

Reluctance to Surrender Power

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For this conference on Panchayat Raj, may I, with your permission, go back quite a few years to the early 1960s, when our great Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru planned for the effective implementation of Panchayat Raj. He selected a very able person in Dr. S.K. Dey to implement the panchayati raj system in the country. My colleagues here, who were there in the 1960s, would remember how this was given effect to at that time.

MPs, MLAs and Panchayats

The problem really remains with us, the legislators, MPs, ministers, the central and state governments who, once used to wielding authority, are reluctant to surrender even a part of it. This has been the major problem in ensuring effective implementation of the third tier of administration which we call Panchayat Raj.

At the moment, MLAs and MPs demand a share of Panchayati Raj in whatever form. The MPs demanded that they must have the right to recommend capital works to be done in their constituencies and so the prime minister gave them Rs. 1 crore each to be spent, through the district development authorities, on works suggested by the MPs in their respective constituencies.¹

Similarly, the MLAs also demand that a certain amount of funds must be under their control for directing expenditure within the system of Panchayati Raj. MLAs or MPs demand that they must have a say in the deliberations, sometimes even by voting, of the panchayati raj administrations.

I do hope, that a time will come when what we call people's administration at the grassroots would be free from the bondage of the present administrative system. The system was developed by the British under the 1935 Act. A central government was created, state governments were created, state legislatures were created. Parliament was created and so on and so forth. Highly expensive apparatus was created all over the country.

Directions, even now, go from the Centre to the panchayats. This is one of the flaws which needs to be corrected very quickly. Different governments, at different times, have sought political favours or political recognition of rural India. Therefore, you would note, that under the JRY (Jawahar Rozgar Yojana)² system we have in this country for rural development, funds are largely parcelled out by the Centre, which does not surrender any bit of its authority to the people administering panchayats.

At the time the Constitution was being framed, those framing it, I recollect, were worried how this large and diverse country would be governed after the British left. Accordingly, extraordinary authority was given to the central authority under the Constitution framed at that time. The nation had to be held together.

At that time, I recollect, Churchill was thundering in the British Parliament that the natives in India can never run their country, the white man has still to supervise. This happened not too long ago; in the forties. Well, we have entered the skin of the white man. We replaced the white man, without the efficiency of the white man, yet. I must be pardoned if I say so, the white man left, the brown man entered, whether it is in the Rashtrapati Bhavan, or the Governor's House, or the Parliament and so on. White man left, brown man walked in. That is all the position today.

Every year, one population equal to Australia's is added to our country. And we merrily go on discussing various things in various conference rooms, which we have built very comfortably for ourselves while out of 90 crores, 60 crores of people in our country live without electricity, without water, without health, without education, without anything and, ultimately, without any productive employment. It is just not possible for any nation, any government, even God himself, to provide jobs for everybody, of that I am sure.

Now, what do we do under these circumstances! Panditji, way back, was also faced with a similar dilemma: what do we do for the people. He called them "dumb millions". How do we give them voice? I remember having discussed this with him. after I became the Chief Minister in 1961, for many hours. Dr. S.K.Dey was also present with him. I said, "What do you expect them to do? We are legislators, we are ministers and even at our level there are a lot of shortcomings, great deal of shortcomings".

I remember Panditji saying, "Biju. I went for adult franchise knowing that these masses of people have neither the education, nor the training, nor the mood, nor any ideas as to whom to vote for, what to vote for. These people, largely, do not understand parties, unless you go on hammering at them that my party is this, my party is that". He also said. "In ten elections, they will begin to understand, somewhat, whether they are going in the right direction or not". By and large. I must admit, that about 50 per cent of these so-called "dumb millions" now understand their stakes in the election process. I think in another fifty years, the percentage will be much larger.

Direct and Indirect Elections

In the meantime, we have decided, and as a national policy now, that we shall have the panchayati raj institutions. I have cautioned you. from the beginning, against the institutional or human failure to accept another's authority while we still hold that authority. Now. in the execution of these things. as I had seen in the sixties and I am seeing it now, we have, in our constitutional amendment, provided for indirect elections, not direct elections. And in these indirect elections there are always great opportunities for a better off person to buy off the weaker persons.

We had indirect elections in our state for the block or panchayat samiti chairpersons, but direct elections for the chairpersons of municipalities. Direct elections have their own difficulties. Not that these will be solved by indirect elections. But the moment a person gets directly elected, he or she assumes the total authority of the people. So the person, at the helm of the administration, is not likely to take, and on many occasions has not taken, into consideration the elected ward members or the councillors.

Yet, the elected members have the power to vote out the directly elected chairpersons by a two-thirds majority. It has been my experience now in several cases, that where the chairperson has tried to work in a dictatorial fashion, he or she has been shunted out by the elected members of the panchayat samitis or the municipalities, as the case may be.

