CHAPTER 4

GANDHIAN CONCEPT OF DECENTRALIZATION,
VISION OF GRAM SWARAJ AND THE PANCHAYAT SYSTEM.

The scheme of decentralization with the focus on ancient rural bodies in India is deeply indebted to Mahatma Gandhi. A virulent critic of centralized power and a staunch advocate of decentralization, he forcefully projected an indigenous system that truly represented his general philosophy of life based on truth and non-violence and which ensured the removal of all impediments to the freedom of the individual and his self-realization. Panchayats, the innermost administrative mechanism which he envisioned for his scheme of village republics represented a bulwark against authoritarianism and exploitation and a guarantee for the promotion of the freedom and progress of individual citizen.

4.1.0. Human Autonomy and Small Communities

The ultimate purpose of any form of decentralization is the maximization of human autonomy and creativity, in terms of both individual citizens and groups. Since Jean Jacques Rousseau, all emancipatory movements have been plagued by the confusion between ‘volonte generale’ and ‘volonte ditous’ (General Will and the Will of all individuals)\(^1\). The former does not involve actual consent and participation of individuals; in contrast, the latter is constituted of common aims in actual wills of individuals.

Mahatma Gandhi too, shared most of the above mentioned concepts of Rousseau, particularly the idea of General Will, i.e., the Collective Will and the Individual Will. He insisted on protecting them at all levels, but believed that these would be better protected in small communities, where, each human individual is able to participate in political decision-making, at

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least at the elementary levels of social organization. There is a vital connection between institutional smallness and human wholeness. In the small social unit every member is able to grasp all its functions, to know how they work and who is responsible for them.1

It might seem that an alternative to centralism is individualism, (not the individualism upheld by the Liberalists) based upon the fact that man is a unique being justified in pursuing his own private and freely chosen aims and interests. This would be possible in higher degrees in small units of a self-governing system. Therefore, Mahatma Gandhi stood for small units of the self-governing village system, as also a political activity of that kind which strengthens the tradition of Indian culture.

4.1.1. Democracy from Below

Mahatma Gandhi also developed a concept of democracy in relation to his vision of decentralization at the smaller units’ level. He visualised a form of democracy as a means to protect and develop the weakest among the weaker sections. Gandhi wrote:

it is only a government that fully protects the weakest among its subjects and safeguard all his rights, which may be described as perfectly democratic. Such a government does not mean the rule of the majority but patriotism of the interests of even the smallest limb of the realm.2

He argued that true democracy could not be worked by some men sitting at the centre; it had to be worked from below by the people of every village. Gandhi believed that, power, to be effective and genuine, from the standpoint of the masses, must lie with the people, which could be possible in small communities of villages. In small communities, the temptation to abuse power does not arise.3

In a conversation with Louis Fischer, the American journalist, Gandhi explained: “the centre of power now is in Delhi, or in Calcutta, and Bombay in the big cities. I would have it distributed

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Kripalani says, the larger the democracy grow, the less real become the rule of the people and smaller is the say of the individuals and localised groups in deciding their destinies.
among the seven hundred thousand villages in India."¹

Gandhi revealed his vision of decentralization at the lower levels in the form of grass-root level democracy or what some call a 'third alternative of parallel politics or parallel politics' in which not only the choices are widened, but more democratised and decentralized.² Here, the management of public affairs does not function from the top but operates through a wide net work of people's participating units in the local area.

4.1.2. Contrary to the West

Thus, the Gandhian concept of decentralization is fundamentally different from the British model of decentralization introduced in India under their rule. It is also different from all Western concepts of devolving authority from the centre to the subordinate units by means of parliamentary statute. Gandhi visualized the whole process in the reverse gear and wanted a system generated from below, where every individual's dignity is well protected. In the West the concept was used as a process of administrative arrangement; Gandhi did not want to incorporate this model for India. In 1942, he told Louis Fischer "I do not think that a free India will function like the other countries of the world. We have our own forms to contribute."³ He stated that India could be called an old laboratory of constitutional development. To manufacture for her a mixture of Western constitutions would be an insult to her tradition and culture.

4.2.0. Historiography of Gandhian Concepts

Traditionally, India built-up smaller units of authority in villages, i.e., in village panchayats where the people were well versed with the self-governing institutions. Gandhi's concern for the traditional village communities on which Indian democratic system in the past have been built converted him to a votary of the Panchayat system. Gandhi unfolded his mind over self-governing institutions of India even during the days of his agitation in South Africa.

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4.2.1. Gandhi’s Views on India’s Self-Governing Institutions in Africa

As early as 1894, Mahatma Gandhi pleaded for the enfranchisement of Indians in South Africa. His plea was based on India’s tradition of the Village Panchayat system. Through a series of petitions addressed to the Natal Legislative Council, Gandhi refuted the charges of the South African Government that the Indians were unfamiliar with the democratic traditions and stated that Indians were well-acquainted with the self-governing institutions in the land they came from and that they were fit for them, because all the facts and history point the other way.¹

4.2.2. Remarks of Indologists

Gandhi petitioned to the assembly that the Indian nation had the rich experience of self-governing institutions from very early times, even prior to the time when the Anglo-Saxon races first became acquainted with the principles of representation.² Defending his argument that India had long traditions of village self-governing institutions, Gandhi drew the attention of Natal Assembly to the approbative comments of Henry Sumner Maine.³ Sumner Maine, in his writings on Indian village communities, had pointed out that Indian races had been familiar with representative institutions almost from time immemorial. Maine also wrote that ‘Teutonic Mark’, an Anglo-Saxon local body, had hardly been so well organized or representative as an Indian village community, until the Anglo-Saxons absorbed the Roman system.

Gandhi also quoted Mr. Chisolus Ansley, who addressed East India Association in London:

Local self-government in the widest acceptation of the term is as old as the East itself. No matter, what may be the religions of the people who inhabit, what we call the East, there is not a portion on the country from East to West from North to South, which is not swarming with municipalities, and not only so, but like to our municipalities of old, they are all bound together as in a species of net work, so that you have ready-

² Ibid., pp. 128-32.
³ Ibid., p. 129.

Henry Sumner Maine (1882-’88) was an eminent jurist whose works include Ancient Law and Early History of Institutions. He was a member of the Indian Council from 1861-’69 and again in 1871.
made to your hand, the framework of the great system of representation. 1

4.2.3. Panchayats, the Proto-types of ‘Witan’

Gandhi reminded the Natal Legislative Assembly of India’s rich heritage by citing the very Englishmen who praised the Indian tradition of local government. He also said that every caste in every village or town had its own rules or regulations and elected or nominated representatives which furnish the exact prototype of the ‘Saxon Witan’ from which have sprung the present English parliamentary traditions. The term ‘Panchayat’ was a household word throughout the length and breadth of India. Gandhi further explained to the assembly, that the Panchayat is a council of five, elected by the people to manage and control all the affairs of a particular village.

4.2.4. Example of Durham

Gandhi further cited examples of people’s representative institutions in Durham, which was an Indian settlement in South Africa. The Indian trading community settled at Durham had their ‘Panchayat’ or a council, and in matters of pressing importance their deliberations were controlled by the community at large, a visible example of direct democracy. Gandhi said that such deliberations were a proof of India’s capabilities as regards representative institutions.

Gandhi argued that, further evidence of India’s merit in the exercise of franchise and representation could be found in the passing of Indian Councils Act (1861) whereby a system of representation had been introduced even into the legislative councils of the various Presidencies of India. Thus, he emphatically clarified that the exercise of the franchise by the Indian subjects in S. Africa is no extension of a new privilege but the legitimate right of the Indians, and an apposition to it would be an unjust restriction which under similar circumstances would never be put on them in the land of their birth.

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Chrisolus Ansely (1816-1873) was an eminent jurist and politician. He was also a member of the British Parliament from 1847-57.
4.2.5. Thomas Monro’s Testimony

Gandhi also quoted from Sir Thomas Monro, one of the Governors of Madras, to prove that Indians were familiar with local governing institutions.

Monro observed:

I do not know what is meant by civilizing the people of India. In the theory and practice of good government they may be deficient, but if a good system of agriculture, if unrivalled manufacture... if the establishment of schools for reading and writing, if the general practice of kindness and hospitality... are amongst the points that denote a civilized people, then they are not inferior in civilization to the people of Europe.1 Representation in the truest sense of the term, the Indians have understood from the earliest stages. The Panchayat, the lowest level administrative unit, guides all the actions of an Indian. He considers himself a member of the Panchayat which really is the whole body civic to which he belongs for the time being. That power to do so, and that power to understand thoroughly the principles of popular government, has rendered him the most harmless and most docile man on earth. And even when nominally there is a monarchical government the Panchayat is the supreme body.2

Thus, Gandhi portrayed the village democracies and the people’s democratic experiences with self-governing institutions to the Natal Legislative Council, and stated that during all the ups and downs of Indian history, caused by the Imperial powers, and also various structural changes the panchayat remained the supreme body, having survived the onslaughts, political, economic, cultural or religious.

