HISTORY OF PANCHAYAT SYSTEM IN ASSAM

Ancient Period

In India the local self-government institution flourished since time immemorial. In ancient India village formed the basic unit of social and economic life. Panchayati Raj is identified as an institutional expression of democratic decentralization in India. Though the concept of Panchayati Raj is a new phenomenon, there is a strong legendary tradition, that Panchayat existed since the beginning of India history. The Panchayat or local government is ancient institutions and were considered as self sufficient, small republics. They exercised powers in various spheres such as industrial, commercial, administrative and social including civic education and religious functions.

During the vedic period, Village Panchayat called ‘samiti’ was the basic unit of administration and the head of the samiti was called ‘Gramin’. During those days people formed little republics to function
as a unit. *Arthasatra*, which depicts the system of governance in the Mouryan period, indicates the significance of these institutions particularly for revenue and economic purpose. It also mentioned the various functions to be performed by the ‘Gramik’ the village head man. The historical record of the Gupta period clearly reveals the existence of village councils and mentions about their meetings.4

During the Mughal rule in India local government existed. The administration of a town was vested in an officer called ‘Kotwal’, who performed municipal functions besides exercising supreme authority in all magisterial, police and fiscal matters.

**British Period**

The existing modern system of rural government (Panchayati Raj) in India is the contribution of British rule. The first local government body, a municipal corporation was set up in Madras in 1687. It was modeled after similar institutions which existed at that time in Britain. In the major towns similar bodies comprising of nominated members having certain powers to levy taxes were introduced. The traditional village councils ceased to get importance in his era, but they continued to survive in the form of village communities. Lord Mayo’s resolution (1870) marks a further stage in the evolution of local government. Lord Mayo’s Resolution advocated the measure of decentralization from the centre to the provinces, emphasized the desirability of associating Indians in administration,

and indicated the municipal government as the most promising field for this purpose. Subsequently Lord Ripon Resolution (1882) provided for local bodies which comprised of elected non official members.

Mahatma Gandhi was an ardent supporter of Gram Swaraj and the village self-sufficiency through Panchayats. He stated that the idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic. The government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat of five persons elected annually by the adult voters, both male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. Gandhiji advocated the development of local leadership based on the ideology of village self-sufficiency and self-reliance. However, the Panchayat was not given significant place in the draft constitution of independent India. It was at the insistence of Mahatma Gandhi that Article 40 was included in the constitution. The Directive Principles of state policy which stated that the state shall take steps to organise village Panchayats and to endow them with such powers as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of local self government.

The concept of Panchayati Raj has been developed to ensure people’s participation in the development process. Almost all the newly independent states of third world have adopted the democratic system of governance to achieve their objectives. Thus, it has become one of the prime objectives of the democratic government to ensure man’s participation in their working.
Post Independence Period

In India Panchayati Raj system evolved out of the Community Development Programme (CDP) inaugurated in October 1952. It was intended to bring socio-economic development of rural masses in a democratic way. It was further supplemented by National Extension Service (1953). The Community Development is a process by which, the efforts is a process by which, of the people are united with government authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of the communities. However, after a few years the programme failed to achieve desired result due to lack of people’s participation in the development programmes.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Team was appointed in 1957 to study community projects and to suggest the appropriate organizational structure for eliciting people’s participation. The committee observed that the major reason for the failure of the Community Development Programme was lack of enthusiasm and non-participation of the people in its implementation in the local level. The committee stressed the need of democratic decentralization popularly known as Panchayat Raj at the three levels, Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad. There should be devolution of powers and decentralization of machinery and such powers be exercised and such machinery controlled and directed by popular representatives of the local area. The recommendation of the Mehta committee was accepted in 1958 and the states were asked to evolve the three-tier system of Panchayati
Raj adopting the common principle as per local requirement and condition. Following the recommendations of the Mehta committee, Rajasthan was the first state in India to introduce Panchayati Raj on October 2 in 1959. Thereafter, the states also adopted it as per local requirements and conditions. The rural development programme was brought under the purview of the Panchayat Raj for effective implementation of the programmes in the grass root level.

