Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions
A Study in West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh

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Preface

Societies in Arunachal Pradesh are purely traditional in character. They still steeped in traditional system of cultures and traditions. In this society, usually women did not participate in the deliberations and discussions. They were engaged in serving tea, Apong (local rice beer) etc. in any type of gatherings and meetings. Usually Kebang settled any types of disputes arise in the society but generally women did not participate in the process. But there are no established norms that the women shouldn't participate in the same. However, the scenario in societies have slowly been transformed due to the establishment of administrative block, school and college, communication and the introduction of market system in many parts of the state. This gave an opportunity to the women to interact with different people with different cultures and life style, which help the outlook of women at large.

The 73rd Amendment Act in general and Arunachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1997, in particular, gave an immense opportunity to the women to participate in decision making process. But the participation of women in decision making process is very low in the state vis-a-vis to their male counterpart. Though they were given 33 percent reservation in all tiers, still they were reluctant to participate in the decision making process. Instead of women, male members of the family or relatives participate in official work and decision

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making. West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh is not lack in this. Though the women were given 33 percent of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions, but the conditions is quite similar with other parts of the state.

The book is an attempt to understand the women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and is a scholarly task to find out the problems faced by them in the decision making process and the remedial measures of the country in general and West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh in particular.

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Dahung **Kemo Padu**

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Introduction

Introduction

The local self-government, as a system, has existed in India since long. Its form may have varied, but its spirit has always been a part of our socio- cultural ethos. In the medieval times, it was seen in the form of a Gram Sabha functioning through its executive committee viz. Panchayat, a village body able to govern and sustain small communities of people. During the British period, the institution became the instrument of the ruling elite, intended to project the interest of the British Government. After independence, it was in 1959 that the local self- government, known as Panchayati Raj took its present shape[1].

The experiences of the past suggest that the Panchayati Raj System could be a very effective instrument in the decentralization of power to the lower level. The basic idea behind this is that the process of development gets accelerated when the common people consider "creation of local capacity for resource mobilization and management in support of development programs" as a principal concern for existence of institutions of local governance[2]. The experimentation with one or the other form of democratic decentralization has been going on for quite some time in many

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developing countries of South and South-East Asia. It has shown a mixed result[3].

In the context of India, especially the rural India, the Panchayat has been providing the institutional mechanism for such democratic decentralization. It is a well known fact that Panchayat in one form have exists in India since long. The literature on the subject reveals that even in medieval ages, in spite of radical political changes, one or the other form of village local Self Government existed. During the British rule, we witnessed, the emergence of Local- Self Government as a direct projection of the ruling elites. After independence, although the draft constitution of India did not make any mention of Panchayat, a mention was added in the final draft under article 40 in the chapter on 'Directive Principles of State Policy'. It states, "The state should take steps to organize Village Panchayat and endow them with such powers and authority as may be function as units of Self – Government[4]".

It is necessary to mention here that Local Self-Government is a subject mentioned in the state list incorporated in VII Schedule of the constitution. This was the reason why various states adopted various types of Panchayati Raj Institutions- "varied numbers of tiers, various names, different methods of election to the different tiers, different powers and functions and different financial support systems, before the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment".[5]

Panchayati Raj Institution is an important political innovation of India, for the establishment of grass-roots democracy and to ensure the greater people's participations in political system of the country. Panchayati Raj Institutions, the grass-root units of Local Self-Government, have been considered as an instrument of socio-economic transformation in rural India. Decentralization of power to the Panchayat is seen

as a means of empowering people and involving them in decision making process. Local government being closer to the people can be more responsive to local needs and can make better use of resources. The democratic system in a country can be ensured only if there is a mass participation in the governance. Therefore, the system of democratic decentralization is considered as an instrument to ensure democracy and socio-economic transformation in a society.

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI's) owes its origin to the different traditional patterns of governance, in the phase of history in many parts of India. The term Panchayati Raj is relatively new, having originated during the British administration.

Evolution of Panchayati Raj in India

Historical roots of the local self-government in India can be traced from the ancient past. In fact, India has been the home of rural local government, which continues to flourish from the time of Vedic Civilization to the advent of British rule.

The village India has been considered as the basic unit of the local self-administration. The evolution of the Panchayati Raj System can be traced through three distinct periods:[6]

Pre-British Period

The origin of the local government system can be traced to medieval ages where community spirit was the main force not only to keep village communities united but also to help them to manage local affairs independently. Not only they are mentioned in the *Rigveda,* there is also a definite evidence available of the existence of village Sabhas and Samities(Assemblies or Council) and Gramins(village leaders) in Vedas. The ancient system of village democracy later took form of

Panchayat (assembly of 5 persons) to look after the affairs of the village with police and judicial powers. Custom and religion elevated them to sacred position of authority.[7] Sir Charles Metcalfe, the provisional Governor General of India (1835-36), characterized them *as small republics having everything that they want within themselves and almost independent of any foreign relations. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds to revolution; Hindoo, Pathan, Maratha,Sikh,English, are all masters in turn; but the village community remains the same...*[8] In village, different sections of the community helped and depended on one another and this mutual dependence was reinforced by age-old customs and traditions. Since most of the village communities were self-sufficient in their day-to-day needs, the system of self governance helped them remain intact and self contained. Despite many of the political changes in the cities and towns during the medieval period, the system of Panchayat remained same. "Although under the Mughals, their judicial powers were curtailed, local affairs remained unregulated from above and village officers and servants were answerable primarily to the Panchayat."[9]

British Period

During the British period, the local government system passed through two distinct phases. The first phase commenced from the advent of the British rule and lasted till the Constitutional Reforms of 1919 to the end of the British rule.

