



Gandhian Concept of Panchayat Raj in the Twenty First Century

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Abstract: The 21st century is knocking the door of history. It will usher in a new millennium. It is time that the entire human race comes out of the bondage of traditional thinking and look out to the future with a liberated mind. As we look up at such a prospect, we may find the precepts of Gandhi holding out a great promise for freedom and empowerment of the people vis-a vis a totalitarian and centralized state which has usurped all such freedom and power. Good governance demands respect for human rights, rule of law, strengthening of democracy, promoting transparency and capacity in public administration. The responsiveness of the state and its institutions to the needs and aspirations of the people, and inclusive citizenship are imperative to good governance. Democracy depends upon the equality of all human beings, their right to participate in social and political transformation and the right to development, to live in dignity. This paper objective is to study the importance of Gandhi's concept of Panchayat Raj in 21st century.

Key words: good governance, Panchayat Raj institutional,

Introduction

Good governance demands respect for human rights, rule of law, strengthening of democracy, promoting transparency and capacity in public administration. The responsiveness of the state and its institutions to the needs and aspirations of the people, and inclusive citizenship are imperative to good governance. Democracy depends upon the equality of all human beings, their right to participate in social and political transformation and the right to development, to live in dignity. Panchayat Raj is a system and process of good governance. Villages have always been the basic units of administration in India since ancient times. The Gram Sabha can become the cornerstone of the whole Panchayat Raj institutional set-up, thereby the Indian democratic system. So in this paper focus is on Gandhian concept of Panchayat Raj. This is useful

to development of India. So in 21st century this concept becomes powerful in the Nation. This paper objective is to study the importance of Gandhi's concept of Panchayat Raj in 21st century.

Panchayat Raj and Good governance;

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since ancient times. The Gram Sabha becomes the cornerstone of the whole Panchayat Raj institutional set-up, there by the Indian Democratic system. So Gandhian concept of Panchayat Raj is useful to develop the India. So in 21th century this concept becomes powerful in the nation.

Importance of Gandhi's Concept of Democratic Decentralization:

It bears the stamp of his passionate belief in non-violence, truth and individual freedom. He wants to see each village a little republic, self-sufficient in its vital wants, organically and non-hierarchically linked with the larger spatial bodies and enjoying the maximum freedom of deciding the affairs of the locality. Gandhi wanted political power to be distributed among the villages in India. Gandhi preferred the term "swaraj" to describe what he called true democracy.

Village - unit of decentralized system:

Gandhi made it very clear that concentration of either economic or political power would violate all the essential principles of participatory democracy. To check centralization, Gandhi suggested the institution of village republics both an institutions of parallel politics and as units of economic autonomy. Village is the lowest unit of a decentralized system. Politically a village has to be small enough to permit everyone to participate directly in the decision-making process; it is the basic institution of participatory democracy. The technical skills of villages will be fully developed, there will be no dearth of men with high degree of skill and artistic talent. Gandhian

decentralization means the creation of parallel politics in which people's power is institutionalized to counter the centralizing and alienating forces of the modern state.

Gandhi and Village Panchyats:

Mahatma Gandhiji tours all across the country reinforced his conviction that India would benefit if the villages were been governed by village panchayats based on the principal of "simple living and high thinking". These were village republics which were self-contained and self-reliant and having all the people want. These were the institutions where minimum standard of living could be accorded to all human beings.

Gandhi and Panchayat Raj System:

The Gandhian Idea of panchayat Raj system can become vehicles for ushering in the much needed social and political change by including all the stakeholders in the process of decision-making and public policy formulation "Panchayat Raj" represents true democracy realized. We would regard the humblest and the lowest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land.

Gandhi and India's development policy:

Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayat Raj, a decentralized form of Government where each village is responsible for its own affairs, as the foundation of India's political system. The term for such a vision was Gram Swaraj (village self-governance). After independence, various committees recommended 3-tier Panchayat Raj system. This system adapted by state governments and established in



various states. It also found backing in the Indian constitution with 33rd amendment in 1992 to accommodate the idea. The amendment act of 1992 contains provision for devolution of powers and responsibilities to the Panchayats both, for the preparation of economic development plans and social justice, as well as for implementation in relation to 29 subjects, listed in the eleventh schedule of constitution.

