CHAPTER 4

PEOPLE'S EMPOWERMENT
Two major initiatives have been taken by the Government of India a decade before in the area of public administration. These are economic liberalisation under the New Economic Policy (July 1991) and empowering people through decentralisation of power, called Panchayati Raj Act April 1993.

The goals of economic reform have been succinctly recapitulated in the discussion paper of the Ministry of Finance. "The fundamental objective of economic reform is to bring about rapid and sustained improvement in the quality of life of the people of India. Central to this goal, is the rapid growth in incomes and productive employment. Hundreds of millions of our people are still trapped in abject poverty. The only durable solution to the curse of poverty is sustained growth of incomes and employment in farms, roads, irrigation, industry, power and above all, in people. And this investment must be productive. Successful and sustained development depends on continuing increases in the productivity of our capital, land and labour.

Investment in people and capital is necessary, but not enough for rapid productivity growth. People must also foster an environment which encourages full utilisation of our material and human resources and ensures that they are deployed in the most productive manner. What kind of economic environment will achieve this? Decades of development experience in dozens of countries show that a good economic environment combines the discipline of competitive markets with efficient provision of key public services, such as primary education, primary health care, transport and communication and of course, law and order. Consumers gain from choice. And producers (public or private) are most productive when exposed to competition. Government should foster the maximum flowering of personal initiative and effort, but it must also step in where market fail or are abused powerful sectional
interests. Fostering an economic environment, which promotes rapid, broad-based development will not be easy. Old habits of thinking and working must be shed. Difficult decisions will have to be taken which hurt powerful vested interests. Reforms of broad policy will not be enough. They must be accompanied by reforms of laws, rules and procedures. But it can be done. People should ask ourselves why do millions of our countrymen and women who migrate abroad, prosper? Because the environments they go to, reward hard work, efficiency, discipline and social responsibility. Surely, people can cultivate such an environment at home, so that 1000 million of us can also enjoy the fruits of prosperity without leaving our beloved land.

Within a generation, the countries of East Asia have transformed themselves. China, Indonesia, Korea, Thailand and Malaysia today have living standards much above ours. The proportions of poor in these countries has declined from 40 percent and higher in the early 1960s to below 10 percent. Their levels of life expectancy, nutrition, literacy, school enrolment and medical facilities are much higher than ours today, though they were not so very different two or three decades ago. What they have achieved, we must strive for.

To repeat, the goal of our economic reforms is to improve the living standards of all of our people, not just the rich and privileged. Reforms will be difficult and will take several years. But the alternative of continuing widespread poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, disease, malnutrition, rising inflation and stagnant production is unacceptable. Another side the objectives of empowering people through people's participation in decision making process and decentralisation of power (Panchayati Raj) have been clearly enunciated in the prime-minister's letter to Panchas and Sarpanchas in May 1993. "You would be glad to know that democracy and devolution of powers to Panchayats have now become part of the most sacred document of this nation: The Constitution of India, no one can now snatch democratic practices from your panchayat. Panchayats cannot be kept arbitrarily suspended or dissolved now. No one will be able to take away the powers, responsibilities and
finances devolved upon the Panchayats. The constitutional changes will prove to be a major landmark in the history of development of rural areas of the country.

This Act will ensure that real power will go back to you only and you will be expected to play a much greater role in the development of your area and people. It should be possible to ensure the participation of poorest of the poor in this process and no section of society should have a feeling of being left out.

Village Panchayats will very soon become living institutions on permanent basis and will consist of representatives of the people elected by them. These institutions will run various programmes for their welfare and will also involve people in their planning. They will be vibrant institutions performing necessary development, regulatory and general administrative functions. Agriculture, Land Improvement, Animal Husbandry, Village and Cottage Industries, Health, Sanitation, Family Welfare etc. will necessarily be the concern of the village Panchayats. They must be able to provide for the day-to-day common needs of the people, besides protecting their well being in different ways.

Development of our nation can only be achieved if our vast rural areas are developed. People living in rural areas have been suffering from poverty and unemployment and they do not have adequate purchasing power. In some of the areas the plight of the poor people is multiplied by the vagaries of nature. Excessive problems are created for the poor people due to failure of monsoon and some of the areas are chronically drought affected. In these areas you are expected to play a much greater and responsive role so that relief could be provided to the needy people.

Recently, I have toured the drought affected regions in the states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. It is my firm belief that relief programmes can be administered in a better and systematic manner only with the involvement of Panchayats”.

“Empowerment means that people, especially the poor people, are enable to take more control of productive assets as one key element. Participation,
Decentralisation and Empowerment enable local people to exploit the diverse complexities of their own conditions and to adapt to rapid change.

