Chapter-2

History of People’s Empowerment Through Panchayat Raj in Modern India
People’s Empowerment in Pre-Independence Period

History of People empowerment can be traced back to the period immediately after mutiny of 1857 when Sir Syed Ahmad Khan wrote a book causes of Indian revolt written in 1858. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan said The Shock of the Indian mutiny had forced the Government of India and the British Government to consider ways and means of establishing closer contacts with the Indian Public opinion so that a similar tragedy may not occur again. He was of the opinion that the mutiny of 1857 was the result of the gulf between the people of India and the British government, because the British government never knew the needs and the wishes of the Indian people, and the people had no means of protesting what they might feel is not right for them, and people thought that all the law’s and regulations which they passed was nothing but a source of exploitation which they never liked. So Sir Syed wanted to fill the gap between the people and the British government by suggesting the nomination of non-official Indians on the council of governor-general, by doing this the bond between the two will be strengthen which would avert evils such as mutiny in the future (Ghram 1885:39). Sir Syed Ahmad writes, “These evil’s were the resulted in India from the non-admission of the natives into the legislative councils of India. government could never know that
the in advisability of laws and regulations which it pass. It could never
hear as it ought to have heard the voice of the people on such a subject.
The people had no means of protesting against what they might fell to be
a foolish measure, or of giving public expression to their own wishes. But
the greatest mischief, lay in this, that the people mis-understood the views
and the intension of the government. They mis-apprehended every action,
and what ever law was passed was mis-construed by men, who had no
share in the framing of it, and hence no means of judging of it’s spirit....
when the Governor’s and the govern occupies relatively such a position
as this, what hope is there of loyalty or of good will? Granteed that the
intension of the government where excellent, there was no men at hand to
correct the error’s which they had no one of their own number among
their member’s of the legislative council. Had their been, these evil’s that
have happened to us would have been averted. The more one think’s the
matter over, the more one is convenes that here we have the one great
cause which was the origin of all smaller causes of dis-satisfaction”.
(quoted in Ghram 1885:37-38).

The shock of Indian mutiny had forced the British Government to
consider ways and means of establishing closer contacts with the Indian
Public opinion so that a similar tragedy may not occur again. Sir Syed
suggested the nomination of the non-official Indians on the council of the
Governor-General this would lead to participation in decision-making and so an beginning was made in sharing power with the people. The then Governor-General accepted this suggestion on the condition that the non-officials Indians were to be concerned only with legislative matter's and the Government of India Act of 1861 was passed. These council's were subsequently to be established at the local level to form the bases of local-self-government or Panchayat Raj in India (Mahajan; 1986:38).

The resolution of 18th May, 1882, of lord Ripon a British viceroy led to the people undertaking the management of their own affair's and so to their empowerment. He was rightly credited with the enunciation of a new philosophy of developing the capacity of the people's for self help which could be done only by people's education through participation in local government. It was also necessary to share power with the growing number of educated people who would them be able to share the burden of the work and to improve efficiency. The resolution embodying this doctrine has been hailed as the Magna-charter and Lord Ripon, it's author, as father of local self government in India (Maheshwari 1971: 17; Ventatrangaiya & Pattabhiram 1969:109). A document of such historic importance is worth quoting:
In advocating the extension of local self government, and the adoption of this principle in the management of many branches of local affairs. The Governor-General in council does not suppose that the work will be, in the first instance, better done than if it remained in the sole hand of the government district officers. It is not primarily with a view to improvement in administration than this measure is put forward and supported. It is chiefly desirable as an instrument of political and popular education. His excellency in-council has himself no doubt that in course of time, as local knowledge and local interest are brought to bear freely upon the local administration, improved efficiency will in fact follow....

