

Gandhiji's Idea and the Grassroots Reality of the Panchayats: A Study of Two Districts of West Bengal, India

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Abstract

Gandhiji believed that India lives in her villages. He felt that each village has to endure democratic practice to establish real democracy in the country. Gandhiji was the main architect of decentralisation through panchayats, and believed in complete Swaraj of villages. He was against the centralised planning process. However, the draftsmen of the Indian constitution were doubtful about the self-rule of the villages, as in their opinion villagers lived largely in the world of ignorance and illiteracy. Therefore, contrary to Gandhiji's view of Gram Swaraj, panchayat institutions were placed in the non-justifiable part of the constitution. Throughout the planning process, it was largely realised that a decentralised planning process through steady Panchayat Raj can resolve the problem of deprivation of the villages. Thus in 1993, according to the 73rd amendment to the constitution, panchayats were recognised as the third tier of the federal structure and were entrusted with the authority of self-rule. Against this background, the present study tries to show how the self-authoritarian power of the panchayats has been hindered and the scope of decentralised planning became distorted. The study shows that in West Bengal (the state popular for steady Panchayat systems since the 1970s), panchayats are barred from exercising self-rule. The present study, based on primary data collected from two districts of West Bengal (Purulia and North 24 Parganas), has shown how the socio-political factors inhibit the democratic practice of the villages by hindering the process of participatory planning at the panchayat level. The study was done by intensively assessing both the beneficiary and

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non-beneficiary villagers. It also explores how panchayats have been transformed into centres of political power instead of people's power.

Keywords

Gandhiji, Panchayats, self-rule, decentralisation, participatory planning, West Bengal

Introduction

India has been through many structural changes since the 1990s. As the economy faced liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation, the rural economy went through drastic changes. Rural poverty increased massively as there was a large scale decline in public investment in rural infrastructure, marketing, credit facilities, and subsidies in the rural economy. Although villages are the lungs of Indian economy and culture, the rural sector has remained marginalised in the growth process. After the 1990s, as India started to emphasise growth and urbanisation, the deprivation of the villages increased. It was realised worldwide from this time that only the economic, social and political empowerment of people can enhance the capabilities of the impoverished. Lack of real opportunities and capability deprivation were considered the components of poverty. Academicians and economists strongly suggested widening the scopes of participatory planning and democratic practice for the real development of the downtrodden. It was understood that unless the growth process incorporates the impoverished and the powerless socially, economically and politically in an intensive manner, they cannot enjoy the fruits of development. Therefore, along with inclusive growth, a participatory planning process was proposed for uplifting the marginalised. Along with the liberalisation model, decentralisation through local governments was expanded throughout the country with a strong emphasis on participatory planning. The 73rd amendment to the constitution in 1993 included Panchayats as local governments in the rural sectors as the third tier just below the state governments in India. Panchayats with self-authority were given the power to execute the local level planning and the welfare programmes according to the local needs. Public forums organised by the panchayats were recommended as the basis of participatory planning. Against this backdrop,

the present study assesses the relevance of participatory planning at the village level in executing the welfare programmes by the panchayats. While doing this, the study also tried to gauge the existence of democratic practice among the villagers and association of the commoners with the local governments. This micro level study aims at assessing how far the Gandhian philosophy of self-rule through the panchayats has taken shape in the villages after the revolutionary 73rd amendment to the constitution. Perceptions of the villagers about the panchayats, welfare programmes and the public forums were assessed by intensively interviewing the villagers in the two districts of Purulia and North 24 Parganas in West Bengal. Four panchayats under two blocks in each district were studied. A total of 120 beneficiaries of different welfare schemes and 120 non-beneficiaries from each district were randomly surveyed for comparisons between the associations of the villagers with the panchayats. Two districts with very different backgrounds were chosen to assess the nature of the involvement of the villagers with Panchayat activities against two contradictory backgrounds. A simple percentage analysis was undertaken to analyse the primary data.

