CHAPTER 3

DECENTRALIZATION IN INDIA: HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS, CONTINUITY, CHANGE AND RECENT EFFORTS

3.1.0. Village Autonomy

Indian villages have been regarded as seats of local government since very early times. Each village formed a separate unit in itself and each one was more or less autonomous, governed by a Panchayat. Thus, the concept of Panchayat has an ancient flavour and tradition.

The emergence of village autonomy was due to many reasons. Firstly, the economic life was primarily built around land, the principal means of subsistence. Since land was generally owned by the village community a communal spirit developed in all the economic activities. This, in turn permeated other spheres of life as well. Such a communal social life provided an atmosphere congenial to their autonomous functioning.¹

Secondly, physical remoteness imposed a check on the intrusion of the central authority in the life of the villages. The lack of transport and communication rendered it rather difficult for any authority to exercise that degree of control which made it impossible for the village to act as an independent unit. Thus, despite a central focus of power, authority in ancient India tended to be diffused and divided between different layers of the social framework. Under every regime, suzerain or feudal, the village remained the ultimate unit of society in India.

There were many associations also in the villages — economic, social and religious — which urged a fair degree of autonomy and sovereignty. Among all such various units of power, however, villages were the axis round which other centres of power revolved. The ‘Rig Veda’ bears testimony to the role played by the Village Council in Ancient India thus:

Assemble, speak together; let your minds be all of one accord:

The place is common; common the assembly, common the mind so be

- their thought united;

The one and the same be your resolve and be your minds of one accord,
United by the thought of all that may happily agree...\(^1\)

3.1.1. Antecedents of *Panchayats*

A survey of the nature and scope of the activities of the Mauryan State (in ancient India) will show that it was largely a welfare State.\(^2\) The Mauryas paid full attention to all the matters like public hygiene, measures against adulteration of food etc., through various committees at the village level. Hence, attempts were made under the Mauryan rule to revive and encourage the old village institutions in order to have better and uniform administration for the first time in the history of India. But, on account of the limited time, these village councils could not be revived to the extent desired. Nevertheless, they managed their various affairs through an elected council of villagers.\(^3\)

Under the Imperial Guptas, the village administration was in the charge of a headman designated as a *Grameyaka* or *Gramadhyaksha*. The headman was assisted in his work by a non-official council. The members of this body were known as *Mahattars* under the Vakatakas and the Pallavas and probably had the same designation under the Guptas too. The village council as the lowest unit of administration looked after the village defence, settled disputes and acted as a trustee for minors and collected the government revenues and paid them into the central treasury.\(^4\) The villagers were prosperous and well advanced in art, literature, folklore, and folk-culture.

The Muslims and more particularly, the Mughals did not interfere much with the existing arrangements, although the system of administration which the Mughals developed was not entirely indigenous in character.\(^5\) It presented a blend of Indian and extra-Indian elements, or more correctly it was a 'Perso - Arabic' system in Indian setting. But, despite its alien characteristics, the changes in the government were effected at the top levels only, at the bottom, the lowest unit, i.e., the village, autonomy continued. The Muslim rulers respected the then existing Indian practice and "the vast mass of Indian customary laws, so far as they did not run counter to the root principles of all

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Islamic governments and ‘in all non-essential matters’ lower rung of the official ladder, the Indian was allowed to prevail.”1 (emphasis added)

The Muslim rulers respected village autonomy and the village Panchayats continued to keep a vigilant eye on breaches of time-honoured custom, to secure order and mutual co-operation to settle petty disputes.2 The village Panchayat was so much held in respect that an appeal preferred against its judgment only tended to confirm its judgment. In other words, it was the highest authority and the king respected the decision of the Panchayat. Together with the functions like settlement of disputes, which the village councils undertook for the welfare of the community it had also an elaborate system of functionaries.3

However, under the later Mughals, the structure and functioning of village communities showed unmistakable signs of decadence. The quest for large finances for the state and their feudalistic bend of mind forced the Mughal rulers to centralize the administration.4 They worked out a new land policy whereunder all the lands situated in the length and breadth of their domain, the provinces, districts and villages, were put under the charge of the centrally appointed Subedars, Amualguzars, Muqaddams and Patwari.

Moreover, in the villages which were completely under the Muslim suzerainty, due to the oppression of its officers and the greed for revenue, farmers and the other villagers practically lost their power and the village councils became an obsolete body hardly possessing any major influence. The peasant population in the rural area fell a prey to the rapacity of the Jagirdars who tried to extort from the peasant as much as they could. The Jagirdars are reported to have said thus: “Let us draw from the soil all the money we can, though the peasant should starve or abscond and we should leave it, when commanded to quit, a dreary wilderness.” Exactions, beating and whipping of the peasantry fleeing the land, all became general features of the agrarian condition in India during this period.

3.1.2. Decline under the British Rule

The British policy towards the local bodies was linked with their overall strategy of political and economic centralization; This has been linked with the superior administration. It was necessary to make village officials the salaried servants of the state in order to realize the above objective of a highly centralized administration. And this was the policy of those who saw the advantage of a centralized uniform system and applied it without regard to its effect upon the indigenous social structure in the vast area.¹

Also, an overall evaluation of local bodies under the British rule brings to light the fact that their administration with its Roman system of justice replacing the traditional powers of the Panchayat in the more serious judicial cases, its system of tax gathering and a centralized administration had made so violent an impact that the corporate life of the villages was weakened, and in most cases died. Under the new administrative arrangement, the village headman increasingly came to be identified as a representative of the government and the villages were not impressed by the popular character of the institution. A British historian commented thus: "The desired effect could not be brought down as the British hymn of praise to the traditional Panchayats turned out to be a funeral dirge. Efficiency triumphed at the expense of local autonomy and organic village life."²

On the eve of the British conquest, the Indian rural society was composed of a multitude of villages, and each village lived almost an independent, atomistic, self sufficient social and economic existence.³ The bullock cart and village huts seen in Bharhut sculptures of about 150 B.C. or the plough and ploughman in Kushana reliefs of A.D. 200 would reveal that there were

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² Percival Spear, The Oxford History of Modern India (1740-1975), 1984 rpt., Delhi, p. 191
  The author says that the net result was the gradual transfer of authority (within the village) from the village elders to the agents of government. The same process occurred in judicial and in other matters like setting-up of a new police force. As police forces were organized in the districts they took cognizance of crimes which had formerly been largely left to the discretion of village councils. For details see, pp. 190-192.
tremendous advances in the means of production\textsuperscript{1}. It does remain true that the Indian village was nearly self contained. The village administration was carried on by the Village \textit{Panchayat}, composed of elected or customary representatives of various castes, generally elders of the castes or village headmen with the \textit{Panchayat} as the consultative body. The Village \textit{Panchayat} was the link between the village population and the higher authority. The \textit{Panchayat} and the headman maintained peace in the village, settled disputes among the villages, looked after the sanitation and other matters of common concern of the village population. Thus, from the stand point of administration the village was autonomous, till the state’s interference under the British rule. The autonomy of these villages disappeared largely due to the establishment of local, civil and criminal courts, revenue and police organizations, increase in communications, growth of individualism and the operation of the ryotwari system\textsuperscript{2}.