It is not un-commonly asserted that the people of this country are themselves entirely indifferent to the principle of self-government, that they prefer to have such affairs managed for them by government officers. The Governor-General in council does not attach much value to this theory. It represents, no doubt, the point of view which commends itself to many active and well-intentioned district officers, and the people of India are, there can be really no doubt, remarkably tolerant of existing fact's. But as education advances there is rapidly growing up all over the country an intelligent class of public - spirited men whom it is not only bad policy, but sheer waste of power to fail to utilize.... The annual reports of every government tell of an ever-increasing burden laid upon
the shoulders of the local officer’s. The cry is everywhere for increased establishments. The universal complaint in all the departments is that of over-work. Under these circumstances, it becomes imperatively necessary to look around for some means of relief, and the Governor-General in council has no hesitation in stating his conviction that the only responsible plan open to the government is to induce the people themselves to undertake, as far as may be, the management of their own affairs, and to develop, or create, if need be, a capacity for self-help in respect of all matters that have not, for imperial reasons, to be retained in the hands of the representatives of government. (quoted in Maheshwari 1970: 17-18).

Reform’s projected by Ripon were ignored by government and district officer’s who were responsible for putting them into practice, the local daroga and bania were the real bosses in the villages and the local leadership was not concerned while formulating the policy but rather this policy was impose from above, unfortunately therefore, lord Ripon resolution, often describe as the milestone on the roads of Indian self-government or panchayat raj, remained a dead letter for a long time (Purwar 1960: 46-47). The next step in the history people’s empowerment was the report of the Royal commission upon decentralization which was appointed by the government in 1907 and published in 1909, the then secretary of state of India, was alarmed at a
gigantic stature of over centralization and he took a serious note of it, and called it a great mischief. He attributed it to a widening gulf between the official’s and the people of India. The commission recommended that it is most desirable, alike in the interests of decentralization and in order to associate the people with the local tasks of administration, than an attempt should be made to constitute and develop village panchayats for the administration of local village affairs and became a instrument of people participation (Malaviya 1956: 221). The proposal’s and suggestions of the commission were favourably commented by the Government of India. But the official’s found some practical difficulties to implement in different part of the country. They were not willing to share power with the people as it would weaken the hold of bureaucracy on them. The inefficient bureaucracy for not doing even the little that was suggested in the report of the Royal commission on decentralization for people participation. (Mathew 2000:4).

The development of local-self-government institutions or panchayat raj got further fillip with the introduction of Montague-Chelmsford Report which made local-self-government a ‘transferred subject’ under the scheme of Drarchy (Kazi 2002: 69). To make local-self-government really representative as well as responsible, the Montague-Chelmsford Report on the Indian constitutional reform’s had
suggested that there should be, as far as possible, complete popular control in local bodies that is peoples empowerment and the largest possible independence for them of outside control (Khanna 1972: 29). Notwithstanding this professed objective of the montague-chelmsford scheme, it did not make Panchayats institution democratic and vibrant instrument of people's empowerment, due to various constraint's, both organizational and fiscal. The most significant development of this period was the establishment of village Panchayat's n number of provinces. However, these statutory Panchayats covered only a limited number of village and had, generally, a limited number of functions and did little for people's empowerment. (Mathew 2000: 5).

The Government of India, showing it's willingness to practice what it preached for people empowerment issued a resolution on the 6th, May, 1918, which supported the principles enunciated long before by Ripon and decentralization commission. The resolution affirmed the policy of minimum of interference in the affairs of local-government or panchayat raj. The resolution of 1918, approved the proposals of establishing departments of local-self-government or panchayat raj in the provinces. And it was in pursuance of the policy contained in the British Governments famous announcement of August 20, 1917, that the Government of India Act of 1919 was passed and enforced in 1920. All
the provinces passed their respective Act’s to revive and resuscitate Panchayats so as to ensure people participation in local affairs (Purwar 1967: 53). Yet, this attempt also did not lead to the sharing of power with the people and their continued to be the concentration of power in the hands of government official’s.

