

Institutionalization of Grassroots Democracy in Rural West Bengal

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ABSTRACT:*The idea of grassroots democracy is built on the basis of democratic decentralization policy. Democratic decentralization is the main pillar of the grassroots democracy through which power (political, administrative and financial) can truly be reached to the common people of the country. The main aims of democratic decentralization are to establish a democratic society, where change is brought about by voluntary consent and not by the force of arms. Grassroots democracy really means the active popular participation (of the people) in the process of the nation-building. It (grassroots democracy) can be institutionalized and secured through the working of an efficient system of local self-government. In rural West Bengal grassroots democracy has been institutionalized through the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as in the form local self-government of the people.*

KEYWORDS:*Democracy, Grassroots democracy, Decentralization, Democratic decentralization, Panchayat and Self-government.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Grassroots democracy is the real form and source of democracy, where power reaches the grassroots level of society. Only grassroots democracy can ensure power to the people directly. Grassroots democracy is the basis of the democratic system. In grassroots democracy, the meaningful participation of the ordinary people is the means of sharing of power at the micro level of society. Grassroots democracy is a real forum of citizen through which they can participate in elections, governance and decision making process. It can be considered as a tendency towards designing political process where as much decision-making power and authority as really is shifted to the lower level of society. The idea of grassroots democracy is built on the basis of decentralization policy. Democratic decentralization is the main pillar of the grassroots democracy through which power (political, administrative and financial) can truly be reached to the common people of the country. Grassroots democracy really means the active popular participation (of the people) in the process of the nation-building. It (grassroots democracy) can be institutionalized and secured through the working of an efficient system of local self-government.

Local Self-government and Grassroots Democracy

Local self-government means autonomy and autonomy designates and simplifies local government. There is a direct correlation and powerful link between localism and self-government. The great bulk of activities of self-government or so to say local government are closely associated with providing services to the common people living in close proximity who are not able to provide these services for themselves individually. Local self-government is to make its communitarian contributions arousing the common people to enthusiastic and purposeful activities as a body of self-less individuals. Therefore, self government is necessity, not an option. It is justified because it is an effective and convenient way to provide services to the people (Mallick, 2004, p.78). So it can be said that local self-government is a legitimated government of the grassroots level people. It is the outcome of the idea of democratic decentralization that has empowered and developed the foundation of democracy.

Local self-government is the government of the specific local area which is formed and generated by the people of concerned area. Appadorai (1975) also defined the local government system as government by the popularly elected bodies charge with administrative and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particular district or place. Local government was further defined by Lawal (2000) as that tier of government closest to the people, which are vested with certain powers to exercise control over the affairs of people in its domain. According to Stones (1963, p.1), 'Local Government is that part of government of a country which deals with those matters which concern people living in a particular locality'. It can be expressed as a system of decentralization of government in which many of the tasks are distributed among units, separated both physically and organizationally from the central government departments. These separated units are called

local government or local authorities. The definition also connotes that a local authority is composed of the adult residents of the area if it is small enough, otherwise by representatives of the inhabitants. It must, therefore, usually be a council, which is established by the Central enactments. The power of local authority as also the way it exercises the power may be prescribed either by the constitution or by the law (Bhargave & Rao, 1978, p.55). Local self-government is a system of public administration at a local level, charged with the responsibility of bringing the people at the grassroots closer to the government.

The Constitution of India and Attempts to Institutionalization of Grassroots level Democracy in India

The article 40 of the Constitution of India says that the state shall take steps to organize 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 main objective of this article is to provide a broad base to democracy in the country by transferring powers from the centre and the state through districts and blocks to the villages and also enabling the people to participate in democracy in a more effective way and thus provide training ground for future leadership in the country. It is giving the rural people an opportunity to plan and administer their own affairs, to arouse and stimulate rural initiative to community development programmes. The sense of community feeling, self-reliance and initiative among the village people is to be developed and an opportunity for the weaker sections of the society to participate in the management of rural affairs will be created through the village Panchayats.

