

● COMPREHENDING AND INQUISITIONING DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALISATION IN INDIA



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Abstract

The portentousness of Democratic Decentralization can be apprehended by the verity that popular participation is the quintessential module for success of the nation. Mahatma Gandhi encapsulated "India lives in its villages", whereas Pandit Nehru furthered "There is still truth in the saying that India lives in its villages". The idea of both was decentralization through local self- governance. The Constitution (Seventy Third Amendment) Act, 1992 further escalated the local area governance. Decentralization implies deconcentration in terms of administrative decentralization, legislative decentralization and fiscal decentralization. The system of Panchayat Raj in India (local self-government) reinforces decentralization in a very efficient manner. The subsequent endeavour is to analyse democratic decentralization in India through Panchayat Raj system in India. This paper analyses development in India through democratic decentralization.

Key words

Democratic Decentralization, Panchayat Raj, and Local Self-Government.

I. INTRODUCTION

"India lives in its villages"

-Mahatma Gandhi.

The contemporary communities are blemished by decentralized governance as a strategy and ideology to usher reforms in democracies. This prompts to rectitude of transparency, responsiveness and accountability and establishes good governance. Today decentralization and democracy are the most remarkable themes in the progressive discourse. In the current context of meteoric social transfigurements and accelerated activities, decentralization is more apposite to indenture with contemporary preferment of globalization, liberalization and privatization. In this milieu incessant ventures are made to analyse conceptual facets and magnitude of democratic decentralization as a systematized mechanism to govern rural and urban domains of the society. Democratic decentralization expedites expansive participation. It compliments and intensifies the system of Federalism in India.¹

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¹James Manor, "Democratic decentralisation in India"; *SIDA* (Embassy of Sweden, New Delhi, 2003)

II. DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALISATION

Popular participation in the policy process and in local politics proliferates invariably. Increased people partake, more frequently by the schemes of campaigning, contacting bureaucrats and elected representatives, protesting, petitioning, etc. Civil community is invigorated and people chain voluntary associations which grow increasingly vigorous and numerous, thereby, strengthening "political and civic pluralism". Democratic decentralisation augments the transparency of government, and circulation of information. Information progresses from government to citizens efficaciously because elected representatives are advantageous to bureaucrats at elucidating government policies to their constituents.²

Democratic decentralisation has a propensity to augment accountability. Democratic decentralisation makes the government more compliant. The briskness and volumes of ripostes (actions, projects) from government proliferates. Democracy is reckoned to be unsurpassed form of government since it establishes liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status and opportunity, fraternity and decisively the right to participate in political decision-making. Participation and charge of governance by the people of the country is the quintessence of democracy. Such participation is viable when the capacity of the state is decentralized to the district, block and village levels.³ People can sit in conjunction and deliberate about their plights and propose solutions. Decentralization implies conveying of planning, decision-making or administrative authority from the central government to local administrative units, semi-autonomous organizations or local governments. Under decentralization authority is distributed to smaller administrative units. The expression 'democratic decentralization' is divergent from 'administrative decentralization'. Democratic decentralization affiliates people with government at national, regional and local levels. Democratic decentralization is people's right to pioneer their own projects for local well-being and the power to execute and manoeuvre them autonomously. Administrative decentralization initiated from the desire for effectiveness in terms of operation and rapidity of administrative personnel, particularly at the lower levels. Administrative decentralization is hence the right to freedom of realizing projects. Decentralization is adjudged as an imperative for social, economic and political advancement.⁴ Participatory progress has transpired as an alternative over the past two decades resulting from the condemnation of the dominant model for development. Development is a phenomenon of progress towards amelioration. New perspective of growth accentuate that along with economic development, increase in the quality of life of individuals, families and society should also be ascertained. Development can be prolonged if distinctive attempts are made to encompass the deprived sections of the society in the process by taking into account their special needs in a coherent manner. It can reduce inequalities and bridge the ever-widening gap between the rich and the

²*Ibid.*

³Craig Johnson, "Decentralisation in India: Poverty, Politics and Panchayati Raj"; Department of Political Science University of Guelph, Ontario Overseas Development Institute, 111 Westminster Bridge Road London SE1 7JD UK.