Similar to the concept of participation, it appears that much ambiguity surrounds notions of ‘empowerment’. Empowerment is a term, which is widely used but not properly defined. Empowerment is often a very loosely employed term. The most important thing to understand about empowerment is that, in a sense, no one empowers anyone else. In the way it is used in relation to development, true empowerment is achieved by people themselves, through their own efforts. Karl says, “empowerment is a process and is not, therefore, something that can be given to people. She further says that, “the process of empowerment is both individual and collective, since it is through involvement in groups that people most often begin to developed their awareness and the ability to organise to take action and bring about change”.

Just as economic growth means little unless it is translated into improvement in human lives, so also democracy can be merely an empty ritual of periodic elections unless people actively participate and are aware and empowered, in all the institutions of civil society. People everywhere want to determine their own destiny. Democracy has its own problems when it comes to managing competing claims of different classes, ethnic groups and political factions. Developing countries are especially vulnerable because the State Controls a big part of resources and when these are allocated by Government decisions the reward for influence can be very high.

Decentralising governance from the “Centre” to states, Towns and villages – can be one of the best means of promoting people’s participation and efficiency in working. In India Local government is widely known as Local Self Government (LSG). This term originated when the country was under British administration and did not enjoy and tinge of Self-government either at the centre or at the state level. When a decision was taken by the British government to associate Indians in administering local affairs, it only meant a slice of self government for the people.
The important local bodies today are District Boards, Municipalities, Improvement Trusts, Development Boards and Panchayats. Their administrative functions cover a wide field like education, medical aid, public health, water supply, communication, lighting, sanitation, drainage, construction of roads, bridges and culverts etc.

There are many establishments like Railways and Defence departments which provide separate roads, transport, systems, water and electricity works, educational and recreational facilities in deed virtually the whole range of affairs which are customarily looked after by local government. Yet they can not rigidly by called local government. The essential attributes of a local government are firstly statutory status, Secondly its power to raise finance by taxation in the area under its jurisdiction, thirdly participation of the local community in the decision making in specified subject and their administration; fourthly the freedom to act independently of central control; and lastly its general purpose approach in contrast to single purpose character.

The constitution’s 74th Amendment Act, 1992 on Municipalities had come in to existence, stooping towards delegating the powers to people at the grass root level. Subsequent to the 74th Amendment to the constitution, the Municipal government / Local government has attained a special status as the government at the third level, after the two levels of Central and State governments. Local Self-Government (LSG) with an electoral body and people’s participation is the essence of the 74th Amendment. Consequent upon the Act, the LSG envisaged the composition of Municipalities, constituent Ward Committees, financial provisions and the functions of District and Metropolitan Planning Committees. The composition of Municipalities Stipulates direct elections from territorial constituencies in Municipal area, also known as wards. The state legislature may, by law, provide for representation of persons in the municipality, who may be having special knowledge or expertise in the field of municipal administration and the Members of the House of the People and the Members of legislative Assembly of the state representing constituencies which comprise wholly or partly the Municipal area.
Decentralisation can take place in several forms: it might be for example horizontal or vertical. Horizontal decentralisation disperses power among institutions at the same level; for instance a government spending decisions instead of being concentrated in Finance Ministry might be taken at the level of different Ministries. On the other hand, vertical decentralisation allows some of the powers of central government to be delegated downwards to lower tiers of authority to states and the further down to local governments or so. Vertical decentralisation of the government can itself take 3 forms:

a- Deconcentration

b- Delegation and

c- Devolution.

Deconcentration is limited to passing down only administrative direction to local offices of central government ministries etc. Although it does result in some dispersal of power, few decisions can be taken without reference to the centre.

Decentralization, in its deconcentration aspect, is spurred by what are essentially functional considerations, for example preventing the central system from becoming too unwieldy; securing speed and economy in delivery of public goods and services. Deconcentration, through the process of decongestion and localization improves common man's access to public services by relocating services to various serving sites instead of confining at one central point.

Delegation, on the other hand, involves passing some authority and decision making powers to local officials.

Devolution is the strongest from of decentralization-granting decision making powers to local authorities and allowing them to take full responsibility without reference back to central government. This includes both the financial powers as well as the authority to design and execute local development projects and programmes Political devolution in its present day connotation means much more beyond its
conventional sense. It is not simply Local Self Government Institution (LSGI) but the LSGI with vibrant local level assemblies so that not only the elected representatives but the entire adult population gets associated through active participation in decision making process. The closer to the grass-root democracy is extended, the brighter would be the chances of accountable governance. The two effective wings political decollation are sub local for a of political devolution is one of the told of collective political action as strategy for reforms, seeking people’s participation in the governance process.

In most of the developing countries, decentralization has been limited to decontraction. Wherever the decentralization has gone beyond the extent of devolution, the resources which are controlled by the local government, municipalities etc. are generally very small.

