

50 Years of Panchayati Raj in Goa: Retrospect and Prospects

Edited by

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CHAPTER - 2

Perspectives on Self-Governance or Local-Governance in India: From Gandhi to New Social Movements

Prakash Desai

Self-governance or local -governance is an idea that received attention from various thinkers from ancient India to modern India. The very presence of continuous discussion on it makes it an important idea in the realm of Indian political thought. It is an important idea but is not without any negative note. However, the very negative note has enhanced its importance than decline. Both negative and positive notes are required to understand it as a new hope in the demagogic incarnations of democracy in India

Introduction:

The discussion on governance is not new in India. It is there in the works of ancient Indian thinkers and has been revived in the works of modern Indian political thinkers. Mohan Das Gandhi, apart from his other political ideas, is

better known for his ideas on local governance. He found the village to be the basic unit of governance in India. Like Gandhi, other modern thinkers, like Jayaprakash Narayan and Ram Manohar Lohia gave greater importance to the village as the basic unit of governance. The new element that became part of the discussion on governance in modern India was influenced by modern western ideas (Narain, 1961:297-298).

The western influence almost created divisions among thinkers who dealt with governance. Some thinkers like Nehru and Ambedkar had apprehensions about the village as a unit of governance. They looked mostly for modern ideas to be the guiding principles of governance whereas Gandhi and Gandhians found certain ancient ideas and practices more conducive in the matter of governance. The idea of the village has been discussed by all these aforementioned thinkers of modern India. They invoked village

in many different contexts. Despite disagreements and differences in their ideological orientations or political agenda, the 'village' remained a core category through which most of them conceptualised or thought of the 'traditional' Indian social life. However, unlike the colonial administrators, the nationalist leadership did not see the village simply as the constituting 'basic unit' of Indian civilisation. For most of them, village represented 'the real' India, the nation that needed to be recovered, liberated and transformed. Even when they celebrated village life, they did not lose sight of the actual state of affairs marked by scarcity and ignorance (Jodhka, 2002:3343).

This paper tries to know how the idea of self-governance has been understood by the modern Indian political thinkers. It explores what are the differences between them on the question of village as a unit of governance. The other question dealt with in this paper pertains to how the new social movements are carrying forward the ideas of self-governance as narrated by the modern Indian political thinkers and to what extent they differ from them.

Historical Legacy of Self-governance in India:

It would be necessary to have glance on the kind of local governance that was there in India's past to know the ideas of governance in modern India and on what basis they came to the fore.

The concept of local self government is not new to our country and there is mention of community assemblies in the Vedic texts. Around 600 B.C., the territory north of the river Ganga comprising modern day north Bihar and eastern U.P. was under the suzerainty of small republics called Janapadas among which Lichhavis were the most powerful. In these Janapadas, the

affairs of the State were conducted by an assembly consisting of local chieftains. (Government of India, 2007:2).

Such local governance was present in the post-Mauryan times as well and 'there existed republics of Malavas and the Kshudrakas where decisions were taken by "sabhas". The Greek Ambassador, Megasthenes, who visited the court of Chandragupta Maurya in 303 B.C. described the City Council which governed Pataliputra - comprising six committees with 30 members' (Ibid). The Southern part of India did not lag behind in having similar participatory structures.

In the Chola Kingdoms, the village council, together with its sub-committees and wards, played an important part in administration, arbitrated disputes and managed social affairs. They were also responsible for revenue collection, assessing individual contribution and negotiating the collective assessment with the King's representative. They had virtual ownership of village waste land, with right of sale, and they were active in irrigation, road building and related work. Their transactions, recorded on the walls of village temples, show a vigorous community life and are a permanent memorial to the best practices in early Indian polity (Ibid).

There is a point of difference between western local governments and the local government that existed in ancient and medieval India. The point of difference is with respect to representativeness. 'In India local self-government was not vested in a representative body of the people of the locality exactly according to the type of western countries, but it had its authority vested in the local officials, particularly in the towns. In the rural areas the local government was originally by the Punchayet, that is, the Board of Five -- though the body so called was not always limited to five' (Mallik, 1929:37)

With the advent of modernity in the Indian politico-philosophical landscape many changes had to take place with respect to ideas and institutions. Local self-governance is one such idea which received attention in modern Indian political thinking mainly because of the debate on modern democratic governance that was going on during the colonial period and in the early decades of post-independent India. As it has already been mentioned, there was no feature of representativeness in our earlier local governance. This lacuna had to be covered philosophically by the thinkers who had argued in defence of local-governing institutions. Here mention must be made about the contribution of Mohandas Gandhi. It was he who tried to give a democratic touch to these ancient institutions. Later on, many others followed suit with diverse ideas but they did not deviate from the basic objective of providing democratic shape and content to local institutions.

