As discussed earlier decentralization, to Gandhi, is the basic requirement for the success of democracy. For him a decentralised democracy based on non-violence must consist of groups settled in small communities or villages in which voluntary co-operation is the condition of dignified and peaceful existence. For, it is the only way to realize the values of democracy from the grass root level as it will enable the people to participate in taking and implementing decisions without a rigid and strict control of any higher authority. Moreover, it is the only alternative to reduce the interference of the state in day-to-day affairs of the people.

**Gandhi's first reference to democratic decentralization:**

Gandhi made first reference to democratic decentralization sometime in February, 1916, while appreciating the working of the ancient 'Indian Panchayat' system. He said, "India is really a republican country, and it is because it is that that it has survived every shock hitherto delivered". He was sure that the problem


of village sanitation would have been solved long ago and India would have been enjoying self-government suited to its requirements, had village panchayats been acting as a living force.3

However, during the non-co-operation movement the panchayat system acquired greater significance as it offered an alternative to the English judicial system. It represented the positive aspect of the programme of boycott of courts. It aimed at the replacement of courts by panchayats for the settlement of disputes between individuals. Unlike the British courts in India, these panchayats were to function as arbitration courts in order to dispense speedy justice to the parties.4 As a result, several thousand panchayats were established throughout the country during non-co-operation movement and Gandhi wanted the panchayats to provide speedy, cheap and efficient justice.5

Similarly, in his Presidential Address at Belgaum Congress, Gandhi referred to the panchayat system as the right medium for securing cheap justice as well as for

3. Ibid., p.228.
4. Collected Works, November 1965, Vol.XVIII, p.136. Gandhi said, "They will improve arbitration boards in order to settle disputes. A nation, that is bent on forcing justice from an unwilling Government, has little time for engaging in mutual quarrels".
5. Collected Works, March 1966, Vol.XII, p.431. Gandhi said, "I would therefore strongly advise the panchayats…..to continue their very useful work of giving people cheap, speedy, and efficient justice."
avoiding reliance on Government for the settlement of our mutual disputes. During his term of office as President of Indian National Congress, he extensively toured the country. That reinforced his conviction that India would be benefitted a great deal if the villages were governed by the village panchayats. However, he felt that the reorganisation of the village administration could not be taken in isolation. For it involved the reorganisation of the administrative structure of the whole country as India was predominantly rural.

He was sure that Indian village life had great vitality and character. It was because of this that it had persisted all these long years and had weathered many a storm. Those villages were so many village republics, completely self-contained, self-reliant, having all that one may want, i.e., schools, arbitration boards, sanitation boards and no poor law indeed, but ample provision for the relief of the poor.

Gandhi's view of democratic decentralization developed over the years. He laid emphasis on panchayati raj or democratic decentralization till the last moment of his life.

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Gandhi's View of Democratic Decentralization: It must be noted that like Laski, Huxley and Jefferson, Gandhi never believed in 'half-way house democracy', nor a disinterested decentralization. Shriman Narayan explains, "It must be clearly understood that Gandhiji does not advocate decentralization only because of its economic and political advantages. To Gandhiji decentralization envisions and upholds the cultural or spiritual ideal of 'simple living and high thinking'. He does not hunger after raising merely the 'standard of living', he wants to raise the standard of life'. 'Simple living and high thinking is the ideal, the very foundation and essence of Gandhian approach to decentralization. The main aim of socio-economic organization, according to Gandhi, should not be the multiplicity of wants and accumulation of comforts and luxuries, although a minimum standard of living must be assured to all human beings. He was of the opinion that society should be organized in such a manner that individual gets the maximum freedom and opportunity to develop his personality and character to the fullest extent. He was fully convinced that man could never attain peace and happiness with money. It is the substance of the whole Indian philosophy, and for that matter, of all

philosophies and religions in the world. In this respect, George Kateb seems quite right when he observes that the more important thing for Gandhi was not life itself but the quality of life. Therefore, he romanticized the whole philosophy of decentralization. His is, an 'ideal type construct' of a 'decentralized village republic plan' resulting in the fanciful open air rural life, which is the only way out of the devastating effects of concentration and mechanization of political and economic power.

As mentioned earlier Gandhi is opposed to all types of concentration of power, since to him, centralization is a menace and danger to democracy. Concentration of power, in his view, distorts all democratic values. So he argues, "Possession of power makes men blind and deaf; they cannot see things which are under their very nose, and cannot hear things which invade their ears." Thus, his liking for decentralization originates from his urge for the diminution of the state and the deepening of the roots of democracy. He, therefore, asserted, ".... If India is to evolve along non-violent lines, it will have

to decentralize many things. Centralization cannot be sustained and defended without adequate force. In other words centralization as a system is inconsistent with non-violent structure of society. Moreover, he was convinced that moral progress was possible only in a decentralized set-up. So he wrote, "The end to be achieved is human happiness combined with full mental and moral development. I use the adjective moral as synonymous with spiritual. This end can be achieved under decentralization." In a nutshell he affirms that without decentralization it is impossible to ensure individual liberty and mental and moral growth of man. Similarly, it is equally essential for the realization of the ideal of democracy, for, the rule of the people, which it stands for, is not possible without adequate opportunities to individuals to participate in the management of their own affairs.

Further, Gandhi does not seek only the decentralization of political power. He rather pleads for decentralization of both economic and political power. For, the success of political decentralization, in his view, depends upon economic decentralization. This follows from his conviction that a highly centralized political set-up is likely to bring dictatorship of one

13. Ibid., 18.1.1942, Vol. IV, p. 5. Gandhi said, "Centralization as a system is inconsistent with non-violent structure of society".
14. Ibid.
kind or another by self-interested and power-hungry minority imposing itself on a deluded and subservient majority.

