerjee 1985: 289-90) being the lynchpin of the village administration supervised and directed the village government, whose office, later, became hereditary and the other officials were subordinated to the central authority (Altekar: 226). As a ratnin -one of the jewels in the crown-participating personally or through his representative in the coronation ceremony for legitimacy of a king in office, he was identified as the raja kirtar -the king maker- in the Shantipath Brahmana. Srenis (guilds) having their representation in all the popular state bodies and, through the ratnin, in the coronation ceremonies, religious organizations and numerous castes also had their systems of local self government. The king usually participated in meetings of sabha and samiti discussing agrarian life and activities (Jain 1967: 77-8). Owing to marked divergence of opinion by the authoritative commentators on the meaning and scope of these local bodies referred in the original texts by various terms listed by Mookerjee such as kula, guna, jati, puga, vrata, sreni, sangha, samudava, samuha, sambhuya, samuthana, parishal, charana (Malviya 1987: 171-2), a comprehensive picture of the popular bodies especially with regards to their village level composition and functions bristles with difficulties. In all, the early Vedic state, essentially a country state, was so much small as to render hardly any distinction between central and local governments. As the states, in course of time, grew larger in size, the distinction between activities of the two came to be necessary (Banerjee : 289).

The Epics

Of two types of villages in the Valmiki Ramayana and the Mahabharata, i.e., Ghosh and Gram-the former being smaller than the latter -officiated by the Gosh-Mahattar and the Gram-Mahattar respectively, the former were generally situated near forests where dwelt the Gops- the people who maintained cow-herds. Another highly respected
official, i.e., *Gramni*, with whom Rama as a General while killing Ravana, was compared, was appointed by the King to work under the advice of the *Gram Vridhas* - the non-official body of village elders - chosen by an assembly of the village. Along with him there was the scribe as a record-keeper who was accountable to the *gram-vridhas*. As the locus of relationships developed between the state and the people, this official being responsible to and necessary for the both was essentially a man of the people always ready to protect their interests, to look after village defence and to head volunteers and guardsman organized for the purpose and also to realize the state dues and keep record of the realizations. The administration of justice being primarily a task of the village level bodies like *ganas, kulas*, etc., Rama’s court as well as those of a long kingly line preceding him performed judicial function of appellate type only. The Shanti Parva of Mahabharata mentioning of prompt criminal justice through learned men of *ganas* and of the intercourse of Bhismma and Yudhishthara denotes their existence and functioning before the rise of kingship. In course of time, development of their customs and usages and confederations brought the institution of kingship into being with their allegiance. Even then the customs and practices followed or *samayas* -the resolutions passed in meetings of an assembly of the gana were held with the highest esteem in the courts of kings listening appeals against the decisions of such bodies (Malviya: 172-73).

Manu named the village official as the *Gramik* who being responsible for the village administration and the collection of king’s dues from the villagers reported to the (Dashi) - the next higher official incharge of the administration of 10 villages; the latter to the *vishanti* - the higher official for 20 villages; over him was the Shati - the official responsible for 100 villages and even above him was the Sahastra - Gramadhipati responsible for 1000 villages (Ibid).

### The Jain and the Buddhist Texts

Of the Jain and the Buddhist canonical books dating 5\textsuperscript{th} century B.C., the Buddhists books elaborately refer to the arrangement of villages, towns and forts often mentioned as *ganas, nigma, kulas*, and *nagarka* while the Jain texts refered to the settlements such as *ghosha, kheta, Kharvata, gram, palli, pattana, samvaha, uagra, matamha*, etc. In the sketch of *Buddhist Jatakas*, the average village consisted of closely dwelling families numbering upto 1000 with a gate or *gram-dwara* beyond which lied the *gram-kshetra* -the cultivated area of the village consisted of individual holdings and even beyond this, the village pasture held in common. The *gopalka -the protector of the flocks* looked after the flocks. The village headman or *bhojak* collecting revenue for the state and organizing constructive programmes in view of the public opinion was in principle selected by the villagers in accordance with local customs but, in practice, was hereditary essentially approved by the villagers. Various occupational bodies headed by *apramukh* were also functioning in the period (Tak 1973:9). The religious orders founded by Buddha and Mahavira observing high democratic procedures functioned without any interference from the central authority. In the post-Buddhist period, the village headman came to be known as *jethak -the elder brother* - still respected in the king’s court (Mishra 1980:30).
The Mauryas