Village and Local Governance as Narrated in Modern Indian Political Philosophy:

It was a big issue before the architects of the Constitution 'whether to make panchayats constitutional bodies or not' (Mathew, 2013). It is a known fact that though Gandhi strongly advocated the panchayat system, his aspirations were not reflected in the Constitution and had to wait till the time the new amendments on local self governments were brought in. It was Mohan Das Gandhi who 'had made panchayats a part of his political programme since the Non-Cooperation movement of 1920-22, made it imperative that local self-governing bodies be set up'(Chandra, Mukherjee and Mukherjee,2008:75). His idea of the village is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital issues and every activity in which would be on the cooperative basis (Pantham, 2013:68). He envisaged an important role for villages in the democracy. 'For him the village was the locus of genuine freedom' (deSouza, 2013:84). Gandhiji suggested, 'village panchayats as the basic "units" of democracy, direct elections with universal suffrage being held only at the village level, with higher echelons of the system, at state and national level, being elected indirectly by the immediately lower level'(Aiyar, 2014). Such a suggestion was not supported by Ambedkar because for him individual became the basic unit of democracy.

Ambedkar was not in favour of local self-governing institutions. He had a socially inclusive assessment of ancient Indian political institutions. He defended non-representation of the ancient polity of India in the Draft Constitution. He had to respond to this question because there was criticism against the Draft Constitution that no part of it represented ancient polity of India. (CA Debates, 1948:Vol.7, 4th November)There was a concern on the part of the critics that the new Constitution should have been raised and built upon village Panchayats and District Panchayats. There was also a more extreme view on the part of many that they did not want any central or provincial governments but wanted India to contain many village governments. Ambedkar said such love of Indian for the village community 'is largely due to the fulsome praise bestowed upon it by C.T.Metcalfé'(Ibid). He 'was an influential colonial administrator of the early nineteenth century, who had served as governor of Agra, lieutenant-governor of the North-Western Provinces and acting Governor General of India'(Guha, 2012:316). Metcalfe had described the village community, 'as little republics having nearly everything that they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations' (CA Debates, 1948:Vol.7, 4th

November). Ambedkar was very doubtful about the potentiality of village as self-governing institutions. Regarding village he said, that

they have survived through all vicissitudes may be a fact. But mere survival has no value. The question is on what plane they have survived. Surely, on a low, on selfish level. I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India. I am therefore surprised that those who condemn provincialism and communalism should come forward as champions of the village. What is the village but a stink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism? I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit (Ibid).

Gandhi desired people's participation in local governance. For Gandhi real swaraj or self-rule 'could be achieved only by restoring the civilisational strength of India through revival of its village communities' (Jodhka, 2002:3346). But, when he spoke about the idea of governance he did not think of the possibility of realisation of genuine participation of the people belonging to all sections of the society. Gandhi did not give much serious attention to the prevailing inequality between different sections in terms of economic and social position. It can be said that Gandhi's idea of governance and people's participation was more of political colour than social urgency or necessity. It is because of such absence of thought on genuine participation the very idea of Gandhi's swaraj can be doubted and criticized.

Gandhi had said that Delhi is not India, villages are India and in villages live the soul of India (Mathew and Nayak, 1996:1771). If one looks at today's condition of rural India such idea looks weird. Even today we find vast numbers of poor people live in villages, villages have been continuously witnessing caste violence against people belonging to Dalit-bahujans, and women have been victims of multiple violence in rural India. In some states like Haryana and Uttar Pradesh non-governmental community associations (Khap Panchayats) have number of times worked against change in gender empowerment.