The next part of the study is divided in five subsequent sections. The first section discusses Gandhiji's view of panchayats and decentralisation in India. The second section discusses the status of panchayats after independence. The third section provides a brief literature review regarding the involvement of the panchayats and the relevance of participatory planning in rural lives. The fourth section discusses the findings of the primary survey. The last section is the conclusion.

Gandhiji's View of Panchayats

Gandhiji thought not only of the independence of the nation from British rule, but his struggle also aimed at the independence of the villagers from ignorance, poverty, class division and external intrusion in a sustainable manner. Gandhiji truly believed that India lives in her villages and therefore the task of nation building should start from the villages themselves. According to him, the development of our country can only be fruitful if every village of the nation can become self-sufficient. This self-sufficiency should be brought about in a sustainable manner in every respect, from economic affairs to the social and judiciary aspects of the villages. Villagers

would make plans to employ the locally available resources to sustain the local demands. There should be a participatory planning process, where every villager will participate in deciding what to produce by listing the local demands. Non-cooperation of the downtrodden with the privileged who exploit them will help to achieve the desired goal of full employment of labour and capital.

Panchayats were thought to be the heart of the villages, which with the elected local representatives would take care of the economic, social and judiciary affairs by involving the local commoners. Gandhiji always emphasised village republics focusing on panchayats. The spirit of these village republics should be based on cooperation, mass participation and non-violence which he believed will gradually ensure empowerment of the commoners and self-sustenance to the villages. Mass participation and democratic practice for the panchayats at the village level will groom leadership at the national level. He believed that a top down centralised planning process would benefit the villages as well as the nation as a whole. He always denounced central planning as external interference which would destroy the village sovereignty. It would be detrimental to the village economy if villagers cannot be relied upon to ensure local level democracy through village panchayats. If these villages do not do well, the nation cannot walk along the path of development. His visions are fully reflected in his sayings as he says. "The village panchayats should be now a living force in a special way and India would almost be enjoying self-government suited to her requirements" (Gandhi, 1947: 105). But, he warned, "democracy becomes an impossible thing until power is shared by all, but let not democracy degenerate into mobocracy" (Gandhi, 1966: 6) as he was always doubtful about the percolation of power to the proletariat in the Indian villages.

Gandhiji knew that commoners in the villages of India are mostly powerless and ignorant. If these downtrodden people are not given the chance to speak for themselves about their demands and needs in an open environment, social empowerment can never take place. Bringing these men to the public place, broadening scopes for their participation at every level and raising their voices for their needs will gradually foster true democracy. On the other hand, without broadening the scope of mass participation, a centralised democratic pattern will give some people the authority to control the proletariat in the name of democracy, which is

called mobocracy. Gandhiji warned of this mobocracy. But a half-hearted belief in Panchayats has already taken the shape of mobocracy. National leaders and draftsmen of the constitution could not believe in the panchayat system so there was no mass acceptance of the system among the policy makers, planners or national leaders. In every step they took they were careful to avoid the self-rule of the villages.

If the history of the political system of India is examined, it will be seen that the panchayat system was inherent only in the village administration system. Since the start, as villages were the units of administration, panchayat was a system through which rural people were governed and all the village affairs were looked after. The Rigveda, Mahabharata, Manu Smriti and Kautilya's Arthashastra mention local self-government systems at the village level (Mathew, 2000; Joshi and Narwani, 2002). Direct dealings of the state with the dominant land owners in the Mughal era undermined local administration of the rural society. The casteism and feudalistic culture of the Mughal reign slowly eroded the self-government system in rural India (Khanna, 1999; Singh, 1998; Tinker, 1967). The colonial era gradually built up a new system of centralised imperial structure, completely replacing the old indigenous decentralised institutions of village solidarity.

