CHAPTER II

THE HISTORICAL GROWTH
OF PANCHAYATS

(a) Panchayats in Ancient India
(b) Panchayats during British Rule
(c) Panchayats after Independence
India lives and grows through her villages. Her socio-economic growth, democratic political set-up and goal of establishing a socialist society will have to be directly related to the Indian ruler life. It is for this reason that in recent years, more and more emphasis is being given to the programme of organising a full-fledged village panchayati raj in India. It has been widely accepted that for achieving the lofty goals of democratic decentralisation and also of creating development consciousness, the establishment of Panchayati Raj has become a 'must'. In this context, it will be worthwhile to study the historical growth of the panchayats in India.

(a) Panchayats in Ancient India

India is a land of villages and more than 80% of its population still lives in villages. Through the centuries, these village communities have led a life of their own. From the earliest times the village communities developed a rich corporate life and enjoyed practically unlimited autonomy. They formed a sort of little republics providing for practically all their needs. Each village had its own council or Sabha which formed the most important organ of the village. It was constituted of the village elders who used to assemble to discuss and deliberate over questions of public importance. They performed for the village nearly all the functions which are performed by a modern government i.e. from maintaining
peace and order to the welfare of the villages.

As stated by Majumdar and Altekar\(^1\) regarding their functions in Vakataka-Gupta Age (200 to 500 A.D.) -

"the village council discharged almost all the functions of Government. It looked after village defence, settled village disputes, organized works of utility, acted as a trustee for minors and collected the revenue and paid them into the central treasury."

An interesting description of ancient village panchayats is given by Sir Charles Metcalfe. Speaking about the efficiency and vitality of these village communities, he said:

"They are little republics, having nearly everything they can want within themselves and almost independent of any foreign relations. This union of village communities, each forming a separate little state in itself, has, I conceive, contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of India, and to the enjoyment of a greater portion of freedom and independence. Empires rose and fell, conquerors came and went, but the real life in the villages persisted undisturbed. Whoever was the King or Emperor, village India continued to live its own life and govern its own affairs."\(^2\)

2. Dr. Ambedkar, it will be interesting to note, holds quite opposite views: He thus spoke, "I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India. I am, therefore surprised that those who condemn

(continued on page...25)
These village councils were quite flourishing up to the Hindu period except for short pitfalls during the Buddhist period. During the Mohammadan period they were not well attended to by the rulers. Therefore, some of these Village Councils did not remain as powerful as before while in some places they were nearly defunct.

Every nation has certain traditions of social and political institutions, ideas and procedures. The future growth to a large extent, depends on the character of such traditions. Viewed in this context, it is important to see if a particular system has any roots in the ancient tradition of the people. It has been claimed that Panchayati Raj is a natural growth from the ancient traditions and that it can be traced back to Vedic India. Dr. Radha Kumud Mookerji \(^3\) writes:

"While in most of the civilised countries of today, the state as fully developed and completely constituted body consciously creates autonomous centres within itself by devolution and delimitation of its own functions, in ancient India the communal institutions, guilds and local bodies had an independent origin and growth out of fluid and inchoate conditions of tribal life and organisation."

It is thus clear that there was a developed system of democratic institution and rural government in ancient

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provincialism and communism should come forward as champions of the village. What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrowmindedness and communalism?" [From the General Debate on the Second Reading of the Draft Constitution, AYARD (1962), p. 25]

times. It is possible that the Local Government in present day India may not have inherited much from indigenous local institutions. There are important differences of structures and procedures between the old and the new institutions, yet the ancient foundations of rural government were there to enable the construction of the present superstructure.

Jataka Stories:

The organisation of the village as a political unit is also referred to in the Jataka Stories from which also we learn that the village headman was the executive of the village and was responsible for carrying out certain duties. Several references to this village headman in the Jatakas go to show that he was a normal feature of village administration of the Aryan Village Community in the sixth century B.C. This village headman was also called Gramanee. Each village had its own council or sabha which decided questions of village administration. There were regular council-houses where villagers used to assemble and talk on usual matters of village interests.

Professor Altekar has shown how this council did not consist of the Brahmans alone. He says that in western village communities, which consisted mostly of non-Brahmins and which were proverbially unorthodox, the village council must have been a cosmopolitan body.

Vedic India was predominantly rural and agricultural and there are many Vedic hymns praying for the prosperity of villages but rarely any for towns and cities. Professor Dikshitar\(^7\) describes that the provincial administration under the Mauryas was fairly well developed and that district and village were accepted as units of government. The autonomy of the village was more or less full.

