

Panchayati Raj

Essay No. 01

Synopsis: Panchayat system is best suited to our rural needs and administration. It is a right step towards devaluation and decentralization of power. It deserves all help and encouragement as it is a truly representative and democratic system. As a fit and effective instrument of self-governance, it is matchless. Now, Panchayati Raj institutions are there in almost all the Indian States with three tier arrangement at village, block and district levels. There are nearly 2020 lakh Gram Panchayats, 5.5 thousand Panchayat Samitis and 371 Zila Parishads. They have helped a lot in removing socio-economic disparities, among the rural masses. They have also helped in the empowerment of women, backward, poor and down-trodden classes of the rural society. Still these institutions need many reforms and more empowerment to be really effective. Panchayats assume a very vital role because about 80 percent of Indian population lives in villages.

Panchayats Raj institutions are democratic and so best suited to the rural population in Indian to take care of their local problems. It is a system of local self-government run by a council or Panchayat elected democratically by the local people. It provides the necessary administrative apparatus for the planning and execution of rural development schemes. It is a very inexpensive system to identify and solve local problems of the rural population. It provides a platform where people can assemble, identify problems, and aims at decentralization of power. Decentralization and devolution of powers are at the root of Panchayati raj.

Panchayati Raj is nothing new to India and its history dates back to the hoary past. It was an integral part of self-contained and self-sufficient rural planning, execution, and administration. A Panchayat consisted of 5 or more public representatives selected or elected by the people. A panch or members of the council could be removed if people wanted it. The Panchayat worked under a Sarpancha who presided over its meetings and deliberations. They were fully responsible for the administration and development of a village or a group of villages. The Panchayat administered justice, punished the offenders and decided the disputes, and looked after the welfare of the people. The Panchayat also looked after the rest-houses, temple wells, ponds, irrigation systems, and schools.

The re-introduction of the Panchayat system is in perfect harmony with our spirit of democracy and the aspirations of the rural public. In order to strengthen democracy, it is imperative that the Panchayat system in the country is given all possible help and encouragement. It effectively participation, decentralization, transparency, accountability, and fairness in the affairs of the villages. The 64th Constitution Amendment Bill of May 15, 1989, gave a new lease of life to Panchayati Raj as a truly representative system in India. During the debate on the subject then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi told the Lok Sabha, "Too often in past Panchayati Raj has had functions without finances, responsibilities without authority, duties without the means for carrying them to make these rural legislatures or councils a fit and effective instrument of self-government". The Bill also made it obligatory that elections be held regularly every five years, but the various states have failed to fulfill this obligation and so the Centre had to intervene.

Now, Panchayati Raj institutions are there in almost all states and union territories though with variations in structural pattern. It involves a three-tier arrangement—village level, block level, and district level. Panchayat Samiti and the third tier as Zila Parishad. The tenure of Panchayati Raj institutions ranges from 3 to 5 years. These institutions are generally responsible for the promotion of agriculture, rural industries, maintaining common grazing grounds, village roads, tanks, wells, sanitation, and execution of the other socio-economic programs. In some places, they also provide for IRDD (Integrated Rural Development Programme) and execution of other rural programs like JRY (Jawahar Rojgar Yojana). There are about 2020 lakh Gram Panchayats, 5.5 thousand Panchayat Samitis, and 371 Zila Parishads.

The 73rd Constitution Act, 1992 has further strengthened these institutions of democracy at village levels. Because of these institutions' awareness about their rights and privileges among the poor, the scheduled castes and tribes have been building up and they are coming forward to challenge and remove existing socio-economic disparities and injustices. Many of the Gram Panchayats have their Pradhans from scheduled castes, tribes, and women-folk. These institutions have generated a fruitful interaction and cooperation between the people of the upper castes and the people of the backward and lower castes. Panchayati Raj institutions have definitely helped in the empowerment of women, the weak, the poor, and the downtrodden to some extent. And in many cases, the poor and socially weak candidates have successfully won against their rich, resourceful, and influential candidates because of their integrity, character, dedication to service, and commitment to genuine social and economic change. But it never means that Panchayats are today totally free from the dominance of beginning, the emergence of new awareness, and

leadership. However, the resistance to these changes is evident in the elections not being held in stipulated time in many states.

