

Participation a Requisite for Grass Root Democracy. An Indian Overview

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ABSTRACT : *Indian society is basically a rural dominated society. The basic traits of the rural society are marked by illiteracy, poverty, ignorance, superstition, patriarchal values to name a few. The clamour for democracy is a futile cry since the success of democracy depends on the participatory level of the masses. But in India it is yet to catch up the momentum. The common mass is still reeling under economic crisis, not to mention about the educational backwardness of the people. Conventions and customs also prevent the people from participating freely particularly the marginalized section. On the other hand democracy demands that at every stage people should participate if they are to bring overall development of the masses. But the participation should be voluntary and spontaneous and not hoisted from some authority at the helm of affairs. Hence in India emphasis is being laid on decentralizing power to the grass roots level so that they get a scope to participate at the decision making level. Involvement of the people in affairs that concerns them creates awareness among them and this leads to a close watch on the activities of the government and increases their level of participation. An attempt is made in this paper to see how through rural governance participatory level of the people can be enhanced and this would lead to the success of Indian democracy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The basic idea behind the panchayati raj institutions is to ensure people's participation. Unless participation of the general masses is ensured at every level of the political and administrative system, real democracy and development would be a futile exercise (Sharma, 1983). A state that ignores the needs and interest of a large section of the population fails to establish itself as a well developed state. Even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through article 21 states that "Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives... The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government." The development process in a developing economy will be meaningful not only when the citizens associate themselves with the planning and development programme but also become a part in their implementation programme. The eighth five year plan in India categorically states that "It is necessary to make development a people's movement. People's initiative and participation must become the key element in the whole process of development." Hence participation of the people assumes great significance as it helps to bring the government closer to the people (Biju, 2008).

The progress and development of a country is ascertained only when all strata of society develops equally. Development forms an integral part of a society. But development is not a one sided governmental affair. It needs the cooperation and participation of the common masses. The cooperation should come voluntarily and spontaneously because voluntary action is an important vehicle of rural development. The ultimate aim of all activity should be to help people to help themselves. Participation of people in the rural oriented projects would enable them to improve the quality of rural life. A forceful development programme implemented from top will not yield any fruitful result unless the people themselves feel the need to participate and bring the required changes. Participation means promoting, enabling local communities to deal with their own problems according to their priorities (Ram, 2007). The concept of participation gained preponderance only in recent times yet its roots can be traced to Aristotle who in his book "The Politics" defined a citizen as some one who "is entitled to participate in an office involving deliberations or decision" for making the city self-sufficient. Modern Political Scientist like Sidney Verba, Schlozm Brady and Nie refers to political participation as a mechanism through which needs and preferences of citizens are communicated to political decision makers and by which pressure is brought to bear on them to respond. Rousseau's idea of an active citizenry is also a reflection of the concept of participation as an end in itself. Communitarian thinkers like Benjamin Barber views participation as an essential aspect of a community's ethical life. In the Indian context also Gandhiji's concept of gram swaraj and M. N. Roy's idea of people's committees, which was further extended by Jayprakash Narayan, are attempts of the people at participation in the democratic process of the country (Puri, 2004). Participation forms the background of a democratic system and enables power to reach down to the grass roots level. Participation is possible only when people are bound by common interest.

“Participation includes people’s involvement in decision making process, in implementing programmes, sharing in the benefits of development programmes, and thus involvement in efforts to evaluate such programmes” (Soni, 2005). People’s participation implies direct involvement of the citizens in the administrative process as well as in the decision making, and policy formulation (Biju, 2008). Different writers have viewed participation from different aspects. John. M. Cohen and Norman. T. Uphoff describes participation as “people’s involvement in decision making process about what would be done and how; their involvement in implementing programmes and decisions by contributing various resources or cooperate in specific organizations or activities; their sharing in the benefits of development programmes; and or their involvement in efforts to evaluate such programmes. Taken together, these four kinds of involvement appear to encompass most of what would generally be referred to as participation in development activities.” According to P. R. Yadav, people’s participation means “involvement of the people in the development process voluntarily and willingly. Such participation cannot be coerced.” He further reiterated that people’s involvement has to be understood in terms of participation in decision making, implementation of development programmes, monitoring and evaluation of such programmes and in sharing the benefits of development.

