

## The Administrative Challenge to Panchayati Raj in India

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### ABSTRACT

In India political system, the administrative challenge to Panchayati Raj is not exclusively administrative, it has pronounced politico-psychological overtones. And these make the challenge both intriguing and baffling. It may be argued that the politico-psychological dimension of the challenge is not peculiar to democracy at the grass roots level. It may not be entirely so and yet it is peculiar for its initial thrust and in its close deep intense and wide impact on the working of Panchayati Raj institutions in the early stage of their life. As the institutions become steady in their behaviour and functioning and as they develop healthy democratic conventions by way of their code of conduct, the administrative challenge to Panchayati Raj may itself ultimately turn out to be a transitional phenomenon.

**Key Words :** Administrative, Constitution, Democracy, Development, Institution, Panchayati Raj, Political

### INTRODUCTION

Panchayati Raj has followed Community Development programme. The latter which was earlier administered almost exclusively by the official agencies is now to be channelized through the instrumentality of the former. By virtue of this inheritance, as it were the Panchayati Raj institutions assume in conceptual terms the mantle of a developmental mechanism (Third five year plan of India). It is this conceptual image (Asian Survey, 1965) which is naturally uppermost in the minds of the civil servants and which they are also expected to protect and promote.

Democratic decentralization which has got institutionalized as Panchayati Raj in India is also a charter of the devolution of power to the people at the rural local levels who have had no access to authority and power through the centuries and who as such have had no occasion to develop norms of balanced and sober political behaviour through the essentially democratic process of trial, error and correction. This situation realistically speaking has potential for three consequences. First, there is an inherent possibility of the non-officials becoming rather

sensitive about their sphere of power and authority, they may even develop a tendency to over assert and aggrandize it. Secondly, as politics and power inevitably go together (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950, Weiner, 1962, Catline, 1962) the phenomenon of politics creeping into the operation of Panchayati Raj institutions and its interactive impact on administration can be taken as natural corollaries of a given political situation, which may even tend to create in the initial stages somewhat of an imbalance between the political pre-occupations and developmental obligations of panchayati Raj leadership. Perhaps one could expect to make politics sober, thereby safeguarding against politics becoming the be-all and end-all of Panchayati Raj institutions but one cannot hope to banish it altogether, whatever the academic-cum-idealistic and somewhat utopian arguments be in its favour. Finally, it also logically follows that there may come about the phenomenon of link politics from bottom upwards with state level politicians and political parties trying to capture and control the power structure from the grassroots through the district to the state levels and the local politicians making efforts to forge patronizing links with

higher political echelons. In a situation of this type the administration may not merely be exposed to the interactions of local politics but also of district and state level politics. These interactions may become all the more aggressive in a one party dominant system. All these three potentials have already crystallized in operational terms and determine.

The tradition of regulatory administration with all its power and prestige which has been the legacy of colonial rule in India is still a hallowed part of the administrative sub-culture in the country. The young entrant to the Civil Service is instinctively drawn to it and this in turn becomes a resistant to his adaptation to the more exacting and positive but less authoritarian demands of developmental administration which, as if to add insult to injury co-exists with regulatory administration. This contributions have no small measure to the psychological component of the administrative challenge to Panchayati Raj.

The administrative sub-culture also has a pronounced urban orientation. The recruits to the band of bureaucratic ELITE even at the State (let alone the question of the central level) have by and large an urban background. They, therefore, find the rural surroundings rather discomfoting particularly owing to the lack of physical and educational facilities in the Indian villages. They have at best a bookish understanding of the rural arena and an academicians' detached sympathy with the illiterate, ill-clothed and ill-fed villager and his problems, with whom they at times find it difficult to communicate owing to language barrier. To this at times is added the superiority complex born of higher education, or richer social background or established administrative authority or all of them taken together. It should, therefore, not be surprising if the civil servants attached to the Panchayati Raj institutions find it difficult to reconcile themselves psychologically to the acceptance of the village non-officials as their political bosses. Altogether, this aspect further feeds the psychological component of the administrative challenge to Panchayati Raj.