Regarding Ambedkar's opposition to the village community as the basic unit of democracy there is an observation that by, 'casting off elected community institutions, Ambedkar did not answer the question of how to make our democracy participatory on a continuous basis, instead of the individual having little role in governance beyond the right to vote once every five years' (Aiyar, 2014). If the present state of affairs at the village level is taken into consideration, Ambedkar's reservation about village panchayats seems right and a well -predicted observation. Participatory democracy means participation of the all citizens in governing institutions. Even if there is scope for participation

on continuous basis in present Panchayat set up, there is no guarantee that it will be of inclusive of all sections of the society. Since there is the presence of social hierarchies in Indian society there cannot be continuous inclusive democracy. Though there is political reservation for socially marginalized communities at village governing institutions it has not been properly practised in the sense that the elected representatives from marginalized communities have to work under constant hegemony and domination of forward communities. The presence and voice of marginalized at gramsabhas is generally not encouraged even today. Ambedkar had suggested social democracy to go hand in hand with the political democracy. Since there is no realization of social democracy in India, the question of expectation of continuous participatory democracy becomes hollow.

As Ambedkar and Gandhi had different observations on the question of panchayats, Nehru too had his independent observations. Nehru as a modernist was averse to giving ruling power to village communities. His understanding of village was guided by his exposure to western ideas such as liberty, democracy, development etc. He was more towards political and economic development in the modernist sense. 'He emphasized upon economic planning or planned development of the country, modernization, new technology and atomic energy with a view to realising democratic values and socialistic objectives for India'(Gehlot,1990:260). Nehru's understanding of village life was not with any social inclusive sense because he only looked at economic and political backwardness of village communities. He did not see the social backwardness of village people with respect to their interrelationship and social harmony. He did not look at how the village life was based on social hierarchies and the related discriminations and inequalities associated with them.

After independence Nehru and his colleague Patel 'spent much of their time taking charge of, adapting, and sustaining the institutions of the Central government' (Manor, 2012:63). Nehru was more delighted by development led by centralized state machinery. It is argued that this did not make him hostile to democratic decentralization (Ibid). An example of as early as 1949 is given as proof for this observation. The example is 'the Etawah project-- an initiative in selected villages in Uttar Pradesh- which, among other things, sought to promote the idea of self-government through panchayats'(Ibid). It is pointed out that Nehru wanted attention to be given to this project (Ibid). But, mere giving attention to some developmental projects which had certain objectives to bring self-governance cannot be the reason to locate Nehru as a leader who was philosophically in favour of local self-governance.

The other fact which is given to argue that Nehru was not against decentralization is the setting up of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee in 1956 to make recommendations on community development programmes. 'The Mehta Committee diagnosed the lack of democratic local bodies with real powers as the major cause of the failure of the Community Development programme' (Chandra, Mukherjee and Mukherjee, 2008:76). The remedy suggested by the Committee 'was the setting up of Panchayat Raj (PR) by instituting three levels of representative bodies' (Ibid). Nehru embraced this concept of Panchayat Raj (Aiyar, 2014) and 'state governments in all parts of the country introduced Panchayat Raj legislation' (Chandra, Mukherjee and Mukherjee, 2008:76). No significant change happened with the introduction of Panchayat Raj in the country. Nehru witnessed the beginning of local governance but did not come up with any innovation to make local governance more successful. In his tenure as a prime minister he could have taken tangible action to give life to self-governing bodies as it has happened due to 73rd amendment. There might be several other reasons for Nehru not paying much attention to local self-governance but it becomes difficult to accept him as a leader who was in favour of local governance just because of certain facts in his favour.

Strong support for local self-governance came from indigenous socialist thinkers like Jayaprakash Narayan and Rammanohar Lohia. There was hope among many that Independent India with its new Constitution would run as a successful polity, as it had been the aspiration of the national movement for freedom. Contrary to such hope things turned differently in the sense that people could not realise true freedom, true governance for the people. Jayaprakash Narayan was one among many leaders who 'got disillusioned with the working of the democratic polity in the country' (Chakrabarty and Pandey, 2009:109). This dissatisfaction regarding working of democracy might be the reason for Jayaprakash to travel to different European countries to understand the functioning of government in these countries (Ibid). One fundamental flaw he found out in all these countries including India was over-centralization of power at higher levels of governance (Ibid). As an effort to revitalize the existing polity he suggested revival of panchayat raj system.

Jayaprakash Narayan desired that the foundation of Indian Polity 'must be self-governing, self-sufficient, agro-industrial, urbo-rural, local communities. The highest political institution of the community should be the General Assembly-the *Gram Sabha*- of which all the adults should be considered members' (Guha, 2012:408). He did not favour the principle of election for the executive positions in institution of the community.