In the Indian Context, the panchayats as institutions of self-government are expected to manage their resources and to plan and implement schemes for socio-economic development and social justice. Much depends on how the elected representatives use the available resources for the benefit of the community and how skillfully they perform the functions and also how vigilant and active the Gram Sabhas are. The Gram Sabhas can be regarded as the ‘base’ on which the pyramid of PRIs rests. Since it is the Gram Sabha whom the PRIs represent and to whose needs they must respond to and to whom they must be accountable, therefore, it is incumbent upon the Gram Sabha in turn to be watchful about the general functioning of the PRIs as without the participation of the Gram Sabhas, the PRIs have no way to succeed village people now have a forum in the Gram Sabha for direct participation in managing their own affairs. Focus on Gram Sabha has to sharpened to make it functional and participatory adequately.

As regards the urban local bodies, the 74th Amendment Act, 1992, provides for establishing District Planning Committee (DPC) under section 243ZD. It is accordingly required to constitute in every state, District Level Planning Committees
for consolidating the plans prepared by the Panchayats and the Municipalities of the concerned District. The draft development plan for the District as a whole has thus got to be prepared by the DPC.

Every DPC is required to take note of many considerations while preparing the draft development plan namely, matters of common interest between the Panchayats and Municipalities including spatial planning, sharing of natural resources, integrated development of infrastructure and environmental conservation, the extent and type of available resources financial or otherwise.

A Metropolitan Planning Committee (MPC) under section 243ZE has to be constituted in every Metropolitan area, for the purpose of preparing the draft development plans of the Metropolitan areas. Now with the MPCs formulating the preparation of the development plans for the Metropolitan area, obviously the functions of the Urban Development Authorities (UDA) and State Town Development Authorities (STDA) will become ineffective and redundant. The existence of multifarious authorities would more over pose difficulties for coordination for local planning in an integrated manner. For the consumption of MPC, the roles of the Development Authorities (DA) and STPA have to be integrated for preparing the development plan of both Panchayats and Municipalities.

Not less than four-fifth of the total numbers of members of DPC shall be elected by and from amongst, the elected members of the Panchayats at the District level and of the Municipalities in the District; in the case of MPC, however, not less than two-thirds of the Members shall comprise the elected strength.

Reservation of seats is done for the scheduled tribes under section 243T of the 74th Amendment Act, 1992. Thus the LSG would have greater participation of weaker sections. Women have also been covered within the ambit of reservation, by this way the women are also expected to have an active role to play in functioning of LSG administration.
The 74th Amendment Act has given mandate for creation of elected ward committees and zonal committees in the larger cities (with a population of 3,00,000 and above).

Administratively, it is important that the civil services, which any community of people would need, are planned, programmed and integrated in terms of region or area inhabited by them. Local government involves distribution of work on a territorial basis. Local government is necessary precisely because some public requirements at least are totally local in their intensity, character and scope or in other words they are not common to all the areas and the degree of their intensity shows marked variations from region to region. Such local matters can be overcome by evolving local solutions only for which local government exists.

"True democracy cannot function through the twenty people sitting in the centre. It should be from base level and by the people of village", the above statement of Mahatma Gandhi reflects the importance of public participation and people’s empowerment in decision making process. Public participation can be assured through Panchayati Raj or democratic decentralisation. Fortunately, India has adopted the ideas of Panchayati Raj in the country. Rajasthan has the honor of being the first state establishing Panchayati Act on 2nd September 1959 for the first time in India. Late Prime Minister Pt. J. L. Nehru inaugurated Panchayati Raj system on 2nd October 1959 at Nagaur district or Rajasthan.

The Panchayati Raj has become backbone of our democratic setup. On the recommendations of B. R. Mehta Committee three-tire system of Panchayati Raj was adopted with Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat at village level, Panchayat Samiti at block or Tehsil level and Zila Parishad at the district level were constituted. Panchayati Raj Institutions are elected bodies and have to work in cooperation with each other. The people of the village take part in their elections. All social and economic activities of villages are governed through panchayats. The employees of these institutions work under elected public representatives. They have vast powers to
mobilise resources and organise public meetings. These institutions are responsible to execute the programmes and plans related to village development. The basic ideology behind Panchayati Raj is that the people of the villages should shoulder the responsibility of their administration.

Democracy is introduced to grass roots of the country through Panchayati Raj. Even the common people of the country are associated with administration through these institutions. Through Panchayati Raj Institutions, local people not only determine policies but they also guide and control the administration for the execution of these policies. The importance of Panchayati Raj System lays in the fact the expansion of democracy at the grass roots and public participation in government programmes and development activities is possible only through this system.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act\(^\text{10}\) was passed which provided constitutional status to PRIs and enhanced its power for better functioning.

The main features of the Act are as follows:

a- A three tier system of Panchayati Raj for all states having population of over 20 lakhs;

b- Panchayat elections to be held regularly every 5 years;

c- Reservation of seats of SC/ST and women (not less then one third of seats);

d- Constitution of State Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats, and

e- Constitution of District Planing committees to prepare development plans for the district as a whole.