3.1.3. Lord Mayo’s Resolution

Lord Mayo’s Resolution had provided for a measure of decentralization from the centre to the provinces and emphasized the ideal of the increased association of Indians in the administration, but limited to municipal levels only. In rural areas, the village officials were made the salaried servants of the government.

3.1.4. Lord Ripon’s Resolution

It was into this scene of a decaying traditional village system that Lord Ripon introduced his Resolution on Local Self Government in 1882. Lord Ripon, while advocating a wide extension of local self government, insisted also on minimum government interference, in inducing the people themselves to undertake the management of their own affairs. Ripon’s Resolution of 1882 is a document worth quoting:

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In advocating the extension of local self-government and the adoption of this principle on the management of many branches of local affairs, the Governor General-in-Council does not suppose that the work will be in the first instance better done than if it remained in the sole hands of the Government District officers. It is not primarily with a view to improvement in administration that this measure is put forward and supported. It is chiefly desirable as an instrument of political and popular education...

3.1.5. 'Popular and Political Education'

Thus, Ripon’s Resolution on Local Self Government was not merely a means of devolution of authority in administration, or decentralization of financial resources only, but was a means of popular and political education and under the successors, Panchayats were meant to be units of imperial administration at the lower levels. It is to be noted that his scheme did not cover the grass-root level bodies but limited up to the Taluq level only. Anyhow the noble intentions of the Viceroy were defeated by the officials themselves. In Central Provinces the principle of election was implemented to a great extent and the chairman of Local Boards became non-official. In other Provinces the old system continued which resulted in greater chaos. The government exercised strict control over the activities of urban and local bodies and imposed rigorous action at its discretion.

However, the later Report submitted by the Statutory Commission pointed out that the intentions of Lord Ripon could not be fulfilled due to many factors. They include customs of the country, force of habit, apathy and lack of desire to assume responsibilities among the elected members, reluctance of officials, all combined to prevent real and substantial progress being made in political and popular education in the art of self-government. Therefore, no real attempt was made to inaugurate a separate system amenable to the will of the local inhabitants. Hugh Tinker comments thus: "Despite the clear directive given to official policy by Lord Ripon, and periodically re-affirmed thereafter, neither the central government nor its officers in the districts, gave a sustained impetus to the development of the ideal of local responsibility in the period ending with the first

3.1.6. British system Incorporated

The most remarkable fact is that the Resolution of 1882 was the maiden attempt to introduce the British model of local government in India. It reported that there existed in India, nothing similar to the Local Self Government of the British type, before the era of Ripon's reforms. All the subsequent enactments under the colonial administration in one way or other followed the Ripon’s pattern and this was subsequently incorporated into the Indian psyche. In 1896 and again in 1897, the Government of India adopted resolutions on local government, but they were limited up to Taluq level only. And also their content and spirit were more or less similar to the earlier resolution.

3.1.7. Royal Commission on Decentralization, 1907

All the enactments pertaining to urban and local bodies under Lord Curzon were directed to curtail the democratic nature. However, the ‘Royal Commission on Decentralization’, appointed by Edward VII in 1907, which consisted of five Englishmen and one Indian, Ramesh Chandra Dutt examined the whole question of local self government in India. The commission recommended the government to strengthen Village Panchayat system and recognized that throughout the greater part of India the village constituted the primary territorial unit of government organization and from the villages are built up larger administrative entities.

3.1.8. Village as the Unit of Imperial Administration

Therefore, the Decentralization Commission favoured the village as the first unit of administration, with all the functionaries like the headman, the accountant and the village watchman forming a village government. All of them became hereafter government servants. In effect the Panchayats with greater antiquity were replaced by administrative creations such as tahasils, and the

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   Also see, Rushbrook Williams, ed., *India in 1922-23*, Calcutta, 1923, pp.56-65.
local bodies were considered as the units of imperial administration. Matters pertaining to revenue, agricultural loans, or the distribution of irrigation water, the Commission felt, should not always remain outside the scope of Panchayat’s duties. In fact the resolutions pointed to the direction of village as the starting point of public life.¹

3.1.9. Pleas for Effective Decentralization

In spite of all the efforts, functioning of Village Panchayats was far from satisfactory. The efforts at the government level towards democratising the local bodies did not produce any headway and therefore, the stalwarts of Indian freedom struggle, using the public forums, pleaded for genuine decentralization and empowerment of rural local bodies. This issue became an unvaried part of the proceedings of Indian National Congress since its 24th session held at Lahore. The members hoped that the rural local bodies would be endowed with real power and alleged that the Imperial Government had more mind in the affairs of Municipal and District Boards than the Panchayat system. At the Karachi session of Indian National Congress (1913) a resolution was adopted “urging to take early steps to increase the powers and resources of local bodies.”²

3.1.10 Mrs. Annie Besant’s Plea

Mrs. Annie Besant, at the 32nd session of Indian National Congress held in Calcutta (1917) complained against the tyranny of petty officials, state’s interference, and administrative deterioration at the lower levels. The manner in which the British attempted to organize Village Panchayats (the village officials were made dependent upon the higher officials) was alleged by Mrs. Besant as the killing of the old village system. According to her the British officials became village tyrants and not the village servants. She also criticised the inefficient bureaucracy for its failure to do whatever little was suggested in 1907. She visualized that the village would become articulate through its Panchayat and be brought into touch with the larger life. Surendra Nath Banarjee, a prominent early nationalist in India, also demanded self government for India at the Calcutta session of Indian National Congress (1917).

² M. Rama Chandra Rao, The Development of Indian Polity, New Delhi, 1978, p.296.
3.1.11. Montague-Chelmsford Reforms

The British policy thereby, evoked violent protests in India. Therefore, the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms (1918) suggested to the government that the radius of official control, (which was opposed by the early nationalists) should be strictly circumscribed. The Reforms Commission laid great stress on the advisability of fostering village government. It also laid fresh emphasis on the advisability of developing the corporate life of the village as a step in the growth of self-governing institutions by taking advantage of the existing bonds of common civic interests and common traditions.¹

3.1.12. Introduction of Rural Local Board

The Montague-Chelmsford Reforms did not recommend a complete scheme of local government with wide distribution of powers down to the lower levels. The reforms included those features of British system of local government and also the native one. The British system was represented by the Rural Local Boards, while the native one was the Panchayat system. The Commission rightly observed that it is not possible to create a system in India entirely alien to the native one. The Reforms of 1918 commented: "It is impossible to ignore India's past, and at once to create a perfect system out of the present uneven materials (local government)."²

3.1.13. The Government of India Act, 1919

'The Montague-Chelmsford Report' formed the basis of the Government of India Act of 1919, which contained several measures towards decentralized functions of local bodies. Under the 'Dyarchical System' of administration, introduced in India, the Department of Local Self Government was transferred into the hands of an Indian minister and each Province was now allowed to develop local governments according to Provincial needs and requirements. It was but natural that the Indian minister should do all that he could, for the growth of local self government; however, he was handicapped of shortage of funds. As the finance portfolio was under the charge of an executive councillor, who was unsympathetic to the local

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bodies, very little work could be done in the provinces as well as at the sub-province levels.

