ROLE OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN ASSAM AND PEOPLE’S PARTICIPATION
AFTER 73RD CONSTITUTION AMENDMENT ACT, 1992

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ABSTRACT

People’s participation in PRI devotes to direct involvement of grass root level people in administration. The involvement is not only in policy formation or planning but also in implementation of the policies in the rural and remotes areas. In a predominantly agrarian country like India, any attempt aiming at a radical change in the socio-economic condition of the masses must be directed towards rural masses because they are the backbone of our existence. People’s participation in PRIs is very necessary for the survival of a democracy like India, where the rural peoples forms the base of our existence.

This paper tries to examine the question of people’s participation in PRIs specially in Gaon Panchayat and how far the objectives of the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act; 1992 has executed in Assam with special reference to two Gaon Panchayats, viz., Tamulisiga and Bamanpukhuri Gaon Panchayat under East Jorhat Development Block, Kaliapani in Jorhat District.

ARTICLE INFO

Received: March 27, 2013
Accepted: April 29, 2013

KEYWORDS
PRI - Panchayati Raj Institution.
CAA - Constitution Amendment Act.
GS - Gaon Sabha.
APA - Assam Panchayati Act.
GP - Gaon Panchayat

1. Introduction

Active participation of the people in the process of government is one of the basic condition of democracy. It is the panchayati Raj System which has most important role for the participation of the people as well as training ground of democracy. “True democracy cannot be worked by twenty persons sitting at the centre. It has to be worked from below by the people of every village.” (Mahatma Gandhi).

The Constitution has established India as a sovereign democratic republic. Like the other democratic countries of the world, India has realized the importance of the Panchayati Raj System. The Local- Self Government institutions are included in the State List of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution and in the Part IV as Directive Principles of State Policies in Article 40. There is no constitutional bindings for the state government to act as directed by the Constitution because the Directive Principles of State Policies are like the instrument of instruction.

As a state subject, the local self government are different in its composition, power, functions and resources of Panchayats in various state of the country. Till the Constitution(73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, the rural development has not materialized its objectives in true sense of the terms. This provision of the Amendment gave a little hope regarding the practice of democracy at the grass root level with active participation of the people in local affairs.
Accordingly in view of the historic Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1994[1] was enacted and comes to effect from 5th May, 1994 and it has expected that the new Panchayati Raj System will be fruitful if executed in the true sense of the term.

Assam was the pioneer of the Panchayati Raj System. Since independence the Panchayati Raj Institutions have been in existence in the state of Assam for more than five decades in casual interval. In Assam 87.10% of the population still live in rural area(Economic Survey of Assam) [2]. The number of total rural families are 34,12,506. Out of this 20,28,058(59.43%) live below poverty line [3]. It is unanimously accepted that without rural development there will be no significant development of the state. It is conceive that only effective Panchayati Raj system can uplift the socioeconomic condition of the people of Assam. But there has not been considerable achievement in developing the socio-economic condition of the rural people. The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 has given a scope to revive the democratic spirit of the rural people providing an opportunity to associate and participate their own local development affairs. And also provided decentralization and devolution of fund, function and functionaries. The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 has enacted in due time after the Constitution(73rd Amendment)Act, 1992 and held election in the last part of 2001. In the study it has been found that government of Assam hardly realized the importance of the new Panchayati Raj system through investigation, own experience and observation study the problem of people’s participation.

2. Objective and scope of the study

By introducing the Gaon Sabha, the new Act ensure the common people’s participation in Panchayati Raj institution. In the study it has been found that powers are concentrated in the hands of some opportunist middle class people. Besides, majority of the villagers who are poor, have remained mostly isolated from the active participation in the Panchayati Raj activities. They only participate in voting once in five years. The objective of decentralization of administration with the devolution of funds, functions, and functionaries have not reflect in these Panchayats.

