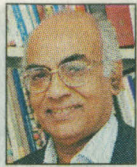


Panchayati Raj Or Collector Raj?

Even 66 years after Independence, our administrative culture retains the imperial distrust of local governments

George Mathew



It is universally recognised that for ensuring people's participation in governance and holistic development, the best instrumentality is local government. So when Parliament passed the 73rd Constitution Amendment Bill on December 23, 1992 to enshrine the essential features of panchayats in the Constitution, this was hailed as historic. But where do our panchayats stand 20 years after becoming institutions of self-government?

A big issue before the founders of the Constitution was whether to make panchayats constitutional bodies or not. Even though Mahatma Gandhi was the strongest advocate of panchayats, to his utter dismay, panchayats found a mention only in the Preamble. It took another 43 years for panchayats to find a place in the Constitution.

A general feeling remains that panchayats are marginalised constitutional bodies. The main reason is political. When a political party is out of power, it swears by panchayats; once it is in power, it seeks to weaken the panchayati raj. Here, what has been the role played by the Congress?

Three years before the party's inception, Viceroy Ripon's local government resolution (1882) set the stage for the idea of self-government, not only local but national as well. The Congress firmly and continuously fought for local government, till India won independence. The All India Congress Committee worked

hard to make village panchayats really self-governing, endowed with real powers. From 1920 to 1947, under Gandhiji's leadership, gram swaraj was at the centre stage of political discourse. Yet, when India got Independence, Congress paid mere lip service to panchayati raj.

Jawaharlal Nehru coined this term, panchayati raj. Between 1957 and 1964, he fought to establish panchayati raj on a firm footing, almost like a crusader, with support from trusted lieutenants like S K Dey. He also knew that his party did not, by and large, share his enthusiasm for giving powers to the panchayats, that the opposition against decentralisation of

Although panchayats got a constitutional status 20 years ago, politicians have managed to subvert the decentralisation of power, out of fear of the emergence of rival political forces. So panchayati raj remains a pipe dream while the bureaucracy's writ runs large

power was very strong within the Congress. After his death, the ministry for panchayati raj and cooperation was abolished in 1966 at one stroke, without even a whimper of protest.

Then in 1977 when the Left Front came to power in West Bengal, local government got a leap forward. E M S Namboodiripad was a great inspiration for the



Aiming to overcome the collector-BDO raj

West Bengal Marxist party leadership, to implement a new generation of panchayati raj. The former Kerala chief minister's vision was "to make a radical change in the very concept of democracy and adopt what is called four-pillar democracy". He fully supported Ram Manohar Lohia's idea of chowkhamba raj – across village, district, state and Union.

Besides Nehru, the only Congress prime minister who took a bold step for the sake of panchayati raj was Rajiv Gandhi. During his tours, he realised that the district administration was non-responsive and even cruel at times, because 'it was unrepresentative'. This encouraged him to introduce the 64th Constitution Amendment Bill on May 15, 1989 to give panchayats constitutional status. But the irony is that when the Congress came to power in Karnataka, it sought to subvert panchayati raj

there. Hardly any Congress-ruled state has been a pioneer in devolving power to the panchayats, except Digvijay Singh conducted the first elections as per the 73rd Amendment in Madhya Pradesh in 1994.

After Rajiv Gandhi, the Congress took up panchayati raj only in 2004 when the UPA came to power, by creating the ministry of panchayati raj. Under Mani Shankar Aiyar's leadership, this ministry generated ideas and programmes at the state level and below to make panchayats the 'institutions of self-government', and created a new momentum towards decentralised governance. Still, one continues to see political leaders try to subvert the decentralisation of power, and one is reminded of M L Dantwala's observation that whatever may be their rhetoric, politicians are scared of the emergence of rival political forces.

When political parties of all hues do not believe in local government, who is the happy lot? The bureaucracy – officers from the village level to the highest level. The bureaucracy has been subverting the ideals of local government since 1882. And even after 66 years of Independence, our administrative culture remains deeply mired in the imperial model of governance, retaining their distrust of local governments. The 'collector-BDO-gram sevak raj' continues to this day.

In 1995, I conducted a study of Shadnagar in Andhra Pradesh where Nehru had inaugurated the first panchayat in south India on October 11, 1959. I asked why panchayats were not working. An old guard said: "The officials worked against giving power to the non-officials, especially the people's representatives from the villages. In this they were hand in glove with state-level politicians." Hardly anything has been done to change this mindset of the bureaucracy and of political leaders in the country and, therefore, panchayati raj remains a pipe dream.

The inability of the panchayati raj institutions to become institutions of self-government is not hard to explain. As Annie Besant said prophetically in 1917 in Calcutta, "Tie up a baby's arms and legs, and then leave it to teach itself to walk. If it does not succeed, blame the baby. The free baby will learn equilibrium through tumblers; the tied-up baby will become paralysed, and will never walk."

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