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PANCHAYATI RAJ
IN ACTION

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CHAPTER I

PHILOSOPHY AND OBJECTIVES.

Panchayati Raj is a culmination of the recognition given by our Constitution to the role of panchayats. One of its Directive Principles enjoins that the "State shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-governments." The devolution of powers is an implementation of a Directive.

Panchayati Raj aims at making democracy real by bringing the millions into the functioning of democracy. It is a system of grass-roots democracy which seeks to link the individual family in the remotest village with the Central Government.

The basic unit of self-government is the family. The family has been guaranteed certain fundamental rights which cannot be interfered with by the State. But there are certain spheres of activity which can only be executed by several families collectively. These activities will obviously have to be left to an organisation called the village panchayat. It is essential to build up the Panchayat as a dynamic organisation which can look after all the facets of life of the village community. It has to draw its strength and sanction from the village people as a whole simultaneously working in close co-operation with self-governing bodies at higher levels in an organic set up.

The Panchayat must constitute a strong base for a three-tier structure of self-governing institutions located at block and district levels. Responsibilities and activities which fall beyond its scope will be surrendered by the panchayat to the next higher body which is called the Panchayat Samiti. While the Samiti will look after these activities, it will also try to use the Panchayat as its agent for some of its numerous tasks.

The Panchayat Samiti will be linked to the next higher body at the district level known as the Zila Parishad. The latter will guide the former in technical and administrative matters and engage in activities which only a district organisation can discharge effectively. This process of assuming responsibilities with the requisite authority within its own sphere and surrendering those which involve inter-unit co-operation are the main features of the Panchayati Raj system. In other words, as one steps down these three-tiers, the coordination

and policy making functions decrease correspondingly to the executive responsibilities which increase till at the village level, the panchayat becomes mostly an executive body.

It will be seen that by this pattern, Panchayati Raj will bring about a complete link-up of the millions in this country from the Gram Sabha to the Lok Sabha. It seeks to bring to the individual family the highest guidance available from the Parliament downwards. People will be free to handle matters within specified spheres without interference from others. This freedom to think, plan and work will draw out the latent initiative and ability in every individual for the growth and welfare of the family and the community. Panchayati Raj is thus a way of life and involves a new approach to government.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee had recommended democratic decentralisation by the association of peoples' representatives through the three-tier system. The new Panchayati Raj legislation has been enacted in Andhra, Rajasthan, Madras, Assam, Mysore and Punjab. Andhra and Rajasthan were the first to implement their legislation and they have completed one year of operation under this system. Assam, Madras, Mysore and Punjab have also started setting up such institutions. In Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, legislation is shortly expected to be introduced while Gujarat and Maharashtra have set up high-level committees to recommend the type of institutions which will suit local conditions.

The growing concept of Panchayati Raj will bring in its wake a number of problems, the most important of which will be rural industrialisation. The needs of the millions of families, artisans, traders and small industrialists will have to be complied with. As a result a rapidly growing cooperative sector is envisaged, specially in agriculture, small industries, trade and spheres of social services. This sector helps build up Sahakari Samaj in the economic field as a complementary counterpart of the three-tier democratic system of Panchayati Raj.

CHAPTER II

PROGRESS IN RAJASTHAN & ANDHRA PRADESH.

Panchayati Raj was proceeding in the right direction in Rajasthan, according to the Congress Parliamentary study Team's report.

This team, which consisted of seven members headed by Shri Raghubir Sahai, toured Rajasthan from 2nd to 11th October, 1960. It was not a "conducted tour" and a large number of blocks and villages were visited which were not in the scheduled programme. Some of the meetings of the village panchayats, panchayat samitis and Zila Parishads were also watched by the members of the team.

The general impression of the team was that there was a great consciousness amongst the people as well as their elected representatives who were alive to their responsibilities and duties. Though the members were reluctant to pass a verdict on the "success or otherwise of this great experiment," they were confident that the movement was proceeding in "the right direction with the right mental attitude on the part of the services and elected representatives." The team was highly impressed by the official attitude at all levels which was determined to make panchayati raj a success in the State. Panchayati Raj is looked upon not only as "an experiment but a way of life, something closely tied up with democracy."

Cordial relations generally prevailed between the Pradhan and the Vikas Adhikari on the one hand and the Pramukh and District Collector on the other. The work was executed in a spirit of accommodation and goodwill. Instances of friction were few and both the officials and elected representatives regarded each other as complementary and indispensable. The report discloses that out of 232 Panchayat Samitis and 26 Zila Parishads, there were only seven to eight cases of conflict between the Pradhan and the Vikas Adhikari. In 15 to 20 cases, the Vikas Adhikaris had been transferred while in two or three cases, the Pradhans were suspended for some irregularity or the other. In only one case, the Pramukh could not see eye to eye with the District Collector.