In this way attempt’s were made for people’s empowerment in Pre-Independence period by then viceroy Lord Ripon (1882) in local-self-government Act, Royal commission upon decentralization in 1909 and government of India Act 1919. The question of representation of different population group such as women was not considered and was limited to the resident male. This reflects the prevalent ideology of patriarchy which did not address the questions of women’s participation (Bush 2001:8). The early twentieth century saw the birth of National movement and women’s organization. These women organization become the part of national movement under the leadership of Gandhiji and struggled for women’s participation. In 1917 a deputation of Indian women led by Shrimati Sarojini Naidu presented to the British parliament a demand for the enfranchisement of women on the basis of equality with men (Guha 1975: 103). In this context, the franchise committee set-up by then British Government deliberated upon franchise to women and left it to provincial legislatures and linked it with the issue of local culture and sensitivity on
the subject. The joint committee of British Parliament in its first report on the bill for the Government of India Act, 1919, endorsed the recommendation of franchise committee on the subject of women's franchise. Hence, the Government of India Act, 1919 provided that if legislative council in any province passed a resolution in favour of women's franchise, they should be put in the electoral register of that province. The law was modified only later and power were given to the council's to pass resolutions to allow qualified women to become members by election or nomination (Buch 2001: 8-9). The reforms Act of 1921 extended the franchise only to wives who had property and education. The British Government was reluctant on this question because it could not believe that Indian society would ever regard women as equal participant with men, nor did they regard women as a political force. The massive participation of women in the National movement led to the demand of immediate acceptance of adult franchise without sex discrimination. The demand was accepted by the Indian National Congress (INC) in Karachi Session 1931 which committed itself to women's political equality, regardless to their status and qualification (Guha 1975: 104).
People’s Empowerment in Post Independence Period

In the period immediately after independence it was the constitution of free India which fulfilled the promise made by the congress in Karachi session in 1931 for granting equality to women in all spheres including adult franchise without sex discrimination but did not guarantee political representation to women in decision-making. The focus of this time was on the development of all sections and so in March 1950, the planning commission came into existence and began to plane for large-scale economic and social development. It was soon realized that no development could be achieved until it is backed by the development of villages. Since 80% of the people lives in the villages. The planning commission, therefore, thought of shaping the village development programme, so as to attack the five giants of Hunger, Poverty, Disease, squalor and Ignorance through a self-help programme of community development (Dayal 1970: 3).

The community development programme started on October 2, 1952, with the launching of 55 community project’s each consist of 300 villages and population of 16.4 million. Each of the 55 projects covered about 300 villages with an area of about 450 to 500 square miles, a population of about two lakhs and a cultivated area 1,50,000 acres. With-
in few month's of launching of these pilot projects and it was felt that there should a extension of the community project's and so the National Extension service programme was formulated and put into operation on October 2, 1953. It was a planned to cover 5,000 Block’s each comprising of about 100 villages and the number’s of block went on increasing from year to year till October 2, 1963, in what time the entire was covered with community Development Block’s (Desai 1970:3).

The committee on the plan project, a high powered body constituted by National Development council, under the chairman of Balwantri G. Mehta appointed in 1957, to study after the functioning of community development Programme. The team toured several part’s of the country to examine and assess of the work and to recommend to the Government of India so as to what more need to be done to make the programme a success. The team in it’s report submitted at the end of December 1957, had tried to find out what needs to done io make the performance match with the promise (Dayal 1970:9 & Mesheshwari 1963: 9-10). The report revolutionized the entire thinking about the community development as well as the rural local government or panchayat raj. It was undoubtedly an outstanding and important landmark in the field of people’s empowerment i.e., people participation in decision making. (Sharma 1987: 18-19).
The team did not try to conceal the bitter truth and admitted that one of the least successful aspect of the community development and the National extension work was its failure to evoke popular imitative (Mehta 1957: 3). The team pointed out “local people’s have not shown any enthusiasm or interest in the community development or National Extension service work. While an attempt had been made to harness local initiative, it failed because no attempt was made to create a representative and democratic institution which will supply the local interest, supervision, and care needed to ensure it success. It was necessary to consider the needs and wishes of the local people and for this it was necessary to create local self-government or Panchayat raj. (Mehta 1957:5).

The team laid emphasis on immediately decentralization of power which had not yet taken place below the state level. It was of the opinion that it can be effected by a devolution of power to a local bodies or panchayats which, when created, will have the entire charge of development work with its jurisdiction. Development must be controlled and directed by popular representatives of the local area (Mehta 1957:7). The Balwantray Mehta committee report gave a blue print for panchayat raj which was to serve as the institutional framework of people’s participation in India. They suggested a three-tier scheme with Panchayats as the base, Panchayat samitis as the intermediate tier, and
Zilla Parishad at the apex (Narian 1981: 20-21 & Dayal 1970: 21). The Panchayat should be a directly elected institution with provision for the cooption of two women member’s and one member each from the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes. The report suggested that the Panchayat samiti which would form the most important unit in the three tier scheme should have a jurisdiction co-extensive with a development block (Mehta 1957:17). Its members should be indirectly elected by the village Panchayat together with two women members and one member each from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (incase their population exceed 5 percent of the total population) as co-opted members. The Panchayat samiti may co-opt two local residents who have shown special aptitude in the rural development work. Besides, number of seat’s equal to 10 percent of the number of elected seats by filled by the representative either by co-option or by election (Mathur 1981: 22).