Gandhiji dreamt of reviving village panchayats and their self-authoritarian power as, according to him, the villages are the backbone of the Indian economy and serve as the basis of Indian society. He believed that decentralised planning would definitely give self-rule to the villages and foster self-sufficiency in a sustainable manner. Gandhiji was the main architect of decentralisation through panchayats, and believed in complete Swaraj. He always encouraged self-rule of the villages through elected panchayats which would have the administrative, judiciary and legislative authority. He believed that the decentralised process through elective panchayats would bring equity within the village and among the villages. In this structure only, equal sharing of power between the state and the small villages can happen, broadening the scope of regional equity of power, economic and social status.

Panchayats in Independent India

In independent India, the western culture of parliamentary democracy at the central and state level was initially followed with no involvement of

local decentralised self-governments. The idea of local self-governance was completely ignored (Mathur, 1994). The draftsmen of the Indian constitution were doubtful about revitalising the traditional panchayats in rural areas. They were of the opinion that villages were not in a position to manage self-rule as they were suffering from ignorance, deprivation and exploitation. After much debate, panchayats finally were included in Article 40 of the Directive Principles of State. The article stated that the state shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary. In spite of Gandhiji's strong feelings for self-rule in villages (Grama Swaraj), panchayat institutions were placed in the non-justifiable part of the constitution. States were given the power and liberty to handle the panchayats as they wished, thus there were many discrepancies in the execution of the system of panchayati raj in different states.

The panchayat system gained impetus in only a few states such as Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and West Bengal. However, following the Ashok Mehta Committee's recommendations in 1977, the process of democratic decentralisation through Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) developed to some extent in West Bengal, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh but the local institutions failed to develop due to political instability in most of the states (World Bank, 2001). As the 1980s witnessed poor progress in poverty reduction and bleak implementation of rural development programmes, the necessity of the panchayat system, decentralised planning and inclusive growth was realised by the planners. Eventually in the 1990s, when the rural economy and society was slowing down in the era of liberalisation, the absolute need for decentralisation through panchayats was felt. It was realised that self-authoritarian rule of the panchayats at the village level with participatory planning can only uplift the rural society with overall development. The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act came into effect from 24th April 1993 and gave the panchayat system constitutional status. The amendment also changed the federal structure of the nation by making PRIs the third tier of government below the centre and the state. The 73rd amendment to the constitution ensures certainty, continuity and strength to the panchayats. A new part (Part ix) with the heading Panchayat has been added to the constitution and Panchayats were made an integral part of the constitution. The law

sanctioned democracy at the grass roots level. The Grama Sabha or village assembly, as an authorised body of the masses, was visualised as the foundational base of the Panchayat Raj system. A uniform three-tier structure of panchayats throughout the nation was prescribed—Grama Panchayat (GP) at the village level, Panchayat Samiti (PS) at the intermediate block level and Zilla Parishad (ZP) at the district level. All the seats in a panchayat at every level are to be filled by direct elections from the respective constituencies at five yearly intervals.

Indian villages have not undergone any massive changes. Structural changes have been undertaken but true decentralisation is still missing. Panchayats have been established in every state and union territory and regular elections are arranged every five years, but in most of the states there is a mismatch between the functional decentralisation and financial devolution. States have also been slow in equipping the panchayats with sufficient functionaries. Panchayats are handicapped by a small resource base. Most of the panchayats across the country, with a few exceptions, are used by the states to implement the central schemes by using the grant-in-aid. Local level planning is often manipulated by the local representatives. Political power games include almost all panchayat activities, leaving very little scope for the commoners to raise their voices and extend democratic practices. According to many research studies, a client-patron relationship exists in local politics at the village level which overrules the panchayat system. In some states, elite capture of the village panchayats and the schemes which they run is widely seen. Therefore the majority of the fruits of the development schemes and the efforts of the state power have been intentionally passed to the well-to-do section, leaving the downtrodden in despair. Most of the subalterns and the marginalised, who make up the largest share of the nation's population, are left without benefits. A small proportion of the population that is politically powerful and wealthy has all the advantages.