With the enactment of this amendment the PRIs have been endowed with such powers and authority as may be necessary to function as institutions of self-government and contains provisions of devolution of powers and responsibilities upon panchayats at appropriate level with reference to:
a- Preparation of plans for economic development and social justice.

b- Implementation of such schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them.

As per Article 243-H of the constitution, State Legislatures have been empowered to enact laws:

a- to authorise a Panchayat to levy, collect and appropriate some taxes, duties, tolls and fees;

b- to assign the Panchayat, some taxes, duties and tolls levied and collected by the State Government;

c- to provide for making grants-in-aid to the Panchayats for the Consolidated Fund of the state; and

d- to provide for constitution of such funds for Panchayats for crediting all money received by or on behalf of Panchayats and also the withdrawal of such money there from. The tenth Finance Commission, made an adhoc provision of Rs. 4381 crores to the PRIs for the period 1996 – 2000. The Eleventh Finance Commission has recommended Rs. 1600 crores per annum for rural local bodies and out of total grants, an amount of Rs. 197 crores has been earmarked for development of data base on the finance of the Panchayats. The commission has also recommended that in cases where elected local bodies are not in place, the Central Government shall hold the grants for local bodies in trust on a non-lapsable basis during 2000 – 05 and that the Central Government may also withhold a part of the recommended grants in case of such bodies whose functions and responsibilities have not been developed. Besides, the commission ahas recommended that audit of accounts of the local bodies be entrusted to C and AG who may get it through his own or by engaging outside agencies.
A conference of Chief Ministers under the Chairmanship of Prime Minister was held on 2\textsuperscript{nd} August 1997, to review the functioning of PRIs\textsuperscript{12}. Based on detailed discussions the conference recommended setting up of two committees – (a) the committee of ‘Panchayat and Tribal development’ ministers of 8 states to examine and give recommendations to enact the state legislation in consonance with the Central Act 1996. (b) the committee of Chief Ministers under the Chairmanship of Prime Minister to examine the issues regarding the devolution of powers, functions and responsibilities upon PRIs and to recommend measures to streamline the Panchayati Raj System.

The important recommendation of the committee of Chief Ministers are as follows\textsuperscript{13}:

- Leave selection of beneficiaries to Gram Sabha.
- Waive requirement of technical sanction for works up to Rs 10,000
- Innovate to provide adequate manpower support to the Gram Panchayats
- Delegate total control over such manpower to Gram Panchayats.
- Make Zilla Parishad Chair persons the Chairpersons of DRDAs.
- Provide reasonable opportunity to hearing to the PRIs before suspension / dismissal.
- Expenditious constitution of District Planning Committees.

The role of Gram Sabha is, perhaps, the most important in ensuring the success of PRIs at the village level. The role of local people in conducting social audit\textsuperscript{14} and fixing responsibility on Panchayat functionaries will be effectively ensured with the Gram Sabha becoming active. It is essential that the village community perceive meetings of the Gram Sabha as useful. The most important factor for that is the empowerment of the Gram Sabha.
Another important factor for the success of the PRI is the need for transparency in the functioning of these bodies. Panchayats being closer to the people, their right to information and accessibility to the Panchayats must be ensured. The Government of India had urged the States, that all relevant information on development schemes taken up by the Panchayat along with budget for them should be displayed prominently in the Panchayat office. Panchayats should make relevant records available for inspection by members of the public. Photocopies of documents such as muster rolls, vouchers, estimates, etc can be made available to the public on payment of a nominal fee.

The Government of India observed the year 1999 – 2000 as the “Year of Gram Sabha”. This is in recognition that the Gram Sabha is potentially the most decentralised democracy. All the states have been requested to initiate measures to energise Gram Sabha with minimal package during the year in tune with the following points:

a- The relationship between the Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat may be the same as between the legislature and the government. The panchayat should be accountable to the Gram Sabha in unequivocal terms. The members of the Panchayats should hold office only so long as they enjoy the confidence of Gram Sabha.

b- The Gram Sabha has full powers for determining the priorities for various programmes in the village and approval of budget. Prior approval of Gram Sabha should be made mandatory for taking up programmes and certification of expenditure.

c- Consultation with Gram Sabha should be made mandatory before acquisition of land for public purpose and other forms of land transfer.

d- The management of natural resources by any authority should be made subject to the concurrence of the Gram Sabha.
e- The Gram Sabha should be vested with full authority to manage all affairs concerning intoxicants including total prohibition, if so desires.

f- Participation of women, SC and ST members in the Gram Sabha should be made mandatory with suitable provision for their presence in the quorum of Gram Sabha meetings.

g- The Gram Sabha should have the power to evolve its own procedure for conducting its business. The rules and regulations which may be issued by the Government in this regard from time to time should be deemed to be as guidelines.

h- There are 3.45 million elected representatives at all level of Panchayats. Out of them about 33 percent belongs to the weaker sections of the society. The constitution has placed vast responsibility on the gram Panchayats to formulate and execute various programmes of economic development and social justice. Thus, elected members should be trained for enhancing their skill through appropriate orientation. Therefore, a time bound and systematic training programme for elected members is considered to the most important prerequisite for the success of PRIs. The Ministry of Rural Development extends financial assistance to the states in their effort to train and create awareness among the PRI elected members and functionaries.

