



The History of Political Panchayats in West Bengal, India; A brief Analysis

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Available online at: www.isca.in

Received 23rd April 2015, revised 30th May 2015, accepted 9th June 2015

Abstract

There is no doubt that to establish "good governance" in a country, decentralization of power is a powerful weapon. In 1990's the proposal accepted in UNOs general assembly related to "good governance", decentralization of power was one of the chief characteristics. To implement the idea of democratic decentralization, establishment of local self government is very essential. Establishment of local self government in any country, not only secures strong participation of local masses in democratic process, but also upholds the democracy and development. For the above necessity 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment in India (1992) provide the mandatory duty of the state government to create panchayat and municipal bodies in respected areas, although it is true that of all the institutions of the modern and independent India, panchayati raj institutions are the oldest and original. In the 21st century of Indian panchayat system West Bengal is the only state where panchayats are operating on political basis. So debates, analysis, discussion, and evaluation related to West Bengal panchayat system are endless.

Keywords: West Bengal, democratic decentralization, panchayat System, history.

Introduction

Democratic decentralization is today a global phenomenon. Governments of a large number of states have responded to demands for increased self government by sharing power with and developing authority to lower tiers of government. Democratic decentralization is a concept based on the recognition of the right of the people to initiate and execute the policy decision in an autonomous way. In a liberal democratic political ideal the concertized form of which is the local self government. In public administration discourse there is various aspects and views to study local self government. But in a single sentence local self government implies a unit of government responsible to as well as representative of the people living in the locality and yet responsible also directly or indirectly to the state¹.

Indian perspective

The local self-government, as a system, has existed in India since long time. The evolution of the panchayat system in India can be traced through three distinct periods i. Pre-British Period, ii. British Period, iii. Post-Independence Period. The ancient system of village democracy transformed into modern panchayats System. The scholars of rural development identified that, At the time of Rig-Veda (1200 BC), self-governing village bodies called 'Sabah's exist, long after the time of colonial period, colonial ruler's created the local self governing bodies for their own purpose. During the British Period the important steps taken by the Government to establish local self government are – Lord Ripon's Resolution (1882), The Royal Commission on Decentralization (1907), Montague-Chelmsford Reforms (1919). Not only that but the British ruler's also introduced several laws and amendments to create panchayat body much stronger,

although their main objectives were to control the village power and acquire safe taxation system.

During the Time of freedom struggle, The Indian National Congress perceived the panchayats as people's institutions; they also realized that Local self government should be seen as the true voice of nursery democracy. But in the post independence period panchayat system has go through various stages. Several steps were taken by the Indian Government to establish a effective gram panchayat system. The first step for development initiative, was community Development programme in 1952, then the Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957), K. Santhanam Committee (1963), Ashoke Mehta Committee (1978), G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985), L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986)². All the above committees are trying to establish a effective panchayat system. Although, in article 40, Part-IV of the Indian Constitution it has been stated that, 'The State should take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government. But the panchayat system got legal validity along with Constitutional Protection after 73rd Constitutional amendment in 1992. The amendment is an important landmark in the process of democratic decentralization, because it has given legal reorganization to three-tier system of governance with PRI.

West Bengal Scenario

West Bengal was the first state in the country for successful implementation of panchayati raj system, It is the state of Eastern region in India and is the nation's fourth-most population, spread over 88,750 Km² with over than 9.5 Crore population included 20 Districts. Over 65% peoples in West Bengal belonging to the