While elaborating his ideas on decentralization, Gandhi keeps in mind two different structures. First, the power state structure of the West. Basically he rejects it on the ground that it leads to centralization of power, exploitation of the weak, denial of individual freedom and moral degradation. It is democratic in its external framework but dictatorial in actual practice.

Second is the panchayati raj model—building up from below. In other words, it can be called democratic decentralization. Basically Gandhi is drawn towards this model. Though Gandhi was not a model builder, his ideas definitely orientate towards a model. One important feature of this model is the economic self-sufficiency at the grass root level. To him, this is the only way to eliminate exploitation of the weaker sections in society and to bring happiness to the millions.

Further, his decentralization implies the fundamental principle of self-sufficiency. But it is not absolute self-sufficiency. It is mostly confined to the basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter. He wanted that people should be independent to the greatest extent, for the satisfaction of these elementary needs. He reiterated that if a new democratic equalitarian social-political order free from exploitation, had to be established
on firm foundations, decentralization in economics must go side by side with decentralization in politics.\textsuperscript{15} Even success of political decentralization depends upon economic decentralization. In other words without economic decentralization, political decentralization would be meaningless.\textsuperscript{16} The manifesto of Congress Parliamentary Board, July 29, 1934, which was drafted by Gandhi, declared: "In order to end the exploitation of the masses, political freedom must include real economic freedom of the starving millions".\textsuperscript{17} Similarly his advocacy of charkha and village industries only demonstrate his living faith in decentralization of economic power.

It has been observed that when starving millions cry for food, the only dominant idea that can influence their minds is the idea of democratic control of the economic life of the nation. \textsuperscript{18} Chesterton writes, "If a ship is being wrecked, we organize a life-boat; if a house is on fire we organize a blanket; if half a nation is starving we must organize work and food." In this connection Gandhi's approach to economic decentralization seems to be relevant in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Harvodaya Planning Committee, \textit{Principles of Harvodaya Plan} (New Delhi: 30th January, 1950).
\item See also Tahadeva Prasad, \textit{Social philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi} (Gorkhpur: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, 1956), p. 107.
\item \textsuperscript{16} \textit{Collected works}, Vol. XII, p. 251.
\item Gandhi said, "Anything that does not include economic independence cannot be regarded as Swaraj at all".
\item \textsuperscript{17} \textit{Collected works}, Vol. VIII, p. 257.
\end{itemize}
the sense that when he entered the arena of public life, he found that millions of Indians were starving and there was a necessity to organize work and food for them. Such type of arrangement could be made only through economic decentralization. Keeping that in view Gandhi placed before the people the idea of 'Khadi movement and village industries'. It meant decentralization of the production and distribution of the necessities of life. It involved as Gandhi put it, 'production by the masses' in place of 'mass production'. The idea underlying it, is that it is impossible to provide full employment to the masses without organizing decentralized industries like khadi and cottage crafts through which the people can earn their livelihood easily and that way it can be an instrument of removing the poverty among the millions.19 For economic decentralization is so designed as to promote the interest of the poorest and the helpless.20 It was in this context Gandhi looked upon Khadi as the symbol of unity of Indian humanity as it could provide them economic freedom and equality. Thus, his philosophy of decentralization is oriented towards 'full employment of human resources of a society so as to minimize discontent and provide adequate opportunity for the expression of reasoned dissent'.21

20. Ibid., p. 200.
Again, under modern industrial societies i.e., centralized system, vast numbers of men and women pass their whole lives in hideous cities, wholly dependent for their livelihood upon capitalistic boss. They possess no root in the soil and no property of their own. They perform merely mechanical and monotonous work. This craze for labour saving device, this infatuation for progress of technologies, makes one impossible to the dignity and worth of human life.

It seems that through economic decentralization, he wants to transform the lives of poor and down-trodden masses. Khadi or decentralized economic set-up is not offered merely as a prescription to provide relief to the poor or provide supplementary occupation to idle hands.22 No doubt these two objectives are there but his whole effort is to confer a new status on the artisan class, spinners, weavers and labourers forming the largest number of a society. He wants the society to give a new status through decentralization to those people who really constitute the strength of a nation. He wants to inject a new vitality and new blood in the atrophied limbs of the body of a society. It is in this context, his plea for sanctity of physical labour, following from his theory of dread labour acquires great significance.

Gandhi is not against modern science and technology. His attitude is entirely rational and scientific. His main

thrust is that science and technology, instead of becoming masters, should function as the servants of the people. Basically, he has no objection to machines as such, but he argues that it is wrong to carry the process of mechanization of industry so far as to kill the cottage industries and concentrate them within a narrow field. Accordingly, he wants villages to be production centres and the towns to be "clearing houses for such products instead of being the reverse as to-day".

Therefore, Gandhi's concept of democratic decentralization bears the stamp of his passionate belief in non-violence, truth and individual freedom. He calls it panchayat raj or village swaraj. He wants each village a little republic, self-sufficient in its vital wants organically linked with the higher bodies and enjoying the maximum freedom of deciding the affairs of the locality. According to Gandhi, real India lives in its villages.

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Gandhi stressed, "India does not live in its towns but in its villages".

Gandhi said, "Our cities are not India. India lives in her seven and a half lakhs of villages and the cities live upon the villages. They do not bring their wealth from other countries. The city people are brokers and commission agents for the big houses of Europe, America and Japan."

Gandhi reiterated in a speech delivered at Gujarati Sabhna Pakistan on October 31, 1936, "The key to swaraj is not in the cities but in the villages, and so I have settled in a village - a village, too, which I did not go seeking but which came to me."

Gandhi wrote, "My heart is in the villages". (A letter to Irabah on February 14, 1936.)
So villages held an important place in Gandhi's scheme of life and social organization. He was a great supporter of rural atmosphere, rural life and rural development. For him Indian villages were the backbone of India or real India. He believed, "if the village perishes India will perish too. It will be no more India. Her own mission in the world will get lost ".