Gandhian Gram Swaraj:

Gandhi mooted the idea of Panchayat Raj with a concept of self-sufficient and self-reliant villages functioning as a Republic. In his dream, every village in India should be characterized by a direct and participating democracy, endowed with all the powers that enable it to function as a government in the true sense of the term. The power and functions, which cannot be effectively discharged at the local level, should alone be transferred to the government at the center. Thus, the policy in India shall take a pyramidal shape having a broad and strong base at the village level and a gradually narrowing one towards the upper hierarchy with delegation only of essential functions where a heavy splash on the water creates the most intense wave at the initial circle, which gradually fades as the circle expands. This is what Gandhi meant by "building from below". That is one aspect. On the other, a republican village shall be self-sufficient and self-reliant in respect of its basic necessities like food, clothing, shelter, employment, education, health, social security etc. The modality of functioning of the village policy was also embroidered by Mahatma Gandhi in his various

writings from which the essence that can be gathered consists in the following precepts, namely:-

1. All adult persons, male or female, of the village shall have a say in the village administration in order to make it truly participatory, as wide as the community.

2. All decisions in the village panchayat shall be on the basis of consensus, which eschew out divisive approaches arising from consideration of party politics, religion, caste, creed, class or culture.

3. "Antodaya" or unto the last, is the philosophy behind distribution of resources so that an equitable distribution of scarce resources can be ensured.

4. All village disputes have to be settled within the four corners of the village and not to be taken outside it so that the curse of litigation may not shatter the rural economy.

5. An approach of villagization to create community assets for the community to be independent of outside resources for further development of the community and to inform all measures for social security in the form of care for the old and infirm, widows and destitute women, orphans and neglected children, handicapped and mentally retarded and the unemployed and the helpless.

Touchstone for Government:

We may not fall back on the concept of government as an institution. What really makes an authority a government? While we spin out the concept of local self-government, we have to bear in mind if the authority at the village level created by the



constitution has really assumed the character of a government. What are the essentials for such a government? It has been recognized in the modern parlance of political theory that a government must have three essential powers:-i) Taxing power ii) Police power and iii) The power of the eminent domain. By taxing power it is meant that the authority termed as government should have the right to raise revenue through compulsory exaction to defray the expenses of its obligatory functions. By police power is meant the right to regulate the behavior pattern of the people living within the governmental jurisdiction in such manner that the individual voluntarily sub-judge individual interests for the community interest since "Good of individual is in the good of all". The power of the eminent domain vests the authority termed as government to resort to preceding of acquisition of land, water, sub-soil rights, ambient air, mines, minerals etc. including the power to escheat. It is on these touchstones that one has to determine whether an authority is really clad with governmental power or not.

Social Audit:

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has issued specific guidelines to make Gram Sabha as a vibrant forum for promoting planned economic and social development of the villages in a transparent way. The guidelines are a part of the proceedings to observe the year 2009-10 as year of Gram Sabha and relates to the social audit for the effective implementation of Mahatma Gandhi NREGA. According to the guidelines, the Gram Sabha as a Key to the self-governance and transparent and accountable functioning are a forum that

ensures direct, participative democracy. It offers equal opportunity to all citizens including the poor, the women and the marginalized to discuss and criticize, approve or reject proposals of the Gram Panchayat and also assess its performance. Hence, the States may, by law, endow the Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be required to enable them to function as institutions of self-government under them, Article 243G read with the Eleventh Schedule stipulates that. Such laws may also endow powers and responsibilities upon Panchayats for the preparation and implementation of plans for economic development and social justice including in relation to the 29 matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule. This did lead to the enactment of Gram Panchayat Acts by various States; these were no more than half-hearted attempts for the creation of rural local government institutions. But the failure of the Community Development Programme, which had been launched for bringing a silent revolution in rural society by awakening the dormant forces of progress, led to the appointment of Balwantraji Mehta Study Team.

Prospects and Challenges for the 21st

Century : In the past 13 years, almost all states, with the notable exception of Jammu and Kashmir, have gone through the process of electing the PRI functionaries conforming to the 73rd Amendment at least once. Elections have taken place in 504 District Panchayats (Zila Parishads), 5,912 Block Panchayat Samitis and 231,630 Gram (Village) Panchayats. Corresponding to each of these tiers of sub-State governance, 1,581; 145,412; and 2,971,446



– a total of 3,132,673 – representatives have been directly elected from their respective constituencies. More than a million of these are women and above 800,000 belong to the Scheduled Castes (dalits) and the Scheduled Tribes. The Houses of Parliament have elected

800 members, whilst the 28 States and two Union Territories have elected 4,508 members. The sheer size of the elected members from the village panchayats to the national parliament is a staggering 3,137,754.

Democracy in India has reached a new threshold, unprecedented in the world.