4.2.6. Testimony by others

Mahatma Gandhi recollected the words expressed by some British friends and other Indologists in honour of the local government system in ancient India. Henry Maine, Elphinstone,

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2. Ibid., p.132.
Charles Metcalfe and Max Muller have left pen pictures of India’s ancient system. Of all, the picture given by Charles Metcalfe, the British Governor in India, is worth recollecting:

"The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves and almost independent of foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds revolution... but the village communities remain the same... the union of village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself... is in high degree, conducive to their happiness, and the enjoyment of a great portion of freedom and independence."¹

Henry Sumner Maine, observed that the Indian village community is at once an organized patriarchal society and an assembly of co-proprietors. He condemned the attempt of English functionaries as formidable miscarriages of Anglo-Indian administrators.²

Mahatma Gandhi argued for the Indians in South Africa, recalling the appreciation of the European authors. He also pointed out that during the long struggle for colonization, Indian society remained intact because of the rock-bottom provided by the village republics. In fact, Indian polity through the ages has accepted a concept of village autonomy and an Indian civilization that has remained dominantly rural. Both in South Africa and in India, Gandhi excited the inherent values of the Indian village system, non-violence, individual freedom and equality which provide a solid basis to the Gandhian concept of decentralization.

4.2.7. Gandhi’s Sojourn in India

In India, Gandhi’s first mission was to know more about the villages which were impoverished under the British rule. During his sojourn, Gandhi was struck by the plight of the peasants. At Champaran, an Indian village in Bihar, he found the dire poverty of the peasants. Gandhi educated them in the principles of Sathyagraha against the land lords. He explained to

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Also see, ___, Lectures on the Early History of Institutions, London, 1914.
them that the plinth on which alone could freedom be raised was, freedom from fear\(^1\). Gandhi organised volunteers to instruct the illiterate peasants in elementary hygiene and to run schools for their children. This was typical of the Gandhian strategy to maintain simultaneously two fronts, a front against injustice from without and a front against ignorance and helplessness within—a beginning of his village reconstruction programme.\(^2\) In a sense, Gandhian vision of ‘Gram Swaraj’ emanated from Gandhi’s village reconstruction programme. Gandhi had a vision of society at the micro-level which would provide for the essential needs of the poorest of the poor.

4.2.8. Decentralization, a National Issue during the Freedom Movement

Shortly, under Gandhi, the issue of the Panchayat system became part of the Indian freedom movement. It was Gandhi, who projected villagism as a national goal. He presented a scheme of reviving the traditional village Panchayats as units of popular bodies. In 1916, at Benares Hindu University, Gandhi explained his vision of a Panchayat Raj rule for independent India. Gandhi, also unfolded his mind before the Missionary Conference, held at Madras (Feb 14, 1916) when he said:

> Following out the Swadeshi spirit I observe the indigenous institutions and the Village Panchayats hold me. India is generally a republican country and it is because of this it has survived every shock hitherto delivered by princes and potentates, whether they were Indian-born or foreigners, have hardly touched the vast mass except for collecting revenue. The latter in their turn seem to have rendered Caesar what was Caesar’s and the rest have done much as they have liked...question of village sanitation etc. would have been solved long ago. The Village Panchayat would be now a living force in a special way and India would almost be enjoying self-government, suited to its requirements.\(^3\)

Again, in 1931 Gandhi sketched his ideas with more clarity at the session of Round Table

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2. Village Reconstruction Programme: According to Gandhi, India’s great curse was poverty and hunger. To combat these evils, Gandhi evolved a programme by which the minimum needs would be available to the people. The programme includes Khadi and Village industries, boycott of foreign goods, etc.
Conference. He suggested a five-tier system of government for free India. To him, political power was just a means and not an end in itself. It is a means to regulate national life through national representation. Gandhi was clear about the goal i.e., Swaraj-based on decentralization in the first stage, and in the second stage, the evolution to Village Swaraj.

4.2.9. On the Indian Slate

Gandhi strongly believed that if India is to attain true freedom sooner or later, people will have to live in villages and not in towns, in huts and not in palaces. He repeatedly told that India must develop a system according to her own genius and cultural tradition. He had faith in Indian villages as the embodiment of her glorious tradition. Gandhi wrote:

I want to write many things, but they must all be written on the Indian slate. I do not want my house to be walled in all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet, by any.

Gandhi wanted an indigenous system of planning and development, too; at the same time he wanted to imbibe what other nations can give. The vastness of our country, the vastness of the population and the climate of the country have destined India for a rural civilization. Therefore, Gandhi, suggested the perpetuation of the rural civilization, indigenous in spirit and endeavour to be rid of 'defects' in Indian culture.

He said:

The Western world has descended into such a moral, and spiritual abyss due to the unbridled pursuit of materialism....the West has been brutalized, insensitivized, thick skinned and de-humanised on such a scale that corruption, injustice, inequality, repression, coercion and violence have become quite natural things.

1. Round Table Conference: The Round Table Conference (17 Nov, 24-Dec, 1932) mentioned above, was held in the wake of ‘failure’ of the Simon Commission, 1928. Mahatma Gandhi attended the conference as the sole delegate of Indian National Congress.
Mahatma Gandhi visualized that the new life in India would cut its own channels vis-a-vis, the present times. But the peculiar genius of the people lies in the villages. Each village has its own individual development as a self-contained unit and its own living bonds of connection with its next door neighbours. In 1928 C.F. Andrews wrote:

The system of village republics each with its own president and Panchayat carrying on its Swaraj is likely to be the national objective. From this fundamental village system, the new body politic of India, (when the British occupation is over) will come into being. It will have the character of ancient India, about it, and it will appeal to the peculiar instinct of those who have inhabited the Indian peninsula from time immemorial. No dynasty or empire either of the Mughals or the British has been able to destroy it though each invader who has come as a foreigner from outside has done something to shake it.¹

Thus, Gandhi’s concepts were crystallized from the indigenous models. It is evident that Gandhi pleaded for a Panchayat system of administration in India in consonance with the Indian tradition of the village system, social heritage, and the rich experience of familiarity with self-governing institutions. It is also because of his faith in individual freedom, non-violent, non-exploitative society that Gandhi pleaded for a decentralized unit of administration from the bottom to the top levels.

4.3.0. Gandhian Vision of Decentralization

As given above Mahatma Gandhi built up a concept of decentralization in accordance with the Indian situation. He presented a new dynamic revolutionary and rational approach to existing socio-political and economic problems, which are deeply connected with the Indian tradition and culture, socio-political heritage and centered round the concept of villagism. His prescription of villagism was based on the dynamics of the common man. It is the question of power and how and by whom it is exercised. The more centralized it becomes the more violated the individual feels; the

more violated he feels, the more insecure he finds himself.¹

On one occasion, Gandhi said that real freedom would come not by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity of all to resist authority when abused. In other words, freedom is to be attained by educating the people to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority. Gandhi had the vision to pronounce that unless power reached every home, unless everybody felt that he or she was co-responsible for the decisions made, society could never live in peace and prosperity. In fact, he shared the views of Leo Tolstoy and Kropotkin in emphasising the view that a national social order must be a life of genuine community and like them he sought an alternative paradigm in a dynamic re-interpretation of ancient communal tradition.² Moreover, Gandhian ideals on decentralization are akin to the views expressed by Aldous Huxley, Sorokin and Arnold J Toynbee.³ Thus, Gandhian prescription of villagism was based on the dynamics of decentralized system with the village as the viable unit, conducive to articulated, participatory and self-governing citizenship.

4.3.1. The Panorama of Human Problems

The Gandhian concept of decentralization does not stand in isolation, restricted to one area only; it has overall links with his creation of models. It is shaped by other concepts and ideas that would encompass a whole range of issues and problems in human affairs. He preached non-violence, stressed the moral aspects of life, fought for freedom, equality for the poor, opposed state control over the individual, pleaded for Swaraj, explained the concept of trusteeship for the welfare of all, opposed big industries to save cottage and village industries and preached swadeshi and khadi. All these concepts directly or indirectly flow from the theme of decentralization.⁴ In fact, Gandhi's

1. Young India, 29 Jan.1925.
3. Cited in, S.C. Gangal, Gandhian Thought and Techniques in the Modern World, New Delhi, 1988, pp.121–22. According to Huxley, democratic principles cannot be effectively put into practice unless authority in a community has been decentralized to the maximum extent possible. Sorokin desired a limitation and decentralization of the power of the state. Arnold J. Toynbee also viewed that in production, a decentralized village economy has far greater spontaneous recuperative power than a more complicated one.
concept did not stand by its own bootstraps, it may be even dangerous to attribute decentralization to Gandhi without linking it with his overall politico-economic, moral and spiritual models¹.

4.3.2. Importance to Non-Violence

Gandhi preached non-violence as a means and an end in itself in his ideal of decentralization. Non-violence is the basic tenet of political and economic decentralization. Exploitation is the essence of violence². It becomes a reality when power is concentrated in a single body like the State. Gandhi held the view that, the State represents an undiluted and organized form of violence. To eliminate violence concentration of power must be avoided through the process of decentralization of power. The non-violent character of a society can only be guaranteed by decentralized institutions and not by the centralization of political power. According to Gandhi, decentralized institutions become an end in themselves because they guarantee non-violent participation for self improvement. This is the basic principle of the non-violent state.