Professor Altekar\(^8\) has also examined some inscriptions in further details which refer to the council of village elders. He has made references to the Baroda plates of Govind II, Cambay plates of Govind IV and Kavi (Broach district) plates of Krishna III, which testify to the existence of the council in Gujarat. Similar councils also existed in Maharashtra and Karnataka.

It is thus clear that in northern as well as in Southern India, the little village republic flourished. They were the real autonomous democratic bodies which looked after the administration of the villages or groups of villages.

**Village affairs after 1000 A.D.**

"The eleventh and subsequent centuries witnessed the most dangerous predatory Islamic incursions into India," observed N.B. Pargee,\(^9\) "when chaos,

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plunder, iconoclasm, disorder and misrule reigned supreme, followed by the permanent Moghal occupation of the country in the sixteenth century by the Moghal emperors."

When muslim rulers consolidated their hold, they introduced the Jagir system and began to collect revenue through Malguzars or contractors. This system weakened the solidarity of panchayat government and the village community. Not only this, some of the functions of the panchayat and the village community passed into the hands of the local landowners and officers of the state. There cropped up a superior claim of these intermediaries and this system brought in its wake a rule of oppression which had demoralising effect on the growth and vitality of the self-governing institutions. In course of time the panchayats in their old form practically disappeared by the middle of the nineteenth century. 10

Lord Hailey, in Foreword to Hugh Tinker's book, writes:

"Though, there may have been between the sixth and ninth centuries A.D. some period when the Panchayat was a live institution with a definite function, this applied only to certain areas, and throughout the rest of India the Panchayat was little more than a community of village elders whose function varied widely in proportion with the status of the village concerned. The Panchayat had, in any case ceased to be operative in most parts of India for a considerable period before the advent of the British rule." 11

It is interesting to note that the attention of Karl Marx was also drawn to these Indian village Republics. He writes in his Das Capital: "

"The small and extremely ancient Indian communities which still exist to some extent, are based upon the communal ownership of the land, upon a direct linking-up of manual agriculture and handicraft and upon a fixed form of division of labour which is adopted as a cut and dried scheme whenever new communities are founded. They constitute self-sufficient productive entities, the area of land upon which production is carried on ranging from a hundred to seven thousand acres. The greater part of the product is produced for the satisfaction of the immediate needs of the community, not as commodities; and production itself is, therefore, independent of the division of labour which the exchange of commodities has brought about in Indian society as well."

In short, the Indian villages had evolved a well-balanced social, economic and political system by eschewing the two extremes of laissez — faire and totalitarian control. They had developed an enviable form of co-operative agriculture and industry in which there was hardly any scope of exploitation of the poor by the rich. As Gandhiji has put it: "The production was almost simultaneous with consumption and distribution." The whole social structure was founded on the basis of mutual protection, regard for law and fellow-feeling. The Village Panchayats administered justice and

peace, maintained law and order, provided facilities for education, collected and distributed charity to the needy and the poor. It derived its finances from the donations by the rich and wealthy inhabitants of the village. In this way it was self-sufficient and self-supporting having little to do with the outside world. Unfortunately the advent of the British rule in India led to their decay and disappearance.  

(b) **Panchayats during British Rule:**

There is a lot of difference of opinion with regard to the position of the village institutions during the Mohammadan period. It seems that the Muslim rulers did not interfere in the affairs of the villagers so long as they did not trouble the central government. The position of the village communities in such circumstance deteriorated. The village headman who transacted village business, became more important. However, the village communities survived all the changes in the upper structure of the government. In this sense they also preserved the individuality and the integrity of the Hindu Society.

However, the impact of continuous foreign invasions over India was disastrous for the survival and autonomy of the Panchayats. Gradually, towns developed as the centres

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13. As R.C. Dutta remarks: "One of the saddest results of British rule in India is the effacement of that system of village self-government which was developed earliest and preserved longest in India amongst all the countries of the earth." in *The Economic History of India under early British Rule*, p. 79.
of trade and politics and the villagers were cut off from the main stream of the social and political power. This process of decline and isolation was slow and spread over several centuries. In certain cases, the geographical isolation should have added to the power of village panchayat but the disintegration was general. As mentioned above, the Mughals had interfered very little with the ancient customs of village government, but they were interested in it only for revenue and order. Gradually, it came under the spell of feudal lords and became an oligarchic body, based on hereditary title. The ancient tradition was too weak to resist and sustain the impact of feudal elements. When the British came to India, Panchayats in most places were already dead as units of effective administration.