rural areas. For the above data it has been proved that West Bengal is basically a rural-oriented state and also agriculture is the leading occupation in West Bengal. West Bengal has distinguished itself from the other states of India by its radical political culture. The state witnessed the peasant uprising like Tebhaga and Naxalbari movement. In mid 60's West Bengal proved the most chaotic state in India, but after 1977 when Left-Front achieved power in Bengal The PRI institutions got new initiatives and then the idea of 'Party less Democracy' was rejected and the political parties contested in the panchayat elections for the first time in 1978. The Left-front Government led by CPI (M) had a landslide victory in that election through out the state. Since this time Gram panchayats are elected along party lines, Competitive mobilization by both the ruling and opposition parties acts as a major determinant in the process of selection of both beneficiaries and sites of development³. The discourse of panchayat system in West Bengal has become a subject of real research after almost seventy years of Independence for a lot of reasons. But now a serious question must be arises, what is the utility of the study, why political panchayat become the subject of real research? To give the answer it may be told first that the panchayat system in West Bengal is quite different from other State from whole India, because panchayat election in West Bengal is conducted remaining in Party lines. Again it also the truth that in spite of political panchayat system, West Bengal is not too lagging behind than other states of India related to the implementation of rural development programme and actual rural development.

In adapting panchayats in post-colonial India, West Bengal was a late starter. West Bengal was the only state, which did not have any legislation on the subject till 1952. In 1957 West Bengal panchayat bill was passed, although it was introduced in 1956, but in this bill panchayat system got two tier structures, i. Gram Panchayat and ii. Anchal panchayat. It is true that the above bill does not protect the popular and open participation at rural masses. The next step of establishing panchayat system in West Bengal taken during the Third Five year plan period. The West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act was passed in 1963 to provide the view to bringing about democratic decentralization and people's participation in planning and development. In this act there was four-tier structure consisting of i. Zilla Parishad, ii. Anchalik Parishad iii. Anchal Panchayat and iv. Gram Panchayat. But this mention structure did not work properly and systematically, elections were not held for years and members remained in office without the consent of local opinion.

Although it was mysterious, but the fact is the panchayat's of West Bengal started its Journey at the time when the phase of decline of panchayat institutions in other States of the Country. The decline of panchayat bodies in various states during the period of late 60's there were various causes-mainly, lack of political support, bureaucratic neglect, and also inadequate statute to make panchayat bodies' representative. During the time of early 60's West Bengal has witnessed various problems like unprecedented food crisis, Peasant uprising, and also unstable

Government, the state was brought under the rule of the president in early 1968. In the next elections the United Front Government again achieves the power. A comprehensive bill about panchayat was introduced in the Assembly but soon after the Second United Front Government fall in 1970 and the state again brought under the President's rule. After presidents rule, elections in 1972 the Congress Government captured power and take the matter seriously, For these result congress Government passed The West Bengal panchayat Act in 1973, the act introduced three tier panchayat system in rural Bengal – Gram panchayat at the village level, panchayat samiti at the block level and the Zilla Parishad at the District level, The Act has been considered as the land mark of Second Generation panchayat. But the panchayat's during the time of Congress Period (1972-77) Critics and evaluate by Many Scholars, Neil Webster is one of them. He identified the two areas those which are the matters of real criticism. The first points to the failure of the State Government because panchayats were not given adequate powers to operate an important role in the field of rural development, and also the various departments not to give the necessary aid for the implementation of rural development. The second point is there was no universal participation of the people in panchayat structure⁴.

After 1977 the role of panchayat institutions in West Bengal has totally changed. In 1977s assembly election significantly, the Left Front Government (LFG) achieved power in the state first time, although it is true that communist parties, particularly the CPI(M) started paying more attention towards rural mobilization only after coming to power in 1967⁵. The panchayats made their appearance at a time of expectation and hope. The left front government promised In its election manifesto, to hold elections to the panchayat institutions at regular intervals. It was further emphasized that all development activities of the Government in rural areas in the state would be handed over to Panchayats. The Left Front Government introduced panchayat elections first time in the state at 1978. According to Bhawani Sengupta – "For the first time in this republic's history there was a Keen Contest for the roots of Power. In an open democratic and peaceful context Never in the history of India's politics did a political Party penetrate so deeply and methodologically the ancient fairness of the village. The panchayat system of West Bengal has been running this format pretty well though it has some change after 1992.