3.2.0. Mahatma Gandhi's Plea for an Indigenous System

It was in this background that Mahatma Gandhi projected villagism as a national goal, and presented a scheme of revival of traditional Village Panchayats as a means for securing democratic decentralization. Soon, Gandhi's idea of Village Panchayats evolved as a fighting slogan against the alien regime. At the Calcutta Session of Indian National Congress (1920) a resolution to the effect of gradual boycott of British courts and the establishment of private arbitration courts, was accepted. This, in effect was a call for the revival of Village Panchayats to settle village disputes and prevent wasteful litigation. Sri. Viraraghaviyyar, at the 35th session of Indian National Congress (1920) highlighted the supreme importance of Village Panchayats in ancient times and their place as quasi-republics and self contained units. Thus, the construction programme under the guidance of Indian National Congress laid down in 1922, provisions to revive the Village Panchayats. However, Statutory bodies under the British rule were not a substitute for the old Panchayat system. Therefore, strong demands came from the nationalists for strengthening the Indian system. C. Rajagopalachari said that the leadership had been working too much at the top, they must go down to the base. Every village had its sabha, which was working for the welfare of the masses. He said thus: "...No mass movement is possible unless we have work of such organizations which by their previous non-political functions have enlisted the co-operation of the majority of the inhabitants of every village. This is the real objective of the constructive programme."2

C.R. Dass, another nationalist, advocated at the Gaya session of Indian National Congress (1922) a scheme of government in which the main emphasis was on powerful local centres. To him, autonomy of local bodies and the organization of village life were more important than either provincial autonomy or central responsibility. He also believed that real swaraj can be attained by

2. Young India, 16 Nov. 1922; Also see, H.D.Mallaviyya, Village Panchayats in India, New Delhi, 1956, p.230.
vesting the power of government in the local centres.

3.3.0 Statutory Commission, 1930

However, the 'Report of the Indian Statutory Commission, 1930,' had given out a graphic picture of the functioning of local self government to appease the cry of Indians for indigenous institutions. The Report says that in all Provinces, except Assam, the most important unit of self-government was the District Board, the jurisdiction of which is co-terminus with the district. It may be compared in composition and powers with the English County Councils though the area and population for which it is responsible are, as a rule, far larger than those of an English administrative County. The majority of the members were elected on a franchise, which, though greatly extended since the advent of the reforms, give the right to vote to little more than 3.2 per cent of the population.\(^1\) The report also says that, inspite of great efforts on the part of the government to establish village authorities in Provinces, it has not proved possible to progress rapidly though a little headway could be made in the Provinces of Madras, United Province, and Bengal. Outside these three Provinces, the movement was in its infancy. This also shows that the new experiments made by the British Government did not create any impact on the Indian masses for whom all these were part of colonial policy of centralized administration and not genuine decentralization. The statement from the United Provinces also revealed apathy of the villages to the British model of local government.

3.3.1. Efforts in Thirties

The policy proposed by the Statutory Commission in 1930 on the Panchayat system was in favour of developing it. But it viewed that the prospect of successfully developing Panchayats must depend very largely on local conditions and that the functions and powers allotted to them must vary accordingly. But where the system proves a success, it is contemplated that they must be endowed with civil and criminal jurisdiction in petty cases. The Commission, therefore, suggested that wherever possible an effective beginning should be made.

'The Act of 1935' had endorsed the directives issued by the earlier Acts and the Department

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of Local Government came under the control of minister.¹

3.4.0. Controversy and Compromise

The Draft Constitution set up by the Constituent Assembly was released with no reference to Village Panchayats. There was many a criticism from different centres against the fact that no part of the Draft Constitution had referred to ancient Village Panchayats. Justifying the position of Draft Constitution makers, Ambedkar argued that Village Panchayats have not shaped the political destiny of India in the past. He said thus: “What is in a village, but a sink of localism and a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism?”

Ambedkar also pointed out that a passage by Charles Metcalfe describes the role of the villages as a passive one. He cited Metcalfe who said thus:

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Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down, revolution succeeds revolution,
Hindu, Pathan, Moghal, Maratha, Sikh, English all are masters in turn,
but the village communities remain the same. In times of trouble they
arm and fortify themselves. A hostile army passes through the country,
The village communities collect their cattle within their walls and let the
enemy pass unprovoked.²
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Ambedkar’s reference to the village was very much regretted.³ When the Constituent Assembly debated the Draft Constitution, many expressed disapproval of Ambedkar’s remarks and recalled that Mahatma Gandhi’s dream of the future constitution of India was very broadbased. Its base was the villages of India.

Arun Chandra from West Bengal criticised Ambedkar’s remark and replied:

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I admit that we require a strong Centre but that does not mean that its
limbs should be weak. If we can build the whole structure on the Village
Panchayats, on the willing co-operation of the people, then, I feel the
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¹. For Details of the provisions see, Government of India Act, 1935, Delhi. 1937.
³. Ibid., p.258.
Centre would automatically become strong. The village should be the real basis of the machinery.¹

3.4.1. Reactions to Ambedkar’s Observations

Mahavir Thaygi from Uttar Pradesh was very unhappy that Ambedkar had referred to Indian Village Panchayat as a den of communalism and a sink of localism. He added that it is these sinks of slavery that faced all sorts of repression in the freedom struggle, 'the villagers being charred, burnt and tortured in chinoor'. He even challenged the claims of Greece as the earliest democratic state and said that democracy flourished in India much earlier than in Greece. It existed in India even during the time of Buddha. He added that the historian of Alexander has praised very much the city states of Northern India which were governed on democratic lines as republics. They were arrested at times on account of invasions from outside. Yet one finds that the same democracy continued to function in Indian villages under the name of village republics.