"It will be no more India. Her own mission in the world will get lost ." 

He observed that independent India had to make a choice between India of the villages that were as ancient as herself and India of the cities which were a creation of foreign domination. To-day the cities dominate and drain the villages so that they are crumbling to ruin. But cities must subserve villages when that domination goes for ever. For, exploitation of villages, in Gandhi's view, is itself an organized violence which is contrary to his plan of decentralization. Therefore, he maintains, "If we want Swaraj to be built on non-violence, we will have to give the villages their proper place".

Similarly in a letter:


See also Harijan, 16Jan, 1936, Vol. IV, p. 73.

See also Collected works, Vol. LIII, p. 32. On April 12, 1936, in a speech made at the time of Khadi and Village Industries Exhibition at Lucknow, Gandhi told, "The city-dwellers are exploiting the villagers, and they must repay the debt, at least partially".

See also Collected works, Vol. LXIII, p. 420. In a speech delivered at the concluding session of the Twelfth Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, Ahmedabad, on November 2, 1936, Gandhi reminded, "The fact is that we have not paid any attention to the villages. Although we are dependent upon them for our food and clothing, we behave as if we were their masters. We have given no thought whatsoever to their requirements. Is there any other country which is so impoverished that it carries on its business in a foreign language while ignoring its own?".
to Lahabji Saharej, on December 25, 1934, Gandhi wrote to him that his soul lived in the villages. 28

Unfortunately this trend of exploitation of villages by cities has rather increased after independence. J. J. Triplani writes that the most intelligent and active villagers who could have put some life in the village have migrated to the cities to seek employment, as most of our industrial complexes have been established in the cities, where they get facilities not available in the rural areas. 29 Consequently the centres of power have shifted to the cities. But Gandhi wanted the political power to be distributed among the seven hundred thousand villages in India. It seems that this was the crux of the whole approach. If people are to be the masters of the country and if majority of population lives in the rural areas the centres of power have to be in the rural areas.

See also Harilal, 29.1.1936, Vol. IV, p. 226.
Gandhi added, "The revival of the village is possible only when it is no more exploited. Industrialization on a mass scale will necessarily lead to passive or active exploitation of the villagers as the problems of competition and marketing come in. Therefore we have to concentrate on the village being self-contained, manufacturing mainly for use. Provided this character of the village industry is maintained, there would be no objection to villagers using even the modern machines and tools that they can make and can afford to use. Only they should not be used as a means of exploitation of others".
See also Harilal, 25.1.1936, Vol. IV, p. 82.
See also Collected Works, Vol. XLVIII, pp. 353-54.
See also Vol. XLVII, p. 90.

29. The Tribune, Chandigarh, October 2, 1976, p. 4.
(J. J. Triplani's Letter to The Editor).
Institutional Framework: Till 1936, Gandhi had not made up his mind or he was not clear about the character of the structure of Indian polity. At the Faizpur Congress session in 1936, he expressed that India must have a polity suited to her genius. But he could not give its blueprint. This shows that he was clear about the spirit but not of the form of Indian polity. He only indicated that western mechanism of democracy was not suitable for India. This meant that India must seek its own institutional framework to realize the values of democracy. He made some loud thinking in this connection. The institution of the village panchayat which had provided a democratic structure at the grass root level for centuries in India, showed him the direction. The institution of panchayat, for him, was the fundamental unit of democratic decentralization. Literally, Panchayat means an assembly of five persons. Several historians hold that the members of panchayat in ancient India were elected by the villagers themselves. However, his ideas about the organization of the panchayat were not entirely based on the system prevalent in ancient India. These developed as a result of his life long Indian public life, his commitment to non-violence and the situation created by his struggle for freedom. He was not satisfied with the organization of the panchayats that followed in wake of the non-co-operation movement. Later on in May 1931 when Indian National Congress under the leadership of Gandhi

30 Collected Works, Vol. XLVI, p. 239.
was again locked in struggle against the British, he suggested the following points about the working of the panchayats:

(i) "No panchayat should be set up without the written sanction of a Provincial Congress Committee;

(ii) "A Panchayat should in the first instance be elected by a public meeting called for the purpose by beat of drum;

(iii) "It should be recommended by the Tehsildar Committee;

(iv) "Such Panchayat should have no criminal jurisdiction;

(v) "It may try civil suits if the parties to them refer their disputes to the Panchayat;

(vi) "No one should be compelled to refer any matter to the Panchayat;

(vii) "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;

(viii) "There should be no social or other boycott for the time being;

(ix) "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;

31. Ibid., p.240.
"A panchayat, that fails without just cause to attend to the requirements mentioned in clause 9 with 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".

However, this advice was given in response to a particular political and administrative situation and so it does not fully reveal the mind of Gandhi about the organization or institutional framework of democratic decentralization. But this, certainly gives an insight into the way his mind was working in this connection and a broad institutional framework of democratic decentralization can be worked out on the basis of these hints and insights. It means that village panchayat must be elected by the adult population of the village. Since at that time there was no regular assembly of the village, he advised the election of panchayats through public meetings called by beating of the drums. Similarly, as there was no national government and the Congress alone could claim to represent the masses, he recommended that they should not be set up without a written sanction of the Congress. This was also essential as the panchayat system was one of the instruments through which the struggle for freedom was being carried on by the Congress. But this situation no more exists and therefore, it is not necessary to take
this advice literally. The essence of his thinking on this issue is that the panchayats have to be periodically elected by the adult population of the village to which it should be responsible. However, he did not spell out the details of the procedure of the election. His opinion was that it could develop and take shape in accordance with the needs and the circumstances of the community.