**Lord Mayo's Resolution (1870):**

It was not until late in the 19th century that the development of local government in rural areas on some systematic lines took place in India. Lord Mayo's Government in 1870 recognised the principle of training the people in self-government. The resolution of 1870 introduced the scheme of financial decentralisation. But this development was confined to urban areas only. However, this seemed to be the first attempt to develop local self-government in rural areas. By the same resolution, the Government of India declared:

"But beyond all this, there is greater and wider

object in view. Local interest, supervision, and care are necessary to success in the management of funds devoted to education, sanitation, medical relief and local public works. The operation of this resolution in its full meaning and integrity will afford opportunities for the development of self-government."

With this object in view, the Government of India transferred to provincial governments certain departments of administration, of which education, medical services and roads deserve special mention. The provincial governments were given grants smaller than the actual expenditure on these departments and were required to meet the balance by local taxation. As a result of Mayo's resolution, an Act (1871) was passed in respect of Local Self-Government for rural areas in the province of Bombay. 15

The Ripon Resolution (1882):

The Ripon Resolution of 1882 which recognised that "there was rapidly growing up all over the country a class of intelligent and public spirited men and it would be not only a bad policy but sheer waste of power not to utilise their services," 16 made a further advance. The resolution gave a definite lead to the advancement of local self-government and a concrete and practical form to the hopes

and aspirations of the Indian people. It may, however, be noted that even this resolution did not contemplate the revival of the village institution. The resolution in clear terms, called upon the provincial governments to extend throughout the country a network local bodies charged with definite duties and entrusted with definite funds, and emphasised on the necessity of having the area of the local unit so limited as to ensure both local knowledge and local interest on the part of each of the members. The "Unit" recommended was however a "taluka" and not a village. 17 Nevertheless whatever little progress was made in the sphere of local self-government was set at naught by the reactionary polity of Viceroy Lord Curzen. He believed that the Indians were not fit to be entrusted with any power and responsibility to govern themselves.

As a result of the recommendations of the above resolution a "two-tier" system came into existence, with District Boards working at the top and Taluka Boards at the lower level. In Bombay, the first 'Bombay Local Boards Act of 1884', which provided that there should be one local board for each revenue district and also one for each taluka, or for such area as may be decided by the government.

**The Bombay Local Boards Act of 1884:**

Under the above act, the 'Local Board' was created

17. Ibid, p.18.
as a corporate body consisting of both elected and nominated members. For the election of members to the Taluka Local Boards the villages in the taluka were divided into groups and each group had to elect one member. The principal qualification for membership was the holding of land. There was, however, no direct election to the District Local Boards. These members were elected by the Taluka Local Board from among themselves, according to the strength fixed by Government.18

These rural local boards were responsible for an imposing number of public services — for education, public health, and veterinary work. But the official control from within, made the boards little more than petty departments of the district administration, and very often the board's share in the above services was restricted to paying the bills. Similarly, the district local boards had almost no control over the raising of their funds; the local fund cess levied and disbursed by Government. Looking to the functions for which they were supposed to be responsible, their resources were slender. The funds were hardly enough to meet even their minimum needs.19

The Royal Commission on Decentralisation:

The resolutions on Local Self-Government adopted by

18. Section 7 of the Bombay Local Boards Act, 1884.

the Government of India had totally ignored the villages. However, in 1907-8 the entire subject of the Local Self-Government was reconsidered by a Royal Commission on Decentralisation appointed by Edward VII. The Commission recognised that "throughout the greater part of India the village constitutes the primary territorial unit of Government organisation and from the villages are build up larger administrative entities." The Report said,

"These villages formerly processed a large degree of autonomy but this autonomy has now disappeared owing to the establishment of local, civil, and criminal courts, the present revenue and police organisation, the increase of communication, the growth of individualism, the progress of education, and the operation of the individual raiyatwari system which is extending even in the north of India. Nevertheless the village remains the first unit of administration, the principal village functionaries — the headman, the accountant, and the village watchman -- are largely utilised and paid by the Government and there is still a certain amount of common village feeling and interest." 20

The Commission recommended that it would be desirable to constitute Village Panchayats for the administration of local village affairs. It further added that the foundation of any stable edifice which shall associate the people with the administration must be the village, in which people are

known to one another and have interests which converge on definite and well-recognized objects like water supply and sanitation. It visualised certain difficulties in the success of such an effort, like caste and religious disputes and factions so common in village life, or, in large estates the influence of the landlord which may prevent free action by the tenantry. It agreed that these difficulties are not insurmountable, and advised a gradual and cautious approach beginning from those villages in which circumstances are most favourable by reason of homogeneity.

