

A STUDY ON EVOLUTION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT- Panchayati Raj institutions are such 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. Decentralization of power to the panchayat is seen as a means of empowering people and involving them in decision-making process. Through this paper researcher try to understand the evolution of Panchayati Raj system in Assam.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Panchayati raj, Political participation, Government.

INTRODUCTION

When we say democracy is a form of government of the people, by the people and for the people, it emphasizes the role of individual and objective participation in the governance of a country. In fact, participation is so essential to democracy that it could be considered a farce if it is absent. Panchayati Raj institutions are a significant political invention in India for establishing grass-roots democracy and increasing people's participation in the country's political system. Panchayati Raj institutions, the grass root units of local self government have been considered as an instrument of socio-economic transformation in rural India. Panchayati Raj is identified as such an instrumental expression of democratic decentralization in India. Decentralization of power to the panchayat is considered as a way to empower citizens and involve them in decision-making. Local governments can be more responsive to local needs and make better use of resources. The democratic system in a country can be ensured only if there is mass participation in the governance. Therefore, the system of democratic decentralization popularly known as Panchayati Raj in India which is considered as an instrument to ensured the democracy and socio-economic transformation in society. Panchayat is a Hindi word that literally means assembly (ayat) of five (panch) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the local community. The term "Panchayat" is a Hindi word that literally means assembly (ayat) of five (panch) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the local community.

Rajasthan was the first state in India to make way for local self government followed by Andhra Pradesh, Mysore and Tamil Nadu in 1959 and Assam and Odisha in 1960. Other states soon followed the trend.

METHODOLOGY

This paper was written using theoretical analytical method as the methodology. The majority of the information in this study comes from secondary sources. Information was gathered from different books, journals, newspapers, and relevant websites.

OBJECTIVES

- To understand the concept of Panchayati Raj,
- To understand the evolution of Panchayati Raj institution in Assam.

EVOLUTION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM IN ASSAM

During Ahom Rule

The Ahoms, who governed the country for nearly 600 years (1228-1826 AD), established a social structure and a local administrative system that included a basic type of panchayat for dealing with local issues. In mediaeval Assam, the mel and khel systems were widely used. While mels were similar to councils where important socio-political matters related to the kingdom were discussed. Khels constituted homogeneous territorial units formed on the basis of professions of the subjects. Despite the fact that these assemblies were not the conventional grassroots level organisations of today, it cannot be denied that they provided the groundwork for the development of Panchayati Raj institutions in the state. During the British rule in Assam popular raj mels (village assemblies) were organized to address the peoples grievances. Raj mels had played a crucial role in mobilizing the peasants against agrarian rule of the Britishers. The raj mels help to organised socio-economic and political activism against the injustice meted out to the peasants in Assam's peasant uprisings, such as those in Phulguri, Patharughat, Rangia, and Lachima. Rural self government in Assam had no legal status till 1915. Following the recommendation of the royal commission of decentralization in 1907, the Assam local self government act was passed in 1915. Under the provision of the act, a village authority was constituted on the direction of the chief commissioner the member of such village authorities were wholly appointed or wholly elected or partly appointed or partly elected for tenure of three years. By 1919, the numbers of such village authorities

were 80. With the introduction of the government of India act 1919 the subject of local self government was transferred to the provincial government. Following that, in 1926, the rural self-government act was passed, which laid down that the village authorities would be made up of members chosen through adult franchises. However, due to financial difficulties, the village authorities were unable to function adequately, and their numbers were reduced significantly in the following years.

EVOLUTION AFTER INDEPENDENCE

The Assam Rural Panchayat Act 1948

In 1948 the Assam Rural Panchayat Act was passed to aim at achieving an all round development of the village governments. The Act provided for the division of rural Assam into several rural Panchayat areas. Each rural Panchayat consisted of a number of villages. Each village again had a primary Panchayat. All adult persons in the primary Panchayat area had the right to vote. The Act gave the main Panchayat the authority to establish an executive authority. As a result, each primary Panchayat had an executive body with a minimum of 9 and a maximum of 15 members, including the primary Panchayat's president and vice president. A rural development officer under the deputy commissioners of the district look after the functioning of this Panchayats both at village level and also at Mouza level. However, because all rural Panchayats and basic Panchayats were not constituted in village areas, the Panchayat Act of 1948 was unable to function efficiently. 422 Mouza Panchayats and 2656 Primary Panchayats have been established as a result of the Act. In this regard, a lack of funds played a crucial role.