But it must be noted that a panchayat of his view does not work in isolation. It is the basic unit of the government of a country organized under a panchayat system, which was chalked out by the rabatma in his second speech to the Federal Structure Committee at the Round Table Conference in 1931. He explained that in his scheme, the villages would elect their own little committees which in turn would elect the taluka committees, that is, a sub-district and 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. Illustrating his point, he said, "we must remember that we have 7,00,000 villages.... we have perhaps 5,00,000 or a little more in popular India. we may have these 5,00,000 units. Each unit would elect its own representative, and these representatives would be the electorate that would elect, if you will, representative to the Central or the Federal legislature". But, he clarified that what he had mentioned

above was just an outline of his scheme and it could be filled in if it commanded the attention of the people.\textsuperscript{33}

Further, in 1942, during the course of an interview with Louie Fischer he remarked that voluntary co-operation and not co-operation induced by Nazi methods was the essence of the panchayat system. Here again he pleaded for the distribution of power among the villagers. He said, "You see, the Centre of power now is in New Delhi, or in Calcutta and Bombay, in the big cities. I would have it distributed among the seven hundred thousand villages of India. That will mean that there is no power. In other words, I want the seven hundred thousand dollars now invested in the imperial bank of England withdrawn and distributed among the seven hundred thousand villages. Then each village will have its one dollar which cannot be lost". Emphasising this point, he said, "The seven hundred thousand dollars invested in the imperial bank of India, could be swept away by a bomb from a Japanese plane, whereas if they were distributed among the seven hundred thousand shareholders, nobody could deprive them of their assets. There will then be a voluntary co-operation between these seven hundred thousand units, voluntary co-operation, not co-operation induced by the Nazi methods. Voluntary co-operation will produce real freedom and a new order, vastly superior to the new order in Soviet Russia".\textsuperscript{34} However, he

\textsuperscript{33} I.G. Tendulkar, \textit{Mahatma} (Delhi: Publications Division, July 1961), p. 118.

\textsuperscript{34} I.G. Tendulkar, \textit{Mahatma}, Vol. VI, pp. 96-97.
again admitted that the future structure of society of India was largely beyond his grasp. But a structure like the one he outlined to Dr. Louis Fischer had existed in India though it undoubtedly had its weakness, otherwise it would not have succumbed before the Moguls and the British. Nevertheless, the roots, he was sure had survived despite the ravages of the British rule which were waiting to sprout if a few drops of rain fell in the form of a transfer of the British power to Indians. Louis Fischer asked him to pursue the idea of the symbolic seven hundred thousand dollars. But what would villages do with the dollar that had come back to them from the imperial bank of England, he queried? Gandhi replied, "one thing will happen, today the shareholders get no return. Intermediaries take it away. If peasants are masters of their dollars, they will use them as they think best."

Louis Fischer again asked him if a peasant buried his money in the ground, because they would have to live. The dollars would go back to the bank, their own bank, and utilize it under their direction for the purposes they thought best. Anyway "a central government will evolve, but it will act according to the wishes of the people and will be broad-based on their will."

35. Ibid., p. 97.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
The above mentioned interview reveals Gandhi's deep faith in decentralized democracy based on village panchayats drawing their power from the initiative and willing co-operation of the people. He fully subscribed to the principle that power resides in the people and it must belong to the people. It seeks expression through democratic decentralization or panchayati raj.

Again, in 1946, Gandhi while rejecting Western political institutions of parliamentary democracy, laid stress on the concept of decentralized democracy consisting of concentric village republics. He elaborated his plan for independent India at the time of transfer of power. He asserted that independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village would be a republic or panchayat having full powers. It follows, that every village had to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the world. It would be trained and prepared to perish in the attempt to defend itself against any onslaught from without. Thus, ultimately it is the individual who is the unit. But Gandhi points out that this does not exclude dependence on and willing help from neighbours or from the world. It will be free and voluntary play of mutual forces. Such a society, according to Gandhi, 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 other cannot have with equal labour. Further, Gandhi elaborated:

"In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be everwidening, 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, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units.

"Therefore, the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it. I may be taunted with the retort that this is all utopian and, therefore, not worth a single thought. If Schliedt's point, though incapable of being drawn by human agency, has an imperishable value, my picture has its own for mankind to live. Let India live for this true picture, though never realizable in its completeness. We must have a proper picture of what we want, before we can have something approaching it. If there ever is to be a republic of every village in India, then 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."

39. Ibid., p.236.
regarding the question of religious freedom in the society outlined by him, be held that every religion would have its full and equal place as all are leaves of a majestic tree whose trunk cannot be shaken off its roots which are deep down in the bowels of the earth. Further, labour has also its unique place in a cultured human family. Therefore, there is no room for machines that would displace human labour and that would concentrate power in a few hands. No doubt every machine that helps every individual has a place.

Later on, Gandhi's ideas regarding panchayati raj or democratic decentralization were developed further by Dr. J. Agarwal, in his book 'Gandhian Constitution for Free India', and Gandhiji himself stated that he found nothing in the book 'that was inconsistent with what he would like to stand for'. Under the Gandhian Constitution, the scheme of government was briefly as follows:

(1) First, the primary political unit was to be the village panchayat, whose members would be elected by the adults of the village. The panchayat would control chowkidars (watchmen), patwaris (the men who kept the land and tax assessment registers) and police and schools. It would also assess and collect land revenue, supervise

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co-operative farming, irrigation, and interest rates as well as khadi and other village industries.

(2) Secondly, above the village panchayat came a hierarchy of indirectly elected bodies. First came Talika and district panchayats, each comprised of the panchayats (panchayat leaders) of the next lower panchayats and having only advisory powers over them. Members from district and municipal panchayats would make up the provincial panchayat, which would elect a president to serve as head of the provincial government. Presidents of a provincial panchayat would comprise the All-India Panchayat, whose president would be the head of state and of the government, which would be ministerial in character. Among the responsibilities of provincial panchayats would be transport, irrigation, natural resources, and a co-operative bank.