Panchayats must ensure transparency, fairness, and accountability. They should aim at a quick resolution of disputes and fair distribution of surplus land among the landless villagers. More and more persons like women, schedule tribes and castes, marginal farmers, and landless laborers should be involved in the process. The Panchayats should be properly empowered to raise their funds to meet their development expenses. The 10th Finance Commission has separately earmarked over Rs.4,000 crores for the development program through the panchayats. The panchas and sar-panchas should be trained and their access to information be improved so that they can take firm, quick, and right decisions as to what was good for their villages. In order to reduce central control further, more emphasis should be laid on grass-root initiatives. Both the center and the State should ensure the flow of proper funds to these institutions for their effective working and success. These institutions of democracy at grass-root levels cannot be economical, viable, and self-sufficient unless adequate resources are at their disposal, and generous grants-in-aid are given.

The reservation of seats, for women, scheduled castes, and tribes in Panchayats is a welcome step for it will make them really democratic, representative, and balanced. The Panchayati Raj institutions assume a very vital role because 80 percent of the country's population lives in villages spread over about 95 percent of its geographical area. It is cynical to think that panchayats cannot govern and administer. They should be given more powers and resources so that they can function more effectively. The panchayats alone can introduce democracy at grass root levels in an appreciable and effective way. There is no other alternative. Only panchayats can fruitfully tackle the specific problems of the area but for this, they need functional autonomy in the true sense of the term. It is wrong to think that Panchayat institutions posed a threat to the power structure in these states. They would rather strengthen the state-structure and so there should be more and genuine development and decentralization of powers and sources.

Essay No. 02

Panchayati Raj System

The panchayat system in India goes back to the Vedic times. It has been an integral part of a self-contained and self-sufficient rural administration. A panchayat consisted of five or more public representatives, selected or elected by the people. A panch could be removed if people so liked. The panchayat was headed by a Sarpanch or a Chief Sarpancha, who presided over the meetings

and deliberations of a panchayat. This council of panchas was fully responsible for the administration and development of a village. These five or more officials, constituting a panchayat, represented all the major sections of rural society. They administered justice, ruled over disputes, punished the guilty, and looked after the welfare of the people. It functioned as a very important administrative body at various levels of villages, districts, and provinces. These panchayats or local bodies also looked after the temples, hospitals, welfare of the poor, and other charitable works like digging and maintenance of ponds, wells, and the irrigation system, etc.

With the centralization of power, village panchayats came to be neglected, ensuring the rights and privileges of the ruling classes, nobility, and feudal community only. These people concentrated powers in their own hands with the help of the state. This gave rise to authoritarianism, tyranny, and exploitation of the rural poor, landless, and marginal farmers. The reincarnation of Panchayati Raj, as a system of local self-government administered by a council or 'Panchayat' duly elected in a free and fair manner, is a step in the right direction. It is in keeping with the very spirit of democracy. It is essential that to strengthen democracy, the panchayat System in India be given all possible help and encouragement. It will further help decentralization of power and check the degeneration of democracy in a very effective manner. It has been an established fact that authoritarianism and too much concentration of power are the main obstacles in the process of democracy, which stands for the full participation of the masses in the administration through regular fair and free elections, etc. The Panchayati Raj system has been purposefully and specially designed to take care of various rural problems. It provides the administrative and legislative apparatus for the implementation of the programs of rural development. The 64th Constitution Amendment Bill of May 15, 1989, has been a landmark in this context. It gave a new lease of life to Panchayati Raj as a truly representative system in our country. During the debate on the subject, the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi told the Lok Sabha that "Too often in the past Panchayati Raj has had functions without finances, responsibilities without authority, duties without the means for carrying them out. The Bill seeks to remove these disparities and bottlenecks and to make these rural legislatures or councils a fit and effective instrument of self-government." The Bill also made it obligatory that elections be held regularly every five years, but various states have failed to fulfill this obligation and the Centre has had to intervene. Thus, the Bill has proved a milestone in revitalizing an ancient and time-tested democratic institution.

The Panchayati Raj system is best suited for the developmental and administrative requirements of the rural population and society because of the wide variation in the nature of local problems. It is an inexpensive form of local

self-government, which can suitably identify the local problems and issues, particularly of the poor and weaker sections of society, like scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, small, marginal, and landless farmers, women, and backward classes. It also ensures quick and equitable measures to solve the problems. It provides a proper forum, where local people can meet, discuss and chalk out programs, policies, and their speedy implementation. It also ensures decentralization of power, and effective developmental activities, in which active participation of the rural masses can be envisaged.

The main objective of the system is to develop a method of decentralization and devaluation of powers, functions, and authority to the rural folk with a view to ensure rapid socio-economic progress and speedier and inexpensive justice. This is to be achieved through increasing agricultural production, development of cottage and rural industries, fuller and proper utilization of available local, natural and human resources with the active participation of the people. Besides progressive decentralization of powers and authority, it aims at improving the living standard of the rural people in general and the weaker sections in particular.

