PROBLEMS AND WORKING OF THE PANCHAYATI RAJ IN GUJARAT -
A STUDY OF MOGRI VILLAGE PANCHAYAT

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

* (a) The Problem Reviewed

(b) A note on the method of study

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(A) The Problem Reviewed

The Panchayati Raj is conceived of as a process of democratic decentralisation. According to the Balwantrai Mehta Committee's Report, which gave birth to the concept, "It is very necessary that there should be devolution of power and decentralisation of machinery and that such power should be exercised and such machinery controlled and directed by popular representatives of the local area."

It is in this context that the interlinked three-tier structure of the Panchayati Raj was brought into being. A beginning was made with Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh in 1959, followed by Assam, Madras and Mysore in 1960, Maharashtra in 1962, Gujarat and West Bengal in 1963 and 1964 respectively.

No rigid institutional pattern has been laid down for the Panchayati Raj set up. Every State is free to work out the details of its own pattern, in the light of local conditions and requirements, subject to certain fundamentals.

These are:

(i) a three-tier structure of local self-governing bodies from the village to the district, the bodies being organically linked up;

(ii) genuine transfer of power and responsibility to them;
(iii) adequate resources should be transferred to these bodies to enable them to discharge the responsibilities devolving on them; and

(iv) the system evolved should be such as will facilitate further devolution and dispersal of power and responsibility in the future.

Thus, over the last five or six years (since the formal introduction of Panchayati Raj), there have been attempts at a progressive devolution of power from higher to lower levels. The success or failure of Panchayati Raj depends to a large extent on the preparedness of the Indian village to utilise in democratic ways the wider powers given to it. The most enthusiastic advocates of Panchayati Raj base their arguments on a particular image of the Indian village, namely, that it is a community in which people can meet on equal terms in order to adjust their mutual interests.

The crux of the problem is, as Andre Beteille\(^1\) puts it: "To what extent is the egalitarian and consensual ideology of Panchayati Raj compatible with the segmentary and hierarchical structure of the Indian village".

There is no doubt that citizen-participation in the business of local government is the foundation of democracy

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and is one of the ways in which the adjustments in society, demanded by the rapid changes for economic development, can be brought about to the satisfaction of large number of people.  

Till recently, students of Political Science did not pay much attention to villages. There are very few studies concerning the day-to-day politics of our rural areas. It is time we study the peculiar problems of the villages which remain at the centre of politics. It will be interesting to learn how leadership at the village level has reacted to the challenge thrown up by the introduction of the Panchayati Raj. Similarly, it will be of much help to know how democracy is shaping itself in rural India.

There is no denying the fact that Panchayati Raj has helped increase mass consciousness in rural India. Better still, it has unleashed forces that pose a serious challenge to the traditional leadership, based on heredity, caste, wealth and age. As a result a new leadership, active and vibrant with emphasis on merit and social services, is gradually emerging in village India. But the pace of

3. (1)Ralph M. Retzlaff, Village Government in India, (1962)
   (2)Somjee A.H.(Ed.), Politics of a Periurban Community in India, (1964)
   (3)Somjee A.H., Democracy and Political Change in Village India, (1971)
emergence is rather slow and it has not yet been able to fill the vacuum created by the old leadership that is withering away. It will be worthwhile to analyse the factors responsible for the slow emergence of this new leadership.

Panchayati Raj has made it possible for the traditionally dormant groups in the village to aspire to political power. Caste superiority has been gradually replaced by considerations such as the numerical strength of the candidate's caste, his economic position, or quite simply his popularity, in determining the chances of success in local elections. While the traditional elite still has some control over the sources of power, its hold is loosening. Successive elections have accelerated this process. The study of the impact of elections as a democratising process is another field which should interest the student of village politics.

There are areas where the Panchayati Raj institutions seem to have proved to be just another means for further strengthening the traditional vested interests. It has, at some places, become an agency of exploitation and oppression to the weaker and non-influential sections. Factionalism seems to have become more intense dividing the villages into rival groups. It has also accentuated caste feelings by encouraging caste loyalties especially at the time of elections.  

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4. This is supported by the observation made by the Fourth National Convention of the All India Panchayati Raj, held at Bangalore in 1964.
Shri J.P. Narayan\textsuperscript{5} welcomes Panchayati Raj as a beginning of the "participating democracy", a system where the people participate in government. "There is still need," he writes, "of arousing popular enthusiasm about this measure, and of making the people realize that what was intended was not a procedural reform of the administration at the lower levels, but a political revolution of the greatest significance for the people, that in effect, the intention and the attempt were to bring swaraj to the people." S.K. Dey,\textsuperscript{6} the former Union Minister of Panchayati Raj and Community Development, views Panchayati Raj as an important event linking the individual with the universe. He visualizes an organic and intimate relationship between Gram Sabha and Lok Sabha.

