
CHAPTER FOUR

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND PANCHAYATI RAJ

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The philosophy of development that emerged in India after independence emphasised the involvement of the members of the national community into institutions that would enable them to participate in the process of decision making affecting their welfare and progress. But at the same time there was also uncertainty about the extent to which participation of the people could be expected in the decision making process.

The community Development and Rural Extension programme was initiated in 1952, to sought for a regional approach to planning and development of the rural areas. The First Five Year Plan clearly refered to ' Mass enthusiasm ' and ' the active interest and support of the people', in improving their own conditions.¹ About the Extension the plan said " Extension is a continuous process designed to make the rural people aware of their problems, and indicating to them ways and means by which they can solve them. It thus involves not only education of the rural people in determining their problems and the methods of solving them, but also inspiring them towards positive action in doing so."²

Jawaharlal Nehru, the First Prime Minister of India, played a very important role in intiating the Community Development Programme in India. Nehru's passion for democracy

and individual freedom paved way to his idea of people's participation in the political and administrative process. Nehru believed that Parliamentary democracy alone was suitable to resolve peacefully the conflicts in a plural society and the common man should be the focus of public administration. Unless free institutions, functioned effectively at the grassroot level, participation of the people in the process of government could not be realised. He therefore, sought to assign definite role to Community Development and National Extension for associating the average man with the activities of the administration, which remained a dream throughout his tenureship as Prime Minister of India.

Nehru therefore described ' Community Development Programme ' as the motive force for the successful implementation of the Five Year Plan. Addressing a conference of the development commissioners in April 1953 he expounded the policy perspective, " The whole object of the Community Development Programme is to raise the general standards of living of the average man - an object which in the Indian context is quite a revolutionary thing. Whether we can bring about this revolution in a peaceful, co-operative way is of the highest importance because violent methods demand a tremendous initial price and their ultimate outcome is totally uncertain."

Thus " Community Development was the method and Rural Extension was the agency through which the Five Year Plan sought to initiate a process of transformation of the social and economic life of the villages."³ The aims of the Community Development Programme was to assist each village to carry out an integrated plan viz. increasing agricultural production, improving village craft, industries and organizing new ones, improving nations communication system, health and hygiene and promote education in villages and " to generate and direct a process of integrated social, economic and cultural change with the ultimate aim of transforming social and economic life in the villages".⁴ The basic assumption was that the rural community would move from official motivated self help to self motivated self help. The second Five Year Plan clearly outlined the objective of the programme stating.

" The aim is not merely to provide ample food clothing, shelter, health and recreation facilities. These are of course essential. Equally important is the realisation that what is required is a change in the mental outlook of the people, instilling in them an ambition for higher standards"

Though the official machinery was created to guide and assist the planning and the implementation of the programme, the main responsibility for improving the socio-economic

conditions in the village was to rest with the people themselves. It was argued that unless people considered Community Development as theirs and values it as a practical contribution to their own welfare no substantial result could be gained. Community Development Programme was conceived, planned and initiated as people's self help programme. Consequently the people's participation in the planning and the execution of the programme was considered a vital aspect of community Development, and was sought by setting up of Project advisory committees consisting of non-officials in project areas.⁵

Officially the Community Development Programme was launched on October 2, 1952. The programme which was first introduced in fifty five blocks spread all over the country by stages extended to cover larger areas. For each community project there was Project Advisory Committee with a project executive officer as secretary and was assisted by a staff of supervisors and village workers. Further at the District level there was District Development Board with District Development Officer as its secretary. Similarly at the state level there was state development committee comprising of Chief Minister as Chairman and Ministers of relevant departments as members. The Development Commissioner was charged with the responsibility of directing and coordinating the community projects throughout the country. A Central committee comprising of Prime Minister

the
Nehru as Chairman and members of/Planning Commission and the
minister for food and agriculture was formed at central level
to lay down broad policies and to exercise general supervision.

In an attempt to implement the Community Development programme effectively, Prime Minister Nehru created a separate ministry of Community Development in September 1956, with S. K. Dey as minister.⁶

In the course of the debate in Rajya Sabha on the Draft Outline of the Third Plan, Nehru commented : " I think the community development movement has done wonderful work, and it will continue to do the work. Looking at the whole picture and thinking of the vast problem of moving hundreds of millions of people out of the rut, of their thought and action, I think it has done fine work. Nevertheless, it began to slow down in its creative energy and creative impulse."

On another occasion, while giving message to the fourth Development Commissioners' Conference held at Simla (May 9, 1955) Nehru explained how Community Development Projects and the National Extension Service became more than anything else, symbols of the resurgent spirit of India.
" They have not only moved our own people, more especially in the rural areas, but have attracted the attention of other parts of the world, more especially of countries in Asia and Africa

which have to face problems rather similar to ours." On yet another occasion/^{he}said " The hundreds and thousands of community projects are changing the face of India. That is the great revolution that is taking place in the village, and in the heart of India."