**DECENTRALISATION AND WORLD BANK**

The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development or the World bank was setup in 1946 and began operations chiefly to finance productive projects to further the economic development of member nations. The World Bank has undergone a shift in its focus since its inception after the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference in Bretton Woods. The shift is clearly visible in its approach to development. From being an exclusive and an increasingly market driven
capitalist mode of functioning, the Bank's metamorphosis in the past few years to being people friendly, community conscious is something remarkable. Of late the bank is becoming a keen player in the process of decentralisation, particularly among the developing countries of the World. It is noteworthy that the Bank's rethinking on decentralisation has begun to catch the attention of the development managers and policy makers. Interestingly, the World Bank realises that decentralisation is a 'political reality' and despite it being a complex phenomenon, has to be seen and analysed within a framework in consonance with a more institutionally sensitive perspective within the context of different countries. The bank in its new agenda is emphasising the importance of the element of decentralisation in its projects. From 1993 the Bank has in its projects sectoral decentralisation strategies as an important component. Moreover, 12 percent of the projects completed between 1993 – 97 have involved decentralising responsibilities to the lower levels of government, one of the project states being Andhra Pradesh17.

One of the main reasons cited for bringing decentralisation to the centre stage according to the latest document 'Rethinking Decentralisation in Developing countries', authored by Jennie Litvack, Junaid Ahmad and Richard Bird and Published by the World Bank is "its cross-cutting reform that relates to such important Bank concerns as the relation between fiscal and financial development; macro-economic stability; poverty alleviation and the social safety net; institutional capacity, corruption and governance; investment in infrastructure; and the provision of social services18. All these are closely and directly related to local self-government systems all over the World; especially for developing economic management for which end the process of decentralisation is crucial to understand and explicate. Will it augur well for the developing countries or is it just a face-saving exercise in the light of the result of the harsh conditionalities imposed on the countries of eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Republic for which they are now paying a huge price, remains to be seen. Students of Social development in developing countries would ask. Is it World Bank rhetoric or banking with a human
face? But going by the recent documentation of the World Bank on the subject and studies conducted by it, there is no doubt that the Bank with a human face could be a reality in the developing World.

The Bank’s initiative is to address the inherent weakness in the institutional infrastructure in developing countries that constrains flow of information, and a proper system of accountability that are the bare essentials in the decentralisation process.

The World Bank views decentralisation as the assignment of fiscal, political and administrative responsibilities to lower levels of government and views the process as a global phenomenon and its implementation will ensure the stability, efficiency and equity of the economic system.

Decentralisation per se for policy makers at the Bank revolves around 3 key elements; fiscal decentralisation, political decentralisation and administrative decentralisation. To discuss them briefly, fiscal decentralisation involves the setting up and collection of taxes; political decentralisation refers to “the extent to which political institutions map the multiplicity of citizen interest onto policy decisions”. Here the focus apart from the conventional meaning of political decentralisation — centre to the state and then to the districts — is on the individual and community and their primary role in effecting policy changes within their immediate social environment. This is effective through strengthening democratic institutions at the local level. Administrative decentralisation deals with mainly the distributive element, involving both fiscal and political powers. However, it maintains that all this may be possible only if the implementation is carried our with a sound knowledge of the local institutions.

The Bank reiterates that a serious review has to be initiated keeping in mind the vagaries in the form and content of decentralisation patterns followed in different countries. Hence, more studies and research need to be undertaken to view in a crystallised manner the context – specific nature of decentralisation. However,
learning from the experience of India, what is important is political decentralisation. India has gone ahead with it and now the second and the third stages, namely administrative and fiscal decentralisation are in the offing. Of course it is not easy, there is virtually a struggle by about 3 million elected representatives to the panchayats and municipalities in India (out of which one million are women), for these two aspects to become a reality. In many states administrative machinery is not transferred to the local bodies.