The national panchayat would be responsible for such things as defence, currency, customs, the running of key industries of national importance, and the co-ordination of provincial economic development plans.

The above mentioned plan is based on the assumption, fully subscribed to by Gandhi, that "that government is the best which governs the least! Here, some people are of the opinion that Gandhi wanted to do away with political parties. It follows from his scheme for the reorganization of the Congress which he spelled out only
a few hours before his death, since it was based on panchayat system. Accordingly the Congress organization was to be renovated under a 'Lok Sevak Sangh' under the following rules with the power to alter them as occasion may demand. The plan mentions:

"Every panchayat of five adult men or women being villagers or village-minded shall form a unit.

"Two such contiguous panchayats shall form a working party under a leader elected from among themselves.

"When there are one hundred such panchayats, the fifty first grade leaders shall elect from among themselves a second grade leader and so on, the first grade leaders meanwhile working under the second grade leader. Parallel groups of two hundred panchayats shall continue to be formed till they cover the whole of India, each succeeding group of panchayats electing second grade leader after the manner of the first. All second grade leaders shall serve jointly for the whole of India and severally for their respective areas. The second grade leaders may elect, whenever they deem necessary, from among themselves a chief who will, during pleasure, regulate and command all the groups."

Accordingly, the whole system is based on voluntary co-operation, people's initiative and indirectly elected bodies.

41 Har’ljan, 15.2.1944, Vol. XII, p. 32.
Gandhi was not satisfied with the contemporary system where a patel or a headman in the village, governed the village with the help of the police. He pointed out that if his frequent wanderings throughout India of the villages had not deceived him, it could be confidently asserted that the 700,000 villages did not want police protection. For, the solitary patel to a village was a terrorist lording it over the villagers and was designed to help the petty revenue collector to collect revenue due to the British Government. He said, "I am not aware of the police man having aided the villagers in protecting their goods or cattle against the depredations of man and beast. The police patel is not to be blamed for what he is".42

Here Gandhi's opposition was based on the fact that the village patel or police patel did not serve the people but he represented his master, i.e., the Viceroy. Again, the change at the top, had not yet permeated the most distant village. He reminded that the people of India had not yet learnt from the village in which real India had been living, that every Indian, man or woman, was his or her own policeman and ruler.

Therefore, 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.

for him, self-reliance had become the key-stone of the whole system. Voluntary participation in the process of realizing the social ends was a fundamental requirement. The members of the panchayat, therefore, must carry the people with them through persuasion and education for the proper functioning of the village panchayat.

The relations of the village panchayat to the higher units of organization of the country, according to him, should not be based on any principle of subordination. This follows from his concept of oceanic circles. The innumerable villages are bound together not in pyramidal order related to each other in oceanic circles whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units.

Further, the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it.\textsuperscript{43}

As a result, in Gandhi's conception of democratic decentralization, the higher units do not coerce or dictate the panchayats, but higher units get their strength and power

\textsuperscript{43} supra. footnote 39, p. 70.
from the lower units. Accordingly, the panchayat has to be the basic unit of democratic decentralization and the higher units will have to tender sound advice, give expert guidance and information, and co-ordinate the activities of the village panchayats with a view to increasing the efficiency and skill of administration and public service.

It seems that the whole plan is turned upside down; the village becomes the real and moving unit of administration. For, Gandhi wants every village to be a republic having full powers, self-sustained and capable of managing its own affairs. However, this does not mean that it excludes dependence on the willing help from the neighbours or even from the world where dependence is a necessity.

FUNCTIONS AND POWER OF VILLAGE PANCHAYATS: However, Gandhi did not dwell upon the functions of village panchayats systematically. He spelled out his views on this subject from time to time in response to different situations. He was fully convinced that the local body must have the power to manage the affairs of its locality because no central government could understand the problems of a far away area.

One of its most important functions, according to him, under the jurisdiction of institutions of democratic decentralization, was the settlement of disputes between
individuals. Its object was to make justice available to the villagers without incurring much cost or inconvenience. So, he said in his presidential address at the Belgaum Congress, "Administration of justice should be cheapened and with that end in view the final court of appeal should be not in London but in Delhi. Parties to civil suits must be compelled in the majority of cases to refer their dispute to arbitration, the decisions of these panchayats to be final except in cases of corruption or obvious misapplication of law. Municipality of intermediate courts should be avoided".  

However, its jurisdiction was based on the voluntary principle. Thus, in his instructions to the village panchayats of Nainital he laid down that the panchayat might try civil suits if the parties to them referred their disputes to the panchayats.  

Similarly at that time he was not in favour of panchayat having criminal jurisdiction. Possibly this advice was given in view of the fact that under the British rule compulsory jurisdiction of the panchayat was not possible. For, by administering justice in criminal disputes, it could come into clash with the British authorities. But these panchayats could be very effective instruments for the uplift of the village. So, he laid down, "Every panchayat will be expected

44. Collected Works, Vol. XXI, p. 48C.
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."

Furthermore, he believed that the disability to impose fines or social boycott was a necessity of the case in the initial stages. Social boycott in villages had been found to be a dangerous weapon in the hands of ignorant or unscrupulous men at that time. Similarly, imposition of fines, in his view, too might lead to mischief and defeat the very end in view. He, therefore, recommended that where a panchayat was really popular and increased its popularity by the constructive work of the mind as suggested above, it would find its judgements and authority respected by reason of its moral prestige. And that surely was the greatest sanction any one could possess and which one could not be deprived.