### **Challenging Nature and Political Dimension:**

One may now turn to examining the nature of the challenge against the foregoing background. There are obviously three dimensions to the challenge - political, psychological and administrative, which besides having an individuality of their own and constituting independent problem areas in themselves, also assume a cumulative identity in the process of their interaction on each other.

In fact, the three aspects do not operate in exclusiveness or in isolation, they operate more often than not, in close and mutually interactive conjunction with each other. Yet for the sake of scientific analysis, the three aspects are being analysed here separately with illustrative cases which should bring home their nature both in their individual and interactive aspects.

Politics appeared to have an all-pervasive impact on administration under Panchayati Raj from the State to the grass-roots level. It may be worth while to make a distinction between state level politics and local politics which, when linked together, particularly in the wake of one party dominance only have a reinforced effect (Draper and Srivastav, 1965).

Let us begin with State level politics which is essentially party oriented politics. With the establishment of Panchayati Raj, the State level politicians, particularly Ministers, were quick to realize the importance of these institutions as vote banks at the grass-roots level. Thus there started a process, which beginning with the cultivation of influence zones on the part of the State level politicians, ended up in the creation of definite pockets of their influence which would cover several Panchayati Raj structures in their sweep. With that there percolated not only State level politics but also its factional labels on the Panchayati Raj structure. And thus the impact of politics on Panchayati Raj administration which was just tangential and remote in the beginning became both direct and close through the elections to the Panchayati Raj institutions.

What had been the bearing of this development on Panchayati Raj? The major consequential trends that have emerged on this score are :

The State level supervision and control gets weakened. The Pradhans with strong links and pulls with State level politicians can manage to evade even enquiries into their misdeeds, let alone the question of punishment. It is true that instances of this type are few and far between and yet these have a demoralizing impact on senior administrators who are the media of State level supervision and control.

The State level supervision and control is also (though again not quite often) used as a vehicle of political suppression harassment and discrimination in regard to Panchayati Raj non-official belonging to the opposite faction in the ruling party or to the opposition parties. The tendency becomes pronounced on the eve of a general election though it is not absent even during the

comparatively normal inter-election period.

The administration at the block level gets demoralized. They are always afraid of the harassment that the Panchayati Raj leaders can cause to them with the help of their political allies among the State level politicians. One of the most common phenomena is the transfer of the officials under political pressure. For example even the B.D.O. whose interests are otherwise well protected as he belongs to State service and is on deputation the block, feels the pinch of harassment because he may be transferred to a place which may be inconvenient, not merely to him but also to his family, if it has poor medical, educational and other facilities. The result is that the block level administration at times tends to get politicalised in a two fold manner. First, the block level official start toeing the line of their non-official political bosses and thus secure both peace and security, besides sharing patronage. Secondly, they also start forging links with State level politicians to neutralize the influence of the non-official bosses at the rural local levels. In sum, their time and energy gets frittered away in tasks other than developmental.

Now one can turn to examining local politics and its impact on administration. Though local politics has a distinct power and material benefits orientation, it has not as yet assumed distinct party labels in spite of the parties at times using and influencing its course and manifestations. Local politics also has had serious administrative repercussions, the more important of which may be identified here :

(i) Local politics has accentuated factionalism and divided the Panchayat Samiti into majority and minority groups, Panchayats into majority and minority-group and villages into majority and minority factions. What is worse is that the majority group tries to monopolize all the benefits to itself and at times deliberately deprives the minority faction of the benefits. This places the block administration in a rather embarrassing position. The minority group expects the administration to play the traditional arbitral role which, if played, brings the administration into clash with the political bosses. If not, the administration is open to the charge of being a party to acts of prejudice and discrimination. Both the situations contribute to administrative discomfiture in equal measure.

(ii) Local politics also has the potential to tempt the block level administration into developing political links and alliances which are not conducive to administrative cohesiveness, discipline, moral and integrity. The point

can be illustrated in regard to Extension Services under Panchayati Raj. Extension Officers as it is common knowledge are under triarchical control with the B.D.O. exercising the administrative control, the Technical Departments having technical supervision and the Pradhan being politically supreme. The Extension Officers quite often bother only for the political boss whose protection makes them successfully elude the other two controls. At times the Extension Services and even other officials would involve themselves into factional politics, thereby reducing the Panchayati Samiti administrative staff to the position of a house divided against itself.

(iii) The involvement of the Panchayati Raj leaders in local politics is at times so deep and possessive that they hardly find time to play their developmental role and help the extension services in mobilizing people's cooperation, support and help.

### **The Psychological Dimension :**

There appear to be three key notes to the psychological dimension of the administrative challenge to Panchayati Raj- role alienation, maladjustment and negative competitiveness, which, again act and react on one other.

Role alienation assumes one of these several forms - no concern attitude and hands-off policy towards Panchayati Raj institutions, apathy indifference and casualness towards one's institutional role, low priority assignment to one's role *vis-à-vis* Panchayati Raj institutions, and lack of satisfaction with one's institutional role. Each one of these has its typical manifestations. The Technical Departments, perhaps smarting under the loss of their power which has now been somewhat transferred to Panchayati Raj institutions refuse to own their obligations to the successful functioning of these institutions and are content with playing at best the role of an out-side critic. Similarly, the District level Officers, as if sharing the injured ego of their technical heads, have been almost uniformly reported to be casual towards their obligations of technical guidance and supervisions (Ali, Sadiq, 1964). Their explanation, however, is that their technical advice is neither wanted or heeded, nor do they have enough supervisory and controlling powers over the Extension officers. Again, some of the Collectors perhaps give almost exclusive priority to their law-and order cum - revenue obligations and do not appear to be as much concerned about their developmental role. There are, however, some happy exceptions also who have

contributed in good measure to the toning up of developmental administration under Panchayati Raj. Finally, quite a few of the B.D.Os feel more drawn to positions in regulatory administration than in developmental administration. They would prefer to be S.D.Os rather than B.D.Os. It should, therefore, not be surprising if they do not instinctively feel attached to their institutional role and even those who do sometimes easily get disillusioned under the pressure of inconvenient living and none-too-smooth working conditions (Draper and Srivastav, 1965).

Mal-adjustment has its peculiar manifestation in the rather waxing problem of nonofficial-official relationship (Ali, Sadiq, 1964) on the hand and official-official relationship on the other. The problem of relationship between the Pradhan and B.D.O. is a typical example of the first category and that of the relationship between the B.D.O. and the Extension Officers of the second category. Such instances may not be very many, (Draper and Srivastav, 1965) but where they are, they do end to assume serious proportions. The problem in both illustrative cases is rooted in quest for power in a monopolistic and not in a distributive sense, and its solution ultimately turns out to be problem of personal equation and adjustment (Economic Weekly, 1964). The more important issues involved in the relationship of the Pradhan and the B.D.O. are control over Panchayat Samiti staff, distribution of loans and Taccavi, use of jeep and so on. What often deepens the tension between the two is the assumption on the part of the B.D.O. that he has a separate entity as eyes and ears of the Government which the Pradhan resents and which also compromises with the principle of unity of command, direction and responsibility. The B.D.O. in turn resents the Pradhan's interference with his administrative obligations (Draper and Srivastav, 1965). As far as the problem of relationship between the B.D.O. and Extension Official is concerned, its roots lie in the triarchical control of the extension services – with the technical supervision vesting in the District level officers the administrative control in the B.D.O. and the political control of the Pradhan tending to outwit the two.

Finally, there appears to develop an attitude of negative competitiveness among institutions and functionaries at the rural local levels instead of a sense of share stakes and comradeship. This versus appears to be the political idiom of Panchayati Raj. The cooperatives posing and behaving as rivals of the

Panchayats, the Patwari that of the V.L.W. the Nyaya Panch that of the Sarpanch, the Pradhan that of the B.D.O., the Extension Officers that of the B.D.O.s that of the B.D.O., the Technical Departments that of the Development Department, are instances in point which provide the psychological component of the problem of coordination.

### **The Administrative Dimension:**

Thus, it is already, discussed the politico-psychological dimension of the challenge which had administrative bearings or repercussion. Now, for examining the somewhat exclusively administrative (of course in a relative sense only) dimension of the challenge. The more important aspects associated with this dimension relate to the problems of administrative leadership coordination and bureaucratization.

Administrative leadership has tended to recede into the background in the wake of Panchayati Raj. This is so for more than one reason. Firstly, there goes around an impression among quite a few of the administrators serving under Panchayati Raj that their job is no more to take and inspire initiative, they are at best required to play a second fiddle and that also anonymously and behind their political bosses for which they are not always keen and enthusiastic. Secondly, their moral gets low in the wake of political interference and inconvenient living and service conditions. Thirdly, there is not always a clear role differentiation with regard to powers and functions of various official and non-officials leading to overlapping jurisdictions confused and divided pattern of responsibility and possibility of under political interference. This applies more particularly to the offices of Pradhan and the BDO, with regard to whom there is no clear cut distinction between policy formulating and administrative roles (Ali, Sadiq, 1964). Finally, the block administration is not always built around or at any rate respects the principles of unity of command and unilinear responsibility with corresponding powers of disciplinary control. For example the Panchayat Samiti staff can go in appeal against B.D.O's disciplinary orders before the Administrative Committee of the Panchayat Samiti. While there is need for a system of checks and balances to ensure that the B.D.O. does not misuse his power and authority the existence of a court of appeal in the form of a non-official body at the block level itself encourages the administrative committee instead of taking the administrative control of the B.D.O. seriously.

Co-ordination naturally suffers under the impact of weak and indifferent administrative leadership particularly at the intra-institutional level, as between the Pradhan and the B.D.O., the B.D.O. and the Extension Officers the Extension Officers and the V.L.W. etc. Besides, there are two problem areas of inter-institutional co-ordination which are rather crucial to the developmental role of Panchayati Raj institutions. Firstly, there is the problem of co-ordination between Panchayati Raj institutions and revenue agencies, as the latter are to recover the loans which the former distribute, besides certifying the status of the land and farmer for purposes of loan and Taccavi in good time. The revenue agencies (particularly the Patwari) have not always been co-operative (IIPA, 1966). Secondly, the co-operatives which form the supply line to Panchayati Raj institutions have not always been up and doing on time.

Finally, there is a somewhat unnerving tendency of over-bureaucratization of the block administration with extension approach and work being subordinate to the pressure of heavy desk work by way of filling of proformas, compilation of statistics attending to plethora of circulars and demands of reporting

### **Towards Meeting the Challenge:**

The foregoing analysis can at best be said to embody the major indices towards identifying the nature of the administrative challenge. Still it should help for knowing the direction in which efforts are to be made to finding out remedies and correctives to the situation analysed here. As it has been done in the case of diagnosis, it may also be useful to isolate the three dimensions that constitute the challenge for purposes of prescription as well, though its application and effect will again be both interactive and cumulative.

So, it could, therefore, being with the political dimension. The situation in this regard could perhaps be improved in good measure with the help of following steps:

(a) An independent administrative tribunal (Ali, Sadiq) should be constituted at the district level to deal with complaints, grievances and enquiries in regard to misuse of powers, funds etc. both against the official and the non-officials, together with a State level tribunal where appeals against district tribunals could lie. This would help in isolating the media of supervision and control from political influence, besides providing a defence mechanism even to the politician who could plead helplessness and thus safeguard himself against pressures

for undue interference. This would also give prestige to Panchayati Raj institutions and boost up the moral of the public services.

(b) An effort on the part of the block level administration to evolve detailed plans in terms of programmes, location of projects, distribution of facilities, technical know-how and benefits for the balanced growth of the area as a whole on the basis of sound technical grounds would go a long way in limiting the discretion of the non-official and the officials who would thus not be so free to use it for partisan ends and purposes.