The provision of Gaon Sabha has a significant role in the decision making process, identification of beneficiaries of different development schemes. But it has not seen in these Panchayats under study and people’s participation also has not reflected in local affairs as provided by the said Amendment Act and the Assam Panchayat Act. This study intends to examine the question of people’s participation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions specially in Gaon Panchayat and how far the objectives of the Constitution(73rd Amendment)Act [4], 1992 has excluded in Assam with special reference to two Gaon Panchayats , viz., Tamulisiga and Bamunpukhuri Gaon Panchayat under East Jorhat Development Block, Kaliapani in Jorhat district. Kaliapani is situated at the eastern part of Jorhat district and at a distance of 34 kilometers from the district headquarter and near the town Teok at a distance 4 kilometers.

3. Working of Panchayats

It is felt that unless the people are associated with the formulation and implementation of the development programmes, it will not be success. The aims and objectives of the new Act is to decentralize and devolution of powers and functions and empower the Panchayati Raj institutions so that it can act as the third tier of the Indian federation. The people’s participation in administration is essential for the successful working of democracy. But it is not mean that mere existence of adult franchise and periodic election. The new Act provided Gaon Sabha as the fourth tier of the Panchayati Raj system. “ In the present Act ‘ Gaon Sabha’ is a new introduction. By making provision for such Sabha the principle of self rule is sought to be given a concrete shape. Gaon Sabha does not mean other than the real sovereign in the system”. In the article 243 (b) of the constitution and the Assan Panchayat Act, 1994 define Gram Sabha as “body consisting of person registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of Panchayat at the village level”. The Gram Sabha or Gaon Sabha empowers the adult members of the Panchayat area

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to participate; to advice the elected body, to supervise the activities of the Panchayats and to discuss on the important matters related to rural development.

In Assam the new Panchayat system was established in 2002 and completed its one full term. The second term has just started. The new act made supreme the people (voters) in the decision making process. But in Assam specially in these two Gaon Panchayats under study, meeting of Gaon Sabha has not been held during the last term in real sense of term. A new innovation was made by the government of Assam in the name of ‘Rajor Podulit Rajor Sarkar’(RPRS)(People’s government at the footstep of the people) and used as Gaon Sabha.

The state government and Panchayat bodies claimed that RPRS would be the effective alternative of Gaon and has performed the functions of the Gaon Sabha. But in real sense of the term this innovation cannot be a substitute of the Gaon Sabha. Meetings of RPRS are convened by the Gaon Panchayats with the direction and control of the district authority. The people are asked to submit their needs and grievances before the government officers. In these meetings, the poor villagers are heisted to express their views freely before the government officers. Generally presentee of these meetings are the poor beneficiaries. But other voters those who are conscious and familiar with the development programmes are not willing to attending the meetings. So, this meetings obstructed the chance of people’s participation in the preparation of plans, recommendations of scheme etc. of the Gaon Panchayats.

The Act also mention that “the Gaon Sabha shall meet from time to time but a period of three months shall not intervene between any two meetings”. But in the investigation it has been found that these meetings are not held in timely. It has also deprived the people from participation of the activities of the Panchayats. Generally the rule people are not aware of the fund released by the government for different development and welfare schemes.

The transparency of fund utilized by the Gaon Panchayat and accountability of the officers and Panchayat elected body should be ensure through Gaon Sabha by the social audit and supervision. But the Panchayats under study have no role of Gaon Sabha in these aspects. In the investigation, it found that not only the common voters but also some elected members has no idea about the real power and functions of the Gaon Sabha.

There are no change has been seen in the attitudes of the rural people regarding the participation and they are not interested in direct involvement in the activities of the Panchayat except casting their votes as usual like the previous elections.

The panchayat election is not free from party politics and except independent representatives the elected representatives are also not free from the influence of their higher level party leaders in all the functions including the beneficiary selection process.

It is also found in the investigation that the common people are not directly or indirectly involved in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Panchayati Raj institutions. When it is asked whether they do participate or involve themselves in these aspects, the replies were in negative.

Another important aspect of people’s participation in the Panchayat institution is the women participation. To ensure women participation the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 and the new Act has reserved 33% seats for women. “In Assam the proportionate strength of women representatives in Panchayati Raj institution had increased to 38% in 20013 election.” It is a good sign for Assamese women that their interest has developed in Panchayat administration. But it is found in the study that majority of the women representative depend upon their husbands or other male family members in their political and administrative decision.