The programme however, failed to involve the people in the planning and implementation of the programme. It was noticed that the community development programme instead of being people's programme with government's assistance was becoming more and more governments programme with varying degree of people's participation.⁷ The block advisory committees, created to enlist popular support and participation in the programme lacked capacity, vitality and power to represent people's point of view.⁸ The village panch^ayats were also found weak and ineffective to mobilize the masses in support of the programme. Besides in most of the states, there was no organization at the block level to represent the people's will⁹ Community Development, became through the years too much a part of administrative network, It did not succeed in growing into a movement which continually nourishes community and welfare at the base of rural society,¹⁰ and therefore Nehru urged the need for " creating a suitable well organized and democratic structure of administration within the district."



Hence the National Development Council constituted a committee on plan projects which appointed a study team for Community Projects and National Extension service in 1957 headed by Balwantray Mehta to assess along with other things the extent to which Community Development programme has succeeded in utilising local initiative and in creating institutions to ensure a continuity in the process of socio-economic change.¹¹

The need to appoint such a study team was reasserted by Prime Minister Nehru. He said " It was seven years ago that we started this great movement with the Community Projects, and the National Extension service. These have by now covered more than three lakh villages. On the whole good work has been done. But we have not been able to do as much as we expected. The reason for our slow progress is our dependence on official machinery. An officer who is an expert, may help but development work can be executed only if the people take the responsibility in their own hands. Some people thought that if the responsibility was handed over to the people, they would probably not be able to shoulder it. But it is only by providing opportunity to the people that they can be trained to shoulder responsibilities. It became imperative that a bold step be taken whereby more and more responsibility could be transferred to the people. The people were not merely to be consulted but effective power was to be entrusted to them." ¹²

The Balwantray Mehta study team submitted its report late in 1957. The team recommended that for the popular participation in the Community Development Programme enlisted through ad-hoc advisory bodies was not adequate, and a separate set of institutional arrangement would have to be statutorially created. The team suggested a three-tier system of institutional arrangement at village, block and district levels, namely the village panchayat the panchayat Simiti and the Zilla Parishad. It recommended that the entire developmental work should be transferred to these bodies.¹³

The basic need for the creation of Panchayati Raj institutions was to make Community Development Programme relevant to the needs and problems of the people and to transfer decision making authority to villagers regarding developmental work.¹⁴

The recommendations of Balwantray Mehta team was accepted by the National Development Council in 1958 and the various states in India started the implementation of the scheme of Panchayati Raj. Rajasthan was the first to take to Panchayati Raj in October 1959, when it was inaugurated by Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India. To Nehru the inauguration of the programme of democratic decentralization in the state was a 'historic step.' He emphatically said

" We are going to lay the foundation of democracy of Panchayati Raj in our country. It is a historic event. It is fitting that the programme of Panchayati Raj should be inaugurated on Mahatma Gandhi's birthday." ¹⁵

Further he said " India will make progress only when the people living in the villages become politically conscious. The progress of our country is bound to improve with the progress in our villages. If our villages make progress, India will become a strong Nation and nobody will be able to stop its onward march." ¹⁶

Nehru also reminded that there is a strong legendary and historical tradition that village Panchayats have been in India since the dawn of history and that they have outlived and survived all change and upheavals of time. He said " There was some sort of Panchayat by the name of Sabha Samiti, Janapada or Mahajanapada from the earliest times. He went on to remind them that " a slow disintegration of ancient village communities had begun to take place during the late Mugul and British period." ¹⁷ Earlier in his book ' Discovery of India ' Nehru had mentioned that in ancient times " there was a widespread system of self government in towns and villages and the central government seldom interfered as long as quota of taxes was paid." Nehru wished this to retain again in India viz self help without any interference.

Following the Balwantray Mehta team's recommendations Panchayati Raj was implemented in fifteen states in the country, namely Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Karnataka, Orissa, Bihar, Gujrat, Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh. In the states of Jammu Kashmir, Kerala, Manipur and Tripura there is only one tier i.e. Gram Panchayat. In terms of the scheme therefore these states cannot be considered to have introduced Panchayati Raj.

An examination of the organizational structure of the Panchayati Raj institutions in various states reveals that, though the ideals and basic objectives of the institutions are identical in all the states, their power, mode of representation of the people and the nature of interrelationship among them are not uniform.

