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Panchayati Raj Politics in India: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

Panchayati Raj, the system of local self-government in rural India, has been a crucial part of India's political landscape. Established with the objective of decentralizing power and making governance more accessible to the rural population, it plays a significant role in fostering grassroots democracy. The origins of Panchayati Raj in India can be traced back to the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee in 1957, which advocated for a three-tier structure of local governance: village, block, and district levels. This recommendation led to the establishment of the Panchayati Raj system, aimed at involving local populations in decision-making processes concerning their socio-economic development. The Panchayati Raj Institutions are vested with the responsibility of economic development and social justice in their respective areas. They are empowered to prepare plans for economic development and social justice, and to implement schemes for agriculture, land improvement, water management, health, and education. The present paper is an attempt to appraise critically the panchayati raj politics in India. It has been shown that the question of whether politics should be allowed to influence Panchayati Raj institutions is a topic of considerable debate. Panchayati Raj, intended as a mechanism for local self-governance, aims to involve citizens directly in the democratic process, promoting transparency and accountability in rural development. Allowing politics to dominate Panchayati Raj institutions can divert attention from development-focused agendas to political rivalries and power struggles. The primary objective of these institutions is to work on local issues such as infrastructure, health, education, and social justice, which could be sidelined by political interests.

Keywords

Panchayati Raj, Politics, Grassroots democracy, Party politics.

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It is generally stressed that politics should not be permitted to enter Panchayati Raj institutions. The emphasis of all concerned should be on developing local potentialities and solving local problems. More particularly, it is argued that political parties should have nothing to do with these institutions because requirements in the local area like a school, a hospital, a cooperative, a veterinary hospital, an approach road, street lights and sanitation etc. are all common requirements of any village and the mobilization of the people need not to be retarded by party politics. But, unfortunately, this view is an idealistic over-simplification of the process of socialization. It has to be conceded that wherever decision making is involved, there politics would operate. Where a major social transformation is contemplated, politics would operate in a big way dramatizing the whole process. To take just one example, "how many hand pumps, schools and dispensaries are to be opened and where are they to be located"? Questions like this become hotly debated issues. It is common sense to assume that in this debate the victory will depend on groups alignments. "Politics and power struggles are thus inevitable in the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions."¹

Political decision-making is a major manifestation of political power and authority. Hence it becomes very difficult to divorce the operation of politics from any social situation, where choices have to be made from among various alternatives claiming the attention of the people. Thus with complexities of democracy of a participatory model committed to rapid socio-economic change, all the evils of politics are bound to manifest themselves as concomitant factors in the functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions. "To try to separate politics from the process of socio-economic development is the attempt at trying to separate milk from water."² In such situation what is more pertinent is to give the political process "a sense of direction and clothe the institutions with a sense of responsibility and accountability to the people and leaving the process with administrative and technical expertise."³

So long as panchayats have little power, there was little reason for political parties to have much interest in them, but once their powers are increased parties inevitably drawn to them. "Power, politics and parties go together."⁴

The politicians cannot abstain from participating in Panchayati Raj politics without committing political suicide. Those who argue that "local bodies should be given more power, but that at the same time there should be no politics amidst them involving either political parties, castes or factions- are taking a contradictory position. Wherever there is power, there must be politics-a law as fundamental in Political Science as supply and demand is in Economics."⁵

Here, when it is argued that politics will operate, it has not been suggested that ideological or policy issue will figure. Here the use of the work 'politics' is in the restricted sense of rivalry for positions or for the achievement of mutually exclusive objectives. "Local politics is different from the state and national politics but its presence at the Panchayati Raj levels cannot be denied or deliberately ignored. The Panchayati Raj institutions have not been able to remain isolated from the political currents around them. Actually in many cases Panchayati Raj leaders have gone out of their way to divert these in their own advantage. In the context of the Panchayati raj set-up the term 'political' cannot as yet be used to denote divisions along ideological or party lines. It is politics of individual connections and preferences, though political labels and ideologies cannot be relegated completely into the background in a discussion of local politics today."⁶

One of the major, perhaps unanticipated, problems that have been facing the states which introduced Panchayati Raj in India is the intrusion of party politics in the activities of Panchayati Raj institutions. Opinions vary as to the desirability of such interference by the political parties. There are two opposite schools of opinion on this issue; one school of opinion suggests that the entry of political parties in them should be banned. Broadly speaking, the opposition to participation by political parties in Panchayati Raj comes from three source - the traditionalists, the Sarvodayaities and the congress. The arguments of these three groups overlap considerably and, therefore, a hard and fast line becomes difficult to draw. The either school of thought includes the supporters of parliamentary

democracy who favour that the interventions of political parties is necessary for the success of Panchayat Raj.

The 'traditionalists'⁷ draw an idealized picture of the ancient villages. Here was a community par excellence. It was the family 'Writ large'. The village governing body, Panchayat, used to be elected in an open meeting of the village by consensus. There was no electioneering and best men were unanimously elected. They were free from personal politics and obeyed the dictates of the people and made the highest sacrifices for the community. Eager to revive this romanticized community of yore, the traditionalists argue that if parties are allowed to enter the village scene, consensus would be rendered impossible, since parties create an artificial rift in the community which presents even the genuine workers desirous of promoting community welfare from working in cooperation.

The most widely publicized is the Sarvodayaities concept of 'partyless Panchayati Raj.'⁸ They would like to replace 'rajniti' (Politics of the state) by 'Lok niti' (politics of the people). In their view, parties being the centralized organizations controlled and guided by top leaders present the growth of democratic institutions from below. Instead of creating and fostering the spirit of self reliance, they tend to destroy it. But the objective of Panchayati Raj is people's participation in development programs, this can be a reality with the help of the political parties.

The consensus, as reflected in various discussions and recommendations, is that politics should not be permitted to enter Panchayati Raj institutions. Keeping these institutions free from political influence ensures that they remain focused on their core mission of local development and community welfare. It allows them to operate transparently and accountably, upholding the principles of grassroots democracy. This view aligns with the assertion that "politics should not be permitted to enter Panchayati Raj institutions", emphasizing the need to keep local governance systems untainted by political ambitions and partisan conflicts

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