

Rural Development and Democratic Decentralization: A Gandhian Study

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Abstract:

Poverty reduction and economic growth can be sustained only if natural resources are managed on a sustainable basis. Rural development can stimulate rural economies, create jobs and help maintain critical ecosystem services and strengthen and strengthen climate resilience of the rural poor. Gandhiji considered agriculture as the main stay for the upliftment of the entire nation. He also had the firm belief that “the future of India lies in its villages”. To Gandhiji, the practice of agriculture signified a promise of limitless reach. Gandhiji also desired that the workers in village should feel confident of the science inherent to their work, and that the modern scientists should sensitize the villagers about the scientific developments, relevant to them. According to Gandhi every person should be provided with bare minimum necessities i.e. food, shelter, and clothing.

Keywords: Poverty, reduction, economic growth, minimum necessities.

Introduction:

“The future of India lies in its villages” – Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhiji firmly believed that self-reliant villages form a sound basis for a just, equitable and non-violent order. Gandhiji wanted to rebuild India from the lowest level with the poorest and the weakest. So he gave a call to the people to go back to villages for the development of the rural area. He had visualized self-reliant villages, free from exploitation and fear, as an important part of the decentralized system. Gandhi firmly believes that village republics can be built only through decentralisation of social and political power. In such a system decision-making power will be vested in the Village Panchayat rather than in the State and the National Capital. The representatives would be elected by all the voters of that village for a fixed period of five years.

Mahatma Gandhi is universally known as the practitioner of truth, love, non-violence, tolerance, freedom and peace. He was very much concerned with the nature, poor, deprived, and the downtrodden and he has intended to alter the evil political, social and economic systems of the people. Mahatma Gandhi struggled to inculcate the sense of self-respect, self-confidence and self-reliance to promote the power of decision-making among the people. He further believed that India will have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts not in palaces. He held this conviction by saying that "If village perishes, India will perish too. Gandhi played the leading role in securing for India political independence from the British Raj, through organizing and mobilizing Indian people from all walks of life in a peaceful and non-violent manner. He is therefore rightly called the ‘Father of

the Nation'. Gandhiji's approach to India's rural development was holistic and people-centered. It was rooted in his conviction in the tenets of truth, non-violence and the goodness of human-beings.

Gandhiji's concept of rural development is oriented to the uplift of the common man. He stressed the need for cottage industries in place of gigantic industries and advocated for a decentralised economy instead of a centralised one. He realised the need for integrated rural development and believed that education, health and vocation should be properly integrated. He emphasised the need for education and training for rural reconstruction. Gandhian approach to rural development strives to reconstruct village republics which would be non-violent, self-governed and self-sufficient so far as the basic necessities of ruralites are concerned.

Democratic Decentralization:

Democracy is basically a decentralized system. A centralized administration however efficient it may be can never excel the basic idea of democracy, i.e. government by the people. In a vast country like India democratic decentralization is the method of making democracy real through Panchayati Raj institutions. 73 Amendment is a historic step to revitalize the PRIs in India. The new arrangements will certainly reduce the burden of the government and increase the responsibilities of the people. For the effective implementation of the system the people should be made well aware of it. The effort has been made in this direction in the present volume. It would be useful for the policy-makers, teachers and students of political science, economics and law.

The basic function of democratic decentralization is to ensure that the development planning is more responsive and adaptable to regional and local needs of the population. It ensures people's participation - the fact recognized by all for the success of developmental programmes. Further, it is also based on the premises that the people at the grass root levels have a better perception of their requirements. However, the system of local self-government goes a step further by ensuring delegation of political power. It also ensures involving objects of development in directing and executing the developmental activities an indispensable aspect to improve the effectiveness of programme. Therefore, planning and implementation of development programmes by people's participation in political and developmental processes constitutes a significant aspect of Panchayati Raj/Municipal bodies.

Democratic decentralization underlines a state which is more responsive to local needs and aspirations and produces systems of governance that are more effective. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) represents a mechanism for democratic decentralization. It is argued that rural development (RD) and the poverty alleviation programmes can be best achieved through democratic decentralization.

