

Evolution of Political Decentralisation in India: An Overview of Panchayats

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Abstract – The present study is an overview of historical developments with regard to political decentralization and Panchayat autonomy in India. The paper argues that however, the conception of political decentralization formally introduced by British regime in late 19th century, it is the institution of Panchayat that enjoyed autonomy in various socio-economic forms in rural polity of India. Despite the fact that the institution faced serious challenges from different regimes with the passage of time but still due to its legitimacy and usefulness it established itself as popular instrument of democracy in rural polity.

Introduction-

Panchayat a popular term used for ‘council of five’ elected by all the formal voters of the village. In fact it is legitimate unit of representative government at the level of grass root politics. The institution prevails since ages due to its democratic significance and relevance in modern democratic system in India. No doubt, the institution enjoyed popular legitimacy after the introduction of 73rd Amendment Act but informally it enjoyed popular legitimacy since times immemorial. Various civilizations in India realized the utility of the idea of decentralization in form of Panchayats. Therefore, due to its democratic relevance the institution enjoyed constitutional legitimacy in form of 73rd Amendment Act, 1992. The nomenclature of ‘Panch’ denotes the legislative body of five persons. Ancient literary references have been recognized them as ‘Panch Parmeshwar’ which indicates that the divine entity recognized as god’s presence among the popular five hence the decision given by them was equal to the will of divine entity. Such a great respect and admired status had been enjoyed in ancient age by the institution of Panchayat. Panchayats in Vedic age represented the body of five persons selected by the people of a village for management of rural affairs.¹

Political decentralization as a system of popular control and transformation of powers in political as well as financial terms became very popular after 1980s at the global level. It is the system of gradual devolution or transfer of powers, functions, resources and the process of decision making to the democratic-subordinate local bodies.² In this context, present paper describes various efforts of different regimes in informal and formal ways to establish political decentralization in form of Panchayats at the village level in Indian state.

Autonomy of Panchayats in Early Age

¹ R. P. Joshi and G.S. Narwani (2011), *Panchayat Raj in India*, Jaipur, Rawat Publication.

² Girish Kumar (2006), *Local Democracy in India: Interpreting Decentralization*, New Delhi, Sage Publication.

In the Rig-Veda, the oldest literary text, the examples of different self government identities recognized as *Samities*, *Sabhas* and *Vidath*. All these units of local governance had been used by the kings for efficient working of administration.³ Ramayana, a well-known religious text observed that administration was organized in two parts called 'Pur' and 'Janpad'. The expression 'Pur' stand for urban and 'Janpad' for rural units.⁴ Tulsidas talked about in his well-known text *Ramchritmanas* described the king as the epicenter of civil management. The ruler and ruled were further divided into three categories which were recognized as *Rajtantra* (King), *Vividhtantra* (visionary men) and *Prajatantra* (people) respectively. In the same system there was existence of Caste Panchayats as integral part of King's administrative committee so that management of the system runs systematically. The *ManuSmriti* also highlighted the realization of self governing units recognized as *Sabha* and *Samities* used by the kings for civil administration.⁵ The *Rakshak* was the person responsible for management of local affairs in the village. Similarly, the Mahabharata another ancient text also reflected the existence of *Gramic*, an official appointed to manage political affairs of a village.⁶ Kautilya also mentioned in his famous book *Arthashastra* that a village comprised of 100 to 500 families and *Gramic* was the chief official to regulate village affairs. Megasthene also recorded that there was an organization of five elected people for effective management of the Patliputra.⁷ Same status had been enjoyed by self governing units in the Maurian period.⁸ The Gupta Empire recognized that the villages' politics function as lowest part of administration.⁹ It is also found in the various historical records dating back to the Satvahan's and Chola Empire decentralize their political set up to manage administration with the help of rural and urban councils.¹⁰

Autonomy in Dynasty and Muslim Regime

Afghan and Turk dynasty didn't change early public decorum of village bodies and they continued with the old patterns to deal with them.¹¹ Later, in the Sultanate regime efforts were made to establish a centralized system of governance.¹² It was a period of identity crisis for the institution of Panchayat. In spite of this the Sultanate meticulously worked in favor of centralization, as the administrators were aware of the fact that it would not be an easy task for them to control India from a particular centre. Therefore, they introduced a new system to run

³ Siga Gandhi (2014), *Evolution of Panchayati Raj in India with Special Reference to Arunachal Pradesh*, International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS), ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print) Volume-I, Issue-III, November 2014, Page No. 225-240.

⁴ R. P. Joshi and G.S. Narwani (2011), *Panchayat Raj in India*, Jaipur, Rawat Publication.

⁵ H. K. Nagarajan, H. P. Binswanger-Mkhize and S. S. Meenakshisundaram (2015), *Decentralization and Empowerment for Rural Development*, New Delhi, Foundation Books.

⁶ R. P. Joshi and G.S. Narwani (2011), *Panchayat Raj in India*, Jaipur, Rawat Publication.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ R. L. Khanna (1971), *Panchayati raj in Punjab and Haryana*, Chandigarh, Mohindara Capital Publishers.

