

PANCHAYATI RAJ IN ASSAM

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I. INTRODUCTION

The idea of decentralized planning and village level popular administrative and development institutions based on the philosophy of community development is as old as Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore who stressed on both autonomy and self-reliance.

Reconstruction and rejuvenation of the rural economy of India was one of the important ideals embodied in the tradition of our freedom movement. Consequently the founding father of the Indian Constitution says, “The State shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable to function as units of self-government”¹.

The report of the Team of the Community Projects and Natural Extension Service under the chairmanship of Sri Balwantray G. Mehta submitted in 1958 endowed Panchayati Raj with great importance and urgency. After that almost all the States in India passed legislation for the establishment of Panchayati Raj institutions.

Assam has experimented with Panchayati Raj right from the dawn of independence. In Assam the first Panchayati Raj legislation was the Rural Panchayat Act, 1948. This Act aimed at developing local self-government in the rural areas of Assam and making better provisions for administration, reconstruction and development of villages. The Assam Panchayat Act, 1959 amended and consolidated the laws relating to the Panchayats and sought to invest them with necessary powers and authority.

The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1972 introduced a two-tier system of Panchayati Raj and abolished Anchalik Panchayats. It also established Gaon Panchayats with jurisdiction larger than erstwhile Gaon Sabhas at the village level and Mahakuma Parishad at the sub-divisional level. Virtually all the powers were vested in the Mahakuma Parishad; and Gaon Panchayats had significant role to play.

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The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1986 reverted to a three-tier system consisting of Gaon Panchayat, Anchalik Panchayat and Mahakuma Parishad. In the new Act, Mahakuma Parishad assumed a supervisory role. The provision of this Act also went through changes by way of amendments.

The perspective of the Panchayati Raj institutions in the States of India were substantially changed by the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 which came into force with effect from 24th April, 1993. This amendment of the Constitution sought to give some uniformity to Panchayati Raj institutions throughout India by providing guidelines and directives. Following this development, Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 was passed with features in conformity with the new provisions of the Indian Constitution with regard to Panchayati Raj.

It is a pity that even after six years of the enactment of the new Panchayati Raj legislation in Assam elections have not been held for forming the democratic Panchayat bodies in the State. But we hope that this is a temporary aberration. Therefore, the present paper will examine the salient features of the new Act passed in the State along with relevant constitutional provisions. It will also discuss the impediments to democratic decentralization and the associated evils. In the conclusion some constructive suggestions are attempted.

II. THE BROAD FRAMEWORK OF PANCHAYATI RAJ AS PER 73RD AMENDMENT ACT

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 sought to provide the following framework of Panchayati Raj as the mandatory guideline for necessary legislation by States:

1. A three-tier system consisting of Panchayats at the village, intermediate and district levels;
2. Direct election of members from the territorial constituencies in the Panchayat area;
3. Reservation of seats of elected members for the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe in proportion to their share in the population. Reservation on one-third of the seats for women in both general and reserved categories. Similar reservation for the SC, ST and women in respect of offices of chairpersons of the Panchayat bodies;

4. A five year tenure for the Panchayat bodies;
5. Disqualification of a person for membership of the Panchayats if the concerned person is declared disqualified for membership of State legislative under any law;
6. Powers, authority and responsibilities of Panchayats in respect of (a) preparation of plan for economic development and social justice, (b) implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice;
7. Powers to Panchayats to impose taxes, duties and tolls and fees and responsibility of the State Governments for making grants-in-aid to the Panchayats from the consolidated fund of the State;
8. Constitution of Finance Commission every fifth year to review financial position of the Panchayats to make recommendations for assignment of taxes, duties, tolls etc to the Panchayats and devolution of financial resources (share of taxes, grants-in-aid etc) from the State to the Panchayat bodies;
9. Constitution of State Election Commission by the Governor for the conduct of all elections to the Panchayats; and
10. Constitution of Gram Sabhas providing for direct democracy in the villages (although in a limited way).

The brief description of the constitutional provisions for Panchayats goes to show that the Parliament has attempted to prescribe certain national principles in developing local self-government bodies in rural India. The provision of direct democracy at the grass-root level through the institution of Gram Sabha is certainly a welcome step which provided the local body invested with meaningful authority.