The recommendations were, however, implemented in a half-hearted manner. The Government of India in their resolution dated 22nd March 1910 endorsed some of the recommendations. In a further resolution of 1915 it promised to implement the recommendations and appointed a committee, headed by Mr. E.A. Phelphs I.C.S. to study the conditions and the various aspects of introducing village panchayats. But it was becoming certain and clear that the programme which was regarded as a bold step towards local self-government in 1882 was hopelessly out-dated in 1915.

**August 1917 Declaration:**

In view of the political situation prevailing at that time, the British Government had to adopt a conciliatory policy and to make historic declaration in August, 1917 that
"the policy of His Majesty's Government, with which the Government of India are in complete accord, is that of increasing the association of Indians in every branch of the administration and the gradual development of the self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realisation of responsible government in India, as an integral part of the British Empire."  

The Government of India Resolution of 1918:

Another resolution of the Government of India issued in May, 1918 emphasised the need for legislation to accelerate the rate of progress and to stimulate the sense of responsibility of the village population. It pointed out that even in 1918 the 'right to vote' was enjoyed hardly by 6 per cent of the rural population and emphasised the necessity of making the local bodies as representative as possible, by widening the franchise and having elective majority. As regards the area the resolution suggested that 'the area under a panchayat should normally be a village.'  

A direction was also given to the Provincial Governments to draft legislations which should be as simple as possible with the fullest scope for details. The British Government passed the Government of India Act of 1919 by which Local Self-Government was made one of the provisional, transferred, subjects under the charge of a popular minister. This had

21. Announcement made by the Secretary of State for India in the House of Commons on 20th August, 1917.  
a desired effect and many of the provinces passed the Acts for the establishment of village panchayats. In the province of Bombay the first village panchayat Act was passed in 1920.

The Bombay Village Panchayat Act, 1920:

Under the Act of 1920, the panchayat was to consist entirely of elected members except the village patel who was to be an *ex-officio* member of the panchayat. All the adult male residents had a right to vote at the panchayat election. The total strength of a panchayat was to be fixed by the district local board, subject to the minimum of five as prescribed under the Act. The Sarpanch was to be elected by the members of the panchayat from among themselves. The appointment of a secretary was compulsory but he was to be appointed by the panchayat subject to the approval of district local board.

As regards finances, levy of a house-tax, in accordance with the rules framed by Government was compulsory. Panchayats were also allowed to levy octroi or any other suitable tax on houses or lands with the approval of the district local board. There was statutory provision for any financial assistance from the Government.

The panchayats were generally placed under the district local board which were given powers of supervision and control, powers to prescribe the number of members, to remove the secretary, a member of even the Sarpanch of a Panchayat, to
frame rules regarding levy of taxes by the panchayats, to prevent extravagance in expenditure of any order or resolution passed by the panchayat, to provide for the execution of any work in the case of emergency or for performance of a duty in case of default by a panchayat. The Collector was practically excluded from any share in the affairs of the panchayats. 23

The panchayat was almost entirely an administrative body, with considerable responsibilities which included almost all the compulsory duties assigned to the panchayats today. The panchayats had no discretion to undertake any other function leading to social or economic well-being of the villagers. In case they desired to undertake any other measure, they had to seek previous approval of the district local board. They had only minor judicial powers solely in respect of offences against their own by-laws. 24

The Act of 1920 was no doubt based on some of the most advanced democratic principles but it did not prove very successful. The main reasons for its failure can be summarised as below:-

(i) Lack of funds
(ii) Compulsory levy of house-tax
(iii) Absence of powers regarding economic development of village

24. Ibid., p. 54.
In the Government resolution reviewing the reports on the administration of the local boards for the year 1927-28, it has been stated; "The village panchayats on the whole did not show any marked improvements. Factions, illiteracy, want of funds, antipathy to direct taxes and the apathy of Local Boards are chiefly responsible for the low standard attained by these institutions."  