The central Gandhian paradigm is that the greater the degree of decentralization, the more will be the possibilities of establishing a non-violent society³. Gandhi believed that the human and social ends that he had set before himself could be achieved in a non-violent society in which there is a thorough decentralization of power and of production and control of wealth, and which is composed of comparatively small autonomous communities, willingly federated and co-operating together⁴. According to Gandhi, today, man is cribbed and cabined by State and Society⁵. He is put under oppressive forces of violence, since the centralized state is in essence violence in concentrated and organised form. If the State is rooted in violence, that would suppress the moral element in man.

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2. Gandhian concept of decentralization had an essentially spiritual dimension. The principle of advaita which upheld the presence of the Supreme Being in every individual ran through Gandhi’s advocacy of the liberty and dignity of the individual. His scheme of a socio-political system is free from indignities and honduages.
5. Biman Bihari Majumdar, ed., Gandhian Concept of State, Calcutta, 1957, p.27
4.3.3. Concept of Power and State

To Gandhi, political power of the State is not an end in itself but a means to enable the people to better their conditions in every department of life. His concept of power is horizontal in structure. What existed in India according to him was a vertical decentralization of power and so long as this is made the other way round, the objective will not be achieved. From the lower level, Village Panchayat represents the most important institution of participatory democracy and he desired to entrust it with functions of very wide character covering all aspects of social, economic and political life. ¹

4.3.4. The Protection of the Individual’s Dignity, Freedom and Rights

The concept of the individual’s dignity, freedom, and rights has very much influenced the Gandhian concept of decentralization. Each individual is important and equally responsible for the welfare of society. Hence, the individual has the right to stand by his or her conviction and propagate what is good and resist impositions against his or her inherent freedom. Gandhi thought that, society is nothing but the sum total of individuals whose wills are sovereign and ultimately decisive. As suggested earlier, he subscribed to the Rousseauan concepts of popular sovereignty and the inherent rights of every individual.

He wrote:

We have long been accustomed to think that power comes only through legislative assemblies-I have regarded this belief as a grave error brought about by inertia or hypnotism. A superficial study of British history has made us think that all power percolates to the state from parliament. The truth is that power resides in the people and it is enlisted for the time being to those whom they may choose as their representative.²

Thus, Gandhi advocated decentralization in order to protect every individual’s right, freedom and dignity. Gandhian vision also pre-supposes and demands the creation of a just order in

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² Young India, 26-3-1931.
which all human beings can fulfil their inherent rights, where their dignity is affirmed and supported, their access to truth recognized and their personal liberty guaranteed, an order in which man and woman are treated not as objects but rather as subjects of their own destiny, a system in which unjust inequalities cannot exist among people where peace and tranquillity exist. Individuals need to be protected against any structure above them, the state or the administrators, or whatever be its name.¹

As such, Mahatma Gandhi valued freedom much. He shared with many Western thinkers the idea that the individual’s freedom can only be protected in small, manageable, sound, coherent and self-contained primary units. According to Gandhi, decentralization of power will constitute a necessary basis for preserving individual freedom. It is the self actualization of the individual that should be the ultimate objective of the institution of civil society and to that end both state and civil institutions must act. Gandhi also held that, a democratic government ruled by the majority party would not be sufficient to safeguard fully the freedom of the individual and the self actualization of personality. The small units of power like the Gram Swaraj would provide an opportunity for the growth of the individual. In the final analysis, they would function as an agent of self actualization of individuals, that is the ultimate objective according to Gandhi, of any civil society and to that end, both the state and civil institutions must act.²

Mahatma Gandhi, who looked upon any increase in State’s power with distrust and fear, was very categorical in his estimate of the relations between the individual and the State. His concept of the ultimate authority of the individual as sovereign, lighted the way for the emanation of the theory of non-violent, non-co operation with the State and the exploitative system that stand in the way of

². For details see, Abraham Maslow’s theory of self actualization. Self actualization is considered to be the highest need in the hierarchy of needs and as such it is directed towards searching the meaning and purposes in life. Even if all other needs are satisfied, a human being feels restless and tries to achieve excellence in fields dearer to him. The desire for self-fulfilment, actualization and living a meaningful life is reflected in this need. Self actualization is presumably the highest desire of any normal individual. A self actualized person possesses an unusual ability to detect the spurious, the fake, and the dishonest in the personality and in general to judge people correctly and efficiently. He will be problem-centred rather than ego-centred. As Maslow emphasized, he works, he tries, and he is ambitious eventhough in an unusual sense.
the all round development of the individual. Thus, the emphasis on the moral authority of the individual over the State, is also important in Gandhian philosophy.

Gandhi also rejected the Hobbesian notion of the autonomous and isolated individual, politically translated into the rational and self-calculating individual voter. Gandhi inquires into a different model of sovereign individuals forming themselves into a communitarian democracy. In the Gandhian model, society must control politics and not the other way round. This approach implies that political power must be within society and formal political structures should not be functionally independent of society. In other words, in the last analysis legitimate power is people’s power and social power.

4.3.5. Participatory Democracy

The Gandhian concept does not favour democracy in terms of largeness. The soul of democracy is not merely the mechanical rule of a numerical and temporary majority. It is the medium for transmitting a sense of participation of individuals in the process of the evolution of society. What is needed is a system of open and participatory democracy through small republics so that the people can play an effective role in the governance of the country.

4.3.6. The Westminster Model, A Gandhian Critique

Gandhi severely criticised the British parliamentary practices and procedures because to him they did not provide scope for participative democracy. He spoke with the full conviction that the British system would not be an ideal one for India. His conviction was well supported by the observation of G.D.H Cole who once asked whether the common man in England was capable of maintaining effective democracy in any unit larger than a Parish or an Urban District Council. He

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compared the "Mother of Parliament" to a sterile woman who could do no good thing." Gandhi therefore said "If India copies England it is my firm conviction that she will be ruined". Gandhi also referred to the contempt in which men like Carlyle held parliament when they called Westminster, the 'talking shop' of the world. He was aware of the oppression that would come from a centralized power structure based on heavy industries, armaments and advanced technology. Mahatma Gandhi's faith in the decentralized power structure developed out of such convictions. Therefore, Gandhi was not in favour of adopting the English pattern of parliamentary system for India. He wrote:

It is very difficult to rid of our fondness for parliament...modern tyranny is a trap of temptation and therefore does greater mischief. One can withstand the atrocities committed by an individual as such, but it is difficult to cope with the tyranny perpetrated upon a people in the name of the people...The common man in India, at least believes that the parliament is a hoax. Not only English model but the whole Euro-American democracies were criticised by Gandhi because there was no participatory nature in them. The participation of the community and the activization of local government are the necessary conditions both for a high rate of economic growth and fair distribution system. So the economic factors also determine the quality of decentralized system. Decentralization and community participation are essential for democratising, legitimizing, mobilizing and rationalising of support mechanisms.

4.3.7. Political and Economic Decentralizations Combined

Mahatma Gandhi, who had unique responses to problems, would go to the very roots, while

1. M.K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule, Ahmedabad, 1984 rpt., pp.31-34. In 'Hind Swaraj' Gandhi challenged the very foundation of what he called the Western materialist modern civilization, characterized by a total lack of religious values and ethical orientations.  
2. Ibid., p.34.  
assessing their nature and impact. To him, political decentralization alone was not sufficient for achieving the goal of creating a Gram Swaraj. On the other hand, economic decentralization was equally important in determining the quality of decentralized system.

The concentration of economic power goes hand in hand with the concentration of political power leading to the development of a dictatorial system.¹ The concentration of wealth or factors of production would also cause the centralization of power in the hands of an oligarchy. Such concentration, Gandhi viewed, would provide a small coterie of men at the top with a great deal of privileges on the socio-political and economic milieu of the country, and would have its own paralysing effect on freedom and liberty, the 'sine qua non' of the development of man’s inherent potentialities. It would destroy individuality which lies at the root of progress.²

Gandhian doctrines of economic decentralization also aim at securing many other objectives - a fair system of distribution, a decentralized production system, environmental awareness, 'distributional balance'; judicious use of science and technology and above all, the establishment of a non-violent, non-exploitative state.

Gandhian economic doctrines, other than production and distribution were aimed at securing the objectives like a balanced growth between economic development and moral progress, structural balance, i.e., a balance between the rural and urban sectors of the economy and a balance in the relationship between man and his environment.

The environmental crisis is the result of unrestricted, uncontrolled use of nature for the sake of economic progress. In all his writings, Gandhi showed remarkable environmental awareness. His vision of self-contained villages is anchored on the principles of a need-oriented drive and environmentally sound development. In this respect, Gandhi is a forerunner of a new theory of economic development, comparable to the ideas of C.F. Andrews, E.F. Schumacher.³ Mao tse

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². N.K. Bose, Selection from Gandhi, Ahmedabad, 1948, p. 42.
Tung¹ and Bertrand Russel².

