

ब्राह्मण एव पतिर्न राजन्यो न वैश्यः ।

तत् सूर्यः प्रब्रुवन्नेति पञ्चेभ्यो मानवेभ्यः ॥

—अथर्व वेद

Brahmana (Yogi—he who has attained Brahma) is the Master, neither the warrior nor the trader. This, God of Light (Knowledge) says unto the Panchas (representatives of the people).

—Atharva Veda.

A HISTORICAL SUMMARY OF INDIAN VILLAGE AUTONOMY*

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INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER REVIEWS THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE *panchayat* (village council) system in India from the Vedic age up to 1962. Specifically, it describes the changes undergone by this ancient institution and points out some constant features in its historical transition. The *panchayat* has been a part of the existing cultural base since the Vedic age. A historic context of village autonomy as it has emerged through the ages will provide a better perspective to Indian planners concerned with rural reforms.

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Vedic and post-Vedic sources¹ show the Indian village as a self-sufficient and autonomous miniature republic. Kingdoms and empires rose and fell but the village survived. This essential feature has given Indian history a sense of continuity. Village social organization can be clearly understood by centering the discussion on the *panchayat*, an effective agency of social control for ages. The autonomous village is best described by Sir Charles Metcalfe in his famous minute of 1830 in which he wrote:

The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they can want within themselves...They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down, revolution succeeds revolution...but the village community remains the same...This union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has...contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the peoples of India...and the enjoyment of...freedom and independence.²

THE VEDIC AGE

The village during the Vedic age was administered by a respected official who in turn was advised by a council of elders. The Ramayana cites a village leader of great prestige called *Grāmanī*. He was held in high esteem "so much so that when Rama killed Ravana, the happy gods, in singing praises to him, compared him to a general and a *Grāmanī*."³ That the *Grāmanī* enjoyed high status in the village can be noted furthermore in that "at the royal consecration, the king's entourage consisted of...a

¹ Altekar decries the "lack of original sources" for a better understanding of polity during the Vedic period as compared to the Mauryan age and the succeeding period of Indian history. See: A.S. Altekar, *State and Government in Ancient India*, (Motilal Banarsidass, Banaras, 1955) p. 304. The time span between the Vedic period and 1962 can be estimated as follows: The Vedic age (Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, Upanisads, and Sutras)—2500-1000 B.C.; Epics Mahabharata and Ramayana—1000 B.C. to 350 B.C.; classical Sanskrit—from Panini's time (4th century B.C.) to 1000 A.D.; Muslim age—roughly from 1000 A.D. to British supremacy in 18th century A.D.; British supremacy—roughly from 18th century A.D. to 1947; from partition to 1962. Pakistan was born out of this partition. The main focus of this paper is Hindu India; the Muslim community will be treated in a separate paper in the future. For a discussion on the traditional *panchayats* such as the caste *panchayat*, see the author's forthcoming paper titled "Traditional Social Control Mechanisms in Northern India."

² Sir Charles Metcalfe, *Reports Select Committee of House of Commons*, 1832, Vol. III, app. 84, p. 331. Cf. Redhakumud Murkerji, *Local Government in Ancient India* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1920), pp. 2-3.

³ H.D. Malaviya, *Village Panchayats in India*, Economic and Political Research Department, All India Congress Committee, New Delhi, 1956, p. 45 [Cf. Ramayana Yuddha-kanda, Shloka 17, Sarga 116.]

Grāmanī, a *Suta* (charioteer), and a *Bhagḍugha* (collector of taxes).⁴ As one Indian historian has written:

Grāmanī was probably at the head of the village administration ... The post carried considerable prestige and is described to be the object of the highest ambition of a *Vaiśya*. The king exercised his powers over the village through the ... *Grāmanī*.⁵

The *Grāmanī* was in charge of defense. He was the chief of "corps of volunteers and guardsmen." He also collected taxes for the state. A *Grām Vridhas* (council of village elders) and the whole village cooperated with him in collecting dues for the state.⁶ The *Grām Vridhas* was a non-official advisory body. The *Grāmanī* and the village scribe (equivalent to the present *patwari*, *patel*, *kulkarni*, etc.) generally headed the *Grām Vridhas*' counsel.⁷

Manu, on the other hand, refers to the village official *Gramik*. Like the *Ramayana*, Manu also mentions village administration and tax collection for the king as the *Gramik*'s main duties.⁸

In brief, this was also the village administration under the Guptas. Before considering the Mauryan age, it may be well to say a word about Vedic judicial bodies. Malaviya claims that there is no clear evidence available for judicial bodies. He, however, states that the nature of village judicial bodies may be inferred from the questions that Rama asked Bharata in their meeting near mount Chitrakuta:

Dost thou condemn any through avarice without regard for justice or subjecting the offender to closer examination by those eminent in law and who are of good conduct? Are those who serve thee, just men, innocent of lying and theft, and not of ill repute? O Noble one, those who are apprehended for theft... are they able to obtain release by bribing the officials? In a dispute between the rich and the poor man, do thy experienced judges carry out justice uninfused by a desire for gain?⁹

THE MAURYAN AGE

Village administration during this period (324 B.C.-236 B.C.) was closely linked with agriculture. The village size ranged from 100 to 500 families. Boundaries were demarcated by river, hill, forest, ditches, tanks, bunds, and trees situated at one or two

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47. Also: the Rig Veda mentions very few government officers; only three of them are referred to: *senani*, i.e. general, *gramanī*, i.e. the village headman or military captain, and *purohita*, i.e. the royal priest, Altekar, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

⁵ Altekar, *ibid.*, p. 309.

⁶ Malaviya, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

kroska (1 *kroska* equals 2 miles) presumably for mutual protection with neighboring villages.¹⁰ The following officials composed the village administrative staff: (1) the headman (*Adhyaksha*), (2) the accountant (*Samkhayaka*), (3) village officials of different grades (*Sthanikas*), (4) the village couriers (*Jamgha karika*), and (5) the veterinary doctor (*Anikastha*). In addition, the *Chikitsaka* (in charge of sanitation) and the *Ashwa-damak* (horse trainer) were also village officials. All these functionaries were given land free of rent and taxes but they were not allowed to sell or mortgage the land.¹¹

Vidyalankar cites the degree of governmental control over the village. He writes that despite Chandragupta's vast empire and centralized regime, he never interfered much with the village administration. The village, therefore, remained a self-governed unit under the Mauryas. A sketch of village life during this period is illuminating:

Every village had its own *Sabha* (assembly) which debated all matters relating to the village; rules helpful to the entire community were framed, and the offenders were punished through regular trials and judgements. The *Sabha* was the centre of the multifarious activities of the village. It discussed religious and social matters. It arranged numerous types of entertainments... The *Sabha* met under a shady tree... Representatives of village families, the elders, and other experienced folk gathered there... The Indian people lived independently in these self-governing village republics.¹²

Even during the post-Mauryan period known as the "dark period"—200 B.C. to 00 A.D.—the village continued to be the smallest unit of administration in which the headman, assisted by the council of elders, still played a prominent role.¹³

THE GUPTA PERIOD

The village government under the Guptas was, in many respects, similar to that of the Maurya period.¹⁴ The village, both in northern and southern India, had the traditional leaders. The headman and

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 71-72. Cf. Altekar, op. cit., p. 319.

¹¹ Malaviya, op. cit., p. 72

¹² Satyaketu Vidyalankar, *Maurya Samrajya Ka Itihas* (It is in Hindu-English translation of the title reads—History of the Mauryan Empire) Indian Press, Allahabad, 1928, pp. 210-211 as quoted by Malaviya, op. cit., p. 74.

¹³ Altekar says: "The Grama or village continued to be the smallest administrative unit; headman was known as *Grāmanī*, *Gramikā*, or *Gramayaka* or *Gramabhojaka*. He was assisted in the administration by a council of elders, *Gramamahattaras*, as in the earlier period." Altekar, op. cit., p. 331.

¹⁴ A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, Grove Press Inc., New York, 1959, pp. 104-105.

the accountant were still active and, in addition, the watchman also helped in the administration. Altekar describes that:

The village administration was in charge of a headman designated as a Grameyaka or as a Gramadhyaksha. He had a clerk to work under him to keep the records. The headman was assisted in his work by a non-official council... The village councils were known as Janapadas in the Gupta administration...¹⁵

The main responsibilities of the village council were defense, settlement of communal disputes, collection of revenues, organization of public works, and acting as a trustee for minors.¹⁶ The councils in South India especially performed a major role in social affairs, revenue collection, assessment, public works, wasteland management and settlement of disputes. On the judicial function, "justice was administered by royal officials with the help of the village council or assembly. In certain cases the assembly alone sat in judgment and passed sentence."¹⁷

In southern-most region of India the "lowest administrative units were the *Kurram* (union of villages) and *grāmā* (village) each under its own headman who was assisted by assemblies (Ur, Mahasabha)..."¹⁸ In some villages, the assembly was made up of the entire population. In some places, however, a few elders or Brahmanas were chosen by ballot. Assembly-appointed committees performed definite functions such as those having to do with tanks, temples, justice, etc. The work of these self-governing bodies was directed by royal officers called *adhikarin*.¹⁹

In summary, the village headman and the accountant, both prominent officials in the Vedic and Mauryan periods, continued to play an important part in village administration during the Gupta period. Although the village council took various forms but it retained most of its earlier functions.

THE MUGHAL PERIOD

When the Mughals came to India in 1526, the country was divided against itself. However, despite the lack of unified authority, the Mughals found the village administrative set-up in the country still vigorous and healthy. The traditional officers, headman,

¹⁵ Altekar, op. cit., p. 342.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 342.