In this study the state of West Bengal is portrayed on the basis of primary data. Two districts are focused upon to show the peculiar nature of the democratic practice experienced by the villagers of West Bengal. Eight village panchayats in four blocks in the two districts were studied to gauge the workings of the village panchayats, the relationship of the villagers with these panchayats, and explore the factors which play a crucial role in

distributing the benefits of the welfare schemes run by the panchayats. The work is a micro level comparative study based on primary data collected from the beneficiaries of different government schemes, and the commoners who have not succeeded in receiving any sort of government benefit from the panchayats. It will be illustrated how a parallel system, fully charged by local politics, runs with the panchayat system and completely offsets the panchayat dynamics. The panchayat system has remained a puppet in the hands of the politically powerful. All the machinery of the panchayat system remains completely politicised. As a definite outcome, participatory planning and democratic practice remain a complete mockery and the downtrodden remain as disempowered as before. They are forced to show their support for the ruling party to get a share of the benefits which are actually meant for them.

This study also tries to show how people remain aloof from the Grama Sansads which are the public forums at the ward level organised by the panchayats. Panchayats do not take the initiative in spreading awareness about these Sansads. They are not organised to broaden the scope of democratic practices and participatory planning. Only a few of the villagers, most of whom are supporters of the ruling party, are present at these forums. People who participate remain inactive and are mere listeners. Only plans and programmes are read out by the representatives. No one is encouraged to ask any questions or raise their voices for their needs. If they raise their voices, they will be marked as opponents and will lose the small chance of gaining any benefit from the panchayats in the near future. Thus the ongoing system of the panchayat affairs and their programmes lacks any transparency or accountability. The present study will show how the system is demoralised, even after rewarding panchayats as the third tier in the federal structure of India. Other factors such as how a nexus between the political leaders plays the role of the beneficiary selection of the schemes executed by the panchayats, and how the public forums at the panchayat level are maintained only in papers are discussed.

A Brief Literature Survey

There is a vast amount of literature on the necessity of the panchayat system in our country and the factors which cause hindrances to their

functioning. Most of the literature identifies the factors inhibiting the panchayat structure from acting in a beneficial way for society. Studies have mostly pointed out the inertia of the state governments in fully authorising the panchayats so that they can competently work to uplift the rural society. Many studies have marked the local political system, a nexus between the political powers and the elite society to overrule the panchayats, and the disorganised rural society as the major inhibitors in the way of panchayats. Panchayats became centres of political power at the local level but failed to become centres of people's power (Bhattacharya, 1998; Ghosh, 2008). Political participation has not paved the way to democratic participation. The mandatory Grama Sabha described as the public forum of all the electors at the village level has not gained its due weightage. Mass participation at the forums has been too low and fails to reveal a decisive role in the formulation of local plans, selection of beneficiaries and management of local resources (Bhattacharya, 2002; Mandal, 2005; Chatterjee, 2008; Roy, 2007). Also, the panchayats have not been equipped enough to fulfil the pivotal role as a self-government authority to execute a welfare programme on its own (Ghosh, 2008). The evolution of all formal institutions and organisations is largely influenced by gender, class, caste and social capital (Pande and Urdu, 2005). The vulnerable sections like the women-headed families, casual labour families and ignorant families are mostly left out of the programmes executed by the panchayats (Alsop et al., 2000). In communities lacking mass awareness and social bonding, administrators and politicians initiate and define the environment in which community participation takes place (Hussein, 2004). The absence of democratic practice has led to inequitable distribution of basic facilities and unequal distribution of local public goods in many parts of India (Bardhan, 2005). A study based on household surveys in the districts of West Bengal concluded that all the poverty alleviation programmes functioned relatively better regarding targeting through panchayats in villages where landlessness, the proportion of lower caste people and illiteracy rates are low (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2003). It was also shown in the study that non-development expenditure increased at the village panchayat level with an increase in landlessness at the village level. A rise in the political control of the ruling party over the local government institutions,