Unfortunately the Constitution (Amendment) Act has not been free from vagueness about the powers and function of the Panchayats. There is also no clear hint about how the Panchayat bodies shall mobilize local resources in order to use them for rural development. The matter has been left to State Finance Commission and ultimately to the State Government. Consequently there is every possibility of the Panchayat bodies to be degenerated into aid-receiving and aid-distributing bodies acting like post offices between the government and the targeted beneficiaries. Village autonomy and self-reliance may turn to be a far cry in spite of the Amendment Act.

Non-application of the constitutional provisions to the areas under the Sixth Schedule and some other hill areas also seriously restricts its usefulness. If the State governments in the planes need constitutional directive for village democracies, why not the same is applicable to hill States, Autonomous District Councils and other Autonomous Development Councils in the hills?

III. THE ASSAM PANCHAYAT ACT, 1994

The Act extends to the whole of Assam in the rural areas except the autonomous districts under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. In pursuance of the new provisions inserted in the Constitution, the Act has created a three-tier Panchayat System in the State consisting of Gaon Panchayat, Anchalik Panchayat and Zilla Parishad. It has also provided for Gaon Sabha for direct democracy at the Village-Panchayat area level and District Planning Committee for drafting development plans at the district level for rural and urban areas taken together. It may also be mentioned here that the Act has provided for the constitution of two Commissions: the Finance Commission and the State Election Commission and it has assured necessary reservation policy for the SC, ST and women as per dictate of the Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. In the following sections we have discussed only the Panchayat bodies and the District Planning Committee and avoided discussion on technicalities relating to the Finance Commission and State Election Commission. Similarly we have not mentioned the reservation provisions in each case as it would lead to repetition.

A. District Planning Committee

The Act has envisaged District Planning Committee as a coordinating agency for the local self-government institutions existing in both rural and urban areas. It is to consolidate the plans prepared by Zilla Parishad, Anchalik Panchayats, Town Committees, Municipalities and Municipal Corporations and prepare a draft development plans for the district as a whole.

District Planning Committee shall consist of both ex-officio members and indirectly elected members. Local Member of Parliament, local Member of Legislative Assembly, President of the Zilla Parishad and Chairpersons of urban local self-government bodies in the district are the ex-officio members. Not less than four-fifth of

the total members of the body shall be elected from the members of Zilla Parishad and urban self-government bodies on rotation annually and in proportion to the ratio between rural and urban population in the district.

The Deputy Commissioner shall be a permanent invitee, the President of the Zilla Parishad shall be the ex-officio Chairperson and the Chief Executive Officer of the Zilla Parishad shall be the ex-officio Secretary of the District Planning Committee.

The idea of district-level integrated planning is sound. But one should ensure the presence of permanent machinery for doing the spade-work for district level planning otherwise the meetings of the body may degenerate into mere rituals.

B. Gaon Sabha

The Act provides for a Gaon Sabha (constitutional equivalent of Gram Sabha) for every Gaon Panchayat area consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls of the area. The Gaon Sabha shall meet at least once in three months to discharge the following responsibilities:

- i. To consider the report in respect of the development programme of the previous year and the development programme proposed to be undertaken during the current year;
- ii. To mobilize voluntary labour and contribution in kind and cash for the community welfare programmes;
- iii. To identify beneficiaries for the implementation of development schemes pertaining to the villages; and
- iv. To promote unity and harmony among all sections of the society in the villages.

These are all very important functions and if discharged seriously will endow the people of the villages with authority in their own affairs. But as per the Act the population of the area of the Gaon Sabha shall be between 6000 and 10,000. So the number of members (who are the adult persons and voters in the general election) will be quite large and residentially scattered over a relatively large area given the density of population of Assam. To ensure their effective participation will not be an easy task. Moreover, in an unequal society it is difficult for members belonging to disadvantaged sections to speak without fear in such a meeting. The day may be carried by the vested

interests in the midst of chaos or the whole exercise may become eyewash to give seal of popular verdict on what has already been done.

Still the experiment of direct democracy in the form of Gaon Sabha is undoubtedly worthwhile. Only movements must be organized to make the masses aware of their rights and to protect them from the onslaught of the dominant vested interest and corrupt elements.

C. Gaon Panchayat

The State Government may declare a village or a cluster of villages or an inhabited area having population between 6000 and 10,000 as a Gaon Panchayat.

