CHAPTER II

EVOLUTION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ

The present forms of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India have evolved through a long historical process whose origin can be traced to the Vedic period. This chapter makes a quick look at the history of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India in general and in U.P. in particular as it has evolved from the old concept of Panchayats to the modern complex system of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

I. Panchayats in Ancient and Medieval Periods:

In ancient India Panchayats were very important democratic institutions. Indications of existence of People's Institutions in Vedic era bearing various names are prompted by many Indian historians like Malviya (see 10) and Mukerjee (see 11). The great historian Havel (see 7, p. 12) writes:

"The political organisation of the Aryan tribes was a Democracy based on the organisation of the village community, a number of villages being generally federated for purposes of mutual protection under the rule of Raja or King, sometime elected and sometime hereditary, who though vested with supreme authority was subject to Aryan Common Law and tradition."

How the village Panchayats flourished in ancient and medieval times is evident from the references found
in histories written by Travernier and Megasthenes and books like Arthashastra by Kautilya. These panchayats maintained and defended the culture and traditions and enjoyed almost complete autonomy in matters of local administration.

II. Panchayats in Mughal Periods

In the Muslim and Mughal regimes, the villages lost much of their autonomy. The village panchayats were generally utilised for the collection of taxes. Village disputes, which hitherto were settled locally began to be referred to the central courts (see 12 and 15). Though the village panchayats continued to exist in some form, their status and influence underwent a considerable fall during the Muslim period. According to Saran, "In a way, the whole of the village local government became assimilated into the general administrative system so as to create a harmonious machinery in which no part seemed isolated or to suffer from neglect. And the village local government worked in cooperation with official machinery of the rulers and in certain respects, it became a part of it" (see 14, p. 237).

III. The British period and Creation of Rural Boards:

In the initial years of British rule, the village panchayats remained neglected, however, not destined to die. In 1803 the Government of Presidency of Bombay made an effort to associate the panchayats with the regular administration of justice. A regulation of this effect was issued in 1802. But the system could not work due to certain inherent defects (see 10, p. 19).
In the year 1870, the local self government as a conscious process of administrative devolution and political education came up as the result of financial reforms of Lord Mayo's Government. In 1882, Lord Ripon's Government passed the resolution on local self government. In the words of Brahman "Resolution of 1882 directed local government to maintain and extend local board in rural areas" (See 13). The functions entrusted to rural boards were mainly communications, education and sanitation and occasionally famine relief (See 2, p. 14). The progress made by local boards in rural areas was reviewed in a resolution on 20th August, 1897.

The Royal Commission on Decentralisation, set up in 1907, considered the whole subject of village organisation and recommended the adoption of special measures for their revival and growth. As regards village panchayats, the commission recommended that their functions must be largely determined by local circumstances and experience. It recommended village panchayats with functions like dealing with petty civil and criminal cases, cleansing of village, and minor village works, construction and maintenance of village schools, houses and management of small fuel and fodder reserves (See 2, p. 18).

The Commission recommended that the Rural Boards should be made sub-district and district boards and they should have the charge of minor district roads, primary,
middle and vernacular education, medical work, vaccination and sanitation in the rural areas where Panchayats had not been entrusted such works (see 2, p. 19). Thus the Royal Commission on decentralisation revitalised the rural development agencies by recognising village Panchayats at the base, sub-district boards at the middle and district boards at the apex. Further the Government of India Resolution of 1918 looked upon village Panchayat not as mere mechanical adjunct of local self-government, but as associations designed to develop village corporate life on the basis of intimacy existing between the inhabitants who had not only common civic interests, but also were kept together by ties of tradition and blood (See 2, p. 33). It emphasised that village officials should be associated with Panchayats, other members being chosen through informal election by the villagers. Many provinces passed Village Panchayat acts during the years 1919-1925. In U.P., the Village Panchayat Act of 1920 and the U.P. District Board Act of 1922 were passed. With the inauguration of provincial autonomy through the Government of India Act, 1935, the development of the Panchayats received further impetus.

IV. Post-Independence Period and Emergence of Panchayati Raj:

The attainment of independence made a prominent landmark in the history of village Panchayats. In the draft Constitution of the Republic of India, due recognition was given to the ideal of village Swaraj as dreamt by Gandhiji.
Article 40 of the Constitution provides:

"The states shall take steps to organise village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government."