The panchayati raj system of India has total changed in the year of 1992, by the implementation of 73rd Constitutional amendment Act. Before this amendment, the panchayati Raj System was not effective the way it should have been. Its power was limited. The district authorities could dissolve panchayati raj institutions. Elections for these bodies were not regular. Accountability was not a recognized feature of these institutions. But the amendment of 1992 got a massive change of rural decentralization process throughout the nation. In a word it can be said, the 73rd amendment reveals that the panchayati raj institution had to be vested with such authority and power as would able them to operate as a effective institutions of local self-government. The

analysis of 73rd amendment also reveals that panchayati Raj institutions are to act as welfare government, which implies that they have to initiate plan and executive development activities and bring about social Justice. Initially there was a positive response from the states, as almost all the states of India passed their respective state legislations in according with the provisions of the 73rd amendment and also held the panchayat elections. For the above reason the consequences was 2,27,698 panchayats at village level, 5906 panchayats at intermediate level, and 474 panchayats at district level were constituted in the country. About 3.4 million people were elected throughout the country. West Bengal not has been exception of the above process. The West Bengal Panchayat act 1973 has been amended again to make it confirm to the requirements of the 73rd amendment of the constitution. A comprehensive amendment of West Bengal Panchayat Act in 1992 provided a new tier called Gram Sabah to be constituted at each and every electoral constituency. The Gram Sabah must organize at least two meeting in a year and send to gram panchayats in his necessary report. The Gram Panchayats were required to carefully consider the comments and recommendations of the members in the meeting. Besides this the reservation structure has been change for the effect of 73rd constitutional amendment. During the time between 1978 to 1992, the Left Front government in West Bengal played a vital role for the establishment of strong panchayat System. The major success of their story was the success for Land Reform programme. In that time Government, try to implement land reform programme through the 'PRI' institution, the main work was recording the names of sharecroppers and redistribution of Ceiling surplus lands among the landless. The programme of recording the names of Sharecroppers popularly known as the 'Operation Barga'. Beside Land Reform Programme, the Panchayats in West Bengal have done remarkably well in respect of implementation of the Centrally Sponsored Rural developmental programmes like NREP, IRDP, JRY, RLEGP, etc.

Conclusion

In the very brief analysis it is proved that the Left Front Government has broken new grounds in mobilizing the rural poor through panchayats for the implementation of the rural development programme. But although a great success on rural development programme, the Panchayats of West Bengal suffering from many critics by several scholars. At present, therefore, West Bengal is the only state which has going political panchayats.

The limitations of the panchayat system in west Bengal cannot be ignored. The Mukarji –Bandyapadhyay report (panchayat And Rural Development Department, Government of west Bengal, Calcutta 1992.)⁶ also argued that panchayats in west Bengal. Do not have adequate functional and financial autonomy. Beside this it is true that autonomy of self government needs self reliance. But panchayats performance in this regard awfully Bad. The MB

report also highlighted that, funds are devolved for development purposes only and panchayats get only a fraction of the funds only. A serious of studies conducted by paramesh Acharya, Amitabha Gupta, Dwaipayan Chattopadhyay, Pranab Bardhan and Abhirup Sarkar have highlighted the 'middleness' of panchayat System in west Bengal .Such nature of 'middleness' is operationalized by Primary and high school teachers, businessman and small and medium land Lords. Their involvement in the decision making process inhibits the role of poor Inhabitants in the planning and also decision making process at rural system of democracy.

The Panchayat System in West Bengal, as considered by Scholars, has mainly two aspects – One is positive and the others are negative. The positive aspect is the competition among the existing parties for the implementation of the rural developmental programmes. But the negative aspect which is identified not only by the Scholars but also by the rural people is, the list of beneficiaries chosen by the panchayat's are the supporters and workers of ruling party in relative panchayats. These are the two aspects which are going parallels for decades. Many thinkers of these areas also have identified that, the ruling parties are trying to control the panchayati raj institutions as their own vested interests. But in spite of all the criticism it is true that the panchayat bodies in West Bengal is working as a implementer of rural developmental programmes through popular peoples participation, although it is not be negligible that even in the age of 21st Century there is various obstacles for the working of self-government institutions.

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