After independence the community Development Programmes and National Extension Services were launched by the government of India for rural reconstruction. The main focus of these programmes were on improving agriculture and rural development and bringing about socio-economic transformation among the rural people. In 1957 the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was appointed to study the Community Development Programmes and National Extension Services stated the community needs to be involved in planning, decision making and implementation processes. But Panchayati Raj institutions across the country faced resistance from bureaucracy, lacked capacity and were often captured by certain elitist sections of the community. The Committee said that unless local interests are created (mobilized) and supplied to provide new blood to representative and democratic institutions, money expenditure on local objectives and local development according to local needs would be doomed to failure (Committee of Plan Projects, 1959, p.5). The Committee said that community development can be real and fruitful if and only if people understand their problems, realize their responsibilities, exercise their democratic rights through elections, and perform their duties, exercising on external and intelligent vigilance on local administration (Department of Rural Development, 1986, para.4.1). Thus, the committee thinks that development cannot go forward without responsibility and power, and recommended an early establishment of statutory elective local bodies and devolution to these bodies of powers, authority and necessary resources. According to the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report (1958), there should be a three-tier structure of local self-government the Gram Panchayat at the village level, the Panchayat Samiti at the block level and the Zill Parishad at the district level and all these three tiers should be organizationally connected to each-other and all welfare and development programmes should be implemented through these institutions. In terms of structures, electoral procedures, powers and functions, there is a considerable progress in Panchayati Raj institutions in different states. According to the recommendations of Mehta Committee many states amended their Panchayat Acts. As a result, considerable variations can be found in different states. 'Though there are variations from state to state, it may be broadly be stated that the functions entrusted to Panchayats include village roads, community wells, maintenance of public parks, tanks, irrigation works, public hygiene, drainage and other civil services (Department of Rural Development, 1986, para.4.5). The basic objectives of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee's recommendations were towards the decentralization of democratic institutions in an effort to shift decision-making centers closer to the people, encourage their participation and put the bureaucracy under local people's control. It was also considered as a revolutionary step and most important political innovations in independent Indian. Panchayati Raj institutions are functioning as a system of local self-government, where the people are taking their responsibilities for development. It is also system of institutional arrangement for achieving development through people's initiative and active participation. Thus the Panchayati Raj system was first introduced in India on the basis of the Mehta Committee report. This report was first implemented in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh in 1959. Other states are also adopted it.

In 1978 another Committee on Panchayati Raj was appointed by the central government under the chairmanship of Ashok Mehta to review the system of Panchayati Raj in different states in the country. Many states had a tendency to postpone the Panchayat elections. Some states had set up a parallel body at the district level to reduce the role of Panchayati Raj institutions in development planning and implementation. Elections of the Panchayati Raj institutions here not held on a regular basis. There was a lack of adequate transfer of powers and resources and generation of resources such as tax and others. There was no representation of women and

backward classes on the elected bodies of the Panchayat. In short, the village Panchayats continued to be more or less in the same condition as in the pre-independence era.

In 1985 the Planning Commission of India had appointed the G.V.K. Rao committee to review the existing administrative arrangements for rural development strongly recommended the revival of Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) all over the country highlighting the need to transfer power of state to democratic bodies at the local level. In 1986 the government of India set up another committee to prepare a plan to revitalize the PRIs. The Committee recommended that the PRIs should be constitutionally recognized, protected and preserved by the inclusion of a new chapter in the Constitution. It also suggested a constitutional provision to ensure regular, free and fair elections for PRIs. On the basis of these recommendations of the committee, the central government brought about the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill (1989) which was passed by the Lok Sabha. This was a comprehensive Bill covering all vital aspects of PRIs. But this Bill could not be enacted as it was not approved by the Rajya Sabha. The Bill ignored the fact that mere funding would not make Panchayats vibrant and democratic. The Bill is playing into the hands of upper strata and self-seekers (Biswas, 1989). The 'power to the people' is nothing but an eye wash. In fact, the socio-economic position of the poor would have to be developed to ensure their healthy participation in the Panchayati Raj institutions. The need is to develop a power structure of the rural poor and have-nots as counter-balance against all forms of exploitation and oppression by the rural haves (Kurian, 1980). Thereafter, a comprehensive amendment was introduced by the central government in the form of constitution Amendment Bill, 1991. After being reference to a joint select committee to the Parliament, it was passed in the Lok Sabha on 22nd December, 1992 and in the Rajya Sabha a day later on April 24, 1993 the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act came into effect to provide constitutional status to the PRIs. This amendment to the Constitution of India constitute a milestone in the process of establishing decentralized democratic administration through local bodies and taking administration to the doorsteps of the people to ensure economic and social justice. The important thing is that now Panchayats are to be directly elected by the people like the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies. The Constitution guarantees the institutional existence of Panchayats through 73rd Amendment Act (1992). The Eleventh Schedule added the Amendment Act (1992) that distributes the powers between the state legislature and the Panchayat paving the way for innovative three-tier federalism. Also, the Constitution empowers the state legislatures to confer on the Panchayats such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government.