In Kautilya's *Arthashastra* which records the Mauryan centralized administration (B.C. 324-236), the villages demarcated by rivers, hills, ditches, tanks, bunds and trees of various descriptions were situated at one or two krosha (1 Krosha=2 miles) allowing one another for help in need and organized under the unions of 10 called *Samgrahana*, of 200 *Karvatika*, of 400 *Dronamukha* and of 800 *Mahagrama* administratively termed as *Sthatuja*- a centre of trade and fairs of the neighbourhood villages. The villages' administrative staff comprised: (i) The *Adhyaksha*-the headman (ii) the *Samkhya*-the accountant, (iii) the *Sthanikas*-the village officials of different grades, (iv) The *Anikastha*-the veterinary doctors, (v) the *Jangha Karika*-the village couriers (vi) the *Chikitsaka*-the village sanitation officer and (vii) the *Aswa-damak*-the horse trainer to build up a cavalry for needs of war. they were granted land holdings free of rents and taxes but they could not alienate it by sale or mortgage (Malviya: 174-75). The village assembly consisted of the *gram-vridhas* chosen by their age, character, wisdom and attainments continued to decide local and administrative matters, to form a court of justice for criminal cases and to look after public property and lands. The headman presiding the assembly was an executive official both for civil and military affairs. The groups like sanyasis, nuts, artisans, moneylenders and cultivators had their separate panchayat bodies (Tak: 10). The *Gop*-officer-in-charge of 5 to 10 villages-supervised the works of headmen of the villages (Banerji 1985:294). This system continued even during the dark period, i.e., the post-Mauryan period (B.C. 300-200).

The Guptas

The system of local bodies prevalent during the Mauryas continued even under the *Imperial Guptas* with certain changes of nomenclature. The *Grampati*-headman- was assisted by the village assembly consisted of the entire population of war. or adult males or the *mahattars*-a select body of elders. The assembly appointed such a number of committees as for acquisition and sale of lands, preserving common lands and pastures and other aspects of village administration. The village officials comprised headman, accountant, watchman, school-teacher, priest, supervisor of irrigation works and boundary man to be paid from free-holding lands or by giving a share of crop at harvest (Mishra: 37-8).

Even during the 6th century A.D. rule of the King Harsha and prior to the Turkish and the Afghan invasions as the *Brihaspati smriti* and Shukracharya's *Nitisara* record, there were occupational panchayat bodies, alongwith the one for the village as a whole, with a headman responsible for reporting serious disputes to the unit of 10 villages and even to the larger one (Tak: 11, Hooja 1989: 108-9).

The Sultans

Despite the Sultans being despotic rulers vested with all legislative, executive, judicial and administrative powers leaving no space for any representative institutions, their laissez fair attitude towards the self-governing institutions helped keep alive the tradition of self-government during that period of unstable central government (Quereshi 1942:12-13).
The Mughals

The Mughal feudalistic system of highly centralized administration bringing provinces, districts and villages under the central officials such as sardars, malgujars, muqaddams and patwaris (Malviya: 139) and incorporating village as the unit of administration for revenue and police purposes dealt with the villages through headman or muqaddam. It curtailed considerably the judicial powers of the panchayat but interfered little with the ancient customs and the village servants regulating village affairs in the remaining areas (Tinker 1967:19). **Mahajan panchayat** of Merta, composed of Maheswari and Agarwal Vaishyas in the erstwhile **Marwar state**, besides other functions, looking after religious affairs such as recitation of Katha, Vrata, Garudpurana, etc. for benefit of the community members settled disputes regarding recitation of Katha in a Mahajan temple. The dispute over the right to recitation between the **Katha-vyas** of the **Dahima** and of the **Parik** was referred to the Mahajan panchayat which seeking its appointment for arbitration in writing from the two parties conducted open proceedings generally in a temple to listen the contending parties, recorded oral and documentary evidences and decided the matter to be binding for the parties (Rajasthan History Congress proceedings 1968:98-100). This tradition of panchayats continued even after Jasvant Singh I of Jodhpur till the Emperor Aurangzeb appointed Muslim officials all over the state.