particularly Zilla Parishads, has led to massive leakages of the resources of the poverty alleviation programmes towards the medium and big landowners. The study also concludes that political competition at the local level panchayats is fought more on the grounds of political loyalty among the villagers and less on the efficiency in implementing the poverty alleviation programmes (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2003). Another study based on field surveys in the two states of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan showed that sharing a good relationship with the Panchayat Pradhans and having a good connection with the panchayat members either socially or politically served as a major basis for being included in the beneficiary list (Alsop et. al., 2000). A household level study revealed that lack of information and abstaining from Grama Sansads and other social networks decreases the ability of the poor to gain benefits from the schemes. This study also found that in some states, the greater the amount of land owned, the larger the chances of participating in public forums organised at the panchayat or ward level (Shankar et al., 2011). Another household level study in 88 villages of West Bengal concluded that the smooth functioning of democracy depends on political awareness and participation of the poor, which in turn depends on wealth, caste, education level and gender (Bardhan, et al., 2009).

Various studies focusing on the functioning of the panchayats have hinted at a malfunctioning of the Panchayat system. In most of the research works, a sort of political and elite capture of the decentralised local government system is witnessed. The elected system is not permitted to function freely. As a result, the marginalised section with the least resources and power faces massive deprivation and the developmental efforts are channelled to the well-to-do section. Strong organisation of the poor and their effective participation can do a lot in improving the decentralised local government system. Efficient social networking among the vulnerable section and their presence in the planning process can make the panchayat system work for them and uplift their condition.

Findings of the Primary Survey

To test the above-mentioned findings of the literature in the case of West Bengal on the functioning of panchayats in different states of India, two districts of West Bengal with very different conditions have been chosen.

One district, North 24 Parganas, is a quite advanced district located nearby the capital of the state, with only two backward villages based on marginal farmers, agricultural productivity and female literacy rate. The other district, Purulia, is a distant district with a massive tribal population and about 200 backward villages. The study is an empirical one based on data collected from two blocks of North 24 Parganas—Barrackpur 1 and Hingalganj—and two blocks of Purulia—Arsha and Hura. Eight panchayats of the four blocks in two districts have been chosen; four village panchayats from North 24 Parganas—Kampa-Chakla and Shibdaspur in Barrackpur I and Hingalganj and Sandelbil in Hingalganj and four village panchayats—Daldali and Jabbara in Hura and Henshla and Beldih in the Arsha block of the Purulia district.

West Bengal is a state where panchayats have continuously acted as state agencies for village level development since the 1970s and have created an example nationwide. Grama Sabhas in the state functioned to increase democratic practices since the enactment of the State Panchayat Act in 1992. After the 73rd amendment to the constitution, the state enacted the Panchayat Act in 1994, which introduced two tiers of direct democracy—Grama Sabhas at the panchayat level and Grama Sansads at the ward level. The amendment included compulsory ward meetings of Grama Sansads twice in the months of May and November and an annual meeting in December at the panchayat level. The Act also initiated the process of representation of the backward classes and women in a proper manner at the grass roots level.

In light of West Bengal's above-mentioned initiatives in ensuring the effective functioning of the panchayats, this paper tries to analyse the facts and figures that have been apparent in West Bengal with a simple percentage analysis based on primary data. The study aims at assessing the relationship between the village panchayats and the villagers. The research also examines the existence of a democratic practice of the villagers by studying their participation at the public forums. This has been done by assessing the factors determining the beneficiaries of different social security schemes. A comparative study of the beneficiaries of different schemes and the people who have failed to get any benefit from public welfare schemes was undertaken by analysing the attitude of the villagers towards panchayats, panchayat representatives and public forums. It investigates whether these

beneficiaries are selected through local level planning or discussions at the public forums organised by the panchayats, or if some other factors play the primary role in their selection.