⁴M. Laxmikanth, *Indian Polity*, (Mc Graw Hill Education, Fifth edn.)



poor.⁵ Participatory development mandates creation of pressure from the grass-roots which capacitate them to participate vigorously in making strategies, execution and monitoring and more equitable dispensation of resources. Decentralization should be viewed as a postulation of advancement, which insists on a variety of institutions for emancipating and encouraging the marginalized and the poor. It is presumed to work for creation of an administrative space where the requirements of the impoverished can be conveyed. Through Decentralization democracy becomes truly representative and responsive.⁶

Decentralization drives to the emancipation of the local people. Decentralized governance seeks local resourcefulness and practices by incorporating grass roots organizations. Representative democracy and participatory democracy both become possible through decentralized governance. Another significant feature of decentralized governance is interactive policy making. Interactive policy is a process where government and non-governmental sectors such as private sector, non-governmental organizations, grass roots organizations and pressure groups all engage in decision-making to influence issues and recommend alternatives.⁷

Decentralized governance enables impoverished people to partake in politics, which is a requisite for buoyant execution of antipoverty programmes. In India the institution through which all this is possible is the Panchayat. The Panchayat is an ancient institution and has been part of the Indian tradition. The seventy-third and seventy fourth constitutional amendments in India have sought to create a new tier in country's governance structure by giving constitutional sanction to Panchayats and urban local bodies. The amendments provide a long list of functions to be devolved on the local self governments, both urban and rural. These amendments have institutionalized peoples' participation through gram Sabha and ward committees.⁸

III. GANDHIAN PRINCIPLE OF DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

Shri M.K. Gandhi was a staunch supporter of village swaraj in India. It was his valiant efforts that ultimately led to the proposal of separate provisions for the grass roots in the Constitution of India at the very first instance in the first place. An ardent believer of "India lives in its villages", he gave an entirely new but best concept of development for the nation. According to Gandhiji, ideal society is a Stateless democracy, the state of enlightened anarchy where social life has become so perfect that it is self regulated. "In the ideal state, there is no political power because there is no State." Gandhiji believed that perfect realization of an ideal is impossible. However "the ideal is like Euclid's line that is one without breadth but no one has so far been able to draw it and never will. All the same it is only by keeping the ideal line in mind that we have made progress in geometry." In the political field he gave us Village Swaraj nearing the conception of his ideal of Stateless Democracy. He considers that Government best which governs the least.

According to the communist philosophy, the final phase is the "withering away of the

⁵Supra note 3.

⁶B.L.Fadia and Kuldeep Fadia, *Indian Government and Politics* (Sahitya Bhawan, Agra)

⁷Ibid.

⁸Supra note 4.

State". But in the totalitarian State of Russia there is concentration of all power in the State. It is difficult to believe that at any time the State there will wither away. Mahatma Gandhi being a practical idealist, realized the practical usefulness of the ideal of Stateless Democracy, and presented Village Swaraj which is not the "withering away of the State" but "scattering of the State". Thus, Village Swaraj is the ideal given expression to on a realizable plane unlike the distant goal of the "withering away of the State".

Gandhiji wanted true democracy to function in India. He, therefore, observed: "True democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. It has to be worked from below by the people of every village." In Village Swaraj, the village being the decentralized small political unit endowed with fullest powers, every individual will have a direct voice in the government. The individual is the architect of his own government. The government of the Village Swaraj will be conducted by a Panchayat of five persons annually elected by adult villagers possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. It will have all the authority and jurisdiction. The Panchayat will be the legislature, judiciary and executive rolled into one as there will be no system of punishment in it. In such a system of government there will be citizens who are self-controlled, not authority-controlled; endowed with initiative and highly developed sense of civic responsibility in place of those who look to government for all things. Real Democracy, i.e. Swaraj works for the full freedom and growth of the individual who is the ultimate motive power of a real political system. Village Swaraj as conceived by Gandhiji is thus a genuine and virile democracy which offers a potent cure for many of the political ills that mark the present political systems. Such a pattern of decentralized genuine democracy will have a message for the whole of humanity.

To Gandhiji political power was not an end in itself, but one of the means for enabling people to better their condition in every sphere of life. He, therefore, observed in his famous "Last Will and Testament" that though India has attained political independence, she "has still to attain social, moral and economic independence, in terms of seven hundred thousand villages as distinguished from the cities and towns." It embodied a picture and a programme of Village Swaraj that is Panchayat Raj which in other terms is a non-violent self-sufficient, economic unit with fullest political power. The Village Swaraj as conceived by Gandhiji is man-centred unlike the Western economy which is wealth-centred. The former is the life economy the latter is the death economy.

Laying down the duties of the village worker who naturally occupies the pivotal position in the planning of Village Swaraj of Gandhiji's conception, he says that the village worker will organize the villages so as to make them self-contained and self-supporting through agriculture and handicrafts, will educate the village folk in sanitation and hygiene and will take all measures to prevent ill health and disease among them and will organize the education of the village folk from birth to death along the lines of Nai Talim.

IV. PANCHAYAT RAJ SYSTEM IN INDIA

The momentousness of the Panchayat Raj system in India can be comprehended from its inception per se. Infused as a system of five members working as a judicial body, the system today is now completely modified. Panchayati Raj system in India is a system of local area governance. Panchayati Raj is a system of governance in which Gram Panchayats are the basic units of administration. Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayati Raj, a decentralised form of government. It is the oldest system of local self



government in the Indian sub continent.⁹ This system was adopted by State governments during the 1950s and 60s as laws were passed to establish Panchayats in various States. It also found backing in the Indian Constitution with the 73rd Amendment in 1992 to accommodate the idea. Currently, the Panchayati Raj system exists in all the States except Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram and in all Union Territories except Delhi.¹⁰

The Panchayat Raj system comprises of three constituents often called the three tiers of the system i.e.:

- i. Village level: Village is the fundamental constituent of Panchayat Raj institutions. It is basically a revenue component. The unit of local government here is known as village Panchayat. In the structure of Panchayati Raj, the village Panchayat is the smallest unit.
- ii. Block level: Block or Union is the second or intermediate level of local self government in rural India. In Andhra Pradesh it is known as Mandal Parishad, in Assam it is known as Anchalik Panchayat, in Bihar, Jharkhand, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Tripura, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Orissa, Punjab and Rajasthan it is known as Panchayati Samiti and so on.
- iii. District level: Besides the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the District/Zila Panchayat constitutes the apex body of the three-tier structure of the Panchayat Raj system. The Panchayat at the district level is called Zila parishad in most of the states.

V. CONCLUSION

Today decentralisation and democracy are the most remarkable themes in the development discourse. Decentralisation means transfer of planning, decision-making or administrative authority from the central government to its field agencies. Democratic decentralization is an extension of the democratic principle which aims at widening the area of the people's participation, authority and autonomy through devolution of powers.¹¹ Democratic decentralisation is a global phenomenon. In India 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts have widened the scope of democratic decentralisation both in rural and urban areas. These Acts have institutionalized people's participation through gram sabhas and ward committees. A note worthy feature of these amendments is an emergence of a new generation leadership at the local level from women and marginalized sections of the society.¹² The Amendments have contributed to bring substantive democracy at local level. 'Democratic decentralization' is an extension of the democratic principle aims at widening the area of the people's participation, authority and autonomy through dispersion or devolution of powers to people's representative organizations from the top levels to the lowest levels in

⁹N.D. Arora, *Political science for Civil services Main Examination* (Tata McGraw Hill Education Private Limited, New Delhi)

¹⁰S.R. Myneni, *Political Science for Law Students* (Allahabad Law Agency, Faridabad)

¹¹D.D. Basu, *Introduction to the Constitution of India* (Lexis Nexis, 21st edn.)

¹²*Supra* note 8.

all the three dimensions of political decision-making, financial control and administrative management with least interference and control from higher levels. Democratic decentralization and local self-government both aim at greater participation by the people and more autonomy to them in the management of their affairs, it can be said that democratic decentralization is a political ideal and local self government is its institutionalized form.