The British

The British regime in India began at the time of caste and village panchayats being very effective in various parts of the country. The **Panches** of Khatik, Kumhar, Mussalman, Chhimp and Lohar castes were known as the **Mahattars** and the headman of a **Jat Khamp** in a compact area was known as **Chaudhary** (Pande:7). In Himachal Pradesh the contending parties in view of lack of regularly constituted panchayats and inaccessibility to law courts of the ruler and other competent officials invited two or three **sianas** -the wise men who assembling in a **santhang** or any other place of convenience listened to the parties and pronounced their verdict seldom challenged (Himachal district Gazetteers). During the British regime, in Punjab, the villagers were divided into **panas** and each **pana** into **thulas** each headed separately or in a group by a headman or a large **pana** by several headmen assisted by a village panchayat constituted by **thuladars**. This panchayat with headman looked after a large number of common interests and activities in the village (Rohtak District Gazetteers: 249). Some agrarian movements were well launched by caste panchayats such as **Dhakar panchayat** in Bijoliya movement in Mewar, **Jat Kishan Sabha** in Shekhawati and **Jat sabha** in Marwar state of Rajasthan (Pande 1974; Surana 1981). The **Bhil movement** against atrocities of the Jagirdars was launched and directed under their panchayats (Pande: Ibid). Highly centralized administration during the early British rule, introduction of Zamindari system of separate property rights leading to loss of their administrative and judicial functions and autonomy under the government nominees such as headman, **patwari** and **lambardar**, the real decay of old panchayats set in (Sharma 1962: 21-22, Tak: 12).

Extension of administrative-judicial reorganization during the second decade of the present century resulted into the dwindling scope of caste and community panchayats in India. With constant realization of need for revival of rural local government as the link-
age between the British administration and the villages, the statutory revival efforts for
the rural local self-government stemmed from the ideas of Lord Rippon, the then Vice-
roy of India declaring on 18 May 1882 to revive it as an instrument of political and
popular education and outlet for the ambitions and aspirations engendered by western
ideas (Alderfer 1964:71). The most remarkable innovation, i.e., the network of local
rural bodies - proposed by Ripon created a two-tier system with the district boards or
the sub-district boards based either upon the sub-division or the tehsil (Tinker:52).
The district boards composed of officials and elected members, lacking vital spirit of
democracy, could receive only a lukewarm response from Indians in the village panchayat
bodies (Aiderfer:72) killing the Ripon proposal's intentions. A Royal commission headed
by E.E.H. Hobhouse set up by the British Government in 1909 to enquire into financial
and administrative relations of the Government of India, the provincial governments and
the sub-ordinate authorities deplored the disappearance of village autonomy in the vil-
lages of zamindari system under the British as against the rayotwari villages. For their
reconstruction it desired for a separate department of panchayats. Each panchayat of five
elected members with the village headman as the ex-officio chairman endowed with civil
and criminal jurisdiction in petty cases and with responsibility for minor developmental
works, was desired to be controlled by the district authorities (Tinker: 64; Sharma:
24-25). The commission reviewing working of the district and the local boards recom-
mended for an elected majority on all the boards in order to remove the cause of their
failure, i.e., their unrepresentative character (Singh 1989:69). After the interregnum of
the War-I, Montague - the then secretary of state for India on 20 August 1917 promised
a gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive reali-
zation of responsible government in India. The resolution of the Government of India
of May 1918 desired to strengthen the local bodies by removing unnecessary controls,
providing for the elected chairman and financial powers and proposing to establish the
department of self-government in the provinces (Singh and Singh 1986-85, Mutalib and
Khan 1982:72). Under the Government of India Act of 1919, the provincial governments
with Indian ministers receiving the subject of local self-government passed a number
of acts to give it fully a representative character. During the period the historic non-
cooperation movement encouraging to settle disputes through the informal panchayats in
order to boycott the government courts caused to spring up numerous panchayats in
various parts of the country (Meddick 1970:19, Bhatnagar 1978:86). The Government
of India Act of 1935 enunciating a fully responsible government of parliamentary type to
replace the provincial dyarchy gave opportunities to the provinces to enact legislation for
further democratization of the bodies, strengthening of their financial powers and expan-
sion of their developmental functions. But the village panchayats still worked as small
darbars and petty courts of the British regime (Dey 1961:9, Maheshwari 1963:6). The
opportunity for local government under the Act was too short-lived owing to the free-
dom struggle, the questions of national and international importance and assumption of
administrative responsibility by the governors after resignation of popular provincial gov-
ernments on the outbreak of the world War-II. This indifference to the local bodies con-
tinued upto 1946 (Narain 1970:3).
The Post-Independence Phase