From the survey it was found that in West Bengal the democratic practice has not taken shape in the approved manner. People do not participate wholeheartedly in the panchayat activities or at the public forums organised by the panchayats at the ward level. Most of the sections of the village population are not made aware of these forums. In many instances, they do not know the timings of these forums. Even if the villagers go to the Sansads, it is only numbers that matter, not the active participation which can widen the scope of participatory planning. The panchayats only act as state agencies for implementing the welfare programmes and consolidating the political power of the ruling party at the village level. Table 1 presents some facts and figures evident from the survey.

Table 1: Panchayat visits and democratic practices in the villages of North 24 Parganas and Purulia

	North 24 Parganas		Purulia	
	Percentage for the beneficiaries	Percentage for the non-beneficiaries	Percentage for the beneficiarie	Percentage for the non-beneficiarie
Never visit the panchayats for any purpose	15.24	20.63	54.80	48.19
Visit the panchayats only at the time of need or crisis	39.05	48.41	22.60	33.73
Visit Block Development Offices	39.05	94.44	37.67	39.76
Attend Grama Sansads	38.57	60	35.62	28.91
Active participation at the Grama Sansads	20.95	40.48	23.29	15.66
Information received informally about the schemes and the	88.57	30.95	72.60	32.17

It can be perceived from the percentage analysis represented in Table.1 that panchayats do not play a central role in selecting beneficiaries, pursuing village plans and granting disbursements. A parallel information system exists in the villages, which predominantly decide upon all aspects of village planning.

It was seen that the villagers who neither have any political background or kinship in the village remain absolutely deprived. The marginalised and the downtrodden frequently visit the panchayats for resolving their problems, asking for grants and for getting information about different schemes and disbursement processes of different grants. In many instances, they receive a sort of indifference and rude behaviour from the functionaries as well as the representatives. The commoners are treated by the Panchayats merely as receivers of different grants, not as the stakeholders of the panchayats. The masses are ignorant of the fact that the panchayats are their institutions, meant for them. The whole system functions in a bureaucratic manner as centres of political power. Local partisan politics are completely based on a client-patron relationship. Panchayat functionaries and the representatives play the role of servers and the commoners are at the receiving end. The people who are involved with the ruling party get the information mostly from outside the panchayats in an informal way so they do not need to even visit the panchayats. In North 24 Parganas 89 per cent of the beneficiaries receive all sorts of information in an informal manner. This statistic is 73 per cent in Purulia. Only 31 per cent of the people who do not receive any sort of grant or do not participate in any public welfare scheme can get informal information from the party men in North 24 Parganas, and in Purulia it is only 32 per cent. Most of these people who failed to get any sort of help from the panchayats in North 24 Parganas visit block offices. Here again, instead of a decentralised panchayat structure, they go to bureaucratic institutions in search of help. While visiting the villages it was seen that Grama Sansads were organised as official forums but people's participation was almost absent there. Only the ward representatives read out the plans and programmes and expenditures loudly. There were no questions or queries raised and there was no space for participatory planning. People were found to be unsure about raising their demands with their representatives and were not made aware of the timings

or whereabouts of the Grama Sansads. Largely, the commoners who attended the Grama Sansads and dared to make some queries were not supporters of the ruling party. Most of the beneficiaries were supporters of the ruling party, and received most of the information about the public schemes and the panchayat's activities from the local party men. In many instances, some of the supporters are asked to be present at the public forum of the Grama Sansads to form the quorum. These people often do not dare to make any queries. They sometimes only raise their local problems.

In Purulia, there is minimum interest in panchayats among the villagers. The village panchayats remain closed for several days and no one remains at the village panchayat office to interact with the commoners. A sense of inertia exists among the commoners about the panchayat institutions. As the block offices are far from the villages, villagers cannot manage the time to visit them for information and resolving problems. Grama Sansads are also not organised on a regular basis. There exists massive unawareness about these public forums therefore participation of the commoners is very low, which is reflected in the statistics of low attendance in the Purulia district. Here the party system informally manages all the development programmes and channels the grants to their supporters. Maybe the apathy of the decentralised institutions by the local masses has given rise to external disturbances like Maoist problems. As the district is remote located in the Chotonagpur plateau, it lacks employment opportunities throughout the year. Land is infertile with low irrigation opportunities. People have to go through tremendous hardship to make any earnings so they massively migrate to other places for work. Against this background, the inactivity of the panchayats is behind the under development of the region as well as the people. Therefore, in this hopeless condition people become misguided and wrongly mobilised by external factors against the existing institutional system.