I remember one case particularly, that will be of interest for you. In Bhubaneswar, that is, in my own constituency, which is the capital of the state, there is a lady who has studied well- she is an M.A.. B. L.- but till a few years ago was a housewife; one of our eminent workers' wives. So one day I asked her, "What the hell are you doing here? Come on, do some public work". She said. "Me? I will never do that. I have never done it". I said, "We'll see. we'll try". So I put her in my van and went around every mohalla (locality) of the town saying she is my daughter and if you like me, vote for her. Well, she got votes and she won the directly elected post of chairperson of Bhubaneswar municipality. But in two years time, only recently, she was outvoted by the municipal councillors. I remember I had cautioned her. I had said, "You've been elected directly, but you have got to take your councillors with you because they have the power to outvote you". She did not listen. She said. "I have been voted to this office directly, so I must have all the powers". She went riding the flaming horse and she was brought down. Now the vice-chairman has become the chairman.

I have given you an instance of human failing in these systems. They are bound to happen. Is that not so with us? Don't we do hanky-panky to keep our governments in position whether at the Centre or in the states? We all do it. We call that politics. If it happens at the level of panchayats. then what do we call that? Village politics or rural politics? So in this system, also, we have to take the good and the bad together.

Only recently, last week, I had a collectors' conference where I told them, 'You will no longer be called collectors, but you will be called district development commissioners. And as such, your job will pertain only to the development of the district. The regular matters should be dealt with by an ADM, an additional district magistrate. You are not to be bothered with these matters'. And they are working out a system by which this would be done, by next week, by the time I go back.

When the zilla parishad elections take place, the DDC will function as the chief executive officer of the zilla parishad. I'm also giving them more authority. Many ministers here know that collectors have very little direct authority. I am also giving the commissioners of the divisions the authority to shift an officer, within their respective divisions, from one place to another depending on his failures or successes in the administration of Panchayati Raj.

We all know that BDOs, the block development officers, are the kingpin in the working of Panchayati Raj. I called a meeting of all my BDOs and secretaries. etc. And I told them, "You are the kingpin in ensuring that panchayati raj administration is a success. You belong to the educated classes and are part of the civil service and so on. These people may be uneducated, but they have the horse sense of the village. They have the sense of right and wrong. You are to support their activities when it is right. And don't try to exhibit your superiority. Because if you do that, then I'll have to come down heavily on you. You have to see that they are the bosses, you are the executive".

I have to repeat this again and again till the mind-set changes. The political culture of our system. originating from the Act of 1935, is that whether we are members of Parliament, or ministers, or the state or the central governments, we are the bosses. That is the design of the administration. Whether you are a chief minister or minister or what have you, you are the master. How can an instrument which is designed to rule, be changed into an instrument for serving the people? I have been trained to be a boss, a master, and the people are my serfs. I go to them only for voting. After that I treat them as serfs. How do I change this system? I am afraid, right from the revenue Inspector to the minister or the cabinet minister or the prime minister, whoever it is, whoever professes to work for the people, by the people, etc., when it comes to that daily routine of exercising power, they are the masters and the people are nobodies.

Fifty percent of Nation's Authority to vest with Women

Panchayati Raj has to develop a whole system of governance that includes both men and women at the grassroots level. My colleagues, on both sides, are aware that unless 50 per cent of the nation's authority vests with women and 50 per cent of the elected representatives are women, this country can never make or register any progress. Of that, I am sure. And I know this from recent experience in my state. Orissa was the first state to implement 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in municipalities and panchayats, in 1992. At that time the Centre was still only discussing this provision. The constitutional amendment passed by Parliament two years later had the same provision. My only regret is that we had 33 per cent reservation for women in Orissa. We should have made it 50 per cent.

We should also pass an act to ensure that women have 50 per cent reservation in the state assemblies and in the Parliament. Unless such a drastic step is taken and women legislators, both in the Parliament and in the assemblies, take their rightful place, this country will continue to limp and not make any progress. The result of male domination and male chauvinism is for everyone to see. Our population has touched 90 crores (900 million). There are not enough jobs, not enough education, not enough health facilities, nothing. Unless women get the power and authority due to them, this cannot change.

Now in my state, thirty-odd thousand women have been elected to the municipalities and panchayats. We have also changed the panchayat act in our state so that if the chairperson of the panchayat samiti is a man, a woman must become the vice-chairperson. In the gram panchayats, where the sarpanch (chairperson) is a man, the post of naib-sarpanch (vice-chairperson) must go to a woman.

Now, the elected women have been given the authority and powers to deal with elementary schools, to see whether the teachers are working properly or they are just loafing around and not doing their job properly, and to write a full C.C.R.(confidential character roll) of teachers. They have also been put in charge of afforestation and child welfare. At these massive meetings of women. I have told them, 'You run homes, you take care of children, but one of the responsibilities that you must take on is to see that your child goes to elementary school'. They said. "We have nothing to eat, how can we send them to school?". I said. 'The children still live. You still feed them, don't you?'. It didn't strike them. "Give them three or four hours in school, the rest of the time they can go and collect wood from the forest for you, or whatever", I told them.

