

Growth and Functioning of Panchayat Raj in Arunachal Pradesh

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Traditionally the people of Arunachal Pradesh were grouped into different societies having more or less identical social organization on democratic footing since time immemorial. Virtually every society or group was not exposed to outside environment due to geographical situation and primitive social behaviour. Every society was almost isolated from each other.

In 1912 the British extended their administration to the mainland of Arunachal Pradesh with the appointment of an Assistant Political Officer at Pasighat. The British followed the policy of isolation as administration in this hilly tribal area was extremely difficult and unrewarding ; and also there was an apprehension of possible political infection. Thus traditional norms of social organization continued to function undisturbed. Only one change was introduced with the appointment of Gaonbaras. They were appointed to supervise the functioning of the traditional social organization under the Assam Frontier (Administration of justice) Regulation 1945. But no attempt was made to introduce any change in the political life of the people.

The policy of isolation, though for a different reason, was followed by the Government of India after independence with the intention of retaining the distinctive identity of the tribals. The official policy was intended not to bring any changes to disturb the cultural and social life of the tribals.

In 1952 the community development scheme was introduced and a national service extension block was established in different areas intending to associate the people with the administration. In each block a Block Advisory Board was constituted with official and non-official members. The Advisory Boards were delegated powers to frame programmes for local development. During the Second Five Year Plan period district level bodies, known as District Development Committees was constituted. But practically no political change was brought in the traditional set-up. The people of this region were virtually considered a sort of foreigners, most probably on the grounds of physical structure, mental make-up, social and cultural set up and geographical situation even by the Government of free India till 1965, for till then the administration of this area was under the control of the Ministry of External Affairs.

The prevalent political thinking of the day was "Friendly with China" and "there would be no war with China". Thus these remote areas were left to themselves and lived as if in a buffer state, inbetween China and India. But the morning of 20th October, 1962 brought a rude shock to the Government of India and awakened India to the grave situation on this frontier. In the aftermath of the Chinese aggression the NEFA administration changed the policy to accelerate the entire administrative machinery for developmental activities and to organise the people to take part in their own government.

In 1964, to consider the expansion and development of modern local self-government in NEFA, the government of Assam appointed a committee, popularly known as 'Ering Committee' after the name of its Chairman Dying Ering, the then Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Home Affairs. The Committee examined the pattern of authority, the scope and functions exercised by the indigenous tribal institution at the village level and above, the adequacy of existing systems and advisability to modify or enlarge or introduce democratic working in the field of judiciary, local development and administration. In total the committee was to frame proposals regarding :

- A) The type of bodies suitable at the village level and above.
- B) The extend and nature of jurisdiction of these bodies.
- C) In view of the varying stages of development of the different tribes, the phases by which the recommendations of the committee might be implemented.

However, the basic objective of appointing the committee was to bring an evolution in the political set-up of the territory. The committee started its work in May 1964 and finally submitted its report in January 1965 wherein certain epoch-making recommendations were made. These recommendations were accepted by the Government and incorporated in the NEFA Panchayat Raj Regulation 1967 with certain modifications.

After the promulgation of the NEFA Panchayat Raj Regulation in 1967 in exercise of powers conferred by article 240 of the Constitution read with sub-paragraph 2 of paragraph 18 of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India (though amended) the Panchayat Raj system was introduced in NEFA in 1969.

Basic objective of Panchayat

Between the collapse of Muslim rule and the advent of the British the political scene in India was in a confused state and there was gradual decadence of the ancient village institution and comm-

unity. Under the highly centralised system of the British administration, where all the activities were controlled and guided by directors from the headquarters, village assemblies not established by statutes, had no place and the few village officials who continued to exist tended to become government servant. But soon, the leaders of India began to shower praise on ancient organization and realised their actual importance. Thus Mahatma Gandhi stated in *Young India*, 28 May, 1931 "Panchayat has an ancient flavour, it is a good word. It literary means an assembly of five, elected by villagers. It represents the system by which the innumerable village republics of India were governed.....".

Further Lokmanya Tilak once remarked, "Gram Sanstha (Village Organization) has been the fundamental basis of our ancient polity. The village system was utterly destroyed during British rule. The peasant became dependent and helpless.

The next step after independence would be the revival of the Gram-Sanstha. The village should be the unit of swaraj and education, production, health, police duties, famine-relief, management of forests, infact nearly all the problems should be under the jurisdiction of the Gram-Sanstha or the Gram Mandal".