After a great debate in the parliament, the panchayats as the local government system were included in the directive Principles of policy for the state which (article 40) directs the state to make efforts for decentralization of power and for establishment and strengthening of panchayats at all levels of the rural self government. The structure of the panchayats continuing in different states of Independent India was realized to be reviewed in the wake of the problems faced by the Community Development Programme. The Balvant Rai Mehta Committee appointed to study the proposal to set-up viable units of rural self-government. The committee’s recommendation for a threetier system was enacted into the acts by various states under the parliament’s authorization. The panchayat system working under the model has recently been given constitutional status through the Constitution (seventy third) Amendment Act 1992.

The Panchayati Raj

Philosophy

The Panchayati Raj philosophically rooted into the ancient Indian tradition founds expression in the Gandhian enunciation of the Ram-rajya -an ideal construct not derived from any specific historical period but based on the features of different periods of ancient Indian history of which the panchayat autonomy was an integral component His emphasis on national development through autonomous rural organization modelled on the panchayats prevailing in ancient India provided conceptual strength to the plea for greater autonomy to rural local bodies (Narain: 4). Viewing as the pivot of polity and future of India, he conceived the basic principles of self sufficiency of men and absence of exploitation to be underlying the democratic decentralization (Jadhav 1984:108) consisted of a broad-based structure of numerous village panchayats at the bottom -the vibrant and ultimate source of power and at the apex, a national panchayat elected by the intermediary level of district and state panchayats. A village panchayat of five persons -male and female- annually elected by the villagers, with legislative, executive and judicial authority and jurisdiction was his idea of a perfect village government with a perfect democracy based on individual freedom i.e., of a village republic reaching swaraj (self-rule) beginning at the bottom (Gandhi 1938:198, 1942:238). Thus, in a sense, the panchayati Raj reflecting the people’s aspirations -is a component derived from Gandhiji’s vision of future India with a self-reliant villages under the scheme of political and economic power decentralized on the principle. “The greater is the power of the panchayat, the better is for the people” (Hiraway 1989:1663). The constitutional assembly framing the Indian Constitution preferring a more centralized government in view of the concern for stability, unity and economic progress did not accept his proposal but, on his insistence, the panchayats found a place in the Directive Principles of State Policy under Part IV which laid down for the principles -though non-judicable- to be reference points fundamental and binding for the state while enacting legislations. Article 40 in the Part IV lays down 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”. This part itself delineates a broad philosophy of the Indian constitution.