According to the report that there should be Zilla Parishad (highest body of PRIs) at the district level, mainly with a view to achieving the necessary coo-ordination between the Panchayat samitis with the district. The Zilla Parishad was to consist of the President of Panchayat samitis, member of parliaments and state legislative and district level officer of the development’s (Mathur 1981:23 & Haldipur 1981:166). The team further pointed out that if this experiment of democratic decentralization
was to yield maximum results, it was necessary that all the tiers of the scheme, viz., village Panchayat, Panchayat samiti and Zilla Parishad should be started at the same time and operated simultaneously in the whole district (Mehta 1957: 128).

The recommendations of the study team in favour of a system of democratic decentralization were considered by the National Development council in January 1958. The council emphasized that the foundation of any democratic structure had to be democracy in the village, and endorsed the recommendation of the team. It was, however, left to the state to work out the structure, best suited to its conditions. This point was further affirmed by the central council of local-self-government when it suggested that the evolution of this genuine transfer of power to the people may be left to the state governments. Accordingly, the state government’s were evolving their own pattern of democratic decentralization. Subsequently, the term ‘democratic decentralization’ was given up and the term ‘Panchayat raj’ was adopted (Dayal 1970: 23-24; Maheshwari 1963: 9-10 & Maheshwari 1970: 77). All most all the states government’s accepted Balwantray Mehta famous proposal for ‘democratic decentralization’, it was enthusiastically incorporated in the emerging consensus on National development in India. However, although no less than person than Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, the free India’s
first prime minister, lent his personal support towards statutory institutionalization of the Balwantray Mehta study team's proposal's. The late Nehru inaugurated the Panchayat raj measure in Rajasthan on October 2, 1959 in impressive ceremony at Nagar (Dayal 1970: 26).

The Mehta committee was followed by K. Santhanam (1963) to examine the issues of Panchayat raj Institutions. The committee observed since 1957, the functioning of Panchayat raj Institutions was marked with various short comings and the desired results could not be achieved. The people's participation in the activities of the PRIs was limited. They did not identify themselves with these instructions, and even Panchayats did not make attempts to ensure their involvement in decision-making process. Many panchayats were superseded and election were not held for many year's. Rather, the whole process of development through Panchayats gave an opportunity to the rural elites to emerge as center of powers, an there usually was an alliance between local representative and government functionaries at the local levels. It further discouraged the rural women and other disadvantaged groups for meaningful participation in decision-making and implementation process. Also, the state governments and the local political elites did not make positives steps to strengthen these local institutions (Gupta 2004: 29).
The establishment of first ever non-congress government at the center in 1977 dedicated to a belief in a polity that ensure decentralization of economic and political power has provided yet another opportunity for re-invigoration of people empowerment through panchayat raj Institutions (PRIs) in India. (Mathur 1981: 169-170). The committee on Panchayat Raj Institutions was appointed by the Government of India in 1978, with Shri Asoka Mahta as it’s chairman to enquire into the working of Panchayat raj Institutions, and to suggest measures to strengthen them, so as to enable a decentralized system of planning and development to be effective. The terms of reference of the committee, inter alia, required it to examine the working of Panchayat raj institutions in regard to mobilization of resources as to plan and implementation of the scheme for rural development in an objective and optimal manner, and in looking and in looking after the participation of women and other weaker section of the society (Shukla 1981: 194).