T. K. Moulik is of opinion that “participation in development process implies stimulating individuals to take the initiative and mobilizing people to work for overall societal development” (Ram, 2007). People’s participation or intervention in the development process of a democratic country like India helps to renew their interest in programmes of which they are the beneficiaries. In other words participation for the people is a way of showing by their behavior and action that they are capable of assuming responsibility. Secondly, participation is a means of ventilating their feelings. Thirdly, participation offers the people the opportunity to ventilate their feelings. Thirdly, participation offers the people the opportunity to show their willingness to do constructive work. Fourthly, participation is an antidote against the unresponsiveness and repressiveness of traditional decision-making mechanism. Participation enables the citizen particularly the marginalized section to gain control over decisions that affect their lives through direct participation in programme operations. The intensity of the people’s participation varies from developed to developing countries based upon their political, social and economic systems. In developed countries participation takes place because the citizens have become conscious of their responsibility and want to be associated with the process of governmental decision making and action in some way or the other. In developing countries the participation is yet to pick up momentum. In such countries the government desires their participation because it helps them achieve their objectives (Biju, 2008).

The conventional growth oriented top-down development strategy has failed to achieve the desired trickling down of the benefits of development to the marginalized sections. The programmes undertaken by the government considered people as the “object” of development and the agencies make provisions of things and services of ‘what they can’ rather than ‘what people need’. The failures of the different plans and programmes sensitized policy makers, administrators and donor agencies to understand the local needs and realities. The need for understanding the local realities gradually led to the emergence of the concept of participation. Participation is considered as the rightful claim of the marginalized section and it is also used to perpetuate and disguise continued top-down approaches. The space for participation which is created from above through actions of governments and non governmental organizations or those the people create for themselves through movements may not always guarantee voice, unless the participation prevents the exiting pattern of power from being reproduced. Culturally, participation of people implies their sense of belonging to the community and fraternity rather than the state, while politically it denotes the involvement of all stake holders and creation and sustenance of accountability of the state towards the people. The inherent inequality evident in the Indian society in the form of caste hierarchy, gender discrimination, social exclusion, has created division in the society to the extent of exploitation that the marginalized group has been left out from the participation process sometimes intentionally and some times unintentionally. The aim of the participatory approach is to make the excluded sections being heard who has been ignored or not heard so far. If this can be achieved through participation a profound change in socio-economic political institutions can be attained (Narayan, 2003).

Participation can be studied from four aspects. First, participation can be regarded as a means of getting unpaid labour from the people. The main argument regarding this form of participation is that it creates strong sense of belongingness among the people regarding the public utilities created. This self participation in the form of unpaid labour helps to cut down the expense on welfare schemes. It is a good means to acquire free labour from the poor in development projects. Second, aspect of participation aims to promote self reliance. The supporter of this view states that the out come of this participation is that the poor in the third world countries do not have any initiative for their improvement. This factor is mainly responsible for their poverty, rather than the socio-economic structure of that society.

The feeling that has been floated is that the poor countries in the third world are dependent on the developed world to a large extent and “this structural explanations of dependency at the macro level is being transformed to the situation in the micro level.” Third, participatory approach is often applied to create ideal villages. This approach visualizes a village of the past where people lived in peace and joined hands in solving any problem that might come up. This concept of participation is very popular though it does not escape criticism. Fourth, participation is also considered as a method of project management. It is believed that through participation projects can be successfully manned and can be completed in due time. The 1970’s saw a renaissance of the concept of participation. Robert Chambers states that participation as a model of development can be used in three directions. First, it is used as a cosmetic level which makes every proposal appear good. Second, it is a way of utilizing local labour which will help to reduce the cost of maintenance of the project and finally it is a means of empowering people to take decisions on the problems faced by them and also to find out means and ways of solving the problem (Muraleedharan, 2006). The right to participate in public affairs implies that each and every person and all people representing every strata of society are capable of participating in and contributing to, and enjoying all civil, economic, social and political development. Participation enables people to participate in the activities of society upto their maximum level. It has been observed that most people desire to be involved.

But people are often deprived from participation because of deprived circumstances (Meebnai, 2008). Attempts at democracy and development would be a futile exercise unless endeavor is made to ensure people’s participation at every level of the political and administrative system (Sharma, 1983). Panchayats are the instrument through which participation of the rural people in various activities of rural sector can take place. People’s involvement at the village level planning will generate consciousness in them. Panchayats strive to involve the people by giving them sufficient role to perform and to work for possible political responsibility. Such responsibility will make the people conscious of their rights and ensure their involvement. Through panchayats the planning process would result in better and more efficient planning because the people are well conversant with their own needs and requirements and it will help them to identify, formulate and select schemes and programme of local importance (Soni, 2005). Social scientist has viewed ‘development’ as a broad concept including all aspects of socio-economic political and cultural advancement of human beings that is “total human development.” This sort of view focuses on the need to consider people as the “subject” or the “creative agents” of development and stresses their need to be fully involved in the creation of a just and participatory society.