¹⁷ R.C. Majumdar et. al. *An Advanced History of India*, Macmillan and Co., London, 1948, p. 194.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 195.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 195.

accountant, and watchman, were active and the village, continued to be the basic unit of administration and it was

little altered by the vicissitudes of Mughal, Mahratta...rule. Each village had a number of hereditary native officials. The most important was the headman, usually referred to as the *patel*, who collected the revenue and in Madras was a petty magistrate and civil judge; the *patwin*, or accountant, in charge of the village accounts, registers of holdings, and records connected with the land revenues; and the *chowkidar*, or watchman, the rural policeman.²⁰

This feeling is shared by Majumdar and his associates²¹. Samant's view on the judicial aspect of the *panchayats* is that the village councils under Muslim rule had the support of the state because "when Muhammadan interests were involved, the decision of a *panchayat* was enforced by the ruling monarch which is a sufficient proof to show that the power of the State was always behind the village councils."²²

It can thus be inferred that the administrative structure as well as the spirit of the *Panchayats* remained basically intact from Vedic period through Mauryan and Gupta periods up to the end of Mughal rule in India. The headman, the accountant, and the watchman, still carried on their traditional duties. This age long state of stable village government and time-tested village *Panchayat* was rudely shaken with the advent of the British dominance of India, a period now to be explored.

THE BRITISH RULE

This summary description of the village under the British regime has two aims: to present a "typical" Indian village as perceived and described by the British rulers, and to discuss some of the basic political and economic changes introduced and their impact on village autonomy. Features of village life such as physical setting, the village functionaries, artisans, traders, and the village council served as background material for British innovations.

As seen and described by the British colonial officials, the *typical* Indian village:

²⁰ Cecil Cross, *The Development of Self-Government in India, 1858-1914*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1922, p. 27. Although it lasted up to 1858, when the English finally took over after the Mutiny, but effective Mughal rule in India was from 1526 Baber's invasion to 1707 in the year of Emperor Aurangzib's death.

²¹ Majumdar, *op. cit.*, pp. 381 and 560.

²² S.V. Samant, *Village Panchayats* ... R.G. Patel, Manager, Local Self-Government Press, Andheri, 1957, pp. 15-16.

...has its central residential site, with an open space for a pond and cattle stand. Stretching around this nucleus lie the village lands, consisting of a cultivated area and (very often) grounds for grazing and woodcutting. The arable lands have their several boundary marks, and their little sub-divisions of earth ridges made for retaining rain or irrigation water. The inhabitants of such a village pass their life in the midst of these simple surroundings, welded together in a little community with its own organization and government, which differ in character in the various types of villages, its body of detailed customary rules, and its little staff of functionaries, artisans, and traders.²³

The list of officers and service groups and their respective duties, for example, in a Madras village is contained in a report of a Select Committee of the House of Commons, issued in 1812:²⁴

1. The headman who supervises village affairs, settles disputes, supervises the police and collects revenues within his village.
2. The accountant who keeps accounts of cultivation and registers everything connected with it.
3. The watchmen— of two kinds: the superior and the inferior. Superior watchmen gather information of crimes and offenses and escort and protect persons who go to other villages. Inferior watchmen guard crops and assist in measuring them within the village.
4. The boundaryman who preserves village limits or gives evidence respecting them in cases of conflict.
5. The superintendent of tanks and water-courses who distributes water for agriculture.
6. The priest who performs village worship.
7. The schoolmaster who teaches children to read and write on sand.
8. The astrologer who proclaims lucky or unpropitious periods for sowing and threshing.
9. The smith and carpenter who manufacture agricultural implements and build dwellings of *ryot*.
- 10-16. The potter, washerman, barber, cowkeeper, doctor, dancing-girl, musician-poet.

The most characteristic feature of the government of a village was the village council or *panchayat* (literally, council of five).²⁵ In Matthai's view, the village council might designate either a general meeting of the inhabitants or a select committee chosen from among them.²⁶

Before explaining the British innovations in Indian village life, a description of the systems of landholding in rural India at that time can clarify the succeeding discussion.

There were two main types of landholding: namely, the landlord type and the non-landlord type. The landlord type (prevailing

²³ Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. VI, p. 279 as quoted by John Matthai in *Village Government in British India*, T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., London, 1915, pp. 14-15.

