

Panchayati Raj

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The idea of panchayati raj owes its origin to the system which prevailed in India for a long time under which villages were to a great extent self-governing. According to Dharampal (1971), 'a perusal of early (late eighteenth and early nineteenth century) British Indian records leaves little doubt that in most parts of India, the village (and perhaps also the towns, etc.) possessed an organised institutional framework which looked after the civic, administrative and political needs of the community, and was endowed with necessary powers and resources to perform the various tasks'. These institutions of village self-governance decayed and disintegrated under the oppression of the British rule, particularly on account of expropriation of most of the produce as land tax by the rulers. The initiatives regarding village panchayats in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century by the British rulers were taken primarily for the purpose of enhancing administrative efficiency. The village panchayats which came into existence as a result of these policy decisions were in no way related to the self-governing institutions of the earlier times.

The idea of panchayati raj in the sense of self-governing villages constituted an extremely important and integral part of Mahatma Gandhi's conception of swaraj. Notwithstanding it, in the initial drafts of the Constitution panchayati raj did not find any mention. It was only after a large number of members of the Constituent Assembly had expressed their disaffection at the absence of any provision for panchayati raj that the Article to the effect 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 was added to the Directive Principles of State Policy. Seventy-third amendment of the Constitution was enacted for enshrining in the Constitution certain basic and essential features of panchayati raj as it is envisaged nowadays. The most important of these features include constitution of panchayats at village and other level or levels; direct elections to all seats in panchayats at the village and intermediate level, if any; reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population;

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and reservation of not less than one-third of the seats for women.

One rationale for panchayati raj institutions is straightforward; namely decentralisation of power. It is, however, important to distinguish the objective of decentralisation of power from the objective of establishment of gram raj, wherein the village is conceptualised as a community, an organic entity, rather than an ensemble of individuals.¹ For Gandhi panchayati raj meant gram raj; and not merely decentralisation of power. The initiatives with respect to panchayati raj have not come up to expectations. The reason possibly lies in the fact that the 'development' in the modern sense is inherently power-centralising; and consequently is impeded by institutions which tend to decentralise power. It is in this sense that the Gandhian insight of there being a close relationship between the choice of technology and possibilities and extensionality of freedom assumes importance.

1. For elaboration of this point see Foreword to Dharampal (1962) by Jayaprakash Narayan.

References

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