It has a three-tier structure that includes Village Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and the Zila Parishads. While in most of the states there is a three-tier structure, in some states and Union Territories there is only a two-tier system and, in some cases, only one-tier structure. The village or Gram Panchayat functions at the village level. Each village has its own panchayat. In the case of very small villages, there can be a common panchayat for a group of villages. The Gram Sabha or the Village Council, consisting of all the adult members of the village, elect the members of the panchayat. These members elect their chairman or head, known as Pradhan. They hold the office of the Gram Panchayat normally for a period of three years. Every panchayat has its own secretary and a Gramsevak to help it in its various functions. The panchayat chalks out the program for agricultural production and co-operative management of the land. It also seeks to ensure a minimum standard of cultivation for raising agricultural production.

Panchayat Samitis work at the block level. These main executive bodies have all the elected Village Pradhans of the Gram Panchayats as their members. The Presidents and Vice Presidents of these Samitis are elected from among these members for a period of three years. The main function of the Panchayat Samiti is to prepare, execute and coordinate the developmental program at the block level. It is responsible for preparing and implementing plans for the development of agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, cottage, and small-scale industries, rural health by the block development officer and extension officers.

Then there are Zila Parishads. These function at the district level and are responsible for making, executing, and coordinating the programs of rural development for the entire district. A Zila Parishad has the presidents of the Panchayat Samitis in the district, the members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) from the district, and the members of the Parliament (MPs) representing the district as its members. All these members elect their Chairman, from amongst themselves. The district collector and other government officials provide guidance and help for the formation and implementation of development schemes and programs.

Thus, the panchayat system in India assumes a very significant role because nearly 80% of its population lives in villages, spread over about 95% of its geographical area. This system is quite rational, practicable, and in perfect harmony with the spirit of democracy and should be further strengthened and encouraged. It should be made economically viable and self-sufficient by providing adequate resources, funds, and generous grants. The reservation of seats for women, scheduled castes, and tribes in panchayats is a welcome step, for it would make the institution of panchayat more democratic, representative, and balanced. The panchayat elections are conducted and supervised by the Election Commission to ensure free and fair elections. All these measures ensure a bright and long-lasting future of the panchayat system in India.

Essay No. 03

Panchayati Raj

'Panchayati Raj' means the system of administration which is related to the development of villages. The natives of the villages enjoy the right under this system to run the administration of their respective villages and bring about their development according to their needs and desires. They organize themselves in the form of Panchayats and take independent decisions on how to run their administration and fulfill their local needs and solve their problems by means of their limited resources. They themselves frame and enforce the developmental projects. They receive monetary grants from the government and the government officials give them both guidance and assistance. They sit together and settle their petty disputes concerning land, water, and farming. They need not hang about the courts for such purposes.

In India, the Panchayati rule was in vogue since times immemorial. This system started stumbling during the British rule because the English created headmen and informers of corrupt behavior in the villages to propagate their dictatorship. During the freedom movement, Gandhiji used to say that Panchayats should be reorganized to make the villages self-dependent and self-reliant. This burning

issue also attracted the attention of the framers of our Constitution. It has been clearly laid down in Article 40 of our Constitution that the State would take measures to organize village Panchayats and strengthen them. To give a practical shape to Gandhi's long-cherished dream, the Panchayati Raj Act was passed, first of all in U.P. in 1950 and numerous powers were bestowed on the Panchayats. The Panchayati Raj system was subdivided into Gram Sabha, Gram Panchayat, and Gram Adalat (Village Courts).

Provision has been made to set up Gram Panchayat in every village. It is also an institution for local self-rule; the courts for petty civil and criminal cases also and the pivotal center of developmental activities. Panchayat (Block) Samitis have been set up on community development block levels. They are elected by the Panchayats and in return, they impart guidance and render assistance to all the Panchayats. They keep an eye on the activities of the Panchayats. Their sole objective is to bring about all-around development of the villages located in their jurisdiction. For this purpose, they formulate community development plans and launch them in their regions.

The Zila Parishads make efforts for collective development by coordinating the activities of the Panchayat Samitis of their area. They inspect (audit) the budgets of the Panchayat Samitis and advise them and keep an eye on their activities. They can give suggestions to the government regarding the development of the villages and launch governmental plans. They can take necessary steps for the development of rural life and raise the level of their living.

