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## GOOD GOVERNANCE AND PANCHAYATI RAJ

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Alexander Pope's famous dictum : "For forms of government, let fools contest, whatever is best administered is best", truly reflects the spirit of good governance which in the recent past has become a catchword amongst academics, politicians and bureaucrats. The concept of good governance is not a static but a dynamic one as it keeps changing due to overall societal changes. In ancient times, under monarchical regimes, king was expected to be the embodiment of good governance for promoting general human well being. But with the emergence of modern democratic system this role automatically got transferred to the government- an instrument of the state.

Good governance ordinarily means looking after the welfare for all in the respects. According to Asmerom and others, "Good governance is associated with efficient and effective administration in a democratic framework".<sup>1</sup> It may refer to high level of organizational efficiency and effectiveness for responding in a responsive and responsible way in order to attain the pre-determined desirable goals for the society. To have a comprehensive understanding of the concept of good governance it would be desirable to take into account its parameters given by various scholars and institutions from time to time. Kautaliya, the great Indian philosopher in his famous treatise 'Arthashastra' has dwelt upon 10 indicators of good governance which may be summed up as

under.

King must merge his individuality with duties, properly guided administrations, avoiding extremes without missing the goal; disciplined life with a code of conduct for king and ministers, fixed salaries and allowances to the king and public servants, law and order chief duty of the king- theft loses to be made good from king's salary; carrying out preventive, punitive measures against corrupt officials, replacement of ministers by good ones by the king; emulation of administrative qualities; and pursuing good governance even amidst instability.<sup>2</sup> The gist of these indicators drive one to conclude that the main objective of good governance is to maximize the well being of the people. As regards their relevance in the present day world, they still hold good. However, the essence of these is being presented in modern context by the World Bank as under :

1. political accountability, including the acceptability of political system by the people and regular elections to legitimize the exercise of political power.
2. freedom of association and participation by various religious, social, economic, cultural and professional groups in the process of governance;
3. an established legal framework based on the rule of law and independence of judiciary to protect human rights, secure social justice and guard against exploitation and abuse of

- power;
4. bureaucratic accountability ensuring a system to monitor and control the performance of government offices and officials in relation to quality of service, inefficiency and abuse of discretionary power. The related determinants include openness and transparency in administration.
  5. freedom of information and expression needed for formulation of public polities, decision making, monitoring and evaluation of government performance. It also includes independent analysis of information by the professional bodies, including the universities and others needed for a civil society,
  6. a sound administrative system leading to efficiency and effectiveness. This, in turn, means the value for money and cost effectiveness;
  7. co-operation between the government and civil society organization.<sup>3</sup>

Evidently, good governance implies utmost concern for people's welfare wherein the government and its bureaucracy follow policies and discharge their duties with a deep sense of commitment, respecting the rule of law in a manner which is transparent, ensuring human rights and dignity, probity and public accountability.

The need for good governance has always been indispensable for delivering goods and services to the masses. However, its indispensability has assumed all the more significance considering the present changed national and international scenario. From the point of view of levels of government- central, state and local- its urgency and need is perhaps the utmost at the local level because of its close proximity with the people. Further, it is this local level which provides the foundation to the democratic super-structure.

Keeping this in view, the focus of this article is to study good governance vis-a-vis Panchayati Raj in India- the grass root level of our democratic system.

There is no denying the fact that the indicators of good governance mentioned above are equally applicable at the panchayati raj level. Besides, certain other factors such as committed political will for decentralization, non-hegemonic rural-oriented bureaucracy, constructive role of mass media and non-governmental organizations, enlightened dutiful ruralites and their active participation and cooperation need special attention in this regard. Thus, the indicators along with these factors would determine the state of affairs of good governance at the panchayat level.