T. Prakasam, K. Santhanam, Muniswamy Pillai, Ananthasayanam Ayyangar, N.G. Ranga and some others from Madras Presidency strongly urged that the Constitution must be so amended as to make it useful for the millions of villagers for whose sake freedom had been won. They wanted some statutory provision leading to the recognition of village Panchayats and reminded that, inspite of revolutions and changes, the villages have preserved the Indian life. They cautioned that too much of centralism would result in totalitarianism. Ranga asked thus:

Do we want centralization or decentralization....Indeed all the world is today, in favour of decentralization....without the foundation stone of village Panchayats in the country how would it be possible for our masses to play their rightful part in our democracy....I submit that villagers should be given their due share in the governance of the country. If they are not given their due share, I submit that, they are bound to react to this.²

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¹ For details see, 'Debates in the Constituent Assembly, Nov. 6-9, 1948,' cited in, Anirban Kashyap, Panchayati Raj: Views of Founding Fathers and Recommendations of Different Committees, New Delhi, 1989, p.33.
² Ibid., pp.58-62.
It seems that a sizable section of the members wanted to place greater emphasis on village institutions and the principles central to Indian practice, particularly those glorified by Gandhi’s teachings. The majority of the amendments were directed towards the development of village life and economy and the Panchayat system of village organization. Therefore, some amendments were brought forward which had a direct bearing on Panchayati Raj. The amendment that stood in the name of K.T. Shah is as follows:

……the Union of India shall be organized on a uniform basis of groups of Village Panchayats co-operatively organized inter se and functioning as democratic units within the Union…. in the long run this Union must consist of locally autonomous units equal inter se which will be the strength as well as the salvation of this country….¹

3.4.2. Directive Principles of State Policy & the Panchayats

The Constituent Assembly did not approve of Ambedkar’s summary dismissal of the village institutions in Indian history and polity and put forward strongly its opinion that Village Panchayats must find a place in the Constitution.² Public opinion in the country also expressed itself through a

¹. For details see, Anirban Kashyap, Panchayati Raj: Views of Founding Fathers and Recommendations of Different Committees, New Delhi, 1989, p.36.
M/s. Alladi Krishna Swamy Ayyar and K.G.Krishna Swamy Bharati spoke in favour of giving constitutional status for the village republics. Shibban Lal Saxena said that the Village Panchayats would become the most potent forces for holding the country together if all the light and knowledge which the country and the world gathered were open to them. (Debate on 6-11-1948). R.K. Sidhwa, Kishari Mohan Tripathi, H.V. Kamath and others, wanted to strengthen the old village and Urban Self Government with stability and order. Lokenath Mishra was disappointed to see that the new Constitution did not give anything to the villages, nothing to the Provinces and Ambedkar has taken everything to the Centre. Man Mohan Das and Suresh Chandra Majumdar said that the Draft Constitution of India borrowed many things from the Constitutions of other countries of the world and has taken nothing from the indigenous soil, from the Indian cultural heritage.

number of editorials and write-ups in leading dailies in support of Gram Swaraj.1 The country-wide repercussions to Ambedkar’s remarks on Indian village life and the Panchayats resulted in the inclusion of a new article in the Constitution of India, declaring that the State should organize Village Panchayats and endow them with such powers as might be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government. The incorporation of the panchayat idea in the Indian Constitution, however, was an event of profound importance,2 but for the narrow scope of Article 40 and the amplitue of Gandhian ideology regarding rural local self-government.3

The Directive Principles on Panchayati Raj was welcomed by all who pleaded for inclusion of panchayats in the Constitution of India. The Gandhian activists shortly suggested to the government to appoint a commission to report on a systematic planning of Panchayat organization throughout the country. The commission, according to them, should carefully study the working of Village Panchayats as they existed then, in different parts of the country and recommend a suitable scheme for adoption by the State Government:4 Their argument was based on the conviction that

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1 Also see, Aniranjan Kashyap, Panchayati Raj: Views of Founding Fathers and Recommendations of Different Committees, New Delhi, 1989, pp.34-36.
2 National Herald, a Daily, emphatically wrote in its editorial of 6 Nov. 1948, that they disagree with Ambedkar on the inhibited view he has taken of ancient polity in the light of a quotation from Metcalfe. Amrit Bazar patrika on Nov. 10. 1948 quoted the late Sardar Patel from a speech given at Sevagram, where he said that real India was in the villages...crores live in India and their interest must command our attention. If the village is, and is allowed to remain a sink of localism and a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism, what chance is there of India ever achieving greatness and prosperity? For without doubt, the real India lives in villages. Gandhi built his struggle on four walls; the four walls being untouchability, self sufficiency Hindu-Muslim unity and national education. All these walls were intended to rid the village communities of the chronic ills they were heir to, to pour life and vigour into them and to save them from exploitation. The swaraj that have won through Mahatma Gandhi’s austerities will be worth little, if it leaves the villages where they are immersed in poverty ignorance and indebtedness. And if, new constitution fails to bring the fruits of swaraj to the villages it will not be worth the paper written on. Indeed, congress men will judge the Constitution by its criterion.
4 For details of S.N. Aggarwal’s observations see, Harijan, Vol. XIV, No.42, 16 Dec. 1950, Ahmedabad, p.367. Why the Village Panchayats under the existing condition have not been able to achieve good results? One of the reasons, according to Aggarwal is that the ancient Grama Panchayats were founded on the principle of composite democracy whereas, the modern parliamentary government is based on democracy along party lines...the majority of the Grama Panchayats in ancient India represented the elders of various castes. They were, thus, in the nature of coalition governments for the village communities. In the absence of such composite village cabinets, it is impossible to expect the modern Panchayats to fulfill the important functions that they are supposed to perform. The organisation of political parties for the Union Parliament and the State Assemblies cuts at the very root of the Panchayat system and results in a host of undesirable consequences.
a democratic setup, unless the *panchayati Raj* Institutions become widely accepted and understood, new social momentum, or changes at the grass root level, could hardly be brought about.\(^1\) According to Nehru, “democracy is not merely the parliament at the top or on the states, but it is something that excites every person and something that trains everyone to take one’s proper place.”\(^2\)

3.4.3. Experiments with the Local Bodies in Independent India

In the wake of the constitutional mandate in favour of *Village panchayats* as units of self-government, and followed by the suggestion to constitute a commission, the Government of India appointed ‘The Local Finance Enquiry Committee’ in 1949 (Wattal Committee) to study the local finance.\(^3\) The Committee headed by Wattal recommended that in the new set-up local bodies would be used more and more as instruments of national policy and there must be a steady enlargement of their functions. It also recommended power of *Panchayats* over some items of revenue and suggested that local bodies should have a free hand in determining the rates of taxes. The committee also suggested to every *Panchayat* to levy some taxes according to their needs and local conditions.

3.4.4. Twist Towards the Community Development Programme

Many states have started through legislation to review the old concept of *Grama Panchayat* and *Grama Sabha* so that people’s involvement in the affairs at the grass root level can be started. They visualize civic and economic activities for a village community as one of the functions of *Panchayats*. This concept was added on by the Community Development Programme started in 1952. Shortly, the Project of National Extension Service followed the Community Development Programme ‘as the vehicle through which the idea of community development will be worked. As the experience of this new approach grew, a feeling also developed that public involvement was not representative enough, and not very effective.