Democratic institutions of Panchayati Raj have been introduced in a society which is basically traditional, hierarchical and unequal in many respects. People's active involvement is the very basis of Panchayati Raj but in practice their participation is peripheral or marginal. The attempt to develop Gram Sabha may be inspired by good intentions of integrating the people with the government, but this assembly cannot function effectively as long as the


individuals remain unresponsive. In the opinion of G.D. Berreman, the contemporary rural community in India is simply not structured for democratic, equalitarian self-administration. M.E. Opler also holds similar views when he says that failure to recognize this is a failure to recognize the social organizational difficulty where status, privilege, and power are jealously restricted to the dominant groups.

This is not to say that village life and its politics was better in the pre-Panchayati Raj days. Rajni Kothari observes:

"This does not mean that there were no politics in traditional India. There was no absence of politics in village India, but it was politics of a different order. It was, on the one hand, the politics of village dominance, of local cleavages and factions, in which family and linear ties were the raw material. It was, on the other hand, the politics of managing external authority and its predictable ups and downs by allowing it a role in the pattern of local dominance, such as arbitration in local disputes and periodic changes in the secular ranking of castes. While on the whole such a system settled the relationships between groups at various levels, its principal failure was in evolving a unified political framework."

Iqbal Narain says:

"It is now a fashion to draw a romantic picture of village life in pre-Panchayati Raj period as one of amity, good will, cooperation, peace and homogeneity, and as one imbued with ethical norms of thought and behaviour. Although the assumption seems to be that there was no politics (or at the most negligible politics) in the villages before the establishment of Panchayati Raj. It is difficult to accept this. The nature of village politics may have changed in the wake of Panchayati Raj and its intensity increased, but there certainly was politics in village India before. Either it was the politics of subservience, of feudal over-lordship, of dominant caste hegemony and of Mahajan's financial stranglehold or it was of family and personal feuds and rivalries. Again, politics in the pre-Panchayati Raj may have taken an informal course in the absence of an inter-locked and statutory power structure. But to say that there was no politics at all is as unrealistic as to hold that Panchayati Raj has made no change in the character and extent of village politics."

What distinguishes the politics of Panchayati Raj from earlier village politics is its institutionalised character. Iqbal Narain further writes, "Capturing of elective posts, building up of a support base, using patronage and distribution of benefits for retaining the support base and getting


re-elected" -- this in brief is the gist of institutionalised politics.

Indian society has been stratified into closed groups with well-defined, though circumscribed, relationships and duties. Consequently, the authority structure has largely been traditional, ascriptive and feudal. Authority was vested in persons belonging to certain privileged strata of society. Leaders were invariably drawn from among the higher caste-groups and in most of the cases leadership was an aspect of the hereditary and family functions. The lower strata of Indian society were totally excluded from occupying positions of political, economic or cultural superiority. By virtue of his birth, a low caste man was debarred from becoming a leader of the community. 12 This state of affairs continued till the advent of independence. After independence, the texture of authority structure in the village was bound to undergo major changes. Universal adult suffrage enhanced the importance of each individual. It gave rise to an unprecedented political awakening among masses.

As a result of the operation of adult franchise, writes Rajni Kothari 13, "considerable shifts have occurred in the


13. op. cit., p. 128.
social base of politics. Sections of the people who had been hitherto denied access to political power and who had considered politics to be the legitimate concern of the material and the learned classes have been exposed to the new ideology, have realised the power of numbers, and have started organising themselves through their own associations and leaders. This is the rise of the newly enfranchised in politics." The zamindari abolition freed the common villager from economic dependence on the zamindars and the co-operative societies provided an alternative to the money-lenders. Education has assumed great importance in the sense that lower caste groups are taking advantage of the educational opportunities provided by the State. The analysis of these forces of change at the village level will be interesting and fruitful.

One of the goals of the Indian Constitution is establishment of a Welfare State, which can look after the needs of the people. Article 40 which is placed under the Directive Principles of the State Policy, refers to the creation of Panchayats as agencies of Welfare State in the villages. Prime Minister Nehru14 rightly emphasized that the Panchayati Raj bodies should assume the responsibility of looking after the needs of every one in the village and thus become an insurance against illness, unemployment and

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other disabilities. It becomes, therefore, clear that the real and ultimate purpose of the Panchayati Raj was realization of those goals mentioned in our constitution.