First Phase

During the first phase, the advent of the British rule saw the slow disappearance of the self-contained village local government system and the emergence of a local government as the direct projection of the British rule. As a result, the attitude of the people was changed.

People seemed to lose faith in the age-old system of local government. Other conditions, too had affairs including development and social welfare, are put in charge of to a person on whom they have a faith and confidence. This took the place of the local institutions like Panchayat. As Mathew rightly says- *Village Panchayat were not the priority of the British rulers. They were mainly concentrated around the trading center; their interest in the beginning was limited to the creation of local bodies of nominated members in the major towns.*[10]

The Revolt of 1857 seems to have been largely responsible for creating the conditions for the adoption of Lord Mayo's Resolution on Local Self-Government reviving the traditional village Panchayat system in Bengal. The transfer of authority to the local institutions "was a financial necessity in the context of imperial financial strains and stresses in the wake of the mutiny and it called for, a comprehensive political philosophy involving the transfer of authority from the imperial level to the local representatives with legal, administrative and financial implications".[11]

The report of the Famine Commission of 1880, pointing to the absence of institutionalized local bodies, as a major impediment in the process of bringing relief supplies to the affected people, further strengthened the case of the transfer to bodies. As a result in 1882, the Government of India Resolution was announced. It envisaged a comprehensive geo-administrative country-wide principle for local self-government institutions. Lord Ripon's Government sent circulars to the government in the provinces on subject of local government, in order to seek the popular public opinion. The issue in the circular became basis for the Government of India Resolution (1882). After that the Local Bodies Act of 1885 came into being. This was the basis for setting up local self-governing institutions, but

they had a majority of nominated members down to the village level.[12]

Another major step for Panchayati Raj was the report of the Royal Commission on Decentralization. This Commission was setup in 1907 and it submitted its report in 1909. The commission recommended that it could be desirable for effective decentralization to associate people with local tasks and village affairs through the village Panchayat. But both the recommendations made by Ripon Resolution and Royal Commission on decentralization were not implemented and remain in paper only.

In 1909, the 24th session of the Congress was held at Lahore. It adopted a resolution urging the Government to take early steps to have elected local bodies from village Panchayat upwards with elected non-official chairman for the local bodies and to provide them with necessary financial support. But all these efforts remained largely, on papers.

Second Phase

During the second phase various reforms were introduced largely as consequences of the developments that characterized from the first phase. The Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, under the proposed scheme of diarchy, made local self- government a transferred subject[13]. This means that local self-government was brought under the control of Indian Ministers in the provinces. The idea was to make the local bodies' representative with popular control. However, it did not make the Panchayat institutions truly democratic because of various constraints. A large number of Acts, however, were passed for the establishment of Village Panchayat, in order to fulfill the condition of transferring this subject to the domain of Indian Ministers in the provinces.

These included "Bengal Village Self Government Act of 1919, Madras, Bombay and United Province Village Panchayat Act of 1920, Bihar and Orissa Village Administration Act, Assam Rural Self Government Act of 1926, and Punjab Village Panchayat Act of 1935,etc".[14]

In subsequent years, similar laws were adopted by some other states. These were- Bharatpur (Village Panchayat Act, 1944), Marwar (Gram Panchayat Act, 1945), Morvi (Village Panchayat Act, 1946), Jaipur (Village Panchayat Act, 1948), etc. However, these statutory Panchayat covered only a limited number of villages and had, generally, a limited number of functions.[15] These Acts aimed at looking after the village affairs and their development only.

Post-Independence Period

During the freedom struggle, the Indian National Congress (INC) perceived the Panchayat as people's institutions. Local self-government was regarded as the voice of the people. Many of our leaders, mainly Mahatma Gandhi were wedded to the concept namely Gram Swaraj. The idea was to have democratic process operating at the grass roots levels. However, all this could not be translated into action, when India got her independence.

Article 40 'Organization of Village Panchayat'

Mathew (1994) calls a sad commentary on India's commitment to democratic decentralization that despite the nationalist movement's commitment to Panchayat and Gandhiji's unequivocal propagation of the ideal, the first draft of India's constitution did not include a provision for Panchayat.[16] It is said that, when Gandhiji came to know about it, he felt both disturbed and depressed. "Noticing his distress, an amendment was moved for inserting Article 40- organization of village Panchayat in Part IV of the constitution-

Directive Principle of State Policy."[17] (DPSP) Article 40 reads, *the state should take steps to organize village Panchayat and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government*[18]. As a result, what followed was not an effort to usher in Panchayati Raj in the country, but to bring about socio-economic transformation through the Community Development Programme (CDP). The Community Development Programme (CDP) was firstly introduced in 1952 with people's participation as its central concern. The CDP was soon strengthened by a National Extension Service to tackle the problems of growth and development at different local and functional levels. The programme raised immense expectations. The expectations so raise are however not fulfilled. There was also a lack of enthusiasm among people in the Community Development Programme because of non association of people, particularly the rural poor and their representative in planning and execution of development meant for them.

Although, there were few states like Rajasthan which introduced Panchayati Raj System as early as 1953 through Rajasthan Panchayat Act-1953, 'variations in terms of shape, formal legal status of the Panchayat were so wide in different states that the need for systematic effort to usher in Panchayati Raj in the whole country, on more or less uniform basis, was greatly felt."[19] So there was a growing feeling among the policy makers that the development schemes would perhaps work only when the masses participated in them. Thus a study team on Community Development Projects and National Extension Service was set up in January, 1957 to assess the situation and to make necessary recommendations.

The study team on Community Development Project and National Extension Service (NES) headed by