In order to understand the efforts made by Indian Government to ensure good governance at the rural level, one has to peep into the historical developments in this regard. Panchayati Raj institutions existed in rural India since long in one form or the other with a limited role. However, after independence, these institutions were visualized as one of the potential agencies for bringing about socio-economic transformation by empowering rural masses for self-governance. One of the Directive Principles of State Policy provides that the state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government.<sup>4</sup>

Prior to the establishment of panchayati raj institutions, the Government of India launched Community Development Programme and National Extension Service to bring about socio-economic development of rural India. But these could not achieve the desired objectives for want of people's participation. Consequently, a Study Team under the Chairmanship of Balwant Ray Mehta was appointed to examine and report

upon the mechanism to be evolved through which the active participation of the rural masses could be ensured. The Study Team, recommended a three-tier system of panchayati raj i.e. Gram Panchayat at village level, Panchayat Samiti at block level and Sila Parishad at district level and genuine transfer of power with adequate resources to these bodies. It was also recommended that all the development schemes for rural areas should be routed through the PRIs. Accepting these recommendations, the panchayati raj system was introduced in several states of India. Unfortunately, the system could not make much headway even after a long trial for want of its implementations in its true spirit and desired response from the political masters, bureaucrats and rural masses.

So, another attempt to revamp the panchayati raj system was made by the Janata Government in 1977 by appointing a Committee headed by Asoka Mehta. Its main recommendations were : two tier system of panchayati raj i.e. Mandal Panchayat (consisting of a number of villages having a population between 15 to 20 thousand) and Zila Parishad at the district level; establishment of Nyaya Panchayat, party- based elections to PRIs; transferring of developmental functions to Zila Parishads; no supersession of PRIs on partisan grounds and appointment of a Minister for Panchayats in the State Council of Ministers.<sup>5</sup> These recommendations could not be implemented because of the fall of the Janata Government in 1980. However, the analysis of these recommendations make one to observe that had these been implemented it would not have strengthened the desired process of decentralization for good governance. It may also not be wrong to describe the recommendation of the Committee to shift from three to two tier system a retrograde one as it widens the gap

between the people and their representative bodies. Moreover, the system of elections on party lines as suggested might not be termed as a healthy one given the socio-economic background of the rural masses.

Despite the various attempts made by the government to bring about improvement in the health of PRIs, (setting up of Working Group on District Planning 1984; Committee on Administrative Arrangements for Rural Development 1985; the L.M. Singhvi Committee of the Department of Rural Development, Government of India, 1986 and the introduction of 64<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment in 1989) the position by and large remained unchanged till the passage of 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, 1993.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment has been hailed as major landmark in the history of local self government of India. Some of the salient features of the Amendment are; grant of constitutional status to PRIs; reservation of one-third of seats for women in panchayat bodies holding of elections to panchayats under the direct supervision of the Chief Electoral Officer, setting-up of Finance Commission to review the financial position of panchayats after every 5 years and inclusion of the XI Schedule in the Constitution listing various socio-economic programmes to be undertaken by the panchayat raj institutions.

This Amendment, in fact, aimed at enhancing the capabilities of the rural people to involve themselves in the planning process with respect to their priorities. It also envisaged decentralization of the execution of all types of developmental activities with the active participation of the rural masses. In nutshell, the purpose of the amendment was to bring good governance at the rural local level.

Though the Amendment was regarded as a welcome step yet its indepth analysis reveals some inherent ambiguities. The most

important one is the lack of clear cut demarcation of functions (29 included in the XI Schedule) amongst the three tiers of panchayati raj system. Further, it may also be pointed out that the powers and functions of Gram Sabha have not been specified.

To give effect to the Amendment, the states began enthusiastically to incorporate its provisions in their respective Panchayati Raj Acts and held elections with one-third reservation for women under the supervision of the Chief Electoral Officers. Consequently, panchayat raj bodies came into existence throughout the country in the true spirit of the Amendment. Further, a good number of states appointed Finance Commissions also for improving the financial position of these bodies. But as regards actual devolution of powers both administrative and financial is concerned, no substantial change has been observed as they continue to be poor as their were in these respects. It goes without saying that in the absence of these powers envisaged under the Amendment, the cherished goal of making rural local bodies truly self governing units would remain a distant dream and good governance at this level a distant reality.

Again, under the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, an effort was made to revamp the Gram Sabha by according it a constitutional status and it was hailed as Lok Sabha of the village people. The experience of almost last decade shows that it is still a non-functional body mainly because of lack of faith of the rural people in its effectiveness resulting into their indifferent attitude towards this body.