Though the Panchayati Raj institutions are regarded as mainly development agencies, they have been burdened with a number of administrative and regulative functions which take away a large slice of the time and energies of the Panchayati Raj personnel, especially of the extension officers. Thus, the Panchayati Raj institutions which have been entrusted with promotion of economic development in rural areas have got bogged down into administrative bottlenecks and Panchayati Raj is yet to emerge as a full-fledged vehicle of development.

The Panchayati Raj bodies are generally paying more attention to social service and public works and much less attention to the development of agriculture, animal husbandry and other economic programmes. Perhaps, this attention to social service and public works, even at the cost of development, is inevitable so long as provision has not been made for a basic minimum of welfare services, including public utilities, at the local level. A person holding an elective office may wish to please as many voters as possible in order to be re-elected, and therefore strive to provide widely used services.

If, on the one hand, there is a tendency to go for
popular works, on the other, there is a reluctance to impose and collect taxes. Finances of the panchayats have been found to be uniformly poor. Most of the funds of village panchayats consist of government grants only. Reluctance to raise finance of their own has led the leaders of the panchayat to depend on government grants for all their activities.

The problem of finding adequate financial resources for the local authorities is really serious. It is as much a political as an administrative problem. There is an inherent inadequacy in the resources of local authorities, since very few of the taxes generally allotted to them are lucrative. To recognise the importance of the local authorities in development of the rural areas is to recognise the necessity of assuring them adequate funds for discharging their responsibilities. While there is no doubt that their capacity to raise local resources will be only to the extent they establish their credit with the people by their record of service, it is necessary for Government to give to the local authorities a large measure of assistance in the initial stages.

There is a widely prevalent view that caste influences the distribution and the use of power and the ways and means of achieving it. In this regard I.P. Desai\textsuperscript{15} writes, "The

political system (of our country), though modern and democratic in form, is not so in its working and content. The political behaviour of the people, of the members of different political parties and of the members of the Government is caste-oriented or is influenced by the caste-considerations. Their attitudes are caste-based and their values are the values of the caste society or the traditional society.

While admitting that caste influences political parties and the members of the government and the administrators, he further observes that, "politics also influences caste with consequences that adversely affect caste solidarity and hierarchy".

A similar approach to the study of interaction between caste and politics is adopted by Rajni Kothari. He writes: "In dealing with the relationship between caste and politics... a more useful point of departure would be: what form is caste taking under the impact of modern politics, and what form is politics taking in a caste-oriented society? Those in India who complain of 'casteism in politics' are really looking for a sort of politics which has no basis in society. They also probably lack any clear conception of either the nature of politics or the nature of the caste system." While explaining how politics seeks support from the organised

structure like caste, he observes:

"It follows that where the caste structure provides one of the principal organisational clusters along which the bulk of the population is bound to live, politics must strive to organise through such a structure. The alleged casteism in politics is thus no more and no less than politicisation of caste. It is something in which both the forms of caste and the forms of politics are brought nearer each other, in the process changing both."

Sometimes a view has been held that there is no motivation among large sections of village people for development. It is possible that they may be unwilling to participate in a programme which will benefit only the dominant group but if such programmes are conceived as one of advantage to them, they will unhesitatingly offer full co-operation. However, this brings in another aspect of the situation namely, disparities in levels of aspiration, which, together with interests of conflicts, hinder true community participation. Sometimes socio-economic disparities impinge upon the working of the Panchayati Raj, and often those who are at the top derive maximum benefit.

In view of the above, Jagjivan Ram17 considers that a major test of Panchayati Raj will be the improvement it brings about in the relation between various sections of village

communities and increases the participation capabilities of the rural people and provides a means of self-expression for all of them. It will, therefore, be useful, to study in depth the interaction between the political system and popular participation.

These in short, are some of the problems of Panchayati Raj. It is difficult to separate village politics from Village Panchayat. In fact, village panchayat is a pivot round which most of village politics revolves. Even the outside world enters into the life of the village in a multitude of ways.

The village panchayat, in fact, may be viewed as a point at which social, economic, and political forces operating over a much wider field meet and intersect. As the smallest political unit in the country, it determines the character and forms the nucleus of all village politics. The political character of rural India is derived from ideas which are not strictly political, but is a merging of traditional concepts and political expediency.