The team was impressed by the keen interest shown by some of these institutions to improve the conditions of Harijans and other backward classes by grant of financial assistance for construction

of pucca houses and wells for drinking water. It noticed that the feeling of "inferiority complex" on the part of these communities was "gradually dying out." The team has observed that much more should be done for these communities "in a very systematic manner with a missionary spirit and zeal behind it." The report records that "a realisation has come to those of the so-called high caste people to do their duty by these communities, so far neglected."

The report states that the panchayat members showed "a great awareness of their responsibility" and "the level of discussion was quite high." Even in some cases where acute party factions prevailed, there were some positive achievements. It has been stressed that in the majority of cases funds have been spent in a responsible manner for the benefit of the community and not even one instance was brought to the notice of the members of the team of funds being deliberately misused. There were no complaints of inadequacy of funds and whenever the panchayat samitis or village panchayats found that they required more finance, a tax was recommended. In many village panchayats, such taxes have been imposed and realised.

The team noticed the presence of one or two women members, sometimes in purdah, in Panchayat Samitis. Though these women did not take an active part in the deliberations, their presence was a welcome feature. The report states that women in Rajasthan are very conservative and recommends that the problem of their backwardness will have to be tackled in right earnest.

Though some of the village panchayats had imposed taxes which were realised, there were many more hesitating to do so for fear of incurring displeasure of the electorate. The other difficulty related to the existence of "acute party factions which interfered with the smooth working of these bodies." "It was a struggle for power, which was natural" says the report, "but a realisation must come in due course of time to those who have been defeated to allow those in power to do their duty by the public."

A genuine difficulty was the lack of technical personnel on account of which, large sums of allotted funds remained unutilised. The team has mentioned some cases where e.g. a mobile dispensary or a girls school could not be set up for want of medical personnel and qualified school teachers respectively. Village industries have also not received the necessary impetus due to the same reason. However, the team records that "despite shortage of water, vigorous

steps have been taken to step up agricultural production by adopting improved methods of cultivation, such as use of improved implements, fertilizers, improved seeds, construction of anicuts or masonry wells to provide water for irrigation, line sowing pesticides and technical skill."

The report states that Panchayati Raj has done much good to the social habits of the people. According to some of the District Officers, the crime position in Rajasthan has taken a distinct turn for the better. Cases coming up before village panchayats were compromised and the practice of putting in a regular defence was not common.

Wherever the members of the team met pramukhs and members of the zila parishads, the latter expressed dissatisfaction with their present advisory role. The team has suggested that in order to make the zila parishads more effective, the pramukh may be consulted in regard to the allocation of funds by Government to the various panchayat samitis either by being called at the State headquarters or some officer visiting the zila parishad for consultation. It has further suggested the creation of a convention whereby the zila parishad could tender useful advice to the panchayat samiti or village panchayat.

Referring to the impact of Panchayati Raj, the report states that "the people have become more power conscious and vocal and their elected representatives responsible and sober." Though the caste system is still a live force to be reckoned with, the members of the team feel that with education and political consciousness, its influence would diminish. They are of the view that in the next General Elections, three-fourths of the representatives would be persons of ability and devotion and certainly those who were rooted to the soil.

Andhra Pradesh

The seven-member team, which was joined by Prof. N. R. Malkani, spent more than 10 days, from December 4 to 14, in Andhra Pradesh, where it visited 13 Panchayat Samitis, spread over 10 districts, and met 13 out of the 20 district collectors and 12 out of the 20 chairmen of Zila Parishads. The team came to the conclusion that "trust was rightly reposed in the elected representatives" and that they had "discharged it tremendously well".

The team was more than convinced that, as a result of the transfer of responsibilities to elected representatives for developmental works "a greater sense of responsibility was discernible and the people appeared to be eager to do as best as they could."

As in Rajasthan, so in Andhra, says the team, officials and non-officials, as well as the general public "were determined to make the experiment of Panchayati Raj a great success."

While the team noticed that "very creditable" work had been done in Aruku Valley (Multipurpose), Patencheru and Pendurathi Panchayat Samitis, work in Tanakallu and Thamballpalle Panchayat Samitis had come to a standstill owing to accute party factions.

Referring to the disciplinary provisions of the Andhra Pradesh legislation, the team says that, although a show cause notice as to why it should not be suspended had been served recently on the Panchayat Samiti of Thamballapalle, there had been no other instance of the punitive and disciplinary provisions of the Act being used.

Relations between the elected representatives and the officials, according to the team, were "very cordial". Not a single instance was brought to its notice, where the relations could be said to be strained.