After the mid sixties the phase of decline of Panchayati Raj started. During this period Panchayati Raj lost its glamour and the centralized tendency caused havoc with its functioning all over the country. The election was not held regularly and people’s participation in these bodies weakened. These institutions failed to acquire status and dignity due to many reasons like, absence of regular election, insignificant representation of Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes; lack of financial resources, corruption etc. Thus the village Panchayat was made subordinate unit of government to implement its programmes at the lowest level; and not the agencies of self-government. In December 1977 the Janata Party at the centre appointed a committee under the leadership of Ashok Mehta to review the structure of Panchayati Raj in India. The committee suggested two-third majority of Panchayati Raj consisting of Zilla Parishad in the district level and Mandal Panchayat at the grass root level covering 1,500 to 20,000 people. It also suggested regular elections of these bodies; involvement of political parties in Panchayati Raj

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5 Hoshain Singh ‘Constitutional for Panchayat Raj in India Asian Survey Vol. XXXIV No. 9, 1996-97, p. 819
election, reservation of seats for weaker sections and women, adequate financial resources; requirement of constitutional sanctions and to extend people's participation in the development activities through Panchayati Raj Institutions. Again the G.V.K. Rao committee (1985) was appointed to review the existing administrative arrangements for rural development and poverty alleviation programmes. The committee recommended the strengthening of Zila Parishad for decentralization of power at the direct level planning. In 1986, another committee was set up under the leadership of L.M. Singhvi to prepare a concept paper on Panchayati Raj institutions. It stated that Panchayat Raj institutions should be closely involved in the planning and implementation of rural development programmes at the lower level. The Rajiv Gandhi government introduced the 64th amendment bill in 1989. Though this bill was passed in the Lok Sabha it could not be passed for want of adequate support in Rajya Sabha. Another attempt was made by the National Front Government in 1990 by presenting a constitution (Seventy -Third Amendment) Bill on Panchayati Raj, but it lapsed under the government changed. The congress government under the Prime Minister Narashima Rao introduced the 73rd Panchayat Bill in 1991. The congress government with some modifications got it passed in December 1992. After ratification by 17 state assemblies, the president of India accorded his assent and the Act came into effect from April 24, 1992. The constitution now has a new schedule namely the eleventh schedule after the tenth schedule. India accords constitutional status to local self government. This is a unique feature as most of the countries are content to let their local self government be governed by statutory
law. India is the fifth country in the world to have enshrined the local government in its constitution itself. The four other countries are Germany, Japan, Brazil and Nigeria.⁶

The 73rd Amendment Act marked a new era of democratic decentralization. The main features of the Act are –

The eleventh schedule has been inserted in part IX of the constitution consisting of 29 subjects assigned to Panchayati Raj Institutions covering the activities relating to rural area such as agriculture, land improvement minor irrigation, animal has boundary small scale industries, rural electrification, sanitation, health,

1. Establishment of Gram Sabha in each village comprising of all eligible voters.
2. Provision of a three-tire Panchayati Raj system (except in States whose population is under 2,000,000) with Panchyat at the village intermediate and district level.
3. Direct election by the people of the members of Panchyat Establishment of five-year terms for each Panchyat and holding a midterm election with a period of 6 months for the remaining period of the five-year term only.
4. Provision of reservation of one-third of seats for women including SC and ST women. In all the Panchayats for the offices of members and Chairpersons-

5. Provision of reservation of one-third seats for women in all the Panchayats for the offices of members and chairpersons.

6. Provision of reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion of their population in all Panchayats for offices of members and chairpersons.

7. Minimum age to hold any office of a panchayat is fixed at 21 year and disqualification for members of these bodies will be similar to the method adopted in respect of MPs and MLA.

8. Election to the panchayat should be conducted under the direction of Chief Electoral Officers in respect of MPs and MLA.

9. Provision of State Finance Commission after every five years to review the financial position of Panchayat and to suggest the principles governing distribution of fund of the Panchayats.

10. Provision of ex-officio membership for the concerned MLAs and MPs at the intermediate and district level Panchayat.

11. Panchayats have been empowered to impose and collect the assigned taxes, duties, tolls fee etc. They are also entitled to Grant-in-aid from the consolidated fund of the state.

12. The state would devolve to Panchayat the power to prepare plans for economic development and social justice and for implementation of development schemes in respective areas.

Family welfare, social welfare, public distribution system, primary and secondary education, poverty alleviation programme, non-conventional energy and maintenance of community assets etc.
The 73rd constitutional Amendment Act tried to ensure decentralization and rural development with a view to grant power to the people at the grass root level.

The 73rd constitutional Amendment Act provided for 33% reservation of seats for women. This would enhance women's participation at the district level, block level and help women to take part in the political decision making process with the implementation of this Act Panchayat Raj became a subject under state list. As such the central government avoids interference in the jurisdiction of states. As provided under the central Act most of the states have either modified their existing laws or framed new legislation by replacing the old Panchayati Raj Act and developed powers, authorities and responsibilities to function as the institutions of self government. All the states except Bihar conducted elections of Panchayati Raj Institution in India.