The bank’s document on ‘Rethinking Decentralisation in Developing countries’ gives example of several countries successfully attempting decentralisation. Mention may be made of south Africa, India and Colombia. In Colombia for example it highlights the success of decentralisation in 16 municipalities. It underlines the basic principle of a demand driven (bottom up) approach to public services than supply driven (top down). Through this process there is a new liveliness in politics, more extensive community participation, ensuring that “people are getting what they want rather than what some one in the capital thinks they should want”. Studies show that people trust the local government more than the national government to deliver goods and services. Colombia also has the ‘co-participation’ system, (equivalent of Shramdan in some panchayats in India); local communities provide labour and local materials for new projects. The newly empowered and responsive local governments sincerely attempt to satisfy people’s local needs. After the constitutional sanction given to the local bodies in India, they are on the same path of these municipalities in Colombia, and some states like Kerala and West Bengal are far ahead than other states in this respect. As mentioned earlier the World Bank has been conducting studies and research in the field of decentralisation. One of the recent publications of the Bank is authored by Prof. James Manor of the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, U.K. Prof. Manor who has been closely studying the decentralisation processes in India with special reference to Karnataka, in his latest analysis provides an overview of the decentralisation initiatives in various countries and addresses their impact in the
narrowing of regional and economic disparities. It examines from a political economy perspective, the origins of the current wave of decentralisations in less developed countries, and its implications, especially its promise and limitations for rural development. Drawing extensively from the experiences of India, Prof. Manor cites the necessity of deep-rooted democratic traditions for a successful experiment in decentralisation. It is a matter of satisfaction that India has come a long way to fulfil this criterion.

After more than fifty years, the World Bank has indeed seriously taken up the cause of decentralisation and this new agenda, given top priority will bring positive results in the new millennium for the developing countries.

WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

Democratic decentralisation would be rendered meaningless unless gender-equity is ensured. The pace of development in any civil society would be slow if women who constitute about 50 percent of the population are not facilitate to participate in the development process. India with a female population of over 450 million possesses a vast reservoir of women power, which exceeds the combined total population of the South-East Asian Countries.

The 73rd Amendment to the Indian constitution is epoch-making inasmuch as for the first time in the history of Indian Polity, it provided for a minimum number of seats and political offices in the panchayats for women. In the context of meagre representation of women in the state and national legislatures vis-a-vis their population, reservation of not less than one-third of the total number of seats, and chairperson of panchayats should be considered a significant landmark in the process of political empowerment of women. Clause (3) of Act 243-D inserted in the Indian Constitution by the 73rd Amendment Act provides that “not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes
and Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat." Similarly, clause (2) of the same Article provides that "not less than one-third of the total number of seats reserved (for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) shall be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes or, as the case may be, the Scheduled Tribes." Moreover, the proviso under clause (4) of the said Article which deals with reservation of offices of the chairpersons in the panchayats for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and women stipulates that "not less than one-third of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the panchayats of each level shall be reserved for women." 

The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution has greatly contributed to the political empowerment of the women and marginalised communities in the rural society and has thrown open political opportunities in the panchayats to these disadvantage sections. There were of course skeptics who are not favourably disposed to the proposition of women leadership. Guided by their traditional dominance in a patriarchal society, the males used to cite some of the disabilities of women like illiteracy, family responsibilities, poverty, lack of experience, exposure, awareness and communication skills etc., as the inhibiting factors for effective participation of women in the decision-making process at the local level. Similar arguments were also made in regard to the reservation of political officers to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. The upper class/caste males were indeed apprehensive of the very idea of political empowerment of women and weaker sections, and were frantically in search of methods through which their traditional hold in the rural sector could be retained. Even the women and the marginalised communities in the rural sector were not initially very confident of their abilities to assume leadership in the panchayats.

Obviously, the leadership that emerged as a result of the empowerment of women had to cope with several problems due to their traditional socio-conditioning.
After overall discussion it is understood that empowerment is as a process to change the distribution of social power in favour of the down-and-out in the arena of interpersonal relations and in societal institutions. In Paulo Freire's sense empowerment involves enabling the oppressed to become active and reflective about their reality to create social capacity to struggle to transform existential reality. Thus empowerment is essentially a process which involves confrontation as it is based on redistributionist – transformationist plank. In the Gramschian sense it refers to understanding and challenging the hegemony.

The colonial rulers were, as expected, interested in maintenance, consolidation and expansion of the regime. Empowerment of the people did not therefore form part of the colonial policy. After the Sepoy Mutiny, which had caused a serious crisis to the colonial exchequer, the British rulers became interested in local government as a measure of replenishing to exchequer. During Ripon’s time the question of empowerment of the people had gained some significance but it was primarily for the colonial interest and marginally for the people of India. His attempt to develop local government as an instrument of political instrument of the masses was not successful.

Gandhiji had realised the need for empowering the countryside. He wanted village swaraj to be the starting point of the post-colonial state structure. Nehru did not share his views. The constitution of India did not accept the significance of the countryside in India’s governing design.

The post-colonial India state had embarked on community empowerment through community development efforts in 1950s but it failed because of the lack of interest on the part of the community. The community was invited to participate in the development process dominated by the bureaucracy.

Following the recommendations of the Balvantray Mehta Committee the state again tried to empower the rural community by developing three-tired grassroots democratic institutions. But the institutions did not grow primarily because of the lack of political will. Added to it were the factors like unfavourable socio-economic
reality. In 1980s the realisation dawned on the leaders that no efforts of rural development would bear fruit unless and until the community was empowered. In fact, it was time when the development theorists were emphasising it as development facilitator. It is based on the philosophy that once empowered poor people who had previously been powerless, can become agents of their own development.