The central council of local self government at its fifth meeting in 1959 had recommended that while the broad pattern and the fundamentals may be uniform, there should not be any rigidity in the pattern. In fact the country is so large and Panchayati Raj is so complex a subject with far-reaching consequences, that there is the fullest scope of trying out various patterns and alternatives. What is most important is the genuine transfer of power to the people. If this is ensured form and pattern may necessarily vary according to conditions prevailing in different states.

Following the lines of this recommendations, the states have been left free to try out varying ways of effecting democratic decentralization. Accordingly two categories of Panchyati Raj have emerged. First with three tier system with states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal and two tier system with states of Assam, Haryana, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa.

It may be noted that the powers and functions of gram panchayats being broadly similar throughout the country, a basic issue in structural pattern of Panchayati Raj is the relative strength of the zilla parishad and the Panchayat Samiti.¹⁹ With regard to the five states listed above, the district level body being not in existence the block level (Panchayat Samiti) is ofcourse powerful.

However in three tier category there exists considerable variation. For example in Rajasthan Panchayat Samiti is the most powerful body which is responsible for the planning and the execution of all the developmental programmes. The Zilla Parishad or the district level body is merely advisory and supervisory body. The smilar pattern has been adopted in Tamil Nadu and Punjab. The state of Andhra Pradesh has provided planning and executive powers to both the panchayat samiti and

zilla parishad. The Panchayat systems in the states of Bihar, Himacal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal function on the similar lines. The pattern adopted by Maharashtra is different from both Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan. The Zilla Parishad in Maharashtra is the most powerful body with wide powers and responsibilities.

Thus it can be noted that the functions performed by the Panchayati Raj institutions at each level vary according to the power it possesses.

It was the failure of the Community Development movement to arouse the developmental conscience in the rural masses which made the Balwantray Mehta report recommend the three tier scheme of democratic decentralisation. Panchayati Raj was thus recommended as a remedial measure for the short falls of community development programme in its basic objective of creating a self helping rural community. The creation of a self helping rural community which was the basic philosophic postulate of community development was to give a meaningful goal - orientation to panchayati Raj and the extention approach, which had been the mainstay of the former was to also enrich the operations of the latter.²⁰

Thus Panchayati Raj can be said to ^{be} an improvement on Community Development movement in conceptual terms. Panchayati

Raj basically remained a character of rural local government inspite of the desire on the part of the bureaucrats to treat it exclusively as a developmental agency. But the objectives of Panchayati Raj are much more namely modernization, democratization and politicization than that of community Development Programme embodied in itself a preparatory stage for modernization.

Nehru who had taken deep interest in the Community Development Programme ever since its beginning, made it clear that the two are different from one another. In a message to the Anniversary number of the ' Kurukshetra ' he said,

" Community Development did much good, but it became clear later that something else should be done to give fresh vitality to our work in rural areas. The impetus was provided by the Panchayati Raj programme which was not only an extension of Community Development but was also qualitatively some what different."²¹

Nehru also took great interest in Panchayati Raj system. Talking about the main objective of Panchayati Raj Nehru said " The main aim of Panchayati Raj was to develop this outlook and a spirit of self-reliance amongst the people. The fact that those people were quite often not trained and

had other failings was obvious. Nevertheless the only way to train them and to lessen their failing was to give them the chance of shouldering responsibility and learning by their own mistakes. We have to undertake many development schemes but the biggest project of all is to build men and women." 22

Further talking about the officials of Panchayati Raj institutions and their functioning, Nehru said, " Panchayati Raj as giving the millions of our people the chance to share responsibility, to do good work and to grow in the process. This must be understood by our B.D.O's and other village level workers. All our officials must realize this fully and earnestly and enthusiastically work to this end. They are in a position to lead people and they must exercise leadership not to suppress others but encourage them also to develop qualities of leadership in their own spheres. The officials, while helping in every way must remain in the background and make the people realize that the job is theirs and that the success and failure will also be theirs." 23

Nehru also spoke of the three essentials of the village viz the Panchyat, the cooperative and a school. Nehru said, " The Panchayati would deal with administrative aspect

of village life, the cooperatives will represent the economic side of the village."²⁴ Every village in India should also have school so that every boy and girl will have education without which progress is not possible.

Panchayati Raj institutions in the first decade of their existence fulfilled the aspirations of Jawaharlal Nehru to make decision making process decentralized with popular participation. The performance and achievements of Panchayati Raj institutions were appreciated everywhere. The Panchayati Raj institutions made effective contribution in politicising the rural masses. The people began to assist themselves and had a say in the management of village affairs. Panchayati Raj institutions also pave way for intensifying agricultural development programmes.