Mahatma Gandhi again explained the purpose of Panchayat in *Harijan* on 26th July, 1942, "My purpose is to present an outline of village government. Here there is perfect democracy based upon individual freedom..... It will have all the authority and jurisdiction required. Since there will be no system of punishments in the accepted sense, this Panchayat will be the legislature, Judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office".

Thus the basic theory of Panchayat Raj in India which was introduced for the first time in India on 2nd October, 1959 in the State of Rajasthan, was decentralization and delegation of authority in fruely democratic manner evolving the participation of common citizens in legislature, judiciary and executive matters. According to Gandhi, "Democracy requires that every one, man or woman should realise his or her own responsibility. That is what is meant by Panchayat" (message to a prayer meeting May 18, 1947).

Similar to the structure prevalent in other parts of country the NEFA Panchayat Raj Regulation 1967 laid the foundation of Panchayat Raj system in NEFA. But it had different aims and objectives. Basically decentralization is the objective of Panchayat Raj at national level, but in Arunachal Pradesh it sought to bring uniform political practice by introducing an integrated political system in order to integrate the politics of the region.

The main objectives of Panchayat Raj in Arunachal Pradesh was published in *NEFA Information* July issue of 1968. It stated :-

The Panchayat in NEFA will be the prime agency for rural development. It will provide a sound basis for economic and political growth. Secondly, it will provide a workable medium through which the rural people would be able to express themselves on various problems of the area and also to evolve an integrated community approach for solution of problems that concern the entire agencies. The Panchayat will therefore not only be a decentralised form of administration ; it would be much more than that.

The basic objective of Panchayat in Arunachal Pradesh was mainly for rural development and to give a distinct political identity, thereby to develop a new political culture, involving the participation of its people in a truly democratic manner, by integrating the different community into the larger national life. It was aimed at decentralized form of administration giving opportunities to rural folk to study their problems and find solution by themselves.

Functioning of Panchayat Raj in Arunachal Pradesh

Despite the high ideals the functioning of Panchayat in Arunachal Pradesh is not satisfactory, for, some undefined attitude prevails till today on the part of the authorities. There is too much of official domination. The powers and functions of Panchayat are in the total grip of Ex-officio President, Executive Officer and the representative of the administration.

The system of election of Panchayat members - those of Gram Panchayat, Anchal Samity, Zilla Parishad member and Vice-President and the response of public to the election is almost similar to election of representatives of Assembly and Parliament as specified in section 3 to 42 of Arunachal Pradesh Anchal Samity and Zilla Parishad (Constitution) Rules, 1972. The conduct of the meetings of Anchal Samity and Zilla Parishad is specified in section 44 to 49 of the Arunachal Pradesh Anchal Samity and Zilla Parishad (Constitution) Rules, 1972 which are truly democratic and well organised. But in practice it is seen that the actual conduct of meetings and pattern is not less than an unorganised village Kebab (Panchayat) or meetings. The meetings of Anchal Samity and Zilla Parishad appears to be the conference of officers. All the proceedings and the initiatives are taken by the Government officers. The Panchayat member simply request the government officials to include their demands and developmental schemes in their panel. It is up to the officers to accept or not to accept their requests.

It is seen in practice that list of schemes put forward and approved in A. O. P. are officially oriented. The selection of concerned departments get priority. Most of the schemes and proposal passed in Anchal Samity and Zilla Parishad are rarely placed on the appropriate desk.

Some of the said provisions are also confusing. For instance Section 44 Clause 6 Sub-Clause-II lays down that to call a meeting at least Seven days notice is required ; but the members willing to move resolutions in the meetings are required to serve atleast fourteen days notice as specified in section 48 clause-I.

The status of the members of Panchayat are specified in NEFA Panchayat Raj (Travelling and daily allowances) Rules 1972. According to it members of Zilla Parishad and Vice President of Anchal Samity are equivalent to Grade-I officers of central service, an Anchal Samity and Gram Panchayat members are equivalent to Grade-II and III officers of central service respectively. But it is seen that since the inception of Panchayat Raj in Arunachal Pradesh these members are under the control of an ex-officio President, EAC, Executive Officer, a Circle Officer and a Clerk of the Panchayat. They consider members to be ignorant and uneducated persons. Thus many provisions of the regulations remained unimplemented.