From the above study, it is found that the Panchayat in Assam in general and the two Panchayats under study in particular have miserably failed to fulfill the objective of the new Act and the Constitution (73rd Amendment)Act, 1992 5.

4. Finding of the study

By analysis of the present study, sum-up the findings with some importance suggestion in the way of conclusion. The present system of Panchayat in Assam shows that there are some defects in working of the Panchayat, particularly people’s participation, role of Gaon Sabha, develop of awareness among the rural people in local affairs. It is found

that control over the Panchayats by superior authorities, bureaucrats, and ruling political party etc. are some of the defective features in the working of Panchayati Raj System of Assam. In order to examine the defects some questions has been asked to selected fifty voters of each Panchayat under the study and the voters respondents were selected on random sampling basis from among the beneficiaries of different schemes. Some reasons of the failure to achieve the goal of Panchayati Raj system are as follows:

1. Lack of awareness of the people in Panchayat activities and absence of favourable environment of people’s participation.
2. Gaon Sabhas are not constituted properly and not held its meeting timely.
3. Consious voters are not interested in local affairs.
4. Elected body not accountable to the voters in real sense of the terms.
5. Party organization always tried to influence the Panchayat bodies.
6. Gaon Sabha has no role in annual planning and budget preparation of the Panchayats.
7. The Panchayats have lost its self-governmental character. Besides, it has became implementing agency of the government Schemes.
8. Lack of sufficient staff in the Panchayats and even only one Secretary has been functioning for more than one Panchayat.
9. Lack of proper circulation and information of the different schemes of the government to the common people.
10. There is no proper coordination between common people and the government officials.
11. Elected members are only interested to satisfy their higher level political leaders than the voters
12. The officials formalities and red-tapism has dissatisfied the poor people.
13. The beneficiaries are selected for different schemes from amongst the close relatives of the elected members and from the party men of the ruling party. These defects and disorder were found in the present Panchayati Raj system in Assam and in the particular, the two Panchayats under the study.

5. Suggestions

Some effective ways for working of Panchayats in regards of people’s participation are mentioned here on the basis of the findings, field study and experience and observation as suggestions.

1. Activation of Gaon Sabha in real sense of the term and meetings of Gram Sabha should be held in a definite interval of time. The Panchayat Secretary should take sincere initiative to hold the meetings regularly.
2. Gaon Sabha should be entrusted with the duty of approving plans and programmes of Panchayats to ensure the people’s participation.
3. There should be transparency in all the transaction of Panchayats and with the formal audit there should be social audit through Gram Sabha.
4. The Panchayat functionaries should be made accountable to Gaon Sabha. Gaon Sabha should perform their role as a people’s parliament which imposes checks and balances on the executive authority of the Panchayats.
5. Beneficiaries must be selected by Gaon Sabha and there should be no provision for the selection of beneficiaries by other agency.
6. To develop awareness about their right and duties, the ‘Right to Information Act’ may popularized.
7. The government official should reduce their gap with the common people so that the poor village can meet them without hesitation to express their problems and grievances. The red-tapism should also be minimized in Panchayat activities.

8. Panchayats should organize meetings, seminars, popular talks, workshops and other means to popularize the rural development schemes taken by the government.

9. The local voluntary organizations should may use to develop awareness of the people in Panchayat activities.

10. The excessive control over Panchayats by the state government, political leaders, and bureaucrats should be reduced.

11. Voters should elect honest, educated and efficient representatives as they work for the interest of the people instead of their personal interest.

12. People should be ready to pay the taxes for fund generation of the Panchayats. It is also true that the Panchayat body are not willing to impose taxes upon the voters because if do so, they might lose their popularity.

6. Conclusion

It is true that there are various scopes of participation of the people in Panchayati Raj institutions if materialized the provisions of the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 and the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994. The Panchayat leadership should realize its importance and should take necessary initiative in people’s participation in Panchayati Raj institutions.

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