The inclusion of village panchayats in the Constitution energised their growth in free India. Panchayat legislations were enacted in all the states. While Panchayat Acts were adopted in 1952 in Rajasthan and Punjab, in Orissa in 1949, it was adopted in U.P. as early as in 1947. It was thus the first state to enact a Panchayat Raj Act, 1947. Under this Act all adult residents of a village were incorporated under the name of Gram Sabha and the Gram Panchayat was made the executive committee of the Sabha. By the end of 1951, 1,10,000 villages in the state, 35,000 village panchayats had been established under the Act against the total number of 80,000 village panchayats throughout the country (See 2, p. 284). The panchayats were made responsible for the maintenance of peace and security in the villages, for agricultural production, village roads, streets, tanks and wells, for sanitation and drainage, education and water supply, for the maintenance of the registers and village statistics, for primary schools, library, recreation centres and for social and cultural activities etc.

The post-independence period can be marked for the urge for democratic decentralisation along with an urge for economic development. Even long before independence, a number of philosophers, social reformers, politicians and
alien administrators moved by the pathetic economic conditions of our people had tried to devise methods which could become the nucleus of a programme for community development. The notable personalities were Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Spencer Hatch, V.T. Krishnamachari and F.L. de Zayn (See 1). Their efforts gave a new insight into the programmes of national reconstruction and development through villages. Some provincial governments initiated a few pilot projects for rural reconstruction and improving the destiny of the villagers. In U.P., Albert Mayor started a pilot project in Mohawa village of Etawa district in 1947 (See 8, p. 54). In Punjab, Nilo Khari was developed as an Agro-Industrial Township. But all these pilot projects lacked uniformity and systematisation. In 1951, the Ford Foundation offered to assist India in the task of improving the conditions of rural masses and it was later on decided to launch 15 pilot projects on the Etawa pattern in early 1952. In the meantime, the Indo-U.S. Technical Co-operation Agreement was signed in January, 1952. It was under this agreement, that the Community Development Movement in India sprang and was formally inaugurated on October 2, 1952 (See 9, p. 98).

As the Community Development Programmes were thought for area development and people's participation being their essential condition, the native force for the movement was to emanate from people. In the initial stages people's enthusiasm was seen but soon it started disappearing. The Fourth Evaluation Report on The Working of Community Projects and
The M.Z.S. Block said - "While there has been considerable increase in rural consciousness of economic and ... of social needs, the objectives of stimulating continuing and positive effort based on self-help for promoting economic or social development has been comparatively unsuccessful." (3:19). It was also felt that democracy should be extended to the grass root level to strengthen its working in the countryside. The Second Five Year Plan (see 4, p. 160) suggested the establishment of democratic structure of administration in districts within which village panchayats could be organically linked with popular organisation at the higher level. The functions of such a popular body would include the entire general administration and development of the area or sub-division. The National development Council accordingly decided to investigate the whole issue through a team of experts. As a result, a team under the chairmanship of Balwantrey Mehta was appointed in 1955-56. The team submitted its report in November, 1957.

The team stressed the need for creating a single representative and vigorous institution to take charge of all aspects of developmental work in rural areas. The team tentatively proposed to call this body "Panchayat Samiti" whose jurisdiction was to be co-existent with development blocks with which the village panchayats of the area were to be linked as organic parts (see 5). In order to ensure a proper guidance, supervision and co-ordination of Panchayat Samiti, the team suggested to set up a higher level unit, known as Zila Parishad. Zila Parishads were deemed to be
channels for government grants to Panchayat Samitis. They were also recommended by the team to assume the role of district planning committees. The establishment of a separate Directorate of Panchayati Raj in each state was also suggested for controlling the activities of zila parishads and Panchayat Samitis.

Thus a three tier structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions came into being as based on the concept of democratic decentralisation. The basic unit was the village Panchayat, the middle unit panchayat samiti and apex unit - zila parishad. Rajasthan was the pioneering state in adopting Panchayati Raj on October 2, 1959, followed by Andhra Pradesh, Mysore, Madras in the same year. Orissa and Assam introduced Panchayati Raj in 1960, Punjab, U.P. and Bihar in 1961 and Maharashtra and Gujrat in 1962.