²⁴ Matthai, *ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

then in the Punjab, United Provinces, and greater part of the Central Provinces) is characterized by the presence of

a powerful joint body of proprietors who form a close oligarchy in relation to the general mass of inhabitants. They claim jointly the entire village site, the cultivated land and the waste; and the other inhabitants pay rents to them for permission to hold and use land. Here the revenue was formerly assessed on the village as a whole, and the incidence was distributed among the members of the proprietary group.²⁷

On the other hand, in the non-landlord village (dominant in Madras and Bombay and even in British Burma), "there is no joint ownership and no communal responsibility for paying the revenue. Each cultivator holds his own land and pays the tax on it directly to the State."²⁸ From the local administration angle then, the difference between the two systems lies in the "relative importance assigned to the village headman."²⁹ Whereas the non-landlord village composed of many small holders of "equal position and influence" necessitated a single leader's appointment with sufficient powers, the landlord type did not need a common leader's services. As a result, the headman in non-landlord villages "has always been part of the original Constitution, holding an important position in every sphere of village life," while in the landlord type, the headman is comparatively a government creation and "the original purpose of his appointment was simply to act as an intermediary in revenue matters between the proprietary body and the government."³⁰

With this distinction between the two systems of land-holding, the changes can be seen more clearly. Under the centralized British regime, all activities were initiated and directed from the center. The village autonomy had no important place in the scheme. Because the British rulers deemed it wise and profitable to have direct dealing with the tenants, the existing village machinery was, therefore, relegated to the background.³¹ The land revenue allotment and collection which till then was vested in the village councils was "allowed to lapse in favor of direct dealing with the tenant."³² The traditional village headman and accountant became paid government servants. Thus, the villagers were not only de-

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³¹ Samant, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

prived of their land revenue share but their leaders were also reduced to salaried government employees.

In judicial matters, the regular courts established by law influenced even distant villages. The British administrators would not enforce local *panchayat* courts' decisions. Statute law, therefore, in many ways replaced the social and religious traditions. The *panchayat*, an effective institution of social control before the advent of British rule, was gradually made ineffective with the introduction of a more formalistic, legalistic, and impersonal system of justice:

The introduction of this British system of justice by regular courts and fixed laws, naturally, tended to suppress the indigenous agencies, whether caste assemblies or guilds, by which the customary usages regulating the conduct and rights of the members of the communities were constantly though unconsciously modified to suit the changing conditions.³³

It is evident that, with the introduction of centralized colonial administration under the British, the traditionally self-sufficient and self-governing character of the village was almost completely eroded. However, the British government later, realizing the efficacy of traditional village system of self-government, tried to extend some semblance of local autonomy to the Indian village. The success or failure in British attempts at *panchayat* reform can be made clear by describing in the succeeding discussion the role of the Indian nationalist movement.

PANCHAYAT AND THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

The self-government scheme of 1882, espoused by Viceroy of India Lord Ripon, proved to be ineffective as it was never fully implemented.³⁴ The Secretary of State for India at that time realizing this lag appointed a Royal Commission on Decentralization which investigated in 1907-1908 the crucial issue of local self-government, the main features of which are outlined in the latter part of this paper.³⁵ The Indian National Congress took for the first time a stand on the problem of restoration of village *panchayat* in 1909 and in its 24th Session held in Lahore in December passed the following resolution:

This Congress expresses its satisfaction that the Secretary of State has recognized that the Local Self-Government scheme of 1882

³³ Ibid., p. 23.

³⁴ Malaviya, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 215.

has not had a fair trial and has pressed on the Government of India the necessity of an ineffectual advance in the direction of making local, urban and rural bodies really self-governing and it expresses the earnest hope that the Government will be pleased to take early steps to make all local bodies from Village Panchayats upwards elective with elected non-official chairman and to support them with adequate financial aid.³⁶

This Congress reiterated its stand on the issue during the 25th Congress session at Allahabad, December, 1910. However, at this stage, *panchayat* revival failed to arouse enthusiasm. The delegates who spoke on the Resolution had more in mind the affairs of municipal and district boards, and the references to Village Panchayats were only casual.³⁷

The recommendations of the Decentralization Commission like the local self-government scheme of 1882 remained unfulfilled. The Congress, in its Karachi session held in December, 1913, regretted the non-implementation of the measures of the Commission and passed a resolution urging anew increased powers and resources for local units.³⁸

GANDHI ON PANCHAYATS

Mahatma Gandhi returned from South Africa in January, 1915. Speaking at Madras in a missionary conference a year later, on February 14, 1916, he underscored the importance of the *panchayat* and said that: "following out the Swadeshi spirit, I observe the indigenous institutions and the Village Panchayats hold me..."³⁹ However, the Congress party's preoccupation with *swaraj* (self-rule) movement and the non-enforcement of Decentralization Commission's recommendations retarded the re-emergence of *panchayat* for some time. Although no immediate prospect of progress was within sight, the public interest was kept alive by two classical treaties on local government: the works of Matthai and Mukerji.⁴⁰

BRITISH ATTEMPTS TO REVIVE THE PANCHAYATS

The British rulers made many unsuccessful attempts to reform local government in the country.⁴¹ For the purpose of this paper, only the Royal Commission on Decentralization of 1907 will be treated because it reveals the general pattern of British attempts at reform and the causes of their failure.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 215-216.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 216.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 216.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 216. Cf. Tendulkar's *Mahatma*, Vol. 1, pp. 227-228.