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3. Virendra kumar, comp., *Committees and Commissions in India*, Vol.I, New Delhi, 1988, p.5. The Committee consisted of the following persons, P.K. Wittal (Chairman), Lalbhu Raman Mehra (Secretary) replaced by D.P. Gupta, and later replaced by Dayaldas Sobhraj Parwani.
3.4.5. Studies by the Congress Working Committee

It was in this background that the Congress Working Committee reviewed the working of Panchayats and adopted a resolution in 1954, to the effect that the Panchayats should have both administrative and judicial functions. In view of the importance of the subject, All India Congress Committee appointed a special team to study the working of the Panchayats in various states.\(^1\)

The Committee examined the problems of day to day functioning of Village Panchayats related to administrative, judicial and economic functions, sources of revenue and training of workers.\(^2\) The Report published on 19 July 1954, stimulated thinking on the Panchayat all over India and influenced state legislations. Shortly, a conference of ministers was held at Simla.\(^3\) It made a powerful plea for decentralization of power at the local level. It also approved most of the recommendations of the 1955 Congress Committee. Apart from the functions earmarked, the Conference also favoured entrusting with the Panchayats other functions, like management of waste lands, maintenance of village records etc.

3.4.6. Twist Towards the Blocks

Meanwhile, the Community Development Programme was started and the Block (a territorial area consisting of many villages) came to be recognized as a unit of development administration. It was followed by the ‘National Extension Service’ to tackle the problem of growth and development at the local level and to build up an administrative system. The public participation at the block level was mainly through the nominated representatives. It was observed that the public involvement was not effective and the development of a democratic structure of administration from the district downwards was felt necessary for meaningful popular participation.

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1. The Committee consisted of Kailasnath Katju, Jagjivan Ram, Gulzarilal Nanda, Giani Gurumukh Singh, Musafir, Keshava Deva Malaviyya and Shriman Narayan.
3. The first meeting of the local self-government ministers took place in 1948, to discuss ways of implementing Article 40 of the Indian Constitution. It did not meet again until 1954 when a conference of state ministers was held particularly to pool ideas and review the position in the country as a whole regarding the Village Panchayats. The Conference of 1954 was the second one which gave guidelines to consider and to recommend broad lines of policy with regard to matters concerning local self-government in all its aspects.
3.5.0. Balvantray G. Mehta Study Team (1958)

The twist and turn towards the Block first began with the introduction of Block level planning (1952) which was endorsed later by the ‘Team for the Study of Community Project and National Extension Service, 1956.' The team was appointed for the study of Community Projects and National Extension Service, with a view to economy and efficiency and with specific reference to the extent to which the movement had succeeded in utilizing local initiatives and in creating institutions to ensure continuity in the process of improving economic and social conditions in rural areas.

The Balvantray Mehta Team offered two broad directional thrusts; firstly, it argued that there should be administrative decentralization for the effective implementation of the development programme and secondly, the decentralized administrative system should be under the control of elected bodies. The Report suggested that development cannot progress without responsibility and power.

3.5.1. Block as the Basic Unit of Democratic Decentralization

With this objective, the Study Team recommended the establishment of statutory (selective) local bodies and devolution to them of the necessary resources, i.e., power and authority. This was, according to the Report, the meaning of the term 'democratic decentralization' in operational terms. The basic unit of democratic decentralization should be located at the Block level. A purely advisory role was envisaged for the district tier, where an elected self-governing institution should be set up with its jurisdiction co-extensive with a Development Block.

3.5.2. Inception of Multi-tier System

The Panchayat should act as an agent of state government in executing special schemes of

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The team consisted of Balvantray Mehta (Chairman), Shankar Dayal Sharma, B.G. Rao, Phool Singh and G. Ramachandran (members)
development entrusted to it. The sources of income of the Panchayat were defined, duties both obligatory and compulsory were specified and the powers of judicial Panchayat were stated. All these recommendations were made in accordance with the main objective contained in the Report of the Study Team that:

'The government should divest itself completely of certain duties and responsibilities and devolve them to a body which will have the entire charge of all development work within its jurisdiction reserving to itself only the functions of guidance, supervision and higher planning .

The three tier system recommended by the Balwantray Mehta Team was adopted but the functions of Panchayats were recommended to be revised in the light of observations made by the Study Team constituted in the year 1959 by the Ministry of Community Development and Cooperation, Government of India. The team, which was instructed to study the salient features of local government in Yugoslavia, recommended for India a pattern of various councils discharging executive-cum-administrative functions at the lower levels.

3.5.3. Jayaprakash Narayan Committee

Shortly, the Government of India appointed another 'Study Group on the Welfare of the Weaker Sections of the Village Community' in 1960 to go through the existing welfare schemes for the weaker sections and also the areas where they could be better represented. The Committee suggested a major role to Panchayats in the implementation of welfare schemes for the weaker sections of the community. The Panchayats should provide the minimum essential social services needed by the village community. The organizational set up as visualized by the Committee was a vertical one, from the central government to the village. The main recommendation reads thus:

"The existing organization at the Centre in the Ministry of Community Development and the

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2. Ibid.,pp.263-64.

The committee consisted of the following persons:
Development Commissioners set up in the States should be responsible for promoting the welfare of the weaker sections of the village community. 1

3.5.4. Diwakar Committee & the Grama Sabha

For the first time a study was made on the viability of Grama Sabha in Panchayat Raj movement of the Country. 2 The committee headed by R.R. Diwakar was instructed to examine the objectives of Panchayati Raj as an effective body to establish a participative democracy so that at the village level the Grama Sabha, consisting of all adult residents of the village, should not only deliberate but also participate with its executive, namely the varied programmes of Grama Panchayat. The study team recommended that Grama Sabha should be a statutorily recognized body in each state and its meeting should be held more frequently. To the Grama Sabha was assigned the following functions pertaining to a village.

* Preparation of the Plan and Budget of the Panchayat.
* Supervision of progress of the village production plan and its implementation.

The Committee viewed that in order to strengthen the Grama Sabha it is necessary to strengthen the Panchayat itself to enable the two to work out a proper relationship between them.

3.5.5. K. Santhanam Committee

(a) Finance

The tempo of opinion in favour of Grama Sabha and Panchayat Raj, created by the recommendations of the R.R. Diwakar Committee, led to the appointment of a committee to study on Panchayat Raj Finances (1962). 1

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The terms of reference also included the extent to which the Grama Panchayat is influenced in its policies and decisions by the views and mandate of Mahatma Gandhi.

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The committee was constituted by the Government of India under K. Santhanam in the wake of growing financial dependence of local bodies on the state government. It was felt that political independence, apart from economic freedom has no meaning. Hence specific recommendations were made on matters related to revenue sources of Panchayats. The Panchayats were authorized as per the recommendations to collect house tax, profession tax, vehicle tax etc.

After Panchayati Raj bodies have functioned for some years in accordance with the new economic measures, there should be enquiries at the state level on a uniform basis, by agreement among state governments to review their resources and finances. This should be followed by enquiry, for the whole country.

(b) Panchayat Elections

A committee was appointed by the Government of India in 1964, which studied the details related to elections to Panchayati Raj Bodies. The important recommendations included the norms for grading the Village Panchayats, the structure of Panchayat Samiti, Zilla Parishads.


