Institutionalizing Power At The Grass-Roots: Journey Of The Panchayati Raj Institutions In West Bengal

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Abstract

Panchayati Raj system is identified as the prime instrument of decentralization through which democracy becomes truly representative and responsive. The Panchayati Raj institutions (PRI’s) are considered as local self-government, which are meant for providing basic infrastructure facilities, empowering weaker sections of the society and initiating the development process at the grass-roots level of Rural Bengal. The present PRIs owe their existence to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao. While Rajiv Gandhi conceived the idea of institutionalizing and constitutionalising PRIs, P.V. Narasimha Rao carried forward the gigantic task and enacted 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India. Ever since the 73rd Amendment came into force, the process of political empowerment of the Panchayats has more or less been achieved. But to what extent there has been proper devolution of powers and functions to Panchayats, and how far they have been successful in achieving inclusive democracy and growth at the grass-root level is an important question.

Keywords: development, grass-roots, panchayat, people, power.

Introduction

The origin of the system can be traced to the efforts of the British colonial state to create a system of self-government in the late nineteenth century, starting with the Bengal Chowkidar Act passed by Lord Mayo in 1870. These Panchayats were not democratic, being composed of persons nominated by the district collector or any subordinate officer chosen by him, with the sole purpose of levying and collecting Chowkidari tax for the maintenance of the village watchmen.
On 18 May 1882, lord Ripon, the viceroy of India, issued a resolution encouraging the setting up of local government. When comprehensive scheme for setting up local government institutions was put forward through the Bengal Local Self-Government Act of 1885, it fell far short of the ideals set forth in the 1882 resolution. This act provided for a three-tier structure for rural Bengal. At the top, there was to be a district board having jurisdiction over the entire district; at the middle level, a local board covering a sub-division; at the lowest level the union committee with jurisdiction over a union or group of villages. These local boards had no fixed roles as such and they soon became redundant because of their limited powers and finances. The institutions were not democratic in nature as the District Board members were indirectly elected by the local boards. Members of the local boards and union committees were elected by a restricted electorate.

The Bengal partition agitation of 1905 heralded a new era in the nationalist movement making administrative reforms inevitable. In 1914 the District Administrative Reforms Commission appointed by the Government of Bengal pleaded for a unified system of rural local government and favoured the establishment of a network of unified rural local authorities combining the functions of the Chowkidari Panchayat and the Union Committee. This led to the birth of the Union Board under the Bengal Village Self-Government Act, 1919. This act was practically the first attempt to introduce self-governing institutions for the rural people of the province. The act of 1919 had provided for the creation of union board consisting of a group of villages.

Thus from 1919 onwards, undivided Bengal had two sets of local government institutions—district boards at the uppermost level and union boards at the lowest. The system introduced by the British was sought to be changed after independence. It was replaced by the panchayat system. Constitution of village Panchayats replacing the union boards was initiated in the fifties. In 1954, the West Bengal Legislative Assembly had passed a non-official resolution asking the government to take steps to establish village panchayats and endow them with judicial, administrative and other powers. A draft bill was introduced in the assembly in 1956, which, after scrutiny by a select committee, was enacted in 1957 as the West Bengal Panchayat Act. The act of 1957 replaced the Bengal Village Self Government Act of 1919 and restructured local self-government in the villages by introducing two tiers—Gram panchayats and Anchal Panchayats—in place of the union board. Besides, a new concept called the Gram Sabha was introduced.

In 1963, the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act was passed to provide for the re-modelling of local government with a view to associating local authorities with development activities and bringing about democratic decentralization and people’s participation in planning and development. Under this act, two corporate bodies were created—Anchalik Parishads at the block level and Zilla Parishads at the district level. It was now a four-tier system instead of the three-tier system recommended by the Balwantra Mehta team. Although this fourth tier panchayat system existed till 1977, but it remained stagnant. There was no election to the anchal and gram panchayat and anchalik parishads and zilla parishads remained superseded.

West Bengal started its journey at a time when the phase of decline of the Panchayat institutions in other States of the country had begun primarily because of the lack of political support,
bureaucratic neglect and inadequate statute to make Panchayat bodies representative, responsive and strong. Thus, inspite of some interesting developments in the West Bengal during the congress period, the condition of the panchayats was quite dismal up to 1977.

All this changed with the ascendance of a Left Government to power at the state government level in 1977. Its political reform program consisted of empowering the three-tiered panchayat system with a gram panchayat (village council) for a cluster of villages at the bottom, a panchayat samiti covering the area of a block, and a zilla parishad for the district. The most important innovation they introduced was that all tiers of the PRIs would have party based direct elections. In 1985-86, in order to facilitate decentralized planning, two new structures, namely the Block Planning Committee and the District Planning Committee were added.

In the nineties, three major amendments were made in 1992, 1994 and 1997. These amendments coincided with the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India. Through this amendment, institutions of self-government, known as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), were first institutionalised in India. The amendment made it obligatory for the states to establish PRIs in accordance with the act, and the Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zilla Parishad were introduced as elected local bodies. The 1992 amendment made it mandatory for all Chairpersons and Karmadhyaks has to be full-time functionaries. It also ensured that one-third of the seats of all three tiers were reserved for women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes. The amendment has also introduced a Gram Sansad in addition to the Gram Sabha. Several new features were introduced to the Panchayat Act in 2003 to further reduce concentration of power. On paper there has been quite a few policy changes aimed at devolution of fund, function and functionaries to the PRIs. However, how far there has been real devolution is a big question.

It is true, that PRI’s decentralised the democratic set up by widening political representation of different social groups, especially women. It also enabled the building of efficient local institutions that could plan, execute, and monitor their communities’ development through a participatory approach.

However, real devolution still has a long way to go. Limited efforts have been made to empower elected PRI representatives with their constitutional functions. In most of the cases, state leadership and officials are unwilling to provide real power to local elected leaders. As a result, in many cases, PRI representatives have become mere implementers and followers whereas the idea was to build them as local leaders leading local development. The time has come to move from political representation to grass-roots power devolution. There is a need for the state political leadership to accept the importance of PRIs, and devolve power to them as mandated in the Constitution of India. There is also a need for elected local leaders to come together with their constituents, and demand more control and autonomy as enshrined to them by the Constitution of India.

References:


