



POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF DEPRESSED CLASSES THROUGH PANCHAYATH RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN KARNATAKA

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Abstract : Panchayat Institutions are the vehicles of political empowerment of people at the grass root level for shaping their own destiny. A vast majority of people are living at the grassroots level in the rural and remote areas without any touch of modern day. A large section of such deprived people belong to Scheduled castes, Scheduled tribes and other Backward casts as also women in general at the grass root level.

Introduction

India lives in villages. There are more than 5.76 lakh villages in our country. Naturally the development of the country depends on the development of villages. Every village should be a self contained republic. Panchayath Raj Systems are called grassroots level of democracy which are given and provided to share power of the administration of the government by the common man at village level. The network of Panchayath Raj Institutions covers the length and breadth of the country today. The panchayath raj institutions declined because of lack of conceptual clarity, absence of political will and denial of national priority, lack of research, evaluation and feedback etc., 73rd Amendment Act has opened a new chapter in the history of rural local self governing institutions. The Amendment provides for a three tier panchayath system. That is Grama Panchayath, Taluk Panchayath and Zilla Panchayath.

The term development view at alleviating poverty, elimination of unemployment, reducing inequalities and increasing productivity as well as consumption and literacy level etc. An efficient system of local organisation is necessary for the development, improvement and welfare of the majority of the rural people. According to the Directive Principles of our Constitution, the state is required to secure equal pay for equal work for both men and women, right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement. This constitutional provision reflects the concern of the State to protect and promote the interests of weaker sections of the population. Weaker sections among industrial workers are those who are either unorganized or less privileged and whose economic and social needs call for special attention. We may include under this category, female labour, child labour, physically handicapped, contract labour, interstate migrant work men, casual labour, construction labour, bonded labour and agricultural labour that constitute a sizable segment of the workforce, both in formal and informal sections.

Article 41 of the constitution of India says that, "The state shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement in other cases of undeserved want". From the economic point of view, social security measures help a man to face the contingencies referred to above. When such contingencies arise, it is difficult for him either to work or to get work and support himself

and his family. Social security thus provides a self balancing social insurance or assistance from public funds, or a proper combination of both.

Social security is a very comprehensive term and include in its schemes of social insurance and social assistance as well as some schemes of commercial insurance. Social insurance scheme protects an individual from falling to the depths of poverty and misery while social assistance is of the devices according, to which benefits are given as a legal right to workers who are eligible for such assistance.

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 has added a new part IX consisting of 16 Articles and the Eleventh Schedule to the Constitution. The 73th Amendment envisages the Gram Sabha as the foundation of the Panchayat Raj System to perform functions and powers entrusted to it by the State Legislatures. The amendment provides for a three tier Panchayat Raj System at the village, intermediate and district levels. Article 243A provides that the Gram Sabha may exercise such power and perform such functions at the village level as the Legislature of a state may by law provide. The 73rd amendment thus envisages the Gram Sabha as the foundation of Panchayat Raj System. "Gram Sabha" means a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls comprised within the area of Panchayat at the village level. In the Panchayat Raj System Gram Sabha is the only permanent unit. Duration of Panchayat i.e. Mukhiyas and other members of Panchayat continue for 5 years only from the date appointed for the first meeting, but the villagers do not change. Empowerment of Gram Sabha means strengthening of the Panchayat Raj Institution (PRIs). Success or failure of this system depends upon the strength of the Gram Sabha. The eleventh scheduled of the constitution created by the 73rd Amendment contains 29 subjects on which the Panchayats shall have administrative Control, Article 243H empowers State Legislature to make by law provision for imposing taxes etc. by the panchayat. Obviously these panchayats before imposing any levy or tax in the village would be required to get clearance from the respective Gram Sabha. Drafting and implementation of development plans for the uplift of the villages would be vested and monitored by the Gram Sabhas.

Panchayats have been the backbone of the Indian villages since the beginning of recorded history. Gandhiji, the father of the nation, in 1946 had aptly remarked that the Indian Independence must begin at the bottom and every village ought to be a Republic or Panchayat having powers. Gandhiji's dream has been translated into reality with the introduction of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system to ensure peoples participation in rural reconstruction. 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 marks a new era in the federal democratic set up of the country and provides constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Consequent upon the enactment of the Act, almost all the States/UTs, except J&K, NCT Delhi and Uttaranchal have enacted their legislation. Moreover all the States/UTs except Arunachal Pradesh, NCT Delhi and Pondicherry, all other States/UTs have held elections. As a result, 2,32,278 Panchayats at village level; 6,022 Panchayats at intermediate level and 535 Panchayats at district level have been constituted in the country. These Panchayats are being manned by about 29.2 lakh elected representatives of Panchayats at all levels. This is the broadest representative base that exists in any country of the world Developed or underdeveloped. The main features of the 1992 Act are . (i) a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj for all States having population of over 20 lakh; (ii) Panchayat elections regularly every 5 years; (iii) reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women (not less than one-third of seats); (iv) appointment of State Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats and (v) constitution of District Planning Committees to prepare development plans for the district as a whole. As per the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, the Panchayati Raj Institutions have been endowed with such powers and authority as may be necessary to function as institutions of self-government and contains provisions of devolution of powers and

responsibilities upon Panchayats at the appropriate level with reference to (a) the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice; and (b) the implementation of such schemes for economic development.

Recognizing the importance of democratic institutions at the grass-roots level, Part IV of the Indian Constitution laid down in Article 40 of the Directive Principles of State Policy that the state would take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as might be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government. The Panchayati Raj institutions became a state subject under the Constitution. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was appointed in 1957 to study the Community Development and National Extension Service programmes, especially from the point of view of assessing the extent of popular participation, and to recommend the creation of institutions through which such participation could be achieved. The Committee recommended the constitution of statutory elected local bodies with the necessary resources, power and authority devolved to them and a decentralized administrative system working under their control. It also recommended that the basic unit of democratic decentralization should be located at the block/samiti level.

The Committee envisaged directly elected panchayats for a village or group of villages, an executive body called Panchayat Samiti for a block with directly elected and co-opted members, and an advisory body called Zilla Parishad at the district level constituted mainly through ex-officio members from the lower tier and others with the district chief as Chairman. The National Development Council affirmed the objective of democratic decentralization. This was the genesis of the Panchayati Raj system and when ushering it in, Nehru described it as “the most revolutionary and historic step in the context of New India”.

In 1972, the Planning Commission advised the state governments to set up state planning boards as apex planning bodies with the Chief Minister as the Chairman and the Finance Minister, Planning Minister, and technical experts are representing various departments and disciplines as members. The plans envisaged the decentralization of the planning process to districts and ultimately to the block level. District planning bodies were constituted in all the states except Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh.

According to the information available, planning at block level has been entrusted to the Panchayati Raj bodies in West Bengal. Block level plans are being formulated in the state by block planning committees which are chaired by Sabhapatis of Panchayati Samitis. Thus, district plans and block plans and the schemes formulated for execution with the help of district plan funds are mainly implemented by the Panchayati Raj institutions, such as Zilla Parishads, Panchayat Samitis, Gram Panchayats, and other local bodies. In Karnataka, Zilla Parishads and Mandal Panchayats have been entrusted with the responsibility of formulating and implementing district development plans after these bodies were set up under the Zilla Parishads and Mandal Panchayats Act of 1983. The district planning committees function under the Zilla Parishad. In some other states, such as Gujarat and Maharashtra, the district and block level agencies have been involved in plan formulation for a longer time.

Statement of the Problem

Local leadership development has received new impetus because of the emphasis on the role of the ‘change agent’ who was expected to act as catalyst in the mobilisation of local manpower and resources and for bringing about development and social change in the rural population.

In India the majority of the population lives in the rural areas. As such, their backwardness would be retarding growth in other sectors and in the economy as a whole. The growth of towns and cities will be possible, it is backed by prosperity in rural areas. Rural backwardness is the major cause for the falling demand for most products.

On rural development the stress is also due to many constraints facing the rural areas, which generally suffer from inadequate infrastructural facilities and technological advancements. The rural areas are not well palced in terms of even minimum needs like safe drinking water, primary health and road transport. This apart, the rural population suffers from indigence, ignorance and illiteracy. Their traditional outlook towards development has been preventing them from taking full advantage of the incentives offered by the government. But with substantial exposure to media, both electronic and print media, the rural sector is moving towards self-reliance and economic independence. Also, the ownership of land and other assets has been heavily concentrated in the hands of a few. It is precisely for this reason that the benefits of rural development programmes failed to reach the rural population targeted for these benefits to the extent expected.

The process of economic development involves a shift from agricultural and allied activities to non-agricultural activities. It is however erroneous to believe that the increase in non-agricultural activity should be continued to towns and cities. After all, villages with growing non-agricultural activity will without doubt, become towns in course of time. What needs to be done is that non-agricultural activities in the rural areas need to be focussed upon and strengthened on priority basis. The rural areas remain impoverished with remunerative economic activities initiated to be carried out only in towns and cities. Rural development is a complex process. It can therefore be achieved only through concerted efforts on various fronts. Rural development can be possible if only there is proper balance between service-oriented programmes and development-oriented and self-reliant centred programmes. Hence, the present study will through more light on this respect.

Reduction of rural poverty has been on the development agenda for more than 50 years. In the first three five year plans, the dominant thinking in the policy planning was that poverty could be effectively tackled through general growth process and benefit of growth will automatically trickle down to general poor masses. In the first five-year plan, the emphasis was placed on agriculture development, which shifted to industry in the next two five year plans. During this period, the emphasis, however, was laced on land reform, community development and co-operative movement, but no attempt was made to tackle poverty directly through various anti-poverty programmes. It was during the fourth five year plan, the focus shifted from growth oriented strategy to direct intervention to attack poverty.

A number of anti-poverty programmes, the government have been implementing which have failed due to irregularities in the identification of beneficiaries and assets; lack of co-ordination among the activities and agencies; a large incidence of leakages etc. The voluntary agencies can help in removing these deficiencies. Government of India provided favourable conditions for the decentralization of government through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1993. One of the poverty alleviation strategies popularized by the PRIs in rural areas, as a part of rural development has been the delivery of micro-finance services through a group-based approach.

Panchayath Raj Institutions can ensure people's participation in the developmental process. They can ensure a mechanism of social control over the developmental bureaucracy. The PRIs can seek, more easily than a government department, people's cooperation. People's participation can be ensuring only by genuine

grassroots organizations and these alone can keep a watch on the delivery system. The PRIs are best suited to take up sensitive issues.

Objectives of the Study

The present study is based on the following objectives;

1. To study the evolution, aims and programmes of Panchayath Raj Institutions in the State of Karnataka
2. To assess the role and involvement of Panchayath Raj Institutions in the socio-economic and political development of weaker sections in Karnataka in general and in Mandya District in particular.
3. To evaluate the impact of PRIs programmes on production levels, asset creation levels, food security and standard of living of weaker sections of the society.
4. To ascertain whether PRIs programmes lead to employment generation, reduction in gender inequality and improving the status of women, who are the weakest section of the society in order to achieve the empowerment.
5. To suggest policy measures based on the findings of the study for the socio-political and economic development of weaker sections.

Hypotheses of the Study

The main hypotheses, have outlined to test the objectives of the study, are in the following manner.

1. The functioning of PRIs in Mandya District is note worthy.
2. All the developmental programmes which are implemented through PRIs have helped the development of depressed classes.
3. PRIs development programme approach is an effective strategy for extending financial services to the poor and other disadvantaged groups especially women.

Research Methodology

The present study is based on both secondary and primary data and a systematic random sampling method has been adopted for survey. The present study is an empirical investigation based on sample beneficiaries of panchayath raj institutions in Mandya district of Karnataka. The primary data will be collected from Mandya district.

The sample size is comprised of 230 beneficiaries from different categories, including male and female respondents in the Mandya district of Karnataka State, will be selected for field survey. To have further clarity, Graphs, pie-charts and diagrams will be worked out.

Sources of Data

For data collection a planned approach will be employed so that the facts that are near to reality and free from aberrations are elicited for impact evaluation. The data will be collected from primary and secondary sources. The secondary data and information will be collected from the labour institute publications, and other governmental/ non-governmental organization publications. Secondary data will be collected and processed by

some other agencies on the subject of financial institutions and agricultural advances. Some of the sources of secondary data are:

- various publications of central, state and local governments
- existing literature and data in websites
- various publications of national institutions like NABARD,RBI, NIRD, ISEC, and other agencies
- Indian Institute of Labour Economics Journal.
- Rural Development and Panchayath Raj Institution, GOK, Bangalore.
- other sources like books, magazines, newspapers, reports, articles, seminar papers published by universities and research institutions.

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