A Gaon Panchayat is a body of corporate. The Panchayat body shall consist of 10 members directly elected by the voters of the territorial constituencies and the President of the Gaon Panchayat who shall also be directly elected. A Vice-President shall be elected from and by the members in the first meeting to be called by the Deputy Commissioner or an Officer authorized by him.

The Gaon Panchayat is required to meet at least once in two months. In addition, it is to work through 3 standing committees namely Development Committee, Social Justice Committee and Social Welfare Committee. Important general functions of the Gaon Panchayat are:

- (i) Preparation of Annual Plan for development of the Gaon Panchayat area;
- (ii) Preparation of Annual Budget;
- (iii) Mobilization of relief in calamities;
- (iv) Organizing voluntary labour and contribution for community work; and
- (v) Maintenance of essential statistics of the villages.

The Gaon Panchayat is to identify and implement various agricultural schemes of amounts not exceeding Rs.50, 000 with technical assistance from the concerned State Government Departments. The scope of activities of the Gaon Panchayat extends to a long list of items. Among these special mention may be made of the following:

1. Development of wasteland and grazing land;
2. Development of fisheries in the villages;

3. Plantation of firewood trees and fodder development;
4. Distribution of house sites;
5. Construction and maintenance of village roads; Identification of locality for distribution of electricity;
6. Identification of locality for distribution of electricity;
7. Selection of beneficiaries under poverty alleviation programmes;
8. Ensuring full enrolment and attendance of students and teachers in Primary Schools;
9. Implementation of family welfare programmes;
10. Participation in women and child welfare programmes;
11. Monitoring public distribution system; and
12. Maintenance of community assets.

The fund of the Gaon Panchayat consists largely of contributions and grants from the Central and State Governments and higher Panchayat bodies. But it has also power to levy taxes, tolls, rates and fees. For example, it may impose tax on sale of goods like firewood and thatch, private hat private fisheries, fallow cultivable land etc. It can also realize cess or fees on registration of cattle sold, license for tea stall, hotel, cart, bicycle and boat. The Gaon Panchayat is entitled to get share of land revenue and local rates etc from the State Government.

It is easy to see power of taxation and potential revenue of the Panchayat is extremely limited. If a Panchayat has to mobilize local resources to a significant extent it will have to stress on the voluntary contribution from the better off sections of the villages. That is a tough task which almost all Panchayats tend to avoid. Consequently self-reliance and autonomy continue to elude them. Moreover, in spite of large potential area of activities the endeavour of Panchayat remains restricted to an extremely narrow area because of lack of resources.

D. Anchalik Panchayat

According to the Act, for each Development Block there will be an Anchalik Panchayat which will be a body of corporate. The Anchalik Panchayat will consist of:

- a) One member from each Gaon Panchayat to be directly elected from the territorial constituency of the Gaon Panchayat under the Anchalik Panchayat;
- b) The President of the Gaon Panchayats under the Anchalik Panchayat; and
- c) Local Member of Parliament and Member of Legislative Assembly.

The directly elected members shall elect from amongst the members, President and Vice-President of the Anchalik Panchayat. Anchalik Panchayat shall hold meeting at least once in two months. For discharging its functions each Anchalik Panchayat shall have three Standing Committees namely General Standing Committee, Finance, Audit and Planning Committee and Social Justice Committee. The general functions of Anchalik Panchayat are as follows:

- a) Preparation of Annual Plan in respect of schemes entrusted to it by virtue of Act or assigned to it by the State Government or the Zilla Parishad and submission thereof to the Zilla Parishad for integration with the District Plan;
- b) Consideration and consolidation of the Annual Plans of all Gaon Panchayats under it and submission of consolidated Plan to the Zilla Parishad;
- c) Preparation of Annual Budget of the Anchalik Panchayat and submission to Zilla Parishad for approval;
- d) Performing functions as may be entrusted to it by the Government; and
- e) Assisting the Government in relief operations in natural calamities.