In India, during the 1950s, the desire of the Government to develop the local areas as per the local needs led to the launching of the Community Development Programme. However the failure of the programme to achieve the stated objectives led to the formation of Balwantraji Mehta Committee. The Committee was constituted to examine the reasons for the failure of the programme and to recommend measures for realizing the principles of democratic decentralization. Consequent upon the recommendations of the Committee the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were introduced as institutions of local self-government. The PRIs were to be so organized as to facilitate not only participation of the rural masses but also to enable them to participate in the micro-planning and implementation of the various developmental schemes.

Political Decentralization:

Political decentralization aims to give citizens or their elected representatives more power in public decision-making. It is often associated with the pluralistic politics and representative Government, but it can also support democratization by giving citizens, or their representatives, more influence in the formulation and implementation of policies. Advocates of political decentralization assume that decisions made with greater participation will be better informed and more relevant to diverse interests in society than those made only by national political authorities. The concept implies that the selection of representatives from local electoral jurisdictions allows citizens to know better their political representatives and allows elected officials to know better the needs and desires of their constituents. Political decentralization often requires constitutional or statutory reforms, the development of pluralistic political parties, the strengthening of legislatures, creation of local political units, and the encouragement of effective public interest groups. The rationale of decentralized governance is also derived from the drawback of centralized decision making at the macro governmental levels. Being away from the basic spatial units such as hamlets and villages and with power concentrated at the top of the space in a pyramidal power base the state and the union government power structures draw representatives from well endowed sub-regions and sections of the community.

Democratic Development through Decentralization:

According to Gandhi decentralization of political power is the basic requirement for the success of true democracy. For him a decentralized democracy based on non-violence must consist of groups settled in small communities or villages in which voluntary co-operation is the condition of dignified and peaceful existence. For, it is the only way to realize the value of democracy from the grassroots level as it will enable the people to participate in taking and implementing decisions without a rigid and strict control of any higher authority. Moreover, it is the only alternative to reduce the interference of the state in day-to-day affairs of the people. Gandhi never believed in half-way house democracy, or disinterested decentralization. He does not advocate decentralization only because of its economic and political advantages. To Gandhi decentralization envisions and upholds the cultural or spiritual ideal of simple living and high thinking.

Gandhi is opposed to all kinds of concentration of power. He says centralization is a menace and danger to democracy. Concentration of power in his view distorts all democratic values. So he thought that "possession of power makes men blind and deaf; they cannot see things which are under their very nose, and cannot hear things which invade their ears." Thus, his linking for decentralization originates from his urge for the shrinking of the state and the deepening of the roots of democracy. He therefore asserted that "If India is to evolve along non-violent lines; it will have to decentralize many things. Centralization cannot be sustained and defended without adequate force". In other words centralization as a system is inconsistent with non-violent structure of society. Moreover, he was convinced that moral progress was possible only in a decentralized set-up. So he wrote, "The end to be achieved is human happiness combined with full mental and moral development."

Recognizing the importance of democratic institutions at the grassroots level, the Constitution of India, under its Directive Principles of State Policy, 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." Our rural democracy has reached the stage where people participation has been assured by the introduction of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in India. Those who decry Panchayati Raj as an election stunt

are only those whose feudal interest has been overthrown by the power reaching to the people. Our late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said, “We trust the people. We have faith in the people. It is the people who must determine their own destinies and the destiny of the nation. To the people of India let us ensure maximum democracy and maximum devolution of power. Let there be an end to the power-brokers. Let us give power to the people.”

Conclusion:

To promote rural development and democratic decentralisation, Government of India initiated many Rural Development programmes implements such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana– Gramin (PMAY-G), Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), Deen Dayal Upadhyay – Gramin Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Rurban Mission (SPMRM), Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana (SAGY) and National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP). The Departments of Rural Development implements these programmes through the State Governments as well as Union Territory Administrations, aiming at sustainable and inclusive growth of rural areas. The objective of these programmes is to bring about overall improvement in the quality of life of the people in rural areas through employment generation, reduction in poverty by enabling poor households to access gainful self employment, ensuring minimum national standard for social assistance and provision of other basic amenities.

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