The Panchayati Raj System (Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Zila Parishads) has set up direct democracy in India and has established the people's own rule in the villages. Under this system, each and every citizen gets a chance of seeking training in administration, and a spirit of freedom, self-reliance, and self-confidence germinates in them. Panchayati Raj is a sort of campaign for bringing about all-around development in rural life. But it is a matter of regret that factionalism (groupism), casteism, and a sense of retaliation (ruffianism) have blurred and tarnished our glorious dream of Panchayati Raj by casting their dark shadow on it. According to the recommendations of Ashok Mehta Samiti, the administrative decentralization should be methodical and the Mandal Panchayats should have active participation in the administrative activities of the district. It was also indicated in the report that political intervention, casteism, and corruption have an upper hand in these institutions, and bureaucracy and aristocracy have a monopoly in them. Hence the Panchayati Raj has proved itself incapable and a failure in sowing the seeds of democracy on the Indian soil and to play the role of a primary school to impart education for democracy and to bring about social changes. The Constitution

73rd Amendment Act has granted Constitutional status to Panchayats. Hereafter, the state legislature will formulate laws for the structure of the Panchayats and the powers assigned to them. Panchayats shall be constituted in every State, at the village, intermediary (block), and district levels. The States with a population not exceeding 20 lakhs need not constitute intermediate level Panchayats. All seats in a Panchayat shall be filled by direct election. Each of the Panchayati areas will be divided into constituencies of nearly equal population. The State Legislature can frame laws to grant representation in upper institutions to the Chairmen of the Panchayats, Members of the Parliament, and Legislators. Seats for Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes shall be reserved in proportion to their population in the Panchayat area and one-third of their seats shall be reserved for their women. In the same way, one-third of the total seats of any institution shall be reserved for women. In the same manner, the offices of the Chairmen shall also be reserved. By framing laws, the State Legislature can reserve the offices of the Chairmen of Panchayati Raj Institutions in favor of Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes, women, and backward classes. Each of the Panchayati Raj Institutions shall continue for five years. By framing laws, the State Legislature can bestow powers on Panchayati Raj Institutions to frame policies for achieving economic development and social justice, to collect money, and to launch their projects. Provision has been made for a Finance Commission for the State under this Act. Provision has also been made for setting up an Election Commission in the State for conducting regular elections. This Act does not apply to many regions and States.

Let us hope that the Panchayati Raj Institution will prove as the Alladin's Lamp for the rural uplift.

Essay No. 04

Panchayati Raj

Democracy implies a distinct evaluation of power to the grassroots level in a manner so as to invite in its fold ready contribution of the common man with an occasional control and supervision of the government. Based on this premise is the Panchayati Raj institution and edifice of a democratic society.

Structured around the smaller unit viz. the village, of the Indian sub-continent, Panchayati Raj is a powerful instrument available to over six lakh villages in India, with which they can become economically self-sufficient and politically self-governing.

Article 40 in part IV of the Directive Principles of State Policy of the constitution states: "The state should take steps to organize village panchayats and endow

them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as a unit of the self-government. This provision gives the villager a right to implement only those schemes which they deem fit for their village and surrounding rural areas falling under the jurisdiction of the village panchayat

Unfortunately, there is continued domination of the upper and the moneyed class in PRIs, who have used the Panchayat to further their sectoral, class, and other vested interests. Large sums of government money are either misappropriated or wasted on non-profitable ventures. Dishonest politicians and corrupt government officials are often hands in glove with non-sincere PRI members in forming a well-organized racket of siphoning off grants meant for rural upliftment.

December 22 and 23, 1992 saw the passing of the constitution (seventy-second) amendment bill with total unanimity by the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. This bill emerged as the Constitutions (seventy-third) amendment act 1993 after being ratified by 17 state assemblies. This legislation provides constitutional status to PRIs. It seeks to make major structural changes in the Panchayati Raj so that it can truly be called the unit of democracy. It suggests reservation for SC/ST and women candidates, indirect elections to the post of chairman at the district level, uniform 5-year term, the power to levy and collect local taxes, grant in aid from state consolidated funds to panchayats, and appointment of finance commission to look into the distribution of finances among other things,

The act will give a boost to various village-level developmental activities and the Jawahar Rojgar Yojana. With assured funds at their disposal, the gram panchayats will be at liberty to decide upon the suitability and implementation of village development schemes. Therefore like any other democratic institution, gram panchayats empowered with administrative and financial powers are expected to carry out the economic development of rural India with renewed vigor and prudent foresight.

The possibility of members taking advantage of the increased flow of money cannot be ruled out. Hence a body, closely monitoring their expenditure through periodic audits and regular statements of accounts needs to be constituted or built in the district level of panchayats. This body along with an impartial central accounting agency can keep a watchful eye on the erroneous expenditure of the panchayats.

The government on its part can facilitate awareness camps with the help of NGOs and other intelligence. Informed rural masses can act as checks, and counter any misuse of the office by Panchayats members. This way the goal of realizing people's participation in community development will be successfully achieved.