⁴⁰ John Matthai, *Village Government in British India*, op. cit. and Radhakumud Mukerji, *Local Government in Ancient India*, op. cit.

⁴¹ For the many other attempts to revive local government by the British administrators in India, see Matthai, op. cit., pp. 162-198.

The Commission appointed by Edward VII considered the whole subject of local self-government. The Commission agreed that "throughout the greater part of India the village constitutes the primary territorial unit of Government organization, and from the villages are built up larger administrative entities."⁴² These villages, according to this report, "formerly possessed a large degree of autonomy," but this autonomy the Commission continued

has now disappeared owing to the establishment of local civil and criminal courts, the present revenue and police organization, the increase of communication, the growth of individualism, and the operation of the individual raiyatwari system which is extending even in the north of India. Nevertheless, the village remains the first unit of administration, the principal village functionaries—the headman, the accountant and the village watchman—are largely utilized and paid by the Government, and there is still a certain amount of common village feeling and interests.

The Commission recommended the individual village as the ordinary unit of *panchayat* administration, and the membership of five as "as good average," though local variations were allowed. The report also urged that the village headman "should be ex-officio chairman of the *Panchayat*, as being *ex-hypothesi* the most influential person in the village." Informal election by the village of council members under supervision of government officials was also suggested. No fixed tenure was given to *panchayats*. The report frowned on too frequent elections. The following *panchayat* functions were embodied in the report:⁴³

1. Civil and criminal jurisdiction of petty cases;
2. Village sanitation and expenditure on certain minor works;
3. Construction and maintenance of school houses and some local control in respect to school management;
4. Selected *panchayats* to be given the management of small fuel and fodder reserves;
5. Management of village cattle pound and of markets of purely local importance.

The Commission also suggested that *panchayat* should not collect new taxes. It also urged that the revenue for *panchayats* should be taken from the following sources:⁴⁴

1. The assignment to it of a portion of the land cess levied for local board purposes in the village;
2. Special grants, for particular objects of local improvement, to be made by Sub-District Boards or Collectors;
3. The receipts from village cattle pounds or markets which may be entrusted to its management;
4. Small fees on civil suits filed before it.

⁴² Malaviya, op. cit., pp. 220-221. Cf. *Report of the Royal Commission upon Decentralization in India*, Vol. 1, London, 1909; Para 694, p. 236.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 221. See also *Report* ... *ibid.*, pp. 241-242.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

On the surface, the recommendations of the Commission were laudable. But the provision that *panchayats* would be under the control of the district authorities virtually negated the reformative intent of the report. The nationalists felt that village officials' dependence upon government superiors defeated the spirit and intent of decentralization. Led by Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and other leaders, the nationalists continued their agitation for freedom and for reforms.

India finally won its independence from Britain in 1947. With the attainment of freedom, the fight for the revival of *panchayat* was renewed with greater vigor. How far the nationalists succeeded in their battles and what role they assigned the *panchayats* after independence will now be considered briefly.

PANCHAYATS SINCE INDEPENDENCE

A constituent assembly was promptly organized to draft a constitution for the new nation. In the first drafts of the constitution, no mention was made of the village *panchayats*. Gandhi deplored this omission and called for "immediate attention if our independence is to reflect the people's voice. The greater the power of the Panchayats, the better for the people..."⁴⁵

The framers of the Constitution drew inspiration from Gandhi's concept of self-rule—expressed in the following words:

My idea of village swaraj is that it is a complete republic independent of its neighbours for its vital wants and yet inter-dependent for many others in which dependence is necessary. The Government of the village will be conducted by the panchayat of five persons, annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing prescribed qualifications. These will have all the authority and jurisdiction required... Here there is perfect democracy based upon individual judgment.⁴⁶

Accordingly, one of the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Indian Constitution (Article 40, Part IV) states that "the State shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government."

After 1947, Indian leaders took vigorous steps to fulfill the aims of the Constitution through planning and community development.

⁴⁵ *Harijan*, December 21, 1947, as quoted in Malaviya, op. cit., p. 256.

⁴⁶ As quoted by R.L. Khanna, *Panchayat Raj in India*, Chandigarh, Punjab, 1956, p. 6.

PANCHAYATS AND PLANNING

In the planned socio-economic development of the country, the *panchayats* have been entrusted with new responsibilities. They are now the agencies for the execution of development plans and policies. Their new role in national development has been made clear in the first, second, and third Five-Year Plans of the government. It is instructive to review briefly their place in these three plans.