The committee took a keen note of the number’s of changes in the panchayat raj institution that has been unfolding during the past two three decades. The story of the ups and down of Panchayat raj Institutions was well brought the Ashoka Mehta committee (1978) when it identified three phases in the life of Panchayat raj, starting from it’s inception till 1977: the phase of ascendancy from October 2, 1959, to 1964, the phase of
stagnation 1965 to 1969 and the last phase 1969 to 1977. After 1977, the
decline was even more rapid for this sorry pass, three arguments could be
put forward. First, the Panchayat raj collapsed due to the weight of it’s own
inner contradictions. Second, the system was inherently sound anyone’s
control. Third, the ruling elite deliberately ‘killed it’ (Mathew 1994: 3-4).

If we looked at the first time phase (1959-64) all the states had
passed panchayat acts, and by the mid 1960’s Panchayat had reached all
part’s of the country. There was a enthusiasm in rural India and a feeling
gripped that the people that they had a say in the decision-making affairs
which effecting their daily lives. Those were the promising days of
Panchayat raj Institutions in India. There was a younger and better
leadership was emerging through Panchayat Raj Institution and there was
a fairly high degree of satisfaction among the people with their working
(Mathew 1994:8-9). This enabled a large number of people to acquire
leadership at the local levels because, in the earlier traditional, socio-
political set-up they had no access to the political or administrative
organs. It was also felt that conferring of power. On people’s
representatives had improved the attendance of teacher’s in primary
schools, while block administration had become more responsive, people
voiced their grievance before the Pradhans and got relief through them,
and above all petty corruption, both among the subordinate staff as well
as among the newly elected leaders, had declined, the former because the
block staff had come under the Panchayat samiti and the latter because
the public reputation of the Pradhans was crucial for them to get re-
elected (Mathew 1994: 9-10).

The rejoicing of the people was short-lived because second phase
started after there was a stagnation of Panchayat raj. The Nehru’s death in
which political leader’s were determined to end the threat to their
leadership from the village, mandal or district leadership. They paid only
lip service to the Panchayat’s. The bureaucracy in alliance with local
power’s, state and central level politicians, began to discredit the new
system of highlighting it’s shortcoming. It saw in these local bodies the
domination by the upper or dominant castes, corruption and total in
aptitude. In the third phase 1964-1977 for about thirteen year’s after that,
from 1964 to 1977, Panchayat raj remained the whipping boy of all those
who wanted to discredit the decentralization of power. This phase marked
a sharp decline in panchayat raj. (Mathew 1994:15). In view of this
decline in 1985 G.V.K. Roy committee was constituted to examine
various aspect of PRIs. After evaluating the function of local bodies, the
committee made some observation. The committee suggested for
integrated rural development. It has to encompass all economic and social
development activities handled by different agencies at the field level.
Panchayat raj Institutions should be activated and given the necessary support so that can become effective organization for handling local development. The committee also suggested that the election to the local bodies should be held regularly. The Rao committee was followed by the L.M. Singhvi committee. It was constituted by the government of India, Department of Rural Development in 1986. The committee suggested that it considered the constitution of gram sabha for encouraging democracy at the grass roots level. The committee recommended that the PRIs have to be viewed as institutions of self-government which would naturally facilitate the participation of the people in the process of planning and development and as a part of the concept of self government. The committee envisaged and recommended that the Panchayat raj bodies should be constitutionally recognized (Gupta 200: 31-32).

In this way attempts were made for people's empowerment in post independence period by constitution of India, Balwantray Mehta committee report and Ashok Mehta committee report. The constitution of India guaranteed equality to women in all spheres including adult franchise without sex discrimination. There were no provision of women empowerment that is it did not guarantee their representation in decision-making bodies. The Balwantray Mehta committee report provided co-option two women members in Panchayats. The Ashok Mehta committee
report provided that two women securing highest number’s of votes among women candidates in the Panchayat election could takes the seat’s reserved for them. Thus the reports of these two committees had provision for only for token representation of women in panchayats and no provision for women’s empowerment that is no guarantee of their representation in such decision-making bodies. (Kaushik 1995:3). In the meantime, the committee on the status of women in India (CSWI) was setup in 1971. Entitled ‘Towards Equality’ by the Government of India to look into the into all aspects of women status in India, including women’s political participation. The committee had noted in 1974, the ineffectiveness of representation of women in Panchayats but it shying away a bolder initiative. Thus there was a need for women’s empowerment through Panchayat raj by granting representation to them in such decision-making bodies (Buch 2000: 5).