From this point of view the institutional form of democratic decentralization namely panchayati raj which is a political system emphasizes people’s participation in decision making, formulation, implementation, and evaluation of development efforts, assumes great significance. Panchayati raj institutions are visualized as local government bodies which enable people to participate in the process of development and governance. Aristotle, the Greek Philosopher, opined that participation of the citizens in the affairs of the state was essential for the development and fulfillment of the human personality. For Aristotle the best state was one where there was extensive participation of the people in the affairs of the state with no class distinction (Ram, 2007). For democracy to be successful at the grass roots level the local organizations not only has to be strong but must also have the capacity to meet the demands and needs of the people. Local government plays an important role when it makes efforts to see that the instrument of good governance is available to all strata of society whether rich or poor literate or illiterate men or women. Local government can play a crucial role in strengthening democracy and bring about responsive, accountable, effective and people friendly administration at the local level. In spite of the fact that in the past decades, several rural development programmes have been launched in India but these programmes have failed to produce the desired result. The out come is that a large number of people are still living below the poverty line. The result of development efforts have not percolated down to the grass roots level, hence a substantial number of population still resides below the poverty line. Evidences point out to the fact that rural development failed to make its mark as the people failed to participate in the programmes and policies meant for them. Participation does not mean mutually approving projects that has been framed by higher authorities. Participation on the other hand means enabling local communities to deal with programmes that concern them according to their priorities. Local community participation in development has to be genuinely local and directly related to the people. A competent and participatory rural government is an important pre condition for development (Ram, 2007). People’s participation and rural development appears to be synonymous. Involvement of the people in the development programmes that concern them is essential. This involvement makes the people responsible and encourages their initiative and self reliance and also at the same time helps in the effective use of local knowledge, skills and resources (Das and Ray, 2004). A forceful development programme implemented from top will not yield any fruitful result unless the people themselves feel the need to participate and bring the required changes (Ram, 2007).

Development forms an integrated process. It cannot be achieved except through the committed co-ordination between the entire nation building agencies on the one hand and the people as represented by their organizations and their institutions on the other. People's participation in the development process must be spontaneous. All developmental activities should be people centric. If people through their organizations at the grass root level fails to make their voice being heard then any development programme becomes a futile exercise as the work gets concentrated in a few hands with the connivance of the officials who will ride rough shod over people and foist on them projects or programmes which may not have any significance for them (Ram, 2007). Panchayati raj became the model through which people's participation is ensured in the development process of the country. The development of a sound economic structure, upliftment, of the rural and backward community through social transformation and to create a strong sense of democratic governance closer to the people are some of the ideologies India stands by. Panchayati raj institutions are the medium through which all these can be achieved. Panchayati raj institutions are regarded as the vehicle of development and socio-political transformation of rural India. Panchayati raj provides the base ground for democracy at the grass root level. For the common citizen it is local democracy which has real meaning and significance. In a country like India, where the large masses are still illiterate, the literacy rate being only 65.4 as per the 2001 census the illiteracy rate being so high only participatory democracy can do wonders. To ensure participation at all levels of government the government structure should be made decentralized. By 1980 the shift towards decentralization became quite marked. It was soon realized that in a vast country like India where diverse topographical, ethnic and socio-economic conditions exist it would be wrong to perceive that democracy would be successful under the present centralized scheme. The Father of the Nation has aptly pointed out that "true democracy could not be worked out by twenty men sitting at the centre. It had to be worked from below, by the people of every village." Thus the political structure of democracy to be made successful by the common mass necessitates that every citizen should get an opportunity to participate in the day to day affairs of the state, as well as in the community to which he belongs. This would be possible only through a scheme of democratic decentralization in different spheres of administration, policy formulation, its implementation, and financial management (Dube and Padalia, 2002). Decentralization is an important instrument in initiating people's participation at the grass roots level. The main objective of decentralization is development. Decentralization is co related to democratization and it is through the process of democratization that the desired development and changes can be brought about. Thus democratic decentralization may be considered as an efficient method of formulating and executing local plans in line with democratic trends towards local self government (Verma, 2002). It has become a recognized fact that if good governance and better planning were to be ensured under decentralization the state should empower local governments with full political, administrative, financial and planning decentralization (Ram, 2007).

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