⁹ R. P. Joshi and G.S. Narwani (2011), *Panchayat Raj in India*, Jaipur, Rawat Publication.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ R. L. Khanna (1971), *Panchayati raj in Punjab and Haryana*, Chandigarh, Mohindara Capital Publishers.

¹² H. K. Nagarajan, H. P. Binswanger-Mkhize and S. S. Meenakshisundaram (2015), *Decentralization and Empowerment for Rural Development*, New Delhi, Foundation Books.

India by dividing it into provinces. These provinces were officially designated as 'Vilayat' in their records. 'Amir' or 'Vali' was the official administrator of the province. At the same times three officials were officially accountable for village affairs to the provincial administration, first was known as 'Mukkadam' the administrative controller, *Patwari* who was responsible for financial control and became *Choudhrie* while managing local disputes with the help of *Panch*. The village was considered as the smallest unit of administration and administered by *Patwari*, *Lambardar* and *Chownkidar*.¹³ Later in the Mughal Empire, they continued with the same system to manage the village polities. It is believed that this regime managed village polities through the traditional way while ignoring the political and economic autonomy of the same institution.¹⁴ The Panchayats enjoyed its traditional status except in the decision making at the local level.

Status of Panchayats during the British Period

In the initial phase of their rule, the British policy makers paid attention towards their imperial interests. Therefore, the regime implemented pro centralization policies rather than devolution of powers. However, at the same time they took initiative to improve urban bodies rather than rural development. Gradually, they acknowledged the relevance and usefulness of the local governance through reports and recommendations of the various commissions.

Table-1

Decentralization during British Regime	
Year and initiative	Main Provision
Madras City Corporation (1687) Bombay Governing Body (1726) Calcutta City Corporation (1863)	Separation of resources between Provinces and Centre
Mayo Resolution (1870)	Introduction of local governance along with devolution of power and finance to Provinces and Centre.
Revision of Mayo Resolution	Introduced modified face of Mayo Resolution.
Royal Commission (1909)	Elevated problems and perspectives of Panchayats
Government of India Act (1909)	Adoption of self-governance as a subject of Provincial List and introduction of diarchy
Montague-Chelmsford Reforms (1919)	Recommended functional efficiency.
Simon Commission (1927)	Recommended need to control and proper establishment of local self governing institutions.
Government of India Act (1935)	Lucrative provisions for the establishment of self-governance including introduction of double taxation system.

¹³R. P. Joshi and G.S. Narwani (2011), *Panchayat Raj in India*, Jaipur, Rawat Publication.

¹⁴R. L. Khanna (1971), *Panchayati raj in Punjab and Haryana*, Chandigarh, Mohindara Capital Publishers.

From the above discussion it is established that decentralization in the British period was well-organized and established in form of Panchayats along with legal status. On the other hand due to their imperial interests they provided limited autonomy in political as well as economic arena, while in social affairs the body enjoyed greater control in general circumstances.

Panchayats and Constitutional Legitimacy

Subsequently, after independence, the planning commission in its report suggested devolution of powers to the local governing bodies. It was further considered in meticulous manner by the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee.¹⁵The committee was in favor of public representative body for popular control.

Table-2

Decentralization in Post Independence Phase	
Year and initiative	Main Provision/Recommendation
Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1956)	Devolution of Powers to the Panchayats
National Development Council (1958)	Serious note of B. R. Mehta Committee recommendations. Many states in which Rajasthan was first to introduced Panchayati Raj Institutions at the village level and some of the states introduced devolution of powers.
Ashok Mehta Committee (1977)	Rethinking about the Panchayati Raj Institutions along with improvement in administrative support and structural changes.
G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985)	The committee suggested that there is need of capacity enhancement and character building among the grass root leadership. In addition to that the committee also recommend district and block level units for the improvement in self governance.
L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986)	It was the committee that recommends constitutional provisions for the PRIs. It was also suggests that the political parties remained away from village politics.
73 rd Amendment Act (1993)	Incorporated constitutional provision embodied with three tier system of decentralization along with financial and administrative control.

In the above table, formal developments have been mentioned since independence. Moreover, Pachayats played vital role in socio-political development of the village identities, while performing their traditional duties. The main structural transformation took place in the

¹⁵Yatindra Singh Sisodia (2007), *Experiment of Direct Democracy*, Jaipur, Rawat Publications.

phase when the status of Panchayats was transformed from legal to constitutional for enhancement of popular control over the grass root politics.

After the formal adoption of 73rd Amendment Act 1993 by the parliament it was implemented by some of the states without changing the basic structure of the same by established procedure of their respective legislative bodies. While some of the states adopted it with minor changes in the light of already existed provisions for example the extension in the provision of reservation for women.

Conclusion: - In the end, it can be said that the system of Panchayati Raj has witnessed many ups and downs of Indian history. The ancient Indian rulers from Maurian and Gupta ages were well aware of the relevance of the institution and the role it played in promoting social harmony. Initially, this view was not favored by the dynasties established by invaders such as Afgans, Turks and British. This prompted them to follow policies that favored centralization of power. With the passage of time, even these outsiders realized the significance of Panchayats in Indian grass root administration and they left the structure and functioning of this institution mostly autonomous. All these observations prove the resilience of Panchayati Raj Institutions which only gained strength through their constitutional recognition.