Comparing the provisions of the Acts of Andhra Pradesh with those of Rajasthan's, the team points out that unlike Rajasthan, the Andhra Pradesh legislation had transferred many of the functions performed by the old defunct district boards to either the Panchayat Samitis or the Zila Parishads, and the standing committee of the Zila Parishads in Andhra Pradesh was presided over by the District Collectors. One year's experience had shown that relations between the district collectors and the chairmen of Zila Parishads were very cordial.

While the scope of functions to be discharged by the Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads in Andhra Pradesh was greater than in Rajasthan, the team says, their powers to raise resources were "comparatively circumscribed". The team felt that neither the Samitis nor the Zila Parishads had given serious thought to raising their own resources. Instead, they had appeared to be more anxious to obtain funds from the government, rather than take up the responsibility of levying a cess, a tax or a surcharge, which, in their opinion, might make them unpopular.

The team also refers to the controversy over the nomination by Government of two members to the district selection committee for the recruitment of staff and suggests that the State Minister for Community Development and Planning should meet the Chairman of Zila Parishad to allay their doubts.

In every sphere of work now transferred to elected representatives, either at Samiti or Zila Parishad levels, according to the team, there was a marked improvement.

Members of the team were particularly impressed by the progress made by the Panchayati Raj institutions in regard to the expansion of elementary and secondary education. Not only had a "phenomenal expansion" taken place in the field of education but efficiency also had improved. Further, as a result of the concerted efforts made by the Panchayat Samitis, agricultural production also had gone up considerably. There was, however, scope for greater agricultural production in years to come.

Referring to the position of the weaker sections of the community, the team says that although untouchability was still a live issue at some places in Andhra Pradesh, there was greater awareness in the people as a whole and a greater anxiety among the elected representatives at the Samiti and Zila levels to do their part of the duty for the amelioration of the conditions of Harijans.

The team also refers to criticisms of the rules and regulations framed under the Act and says that several complaints were brought to its notice. The rules, it was pointed out, were too many, had been issued too frequently and were difficult to interpret. A plethora of rules caused uneasiness in the mind of many a people associated with the working of Panchayati Raj and the team felt that rules needed a revision with a view to introducing "greater elasticity."

CHAPTER III

PRESS REACTIONS

The press in general have welcomed the institution of Panchayati Raj and expressed a desire that every effort must be made to ensure that these institutions carry on their functions on the right lines. The leading newspapers like the *Times of India*, *Statesman*, *Indian Express* and *National Herald*, to mention a few, have attached great importance to these institutions in the light of rural development specially agricultural production. A large section of the press has emphasised the need for adequate training to the members of these institutions.

A senior correspondent of the *Times of India* who wrote a series of articles on his impressions of Panchayati Raj in the states of Andhra, Madras, Mysore and Rajasthan stated that the impact of Panchayati Raj has two significant implications: "First, it is only now that community development has become genuinely so; secondly, the alienation between the Government and the people has ended at least in so far as Block activities are concerned. The people now know that they can make their voice felt." The same sentiments were expressed by the *Statesman's* correspondent who stated that the villagers had welcomed the new panchayats "quite unreservedly." The main criticism of the press was that these institutions had so far failed to take advantage of their taxation powers to secure funds for rural development. (*Times of India* 13/6/60 and *Hindustan Times* 14/5/60).

On the other hand, the working of these institutions in Bihar was severely criticised. Both the leading dailies in the State, the *Indian Nation* and *Searchlight* felt that the scheme had not worked satisfactorily due to lack of education and training. The *Searchlight* (19/7/60) wrote that "experience in Bihar shows that in a number of villages new feuds and disharmony have cropped up by the election of Mukhiyas and Panches." Similar observations were made by the *Indian Nation*.

The other criticism levelled against these institutions, in a section of the press, was that they were ridden by party factions. *Rashtradoot* of Jaipur (23/8/60) remarked that "casteism has increased and unscrupulous elements are taking undue advantage." The same charge was also brought up by the *Aryavarta*, (19/7/60),

a Hindi daily of Patna, which stated that "corruption in villages has covered most of these institutions into areas of strife and conflict." The *Radical Humanist* (4/4/60) an important weekly while welcoming the scheme felt that it was not making much headway "because of sharp economic divisions in society." The *National Herald*, *Searchlight* and *Janata* urged political parties to come to an agreement not to interfere with panchayats.

On the whole, the press has evinced keen interest in the scheme as indicated by the editorial reactions as well as news coverage given to panchayats. Only recently the *Deccan Chronicle* (7/12/60) of Hyderabad commended the activities of the Srikakulam Zila Parishad in a leading editorial adding that it might serve as a model to similar other institutions.