PANCHAYATS IN THE FIRST FIVE-YEAR PLAN

The First Five-Year Plan (1951-56) devoted primarily to the development of agricultural resources and rural welfare stressed that the success of rural development program largely depended on as the Village Panchayat as an active unit in its implementation. This unit should, therefore, represent the community as a whole. With government assistance and guidance, this agency could also effectively unite the people in common projects for village welfare. For this purpose, "the village panchayat was to be the foundation of the entire administrative structure for national development."⁴⁷

The *panchayats'* performance in the first plan, as described by the government, appears impressive. Under the first plan, the number of *panchayats* increased from 83,093 in 1950-1951 to 117,593 in 1955-1956. In the states of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Mysore, every village had a *panchayat*. A number of *panchayats* were reputed to have provided effective leadership. Many *panchayats*, however, still suffered from "insufficient experience of development activities." The Planning Commission in its review of the first plan noted with regards to Panchayat development that, "the idea of the village panchayat being given the opportunity to share fully, along with the village cooperative, the responsibility for social and economic activities of the village community has not been achieved to any extent." Many examples, however, can be given of the *panchayats'* substantial contribution in voluntary labor (*shramdan*) for road building, tree planting, and other community welfare activities. *Panchayat* resources, nevertheless, were still inadequate.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Planning Commission, Government of India, *Review of the First Five Year Plan*, May, 1957, pp. 310-311.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

PANCHAYATS IN THE SECOND FIVE-YEAR PLAN

The Second Five-Year Plan (1956-1961) stressed the importance of *Panchayats* in cooperation and in the national extension and community development programs. The plan also emphasized that the development of the village along cooperative lines and ultimately the economic prosperity of the country would depend on the effective functioning of *panchayats*:

The reconstruction of the village along cooperative lines implies, firstly, that a more or less homogeneous social structure in which different sections of the community have equal opportunities is brought into existence, and secondly, that the economic basis of village life is greatly expanded...Measures relating to land reform, development of village industries, establishment of village panchayats...have to be considered in relation to these two basic objectives...the agency which provides direction and leadership in the village is the panchayat...The development of panchayats has...to be a fundamental item in the programme of national extension and community projects.⁴⁹

PANCHAYATS IN THE THIRD FIVE-YEAR PLAN⁵⁰

The Third Five-Year Plan (1961-66) noted that legislation for democratic decentralization (*panchayat raj*) at the village, block, and district levels, had already been enacted in a number of states. Other states were also expected to pass similar laws for democratic decentralization. It was regarded as the "fruition of a general approach" suggested in the first and second five-year plans. The plan in its draft outline considered the democratic decentralization to be "a most significant step forward," and stated further that:

The National Development Council...agreed that the foundation of any democratic structure had to be democracy in the village. The two institutions which made effective village democracy possible were the village panchayat and the village cooperative.

Major responsibility for the implementation of development work at the block level is placed on the block *Panchayat Samiti*.⁵¹ This body works closely with the village *panchayat* and the *Zila Parishad*, the unit at the district level. Four criteria have been set for successful projects through democratic decentralization at the district and block levels:⁵²

⁴⁹ Planning Commission, Government of India, *Draft Outline of the Second Five Year Plan*, New Delhi, 1956, pp 66-70

⁵⁰ Planning Commission, Government of India, *Third Five Year Plan A Draft Outline*, June 1960, pp. 159-160.

⁵¹ For a definition and explanation of *Kshetra Samiti*, *Zila Parishad*, etc. see Zamora, op. cit., glossary.

⁵² *Third Five Year Plan*, op. cit.

1. The way each *Panchayat Samiti* and panchayat mobilizes local manpower and other resources and elicits the people's cooperation.
2. District administration's responsibility at all levels for making supplies and services available at the right time according to the accepted programs and for preventing loss due to waste or misapplication of funds.
3. *Panchayat Samitis* and panchayats should stress increased agricultural production.
4. *Panchayat Samitis* and panchayats should emphasize measures to raise the level of living of the less privileged sections to the level of other groups in the area.

In order to fulfill the objectives of the third plan and meet the target set, many states have evolved their own pattern of decentralization suitable to local conditions. This is being enforced now in eight states: namely, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Madras, Mysore, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. Appropriate legislation has been enacted in four states: Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. In West Bengal, necessary steps have been taken toward the passage of legislation. Jammu and Kashmir and Kerala are yet to enact their own laws.⁵³ The manner in which this democratic decentralization program is being carried out is best exemplified by the Uttar Pradesh democratic decentralization system.

DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION IN UTTAR PRADESH (U.P.)⁵⁴

Democratic decentralization was inaugurated in U.P. on December 3, 1961. The main features of this innovation in U.P. are discussed on the basis of the following: (1) democratic decentralization bodies at various levels, legislation, and unit of formation; (2) membership, reservation of seats for special groups and interests, and tenure; and finally, (3) the method of election, official membership, sources of funds, powers and functions, and problems.