PANCHAYAT SYSTEM IN ASSAM

Some sort of social formation of decentralized village administration was prevalent in ancient Assam. However due to lack of historical evidence it is difficult to ascertain the definite shape and nature of decentralized administration.\(^7\)

There is historical evidence that the kingdom of Pragjyotisha on Kamrup was divided into small units such as bhaktis, mandals, visaya,

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\(^7\)Sarmah, Bhupen, "Rejuvenating Panchayati Raj Ideology India State and Lessons from Periphery", Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 18

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puras, agraharas etc. This information has been derived from the different grants made by various kings. However these were not clear whether these were geographical divisions or administrative divisions. Still the historians opined that this region also witnessed local administration, as other parts of India. The term Nayaka on Naya Srisikunda as referred to the Nidhanpur Grant generally means a village Head man. This division perhaps continued till twelfth and thirteenth century.

During the Ahom rule these were smallest administrative units known as *khels*. The *khel* were essentially occupational groups constituted by *paiks* (the adult manual workers). The khel officer such as Bora and Saikia had the power to settle civil and criminal disputes. The ‘Mels’ were in fact the estates conferred to sons, brothers, wives and other close relations of the reigning monarch. The chief of the Mel was empowered to settle minor disputes. Popular assemblies like Barmel, Rajmel etc were organized to discuss the problem of the local people.

The institution of khel still prevails among the Miris, Garos, Rabhas and Deuris in Assam. The head of the *khel* was known as ‘Aam’. He presides over the *khels*.

Besides these institutions, the neo-vaishnavite movement secured strong footing the last part of the fifteen the century under the leadership of Sankardeva. In this period the institutions grew up in every Assamese village and satras in different parts of Assam. Such
institutions were initially setup to covert the functions of neo-
vaishnavism, but in course of time it emerged as the nerve centre of 
village community. Through the institutions of namghar worked for 
the spread of cultural activities, namghars also played a significant 
role in judicial and political spheres.

Therefore, the institutions of khel, mel and namghars were 
some of the very important social institutions of local character that 
emerged during the Ahom rule in Assam.

**British Period**

In 1826 the British colonialism annexed the Ahom states and 
thereby Assam was under British Rule. During this period the system 
of modern local self government began to develop. In 1870 with the 
passing of Bengal village Chowkidari Act Panchayat was formed in 
Sylhet and Cachar. The Assam Local Rates Act was passed in 1879. 
This Act for the first time introduced local rates for local purpose. The 
regulations were introduced in eight plain districts of Assam. In 1881 
the government of India proposed certain reforms in local bodies but 
the government of Assam opposed the reforms on the pretext of 
backwardness of the province. In 1882 Lord Ripon’s Resolution was 
passed which is considered as an important landmark of local self 
government in India. There was no significant change in the 
development in the local self government of Assam till the second 
half of the twentieth century. In 1907 the Royal Commission on 
Decentralization was formed under the president ship of Sir Charles
Hobhouse. In 1915 local self government was established in Assam. According to this Act village panchayats got formal and legal basis for the first time. The government of India Act 1919 introduced the system of diarchy and transferred the subject of local self-government to the provincial government. In 1926 the Rural- self government Act was. This Act provided that every village should have authority of consisting of more than nine members elected on the basis of adult manhood franchise. They were elected for the term of three years. This Act was passed to enable the villagers to manage their own affairs and develop the capacity for self help. However the village authorities failed to make any significant change due to colonial government and only had nominal existence.

POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

After Independence and incorporation of Panchayat in the Directive Principles of state policy, the government of Assam passed the Assam rural panchayat Act 1948. This Act provided two-third majority in Panchayats system. Primary Panchayats at the village level and rural panchayats at the mouza level. The members of the primary directly elected such primary panchayat had an executive body comprising of not more than fifteen members and a president. The Assam rural panchayat Act was in operation in the state for decade. The number of rural panchayat gradually increased from 29 at the end of 1950-51 to 422 in 1959. In 1959 the rural panchayats covered a total of 2,657 primary panchayats seat in the plains district of Assam. However the district administration failed to realize its objectives. As a result the Balwant Rai Mehta committee was constituted in 1953 to
study the system. The state government accepted the recommendations of the Mehta committee (1957) and then the next Panchayat Act 1959 was enacted. This Act provided three her structure of Panchayat system i.e., Gaon Panchayat at the village level, Anchalik Panchayat at the block level Makhuma Parishad at the sub-divisional level. The Gaon Panchayat consisted of eleven members with one president and vice-president. It can appoint its own secretary. The term of Gaon Panchayat was three years. If scheduled castes and scheduled tribes constituted five percent of the total population. The Act provided inclusion of one member each from Schedule Tribes. The Act also provided inclusion of women. Inclusion of women was not provided in Anchalik Panchayat and Mahkuma Parishad. It can be observed that though some attempts were made to include women in the field of democratic decentralization and political participation, those were not sufficient. The Panchayat system under Act 1959 failed to emerge as the institution of democratic decentralization and socio-economic development. After four years the government of Assam appointed a study team to find the defects of the existing Panchayat system and to suggest recommendation for proper functioning of the local government. The Assam Panchayat (Amendment) Act 1964 was passed on the basis of the recommendation of the study team. Under this amendment Act, Anchalik Panchayats were responsible to prepare and executive plans at the block level. The Gaon Panchayat was to execute the plans of Anchalik Panchayats, as its agent.
The government of Assam enacted the Assam Panchayat Act, 1972 on the basis of the recommendation of the executive committee. The 1972 Act abolished the three-tier structure of the rural bodies by eliminating the Anchalik Panchayat from the purview and in its place introduced two-tier system of panchayat, i.e. only Gaon Panchayat at the base and Mahkuma Parishad at the sub-divisional level. The Act came into force in 1974 and continued till 1986.

The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1986, re-introduces the three-tier system by bringing back the Anchalik Panchayat in the middle and entrusted the supervisory power to Mahkuma Parishad. The Act provided for the constitution of Gaon Panchayat for an area having a population of sixty thousand. The bottom level of the institution was to be constituted of ten elected members and a president directly elected by the people, for a period of five years.

The year 1990 was a significant year in the history of Assam, because it was in this year the state government, by an amendment provided for a 30 percent reservation of seats for women. Thus reservation of seats for women in Assam was not just follow up action of the constitutional position, it was a statutory provision adopted prior to the 73rd amendment of the constitution.

The passing of the 73rd amendment Act 1992 which ensured constitutional status to the panchayats is the most significant step in
the direction of the Panchayati Raj. The following are the made by the 73rd amendment Act.

i) The Assam Panchayati Raj (Constitution Rules 1995, dealing with the code of panchayat election, delimitation and

ii) The Assam Panchayat (Financial) Rules, 2002 required for the financial devolution through the panchayat raj institution. Excepting the two autonomous districts of covered by the 6th schedule of the constitution, i.e. Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts, the Act is extended to all rural areas of Assam.

The following are the main provisions of the Act.

i) Constitution of the Gaon Sabha, consisting of persons registered in the electoral roles relating to a village on a group of villages comprising the Gaon Panchayat.

ii) Provision of three-tier Panchayati Raj-Gaon Panchayat: at the block level and Zilla Parishad at the district level.

iii) Direct election of the members of all the three levels of panchayats and president of gaon panchayat.

iv) Fixation of terms for five years for each level of panchayat. In case of dissolution and supersession, mid term election would be held term election would be held within Aix months for the remaining period.
v) Reservation of the one-third seats for women at all levels as members and chairperson on rotation.

vi) Reservation of seats for the schedule castes in proportion to their percentage in population for members as well as for chairperson and one seat in each level of panchayat reserved for Backward classes.

vii) Provision of ex-officio members for the concerned member of legislative Assembly and Member of Parliament at the Anchalik Panchayat Raj Institutions.

viii) The state would develop powers to the Panchayat Raj Institutions to prepare plans for economic development and social justice as provided in the eleventh schedule of the constitution.

Rani Development Block:

The geographical area of Rani is 2275 sq.km. There are 8 (eight) Gaon Panchayat in Rani Block. Five (5) Gaon Panchayat are under Kamrup (Metro) district and Three (3) are in Kamrup (Rural) district. The Rani block was established in 1958.

The name of the place ‘Rani’ has some historical significance. The Ahom rulers ruled in Assam since 1228 A.D. to 1826 A.D. The 16th Ahom king or Swargadeoi Susengpha or Budhi Swarganarayan (1603 to 1640) expanded the Ahom Kingdom on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra river up to the border of the river Manas and on the
south bank of the river Brahmaputra up to Nabagraha. During that time some small kingdoms existed in around present day Rani Development Block, Chaygaon, Bangaon, Pantam, Barduwar and Bhalagaon which acknowledged the Ahom King Budhi Swarganarayan's suzerainty and paid tributes to him. The area around the present Rani Block and also some areas of the present Rampur Block under the control of a Garo woman. She was from the village Luki and she paid tribute to Swargadeo Budhi Swarganarayan in terms of crops. Swargadeo Budhi Swarganarayan or Susengpha because of her sincerity allotted land to her to control as tributary to the Ahom Swargadeo to the boarder of the Bharaloo river in the east and Nahira, about 5 km away from the present town Bijaynagar under Rampur Development Block in the West.