Rural sector on a micro-space has acquired considerable power in the Indian Polity over the last two decades. There has been a significant increase of rural representation in India’s Parliament. Rural mobilisation on prices, subsidies and loans dominated non-party political processes in the 1980s. All political parties support rural demands for remunerative agricultural prices and for higher investment in the countryside.

But the power of the rural sector is not unconstrained. The size of the rural population, as the Harvard University Scholar, Asutosh Varshney remarks, cuts both ways; it makes the countryside powerful in democratic political system but checks this power economically. Universal franchise and competitive democracy in a primarily agrarian India have led to the empowerment of the countryside. But the crosscutting nature of rural identities and interests is a constraint on it. Policies based on economic interests can potentially unite rural India, but politics based on caste, ethnicity and religion divide the countryside and thus adversely affect the process of empowerment.

The capitalist Indian State may also use empowerment as a subtle way of co-opting the masses to top down dictated development. It can also take empowerment initiatives for the purpose of legitimising its coercive authority or regaining its lost legitimacy.

It is against this background one has to understand the recent state-sponsored initiatives for empowering the countryside. Such initiatives, as the experience suggest, can be of two types – empowerment through participation and empowerment through education and conscientisation.
Empowerment through participation has taken the form of constitutional amendment. As noted earlier, the state had tried to develop grassroots institutions for people's participation in late 1950s and the attempt was unsuccessful. The 73rd constitutional amendment came in the wake of suggestion that constitutionalisation of panchayats would alone strengthen them. The amendment inter alia stressed on holding of elections at regular intervals, participation of the weaker sections including women through reservation of seats in panchayats and creation of Gram Sabhas as the lowest tier of the system.

The holding of elections at regular intervals offers the people an opportunity to empower themselves by bringing about a change in the social base of the system. Research suggests that the traditional power holders attempt to stay on in power either by refusing the people the right to elect their leaders at regular intervals or by manipulating elections. The constitutional amendment has empowered the state to foil the first attempt. The recent panchayat elections in Tamil Nadu had shown that caste and religion did not play as significant roles as they did in earlier elections.

The constitutional amendment has facilitated the presence of a significant percentage of the weaker sections in the panchayat bodies. But study suggests that weaker sections find it very difficult to discharge their assigned functions. Such cases are not few and far between in many north India states. The study conducted by Participatory Research in Asia, Scholars (PRAS) indicates that in Uttar Pradesh the backward caste heads of panchayats have very little say in decision-making processes. The scholars have observed that when discussions are held on various sensitive issues like crime, encroachment on land only the influential members participate and decide. The representatives from the weaker sections are crowded out by the rich and upper caste.

The same has been the case with the women for whom the posts of chairpersons have been reserved. The Participatory Research in Asia Scholars (PRAS) study reveals that in states like Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Madhya
Pradesh and Gujarat in the case of female headed panchayats their husbands preside over the meetings. In Haryana, for example, out of six female headed panchayats the meetings were presided over by the husband in one panchayat.

Gram Sabha is a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village. The study conducted by Participatory Research in Asia Scholars (PRAS) in states like Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh indicates that organising gram sabha meetings has turned out to be a more formality. Second, most of the gram sabha members are not fully aware of the need for such a forum. Third, the meeting are held without proper notice. Fourth, the gram sabha members who work as daily wage labourers, cannot forgo their day’s earnings. Fifth, the members feel disappointed to attend meetings because they have found that decision taken are not properly implemented.

A research team studying gram sabha meetings in Karnataka, has noted that women remain passive observers in the meetings and the elders remain mute. Most of the members were not familiar with act. Many were hesitant to confront elected representatives and the officials.

In West Bengal there are both gram sabhas and gram sansads, the former for every panchayat and the latter for every electoral constituency. All eligible voters are members of both the bodies. The gram sabha and gram sansad meetings are held almost regularly. But people’s participation is much below the desired level. Attendance in the meetings is also not encouraging. Meetings have however been most successful in places where parties have taken been interest and where attempts have been made to synchronise meetings with local traditions.

According to scholar like Webster People’s participation in West Bengal has turned out in effect to be party participation. Subrata Sinha and Arun Ghose have argued that political organisations shun community empowerment for fear of losing influence. They think that unfortunately this is today the reality in West Bengal, which has otherwise made good progress on the rural front.
The studies indicate that creation of institutions at the door-step of the people by itself cannot ensure participation and thus empowerment certain condition have to be created in society and among those who participate apart from genuine will to ensure participation on the part of those who control the institutions. People have to be motivated. People themselves will be motivated if they realise that their voice is meriting attention of those who matter.