The Focal points of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act

The focal points of the 73rd constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 were : (a) to provide three-tier system of Panchayati Raj for all states having population of over twenty lakh; (b) to hold Panchayat election regularly every five years; (c) to provide reservation of seats for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and 33% of the seats of the Panchayats were reserved for women (including scheduled castes and tribes women) ; (d) to appoint State Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats, (e) to constitute District Planning Committee to prepare draft development plan for the district as a whole; (f) to ensure people's participation in the developmental process Gram Sabhas constitute the general villagers of the concerned area. Active functioning of the Gram Sabha would ensure participatory democracy with transparency, accountability and achievement; (g) powers have been provided so that the Panchayats can acquire adequate funds that they need for the performance of their responsibilities; (h) there should be one session of the Gram Sabha in every six months to audit the financial accounts and to make Gram Sabha more meaningful and effective as an essential organ of direct democracy at the grassroots (Panchayat) level.

Before the 73rd Constitutional amendment (1992) West Bengal was seriously sincerely tried to build up Panchayat system as the strongest arm of democratic decentralization in the vast rural area. The three tier Panchayats system had been tried in West Bengal since 1978 and each of these three tiers -Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad are directly elected by the people. The democratically elected representatives of different political parties are playing very crucial role in decision-making of all Panchayati Raj institutions. Thus the ideology of democratic decentralization has been widened to a large extent and the deepening democracy has taken its roots at the grassroots level of society.

Institutionalization of Grassroots level Democracy in West Bengal

In West Bengal local self-government institution had been working in the villages of Bengal since 1920s. The Union Board, formed in accordance with the Act of 1919, had occupied a great place in the daily lives of the peoples in rural areas of Bengal. After independence the Panchayati Raj system was established in 1957 in West Bengal. The West Bengal Act, 1957 made a clear provision of two-tier system: Gram Panchayat at the village level and Anchal Panchayat at the Union level, which become a four-tier system after the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act, 1963: Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat at the village level, Anchal Panchayat at the Union level, Anchalik Parishad at the Block level and Zilla Parishad at the District level (Sastri, 1962). All

adult voters of a village were members of the Gram Sabha and the elected representatives were the members of Gram Panchayat. The Gram Panchayat was the executive organ of the Gram Sabha, which was the base of participatory democracy. Gram Panchayat had one Adyaksha and one Upadyaksha elected from among its members. The next stage at the Union Board level was Anchal Panchayat, composed of the elected members by the Gram Panchayats. It had one Pradhan and one Upapradhan elected from among its members. Anchalik Parishad at the Block level was composed of one Adhyaksha from among the Adhyakshas of all Gram Panchayats, one Sabhapati and Sahasabhapati, Pradhans of all Anchal Panchayats, M.L.A. of this area plus two women from backward communities nominated by the state government and B.D.O. of this Block. At the District level two Adhyaks has from among the Adhyakshas of all Gram Panchayats, all Sabhapatis of Anchalik Parishad, M.L.A.S. and M.P.S., Municipality Chairman, two women from backward communities nominated by the state government, all sub-divisional officer, District School Board President, one Sabhadhipati and one Sabasabhadhipati –all these persons constituted the Zilla Parishad. This four-tier Panchayati system in West Bengal could not move on smoothly like it's all India counterparts.

The West Bengal Government's aim was to provide a pattern for remodelling of local government institutions, associating local authorities with development and bringing about democratic decentralization and people's participation in planning and development. But the flash of great hopes faded away. The supervision and control by the state government over these institutions have created Panchayati Raj a crawling baby. However, the competence for self-government and self-management has to be developed through a process of training, and power would not have to be given from the above, it would be taken from below, even from unwilling hands (Narayan, 1962). But the Panchayati Raj institutions in West Bengal could not achieve their aims. A number of factors can be identified for the failure, such as political instability, corruption, inefficiency, political factions and intrigues, financial crisis, political trends towards centralization, excessive governmental control over the Panchayats, dominance of landed class and higher castes etc. Power and authority are not decentralized. As a result, election has brought about this advantage as political parties have come into the picture. As political cannot be kept away from power (Mathur, 1962), so parties and their programmes and policies are irrelevant to the Panchayati Raj institutions. This argument is not acceptable. Because, there is a close relation between power and politics. Therefore, the transfer (decentralization or distribution) of power to the Panchayati Raj institutions has become a political phenomenon. As a result, political parties have come very close to Panchayati Raj institutions. The power structure of the Panchayat has encouraged the local level political parties to enter into Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs). Hence the local parties have become important functionaries of the PRIs. In this way, Panchayats have been institutionalized in terms of power, politics, party and elections. This four-tier Panchayati Raj institution did not make contributions to social change and socio-economic development, but tried to confine their rules in the forms of distribution of relief and monthly pay and allowances to the employees. The acts of 1957 and 1963 could not provide decision-making power close to the village people.