However, Gandhi only laid down the broad principles of the functions and role played by the panchayats. It was essential because these could vary from time to time and place to place. Shriman K. Ram divided these functions into several categories and supplied the details which Gandhi approved. He was of the view that since the

46. Ibid.
villages would enjoy maximum local autonomy, the functions of the village panchayats would be very wide and comprehensive covering almost all aspects of social, economic and political life of the village community. The various functions to be carried out by the village panchayats may be summarized as follows:

1. **EDUCATION**:
   - (a) To run a primary or lower basic school through the medium of productive craft, thus combining cultural and technical education.
   - (b) To maintain a library and a reading room. Books in the library should be educative, having a direct bearing on the social, economic and political activities of the village. The books are very important for the new ideas and knowledge for practice.
   - (c) To run a night school for adults. The old persons can study in the night schools. Therefore, panchayats should make an effort for it.

2. **ENTRETEMIN**:
   - (a) To provide for Akhada, gymnasium and playgrounds. Swadeshi games and sports shall be encouraged. These would be very useful for the village people.
   - (b) To arrange Art and Craft exhibitions from time to time.
   - (c) To celebrate collectively the important festivals of all communities.
(d) To organize seasonal fairs.
(e) To conduct bhajan and kirtan mandals.
(f) To encourage folk-songs, folk dances and folk theatre.

3. **JUXTAPOSITION**:

(a) To maintain village guardians for general protection of the village, against thieves, dacoits and wild animals.
(b) To impart regular training to all citizens in the technique of satyagraha or non-violent resistance and defence. There should be proper arrangements for the protections of the people of the village.

4. **AGRICULTURE**:

(a) To assess the rent of each agricultural plot in the village.
(b) To collect rent from the land-holders.
(c) To encourage and organize consolidation of holdings and co-operative farming.
(d) To make proper arrangements for irrigation.
(e) To provide for good seeds, and efficient implements through co-operative shops.
(f) To see that, as far as possible, all the necessary food-grains are produced in the village itself. In this connection the present system of injurious commercial crops shall be discouraged.
(g) To review, scrutinize and if necessary, scale down the debts and regulate their rates of interest where possible, to organize co-operative credit banks.
(h) To check soil erosion and reclaim waste land through joint effort.
5. **Industries**:  
(a) To organize the production of khadi for village consumption.  
(b) To organize other small scale cottage village industries on co-operative lines.  
(c) To run a co-operative dairy. The cow shall be encouraged in place of the buffalo.  
(d) To run a village tannery using the hides of dead animals.

6. **Trade and Credit**:  
(a) To organize co-operative marketing of agricultural and industrial products.  
(b) To organize co-operative consumers’ societies.  
(c) To export only the surplus commodities and import only those necessaries which cannot be produced in the village.  
(d) To maintain co-operative godowns.  
(e) To provide cheap credit facilities to village artisans for necessary purposes.

7. **Sanitation and Medical Welfare**:  
(a) To maintain good sanitation in the village through proper drainage system.  
(b) To prevent public nuisances and check the spread of epidemics.  
(c) To make adequate arrangements for healthy drinking water.  
(d) To maintain village hospital and maternity-home, providing free medical treatment. Indigenous system of medicine, naturopathy and bio-chemistry shall be encouraged.

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All these programmes aim at uplifting the rural life, the problems of the villages and their solution as is the theme of most his writings and speeches.48

1. JUSTICE :

To provide cheap and speedy justice to villagers, the panchayats shall have very wide legal powers, both criminal and civil. The panchayats according to Gandhi, have better access to the situation of the incident and therefore, these can provide justice, which cannot be provided by the higher courts of law. Moreover, justice done by them will be very cheap for the people. However, he is of the opinion that serious cases should not be decided by them since these are liable to commit mistakes, on account of insufficient knowledge of law. So, the panchayat can perform the more important role of solving the conflicts of the villagers and of maintaining law and order.

About the judicial functions of the village institution, Chiranjwirrain amplifying the ideas of Gandhi says that the village panchayats should be entrusted with the dispensing of justice; no separate judicial panchayats are necessary. The poor peasant need not go out of his village, spend hard-earned money and waste weeks and months in towns of litigation. He can get all the necessary

witness in the village and fight out his own case without being exploited by lawyers. When intricate points of law arise, sub-judge from the Taluka, or district can come down to the village and assist the panchayat in deciding difficult cases. The sub-judge should also act as guide, friend and philosopher to the ignorant villagers by acquainting them with the laws of the state. Such a judicial system would not only be simple, prompt and cheap but also just because the details of civil and criminal cases will be, more or less, open secrets in the village and there should be hardly any scope for fraud and legal juggleries.

9. FINANCE AND TAXATION:

As Gandhi wants a village to be self-sufficient, the village panchayat must find financial resources locally for carrying out its multifarious functions, so it is required:

(a) To levy and collect village taxes for special purposes. Payment in kind and collective manual labour for village projects also can be taken account of.

(b) It may collect private donations on social and religious occasions: but it is to keep proper accounts of income and expenditure.

In fact, Gandhi wanted to build up glorious India through the panchayats. Addressing a prayer meeting, on December 27, 1947, he

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while congratulating the villagers for building a panchayat Ghar said that unless the villagers did the work of the panchayat, the effort would be a waste of time and labour. He recalled that distinguished travellers from the world came to India in the days of yore from China and other countries. They came in quest of knowledge and put up with great hardships in travelling. They had reported that in India, there was no theft, people were honest and industrious. They needed no locks for their doors. In those days there was no multiplicity of castes as at present. It was the function of the panchayats to revive honesty and industry. If one asked them after one year, would they show a clean record and would they show that they had no court save their panchayat? It was the function of the panchayats 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.