LEVEL, LEGISLATION, AND FORMATION UNIT

The democratic decentralization bodies at various levels in Uttar Pradesh are three in number. These units are the *Gaon Sabha* (Village Assembly) and its *Gaon Panchayat* (Executive Committee) at the village level, the *Kshetra Samiti* at the block level, and the *Zila Parishad* at the district level. The Village

⁵³ For development in democratic decentralization, see Zamora, op. cit., Appendix A.

⁵⁴ For a full picture of legislation in various states including Uttar Pradesh, see *Panchayat Raj: A Comparative Study on Legislations*, Ministry of Community Development, Government of India, New Delhi, April, 1962.

Assembly and the Executive Committee are organized under the U.P. *Panchayat Raj* Act of 1947. The *Kshetra Samiti* and *Zila Parishad*, on the other hand, are formed under the U.P. *Kshetra Samiti* and *Zila Parishad* Act of 1960.

MEMBERSHIP, RESERVATION, AND TENURE

All village voters are members of the Village Assembly. The *Gaon Panchayat* (Executive Committee) for its part, has 16 to 31 members elected by the Village Assembly. The members of *Kshetra Samiti* include *pradhans* (presidents) of the *Gaon Panchayats*, the chairmen of Town Area and Notified Area Committees,⁵⁵ two or five representatives of cooperative societies or groups, and the local members of the *Zila Parishad*. In addition, the local Members of Parliament, Members of Legislative Assemblies and Legislative Councils, and members coopted by the above are also members of the *Kshetra Samiti*. The *Zila Parishad* is composed of the following: the *pramukhs* (presidents of *Kshetra Samiti*), as many persons as may be specified by the state government selected by each *Kshetra Samiti* out of its members, presidents of municipal boards, three to five representatives of cooperative societies or groups, and as many persons selected by vote by each block or group of blocks based on adult franchise. Other members are the local Members of Parliament, Members of Legislative Assemblies and Legislative Councils, and members coopted by the above.

In the *Gaon Panchayat*, seats are reserved for the scheduled castes (so-called lower and untouchable castes) in proportion to their population. The number of seats reserved for special groups and interests in the *Kshetra Samiti* is determined according to the following distribution: (1) not exceeding two persons who are interested in planning and development and (2) not more than five women and eight scheduled caste members. In the *Zila Parishad*, however, the seats assigned to special groups and interests are distributed as follows: (1) not more than five women and (2) about five to ten scheduled caste members. The term of office of the three democratic decentralization bodies at the village, block, and district levels is five years.

⁵⁵ For an explanation of the nature and size of the Town Area and Notified Area, see *The Town Area Manual, Uttar Pradesh, Laws, Rules and Instructions* . . ., Superintendent Printing and Stationery, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, 1952.

VOTING, OFFICIAL MEMBERSHIP, FUNDS, FUNCTIONS AND PROBLEMS

Gaon Panchayat voting is by show of hands. The Block Development Officer is the official member in the *Kshetra Samiti*. As chief executive officer, he may attend meetings of the *Kshetra Samiti*, but he is not entitled to vote. The official known as *Mukhya Karya Adhikari* is the chief executive officer in the U.P. *Zila Parishad*. Like the block development officer, he may attend meetings of the *Zila Parishad* but he too is not entitled to vote.

The main sources of funds for the *Gaon Panchayat* are local taxes and fees on professions, vehicles, sale of goods, and annual grants by the state government. The funds of the *Kshetra Samiti* come from fees, tolls, grants, loans, and contributions from the government or other sources. The sources of revenue of the *Zila Parishad* are from a tax on circumstances and property, other state taxes which the legislature may empower the *Zila Parishad* to collect tolls, fees, and grants and loans from the government or other sources.

The Village Assembly elects the *Gaon Panchayat* and sanctions its budget appropriations. The primary responsibilities of the Panchayat include sanitation and conservation, construction and maintenance of public streets, wells, etc. and aiding and guiding agriculturists in obtaining and distributing government loans. Promotion of agriculture and cooperation and establishment of improved seed and implement stores, building and maintenance of libraries, primary schools, maternity and child welfare centers are also amongst its functions. The *Kshetra Samiti* is responsible for the construction and maintenance of primary health centers, maternity and child welfare centers, primary schools, drainage works, minor irrigation works, and the development of agriculture, cooperatives, and cottage industries. It also supervises and coordinates the work of the *panchayats* and examines their budgets. The *Zila Parishad* supervises the *panchayats* and the *Kshetra Samitis*. It is charged with duties to construct and maintain district roads, hospitals, schools above primary and up to junior high school levels; the preparation of district plans, and the distribution of grants allotted by government or other bodies.