The Team consisted of the following members. K. Santhanam, (chairman) Shree Narayan Dass, M. Y. Ghorpade, M. V. Mathur, C. Narasimhan, and R. Saran {members}

The Study Team was instructed to examine the resources and finances of Panchayati Raj Institutions in different states and to recommend with due regard to functions transferred, sources of revenue including land revenue which should be handed over in full or in part to Panchayati Raj Institutions grants by state government, mutual financial relations between the Panchayati Raj Institutions, steps to develop the existing resources and to build up revenue yielding assets for Panchayati Raj Institutions and steps to attract gifts and donations and mobilize voluntary contributions by the people.

2. Report of the Committee on the Methods of Election to Panchayati Raj Bodies (1964). The Committee consisted of the following members: K. Santhanam (Chairman), P. Govinda Menon, T.H. Sonavane, Rajishwar Patel, V.B. Raju, Ms. Maya Banerjee, J.N. Khosla, Shiromani Sharma (members). The Committee was asked to go into the details of the following matters. (1) The method of election to the panchayati Raj bodies at the village, block and district levels so as to ensure the democratic and efficient functioning of these bodies. (2) The need for co-option, the categories to which co-option should be applied, (3) The measures for ensuring adequate and effective representation to the weaker sections. (4) The method of election of office bearers. (5) The association of the members of parliament and state legislatures with the Panchayati Raj bodies. (6) The terms of membership and the periodicity of election. (7) The extent to which political parties should participate in Panchayati Raj elections. (8) The measures required to ensure free and fair elections. (9) The desirability of setting up a state level commission for the purpose.

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representation for special groups, conduct of elections to Panchayati Raj Institutions, the role of political parties, and supervision and control of Panchayats. The committee was more eager to convert Panchayats into statutory bodies retaining the hold of government on them. Panchayati Raj was under implementation at least in 10 states. In Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal necessary legislations have been enacted for the establishment of the higher-tier institution. The Committee was expected to suggest a uniform pattern of election to rural local bodies, and reservation of seats for women, the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes.

3.5.6. Ramanathan Committee

In 1967, Government of India appointed a Study Team to go into the details of involvement of Panchayats in the implementation of basic land reform measures. The intention was to associate Panchayati Raj bodies with the implementation of various land reform measures. The Study Team observed that, Panchayats with their intimate contact with people can play a useful role. Between government and the public, the role of Panchayat as disseminator and procurer of information would be of immense advantage and therefore, suggested an association of Panchayati Raj Institutions and Community Development.

3.5.7. Asoka Mehta Committee, 1978

The Government of India appointed a committee in 1978 under Asoka Mehta to enquire into the working of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in India and to suggest measures to strengthen them so as to enable a decentralized system of planning and development. The resolution as referred to above highlighted the objective thus: “The Government considers that the maximum degree of decentralization both in planning and implementation for rural development in an objective and

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2. Ibid., p.288.
optimal manner is necessary for the attainment of rural development".1

Based on the suggestions of the earlier committees, many states have initiated steps to strengthen the Panchayati Raj Institutions in subsequent years. However, the initial enthusiasm soon died and in some states the momentum was struck by lethargy. Thus, the Asoka Mehta Committee reported that the story of Panchayati Raj has been one of ups and downs. It seems to have passed through three stages — ascendancy (1959-64), stagnation (1965-69) and decline (1969-77).2

The will for strengthening the local bodies was weakened with the move of departmental programmes being kept out of its orbit. The structural inadequacy of Panchayati Raj Institution was pointed out (by the Commission) to be the reason behind such a move. The bureaucracy had also its own role in dissociating the local bodies from the development process. The lukewarm attitude of the political elite at the higher levels towards strengthening of the democratic bodies at the grass-roots level was generally the crux of the matter.3 Ultimately all this led to the weakening of political support to Panchayati Raj Institutions and of the administrative will to work through them.

(a) Main Suggestions

The Committee suggested that both from the political and socio-developmental angles, it is

1. Report of the Committee on Panchayat Raj Institutions,1978, Government of India, New Delhi, August,1978. The composition of the committee : Asok Mehta (Chairman), Members: Karpoori Takur, (Chief Minister of Bihar), Prakash Singh Badal, (Chief Minister of Punjab), M.G. Ramanchandran (Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu), B.Sivaraman, (Member, Planning Commission), Mangal Deo, Kunwar Mahamood Alikhan, Annasahab P. Shinde, E.M.S, Namboodiripad (Chief Minister of Kerala), S.K. Dey, (New Delhi), Shiddharaj Dhadda (Jaipur), Iqbal Narain, (Jaipur), Vallabhai Patel, (Rajkot), and S. K. Ram (secretary).

The Committee referred to the following points interalia;

(a) The existing situation regarding democratic decentralization in the States and the Union Territories and the working of the Panchayati Raj Institutions from the District to the village levels;
(b) Mobilization of resources;
(c) The methods of constituting the Panchayati Raj Institutions including the system of election and to assess their effect on the performance of the Panchayati Raj system;
(d) To suggest measures for reorganizing the Panchayati Raj system, and removing the shortcomings and defects with a view to enable these institutions to fulfil their future role etc.

2. Ibid., p.4
3. Ibid., p.6.

imperative to decentralize power, planning process and developmental activities below the state down to the village level. The democratic process cannot just stop with the state level. The series of elections held for Parliament and State legislatures, District Councils and the Panchayat bodies have attuned the people to the democratic political processes and made them conscious of their power and rights as political sovereigns in the country. The establishment and working of democratic bodies at the grass root levels, inspite of their limitations, have only deepened their consciousness. Such a faith in democracy should naturally demand greater opportunities for direct involvement of the people in the management of local affairs. The urge for democratic control over administration at the local level, particularly in regard to management of rural development, the committee viewed, as an offshoot of the ongoing democratic process. If the edifice of democratic polity is to become secure in the country, the strengthening of democracy at the grass roots level is inevitable.

The committee felt that for effective functioning of the Panchayati Raj Institutions a proper climate of genuine decentralization at all levels is necessary. Once a tendency for concentration of power is there, the entire rationale of Panchayati Raj as an imperative is lost. Unless there is a commitment to the process of decentralization at all levels, the Panchayati Raj Institutions will not be able to fulfil the expectations that the people have.

(i) Mandal Panchayats

It was pointed out by the committee that the Panchayat would not be able to function effectively due to the poor size of the resource base. It is therefore argued that the government should transfer considerable resources to the Panchayats. It has also been brought out that the weakness of ineffective functioning is due to the small size of Panchayats. The smallness of the Panchayat is a handicap to the introduction of new dynamics of development technology and the group action required for many projects. Besides, people would want higher form of services and quality at lower levels. Health education, agriculture and allied sectors, extension of agro-servicing units are examples for higher forms of services. In many states, therefore, the trend is towards large size villages or a cluster of villages. According to the Committee next to the District, Mandal Panchayat will have to be the hub of developmental activities.

