

Original Paper

Rural Leadership: Backbone of Democracy in India

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Abstract

Panchayati Raj is accepted as a way of life to-day. An attractive name like "Decentralization" seems to attract popular imagination. The birth of Panchayati Raj has necessitated self-management of the problems of the community, a sense of popular participation and the political education of the villager in the citizenship of his country. The success of Panchayati Raj and the fulfillment of the hopes of people's participation and involvement in the development work in the villages depend largely upon effective local leadership. "No country can hope to achieve good working democracy let alone a Welfare State without a strong and healthy system of local Government." Again, no local Government can remain healthy unless it is liable to change needed to adapt it to changes in the human and physical environment.

Keywords

constitution, democracy, decentralization, government, local leader political

1. Introduction

Every nation has certain traditions of social and political institutions, ideas and procedures. There has been almost an unbroken tradition of these institutions though with regional and historical variations (Robson, 1966). But as Hugh Tinker remarks, "The local Government in the present-day India, Pakistan and Burma has inherited but little from indigenous local institutions (Hugh, 1954)." However, Panchayati Raj has been our caste character. Gandhiji wanted village Swaraj by making the individual the architect of his own Government (Note 1). The achievement of India's independence has cast the ball rolling in favour of political and economic democracy. The sentiment was voiced in the Constituent Assembly, but the Constitution does not seem to have been much influenced by it. In fact, the original Constitution of India does not describe the organization of Panchayati Raj. "One of the longest documents in the world says nothing about Panchayati Raj as a form of political organization (Kothari, 1961)." But Art. 40 of the Constitution of India empowers the State to bring about the

development of Gram Panchayats (Note 2). The recommendations of Balwantrai Mehta Committee for Democratic Decentralization of power and responsibility have suddenly given a magical touch to it. It has suddenly acquired political interest and public importance. The accepted goal is to build equal roads from each village to New Delhi. The Mehta Committee recommendations have heralded a new era of revolutionary reform since the British administration in India. The Committee recommended for “Democratic Decentralization” and suggested a three-tier system of administration, i.e., Zilla Parishad at the District level, Panchayat Samiti at the Block level and Gram Panchayat at the village level (Note 3). In a big country like India, there is no uniform system of local Government for the whole country. The States have deviated regarding the details of organization. Its greatest merit lies in the contribution it can make to the success of democracy. But Arnold Toynbee while talking of Asian Democracies remarked, “All these Asian peoples wish to run their Governments on democratic lines but a few of them have enough citizens with sufficient experience and public spirit to operate Government of this kind (Toynbee, 1962).” But ours is an experiment, and every experiment has its promises as well as hazards. Much will depend upon the type of rural leadership available to man the organization. The organizations are always means to an end, agencies to help achieve what people want. It is the human beings themselves who are the ends. The vital problem is how to make group activity a happy and satisfying experience for people on the basis of a blood stream of friendliness and personal devotion.

2. Anatomy of Leadership

“Leadership is the activity of influencing people to cooperate towards some goal which they come to find desirable (Tead, 1936).”

The leader must be capable of stimulating and vitalizing others. Consequently, satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment are secured by the followers of the true leader. The leader can arouse popular enthusiasm and local initiative in public service, the lack of which were the chronic maladies of our system. The creation of regional consciousness like “Greater London Consciousness” will gear up the accelerating process of development. Selznik advocates three main premises of leadership (Selznick, 1957).

- 1) Leadership is a kind of work done to meet the needs of a social situation.
- 2) Leadership is not equivalent to office-holding or high prestige or authority or decision-making.
- 3) Leadership is dispensable.

The leader being a child of the social process is to focus attention on the social problems and maladies. Institutionalization is said to be a process. An organizational life, of course, does not give up the concern for self-maintenance. It is in this context that we intend to examine the problem of Rural Leadership. The relevant questions in this connection appear to be three only, viz.:

- I. Availability of right type of leaders and the method adopted to secure them;
- II. Relationship between official and non-official leadership at all levels; and

- III. Interference by the State level leadership in local leadership, in local affairs and the problem of initiative and flexibility in operations.