Therefore, Gandhi wants village panchayats to perform a variety of functions covering practically all aspects of the village welfare. The panchayats of his view hold a good deal of autonomy and thus become effective instruments for the diffusion and decentralization of authority.
Gandhi believes that if the people really want to see the dream of democratic decentralization, i.e., panchayati raj, then they must regard the humblest, the weakest, the lowest in society as being equally the ruler with the tallest, the strongest and powerful in the land. It presupposes that all are pure or will become pure if they are not. And it is also required that purity must go hand-in-hand with wisdom. No one will then harbour any distinction between community and community, caste and out-caste. Everybody will regard all as equal with oneself and hold them together in the silken net of love. No one will regard another as untouchable. The people will hold as equal the toiling labourer and the rich capitalist. Everybody will know how to earn an honest living by the sweat of one's brow and make no distinction between intellectual and physical labour. To hasten this consummation, the people will have to voluntarily turn themselves into scavengers. No one who had wisdom would touch opium, liquor or any intoxicants. Everybody will observe Swadeshi, i.e., country-made goods and articles as the rule of life and regard every woman, not being his wife, but as his mother, sister or daughter according to her age, never lust after her in his heart. Then he would be ready to lay down his life when occasion demanded it, never wanting to take another's life. And needless to say,
Gandhi again remarked that such a son of the land would not want to be told what his duty in the present time is.

However, Gandhi's conception of democratic decentralization has been questioned by the critics on several grounds. First, it has been argued that the development needs of the country, cannot be fulfilled until and unless there is greater role of the state. Secondly, the critics present the international events of the post-Second World War, where militarism is a necessary ingredient to national political survival which is mainly a function of centralized administrative political system. In fact, their conclusion is that the Gandhian scheme of decentralization is neither viable nor feasible in the Indian setting. Further, in this fast changing world, when advances in science and technology are capturing the other worlds, it is not possible to close our eyes and ears and go back to live in the small communities. In this all pervading complexity how can our simplicity fit in? They argue that Gandhian plan avoids the present pace of change and calls for 'going back', may be because of their dislike for change and advancement. It is pointed out that even if we return to small communities, we will be compelled to live as subjects under the domineering rural elite, who have enriched themselves by continuous exploitation from centuries. 

56 In the present set up

it is not so easy, even in small villages to oblige
the master of the village, and keep quiet while the
rub-head elders indulge in village administration.
They argue that it is not possible to bring that harmony
and quietness in this noisy world. Similarly, no one can
confine villagers to their own community matters in this
age when village is a part of the net-work of national
and international economy. A Village has an inflow of
political and economic resources from outside and an
out-flow of the surplus goods it has produced. Most of
the village people now represent both in the state and
central leadership and many articles produced in villages
are even exported out of the country. In this way, village
as a unit is inter-dependent and inter-linked to many
external units. Similarly, the much talked and exaggerated
land reforms have yet to take the real shape in the face
of mighty 'peasant lobby'. In these conditions, autonomous
villages go out of state control, especially when most
of the rural masses are illiterate and know very little
about their role in democracy. Alvin Toffle holds that
most of the Indians with agro-rural background are the
people of the past and alive in many respects, such as
our ancestors did centuries ago. Some of the urbanized
Indians, influenced by mechanization and mass education,
brought up with lingering memories of their agricultural
past, lead modern lives and are in effect, the people of
the present. A minute fraction of society who are affluent,
who live in big cities, who own all the ultra-modern facilities and comforts and who are the fashion-trend-makers are the people who are said to be living the way of life of the future*. In such a situation when a vast population of Indians are the 'people of the past' or 'traditionals' then what should be the criterion; is it to advance or to go back?

However, advancement has become an essential feature of modern civilization. And it has been felt that the people of the past 'must be converted into the people of the present' or they are to be raised to stature of the present if not 'people of the future'. It requires mass schemes, crash programmes and dashing decisions in the development area. This naturally leads to complexity. Social stagnation can be displaced only by some breakthrough measures. Social change is an impossible task as long as the people compromise with social stagnation. Similarly, Hyrdal questions the basis of even the existing local-self-government in India in the context of its development administration. He points out, "whether the Indian practice of immediately giving responsibility over a very wide field to local and district assemblies is rational and effective. Likewise, it is doubtful whether

the village, that stronghold of stagnation, should be preserved as the basic unit. Perhaps forces for change can be mobilized only by integrating the village into a bigger unit right from the start.\textsuperscript{52}

The critics question the Gandhian model by asking as to what would have happened to India, if it relied solely on small-scale industries and village republics, when it was to face aggression after aggression from its neighbours. They also argue, we could silence Pakistan or fight against China only because we established centralized large scale defence production industries. The critics claim that if a nation is strong than the people are able to stand with dignity in the international community. They further argue that it is only possible if a country is self-sufficient to some extent as far as her defence needs are concerned. And, India has proved it particularly after the Indo-Pak war of 1971 and after the advent of Bangladesh. Then making the centre 'strong' in the order of the world governments (both developed and developing) how can India drift away from this line? Similarly, had India confined itself to only rural economics with small scale cottage industries, it would have been forced or compelled to rely much on strings-attached foreign aid as far as her defence is concerned. It trusted its neighbours, but they deceived her badly. In these circumstances, they argue, either India should adopt large

scale production techniques and stand on its legs with honour or go back to her villages only to go outside the country with a begging bowl for arms. Surely the 'liberties' of this country would not have allowed the people to rely and depend on others for defending themselves.