The selection of the Executive – the Panchayat- should be by general consensus of opinion in the Sabha. There should be no ‘candidates’, *i.e.*, no one should ‘stand’ for any post. There should be clear-cut qualifications, as in ancient times, laid down for all selective posts. *No individual should hold the same post for more than a defined period of time.* The panchayat should function through sub-committees, charged with different responsibilities. There should be no official or member appointed or nominated by the State government in the panchayat or its sub-committees’ (Ibid).

Ram Manohar Lohia is another prominent socialist who supported local governing institutions. Lohia suggested a four-pillar model of government in which village, district, state and centre functioned as the levels. The decentralized polity suggested by Jayaprakash Narayan was of five levels consisting of village, block, district, provincial and central levels. (Chakrabarty and Pandey, 2009:111). It is observed that Jayaprakash’s model of decentralized polity ‘gives a more decentralized base to the ‘four-pillar model of government’ as suggested by Ram Manohar Lohia’ because Jayaprakash ‘tried to broaden the base of local level of government by including a middle level also in between the village and district levels so that the operational imperatives of the local government may be strengthened’ (Ibid).

Lohia’s argument was that the then ‘political and administrative institutions were not in tune with the traditional life of India. And those institutions were based on foreign elements which were detrimental to the growth of a strong and healthy India’ (Kumar, 2011:252-253). He was in favour of ‘the division of sovereignty at many levels of administration’ (Ibid: 253) and did not like ‘the concepts of omnipotent and omniscient state. The state must possess limited powers. The hands of common people must be strengthened. He firmly held the view that only decentralization of powers guaranteed individual freedom and strengthened the base of democracy’ (Ibid). Lohia did not trust ‘the model of modernization and economic development that the Congress stood for under Nehru’ (Tolpady, 2006:411).

In response to the Nehruvian project of modernisation and development, Lohia conceived a comprehensive notion of economic and political decentralisation based on a radical and creative rereading of Gandhi. To him the Gandhian concept of decentralisation was a holistic vision implying decentralisation at every level. Lohia believed that political decentralisation could not be achieved without economic decentralisation. Huge machines in the economic sphere were to him the counterpart of a big and centralised state in the political sphere (Tolpadi, 2010:75).

Criticizing the attempts of industrialising ‘India in the western manner, he propounded the theory of the small-unit machine.’ (Jadhav, 2010:26).

He came up with the theory of small-unit machine 'to represent economic decentralisation and the "four pillar state" to signify political decentralisation' (Tolpadi, 2010:75)

Shift and Continuation in the Narration of Self-governance:

In recent years the aspiration for self-governance has received new vigour because of the intervention by state governments in the name of development. Governments at state level would generally come up with varieties of developmental projects and many a time they would not help the concerned villages. In such situations there will be tussle between governments and concerned villagers who oppose unwanted developmental projects in their villages. Panchayats as local governing institutions can also be manipulated by the dominant political communities as far as issuing no objection to developmental projects in their respective villages. Gramasabhas, which are pivotal in deciding the matters concerning issues of Panchayats' governing mandate may become forums of political manipulation. In such situation people whose voice has not been heard in these forums may go for other option like strikes and other forms of protest.

When people sensed the manipulation on the part of representative institutions including local self-governing institutions, they had to opt for alternative methods of putting-up things in order on the question of development. Since the last more than three decades people's movements have been actively participating in the debate on governance. They have been instrumental in raising varieties of questions on governance. 'People's movements resisted increasing commodification and monopolisation of natural resources like land, water and forest, their unsustainable use and unequal distribution, exploitative power relations, the centralisation of decision-making and disempowerment of communities caused by the developmental process. They asserted people's rights over natural rights and decision-making process' (Sangvai, 2007:111). People's movements such as the Majdoor Kisan Shakti Sanghathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan, Parivartan in Delhi, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), Samaj Parivarthan Samudhay (SPS) in Karnataka and many others have contributed to the discourse on local governance indirectly through their activities. The MKSS played a significant role in empowerment of the poor people in the state of Rajasthan (Ganguly & Mukherjee, 2011:173). Parivartan, effectively employed the strategy of using Right to Information (RTI) 'to find substantial leakage in the public-distribution system governing the delivery of subsidized food for the poor in Delhi' (Ibid). The SPS is known for its campaign against

government and corporate abuses and has been in the forefront for causes like participatory local governance.

An important feature of many social movements which came to the fore since last two decades on the question of governance is decentralisation and empowerment of people.

Almost all new movements have a common agenda of restricting state power and strengthening people's power. The new movements want the people to redefine the content and process of development, where the pervasive power of the state does not suppress the initiatives and capacities of people through the panchayat raj village republics. According to this thought decentralisation is not to be the old oppressive village system (Sangvai.2007:115).