These remarks clearly indicate that the working of the panchayats under the Act of 1920 was not satisfactory even after 6 to 10 years after the introduction of the Act. A committee known as the Hatch Committee was appointed in June, 1925, to consider generally the then existing position of village panchayat system and to make concrete proposals for the improvement in its working and effectiveness. Though the report was submitted by the Committee in 1926, there was no action taken to implement the suggestions for a long time. The progress of the growth of panchayats was very unsatisfactory. When the total number of panchayats constituted up to 31st March 1924 was 263 the said figure did not rise above 300 even after 10 years. The progress in Gujarat was not satisfactory. There were only 22 panchayats working at that time.

25. Ibid., p. 35.
26. Ibid., p. 36.
27. Ibid., p. 36.
Panchayats in Princely States:

It may be remembered here that there were about 600 princely States in India. These States, most of which were reactionary and autocratic, had a different story to tell. With a few exceptions like Baroda and Mysore, the princes never cared for the welfare of the people and were reluctant to part with any power to their subjects. The Baroda State had passed Village Panchayat Act in 1926, called "Baroda Village Act, 1926."

The Bombay Village Sanitation Amendment Act, 1931:

As it was felt that the establishment of a village panchayat under the Village Panchayat Act of 1920 may not be practicable in the case of smaller villages which would rather prefer to have Sanitary Committees or Sanitary Boards, the Government thought it expedient to amend the Bombay Village Sanitation Act of 1889 so as to effect far-reaching changes in the constitution, powers, responsibilities and functions of the committee and Boards. By the amendments effected in the Act in 1931, the Sanitary Committee and Sanitary Boards were made corporate bodies and were given power to acquire, hold and transfer property and to execute contracts. However, the changes effected did not improve the financial position of these bodies and their functions were also not enlarged and they could not take up any item that
would lead to economic development of people. These institutions, therefore, failed to rouse any enthusiasm for self-government amongst the villagers.

The Bombay Village Panchayat Act of 1933:

In view of the above situation, the Government decided to amend the Village Panchayat Act. The new Act—the Bombay Village Panchayat Act of 1933—incorporated some provisions on the lines of recommendations made by the Hatch Committee. The new Act enlarged the functions of the Panchayats so as to enable them to undertake any work of measure likely to promote the social or economic well-being of the people. The Act no doubt empowered panchayats to levy some more taxes but it did not solve the problem of panchayat finance completely. As regards the grant of powers to try petty civil and criminal cases also the position was not so encouraging. It will be interesting to note the observation made by High Tinker. He writes, "In 1937 there were four village benches who between them disposed of seventyone cases—mostly breaches of their own by-laws."28

During this period, however, a movement called "Village Uplift" was taken up in almost every Indian province. The movement aimed at the rejuvenation of village life in all its aspects. In the province of Bombay also the movement had its effects on the spread of village panchayats. When the

28. Foundation of Local Self-Government in India, Pakistan and Burma, p. 207.
villagers saw that they could easily form a 'village uplift association,' which did not necessitate local taxation and which was sure to receive official patronage with financial assistance for village development they were least willing to have the statutory panchayats established in their villages. The effect of all this was that even after a lapse of five years from the enforcement of the new Act the total number of panchayats functioning in the province did not exceed 650.

The Bombay Village Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1939:

The Government of India Act of 1935 introduced provincial autonomy. The subject of Local Government was included in the Provincial List. When popular ministries assumed office in 1937, they undertook legislation to make local bodies truly representative. A bill incorporating some important amendments was introduced in the Legislative Assembly in 1938. When it became an Act and came into force in 1939, the Congress ministry had resigned office and during the next six years that followed there was Governor's rule and no major changes were effected in the Act. During this period as a result of the provision regarding compulsory establishment of panchayats, the number of panchayats which stood at 655 in 1939-40, increased to 1339 in 1941-42. But the figure practically remained steady for the next five years and the number of panchayats on 31-3-1947 was only 1355. 29

29. S.V. Samant, op. cit., p. 43.
The Bombay Village Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1947:

The Congress ministry which again assumed power in 1946 was not slow in taking up the matter and they immediately introduced a bill for effecting important amendments in the Act. The new Act made the following changes:-

(i) It specifically enumerated the discretionary functions.

(ii) It made obligatory on every panchayat to levy at least one more tax out of the optional list.

(iii) The properties vested in panchayats by the Provincial Government such as open sites, waste lands, vacant lands, etc., can be converted into regular source of income for the panchayats.

(iv) The Government made a statutory provision of a grant to every panchayat equivalent in amount to fifteen percent of the ordinary land revenue, realised within the limits of the village.

(v) The Secretary was again made a servant of the panchayat.