Thus, the name of Rani came into being as at that time these areas were under administrative control of the Garo woman. This historical evidence can also be cited from the fact that till the present day several Garo villages exist in Rani, Chaygaon, Boko etc. Since she was a woman her Kingdom acquired the name ‘Rani’. The

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6 Rajkumar Sarbananda, 'Itihas Suwara Sasta Basur(Ahom jugar Buranj) 1228-1826, Barua Print House, Jorhat, page-51
historical kingdom is still present from the fact that a big tank ‘Rajapukhuri’ still exists at Batorhat. After the death of the Garo woman (name not described) the kingdom was ruled by Sri Dhani Ram Singha, as a tributary king of the Ahoms. The last ruler of the Rani Kingdom was Keshab Singha who paid tribute to the British at the rate of Rs.100 annually.⁹

**Demoria Development Block:**

The tribal area of Dispur No.52 constituency situated in the east of Kamrup district is known as Demoria. In the past it was known as Dimorwa, Dumuria, Demona etc. but in most history the name ‘Dimoria’ has been used. The boundary of Demoria was Kahimuchi in the east, Rajkhat and Tetelia in the west, in the north river Kolang and in the south Khasi and Jayantia state i.e., it covers the area from Tomabar Nishan to Demsang in the south.

When Kamrup was under the control of the Mohamadan ruler (representative of the Mughal emperor) Ibrahim, the Demoria Kingdom was included in the Southern end of the Kamrup Pargana as

⁹ From local people of Rani Development Block who claims themselves as the decendents of the royal family (Dilip Singha)
depicted in history. When Demoria was under the region of ‘Koch’ the boundary of Demoria was til Kajalichaki. Many smaller kings residing in the hilly regions of the bank of Brahmaputra. These kings acknowledged the sovereignty and paid tribute to them. Amongst them the most significant was the king of Demoria. There kingdom extended till the mouth of the Kolong which flows in the Brahmaputra.

The Demoria Development Block was established in 1952. Then Lakhara, Kharghuli and Greater Guwahati were included. In 1961 the revenue villages of Demoria was 210. In 1971 their number declined to 176 and in 1991 its area declined to 144. At present its boundary is Kahikuchi in the east, Na-mile in the West (till C.R.P.F. Centre), river Kolang in the North and Meghalaya in the South.

The origin of the name Demoria:

In order to know the origin of the name of a place, one has to know the history of the place is gathered. There is interesting stories about the origin of Demoria among the tribal people.
In the chronology of the Kumi tribe there was a powerful king named Pratap. He ruled for several years and suddenly he was killed by King Arimatta. Then his son Mriganki became the ruler. Then Naranarayan (Koch King) attacked him so he had to run away with his son in the jungle and at last died there. Then his Harichandra became the king. King Harichandra and Ratnakanta son of King Arimatta fled away to the jungle. They took rest under a 'Demoria' tree. As such the name of the place became 'Dimoria'.

In the legends of the Karbis living in plains the origin of the name Demoria is depicted in another way. When the Karbis were under the Kachari. The Kachari King tortured the Karbis. So a section of people had to run away from the place. On the way they took rest under a 'Demoria tree'. So the name of the place came to be known as Demoria.

According to another legend it is found that in Dimoria Bhakat Gaon a woman from fisherman's clan (Dom) took contract to build a road in Dimoria. The labours got angry as she did not grant them leave during Magh Bihu. Out of rage they killed the lady and smashed
her dead body with a stone and took Bindi (Phut) with her blood. In this way the name of the place came to be known as Demoria i.e. Dom + Moria (fisherman +Killing) Demoria.

The name of the place Demoria is much related to ‘Dimoria Tree’. Dimoria Development Block of Kamrup (metro) district, Assam comprises of several ethic groups, namely, Karbis, Bodos, Sonowal, Nepalis and Tea-tribes.

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10 Maniram Kalita, 'Dimoria Anchalar Upabasha, Ati Anchalik Rup Bislachanmular Adhayan', unpublished Thesis submitted to Gauhati University