As regards the emerging leadership in panchayati raj bodies, it does not seem to be a better lot qualitatively. It may mainly be attributed to the degenerating petty party- politics dominating the elections besides other factor such as the role of money and muscle power, and

considerations of caste, clan, religion and region. No doubt, one- third reservation has been provided to women in PRIs but the experience so far shows that they have failed to play their expected role independently and still seem to be puppets in the hands of their men folk due to the male- dominated set-up of the Indian society. Also, the rural leadership under 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment has, yet to reach to the commoners as it is still in the hands of rural elite. Moreover, the close look at the functioning of the PRIs makes one to observe that it is marred by petty party politics and suffering from domination both political and bureaucratic, caste and religious considerations which is far from the ideal of good governance.

On the basis of the preceding discussion, it may be observed that the implementation of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment during the last decade has, yet to exhibit a qualitative improvement in the governance of PRIs in India. It is mainly because of the fact that certain essential pre-requisites such as revamping the Gram Sabha, financial viability, political will for decentralization, attitudinal and behavioural changes on the part of both politician and bureaucrats, enlightened rural masses, committed and dedicated representatives and office bearers have not been given due attention. So, what is required is that corrective measures must be taken immediately to facilities the PRIs to function in such away as to send signals of good governance to the rural masses.

For this, in the first place, ambiguity regarding functions of various bodies of panchayati raj contained in the XI Schedule (29 in number) needs to be done away with so as to demarcate clearly the role of each tier to pin down their respective responsibility. Secondly, powers and functions of the Gram Sabha have also to be specified and at the same time it must be reinvigorated to actual terms to enable it to

perform the role of mini parliament at the village level. This will certainly ensure transparency and accountability—the twin components of good governance. Thirdly, the political masters ought to exhibit their will to transfer the powers and functions in the true spirit of the Amendment to achieve the desired objective of democratic decentralization ultimately contributing to good governance at the grass root level. Fourthly, considering the fact that the financial viability of any administrative system is the sine-qua- non for its effective functioning, the financial health of PRIs needs to be improved and strengthened. Here too the political masters have to show the spirit of magnanimity in making them financially self sufficient. At the same time, these rural institutions should come up with the strong will power to tap and augment their financial resources shedding their populist approach. Fifthly, the office bearers i.e. the panches and sarpanches who are the real actors in the PR system must be men of vision and integrity, fairly educated, committed and dedicated to serve the rural masses. But this can hardly be expected in the given socio- economic and political set up of the rural Indian society. So what is needed is the radical change in such a set- up in which electoral process encourages righteous and awakened persons to come forward to serve the rural masses. It should be conducted in such a manner as leave little scope for party- politics and considerations of caste, class, religion etc.

The best alternate could be the selection of representatives through consensus who, in turn, would function in the spirit of accommodation. Sixthly, keeping in view the famous dictum that people get the type of governance they deserve', rural masses must be an awakened lot, understanding their rights, duties and responsibilities under the panchayati raj system. It is they only who can ensure efficient and

effective functioning of the system embedded with accountability, transparency and probity. Seventhly, to provide good governance at the cutting edge level of administration, the bureaucracy is supposed to play the role of a friend, philosopher and guide to PRIs. However, the general impression has been that it continues to play a hegemonic role in its formal characteristic way. So, need of the hour is the attitudinal and behavioural changes in its style of functioning, making and training it change-oriented, result- oriented and people- oriented to enable the PRIs to flourish as self- governing units. The same applies to political masters as they are expected to play the role of big brothers and faithful guides so as to allow these bodies to function as effective units of participatory democracy. Lastly, the impedimentary tendencies like constitution of parallel bodies (Gram Vikas Samitis in Haryana) and postponement of timely elections of PRIs which are raising their ugly heads here and there need to be curbed immediately with an iron hand.

To sum up, if all the above mentioned remedial measures are properly taken care of, good governance at the panchayati raj level which hitherto has been an elusive dream could become a hard reality.

## REFERENCES

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