The Government, in view of the above enactment, issued orders to the Collectors for the establishment of panchayats in every village with a population of 1000 and over. A Village where the population is less than 1000, permission be given only if at least 50 adult residents of the village
By the end of 1959-50 the total number of panchayates functioning in the various districts was only 1461. It was realised that the District Local Boards, with the machinery at their disposal, were unable to take effective steps for accelerating the work of establishing panchayats, and the state of affairs necessitated some immediate action on the part of the State Government.

Despite the various steps taken by the State Government, it was noticed that the progress in the field of establishment of the panchayats was not encouraging. It was at this stage that the State Government created posts of Special Officers for Village Panchayats with the necessary subordinate staff. The appointment of these officers has no doubt helped to accelerate the establishment of panchayats as can be seen from the fact that during the first four years since their appointment the number of panchayats has increased by more than 2500.31

(c) Panchayats After Independence:

When the Constitution was drafted there was no mention about the organisation of village panchayats. Rajni Kothari makes a very interesting comment on this aspect.32 As a result there was countrywide criticism of this viewpoint, and ultimately a new clause was inserted in the

31. S.V. Samant, op.cit., p.46.
Directive Principles of State Policy. It reads:

"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."

Not only this article but also other articles as well affected the powers of the Panchayats. The Directive Principles also point out,

"the citizens of India should have the right to an adequate means of livelihood and the State should shape off its policy towards securing that the operation of the economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth and means of production to the common detriment."

These provisions affect especially the rural areas. The Panchayat, therefore, are the bodies who have to look after the development work. They have to serve not only as units of local self-government but also as natural institutions for securing social justice and fostering corporate life resulting in full employment.

It will not be out of place here to know the views of Mahatma Gandhi on village panchayats, since he was the real architect of the Indian nation for more than 25 years before Independence. He says:

"My idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its vital wants and yet interdependent for many others"
in which dependence is a necessity. Thus every village's first concern will be to grow its own food-crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have recreation and play-grounds for its adults and children. Then, if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops. It will have its own water works ensuring clean supply. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on a co-operative basis. The government of the Village will be conducted by the Panchayat of five persons elected annually by the adult villagers, male and female both possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. This Panchayat will be legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office.\textsuperscript{33}

Elaborating the concept of Mahatmaji, Shri J.P. Narayan writes:

"The polity of Panchayati Raj, or communitarian polity, must not copy the polity of the mass society. It is for this reason that Gandhiji rejected parliamentary democracy, which he termed the tyranny of the majority, laid stress on gr\textit{am} raj as the basis of Swaraj, and also why he commended the process of decision making through a process of consensus-making and emphasised the role of a detached moral force based on popular sanction and derived from selfless service as a uniting and corrective force in the democracy of

his conception." 34

Planned development and Panchayats:

With the beginning of planned development, organisation of panchayats required a further stimulus. The existence of an agency at the village level which could represent the entire community, could assume responsibility and provide the necessary leadership for implementing development programmes was considered essential for progress in rural development. It was also felt that these institutions taking an active part in both planning and execution of plans should form the democratic base for planning for the country as a whole. It will be interesting to note what place has been accorded to Panchayats in various Five Year Plans.

It is stated in the First Five Year Plan:

"We believe that the Panchayats will be able to perform its civic functions satisfactorily only if they are associated with an active process of development in which the Village Panchayat is itself given an effective part. Unless a village agency can assume responsibility and initiative for developing the resources of the village, it will be difficult to make a marked impression on rural life, for only a village organisation representing the community as a whole can provide the necessary leadership." 35

The Second Five Year Plan observed:

35. First Five Year Plan, p. 36.
"The development of village Panchayats on the right lines has significance for several reasons, under the impact of new developments, including the growth of population, land reform, urbanisation, spread of education, increase in production and improvements in communications. Village society is in a state of rapid transition. In emphasising the interest of the community as a whole and in particular the needs of those sections which are at present handicapped in various ways, Village Panchayats along with cooperatives, can play a considerable part in bringing about a more just and integrated social structure in rural areas and developing a new pattern of rural leadership." 36

The Planning Commission, therefore, provided that by 1960-61 the number of Village Panchayats will increase to 2,24,564 which was 1,17,593 in 1955-56.