Now there is the thinking that 'representative democracy in the newly independent state has failed and on the contrary has become more oppressive, colonial and serves the interests of the market and acts as a collaborator of global market-capitalists' (Ibid:116). The new social 'movements demand the rights of the people in the small units of governance' (Ibid). These movements 'address, on the one hand, the problem of making institutions of governance at all levels more accountable, transparent and participative and, on the other, create new political spaces outside the state structure, in which the people themselves are enabled to make decisions collectively on issues directly concerning their lives' (Sheth, 2004:56).

If the comparison is made between thinking of peoples' movements and modern Indian political thinkers, the vision and aspiration of peoples' movements can be considered as both continuation and change. It is continuation in the sense that they heavily borrow the ideas of Gandhi as far as their understanding of empowerment of local institutions is concerned. They follow the path of Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan as far as participatory and deliberative democracy is concerned. It was Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan who had questioned the overarching role of the state in the matters of governance. The great value of Narayan as philosopher lies in his 'criticism of existing society: the acquisitive instinct must be curbed; greater decentralization of economic and political power must be achieved; economic inequalities must be reduced; and the exaltation of the state over the individual must be avoided' (Appadorai, 1968:357). Lohia suggested appropriate action to get his vision implemented. 'Constructive action, supplemented by peaceful resistance to injustice, is the "appropriate form of action" suggested by him. Electioneering activity - the ballot box - is necessary but by itself inadequate to secure the socialist

objectives' (Ibid: 359). The new peoples' movements are fighting against state's control over individual or local initiative in the last more than two decades. They are questioning the state's facilitator role for multinational corporations in their activity of suppressing local initiatives and decisions. For many of the movements and activists, elections are not the only solution to overcome the problems of governance including local governance. To a considerable extent elections have lost their importance for these movements and they have started believing in continuous engagement with the representative institutions. For this they have adopted peaceful resistance as a method of dissent and critique of hegemony, domination, and all-pervading role of the state and its agencies. Thus, new peoples' movements have been following the ideas and strategies of thinkers like Jayaprakash and Lohia.

As far as social issues like caste oppression and gender violence at village level are concerned these movements are more Ambedkarite than Gandhian in the sense that they are demanding peoples' participation at local governance but the inclusive participation which empowers every section of the society. This is a change in their understanding of local governance and it can be considered as their contribution to the discourse of local governance. It is their unique contribution because they are not following the understanding of Ambedkar that villages are a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism. Their efforts show that they believe in the possibility of villages becoming an arena of social and political changes. At the same time they are not of the Gandhian understanding of villages that villages are locus of genuine freedom. They are trying for village to become an arena of genuine freedom through social and political democratic activities. In one sense it is their tribute to Ambedkar because it is he who aspired for social and political democracy to go hand in hand. Their thinking and activity is a combination of Gandhian and Ambedkarite philosophy which they are trying to realise at village level. It is a combination of their ideas but not acceptance of their philosophy in toto.

Conclusion:

After independence the idea of participatory democracy did not receive genuine attention by the government of India. It got certain recognition through the 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has brought changes as far as representation of women, scheduled castes, and tribes are concerned. Seats have been reserved for women, scheduled castes and tribes. This step is revolutionary in the sense that it would alter the

power relations at village level and it is innovative because it is a move forward and 'not a return to the institutions of the pre-colonial village' (Beteille, 2002). These amendments have no doubt enhanced the quality of participatory democracy to certain extent but are not radical as far as genuine participatory democracy at local level is concerned. It is the lacuna in these amendments that has made many concerned organization and grassroots activists to highlight the issue of participatory democracy. The idea of participatory democracy has received major attention from these organizations and activists. This idea has 'not only been kept alive but developed conceptually and in practice by a section of grass roots activists' (Sheth, 2004:52).

Contemporary thinking on Indian political institutions has varied observations and suggestions for better governance. There are arguments in favour of democratising the representative institutions in the form of ensuring a greater role for people than the elected representatives. Bikhu Parekh observed that India's Constitution 'enshrines the principle of parliamentary sovereignty and trusts the representatives more than those who elected them. We should substantially revise this doctrine and find ways of giving the people a greater political role and limiting the power of their representatives. The Panchayat Raj is a step in the right direction, but we need to give the panchayats greater powers and autonomy' (Parekh, 2006:449).

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