### Genesis

The Panchayati Raj has its origin as the means of Community Development Programme in India which itself is seeded into the recommendations of the Grow More Food Enquiry Committee headed by the late V.T. Krishnamachari recommending that food production should form the part of “a wider plan for development of village life in its all aspects” and that “the administrative machinery of Government should be organized and equipped for the efficient discharge of duties imposed on it under the new conception of India as a welfare state” (Report of the Grow More Food Enquiry Committee 1952:68-77). Besides, along with the realization of insufficiency of stray and unsystematic efforts for socio-economic development the inspiration for the community development programme was drawn from the earlier experiences such as (i) the intensive rural development activities carried out at Sevagram and the Sarvodaya centers in Bombay state since 1948-49; (ii) the Firka Development Schemes in Madras since the end of 1946, (iii) the experiments to build up community centres for refugees at Nilokheri and other places and (iv) more particularly from the Pilot Projects at Etawah and Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh (1948) with the active assistance of Albert Meyers.

In the wake of decision of the president of the Fort Foundation in 1951 to improve the conditions of Indian rural masses, 15 pilot projects - more or less on the Etawah line - were undertaken in early 1952. Meanwhile, as per the desire of the U.S. Government to finance some programme for India’s development, in January 1952 there was signed the Indo-U.S. Technical Co-operation Agreement - the first scientific and systematic programme of community development in India (Bhatnagar: 17). The community development programme started under the agreement on 2 October 1952 in 55 Community Development Projects, each covering three development blocks of 300 villages with the population of about three lacs, aimed to fourfold objectives: (i) Transformation of the people’s outlook, (ii) inculcation of the spirit of self-reliance, (iii) generation of the habit of cooperative action through popular bodies and (iv) these three to lead to new enlightenment, strength and hope (Jain 1985: 17). In view of the people’s demand for increase in the number of blocks on the one hand and the emphasis of the Grow More Food Enquiry Committees on improving the people’s socio-economic condition for success of any programme of agricultural development, on the other, the Government of India implemented the committees’ recommendation to introduce the another programme called the National Extension Service on 2 October 1953 in a situation of inability for immediate extension of the comprehensive programme like the community development programme (Bhatnagar: Op. Cit.). Originally the CDP aiming to mark an intensive phase of rural development lasting for three years and the NES to be permanent multi-functional extension agency in a block (Masheshwari 1985:37) were complementary and working concurrent by being integrated under the same agency at the centre as well as in the states. The CDP was the method and the NES the agency to cover the entire country within the next 10 years or till 1963. During the First Five Year Plan (1951-56), various development activities such as animal husbandry, construction of roads and buildings, health programmes, etc. were launched in the country divided into the blocks each under a generalist, i.e., the Block Development Officer, assisted by a team of extension officers,
gram sevaks and gram sevikas and seeking people’s participation through the village panchayats with a view to limit the role of government upto advice and financial assistance. Expert committees were constituted at the block and the district level (Hussain 1984:136, Maheshwari 1976:68). After the initial momentum of 3-4 years, the CDP grew more as the government programme in the wake of declining people’s participation (Srivastava 1987:23) owing to: (i) Lack of consciousness among the rural masses, (ii) too much emphasis on shramdan (free-labour), (iii) lack of financial resources, (iv) wrong approach in the training process (v) absence of proper local leadership, (vi) neglect by political parties and (vii) lack of proper propaganda (Singh 1971:18). Therefore, the Planning Commission urged the National Development Council to have the whole issue of rural development investigated by a team of experts (Mukherji 1961:210-4). Early in 1956, the NDC appointed a study team headed by the rural specialist, Balvantray G. Mehta “to identify the problems emergent in the rural community development work, and also to assess the proposal to set up viable units of local self governance in the rural areas, thus initiating democratic decentralization of authority in favour of villages and groupings of villages, as specified in article 40 of the Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution” (Panchanadikar and Pahchanadikar 1980: XXIII). The team’s comprehensive three volume report of 1957 recommended a three-tier system of rural local self-government in which each tier was to be linked by indirect election and genuine transfer of power and responsibility of planning and developmental activities to the bodies at the level of village, block and district. However, the middle tier-block level body -was conceived as the main agency for rural development with vast powers to exercise, resources to dispose off and authority for planning and the district body as the advisory cum-supervisory body. After the approval of the report by the NDC in January 1958, the parliament enacted the act and the states also passed acts to suit the special needs of respective regions. The scheme of the democratic decentralization was implemented in August 1958 in some areas of Andhra Pradesh on experimental basis but it came into effect in the entire Rajasthan with its inauguration by Jawaharlal Nehru on 2 October 1959 at Nagaur. At the place, Nehru desired to replace the imported word, democratic decentralization, by an indigeneous one, some one from the people present there suggested Panchayati Raj and therefore the whole scheme came to be known by this nomenclature. While implementing the Panchayati Raj scheme majority of states followed three-tier system, while the other, the two-tier or the one-tier (as in Jammu and Kashmir) or the traditional panchayats (in Nagaland and Meghalaya). The states with the three-tier system are: Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamilnadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh and Chandigarh.