The Third Five Year Plan 37 suggested the following ten points tests as measurement of success for Panchayati Raj:

(1) agricultural production as the highest national priority during the plan;
(2) development of rural industry;
(3) development of cooperative institutions;
(4) full utilisation of the local manpower and other resources;

37. Third Five Year Plan, p. 338.
(5) development of facilities for education and adult literacy;

(6) optimum utilisation of resources available to Panchayati Raj institutions such as finance, personnel, technical assistance and other facilities from higher levels, and efforts by them to raise their own resources;

(7) assistance to the economically weaker sections of the village community;

(8) progressive dispersal of authority and initiative with special emphasis on the role of voluntary organisations;

(9) understanding and harmony between elected representatives and public servants to be achieved through comprehensive training in education and a clear demarcation of duties and responsibilities, and progressive increase in competence both among officials and non-officials;

(10) cohesion and mutual self-help within the community.

**New Era of Panchayati Raj:**

Despite the fact that the general picture is one of progress in all states and signs of healthy growth are noticeable here and there, there are yet substantial elements of instability and weakness present in a majority of Panchayats.
The available information indicates that possibly not more than 10% of the total number of Panchayats are functioning effectively, roughly one half are average and the remaining about 40% are working unsatisfactorily. According to the Anand Taluka Panchayat Office, Mogri stands little higher than the average panchayat in the Taluka.

Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957):

Attempt to seek the involvement of the people in the development programmes was met with disappointment. Five years' experience with the community development programme revealed that there was something seriously wrong with the system and fundamental changes were, perhaps, essential. Appointment of a committee under the able chairmanship of B.R. Mehta was the result and its recommendation for Democratic Decentralisation ushered in a new era of rural government.

The Mehta Committee examined the question as to whether existing local bodies could take over and perform these plan projects and if not what new bodies should be created and with what jurisdiction, powers and resources. It came to the conclusion that the existing local bodies in the rural areas were not expected to play an effective role in implementing

Hugh Tinker has also given valuable information in his study: "Authority and Community in Village India, "Pacific Affairs, Vol. XXXII, No.4, Decemberm 1959."
development plans nor were they capable of inspiring confidence or enthusiasm among the masses in their areas to carry them effectively. 39

The Mehta Committee, therefore, observed,

"with this background we have to consider whether the time has not arrived to replace all these bodies by a single representative and vigorous democratic institution to take charge of all aspects of development work in the rural areas. Such a body if created had to be statutory, elective, comprehensive in its duties and functions, equipped with necessary executive machinery and in possession of adequate resources. It must not be cramped by too much control by the Government or Government agencies. It must have the power to make mistakes and to learn by making mistakes, but it must also receive guidance which would help it to avoid making mistakes. In the ultimate analysis, it must be an instrument of expression of the local people's will in regard to the local development." 40

The Committee, therefore, felt that such a body could function effectively only if it was the sole authority for all those development programmes which were of exclusive interest for the area. The Committee also pointed out that democracy had to function through certain executive machinery


40. Ibid., p.6.
but the democratic government operating over large areas through its executive machinery could not adequately appreciate local needs and circumstances. It was, therefore, necessary that there should be devolution of power and decentralisation of machinery and that such power be exercised and such machinery controlled and directed by popular representatives of the local area.41

The Committee, therefore, proposed the establishment of a local body at the block level called 'Panchayat Samiti'. This Samiti was to be assigned specific functions and specific items of revenue. With the devolution of these functions on the Panchayat Samiti, the Mehta Committee felt that the District Boards would become superfluous and suggested instead, the provision of a co-ordinating body at the district level called the 'Zilla Parishad'.

The Committee further recommended that the Village Panchayat should be constituted by direct election on the basis of adult franchise with a special provision to co-opt two women members and one each from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, wherever they can be represented. It has also indicated the specific items of revenue which should be available to the Village Panchayat. The budget of the Village Panchayat is to be made subject to scrutiny and approval of the Panchayat Samiti. The Village Panchayats

41. Ibid., p.7.
have to perform certain obligatory duties and to act as agents of the Panchayat Samiti for executing schemes entrusted to them. 42

The Committee's Report was examined by the Central Government and then discussed at length in the meeting of the National Development Council. The recommendations were generally endorsed by the Council and Central Government requested all the State Governments to consider their implementation. All the State Governments have accepted the policy. There was no insistence on the States to follow particular or prescribed pattern. However, almost all the States have tried in their own way to incorporate in their respective legislations the essential principles of Panchayati Raj.