The Anchalik Panchayat shall identify and implement agricultural schemes of amounts not exceeding Rs.2, 00,000 (four times that allowed to a Gaon Panchayat) and not below Rs.50, 000 for agricultural development of the Anchalik Panchayat area with technical assistance from the concerned State Government Department. It has wider scope of functioning and greater authority in rural development works than the Gaon Panchayat as it is the superior body. Some of the important areas of functions of the Anchalik Panchayat are as follows:

1. Maintenance of agricultural seed farms and horticultural nurseries;
2. Storing and distribution of insecticides and pesticides;
3. Training of farmers and extension activities;
4. Implementation of individual irrigation works;
5. Planning and supervision of implementation of poverty alleviation programmes;

6. Maintenance of veterinary and animal husbandry services;
7. Organization of training programmes in khadi, village and cottage industries;
8. Implementation of housing schemes;
9. Planning and preservation of trees on public land;
10. Construction and maintenance of public roads and maintenance of public ferries and waterways;
11. Construction, repairs and maintenance of primary school buildings;
12. Implementation of adult literacy programmes;
13. Promotion of immunization and vaccination programmes;
14. Promotion of programmes relating to the development of women and children;
and
15. Monitoring the old age and pensions of widow and handicapped.

The fund of the Anchalik Panchayat mainly consists of grants made by the Central and State Governments and share of land revenue. It may also receive contribution and grant made by the Zilla Parishad and raise loans. An Anchalik Parishad has also tax-raising power. It can levy surcharge on land revenue at the rate of two paise per rupee, tax on profession, trade, manufacture and production; levy fee for cinema hall, brick kiln, saw mill, rice mill, confectionary and bakery, private fisheries etc.

In addition it can levy toll at any toll bar established by it on road or in respect of ferry under its management. It may levy a cess or water rate for recovery of cost of minor irrigation works. An Anchalik Panchayat may borrow money from the Government or from banks and other financial institutions with previous permission of the State Government.

The State Government shall appoint the Executive Officer of Anchalik Panchayat who shall be the ex-officio Secretary. Other staff will be either appointed or deputed by the State Government.

Anchalik Panchayat is expected to play the main role in rural development. But again its tax-raising powers are extremely limited. Its success will depend on the corporation received by it from the Block Development Office and loyalty of its own staff who would happen to be government employees. If the Block Development Officer is appointed the Executive Officer of the Anchalik Parishad it may facilitate coordination

of activities but it may also tighten bureaucratic control. It is also doubtful whether an Anchalik Panchayat will be able to perform activities expected of it or infrastructural and social development if technical and financial support does not reach it on time as its own organizational set up and its fund may be meager.

E. Zilla Parishad

For every district there shall be a Zilla Parishad having jurisdiction over the rural areas of the district. The Zilla Parishad shall consist of:

- i. The members directly elected from the territorial constituencies of the district (one member for a population of not less than 40,000);
- ii. The Presidents of Anchalik Panchayats of the concerned district; and
- iii. Local Member of Parliament and Member of Legislative Assembly.

The term of the Zilla Parishad is 5 years. President and Vice-President shall be elected from amongst the directly elected members in the first meeting of the Zilla Parishad to be called by the Deputy Commissioner. Every Zilla Parishad shall hold meetings at least once in every three months. The Zilla Parishad shall have four standing committees namely General Standing Committee, Finance and Audit Committee, Social Justice Committee and Planning and Development Committee.

The Government shall appoint an Officer not below the rank of Additional Deputy Commissioner of a district as Chief Executive Officer (Ex-officio Secretary). Chief Accounts Officer and Chief Planning Officer are also to be appointed by the Government.

The Zilla Parishad is to prepare plans for economic development and social justice of the rural areas of the district under its jurisdiction. It has also to ensure the coordinated implementation of such plan. Being the nodal agency of rural development in a district the Zilla Parishad is concerned with all the aspects such as planning, coordination, implementation, supervision and resource allocation. Some of the important functions of the Zilla Parishad are as follows:

- i. Opening and maintenance of agricultural farms and marketing agencies and infrastructure;
- ii. Establishments and maintenance of go-downs and cold storages;