Gandhi pleaded for decentralization in production and distribution. The conception of self-contained village units envisages both production and distribution, contained within the unit normally and in case of surplus, extending to the neighbouring units. The concept of self-contained village economy is indicative of a people whose philosophy of life is simple living and high thinking.³

4.3.8. Decentralization of Technology

Gandhi felt that the enormous power of technology would convert the state to a 'Leviathan'. Such a situation would constitute a great threat to human liberty and freedom. Therefore, Gandhi dreaded the increase in the power of the state in technology that would lead to indiscriminate multiplication of large-scale industries. The end product of such a system is the progressive curtailment of liberty to the people. Aldous Huxley commented:

> The centralising of industrial capacity in big, mass producing factories has resulted in the centralization of a large part of population in cities and in the reduction of ever-increasing numbers of individuals to complete dependence upon a few private capitalists and their managers or upon the

2. For details see, Young India, 23 Mar.1921.
3. Go back to your village or keep yourself to the village is a great philosophical creed with wide importance in the domain of economy, as it satisfies all the tests of economic reconstruction as propounded by Bertrand Russel. It consists of the maximum production, justice in distribution, a tolerable existence for producers and the greatest possible freedom and stimulus to vitality and progress. Gandhi said: 'What India needs is not concentration of capital in few hands, but its distribution, so as to be within easy reach of seven and a half lakh of villages'.
5. Modern technology has assumed the shape of large scale machinery with the result that its production requires large finances. Naturally, those who can undertake to finance the production of such a large scale technology control it. If the financier happens to be an individual the power of control and management of production and distribution tends to be concentrated in the hands of individual owners. Such concentration of economic power brings corresponding centralization of political power in a few hands.

public capitalists, the state represented by politicians and working through civil servants.¹

Mahatma Gandhi was also conscious of these trends in modern technology and its impact on the people, i.e., exploitation of the majority by a minority. Therefore, Gandhi visualised an alternative technological scenario suited to the true development of India.²

4.3.9. Judicious Use of Science and Technology

Gandhian vision was to make a judicious use of science and technology with a view to achieving enough production to meet the needs of the villager. The technology he visualised was a decentralized one affordable to every village by virtue of the diffusion of economic power. In Gandhi’s concept the emphasis is on small scale technique of production, carried to every home and family in the village. A proper balance of agriculture and industry in the village will bring about a relationship in which the village will assume a great influence. He was conscious of the fact that the city with its satanic mills was riding on the back of the villagers. The villagers were crushed under their weight. Gandhi had no doubt that decentralization of technology and judicious use of science are a panacea for such ills.

4.3.10. Trusteeship system

The ideal of trusteeship, largely based on decentralization also is another significant feature of the Gandhian concept. Gandhi said that ‘trusteeship’ (a co-operative combination of landholders, producers etc.) would prevent the concentration of economic power both in the hands of the individuals and the state authority. He believed that ‘trusteeship’ could bring about a non-violent state and if the theory is put into effect, it could become a major instrument for decentralization of power for the greater welfare of the people in society.

Without any ambiguity Gandhi enunciated that ownership of private property was permitted by society to a limited extent for its own welfare. Under the Gandhian economic order, the

character of production would be determined by social necessity and not by personal whims or greed.\textsuperscript{1} It provides a better type of socialism and avoids considerable recrimination and bloodshed. It is a natural corollary to non-violence. To Gandhi, economic exploitation was the essence of violence in society and in future this could be eliminated only by following a bold policy of decentralization.

4.3.11. Resuscitation of Village Communities as Prelude to Gram Swaraj

To Gandhi, cities did not represent India and they were alien to India. To him, the cities were the brokers and commission agents for the big houses of Europe, America and Japan. The cities had joined hands with the aliens in the ‘bleeding’ process that had been going on for many years. In the Indian context there was a considerable difference between city life and village life in that the latter had no sanitation, education and medical facilities. Gandhi carried on the tradition of early 19th century Indian thinking, which began with Rajaram Mohan Roy,\textsuperscript{2} the father of Indian nationalism. He also incorporated the celebrated ‘Drain Theory’ of Dadabhai Naoroji\textsuperscript{3} and Gopalakrishna Gokhale\textsuperscript{4}. Still later, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India wrote that the system of village self-government was the foundation of Aryan polity.\textsuperscript{5} It was this tradition that gave to Indian polity strength and vitality, which ensured to everybody a home, an honest occupation and means of healthy subsistence. Inspite of its shortcomings and defects, people were happy.

\textsuperscript{1} Shriman Narayan, \textit{Towards the Gandhian Plan}, New Delhi, 1978, p.100.
\textsuperscript{2} Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833).
Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of ‘Brahma Samaj’, was the pioneer of Indian renaissance.
\textsuperscript{3} Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917).
Dadabhai Naoroji, respectfully remembered as the ‘Grand Old Man of India,’ was associated with the Indian National Congress right from its inception. He exposed the exploiting nature of British rule in India. He was the first Indian to draw the attention of the Indians as well as the British public to the drain of wealth from India and the resulting poverty of the Indians.
\textsuperscript{4} Gopalakrishna Gokhale (1866-1915).
A prominent leader of the Indian freedom struggle during the first phase. He was elected to the Bombay Legislative Council and later to the Imperial Legislative Council. He attacked vehemently the salt tax and the British commercial policies. He saw the reactionary role of the Anglo-Indian bureaucracy in defeating the object of the Act of 1892. Gandhi was inspired by Gokhale’s liberal and moderate views. Also see, \textit{Harijan}, 28-1-1939, \& 26-7-1942.
\textsuperscript{5} Jawaharlal Nehru, \textit{Glimpses of World History}. Bombay, 1975, pp.434-'42.
It was Gandhi’s firm conviction that the self-governing village communities about which Monro (the British administrator in India) and others wrote were not defunct. They were capable of being resuscitated by re-creation of their self-governing powers and regional self-sufficiency. In the outline picture of Gram Swaraj and the Panchayat rule, Gandhi, thus incorporated the ideas of self rule and autonomy in their historical background.

4.4.0. Gram Swaraj (Village Republic)

The Gram Swaraj is the central theme and nucleus round which revolves the whole Gandhian concept of decentralization. Unlike the Western concept of local bodies, the Gandhian concept of Gram Swaraj is not merely the units of administration as an agency to exercise only those powers delegated to them, but self-sufficient and self-contained units, ruled by the people of a village. Every village must be autonomous, self-reliant and self-contained in itself in all respects, but depend on such other units for what it lacks.

The idea of Gram Swaraj arose from Gandhi’s dearest thought that the India of his dreams lay not in towns but in her 700,000 villages. Gandhi was so clear about the crucial importance of villages that he declared “if the villages perish India will perish too”\(^1\) He felt that the Indian villages had been exploited by the cities. Gandhi wrote that, the villages have died in thousands so that city dwellers might live. The difference would be fundamental.\(^2\)

To Gandhi, Gram Swaraj and its governing system, the Panchayats are the real democratic, political apparatuses that can guarantee freedom and equality of each and every individual as well as promote certain values at the lower levels. As referred to above, they will become autonomous units at the micro levels. To him, village autonomy implied political, (self-government) economic (self-sufficiency) moral (non-violent, non-exploitative force) and social (egalitarian society) as well as many other factors. Gandhi gave great importance to its political connotations. He conceived village autonomy, as a two-tier democracy, with direct participation at the village level and representation at the national level.

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2. The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi in 95 vols., V. 1, XXIII, 1979 rpt., New Delhi, p.454. Also see, Harijan, 4-4-1936.
4.4.1. Swaraj: Terminological Meaning

The word ‘swaraj’ is a Vedic term which literally means self rule and its original connotation meant autonomy of the moral self, the strict exercise of moral control over the senses and self-restraint. It was not freedom from all restraint which independence often means.\(^1\) Gandhi employed the term ‘Swaraj’ in its specific and generic senses. While he organized the Indian masses for Swaraj it was conceived as a constitutional democratic political order. Gandhi, at the same time stressed economic mass or organic content.\(^2\) By Swaraj Gandhi meant the government by the consent of the Indian people as ascertained by the largest number of the adult population who have contributed by manual labour to the service of the state. In ‘Hind Swaraj’ Gandhi enumerated his ideal of Swaraj as Indian Home Rule. According to him,

“Real Swaraj will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all who resist authority when it is abused. In other words, swaraj is to be obtained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority.”\(^3\)

Gandhi uses swaraj to mean ‘positive freedom’ i.e., participating in the process of politics in every way possible, “rather than seeing the state as a negative institution restricting its activities to the minimum....in other words Swaraj implied participative democracy.”\(^4\)

4.4.2. Holistic Vision

Gandhi’s approach was a ‘holistic’ one. All aspects of development-political, economic, social, moral or spiritual—were equal, and were given due place in his scheme of Gram Swaraj. Thus, the concept is a comprehensive one, consisting of all dimensions of development both in

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2. Ibid., p.275.
3. For details on the concept of swaraj see, M.K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule, Ahmedabad, 1984, pp.28-30.
life of individuals and society, restricted to each and every village.\(^1\) It centered round Gandhi’s commitment to the uplift of all villagers. It implies not merely change of the existing political domination, but a re-organization of the polity and the citizens on foundations where citizens consciously and voluntarily participate and govern the political process from below. Only a highly decentralized polity could provide for such direct participation for the citizens.