Various State Governments have evolved pattern of Panchayati Raj suitable to local conditions in the light of these principles. Each State stands to benefit from the experience of the other and can add, alter or change its own system in order to improve its working. The entire approach is pragmatic as Panchayati Raj is a growing concept and there is no finality or rigidity about the pattern or system evolved at any time. 45

Present Position:

It was Rajasthan which gave a lead to the country by

42. Ibid., p.30.
launching the scheme of Panchayati Raj on 2nd October, 1959. In the following month Andhra applied this scheme. Now Panchayati Raj is under implementation in Andhra, Assam, Bihar, Bengal, Gujarat, Madras (Tamil Nadu), Maharashtra, Mysore, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, and U.P. The remaining States are in the process of enacting legislation. On March 31, 1961, the panchayats numbered 1,95,327 and now they are 2,05,452.

The size of the Village Panchayat in terms of average number of villages and rural population per panchayat varies from one State to another, the number of villages in a panchayat being as high as 22 in Himachal Pradesh and 20 in Orissa. The average in Kerala, Gujarat, Madras, Punjab and U.P., is between 1 and 2 villages.

In terms of population Kerala tops the list, with nearly 15,493 people per panchayat, followed by Orissa with 6,746. In Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Assam and W. Bengal, it ranges between, 3,000 and 4,000; in Mysore, Rajasthan and M.P., between 2,000 and 3,000; in Andhra and Madras between 15,000 to 7,000; and in Gujarat, Maharashtra, M.P., Punjab and Delhi between 1,000 and 1,500. In U.P. it is less than 1,000. 44

There are variations also amongst panchayats in each

State. In Madras and Mysore, panchayats with a population of 5,000 and an annual income of over Rs. 10,000 have been classified as town-panchayats, and in Andhra, as notified panchayats. In Gujarat Village Panchayats with a population of over 10,000 are known as Nagar Panchayats.

Gujarat Pattern:

The Gujarat State came into existence on 1st May, 1960. Before this date, it was a part of the Bombay State. Panchayats at Village, Taluka and District levels have been established under the Gujarat Panchayat Act, 1961, on the basis of Balvantrai Mehta Committee Report. Gram Panchayats (or Nagar Panchayats), Taluka Panchayats and Zilla Panchayats have accordingly formed the three layers of the panchayati system.

In the villages, all the adult citizens with a population not exceeding 10,000 form a Gram Sabha which elects the members of the Gram Panchayat. Membership depends upon the size of the population of the village and varies from 9 to 15. Two seats are reserved for women, and provision is also made for the seats reserved for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The allocation of seats for the scheduled groups is made on the basis of their population.

The Taluka Panchayat is an indirectly elected body, consisting of the Sarpanchs of Gram Panchayats and Chairmen of the Nagar Panchayats. The Chairmen of the Co-operative
societies in the Taluka elect from amongst themselves about 1/10 of the total number of Sarpanchas. Local M.L.A.s., President of Municipalities, local members of Zilla Panchayat and the Mamlatdar are associate members with no voting power. Two women representing the welfare activities of women and children, two representatives each of scheduled castes and tribes, and the social workers having experience in rural development are co-opted to the body. The Taluka Development Officer works as Secretary.

The District Panchayat is a partly indirectly and partly directly elected body. The Presidents of the Taluka Panchayats become ex officio members of the District Panchayat. Of the elected members, one member is elected by each Taluka Panchayat from amongst themselves. Two seats for women and one or more seats for scheduled castes and tribes, depending upon their population, are reserved and filled in by direct election. Two persons having practical experience in respect of matters pertaining to education are co-opted. Local M.Ps. and M.L.As., Presidents of Municipalities and the District Collector are made associate members. The District Development Officer, (D.D.O.) assigned from I.A.S. cadre is ex officio Secretary of the District Panchayat and entitled to attend its meetings.

There were 11,208 village panchayats covering some 17,760 villages (i.e. 99%) with 185 Taluka Panchayats and 17 District Panchayats throughout the State, as a result of
the introduction of Panchayati Raj in 1964. In terms of average population per panchayat it becomes to one panchayat for 1070 persons.  

One of the distinguishing features of the system of Panchayati Raj envisaged in Gujarat, is that the district local body is not merely an advisory and co-ordinating body with limited executive powers, as is the case in many other States, but is a body with wide executive and administrative powers. The most revolutionary and far-reaching step of the Government was taken when it declared that the land revenue collected by the Gram Panchayats will be handed over back to them as annual grant. This may help Gram Panchayats to be financially viable units.

45. As per the latest information available, there are, now, 11,755 panchayats covering some 18,247 villages (i.e. 100%) with an average population of 1259 per panchayat. Statistical Abstracts; Gujarat Government, p.47.

46. Gujarat Panchayats Act, 1961, Section 145.