- iii. Arrangement of agricultural and horticultural extension and training centers;
- iv. Construction, renovation and maintenance of minor irrigation works;
- v. Publication of statistical and other information relating to activities of Panchayat institutions;
- vi. Land reclamation and land development works;
- vii. Development of regulated markets and grading and quality control of agricultural products;
- viii. Establishment of veterinary hospitals, dispensaries, breeding farms for cows and pigs, farms for poultry, duck and goat;
- ix. Promotion of social and farm forestry;
- x. Fish seed production and distribution and development of inland fisheries;
- xi. Identification of traditional skills in household industries, assistance of their raw material requirement, development of new designs, organization of training programmes, credit-link establishment and marketing of finished products;
- xii. Construction and maintenance of roads other than National and State Highways;
- xiii. Establishment and maintenance of hospitals, primary health centers and dispensaries;
- xiv. Establishment and maintenance of primary secondary schools;
- xv. Management of hostels for the benefit of SC and ST students;
- xvi. Planning, supervision, monitoring and implementation of poverty alleviation programmes;
- xvii. Maintenance of social welfare institutions such as Poor Home, Orphanages, Rescue Shelters etc; and
- xviii. Sanctioning and distribution of pension for widows, old, physically disabled, destitute etc.

The Zilla Parishad fund mainly consists of the amount transferred from the consolidated fund of the State Government and contribution and grants from the

government. The power of taxation is very limited. It can levy tolls on ferries, collect registration fees of boats and vehicles, realize lighting rate, water rate etc where the services are provided by it. It can raise loan with government approval for executing any development work.

The Zilla Parishad shall always be under the tight grip of the State Government as per provisions of the Act. The annual budget of the Zilla Parishad would become effective only if approved by the State Government. At every step the activities of the Zilla Parishad are likely to be controlled by the authorities in the State capital and the arrangement is far from the ideal of democratic decentralization. In a State like Assam where different linguistic, ethnic and religious groups’ live side by side and where separatist tendencies are open much of the problems could be contained if Zilla Parishad could be developed as vigorous institutions representing local autonomy and fulfilling local aspirations for development.

IV. IMPEDIMENTS TO DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION AND ASSOCIATED EVILS

The Act envisages that for the sake of coordinated and integrated rural development the Anchalik Parishad will have some authority over the Gaon Panchayat and the Zilla Parishad over the Anchalik Panchayat under its jurisdiction. In the case of the Zilla Parishad, the State Government is the supervisory authority. Of course, the State Government has the authority of intervention in the cases of all the Panchayat bodies. If the interventions of the higher bodies are not motivated by partisan politics there is nothing wrong in it. But in the present milieu of politicization of every aspect of social life, that is a great ‘if’ unlikely to be fulfilled. Consequently autonomy of the lower level institutions may unduly suffer to the detriment of both equity and efficiency.

A great threat to the autonomy of the Panchayat bodies is likely to be posed by frequent government intervention (if one refuses to call it interference) at every level of rural development planning and its implementation. This is illustrated in the following paragraphs:

The Act provides that officers empowered by the State Government will have general powers of inspection and supervision over all Panchayat bodies. The State Government may also institute inquiries into the matters of any Panchayat body. The most formidable power of the State Government is the power to suspend the Panchayat

bodies on the charge of abuse of power, incompetence etc. An apparently innocent but actually crippling provision is the power of the State Government to issue directives to any Panchayat as such directives is binding on the Panchayat bodies. This is likely to nip in the bud any possibility of real self-governance for the rural people.

The consequence of the excessive power of the State Government vis-à-vis the Panchayat bodies is illustrated by the fact that the Government of Assam has not taken steps for the elections to the Panchayat bodies as per the provisions of the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 ever after six years have elapsed. In stead the State Government is merrily going on with an ad hoc arrangement giving all powers to the government officers. The old Mahakuma Parishad continues to exist with arrangement of the Deputy Commissioner of the District as the Chairman and one Assam Civil Service Officer as its Executive Officer. In the Anchalik Panchayat the SDO is the President and the BDO is the Executive Officer-cum-Secretary. In the case of a Gaon Panchayat the BDO as the President is managing the show with the help of the Panchayat Secretary who is a Government employee.

At the district level, the District Development Committee is the authority to draft schemes for rural; development. This body consists of Departmental Heads at the district level and also the local MP and MLA (perhaps to maintain a semblance of democratic representation). There is no trace of local self-government in such an arrangement³.

In the post independence Indian political system, the Panchayats have been viewed as the institutions that allow the political bodies to penetrate into the power-structure in the villages in collaboration with the dominant sections of the rural society. Panchayat elections serve as the dress-rehearsal of general elections to the State and the Central legislatures and their results are treated as the indices of the trend of power status (euphemistically called popularity) of the political parties.