The Swaraj of Gandhi’s dream was above any racial or religious distinction, nor was it to be the monopoly of the educated persons and the rich. Swaraj has to be for all. Under Swaraj, based on non-violence nobody is anybody’s enemy, everybody contributes his or her due quota to the common goal, all can read and write and their knowledge keeps growing day to day. No one is a pauper and labour can always find employment. There is no place under such a government for gambling, drinking and immorality or for class hatred.\(^2\)

4.4.3. Swaraj at National, State and Individual levels

Gandhi also used the term ‘Swaraj’ with reference to both the nation and the individual.\(^3\) At the national level he meant a republic i.e., rule by the people themselves, a state of complete independence of alien control. By personal swaraj, he meant rule over oneself, after securing control over lust. Man cannot rule over himself without conquering the lust within him. Rule over oneself implies that there should be minimum rule of the government and society. It means that the individual will rule over himself in such a way that he will not come in the way of others. He shall develop his personality in such a way that his activities will not be a hindrance to others and on the other hand he shall serve others to the best of his abilities. It is clear that Gandhi desired an ideal state at the national level and an ideal unit of administration at the village level guaranteeing to all individuals the maximum degree of self rule and self restraint guided by certain ideals and principles.

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   Also see, Vijay Ranjan Dutta, “Decentralization and Political Development in India, A Gandhian Perspective,” in S.I. Verma, ed., *Panchayati Raj, Gram Swaraj and Federal Polity*, Jaipur, 1990, p.105; M.K. Gandhi, *Village Swaraj*, comp., H. M. Vyas, Ahmedabad, 1963, pp.3-4. Gandhi said: “Swaraj promotes individual autonomy for self realization and creativity. He also said: The Swaraj of my... (our) dream recognizes no race or religious distinctions... Swaraj is to be for all, including the maimed, the blind, the starving and the toiling millions.”
4.4.4. Aspects of Swaraj: Political, Economic, Social and Moral

Gandhi was particular that the concept of ‘Swaraj’ should not be misconceived as partial freedom or independence. At the national level it is complete independence of alien (external) control and complete economic independence. At the Panchayat level, it is the establishment of village republics. Gandhi emphatically stressed four aspects of Swaraj - political, economic, moral and that of dharma. The last of these, approaches religious dimension. Gandhi wrote that: the square of a swaraj, would be out of shape if any of its above angles’ was untrue.1

Politically, national swaraj means that the people of the country must be in complete control of all the political institutions. This condition can be realized only if the masses develop a capacity to resist authority when it is abused. Under such swaraj in the state, the ultimate power would be vested with the people. The political power is decentralized in such a way that even the smallest man can enjoy freedom without any social, political or economic disability, or domination either by individual or by a group. The same were the conditions for swaraj at the village level. The swaraj at the village level would be a miniature of swaraj at the national level. Economically, Swaraj means easy availability of locally produced food, clothing and shelter to all the people. Localization of production should make every village self-sufficient in these basic necessities. The villages should also preserve certain basic (Indian) industries which are vital to their economic existence. Men with capital or wealth will voluntarily share the fruits of their enterprise with their common workers under trusteeship system which ensures economic equality. Socially, swaraj means removal of social suppression of one community by another or, domination by one group over the other. Social evils like untouchability will be completely abolished.2 Morally, swaraj means a state based on non-violence. A State which is based on the principle of violence can never achieve its full moral height.3 Gandhi firmly believed that under such non-violent state the weakest man can rise to his full moral height.

To Gandhi, swaraj of a people means the sum total of the swaraj, i.e., self rule of the


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individuals\(^1\) formed at the national, provincial or local level. The state of *swaraj* can be established through two stages, destructive and constructive\(^2\)- the former indicates dismantling and the latter, creation. For dismantling the existing society the weapons (based on truth and nonviolence) are *sathyagraha* and non-cooperation. Constructive programmes like village industries, *Khadi*, giving up of untouchability, and maintenance of religious harmony, are to be taken up to build up the *swaraj* state. The features of the *swaraj* are new social order, new educational system, new economic order and a decentralized political system.

While explaining the constructive programme for creating *swaraj* rule, Gandhi wrote:

Parliaments have no power or even existence independently of the people. It has been my effort for the last 21 years to convince the people of this simple truth. Civil Disobedience is the store house of power. Imagine a whole people unwilling to conform to the laws of the legislature and prepared to suffer the consequences of non-compliance. They will bring the whole legislative and executive machinery to a standstill. The police and the military are of no use to coerce minorities (however powerful they may be). But no police or military coercion can bend the resolute will of a people who are out for suffering to the uttermost.\(^3\).

In Gandhi’s scheme villages are the real repositories of power. The government at higher levels will not interfere in matters related to the village. The government of the village will be by all the adult villagers.\(^4\) As to the sphere of state activity, Gandhi believes that true self-government means a continuous effort to free the people of government control.\(^5\)

A journalist once asked Gandhi to give an outline of a village swaraj. Gandhi’s reply is rich in evocative detail:

My idea of Village *Swaraj* is that it is a complete republic independent

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5. Ibid., p.128.
of its neighbours for its vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. The village’s first concern will be to grow its own food crops, and cotton for its growth. It should have reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops excluding ganja, tobacco, opium, and the like. The village will maintain a village theatre, school and a public hall. It will have its own waterworks, ensuring water supply. This can be done through controlled wells and tanks. Education will be compulsory upto the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on a cooperative basis. There will be no castes such as we have today, with their graded untouchability. Non-violence with its technique of Sathyagraha and non-cooperation will be the sanction of the village community. There will be a compulsory service of village guards, who will be selected by rotation from the register maintained by the village....

The concept of Gram: swaraj does not mean non-dependent village units. This does not exclude dependence on and willing help from neighbours or from the other states. It will be free and highly cultured and at the same time dependent on voluntary play of mutual force. Such a society is necessarily highly cultured in which every man and woman knows what he or she wants and what is more, knows that no one should want anything that others cannot have with equal labour.

4.4.5. ‘Poor Man’s swaraj’

The swaraj, as visualized by Gandhi, is one in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country in whose making they have an effective voice. Therefore. Gandhi defined the Swaraj of his dreams as a poor man’s Swaraj. He believed that whatever cannot be shared with the masses is taboo for him. The Gram Swaraj and the Panchayat system of administration would provide the poor man an opportunity to secure participation, power and authority. The swaraj Gandhi visualized was for all including “the maimed, the blind and the starving millions”. The necessities

2. Ibid., P. 14.
3. Young India, May 1930, p.149.
of life should be enjoyed by all in common.¹ To Gandhi, *Grama Swaraj* is a fulfilment of one's commitment to the concept of equality.² He visualized an India in which there shall be no high class or low class people, an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony. He said thus “I have no doubt, the slightest doubt, that *swaraj* is not ‘poorna swaraj’ until these amenities are guaranteed...”³

4.4.6. Village Swaraj—a micro level Socialistic Pattern

The quintessence of Gandhian socialism is related to both political and economic decentralization at the village level.⁴ Here the plans of development are by and large framed and implemented at the village level for the people and by the people.⁵ It is to the village that the Indians have to turn to, if they have to be free from prejudices, superstitions, and narrow outlook. They can achieve this by staying amongst the villagers and sharing their joys and sorrows and spreading education and intelligent information among them. The villages have to be taught how to economise time, health and money.

Gandhi wrote thus: “Lionel Curtis described our villages as dump heaps. We have to turn them into model villages. Our village-folk do not get fresh food, but they are surrounded by the freshest food. I am talking like a missionary in the matter of food because my mission is to make villages a thing of beauty”⁶.

4.4.7. Vision of an Ideal Village

The village in Gandhi’s dream is not a collection of unsanitary, dwellings constructed on

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¹. *Young India*, 26 Mar. 1931, pp.46-47.
³. *Young India*, 15 Nov. 1928, p.381.
⁵. While replying to a question raised by some students, Gandhi said, let us study the Eastern Institutions in a spirit of scientific enquiry and if so we shall evolve a truer socialism and a truer communism than the world has yet dreamt of. It is surely wrong to presume that Western socialism or communism is the last word on the question of mass poverty.
unhygienic surroundings. He prescribes certain conditions for an ideal village.\(^1\) Gandhi conceived of an autonomous and self-contained village system, forming a unit of society, every village would avoid the risks arising under either absolute dictatorship of the state or absolute anarchy of statelessness. He also visualized a responsible agrarian population and the stable and level-headed people of small agricultural market towns dominating the internal social, and political life of the community. This, of course was not a plea for primitivism. It was a plea for a way of life that is instinctive to India, a way that provides a purpose, a faith and meaning.\(^2\)

Sketch of an ideal village according to Mahatma Gandhi:

- Communal unity
- Removal of untouchability
- Prohibition
- Khadi
- Revival of village industries
- Village sanitation
- Basic education
- Adult education
- Equal Participation for women
- Health
- Simplicity
- Economic Equality
- Ending Exploitation of peasants
- Regulation of labour organisation
- Uplift of Adivasis
- Care of lepers
- Active participation of students
- Civil disobedience and Improvement of cattle

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Self reliance, an abstract scheme for small and independent unit, finds its fullest application at the level of Gandhian vision of Grama Swaraj. All modern development theories are anchored on the goal of fullest realization of the human personality for creating a new social order. The ultimate object is the fullest realization of each and every man. Self reliance starts with the individual and finds its fullest application at the level of village Swaraj.