There was an argument that the long list of functions and responsibilities assigned to the
Panchayats are beyond the capacity of villages or the cluster of villages. The Commission reported that many villages could effectively perform only a fraction of their statutorily defined responsibilities, hardly beyond the traditional, civic, and general administrative functions. Expecting them to do more, in effect, has spread the limited resources too thin with the result that neither the developmental nor the civic function could be attended to satisfactorily.

(ii) Grama Sabha

The Committee reported that the Grama Sabha has not been functioning satisfactorily because of two reasons (1) lack of political interest and (2) administrative indifference. They deserve genuine encouragement. The Grama Sabha has an important role in activating the democratic process at the grass-root level, in inculcating community spirit, in increasing political awareness, in strengthening developmental orientation, in educating the rural people in administrative and political processes and in enabling the weaker sections to progressively assert their point of view. The Committee also suggested that the proposed village committee members will meet the Grama Sabha at least twice to explain to them the work pertaining to the village and also carry the feedback. At least two meetings should be held by the village committee members.

In short, the Asoka Mehta Committee in 1978 took a close look at the Panchayati Raj Institutions with a view to reviving them in accordance with the Gandhian vision of democratic decentralization, i.e., strengthening of local bodies at the lower levels. The decentralization has to begin with the major items, and gradually cover all the developmental items. The co-operative structure, a self contained democratic organization, would give special attention to weaker sections. The Panchayati Raj Institutions can limit themselves to motivating and organizing the co-operative movement at this stage.

3.5.8. Dissenting Notes from E.M. Shankaran Namboodiripad and Sidharaja Dhadda

The recommendations of the Asoka Mehta Committee according to E.M.S Namboodiripad,


2. Ibid., p.59.
(a member of the Asoka Mehta Committee) would go a long way to transform democratic decentralization from a dream to a reality. However, the idea implied was that while there is maximum possible decentralization of the developmental functions of administration, the regulatory functions were not decentralized. Also the structural rationalization envisaged by the Committee resembled more a deconcentrated model of local administration. Namboodiripad was opposed to this approach which he expressed in a dissenting note:

I am opposed to this whole approach...it was a centralized administration at its core that the Panchayats were envisaged in the Constitution of India and Balvantray Mehta Report. It is therefore not surprising that neither the bureaucrat nor the politician at the state level is prepared to decentralize whatever power has been on the state under the Constitution. The point is to make a radical change in the very concept of democracy and adopt what is called ‘four pillar democracy’ Central, State, District and Panchayat as the essential parts of an organic whole for the administration of the country.

The contents of the note submitted by E.M.S. Namboodiripad point to the direction that he is in favour of combining both developmental and regulatory functions together and wholeheartedly supported the elected bodies at all levels of Panchayati Raj. As for combining judicial functions, any proposal for bringing the judiciary closer to the people could be considered only as a matter of reforming the judicial system and not as a part of democratic decentralization of administration, i.e., not to treat as a method of strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Sri Siddharaj Dhadda, another member of the Committee, in his dissenting note reminded that panchayats are the only democratic institution where the common people can effectively

1. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, ‘Note on the report of the Committee on Panchayati Raj Institution,’ in Asoka Mehta Committee Report, 1978 pp. 156-170. E.M.S. Namboodiripad was the former Chief Minister of Kerala and a member of the Asoka Mehta Committee. He noted his differences in the approach to the problem of decentralization particularly in the Chapters I, II, VI and VII, and said that the report has omitted the crucial factor-lack of political will on the part of the former and the present ruling parties at the Centre with regard to decentralization of powers.
2. Ibid., p. 16.
3. Ibid., pp. 156-170
function, and the decentral. . . democratic process has no meaning when the opportunity is denied to them. He noted:

Mahatma Gandhi’s concept of society as an oceanic structure comprising of concentric circles of live and vibrant communities of which the village, or the primary face to face community was to be the hub and the centre, is vital to democracy. I am strongly of the opinion that the village must be the base and the Grama Sabha an integral part of Panchayati Raj. Without this base not only Panchayati Raj or democratic decentralization would have no meaning and democracy itself would remain fragile.

3.5.9. G.V.K. Rao Committee, 1985 & Three-tier System

The G.V.K. Rao Committee Report 1985 on ‘Administrative Arrangements for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation Programme (CAARD 1985),’ also suggested that Panchayat Raj Institutions have to be activated and given all the support needed so that they can become effective organizations for handling people’s programmes. Elections to these bodies should be held regularly. The Report is bound to become a major work of reference on the subject of administrative decentralization. The Committee very rightly makes suggestions on the activation of Panchayati Raj bodies. Panchayati Raj Institutions according to the Committee, have been allowed to languish without powers and resources, notwithstanding the lip service they have always received over the years. The local bodies should be assigned an important role in respect of planning, implementation and monitoring of rural decentralized planning.

3.5.10 L.M. Singhvi Committee 1986; Near to Gandhian Vision

The Committee under L.M. Singhvi, went deeper in studying the structure of Panchayati Raj

Institutions and believed that the inclusion of Article 40 as a Directive Principle of State policy did accommodate a Gandhian conceptual view point.\textsuperscript{1} Article 40, does contain in it the seeds of a constitutional mandate and unequivocally projects the concept of Village Panchayats as units of self government and requires that they be endowed with all the necessary powers and authority to enable them to function as units of self government.

The Committee strongly demanded the reorganization of the villages in terms of its extent and area, in order to make them more viable village Panchayats, so that they should continue to be the primary and homogeneous units of self government with a measure of direct democracy. The Committee also cautioned the concept of large federal mandal units 'with numerous hinterland villages' as basic units of self government.\textsuperscript{2}

The Committee made an attempt to conceptualize the framework of Panchayati Raj Institutions by taking the inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi who breathed into these concepts an inexorable impetus. At the village level, Gandhi visualized that the Panchayat would provide an opportunity to the people to participate in decision-making. The Committee therefore, viewed that it had been a fundamental error to regard Panchayati Raj Institutions primarily as convenient tools for administrative programme and development projects. This error had the effect in greater or lesser measures of devaluing and downgrading the role of Panchayat Institutions as units of government administration and relegating them to a secondary position, harming and hampering both democracy and development.

The L.M. Singhvi Committee largely recommended the Gandhian vision of Grama Sabha and other local bodies. But more than this recommendation, it created an atmosphere of promoting decentralized democracies at the grass root level. These factors paved the way for the 'Sarkaria Commission, 1989' to recommend devolution of powers to urban and rural local bodies.

3.5.11 The Sarkaria Commission, 1989

'The Sarkaria Commission 1989' was mainly concerned with the Centre-State relations.