3. Political Socialization

People get the leaders they deserve. The strains in our social life determine the nature of new leadership. The people are aware of the changing world and they try to make adjustments in the age-old society. Even then, the doctrine of dominant caste is still the guiding principle of Rural leadership. The caste structure is quite important for the purposes of locating and identifying leadership in the village. This is determined according to the numerical strength, economic prosperity, large land holdings, and group cohesiveness. Thus, economic structure of the community and leadership pattern are interdependent. Consequent upon diversified production, traditional social leadership has tended to decline. The absence of feudal leadership has further created gulf between the old and the new in the context of contemporary socio-cultural dynamics. Again, caste conflict gives rise to vitiated atmosphere and bitter circumstances. In the faction-ridden village, the dominant faction has the claim to leadership. But in the modern times, the formal political leadership has replaced the institution of traditional leadership. On the support of a group, family and friends, the formal leadership of the Sarpanch or the Chairman is articulated. Normally, it is either due to group domination, economic relationship or money-lending. Behind the screen are persons who can be said to be real leaders. They exercise decisive influence and their authority is based on economic prosperity, personal cleverness and intimate relationship with important individuals outside the locality. The intimate leaders are found in the most rudimentary form in society. Now economic prosperity and education will be formidable rivals of age, caste, and tradition. The burden of future leadership is bound to come upon the young ones. They are supposed to possess enlightened development-oriented outlook, and they have the capacity to gear up development programmes.

A prominent feature of present-day Local Government Organization seems to be the concentration of powers in the hands of the Sarpanch and Chairman. They are said to be called the Chief Ministers of their respective areas. But the system concentrates power without corresponding accountability. "Our local bodies at present do-not really have an integrated executive at all. There is, on the contrary, a division and dispersal of executive authority." There is again a unity among the officials and popular elements. Official leadership is supposed to be complementary not competitive with the non-official leadership. Policy decisions come within the purview of the popular representatives whereas implementation and execution of decisions are under the officers. The idea is to secure active participation of the people and through the devolution of Governmental power and authority. But it is found that the people are not in a position to accept the new projects. Local leadership and initiative were not forthcoming. There was a great estrangement between the officials and the common people. There was again absence of tradition of popular co-operation with the administration due to a long history of alien rule in the country. Thus it has made Indian administration negative in mind. The

system of our local government was of a peculiar colonial pattern as in Malaya and East Africa due to similar circumstances.

The structure of Indian administration was said to be a steel framework since there was no scope for popular participation though the beginnings of Democracy had been made in 1919 by the introduction of Diarchy in India. Secondly, though our Constitutional system establishes political democracy, it does not encourage democratic administration. Lord Bryce had compared Indian administration to Plato's Philosopher King. The scheme of "Democratic Decentralization" has been called neither democratic nor decentralization as evidenced from the Constitution of the local bodies at various levels. All Democracies need intensity of politics and in India, there is a tendency to minimize it. The thinking organs of the Political Parties have to be mobilized in order to reflect public concern about it. The elected representatives do not possess the qualities of comprehensiveness and objectivity about it. As regards decentralization, central controls, supervision and direction were strong in system. A overburdened Centre has started spreading the burden more evenly throughout the nation. It enables the large reserves of human energy and ability which might otherwise remain dormant and unused to participate in the administration of Welfare policies. A good State of its health requires freedom from Parliamentary interference. Local authorities must be free from the suicidal consequences of their well-known devotion to the divine right of things as they are.

4. Conclusion

Democratic decentralization of power and responsibility to the people's representatives at local levels has resulted in reorientation of the administrative outlook and organization in inter-relationship. But still certain strains in the pattern of adjustments are noticeable. The pattern of administrative organization must be in conformity with the Constitution of these bodies and should be complementary to them. Great changes in the history of social organization result generally from the innovative efforts of a few superior individuals. As local Government is important for good Government, the Leader is to inspire the local spirit by the sense of community. The human resources for leadership at the village level is to emerge in due course of time. The village leaders will be useful as agents but hardly as Principals and masters. All the local institution will assume prominence according to the character, ethical standards political education, and experience of the people who work it out.

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Notes

Note 1. M. K. Gandhi,—The picture of village Swaraj—The Harijana 28-7-42.

Note 2. Art. 40—“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.”

Note 3. Report of the study team for the study of C. D. & N. E. S. Blocks—Planing Commission—1956. Vol-I, p. 7.