The Assam Panchayat Act 1959

The Assam government passed the Assam Panchayat Act 1959 in response to the recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee. In Assam, this Act established a three-tiered Panchayati Raj system. These are Mahkuma Parishads at the sub divisional level i.e., Anchalik Panchayats at the intermediate level and the Gaon Panchayats at the village level. The Gaon Panchayat was the executive body of the Gaon Sabha. It consisted of not more than eleven and not less than nine members. They elected directly on the basis of adult franchise. Under the Act, Mahkuma Parishad created at the sub-divisional level replaced the erstwhile local board. The Mahkuma Parishad was formed with the president of the Anchalik Panchayats, the members of the parliament and of the state legislative assembly, the deputy commissioner and the sub divisional officer.

The Assam Panchayati Raj Act 1972

The Assam Panchayat Act 1959 was further amended and it was replaced by the Assam Panchayati raj Act 1972. Under the Act of 1972 the government of Assam wanted to abolish the intermediate level Anchalik Panchayat and centralized more and more power at the sub divisional level called Mahkuma Parishad. This act introduced a two tiers Panchayat system- Mahkuma Parishad at sub divisional level and Gaon Panchayat at the lower level. The management of the Panchayati raj system was extended to the tea garden areas under this Act. The Gaon Panchayat had 15 members, including a president who was directly elected. The vice president, on the other hand, was chosen from among the Gaon Panchayat members. One councilor was voted to the Mahkuma Parishad by the electorates of Gaon Panchayat. From among the councilors, the chief executive councilor and deputy chief executive councilor were chosen. The Act also stipulated the formation of certain standing committees. Provision for representation of SC and ST people including women at the both levels was also there.

The Assam Panchayati Raj Act 1986

The Assam Panchayati Raj Act 1986 replaced the Assam Panchayati Raj Act 1972. The salient features of this Act are as follows-

- 33% of the total seats of each tier of Panchayats were reserved for women candidates.
- The numbers of members of the Gaon Panchayat were reduced to 10.
- President of the Gaon Panchayat was directly elected and the vice president was elected from amongst the members.
- Reintroducing the three tiers system of Panchayati Raj system, viz. Gaon Panchayat at the village level, Anchalik Panchayat at the block level, and Mahkuma Paishad at the sub divisional level.
- One member of the Gaon Panchayat represented SC/STs if their population was up to 33.33 percent.
- Inclusion of tea garden areas to provide them an opportunity to participate in the local self government.

The Assam Panchayat Act 1994

The Assam Panchayat Act 1994 was introduced for incorporating the provision 73rd Amendment Act' 1992 of the constitution and it replace the Assam Panchayat Raj Act 1986. This Act extends to the whole of Assam in the rural areas except the autonomous districts under the Sixth Scheduled of the constitution of India. According to this Act the structure of the Panchayat System is-

Gaon Panchayats

The state government may declare a village or an inhabited area having population between 6000 and 10,000 as a Gaon Panchayat. The president and the ten members of the Gaon Panchayat are directly elected by the people. One Vice President is elected from among the members of the Gaon Panchayat. The Gaon Panchayat is required to meet at least once in two months. It works through three standing committee namely-

1. Development committee
2. Social Justice Committee
3. Social welfare Committee

Some important general functions of the Gaon Panchayat are-

1. Preparation of annual plan for development of the Gaon Panchayat areas,
2. Preparation of annual budget,
3. Mobilization of relief in calamities,
4. Organized voluntary labour and contribution for community work, etc.

Anchalik Panchayats

President and vice-president of the anchalik Panchayat elected by the elected members of the Anchalik Panchayat. The Anchalik Panchayat will consist of:

- One member from each Gaon Panchayat to be directly elected from the territorial constituency of the Gaon Panchayat under the Anchalik Panchayat.
- The president of the Gaon Panchayats under the Anchalik Panchayat.
- Local members of parliament and member of legislative assembly.

Some important general functions of the Anchalik Panchayat are-

1. Preparation of annual budget for development of the Anchalik Panchayat and submission to Zilla Parishad for approval,
2. Preparation of annual plan in respect of scheme entrusted to it by virtue of Act or assigned to it by state government or the Zilla Parishad,
3. Mobilization of relief in calamities, etc.

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:

- The members directly elected from the territorial constituencies of the district.
- The president of Anchalik Panchayat of the concerned district and
- Local members of parliament and member of legislative assembly.

The term of the Zilla Parishad is five years. The president and the vice-president of Zilla Parishad shall be elected from amongst the directly elected members of the Zilla Parishad. 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.

Some important functions of Zilla Parishad are-

1. Construction, renovation and maintenance of minor irrigation works,
2. Publication of statistical and other information relating to activities of Panchayat institutions,
3. Opening and maintenance of agricultural farms and marketing agencies and infrastructure,
4. Promotion of social and farm forestry,
5. Construction and maintenance of roads other than national and state highways, etc.

CONCLUSION

In India, the phrase Panchayati Raj refers to a system of rural local self-government. It was founded by state legislatures in all of India's states to help strengthen democracy at the grassroots level. It is entrusted with rural development. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 made it constitutional.

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