Empowerment of people through participation in panchayats can become meaningful if the panchayats are endowed with powers, functions and responsibilities and if the wings of the political interference are clipped. But this has not happened. In Punjab, for example, elections were held after a long gap because of constitutional compulsion. But the panchayats do not have adequate powers and functions. The second method of empowering the people in the context of the third World countries like ours is the spread of literacy and access to resources and information. The launching of the literacy mission has been one of the most significant events after independence. Literacy campaign has spread in various parts in India, though success has not been commendable. At present, India spends about 30 percent of the gross national product on education but the literacy rate is awfully low. It has the largest number of illiterates in the world even when it is poised to have the highest number of graduates by the turn of the century. Only 40 percent of India’s population above 15 is literate. The national literacy mission had a mandate to make 100 million people in the age group of 15 – 35 literate by 1996. Only two thirds of the children complete primary schooling and a half-complete upper primary education.

The weaker sections of the society, namely, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are in a more pitiable condition insofar as their literacy is concerned. For example, literacy rate among the SCs and STs in Madhya Pradesh is little over 25 percent the rate plummets to 10.73 percent among women of STs and 18.11 percent among those of SCs. The state had launched the education guarantee scheme for the tribals in 1996 but things have not changed much. It is estimated that half of the world’s illiterates would be residing in India by the turn of century.
Though the literacy campaign has not been very successful, the spin offs from the campaign as noticed in some states include the women’s antiliquor agitation in the Andhra Pradesh and movement for women’s rights in Tamil Nadu.

One wonders if the ruling classes in India are serious about the spread of literacy. It may be recalled that after the anti-liquor agitation in Andhra Pradesh inspired by a book for neo-literates the government had issued on order requiring that all reading material to be used in the campaign had to be approved at the highest level of the state government.

Empowerment of the relatively powerless has inherently limited possibilities under conditions of capitalism. In today’s world situation where the world bank-led structural adjustment programmes are in operation in most developing countries, there is widespread concern about reduction of budgetary allocation for the social sectors including health. In our country, as the International Labour Organization’s Study had shown allocation for the social sectors stagnated in real terms and declined as proportion of GDP, although there was an increase in nominal terms. Based on priority allocations rations calculated for 15 states it has been found that in comparison with 1990-91 the general trend was that of a decline in allocation for the sectors of social priority between 1990 and 1993-94. An in view of the leakage’s allocation alone may not get translated into benefits for the poor.

Structural adjustment has led to an increase in poverty. Patnaik and Chandra Shekhar have cited Tendulkar’s and Jain’s computations to conclude that the increase in poverty is undeniable. According to them by insisting on a reduction in the food subsidy, elimination of all input subsidies into agriculture and requiring that prosperous farmers should not only get remunerative prices but international prices, SAP necessarily ensures that the price of food in terms of the wage unit, especially in the unorganised sector, goes up. Under such a situation the rise of rural poverty is an inevitable phenomenon. This socio-economic reality cannot facilitate empowerment of the poor.
The empowerment model rests on the idea of self organization of the poor for collective action. Self organization helps create collective strength to articulate demands and put pressure on the state. Psychological empowerment is the consequence of taking part in collective action and in gaining greater control over the means of one’s livelihood.

The greatest problem in India stems from the fact that the primary producer at the grassroots have hardly any control over the means of production nor any say in its pattern. Most of the poor in the country sides survive on the common pool resources and they have proved to be the custodian of the CDR. In the field of social forest management the mode of local societal involvement has yielded good result. Panchayats properly backed up by powerful peasant organizations and movement have to be developed as instrument of planning and development. While West Bengal has made some progress in this regard lessons have also to be drawn from Kerala’s people’s campaign for decentralised planning.

Empowerment through institutions depends primarily on the class background of the leaders who control the institutions. The institutions in the hands of the rich cannot empower the poor. It will lead to the gradual alienation of the poor from the institutions and thus work against empowerment.

The working of panchayats has to be transparent while holding of gram sabha meetings at regular intervals will go a long way in increasing the transparency, the people have to be empowered by giving them the right to information about the inner working of panchayats. Rajasthan has shown the way: following the agitation organised by the national campaign for peoples participation the state government has amended the panchayat act. The amended section of the act says that any person or any voluntary organisation can inspect records of the construction works in a panchayat area on a deposit of Rs.5. It also permits noting down of the details on a sheet of paper. The rule allows taking copies or extracts of details of documents on depositing a fee at the rate of Rs.2 for every 200 words. The precondition of proper
exercise of this right is however education of the people. And unfortunately literacy in Rajasthan is very low.

Empowering the countryside is therefore a very complicated task calling for multi-pronged action by the state and non-state agencies. Conscientisation which is an essential component of empowerment, cannot be left to the hands of the state exclusively. The non-government organisation can play a meaningful role in this regard. The mass organisations of the poor people such as peasant organisations and grassroots people's movements like the Chipko movement in the Uttar Pradesh hills, the Kerala silent valley protest, narmada bachao andolan can conscientise the poor and sensitise them to the social reality around them and thus act as a facilitator to the processes of their empowerment.
REFERENCES


8- Ibid – P – 32.


29- Ibid – P – 70.