The elected Vice-President has no status according to regulation. He can simply conduct a meeting in absence of the Ex-officio President according to section 44 clause 3 of Arunachal Pradesh Anchal Samity and Zilla Parishad (Constitution) Rules, 1972. On the contrary no confidence motion can be moved against the Vice President of Anchal Samity and Zilla Parishad according to Section 13 of NEFA Panchayat Raj Regulation 1967. It is not understood how the clause for no confidence motion has been embodied in the regulation without giving any power or duty to the Vice President. The election system and section 13 of the NEFA Panchayat Raj Regulation 1967 implies the importance of elected representative. But in practice and in accordance with norms of regulation an elected Vice-President has no specific functions or power given to him. As such it appears to be contradictory and confusing.

The powers and functions of Panchayats particularly the Anchal Samity are specified in section 20 to 50 of the second schedule of the NEFA Panchayat Raj Regulation 1967. The Anchal Samity can raise its own fund, receive grant in aid, levy taxes on specific items like drinking water, land, licencing, fishing, registration of cattles etc. It can also maintain dispensary, schools, public

charitable schemes etc. But till today not even a fraction of the powers and functions have been exercised by any of the Anchal Samity of Arunachal Pradesh as no scope has been given to them for exercising their powers. Even the provisions are not known properly in the Panchayat offices.

In summary, the function of Panchayat in Arunachal Pradesh is ridiculous, confusing and fails to serve the purpose of the system for which it was created. It is observed that approval of resolutions or plans and programmes resolved by the meeting of Anchal or Zilla Parishad is at the mercy of the representatives of the administration. It is seen that the resolutions adopted by the Panchayat bodies along with the head of the department of government offices of the district are often rejected outright by the representatives of the administration according to their suit will. It is seen that till today the attitude of the British administration prevails in Panchayat activities in Arunachal Pradesh. The democratic spirit and approaches are discarded. People are rarely given a chance to participate in democratic representation of public grievances. This goes against the original objectives of Panchayat. Unlike in other states of India here power is concentrated in the hands of the administrator and the Panchayat representatives are neglected. The public opinion carried by the Panchayat representatives are given second priority.

The Panchayat office in district level is controlled and looked after by the ex-officio President (an A.D.C. or E.A.C.) and Executive Officers (a C. O. or an E. A. C.) who are mostly engaged in normal official duties and hardly have any time to devote to the Panchayat subject which become secondary. In the Directorate level only few routine works are carried out. The Director is generally overburdened with other portfolios to which Panchayat subject become subordinate.

Under such circumstances the Panchayat Raj in Arunachal is not functioning properly. Even due attention has not been given for modifications, reorganization of certain draw back in the Panchayat Raj system. The irregularities of Panchayat have been pointed out in a meeting of Arunachal Pradesh Panchayat members committee meeting on 5th March 1985. The members painfully remarked that Panchayat Raj is simply to conduct the elections of members only just to encourage the public to fight against each other. But no attention have been given for its proper functioning and remedies thereafter. The said committee adopted resolutions for amendment, modifications of existing rules and regulations.

etc. and demanded a two tier Panchayat system in Arunachal Pradesh.

Infact, Arunachal people had traditional democratic social organization like *kebang* or village councils which functioned better than the present Panchayat system. According to traditional democratic organization the social or political anomaly or disputes were settled and social developmental activities were organised in a better way than the present Panchayat system.

The Panchayat Raj in Arunachal Pradesh has inculcated the political awareness to the masses but socially it has brought the degeneration of traditional democratic organization as neither is it organised properly nor attention is paid to the Panchayat. The traditional system had true democratic norms and spirit but the pattern and system of organising the Panchayat is not in truly democratic spirit as stated earlier. All the powers are concentrated in the hands of administrators. The rights of the elected Panchayat representatives are controlled and dictated by an officer. Thus the present system of Panchayat Raj is not effective and not much justified in social, political and administrative setup.

It is essential to reorganise the present system of Panchayat to give it a proper shape and to make it workable in truly democratic spirit. The present regulations and rules should be modified by appointing a committee to study the working patterns and drawbacks of the present system. It is essential to rejuvenate the present official setup, the officials and the approaches and response of legislators. According to the Ering Committee Report Clause 13, time has come for an elected President to eliminate all deficiencies and irregularities. Moreover, it is justified to have the Two-tier Panchayat system in Arunachal Pradesh as is prevalent in other parts of the country.