4.4.8. 'Gardens of Eden' instead of 'Dumpheaps'

It is evident that Gandhian vision of the village was not a static one. He believed that when Indian villages are fully developed, they will not be dump heaps but tiny 'gardens of Eden' where dwell intelligent folk whom no one can deceive or exploit. His vision of an ideal village through the 'swaraj' did not prevent Gandhi from working for immediate targets, i.e., to promote the dignity of labour, a direct extension of the concept of self-reliance, providing the individual an opportunity to earn a decent livelihood. The village is the focus of the direct struggle against misery and the proper organizational level for direct democracy. The prime necessity is seen as equalizing the access to land, without which equality among the villagers cannot be realized. Gandhi clearly analysed the deplorable conditions of the peasants and he mentions repeatedly that to speak of equality among villagers without equalising their access to land is meaningless. Therefore, Gandhi wanted land reforms through a non-violent approach. Without these, villages may remain centres of organized violence. If India wants swaraj to be built on non-violence, she will have to give the villages their proper place. In this respect Gandhian ideas are very close to the United Nations' concept of the totality of community living. Gandhi strongly advocated that a non-violent society cannot be built on a factory civilization but it can be built on self-contained villages. Industrial societies have suffered from inherent contradictions because of centralization, exploitation and their class nature.

2. Ibid., p.194.
Hence Gandhi advocated decentralization, a rural economy free from exploitation, ignorance and violence.¹

The rural set up providing the milieu for everyone to perform physical labour is a great social leveller. The village life promotes the swadeshi spirit which restricts one to use immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote, be it in religion, polity or economy. It also means a state of perfect religious harmony among different religious groups. So the vision of Gandhi was freedom for all people and it is also in all senses a state of non-subjection to any force.

Gandhi said “I am not freeing India merely from the English yoke. I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever, I have no desire to exchange ‘King Log’ for ‘King Stork’. Hence, for me the movement of swaraj is also a movement of self purification”.²

Gandhi also distinguished through a letter dated June 6, 1947, the concepts of self-government and good government and reminded that far greater sacrifice would be needed after the attainment of self-government to establish good government³. The word self-government also has the connotation ‘independent government’. Self-government means continuous effort to be independent of government control whether it is foreign or national. Gandhi said “swaraj government will be a sorry affair if people look up to it for the regulation of every detail of life”.⁴ Gandhi’s conception of self-government envisages a man governing his own being as the highest type of reformer. This concept is the basis of Gandhi’s philosophy of economic, political, social and religious reforms which are but extensions of individual freedom.

One may find a striking similarity between Gandhi’s concept of self-government and J.S. Mills’ concept of “liberty”. The central idea of Mill’s essay ‘On liberty’ encourages and promotes a large variety of types of characters and modes of thinking in a significant way. Mill was in favour of permitting full freedom to human nature to expand and improve in all kinds of directions.⁵

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¹ Harijan, 29-6-1935.
² The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi in 95 vols., Vol.XXIV, 1979 rpt., New Delhi, p.226. Also see, Young India, 12-6-1924.
⁴ Young India, 6 Aug. 1925, p.276.
also declared that the only part of the conduct of anyone for which he is amenable to society is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is noteworthy. Over himself, over his own body, and mind the individual is sovereign.¹

4.4.9. Participation for all

It is the people’s involvement in the day to day conduct of affairs that gives the strong base for the government to perform its activities effectively and successfully. It is rightly said by J.S. Mill that the only government which can fully satisfy all the exigencies of the social state is one in which all the people participate. It is observed that people participate in development either by taking advantage of the institutional means that society makes available to them, or by forming groups to alter or create a new institutional order itself....the nature and extent of people’s participation in development will be largely determined by the nature of the institutional structure, the prevailing value system and the relationship between the elite group and the citizenship.²

4.5.0. Vision of Panchayat Raj

The political ingredient of Gandhi’s vision of Gram Sabha at the lowest level is the Panchayat or the government of the village that will function within the framework of Gram Swaraj. This Panchayat, however, does not work in isolation but it is linked with the national central legislature.

The rationale that Mahatma Gandhi put forward in favour of Village Panchayat in a Gram Sabha has many dimensions. Needless to say that, it is all centred round his commitment to the uplift of all villagers. Gandhi visualised Panchayat Raj as a political structure, suitable to Indian genius and tradition because in it the lowest and the weakest in the society are equally treated as the highest and strongest in their land. The scheme has many other dimensions too, even though the draft scheme sketched by Mahatma Gandhi does not give a full picture. In fact, Gandhi, never

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¹ D.K. Chatterjee, Gandhi and Constitution Making in India, New Delhi, 1984, p.1X.
outlined the complete scheme which was in his mind.

4.5.1. Antecedents: Mrs. Mayo’s carping criticism

Mahatma Gandhi opened his mind to illustrate the scheme of Panchayat Raj in 1930’s in the context of many allegations against the revival of the Indian village system. The main criticism was weighed down against social evils like child marriage, caste, untouchability, ignorance, superstitions, and lack of a sense of corporate cleanliness. Such allegations were repeated by both the Indian and English friends who became both the admirers and critics of Mahatma Gandhi. The statement of Mrs. Mayo, is a case in point, to which C.F. Andrews gave an apt reply. Mrs. Mayo remarked that India’s villages lay scattered miles apart across the open country that, each just a handful of mud-walled huts chiseled beside the hole they took the mud from, now half full of stagnant water, in which they wash and bathe and quench their thirst. C.F. Andrews replied that village life in India as a whole is a clean life and normally free from the gross forms of violation of moral life. If the village life is rotten, then India must be rotten.¹

C.F. Andrews thus commented that the village people have a regular culture of their own, which reaches mystical heights of spiritual vision in the place where they settle. The genius of India, whether in art and music, or architecture, has continually had its origin in these villages. The village community is like a large family. Behind all, there is a religious observance which has placed

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¹ C.F. Andrews, ‘Poverty in Indian Villages Under British Rule,’ in S.R. Bakshi, ed., The Gandhian Thought: Social and Political Development, Vol. III, Delhi, 1990, pp. 124-125. He wrote: “Where there are in all more than seven hundred thousand villages each with a character of its own, only a life long residence in India on the part of a foreigner can give him experience sufficient to say with confidence that the main facts are known to him at last. Indian life is so complex that most of those who stay longest in the country grow less confident as time goes on, about the things they believed to be true... the whole life is incredibly simple. This is all very far removed from indulgence in vicious practice. The industry of these patent villages is proverbial.... There is a phrase in English literature which describes a major part of this village life — Worthington’s “Plain living and high thinking”....it is necessary always to remember that there are millions of villagers called the depressed classes or untouchables who live on a lower scale of hard physical discomfort... In spite of physical difficulties, on the mental and spiritual side I have by no means overdrawn the picture. Yet facts like this seems to be convincingly to prove that the sex theory of Indian poverty is wrong. Also, C.F. Andrews quoted another report appeared in Young India’ed. 14 June, 1928, which clearly portrayed the pen picture of an Indian village life. The towns are a growth of modern times, artificial and exotic. The villages have nestle amid their tiers for centuries. Also see, Young India, 7 June 1928.
greatest emphasis on self control. In another letter C.F. Andrews replied to Mrs. Mayo’s formulation of a sex theory of Indian poverty in villages.1

Answering Miss Mayo’s allegation that India was traditionally backward, C.F. Andrews wrote that subjection to foreign rule has badly crippled the manufacture of cotton cloth and other indigenous industries. Villages were secure and self-contained in earlier years because in the hot and dry season of the year they could employ their time in cloth manufacture. Indeed they had become marvellous experts, and Indian cotton cloth, handsome, and hand woven was known all over the world. But the power of dictation having passed to Great Britain owing to conquest, the process rapidly set in, whereby the manufacturers of Lancashire supplanted the home made manufacturers of India. And it has been done deliberately to cripple the Indian villager.2

When the British took over, they incorporated the Panchayat as a part of the British system and put a cess on it and converted them as revenue units. This was contrary to the spirit of self-government. It lost its root when it derived its authority from the British laws instead of the will of the village community. The British conquest had a commercial, rather than a military concern. While in the new commercial centres, riches have accumulated, in the villages there has been evergrowing poverty over large areas. The actual pinch of poverty is now more keenly felt.3

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2. Ibid., pp. 178-179 and p. 183. Also see, Young India, 26 June 1928 & 2 Aug. 1928.

3. Ibid., pp. 173-74.
4.5.2. Every Village, a Republic

It was this situation which compelled Gandhi to expound the vision of a Panchayat Raj from the village to the Centre in "Oceanic Circles. This concept is also very much related to two features - decentralization of power at the grass-root level, and emphasis on sovereignty of people at all levels. Both of these would pave the way for the exercise of freedom and enjoyment of independence. To Gandhi, independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic with a Panchayat system of administration. It follows, therefore that, every village has to be self sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against any onslaught from without. Thus, ultimately, it is the individual who is the unit.¹

4.5.3. Features. Oceanic Circle instead of Pyramidal

Gandhi did not think of a pyramidal structure of Indian polity. He did not think of higher or lower layers of powers, crushing each other, or the village autonomy. The autonomous units of power at different levels which Gandhi calls 'Oceanic Circle' are organically linked together². Their important features are (a) autonomy and self reliance at different levels, (b) perfect entity and separate existence of every village, (c) individual entities of rich and poor, (d) greater degree of decentralization in which one is not tied up to the other for its existence.

It is relevant to cite Gandhi's view of a self-contained village to be created by decentralisation and the position of Panchayat Raj in a village. In this description too, Gandhi's reply is rich in evocative detail. He said:

In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever widening, never ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle, whose centre will be the individual, always ready to perish for the village... till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majority of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units. Therefore, the outer-

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1. The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi in 95 vols., Vol.LXXV, New Delhi, 1979, p.32 & p.147
most circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but give
strength to all within, and derive its own strength from the centre.1

Gandhi's contribution was to alter fundamentally the base, the structure and shape of the
power pyramid. This he advocated through the vision of 'Oceanic Circle' of power structure in ever
widening and never ascending circle. In almost every nation of the world, in the pyramid-structure
of the administrative system, all the power flows from the top to bottom rather than the otherway
round. Contrary to such pattern Gandhi envisaged the model of an inverted pyramid.

The Gandhian system of Panchayat Raj will function successfully on the basis of mutual help
of different circles of villages leading to the central power structure. Gandhi declared that the
outermost circumference will not yield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all
within and derive its own strength from it. There will be dependence on one another in those areas
where one village republic is threatened with scarcity. Sociologically, it is an equalizing
mechanism. Gandhi said: "I claim verity for my picture in which the last is equal to the first or in
other words no one is to be the first and none the last. Under this arrangement every one knows
what he or she wants.2

It is the function of the Panchayat to revive honesty and industry to teach the villagers to
avoid disputes. This would ensure speedy justice without any expenditure. They would use neither
the police nor the military. Then the Panchayat should work for cattle improvement. The
Panchayat should also see to an increase in the quantity of the food stuff grown in the village. This
was to be accomplished by properly manuring the soil. Then they must see to the cleanliness of their
village and its inhabitants. They must be clean and healthy in body and mind.3 Everyone will know

2. Harijan. 28-7-1946.
3. D.G. Tendulkar, Mahatma, Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in 8 vols., Vol. VIII, Bombay,
1954, pp. 271-72. The author says that a prayer meeting was held at the Sammalka Village where a
Panchayat Ghar had been built. Gandhi congratulated the villagers on having built a Panchayat
Ghar (office). He said that distinguished travellers from the various parts of the world came to India in
the days of yore, from China and other countries. They all came in quest of knowledge and they put up
with great hardships in travelling .... It was the function of the Panchayat to teach the villagers to avoid
disputes if they had to settle them. That would ensure speedy justice without any expenditure. They
would need neither the police nor the military ... He hoped that they would also eradicate untouchability,
if there was any trace of it still left in their village. The Hindus, the Muslims, the Sikhs, the Parsis, and
the Christians should all live as brothers and sisters. If they achieved all, he had mentioned, they would
come to see their model village, and take inspiration from it.
how to earn a living by the sweat of one's brow. There will be dignity of labour: the people will voluntarily turn themselves into "scavengers" or "capitalists". Everybody will use country made goods or swadeshi and finally they will be prepared to sacrifice their life for the village. These are the Gandhian contours of a model village administered by Panchayat.

Every religion will have an equal place in the village republic, and Gandhi wanted to build up perfect harmony among different religious groups, as all people are "leaves of a majestic tree whose trunk cannot be shaken off its roots which are deep down in the bowels of the earth. The mightiest wind cannot move it".1

4.5.4. Scheme of Panchayat Raj

In 1931, while addressing the Round Table Conference in London, Gandhi gave his scheme of political structure which differed slightly from the one which he had given earlier. The scheme visualizes the future structure of the political system beginning with the village at the base to central legislative body at the upper level. Gandhi also suggested many points about the working of the Panchayats.2

However, the draft scheme sketched by Gandhi does not give a full picture. In fact he never outlined a complete plan. The scheme remained in his mind.

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A Panchayat should be set up without the written sanction of Provincial Congress Committee. No Panchayat should be set up without the written sanction of Provincial Congress Committee. A Panchayat should be set up. In any instance, it should be recommended by the Tehsil Committee; it should be recommended by the Panchayat; Such Panchayat should have no criminal jurisdiction; it may try civil suits if the parties refer their disputes to the Panchayat; it may try civil suits if the parties refer their disputes to the Panchayat; No one should be compelled to refer any matter to the Panchayat; No one should be compelled to refer any matter to the Panchayat; No Panchayat should have any authority to impose fines, the only sanction behind its civil decrees being its moral authority, strict impartiality and the willing obedience of the parties concerned; there should be no social or other boycott for the time being; Every Panchayat will be expected to attend to - a) The education of boys and girls in its village, b) Its sanitation, c) Its medical needs, d) The upkeep and cleanliness of village wells or ponds e) The uplift of and the daily wants of the so called untouchables. A Panchayat that fails without just cause to attend to the requirements within six months of its election or a Panchayat that fails without just cause to attend to the requirements within six months of its election or fails otherwise to retain the goodwill of the villagers or stands self condemned for any other cause appearing sufficient to the provincial congress committee, may be disbanded and another elected in its place.

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4.5.5. Highlights of Panchayat Raj: Distribution of Powers and Links with the Centre

The Panchayat in Gandhian view does not work in isolation but it is linked with the national central legislature. Gandhi explained that in the Panchayat Raj Scheme the villages would elect their own little committees which in turn would elect the Taluq committees, (sub-district). These would again elect the District Councils which would constitute the electoral college for Provincial Councils. The Provincial Councils would send their members to the Central Legislature.

In the Gandhian scheme the people elect directly only the Village Panchayat Government. The elected members or the Village Panchayat, elect indirectly the representatives of the national system. In this model one finds a decreasing sense of political legitimacy as one proceeds from the village community. His model assigns the greatest political power to the village community and the least to the national political structure. About the functions, local matters are assigned to the local bodies and central matters to the central legislature.

At the same time the Panchayati Raj implies that it is not an isolated system at the grass-root level but part of a wider national system. The system was expected to strengthen the national political system on the basis of genuine grass-root democracy. The Panchayat system of administration under the vision of Gram Swaraj is not only a scheme of choosing political representatives, but an arrangement in which the entire community finds itself involved in the political, social and economic affairs of the local community, the state and the nation, through its links with the national government. It is based on the assumption that the establishment of a chain of new democratic institutions at the grass-root level would open to the rural areas many more avenues for their participation in the political process of the country. In Panchayat Raj, the people of India govern themselves through their representative institutions from the Lok Sabha to Gram Swaraj. In other words, the Lok Sabha should be the cumulative reflection of Gram Sabha. Here, two aspects would be at a higher plane-responsibility to the community at micro level, and concern for the state and the country at the macro level. It is clear that Gandhi looked upon the village as basic unit; it is also postulated as a link in the strong chain of the society. The unit of society means a manageable

small group of people who would ideally be self sufficient in the matter of their vital requirements and bound together in bonds of mutual co-operation and independence. Mahatma Gandhi established his micro level laboratory in India at Sevagram (Maharashtra) where he experimented with the self sufficient, participative and co-operative village system.1

A dynamic democracy, Gandhi believed, could grow only out of meaningful relationship and spontaneous organization that spring up among the people where they come together at the local level to solve their basic problems among themselves. In such a community, achievement of self sufficiency and security by mutual co-operation engenders a strong sense of local strength and solidarity. This also forms the message of the Gandhian vision of Gram Swaraj.

It is evident that Gandhi wanted the Panchayat to end exploitation and to carry out its functions and responsibilities with the co-operation of the villagers. Self reliance had become the keystone of the whole system. Its fundamental requirement is voluntary co-operation or participation of all the villagers. The relations of the village Panchayat to higher units of the organization of country should not be based on any element of permanent subordination. This follows from his concept of oceanic circles as already referred to. In short, for Gandhi, every village is to be a republic having full powers, self sustained, self reliant and self-contented.2

4.5.6. Relation to Modern Quality of Life

It may seem that Gandhi’s concept is not anchored on the modern, urban, or industrial notion of development or on the ‘post-modern’ perspective of the quality of life. Gandhi ceaselessly insisted on a pattern of village life, wherein the quality was the crux, and he argued for village development, by accelerating all aspects of life in the village. India, to him, represents the rural as contrasted with the urban culture; the genius of the one differs from that of the other. Under these circumstances the only system suitable to India is decentralized autonomous bodies at the lower level.

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   Also see, Harijan, 15-2-1948.
4.5.7. Panchayats, not relics of Tribalism

Gandhi advocated that if democracy is to survive, it must be based on decentralization and on the models of ancient ‘rural republics’ in India. This does not mean that the old Panchayat could be revived exactly in the old form that is neither possible nor desirable. Necessary changes will have to be effected to suit modern conditions. Gandhi held the view that an ideal constitution, whether for India or for other countries, must be based on the organization of well-knit and co-ordinated village communities with their positive and direct democracy, non-violent, cottage economy and human contacts. It is absolutely wrong to think that Gandhian ideas on decentralization of democracy are medieval and that Panchayats are relics of tribalism.¹

4.5.8. Legislative, Executive and judicial Combination at the Microlevel

The village Panchayat would have legislative, judicial and executive functions in the village. Therefore, it would pass laws, settle the disputes and act as the executive of the village government. Obviously therefore, it would have a list of subjects on which it could pass laws. Gandhi’s statement about the extent to which a Panchayat should hold powers is a clear testimony of its efficiency and value. It is also a proof of his faith in the rural local bodies. He said that the greater the power to the Panchayat, the better for the people of India. Gandhi’s commitment to the Village Panchayat was so great that he looked upon it as an extended family.