Consequently they conclude that Gandhian approach to democratic decentralization is a utopia and not viable and practicable. According to Feisler, the Gandhian structure joins the list of 'doctrinal approach' category. Under the title of "Approaches to the understanding of decentralization", he points out this approach as "the aspiration ... to turn the clock back, to restore traditional values and face-to-face dealings between men". He concludes that the approach is an "attractive picture"...but its attractiveness is that of a romantic work of art, or that of a terrifying of ideological conflicts ...". 53

However, this utopianism needs further explanation. For example, Gunnar Myrdal's "Beyond the welfare state" has a relevance which has many similarities to Gandhian plan, where state restricts itself to two main functions, i.e., maintaining a basic structure of society, and the


rules relevant to life within that structure, leaving the rest for local self-government and for co-operation. Lyrdal states that he has knowingly meant to depict an utopia. The reality in all western countries is far from realizing it. No doubt he would nevertheless insist on the relevance of the utopian, decentralized and democratic state where, within the bounds of ever more effective overall policies laid down for the national community, the citizens themselves carry more and more of the responsibility for organizing their work and life by means of local and sectional co-operation and bargaining with only the necessary minimum of direct state interference. This utopia is, in his belief, a real goal. It is inherent in those ideals of liberty, equality and brotherhood which are the ultimate driving forces behind the development of the modern democratic welfare state.  

Further, Toffler's categorization, if we apply, to thinkers also, perhaps we may have to call "Gandhi" a thinker of the future, for, "his is the voice of the age to come and not that which is fading and should fade away," while most of us are either striving in the 'present' or struggling with the 'past'.

Similarly, the world at present appears to be passing through a phase of all pervasive hypocrisy. The people admire and widely cherish the ideals of life, but in the same vein they brand them as utopian. For instance, the people say that they are for peace. But all that they do as human beings only contribute to all that is contrary to peace. They think that 'peace' is not a value of life but a purchasable commodity. (Governments go to United Nations for purchasing 'peace' — which is 'out of stock' there), while individuals want to purchase it through 'drugs'). Everywhere people talk of peace, but nowhere they realize it. Politicians all over the world are bothered very much about the 'power' (and bayonet innocent people), but in their characteristic rhetoric they say, they are doing all this for peace. The funniest part of the human hypocrisy is, the man is producing peace. Naturally Gandhi appears to the present generations as a 'Utopian' for, he "sought to prepare us for life in a disarmed world. We must pull out of the world of strife and hatred and get ready to work on the basis of cooperation and harmony."

As noted earlier, Gandhi wants all human beings to be free both externally and internally or both politically and spiritually. But, the people are contented with what

little political freedom they have. Louis Fischer points out that our governments, all our organizations and also individual citizens, believe in the ideology of secrecy (secrecy is the prime tenet for hypocrisy). But "Gandhi believed in revealing himself. He regarded secrecy as the enemy of freedom". Furthermore, the point here is that, Gandhian plan of democratic decentralization, like his all other principles, was not transformed or translated into action in India, most probably because his followers did not reach the inner unity that he had realized in himself and their satyagraha was to a great extent a pretence, for, they believed it to be a means to achieve unity and freedom, while he saw that it must necessarily be the fruit of inner freedom.

Similarly, we have to examine Gandhi's plan keeping in view the present situation where the world is under the influence of 'machinocracy', i.e., the rule by machines, where the governments as well as citizens have the overwhelming desire for worldly wealth. As a result, the people have lost their desire for private life. They become helpless pawns with no freedom of choice or action. They become parts of a huge machine and they sacrifice themselves in an ecstasy of enthusiasm for the good of the machine.

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59. Quoted by Herbert Read, "The Self and The Community" in Radhakrishnan (ed.), Mahatma Gandhi: 100 Years, p.34.

60. Ibid., pp.8-9.
Therefore, it becomes imperative to decide whether the people should adopt centralization or decentralization or whether they want peace in a disarmed world or whether they should die day-in-and day-out with tension in a nuclear world. And moreover, they have to decide as a human race whether they should survive or extinguish gradually in this polluted, drug-addict, nuclear world. If we carry on our "rat-race" further and further, "we seem," as observed by K. R. Krishnan, "to be moving towards a world catastrophe with our eyes wide open and our ears deaf to the voice of truth".61

Again, it has been commented that our socio-economic problems have taken a serious turn because of our adoption of centralization. The advocates of the Gandhian order of society argue that the present system does not suit India as it cannot solve the problems of the masses and is incapable of meeting requirements of our development. For example, we have not been able to meet the requirements of sprawling urbanization and its net effects such as slums, problems of water, planning, sanitation and transport. We are confronted with the problems of rising unemployment inflating price structure, dwindling resources and all that which speaks ill of our centralized economic planning. The need of the hour is to bring about rapid social and economic changes without a violent revolution.

The Gandhians believe that the roots of the present centralized system are skin deep. This is a system in which the few prosper and the masses decay. The vast majority

61. Ibid., p. 2.
does not have a stake in the system. It looses its aim that the people are the real guardians of the hard won freedom. It cannot deliver the goods. In the Gandhian vein Schumacher in his book ‘Small is Beautiful’ observes that wisdom demands a new orientation of science and technology towards the organic, the gentle, the non-violent, the elegant and the beautiful. Like Gandhi he advocates production by the masses instead of mass production. He favours ‘a technology with a human face’ and a study of economics, ‘as if people mattered’. He adds, “Man is small and therefore, small is beautiful. To go for giantism is to go for self-destruction.”

Accordingly the Gandhians argue in favour of Gandhi’s positive approach and caution against the bureaucratic administration full of negative means. They trust the lover units. They oppose centralization of political and economic power in the hands of a few, who dominate and exploit the poor masses.

Anyhow, Gandhi’s viewpoint here is, that development is an effort which has to be shouldered by myriad segments of people. They can work hand in glove and become complementary to each other only when they have ‘mutual trust’. And development gained by

negative means can't be total, but partial. The political as well as economic problems of a country can be solved only when local bodies are no longer the agents or slaves, but the partners and planners of the development. It has been felt that things imposed from above do not educate the people, nor can they convince them. The people must have the feeling that they are participating in their own programmes. It is most important that they should manage their development programmes.