Yet devolution of power is easier enacted than promulgated. The problem of devolution takes two forms. First, when out of the list of 29 subjects that have been recommended for devolution by the XI Schedule of the Constitution, there is a wide variation between States on the number of subjects actually devolved (administrative devolution). Second, when the financial resources of the local governments are incommensurate with the administrative responsibilities reposed on them (fiscal devolution). As of now, eight States and one Union Territory, in letter, if not all in spirit, have devolved all the 29 subjects to the panchayati raj institutions. We cannot remain oblivious to the numerous problems that confront the world's largest and most complex democracy. It is not within the scope of this presentation to get into these. I shall mention only 12 challenges to our system of local self-government, if only to keep us anchored to reality.

1. There is the factor of the local political economy and the high probability of elite capture of

resources.

2. Central and State-level political elite feel threatened having to vie with the local political elite, trying to win support from a common constituency.
3. The non-elected resource-rich NGOs/INGOs with their primary accountability to the donors operate within panchayat jurisdictions as competing structures of influence and power.
4. There are State and central-level projects that bypass the authority of the PRIs.
5. Problems of accountability and transparency often associated with rent-seeking behaviour characterise many functionaries at all levels.
6. Gram sabhas, which are the fundamental units of direct democracy, are often convened at irregular intervals with poor attendance.
7. There is the problem of what is known as 'proxy panchayats', where the husband/male members of the family act on behalf of the elected women representatives.
8. Social-institutional barriers often inhibit the role of dalits (the Scheduled Castes) and the Scheduled Tribes in the Panchayati Raj system.
9. A resistant bureaucracy is tardy in implementing devolution of power.
10. Political and economic



clientelism in an iniquitous agrarian and caste structure perpetuates the role of dominant powers.

11. There are problems relating to ambiguities in the distribution and sharing of power at the various sub-State levels.
12. Most importantly, there are problems of poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition that provide structural barriers to the improvement in life-chances of the deprived and marginal groups.

In conclusion, the dialectics of contestation has entered a new phase after the constitutional breakthrough. The process of contestations that I have highlighted in the presentation points to the resultant, irreversible ascendance of the forces of gram swaraj. It must be distinguished from the wave of decentralisation in many developing countries prompted by structural adjustment programmes since the 1980s that seek efficient service delivery as its main objective. Decentralisation per se is not necessarily democratisation. Neither deconcentration nor delegation of power is a sufficient condition for effective democratisation. What is important is real devolution of power to the constitutionally-elected representatives at the level of local self-government.

Had Babasaheb Ambedkar been with us today, he would have been pleased to note that the serious apprehensions he had nurtured about panchayati raj at the time of drafting the Constitution, no longer remain in the same measure. Had Gandhi been alive he would remind us

that if only the people were able to hold on steadfastly to truth, non-violence and love the process would be so much the easier.

Conclusion:

Several distinguished scholars studied working of the Panchayat Raj in different ways. They lead us to the inference that the Gandhian idea of Panchayat Raj remains an unfinished agenda even after six decades of the implementation of the Panchayat Raj on the recommendation of the Balwantrao Mehta study team on oct 2 1959. 73rd amendment was implemented by various states in 1994. Therefore, concentrated systematic and sustained endeavors are needed on the part of those for whom Gram swaraj remains a cherished dream for the empowerment of people and for making national development of India a Participatory democracy. It is a matter for satisfaction that in several parts of the country rural reconstruction and development is progressing along the lines chalked out by Gandhiji, but more strenuous and sustained efforts are necessary on the part of both individual Sarvodaya workers and official and semi-official agencies, if the pace is to be accelerated. Probably hundred years after Gandhi's death, his views on Panchayat Raj and the way forward will be a come reality. Mahatma Gandhi gave India its freedom - freedom from bondage, slavery, imperialism. Britain ruled India for a long time until Gandhi emerged on the scene to bring the country under its own rule. In today's world Gandhi is more relevant than ever before and his thoughts and insights will once again help in the world in getting freedom from poverty, tyranny



and terrorism.

But the studies of several distinguished scholars on the working of the Panchayat Raj in different States and the Status Report of the Ministry of Panchayat Raj (1996) lead us to the inference that the Gandhian ideal of Gram Swaraj remains an unfinished agenda even after six decades of the implementation of the Panchayat Raj on the recommendation of the Balwantrai Mehta Study Team on October 2, 1959. 73rd Amendment was implemented by various States in 1994. Therefore, concerted, systematic and sustained endeavors are needed on the part of those for whom Gram Swaraj remains a cherished dream for the empowerment of people and for making national development of India a participatory democracy.

The 21st century is knocking the door of history. It will usher in a new millennium. It is time that the entire human race comes out of the bondage of traditional thinking and look out to the future with a liberated mind. As we look up at such a prospect, we may find the precepts of Gandhi holding out a great promise for freedom and empowerment of the people vis-a vis a totalitarian and centralized state which has usurped all such freedom and power.

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