Some of the problems confronting the program of democratic decentralization include the following: (1) misunderstanding on the part of the officials from the *Gaon Panchayat* to the *Zila*

Parishad of the respective powers and functions of the various levels of decentralization; (2) the question of resources of these bodies and their relation to the civil servants; (3) the destructive influence of partisan politics in the scheme; (4) defects in election procedure; and finally, (5) the question of relationship of the towns and cities with the *Kshetra Samitis* and *Zila Parishads*.⁵⁶

PANCHAYAT PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Two of the main problems are factionalism and inadequate finances. It is claimed that one major obstacle faced by Indian villages is the prevalence of factions within the *panchayat*. The so-called "curse of factionalism" coupled with the "indifference" of capable and deserving men of status and education to run for office hamper the growth and development of this agency. As one south Indian author on *panchayat* puts it:

Faction is...one of the greatest curses of village life. It stultifies progress, produces wasteful spending on unnecessary litigation...A faction leader is only too often a rowdy and an ignoramus...In short, a combination of 97 to 99 per cent illiteracy in the village and the elective system together with faction has resulted frequently in ignorant and unsuitable men being elected as Presidents and members of Panchayats.⁵⁷

Other students of Indian culture, however, maintain that factionalism is not altogether dysfunctional. There are allegedly many positive aspects which if sufficiently exploited could bring about desirable changes in the village. Oscar Lewis who made a study of factions in a north Indian village writes:

...the small groups which we have called factions have their positive aspects for community development... (1) They provide ready made communication channels to the people... (2) They provide ready made cooperative groups for community projects... (3) The organization of leadership on a faction basis provides for a much closer representation of the people than is possible in the more sophisticated... type of political democracy...⁵⁸

Besides factionalism, inadequate finance is another pressing problem. The money raised by *panchayat* through grants-in-aid, taxation, and voluntary contribution is still insufficient in view of the wide sphere of its activities.

⁵⁶ For a more detailed discussion, see Jayaprakash Narayan's article "Some Problems of Panchayat Raj," in *Kurukshetra* (Oct. 2, 1961), Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 12-16.

⁵⁷ K. Jayaraman, *A Study of Panchayats in Madras*, Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, Bombay, 1947, p. 138.

⁵⁸ Oscar Lewis, *Group Dynamics in a North Indian Village*, Programme Evaluation Organization, Planning Commission, New Delhi, 1954, p. 36.

The future of the *panchayat* system, however, is not altogether hopeless. There are some important features which, if properly exploited for good, would reinvigorate the alleged faction-ridden financially hard-pressed council. For one thing, village unity seems still very much alive. In the words of Jayaraman:

The sense of village unity is still alive and many matters of common interest are still settled in a caste meeting or by a circle of responsible men sitting in the village meeting house...and certain very disputable questions...are referred to by the departmental representatives of Government...Herein lies the strength of the modern village which must be fostered...⁵⁹

The future of the *panchayats*, therefore, as effective agencies for planned change, rests partly on the villagers' sense of community. In addition to this, governmental coordinated assistance (financial, technical, and administrative) and a more homogeneous village leadership that disregards the barrier of caste, creed, and religion, can perhaps go a long way towards making the *panchayat* an effective agent of cultural change.⁶⁰

S U M M A R Y

Village councils and officials in India can be traced as far back as the Vedic age. These autonomous councils and their functionary efficiently controlled village administration, civic, and judicial affairs during the Maurya, Gupta, and the Mughal periods. They played a significant part in ensuring the continuity of village life through the ages.

During the British rule, however, the *panchayats* lost to a great extent their autonomy. The traditional caste *panchayats*, for example, became ineffective because of the competition offered by the British courts of justice. British attempts to revive and reform them in the early part of the 20th century failed. Indian nationalists led by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru fought for *panchayat* revival. It was only after independence in 1947 that the *panchayats* partly regained their prestige and power. A specific provision was embodied among the Directive Principles of the State Policy in Constitution to the effect that "The State shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government."

⁵⁹ Jayaraman, op. cit., p. 140.

⁶⁰ For similar discussion of *panchayat* problems, see Mario D. Zamora, *An Indian Village Council in Community Development*, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of the Philippines, 1959, pp. 95-97.

The Indian government launched vast programs of community and national extension projects under the Five-Year Plan schemes. These programs are designed to free rural India from poverty, ignorance, disease, and mis-government. The village *panchayat* is considered an important unit for rural uplift. It was realized by government planners that through *panchayats* the people's participation in rural improvements could be sought more effectively. There was therefore a shift in the role of the *panchayat* from purely administrative and regulatory to those of development.

As community development projects increased and more villagers actively cooperated, the government introduced more innovations to cope with current needs and problems. One such innovation of far-reaching importance is the democratic decentralization program. Several states in India are now inaugurating and implementing their decentralization blue prints. Uttar Pradesh is one of them. The success or failure of the democratic decentralization program for "a socialistic pattern of society" will determine greatly the future of Indian democracy.

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