Models of Panchayati Raj

There exist three models of the Panchayati Raj in the Country: (i) The Rajasthan Model with the central role of the Panchayat Samiti at the block level, (ii) the Maharashtra Model with the central role of the Zila Parishad at the district level and (iii) the Gujarat Model in-between the Rajasthan and the Maharashtra Models, slightly tilted towards the latter with the key role for the Zila Parishad and only a few role for the Taluka Panchayat at the block level (Fadia: 99-1100).
Concept

The Panchayati Raj is a process of democratic decentralization brought about by devolution of powers at the levels below that of the state: viz., district, block and village with a view to seek rural people's participation for self-governance and rural development. It is a system of inter-linked panchayats of village, block and district levels aiming for people’s participation in political and economic activities for rural development in India. Iqbal Narain has given its two objectives: (i) Politicalization, i.e., spread of political consciousness among the rural people and (ii) to receive people’s participation in rural development so as to strengthen the concept of planning from below (Kumar and Fadia: 100).

From its genesis and objectives, the following features for formulation of the concept of Panchayati Raj can be drawn:

1. The Panchayati Raj is a system which owes its origin to the CDP -a socio-economic programme for rural development in India.
2. It is a system which was brought up as the consequence of as well as the means for the CDP in India.
3. It is a process of devolution of political and economic powers in rural India.
4. It is a system of self-governance and people’s participation in rural development in India.

Since the very inception of Panchayati Raj, there has been within the government a shift-away from the community or area development to a sectoral or professional approach. In 1960 the government initiated the Intensive Area Development Programme on the advice of a team sponsored by the ford Foundation on India's Food Crisis following disappointment with the community development programme’s performance in raising agricultural production. A group under the chairmanship of Jaya Prakash Narayan was appointed in 1960 to study how far and in what manner the CDP and the three-tiered panchayat system could promote economic development and welfare of the weaker sections of community. The group recommended for proper delegation of powers to the panchayati raj institutions (Jain: 38).