In 1973 West Bengal government passed a new Panchayat Act. West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 introduced three-tier Panchayat system: Gram Panchayat at the Anchal level, Panchayat Samiti at the Block level and Zilla Parishad at the District level. Gram Sabha was abolished. Gram Panchayat members are directly elected by the people and headed by a Pradhan and Upapradhan. The second is tier of the Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) is Panchayat Samiti; it is composed of Pradhans of Gram Panchayats, elected representatives from Gram Panchayats area, M.L.A.s and M.P.s of the concerned Panchayat Samiti area. Panchayat Samiti headed by a Sabhapati and a Sahasabhapati. Zill Parishad, the highest tier, is composed by Sabhapaties of Panchayat Samities, elected representatives, M.L.A.s and M.P.s elected from the district. The District Magistrate is the executive officer of the Zilla Parishad. The Block Development Officer (BDO) of the each Block is functioning as executive officer of the Panchayat Samiti.

In West Bengal a resurgence of Panchayats has taken place during the period of 1970s and 1980s. In 1977 Left Front Government had come into power in West Bengal and took the task of organizing village Panchayats and implemented the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973. This resurgence in West Bengal was preceded by mass movements for changing land-owning pattern in rural West Bengal during 1967-70. Later on, it was accompanied by land reforms, particularly distribution of ceiling surplus land, registration of share-coppers (that is called Operation Barga movement) and distribution of land inputs to the beneficiaries of land reforms (Bandyopadhyay, 1981). The 'two legs' theory (Mishra, 1991) of rural development, land reforms and democratic decentralization is the hallmark of the Left Front Government, which weakened the 'hold of big land lords' (Mukherjee and Bandyopadhyay, 1993, p.3) over Panchayati Raj institutions. It can be said that the 'two legs' of institutionalization of Panchayats are peoples' participation and rural development. It is institutionalization which provides mechanical and structural contact between state and society, and legitimating links them emotionally and psychologically (Kamrava, 1993). Peoples' participation in Panchayats is a crucial ingredient of legitimating process. It is observed that, there is a very close relation between legitimating and institutionalization.

The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act (1992) has made the Panchayati Raj system Constitutional and strengthened its self-governing character and status. To keep parity with this Act, West Bengal government has passed the West Bengal Panchayat Amendment Act in 1994. 'To ensure effective participation of the people in the developmental processes the West Bengal Panchayat Acts, 1992 and 1994 were enacted marking the institutional innovation like Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad, where all the electors of the Gram Panchayat area are involved in the development process.' (Mallick, 2004, p.87). The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act of 1992 declared that every constituency of a Gram Panchayat shall have a Gram Sabha consisting of all the registered voters of the Gram Panchayat area. The Gram Sabha plays a quite significant role in the working of the Panchayat. The Gram Sabha has to approve the budget proposal and annual plan of the village Panchayat. The Panchayat has to work efficiently due to the active interest taken in its work by the Gram Sabha. Gram Sabha is an institution through which the rural people can express their grievances and keep a watch on the functioning of the Panchayats. George Mathew has expressed his view as 'members of the gram sabha, comprising all sections of representative bodies, could raise issues of social concern and public interest and demand explanation' (Mathew, 1999, p.28).

According to the West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act 1992, there should be one Gram Sansad at every electoral constituency of the Gram Panchayat. All the voters within the electoral constituency will be members of the Gram Sansad. It is the bottom most organization that stood even below the Gram Sabha. The Gram Sansad has been created to make Gram Sabha more meaningful and participatory. The Gram Sansad gives advice to the Gram Panchayat on the questions of area development and social justice. Gram Sansad plays a crucial role in promoting solidarity among all sections of the village people without any discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, creed and social status. The Gram Sansad is the unit of grass-roots level people of the rural area where people can directly participate in the decision-making process of the rural self-government and express views about their urgent needs and demands.

II. CONCLUSION

Thus, the Panchayati Raj institutions are playing a very significant role to make democracy more meaningful at the grass roots level on the basis of democratic decentralization. As an institution of the people Panchayats in West Bengal are capable of performing a crucial role in mobilizing the rural people in the process of development. Through these micro-level governments as well as institutions people can take a test of real democracy. They can manage their own problems and needs to participate in the decision-making process of Panchayati Raj institutions. Panchayati Raj system is the best possible arrangement for distributing power among the people democratically. For create a great opportunity to participate in formulation and implementation of the developmental process Panchayats have made a close relation between the state, society and people. Thus, the grass roots levels democracy has been institutionalized through the Panchayati Raj institutions on the basis of democratic decentralization.

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