There are various sicknesses in our society like dowry deaths, dowry killings, population explosion Unless the leaders of my nation, my state, take it into their heads that this far and no further, this nation can never progress. And for that, the first thing that comes to my mind, is that (they must have the necessary authority to exercise their power.

We have also thought of having a panchayat adalat (court) in my state, manned only by women. We are going to bring about some amendments to the Act whereby such adalats can be created and women manning these are given the necessary powers, including the power to impose fines.

In Orissa, at least the women look up to me. They think I am their saviour. I have given thirty per cent job reservations to all educated women who compete. No other state has done it so far. I hope others will follow. Both educated and uneducated women can be taken care of through these kind of avenues to power.

If 33 per cent of the elected representatives in the zilla parishads happen to be women, can you imagine the task they will be given? They will be running the entire district. That means the collector or whoever, the magistrate, the commissioner or whatever you call him, will work as her chief secretary, like her principal executive officer.

You will be surprised to know that I have in the committee of advisors, totally illiterate, adibasi (tribal) women - eleven of them. But they hold their own when they talk in meetings with all my government secretaries, chief secretaries, development commissioners and the whole lot. Very quietly and politely they put across their points and then ask them. "Have you done anything for us?". These are hard-headed women who run their families under great difficulties.

One of them, in one of these meetings, said. "My husband comes drunk every night and beats us up. One day I got fed up. So I took this sukha mirich (dry chillies), I made the powder and as soon as he entered drunk, I threw it in his eyes. He shouted, 'Oh my mother. Oh my father, I am dying!', and he ran away from the house". This is a true story. You can quote me because this is what she had said in a big public meeting of thirty to forty thousand people, in her own area. She also narrated this story in my office, the chief minister's office, with about 25-30 of them listening. Two days later her husband returned, again drunk. So I asked her, "Then what did you do?". She said, 'You know, I didn't know what to do. Then I took my tangia (small axe) and went to the country liquor shop where my husband gets drunk and I broke all the liquor pots. And I told the owner of the arrack shop. You make my man drunk. Everytime you sell this I'll come and break your pots'. He said, 'Til put you to the police etc.'. I said. Take me to the police. I'm not afraid. I have not stolen anything. I'm only saying that don't make my husband drunk".

I had a conference, only last month, in the heart of the adibasi area. And there I declared that all the country liquor shops in the state would stand prohibited from April 1. It will cost us a lot of money, as

about one third of our revenue has so far been coming from the liquor business. But I thought this will do our womenfolk some good.

In the next conference I had with the adibasi women of my advisory committee along with the secretaries, they came up with a proposition. 'Yes, you have made this rule that there will be no sale of country liquor but we will enforce it', they said. I said. "What do you want?". The reply came straight on the bat. with no thinking at all. "We want police powers". What do you think of that Not educated like us, not fashionable, these are raw women, wearing only a rough saree, saying, "We want police powers". On the spot. I asked the Director General of Police to give them the necessary police powers which, under the Act, you can. And next week they will have on whatever they are wearing, some khaki thing, some badge saying they are 'special police'. And they will have the authority to go and break up all the pots and pans in shops selling country liquor - what I call the search, seize-and wrecking authority; that kind of authority they'll be given. And they are now planning to have in every village in these adibasi areas, rnafiila samittcs (women's groups) to ensure that there is no sale of liquor.

I am only telling you this to accentuate the need for women power. And I only hope, that all my colleagues here who, like me, suffer from the disease of male chauvinism will react to this, try it themselves. Try it at the rural level, at the level of the most uneducated woman and the woman who runs a family. Find out her difficulties and try to change the rules and laws of the state to give women the authority to serve themselves, which in turn serves others.

One thing I will again plead for. Fifty per cent of our nation are women. We must all talk and talk volubly so that it goes out loud and clear to the nation that the women of this country must have equal powers and equal opportunities at every step and at every level of administration right from the panchayat to the Parliament, right from the level of a minister to that of the prime minister.

The MPs Local Area Development Scheme (MLADS) was announced by the prime minister in Parliament on December 23, 1993. Under this scheme, each MP will have the choice to suggest to the district collectors works to the tune of Rs.1 crore (100 million) every year, to be taken up in his or her constituency, with each individual work not exceeding Rs. 10 lakhs (million). Members of Rajya Sabha can select any district from the state from which she or he has been elected for exercising the choice of works under this scheme. Works recommended under this scheme are required to conform to the general pattern of programmes and projects within the district plans and the centrally sponsored and central sector programmes operating within the district.

2. The Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) was launched in the last year of the Seventh Five Year Plan and the primary objective of the programme is the generation of additional employment on productive works which would either be of sustained benefit to the rural poor or contribute to the generation of rural infrastructure. Under this programme, the Centre's contribution is 80 per cent, while the states' share is 20 per cent. The JRY is implemented in all villages in the country.