The Government of Uttar Pradesh introduced Panchayati Raj system by promulgating "Uttar Pradesh Kahatra Samitis and Zila Parishads Adhiniyan No. 33 of 1961. The Janpanchayats established under United Provinces Panchayat Raj Act of 1947, were brought under the jurisdiction of the Act of 1961 and were co-ordinated with Kahatra Samitis at the block level and Zila Parishads at district level.

As the introduction of Panchayati Raj was aimed at rural regeneration, the three tiers of Panchayati Raj bodies have been assigned a wide range of functions at their respective levels, under the governing acts in the
state of Uttar Pradesh. The functions assigned to Gram Panchayats include municipal administration, cultural, social, agricultural and developmental activities, sanitation, conservancy, drinking water supply, construction of roads, culverts, school buildings and bridges etc., establishment of primary schools, Ayurvedic, Ayurvedic, Homeopathic or Unani dispensaries for providing medical relief within the reach of villagers. They can maintain, finance and provide grant-in-aid for schools and hospitals.

The Gram Panchayat functions as Gram Prabandhak Samiti (Land Management Committee) under section 28-A of the Panchayat Raj Act 1947. In this capacity, it performs the following functions:

1. The settling and management of land.
2. The preservation, maintenance and development of forests and trees.
3. The maintenance and development of abadi sites, and village communications.
4. The management of rural markets and fairs.
5. The maintenance and development of fisheries and tanks.
6. The rendering of assistance in the consolidation of holdings.

The Kishagra Sanitis in U.P. are entrusted the following main functions under section 32 and Schedule I of the Act 1961:
1. Development of agriculture, irrigation including improved seeds, land reclamation, plant protection and irrigation.

2. Promoting co-operation through providing cooperative education and organising cooperative societies.

3. Construction and repair of tanks, canals, embankments and drainage works.

4. Establishment and maintenance of veterinary hospitals and stockmen centres, improvement of fodder crops, pisciculture and poultry.

5. Development of cottage and village industries and their marketing conditions.

6. Establishment and management of primary health centres and family welfare centres etc., prevention and control of epidemics and providing the facility of drinking water.

7. Promotion of education, social education and cultural activities.

8. Promotion of Harijan welfare and social integration.


10. Collection of data in respect of matters relating to implementation of block level plan.
11. Executing the schemes of government and of the zila parishad which might be entrusted to kehotra samiti.

12. Construction and repairs of roads, bridges, buildings and preservation of trees.

The zila parishads are assigned the following main functions under Schedule II (Part A) of the Act 1961:

1. Control and regulation of cattle fairs and providing facilities for animal husbandry.

2. Promotion of village and cottage industries and assisting kehotra samitis in this regard.

3. Assisting and financing kehotra samitis in prevention of epidemics. Establishment and management of public hospitals and family planning centres.

4. Helping kehotra samitis in providing drinking water and preventing water pollution.

5. Providing and helping in the provision of education, libraries, and cultural activities.

6. Management, fairs, industrial and agricultural exhibitions and cattle shows.

7. Organisation of inter block camps, conferences, seminars and training programmes of officials and non-officials.

8. Construction and maintenance of public roads, bridges, inspection houses, plantation and preservation of trees on the road sides.
9. Administration of famine preventive works, management of relief house, asylums, orphanages etc.

10. Preparation of district plan frame and reviewing the plans framed by the Kshetra Samiti, distribution of the grants allotted by the Government and other All India or State Boards, Commissions etc. according to their general or special instructions.

11. Evaluation of programmes and periodical reviews of achievements and targets. Collection of data on all matters relating to implementation of the plan within the district.

The historical background of the panchayati raj, thus, reveals a long journey of rural self-government institutions from the age old system of panchayat raj to the present system of panchayati raj. The system has not only grown vertically and horizontally but also has assumed a wide ranging role profiles in the context of rural development. Having looked into the historical background of the panchayati raj Institutions in U.P. and their assigned functions, we now proceed to the socio-economic background of their managers who are crucial component of these Institutions in the efficient and effective discharge of organisational functions.
References


10. Malviya, H.P., *Village Panchayats in India*, New Delhi, All India Congress Committee 1956.