It can be said that Gandhiji's dream of decentralised people's power through the panchayat system is far away from the reality of village life today. The loopholes of the planning process and the half-hearted efforts of the state governments to incorporate panchayats into the federal structure all create the dilemma. The panchayats have remained the implementing

agencies of the development programmes in the states mainly depending on the grants-in-aid. States have been given very little opportunity to manage their own resources as their resource bases are too narrow. Except for Kerala, the panchayats of other states face resource crises in making their own local plans fruitful. The panchayat system is also not equipped with adequate functionaries as the states do not show initiatives. Therefore there always remains a mismatch between the functions and the functionaries, which makes the whole system faulty. As the village panchayats lack properly motivated and well-trained functionaries, they lose their reliability and competency among the villagers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that in West Bengal the panchayat system remains totally dependent on the political will of the state government. West Bengal was one of the pioneers in implementing panchayats in the villages and executing regular elections of the panchayats. But the state runs the panchayat structure to popularise its machineries and consolidate the political power at the grassroots level. The colour of the ruling party changes but the functioning process of the panchayats does not go through any radical change. Regular elections are held at the panchayat level in the state but people only use their power of franchise and democratic practice is totally ignored. Commoners are only acquainted with the political symbols and the faces of the people who stand for these symbols. They are taught to vote for a certain symbol. A sort of manipulation of the voting machinery is undertaken by frightening people or on the basis of patronage. The panchayati system based on partisan politics is used to groom local leaders of the ruling party and to maintain a strong base in the villages of West Bengal. The system is far from the cooperative ideology of Gandhiji. People do not even know that they are the stakeholders of the panchayati system and have every right to demand any explanation from the panchayats. Panchayat functionaries and the elected representatives do not take a single step towards mobilising people in the right direction and broaden the scope of democratic practice. The panchayat functionaries only maintain the official records and the whole system is managed by the party system. Elected representatives are only the spokespersons of the party system,

not the representatives of commoners. A political capture of the rural society can be seen in the villages. A parallel system determined by the socio-political factors overrules the panchayat structure, works as an organisation to disburse information and even chooses the beneficiaries of different welfare schemes. Without true democracy at the grassroots level, panchayats can never function correctly with proper objectives. There is the need of an ethical and educated leadership who can organise people, spread awareness, and become their moral support. Social organisations also need to come forward to spread awareness among the rural masses about their basic rights and the panchayati system. A true social bonding among the commoners can widen the scopes of mass organisation and democratic practice. With democratic practice at the village level, people can actively be involved in local level planning, which will lead towards self-sufficiency of the villages and proper functioning of the local governments. Thus local panchayats have a two-fold role in the lives of the rural people. They have to strengthen their moral power, mobilise and empower them. Empowerment of the people will again strengthen the bases of the panchayat structures.

The dream of Gandhiji is thus a long way from achievement. The practices prevailing in the villages of India will have to undergo a long journey to enable true democracy and decentralisation through panchayats to happen. To materialise the Gandhian philosophy of democracy and decentralisation at the village level, a true leadership has to be nurtured which will initiate the people's movement for their rights. Simultaneously, commoners should empower themselves to act as proper stakeholders and mobilise themselves against any sort of corruption and malpractices. Social organisations, academics and researchers should come forward to spread awareness among the commoners and organise them with the motive of empowerment. If the commoners are aware of their rights and can raise their voices for transparency, no external force will get the opportunity to override the panchayat system. Panchayats will get the impetus to function properly and start executing programmes for the people on the basis of participatory planning.

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