\textsuperscript{1} Vasant., Desai, Panchayati Raj: Power to the people, Bombay, 1990, p.461.
\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., pp.464-65.
They considered that in the political system, which is organically a whole, there are many peripheral matters which cast their shadow on Union-State relations. The Commission specially noted the importance of decentralization of power in the present situation. It observed:

The interests and aspirations of most people are concentrated in the localities in which they live and carry on their avocations of life. The objectives of decentralized planning cannot be achieved unless the Panchayati Raj and other local bodies are allowed full scope to play their role. While there is considerable reluctance to decentralize powers to the districts, there has been even greater reluctance in most States to decentralize powers to the lower level like Municipalities, Panchayat Samities and Gram Panchayats in spite of explicit directive in Article 40 of the Constitution.1

The committee therefore, reminded that the objectives of decentralized planning cannot be achieved unless the Panchayati Raj and other local bodies are allowed full scope to play their role.

3.5.12. The 64th Constitution Amendment

In the light of the recommendations of the 'Sarkaria Commission' and also the national scenario of Panchayati Raj Institutions in low profile, Rajiv Gandhi (the late Prime Minister of India) introduced in the Parliament the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill on Panchayati Raj with a view to introducing genuine decentralized democracy in the country.2 Its sudden materialization took everyone by surprise because the Government thought of it just on the eve of general elections. The Bill came forth with innumerable details which became very controversial as some provisions were alleged to encroach upon state autonomy. Therefore, the proposed Bill was summarily rejected by the upper house. The remaining part of the endeavours which are afloat, at the

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Central and State levels, are part of contemporary history.

The above details pertaining to local government introduced in post-1947 India, however, present a wide chasm between Gandhi’s ideological commitments and the official policies embodied in the Constitution of India, and later on elaborated by, and implemented by the government.\(^1\)

The bend towards the Community Development Programme as directed by the Planning Commission of India as also the Draft Scheme of the First Five Year Plan, caused a wide shift from the Panchayat-based programmes to the Block level planning and functions, under the newly launched Scheme of National Extension Service (NES Blocks). It resulted in a wide shift from the model of development envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi as well. The outcome of the new arrangement was disappointing in the sense that, development schemes became government projects run by the bureaucracy. The twist from the Gandhian vision of Gram Swaraj as the instruments of a model of development, had the effect of devaluing the role of rural local bodies. It was also a twist from the recommendations of the All India Congress Committee in 1956 and Vinobe Bhave’s ‘Five Fold Programme for Panchayats’.\(^2\)

The Planning Commission for the Second Five Year Plan stressed the need of creating the district a well organized democratic structure of administration in which the Village Panchayats would be organically linked with popular organization at a higher level. The thrust of the Second Plan, thereby was to establish statutory panchayats in all the villages though, more as a vehicle of National Extension and Community Development Projects than as the units of self government.\(^3\) The Balvantray Mehta Study Team (1957) sought the fixing of development and planning at the Block level. It seems that the principal thrust of the Balvantray Metha Report was towards decentralization of democratic institutions in an effort to shift the decision-centres closer to the

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2. The five fold programme of Vinoba Bhave included the principles that (a) every Panchayat should organize a study circle which will acquaint the people of the village with new ideas and important developments (b) the Panchayats should undertake to bring about an increase in production as one of their responsibilities (c) the Panchayats should consider it their duty to see that no person within their area remains unemployed or goes hungry (d) the village land should be distributed to all (e) the real power of the Panchayats is the people’s support. The Panchayats should therefore follow their will. They should not care whether the Government recognised them or not.
people, to enable their participation and to put the bureaucracy under local control, thereby partially fulfilling the Gandhian vision of Gram Swaraj.1 In the absence of any stipulations on a uniform pattern of Panchayati Raj for the entire country (that was also not favoured by the Balwantray Mehta Committee,) various structural patterns of Panchayati Raj evolved throughout India, in terms of organizational structures and frame-work.2

Evidently there were five models during the period which followed the recommendations of Balwantray Mehta Study Team. They were the models of Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Gujarat. Notwithstanding, the recommendations of the Study Team that, public participation in community work should be organized through statutory representative bodies gave a fillip to a feeling of democratic deccentralization nation-wide.3 Later the National Development Council affirmed the basic principles of democratic decentralization and left it to the States to work out the structures, suitable to each state.

Meanwhile, the Government introduced some structural changes in the pattern of Community Development which was replaced by a Rural Development Board. It marked the end of both the community and Panchayat as agents of change and development.4

Notwithstanding, Panchayati Raj Institutions had a quantum jump since 1958. However, the institutions have drawn a low profile since the mid sixties.

Between the two Mehta Committees and their recommendations lie two decades of the functioning of the village Institutions with special studies led by Jayaprakash Narayain (1960), R.R. Diwakar (1960), K. Santhanam (1962-1964), V. Ramanathan (1967) and T. Jain (1967). Each committee was instructed to study the functioning of village Panchayat system.

The Asoka Mehta Committee Report of 1978, also recommended various measures to strengthen the Panchayati Raj system. Between the Asoka Mehta Committee and the recommendations of the ‘Sarkaria Commission ‘lie the decade of the functioning of the Panchayati Raj Institutions with special studies led by G.V.K. Rao and L.M. Singhvi. Of these, the second

1. Anreshwar Avasthi and Shri Ram Maheswari, Public Administration, Agra, 1984, p.166.
2. B.S. Bhargava, Panchayat System, and Political Parties, New Delhi, 1979, p.129.
one, went deeper in studying the structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions of the Gandhian vision.

3.6.0. Indian Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act

The Indian Constitution (Seventy Third) Amendment Act relating to Panchayati Raj Institutions, has heralded a new era, in the history of Panchayat legislations in India. This Amendment Act has, in essence, constitutionalized panchayats as a third stratum of government, at and below the district level. The amended Constitution requires the states to constitute Panchayats as institutions of self-government not only for villages, but also at intermediate and district levels, the union, the state and the Panchayats. This enactment is certainly an attempt to revitalize Panchayat Raj Institutions for decentralization. In fact, it is the realization of the vision of Mahatma Gandhi to a great extent.1

Conclusion

The roots of the Panchayat system in India lay deep in the Indian soil. It passed through many vicissitudes during the long span of time and showed alternate phases of change and continuity. Despite the changes at the seats of power, the Panchayats in India retained most of their independent character during the long periods of administration under the Mauryas, the Imperial Guptas and the Muslim rulers. It is no exaggeration to say that, in the welter of confusion and convulsion that overtook the country following the disintegration of the Mughal empire, the system still retained its element- a fact which could not fail to impress the new rulers, the English, who assumed the insignia of authority. The British administration introduced a different system replacing the traditional powers of the Panchayats by their model of local administration, and the timeless base of Indian economic life, the village, received the mortal shock of its life. There have

been many attempts at changing them from the colonial model to indigenous after Indian independence. However, the functioning of Panchayat Raj Institutions resembles more a British model of local administration than a pro-Gandhian concept of participatory bodies. As such, the village Panchayat Institutions continue their existence more or less under the same laws and conditions as were in pre-independence days. In recent times, there are some distortions, acceptance and rejections, of Gandhian ideas in respect of decentralization and Gram Swaraj. Therefore, an attempt is made in the following pages to analyse the features of the Gandhian vision of decentralization, Gram Swaraj and the Panchayat system.

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