"The coming of panchayati raj", writes Kothari, "at the district and lower levels has without doubt introduced a new and powerful factor in the consolidation of all this, one that will both simplify the diffused participation

structure ... and integrate it with higher levels of political and economic decision-making, thus adding greatly to the competitive potential of the rural social structure. Such a process of governmental penetration and political mobilization of the nation's traditional sectors, which lie in the logic of India's model of development, here finds its further extension and consummation."

The study of political processes and leadership in the developing countries presents a new and growing interest in social science. Politics has emerged as the dominant theme of the new nations, and the increasing politicization of the individual and his groups in these societies is a fact of great political significance. However, its study at the micro level (in India) is little more difficult. "Political Scientists", writes A.H. Somjee19,

"who wish to undertake empirical investigations of political activity in Indian villages confront innumerable problems. Among others, where to look for the day-to-day politics of villages is about the most complex. This is because only a limited aspect of it is directly identifiable. The rest remains an inextricable part of the general social and economic life of villages. And search for the latter inevitably plunges political scientists into areas, which, conventionally speaking, do not strictly fall within the familiar boundaries of their discipline and

they, therefore, have the feeling of being on uncertain ground."

The need for studies on Panchayati Raj in India today is indeed pressing. In the absence of knowledge regarding the processes of micro-politics in tribal and village India, no definitive assessment of the micro-politics of the country can be undertaken. The paucity of accurate analysis in this field partially explains why programmes of community development and decentralized democracy are groping in the dark and are unable to grapple adequately with some of the hard realities of the social structure.

Apart from the study of the Programme Evaluation Organisation, planning commission, not very many field studies*

20. P.E.O's Fifth Evaluation Report, Chapter IV.

* Some of the recent studies on Panchayati Raj include:
have been made which specifically attempt to ascertain how village panchayats actually operate, and to what extent disparities of social and economic status pose barriers, insuperable or otherwise, to the effective participation of all the strata of village society in these self-governing institutions.

As an increasing number of States adopt the system of Panchayati Raj it is imperative that a thorough and critical evaluation be made of the existing operation of village panchayats.

An attempt is made here to study the problems and processes of the working of the Village Panchayat at Mogri, a village of Anand Taluka in the district of Kaira. The study is intended to cover all the vital aspects of the working of village panchayat, and also those of village politics. The problems like leadership, casteism, factionalism, participation, development, planning and Institutional Behaviour are fully discussed.

The major areas of investigation and analysis are -

(1) a comparative understanding of the socio-economic and political background of the village fabric.

(2) the structure and pattern of formal and informal leadership which is emerging under the new set up.
(3) inter-play of the factors which give rise to the factional politics at the panchayat level.

(4) the processes and problems of the village development through panchayat.

(5) the institutional behaviour of the panchayat.

(B) A note on the method of study

This is essentially a depth study of a village panchayat in the Gujarat State. The data for this study was collected by the field-work method. Intensive field-work was done from 1967 to 1969 i.e. for a period of three years, though occasional visits continued even after this period to augment the collected data with fresh information.

Participant Observation:

The study of leadership, involving the process of interaction at various levels, is a subtle, complex and dynamic phenomenon. It can be observed through social processes such as conflict, competition and co-operation among leaders. These could be understood mainly by participating in the numerous community activities and by observing the main 'actors' on different occasions and by probing their motives behind their actions. Because of these characteristics of leadership behaviour, the method of participant observation was used as the main tool of research for this study. Accordingly, meetings of the panchayat and informal gatherings of the
elites were attended to with a view to observing their behaviour and actions on such occasions. Most of the data in respect of decision making, election process, conduct of the meetings and group relations was collected this way.

**Interview Method:**

To supplement the observational data, a great deal of reliance was placed on the interview technique and accordingly, a number of leaders were interviewed. Since the subject under study was rather of a sensitive nature in view of the villager's dislike to reveal the inside story of their leaders and factional fighting, special care was taken to establish proper rapport with the informants before treading on the sensitive areas. It was also thought that the method of informal unstructured interview would be more appropriate than any structural method of research. The interviewee were encouraged to speak out frankly and openly on pertinent points on his own initiative without any direct interference from the interviewer. Adoption of this strategy, though time consuming, proved to be highly successful in eliciting valuable information.

**Documents**

In addition to the data collected by the above mentioned methods, use of documents was also made in collecting figures pertaining to population, income, age, budgets, taxes,
revenue, dates and agenda of meetings etc. Wherever the data was not available from the records, information was gathered by direct consultation with the officials and local knowledgeable persons.

Since the respondents were assured that any information and opinion expressed by them would be treated as absolutely confidential, pseudo names such as FP, CB, SB, NS, IZ, ZM, DB, etc. have been used to conceal the identities.