The politicization means that the State Government will never eye a Panchayat run by an opposition party with favour. It also means that the State Government may dissolve a Panchayat that stands in the way of the political ambition of the ruling party or postpone Panchayat elections if the political climate does not seem to be favourable. Local autonomy and local level development planning are thus easily sacrificed at the altar of narrow politics of the urban elite. It is an irony that when the regional parties and even some of the national parties speak so vociferously about the federal principle the

State Government led by them wants that implementation of this principle should be effective only up to the State level and must not extend to the Panchayat level. It is a blatant truth that no State Government is truly willing to part with any real power or share it with the Panchayats.

A. N. Bose (1995) has listed the evils of excessive centralization and State control as follows⁴:

1. Increasing accentuation of regional disparity;
2. Imposition of eco-degrading technology in the name of modernization; and
3. Loss of sovereignty of the masses.

In the case of Assam we may add that loss of sovereignty of the masses is mainly responsible for dissension and violence in the State which is characterized by socio-cultural and ethnic plurality.

In a review of development schemes of Assam and other North Eastern States Ganguly (1996) has remarked that the paradigm of development being followed in these States is iniquitous and unsustainable. The centralization of decision-making process has severely eroded the role of the grass-root organizations and egalitarian ethos in the rural life. Easy flow of money for implementing exogenously formulated development schemes has been killing the spirit of self-help generating corruption in social life and causing depletion of natural resources. A truly decentralized system of planning has to rely on people’s knowledge-system for striking a balance between growth with equity and conservation of resources⁵.

Arun Ghosh (1992) is of the view that a firm acceptance of the concept of democratic decentralization is the need of the hour. Decentralization has to be accompanied by the introduction of area planning which will release local resources and also untapped energies of the people thus tackling the unemployment problem. Replacement of sectoral planning and expenditure-oriented development problem by area planning will mean that inter-connected problems of unemployment, poverty, low productivity and social and economic disparities can be dealt within an integrated manner with a holistic approach⁶.

Lack of local initiative and local autonomy has resulted in excessive dependence on the State machinery in Assam. This is evident from the fact that even simple

infrastructural works like building a wooden bridge over a rivulet unattended for years amidst public protest responded by government apathy.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing analysis goes to show that not much can be expected from the Constitutional Provisions and State Panchayat Acts in a polity where tendency towards centralization and reluctance to delegate real power to lower-level governments are evident. Rural self-government, self-reliance and community development are difficult goals to be achieved in the existing milieu. As Amlan Datta (2000) remarks, “People’s will and capacity for cooperation and self-help suffer a steady erosion; the funds sanctioned by the government do not reach their destination, corruption and leakages develop all along the way; competition for misappropriation of funds breeds unholy alliances as well as factionalism”⁷. Thus it is evident that mere passing of Panchayat Acts and even creation of Panchayat bodies do not guarantee political and economic rights to the masses in the rural areas.

Some Gandhians tried to float the idea of party-less democracy at the village Panchayat level. According to them if village development is free from the tangle of party politics good results may be expected. There has been almost no taker of this idea in the political establishment⁸.

Alternatively social thinkers like Amlan Datta have proposed to build up a chain of voluntary institutions working on the basis of consensus and cooperation among the people. Datta calls it the new model of democracy and he has given the examples of work done under the leadership of Tarun Bharat Sangh in Alwar and Gandhi Parishad in Bankura⁹.

It is undoubtedly true that non-government organizations may assume very important role in village development. But to what extent the power-hungry ‘representatives of the people’ will tolerate a parallel seat of power (which is definitely to grow out of good work) in their areas is a matter to ponder over. However, one should not give up hope and should continue to strive at attaining the ideal.

The real remedy lies in making the villages not only more educated and conscious of their rights but also more communitarian in ideal. It is true that there is bound to be some clash between the down-trodden and the vested interest in villages. But there is also

some scope for cooperation between people in different strata. In the final analysis development is not a zero-sum game. Mutual cooperation may serve the self-interest better than selfish actions.

Lastly it should be recommended that Panchayats (even if rightly organized) constitute only one leg of rural development. The other leg is definitely a network of cooperative institutions and non-government organizations dedicated to the ideal of community development.

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8. The idea of party-less democracy was propagated among others by Prafulla Chandra Sen, Ex-Chief Minister, West Bengal, during the last four years of his life.
9. Amlan Datta (2000): op. cit.