But the removal of Nehru from the political horizon of the country and the resultant phase of political instability accompanied by such other hostile factors as the failure of monsoons for three consecutive years, two successive wars with Pakistan and Finally the emergency provided the long awaited opportunity. In due course of time, powers which had been decentralized to the institutions of Panchayati Raj were taken back. Both the Panchayati Raj and the municipal institutions came to be recklessly superseded and elections to them were repeatedly

postponed. The country found itself being over loaded by a highly centralized power and the purpose with which Panchayati Raj institutions were established came to a severe blow. Consequently a number of committees were appointed by the government of India, to examine and report on one or the other aspect of the Panchayati Raj. However the appointment of Ashok Mehta Committee is to be regarded as an event of far reaching significance.

The Committee was appointed in 1977 to enquire into the working of the Panchayat Raj institutions and to suggest measures to strengthen them so as to enable decentralized system of planning and development to be effective. Shri Ashok Mehta was the chairman of this committee, which submitted the report on 21st August 1978.

The Ashok Mehta Committee suggested two tier structure for Panchayat Raj institutions. The committee favoured the retention of Zilla Parishad but desired to abolish the Panchayat Samitis in slow process, an attempt to universalise the Maharashtra pattern. The committee expressed to enlarge the activities of Gram Panchayat which is only possible when they are reconstituted in the shape of Mandal Panchayat (grouping of Gram Panchayats) Further the committee favoured the participation of political parties in Panchayati Raj elections, to

ensure clearer orientation towards development programme and facilitate healthier linkage with higher level political process. Regarding the mode of elections, the Ashok Mehta committee suggested direct elections to chairman of mandal panchayats. The committee further suggested that the state government should not supersede the Zilla Parishad and if the government decided to supercede the local bodies, it should see to it that the fresh elections are held within six months. The elections should not be indefinitely postponed.²⁵

After the committees report several state undertook the elections to the Panchayati Raj institutions, in the years 1978 and 1979. But after these elections no elections have so far held. The new Government which came to power in 1984 again felt a need to assess the functioning of the Panchayati Raj institutions and hence appointed a parliamentary subcommittee to study the recommendations made by the scholars on Panchayati Raj.

However it is worthwhile to see whether the Panchayati Raj institutions have been able to materialize the expectations. Though Panchayati Raj institutions made some contribution in decentralizing political power, making popular participation more viable and emergence of new leadership from rural area, the over all working of these institutions seems to be disappointing on the following aspects.

Firstly it has been observed that the units in Panchayat Raj are not financially autonomous. They neither possess adequate finance nor do the state governments feel concern on their financial backwardness. A largest disparity between the functions of Panchayati Raj units and the finances has been observed, as a result of which Panchayati Raj institutions have not been able to function independently.

Secondly the undesirable feature of Panchayati Raj institutions is the clash between elected members of the Panchayati Raj and the officials of the developmental agency. Each group is suspicious of the other group. This has led to the hindrance in the smooth functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions.

Thirdly the factions and group rivalries have tended to increase in the village due to holding of elections to the Panchayati Raj bodies.²⁶

Fourthly the disquieting feature of Panchayati Raj institutions is the inability or unwillingness on the part of the members of these newly created institutions to fulfill one of the most primary assignments expected of them i.e. preparation of village production plans, block plans and district plans. Even though in some states the plans are prepared they are unrealistic.

The Panchyati Raj institutions though primarily created as spread head of rural development also involved an element of power. The newly elected leaders who were called upon to man them, found to their pleasant surprise that their official positions conferred upon them a variety of power. This discovery enhanced the importance of these institutions and as a result they became an arena of power politics. People began to contest elections, not so much to serve their community but with view to wielding power. Thus there took place a shift in the basic character of the Panchayati Raj - shift from development to politics.

But inspite of all these dysfunctional features Panchayat Raj has brought about revolution in village India. People in villages have acquired a good deal of political awareness. With the introduction of Panchayat Raj institutions the politically passive country folk started questioning the authoritarian attitudes and decisions of the traditional elite. The institutions have also brought to the surface local tensions and conflicts. Above all they have secularized the leadership patterns at local rural level. The new emerging elite is more younger, better educated, performance oriented and less orthodox in approach.

But these achievements have failed to make any great impact which Jawaharlal Nehru dreamt about. Suppression of Panchayat Raj bodies on partisan grounds and the postponement of elections for prolonged period have become injurious to the health and vitality of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Besides this the Zilla Parishads institutions have become a strong link in developing the required support structure. Political linkages have clearly become visible. This has established a strong base ground, for the role of emergence of elite groups; because of which the required social change at the rural level has become a difficult task. The only solution of which is developing social awareness in the rural masses. The need of participatory administration is the basic requirement. " Even the present idea of increasing nomination of Backward Classes, women representation " ²⁷ would be a futile exercise without social awareness.

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