Phases of Panchayati Raj in India

The Panchayati Raj has four phases of development: The initial phase of ascendency, the phase of growth and consolidation, the phase of decline and the phase of resuscitation. The initial phase covering the first and the second plans was the one of establishment of the NES -the agency for bringing technical services to the villages and the CDP-the method for rural reconstruction recognized during the period of the First Five Year Plan extended over the bulk of the country during the second plan (Shindle 1966). The phase of growth and consolidation of the Panchayati Raj institutions during the Third Five Year Plan was emphasized to realize each area of their developmental potential. Most of the states legislating to define relations between the Panchayati Raj institutions and the state itself also provided for administration of the CDP through the Panchayat body at the intermediary or block level. The zenith of the PR institutions was seen in the mid-sixties when the CDP alongwith representation of the weaker sections covered the entire country (Jain: 39). The mounting food shortage of this period and crop failure in 1966-67 led to reshuffling of priorities in the CDP itself resulting in an overriding empha-
sis on agricultural production. The ministry of community development reduced to a department in 1966-67 was appended to the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. The Community Development Department intensified the efforts to gain support at the grass-root level (Maheshwari 57:59; Jain: 40). By the turn of seventies the zeal for the PR Institutions and the CD was on decline. To refurbish the PR system, in 1977 there was set up the Ashok Mehta Committee which considering the system to be meant for decentralization of power and people's participation as well as for supporting rural development and strengthening of planning process at the micro-level recommended a two-tier system of the Zila Parishad and the gram panchayat, the former being the focal point of decentralization of power, and envisaged the mandal panchayats, instead of panchayat samitis, of 15,000 to 20,000 population as the intermediary level for linkage between the two. Karnataka Government headed by R.K. Hegde in 1980 following these recommendations reactivated the system to become a real district government with liberal transfer of powers and resources and an effective share of the elected office-bearers of PR in the local level planning. Andhra Pradesh headed by N.T. Rama Rao also slightly moved in this direction. During 1980's in West Bengal, the village panchayats were utilized in implementation of land reforms and distributive justice under the Tibhaga Movement. In Maharashtra and Gujarat the PR system has been functioning comparatively in a better way. In all these states the PR institutions provided opportunity for the weaker sections and the intermediary castes to rise up on the political ladder (Sharma 1994: 143-44; Seth; Shastri). In 1989 the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, attempted to strengthen the PR institutions by bringing the Constitution (Sixty Fourth Amendment) Act which could not be passed in the Rajya Sabha but with the passing of the Constitution (seventy third) Amendment Act, 1992, inserted as the Part IX of the constitution, the PR system has attained a constitutional status. The Act has made provisions for its regular elections conducted by the State Election Commissions in each state and assured the representation of weaker sections such as the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and women. Various states have enacted accordingly with variations suitable to their situations and almost in all states barring a few, the PR institutions have been constituted through the elections.

Historical Evolution of Panchayat System in Rajasthan

The history of statutory panchayats in Rajasthan goes back to the princely states of the Rajputana in the beginning of the second quarter of the century. The princely state of Bikaner was the premier state to pass the Gram Panchayats Act in 1928, followed in 1938 by that of the Jaipur princely state which could not execute the act. There were also passed the Mewar Panchayat Act in 1940 and the Marwar Gram Panchayat Act in 1945. The Government of Unites States of Rajasthan with the chief minister Manikya Lal Verma also issued an ordinance regarding the panchayats. The Rajasthan Vidhan Sabha (Legislative Assembly) passed the Rajasthan Panchayat Act 1953 which after the consent of the President of India became effective from November 1954. Under this act the panchayats were re-organized, if they were there, and established afresh where they were not. In the atmosphere of democracy, development and decentralization by the end of the First Five Year Plan and after the Second General Elections, Rajasthan Government headed by Mohanlal Sukhadia perceived through the PR system a base for the Congress Party in the wake of coming socio-economic changes, i.e., the shift of political
and economic power from landlords, jagirdars and upper caste elites to the common man and the weaker sections of society (Kumar and Fadia:97-8). The state became the pioneer one implementing the three tiered system of democratic decentralization in the entire state on 2nd October 1959. A few committees appointed by the Government of Rajasthan such as the Mathur Committee (1963), the Sadiq Ali Committee (1964), and the Rajasthan High Power Committee (1973) evaluating the Panchayati Raj bodies in the state recommended for adequate resources and powers to them, specially to the Zila Parishad (Bhagade 1977: 16). The panchayats Amendment Act 1992 (Rajasthan) was passed to re-fabricate the panchayat system in the state but, later, the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 unifying all the existing Acts, i.e., the Rajasthan Panchayats Act 1953, the Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad Act 1959, the Panchayat Amendment Act 1992 and the constitution (Seventy Third) Amendment Act 1992, passed by the Rajasthan Vidhan Sabha has come into force on 23rd April 1994.

Main features

The PR system in Rajasthan adopted in 1959 is characterized by the following main features:

1. The three tiered pattern of Panchayati Raj in Rajasthan consisted of Zila Parishad, Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayat. The middle tier, the panchayat samiti vested with executive and financial powers was given the pivotal role for implementation of various schemes of rural development.

2. The apex body, i.e., Zila Parishad is only an advisory, supervisory and co-ordinating agency.

3. All the three bodies of the Panchayati Raj were interlinked through indirect elections at the Panchayat Samiti and the Zila Parishad levels.

4. The Gram Sabha, though being the part of the Panchayati Raj, was not given any legal status.

5. In the system, the bureaucratic and the elected leaders were to work in coordination but the pradhan -chairman of the panchayat samiti- emerged as the powerful one.

Organization of Panchayati Raj

The system of PR in Rajasthan consisted of the following institutions:

1. Gram Sabha

This body introduced through the section 23(A) amending the Rajasthan Panchayats Act, 1953 is a general body meeting consisted of adult members to discuss twice a year accounts and programmes of the gram panchayat. The body was considered as a platform for democratization of the people and for guidance to the Panchayat bodies by the people but all through the years it remained ineffective.

2. Gram Panchayat

It is an executive body for a single or a clustre of villages, consisted of a sarpanch and the ward panches each from a ward elected directly by the electoral collegiate of
adult villagers. It is assigned with implementation of executive and developmental works. There was also a provision for co-option of 2 women, 2 members of the SCs and 2 members of the STs if they have not been represented by election on the panchayat.

3. Panchayat Samiti

In this intermediary body consisted of ex-officio, associate and co-opted members. Sarpanches of all the gram panchayats from its area were its ex-officio-members, the MLAs and the MPs from the area, with no voting right, were its associate members and 2 members each of the SCs, the STs and the women were co-opted through election by the elected members. Its chairperson -the Pradhan- was elected by the electoral collegiate consisted of the ex-officio and the co-opted members. The panchayat samiti headed by the pradhan is a powerful body responsible for implementation of the most of schemes and plans for rural development.

4. Zila Parishad

This apex body consisted of ex-officio, associate and co-opted members had pradhans of all the panchayat samitis in the district, all the MLAs and MPs (including members of the Rajya Sabha living in the area) from the district and the Block Development Officers (with no right to vote) were the ex-officio members of the samiti. The Chairpersons of the Central Co-operative Bank and the District co-operative Bank were its associate members. 2 women members and a SC member, if there was none of them, and a ST member, if the ST population is more than 5% of the population of the district, were co-opted. It coordinated and supervised the programmers such as the Adult Education Programme, the Literacy Campaign, the Agricultural Extension Programme, etc.

Re-organization of the Panchayati Raj

Under the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act, 1994, the Panchayati Raj in Rajasthan has received a big haul. Its main features as compared to the Balvantray G. Mehta Model are:

1. The Act maintained the three-tier system of inter linkages but differs in the manner of constitution and status of the bodies.
2. The Act provided for all the bodies -Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad- to be constituted by direct election of their members.
3. The Act provided for reservation of seats for weaker sections the SCs, the STs, the OBCs and the women and removed the provision of their co-option.
4. The Act entrusted each of the bodies with executive, fiscal and developmental responsibilities and powers
5. The Act inter-linked the three tiers by giving responsibility for implementation of works at the lowest level and advisory, supervisory and executive roles at the two higher levels.
6. The Act provided them a constitutional status against the previous statutory one. they are to be constituted regularly after a term of five years.
7. The Act led to constitution of the state election commission for their regular constitution and the state Finance Commission to divide financial resources between the state government and the PR bodies.

Thus, the Act did not alter the existing structure of the Panchayati Raj but improved it from within. Such improvements will go far a way for assured and sufficient representation of weaker sections, regular constitution of the bodies and regular allocation of financial resources. The bodies under the Act have recently been constituted in the state by their elections in December-January 1994-1995. How far do they differ in their leadership structuring and working with their previous counterparts is an interesting subject to be researched in future.