4.6.0. Distortions to Gandhi’s Vision

Since Gandhi spoke a lot about villages and rural values it led many critics to call Gandhi a votary of agrarian primitivism. Fesler views that the scheme joins the list of doctrinal approach, that falls into the category of idealism only. “It intends to turn the clock back, and to restore traditional values...terrifying of ideological conflicts”². But Gandhi never stood with the older assumptions or stereotypes about Panchayat Raj. Gandhi made this point very clear:

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I have not pictured a poverty-stricken India containing ignorant millions. I have pictured to myself an India continually progressing along the lines best suited to her genius. I do not picture it as a third class or even a first class copy of the dying civilization of the West. If my dream is fulfilled and everyone of the seven lakhs of villages becomes a healthy republic, in which there are no illiterates, in which no one is idle for want of work, in which everyone has usually occupied dwellings and sufficient Khadi for covering the body and in which all the villagers know and observe the laws of hygiene and sanitation, such a state must have varied and increasing needs which it must supply unless it would stagnate.¹

The overall process, according to Gandhi was intended to wean the village people from their reliance on the traditions of the past and to create in them a full acceptance of science and technology in both their ways of living and of making a living.² It is often forgotten that Gandhi was not enamoured of the village as it exists today, his image of the village was an entirely transformed identity.³

4.6.1. Towards the Uplift of Villages

Gandhi made it clear that he was not in favour of putting back the hand of the clock of progress. He wanted to replace the mills by hand spinning and hand weaving as a duty to prevent the flow of millions from India, sent out of India for the sake of mill processing.⁴ Gandhi was often criticized for his abhorrence of machinery in the villages without a proper analysis of his thought. He wanted to distribute the money saved through hand spinning and hand weaving, instead of production of yarn and cloth, in the mills in the cottages. He identified with the villagers and asked others to love them. Gandhi said that any lover of true democracy and village life can take up a village, treat it as his world and work, and get excellent results. He begins by being the village

scavenger, spinner, watchman, medicine man and school master all at once.

4.6.2. The Vision of a Vast Gram swaraj

Another criticism is that Gandhi's local communities are federally united into a larger polity, and that their consciousness does not rise above the local level. There is no area of life in which they are collectively engaged in the pursuit of a common enterprise. They debate local and not national issues and do not take part in the elections to the National Assembly. Therefore, not only does it remain deeply fragmented and fragile, it is also difficult to see how its members can be morally concerned about their fellow citizens elsewhere with whom their contacts are minimum.¹

In fact, Gandhi never visualised a Gram Swaraj limited in scope. He had a vision of the 'Oceanic Circle' of power structure right upto the national level or beyond that; Gandhi, in fact, presents the highest ideal of internationalism. He wrote that just as the cult of patriotism teaches us that the individual has to die for the village, the village has to work for the district, the district for the province and the province for the country and if necessary for the benefit of the whole world.²

Gandhi in his writings repeatedly said that India does not live in towns but in villages. In a letter to Miraben on 4 Feb. 1936, Gandhi wrote. "My heart is in the villages. Centralization as a system is inconsistent with the non-violent structure of society."³ Gandhi strongly advised the Panchayats to continue their very useful work of giving people cheap, speedy and efficient justice. The key to swaraj is not in the cities but in the villages and so Gandhi said "I have settled in a village, a village which I did not go seeking, but which came to me."⁴

4.6.3. Predominance of Public Opinion

Mahatma Gandhi strongly believed that when Panchayat comes into existence, public opinion will do what violence can never do. The Panchayat as an institution for settling disputes, would be the real representative body and the present power groups at the village level would hold

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away only as long as the common people did not realize their own strength. In a *Panchayat Raj*, only the *Panchayat* will be obeyed and a *Panchayat* can work only through the law of its making. The main features of this system are (a) popular sovereignty based on moral authority is vested with the people and (b) political power is completely decentralized.

6.4.4. Power Politics towards Constructive Work

Gandhi recognized the policy of freedom of thought which guides man’s actions. In *swaraj* state, ruled by *Panchayat* system, man’s mind will not be dominated by power politics. It works under highly decentralized conditions. Therefore power politics is bound to be directed for constructive work and public service. The rule of the elected representative institutions is to be gradually reduced. The individuals are to train themselves for self rule. The concept is also based on the philosophy of *sarvodaya* which seeks to protect the weakest sections in the society. Under such an administrative system the weakest has the same opportunity as the strongest.

4.7.0 A Great India through the revival of villages

The village institutions like *Gram Sabha* and the *Panchayat* with their long tradition and self-contained autonomous nature, provided Mahatma Gandhi the necessary requisites to base his vision of *Gram Swaraj* in a free and independent India. To Gandhi, the independence of India was synonymous with the betterment of the life of the Indian villagers. He never ceased to declare that the soul of India was in her villages and that only when villagers awakened to their full potentialities they could be truly independent and usher in a new era of social and economic justice. Mahatma Gandhi developed the idea of a full fledged system of local bodies from the bottom to the top with the numerous villages forming the true basis of free India. His concept of *swaraj* was one of extremely self-sufficient local units, on which the people had to build a strong India.

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Mahatma Gandhi used the term *Ramrajya* in the context of a system of rule where all the people will be happy. The record one gets from the epic *Ramayana*, tells about the rule of Sree Rama, the exiled son of King Dasaratha. Later, Rama was the ruler-servant of Ayodhya. During his rule, all men were happy, had plenty to eat, and there were no famines or shortages of food. As given earlier the term ‘raj’ means rule.
It seems that Gandhi’s ideal indicates the direction rather than the destination. Gandhi seeks to build up a democratic self-governing structure from below, by awakening the masses into a sense of their power and dignity, a system of planning at the grass-root level itself. He reminds the people that they constitute the real power of the nation; they are the real masters of their own affairs. Gandhi was fully conscious of the fact that power corrupts and absolute power, centralized at one point, corrupts absolutely. The only remedy to this dichotomy, to him, is the dispersal of power. The state in his view must be democratic not only in forms but in practice too. If democracy is to be a real one, it must provide adequate forum for the expression and synthesis of views and thoughts. When democracy provides the maximum opportunity to its citizens for their spiritual and mental and growth, the freedom to develop their personality to the fullest extent possible, then democracy is said to be a real one. The most essential criteria would be the maximum opportunity for the people to participate in decision-making and in the implementation process. This is possible through the process of decentralization because it would ensure the sub-division of the country into a large number of administrative units with the progressive devolution of authority from one level to another, yet interlinked one with the other.

4.8.0 Deflection from Gandhian vision

However, Gandhian vision of an independent India consisting of innumerable units of Gram Swaraj at the lower levels which are linked to the national level by a wide network of Panchayat system was not duly comprehended after 1947. While the total number of Panchayats in terms of arithmetical calculations showed an increasing trend, nothing like community-based self-sufficiency or self-government has developed. In some states, committees were separately constituted to study the process of decentralization at the local levels and to recommend proposals incorporating some of the Gandhian ideas which were themselves not of a major significance within the frame-work of the Western type of parliamentary government. Gandhian concepts of political self-government and democratic decentralization, were poles apart.

conclusion

The constituent Assembly proceeded to frame a constitution for India which embodied a Euro-American type of Constitution or a Westminster model of parliamentary democracy at the centre, bypassing the Gandhian Constitution and his vision of Gram Swaraj.

The confusion of ideological variations still lie over the nature of village democracy itself. As a result Panchayati Raj institutions have come to be associated with three-fold images - as instruments for the realization of Community Development, an organ of the State/Central Government, and finally an extension and embodiment of democracy at the village level. The first looks upon Panchayati Raj as a body of instrumental value, the second as an agent of the government and the third as a nursery for political education.

As stated earlier, there are some distortions too, about Gandhian vision. Since Gandhi spoke a lot about villagism, some critics call Gandhi a votary of agrarian primitivism, primitive tribalism as well as localism. In fact, Gandhi never visualised a Gram Swaraj, limited in scope.

The fundamental frame-work of Panchayats was left with the States under the provisions of the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Indian Constitution. Accordingly, the directives on Panchayats had percolated down the state levels in their varied forms. The State of Kerala, also moved in a line with the other States in the Indian Union.

Kerala State also presents more or less a pattern of the Western concept of local Government, which treats Panchayats as the local units of administration. Though the Kerala pattern of Panchayat system functions more or less on a model of administration left by the imperial rule, there are considerable differences from the national pattern in structure and functions. More than these structural and functional variations in the systems, Kerala State enjoys some other salient features, like a higher degree of political consciousness represented by the needed political, social, and communal harmony in implementing the programme. Effective monitoring of civic and municipal functions, political and financial decentralization of powers at the low level at least in a limited way and better quality of life - all these contributed to a better scope for implementing the Gandhian model of Gram Sabha.

Historically Kerala village system was also different from that which was in other parts of India. The next section under 4 chapters, deals with the above aspects of Kerala State as well as the process of decentralization effected in the State.

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