(c) Political parties have already descended in the political arena at the rural local levels, though they are operating in cognito. The result is that, though they are partners in a power build up from bottom upwards and share benefit and patronage on that score, responsibility in their case cannot be pinned, as they bear no party labels. Responsibility will be better owned pinned and enforced if the political parties have the courage to stick their necks out openly.

(d) The Standing Committees at the Panchayat Samiti level particularly those which deal with distribution of loans, taccavis and other benefits, may be constituted on the basis of proportional representation so that even the minority group may have a say in and exercise moral pressures on the deliberations of these committees. This would serve as a safeguard against the partisan and discriminatory deals of these committees.

It is, however, the psychological component of the administrative challenge which is most difficult to tackle, as basically it poses an attitudinal problem. It is here that one feels the need of a committed leadership (Pol.Sc. Review, 1966) and committed administration each solemnly sharing a set of common political values, goals and aspirations and influencing and re-enforcing the other. The situation at present is just the other way round. It is precisely in this context that training both of the official and the non-officials, assumes crucial importance. The training programme is at present treated as a routine affair—both mechanically imparted and mechanically received (Ali Sadiq, 1964). It has to be radically re-organised if it has to aim at attitude building and role-orientation, which it must with a view to meeting the administrative challenge in its psychological dimension. The training programme, if it is to deliver the goods, has also to be treated as a continuous process. Thus it is necessary that with the help of a network of follow up programmes the context of the training programmes, thus re-organised,

should be grinded, as it were into the minds of the recipients. Further the issue of incentives (Draper and Srivastav, 1965) to officials serving in villages where conditions are certainly hard is to be squarely and realistically faced. Mere exhortations of missionary zeal, with objective realities neutralizing them, will be of little avail.

Finally, for streamlining the pattern of developmental administration under Panchayati Raj, some sort of an overhauling broadly on the following lines, may also be necessary :

1. The block administration may be re-organised on the basis of the twin principles of unity of command and unilinear responsibility with the Pradhan as the political chief and the B.D.O. as the Chief administrative officer. The former should be concerned with policy formulation. The latter who should be subordinate and responsible to the former should act as the Chief administrative officer with full and complete powers of disciplinary control over the Panchayat Samiti staff. Appeals against the B.D.O's misuse of power and authority should only be heard by the administrative tribunal at the district level.

2. It will be difficult to do away altogether with the duality of control with regard to the extension services. Perhaps the situation may be improved if the D.L.Os are also transferred to the Zila Parishad under the overall supervision of a Development Officer who may act as the Secretary to the Zila Parishad which may have also to be re-organised to accommodate this change.

3. Similarly, it may be difficult to do away with the distinction of regulatory and developmental administration in one sweep and yet progressive steps to dovetail the two and thereby overcoming the posture of negative competitiveness between them are the imperatives of the situation and as such can not be avoided for ever.

4. A special cell should be created in the O & M division at the State level to rationalize the amount of desk work by simplifying reporting proformas and working procedures and minimizing the frequency of reports as far as possible without, of course, compromising with the demands of efficient supervision and control.

5. It is also necessary to rise above the somewhat arid controversy in regard to the autonomy of the cooperative movement and evolve a pattern of close linkage between Panchayati Raj institutions and the cooperatives so that they may work as copartners with

equal stakes in a common adventure which is the planned development of the country towards the goal of socialism. In fact one of the major failures had been in regard to the reorientation of the conceptual institutional models to suit of political values and commitments. The co-operative movement offers a case in point which is trying to develop with a laissez faire approach though people expect it to help the growth of socialism in India.

It may not be out of place to emphasise in the end that these efforts at administrative innovations and streamlining of administrative procedures will contribute precious little unless the political leadership, the political parties and the administrative elite are prepared to evolve and practice on their own a self-denying ordinance in regard to temptations of powers, benefits and patronage and the passionate urge towards their monopoly aggrandisement and perpetuation. This in itself is a serious challenge no less crucial and, in fact, much more fundamental, than the administrative challenge, to Panchayati Raj. Will they have the vision and the courage to meet it? That is the question which history alone would answer. Few would, however, doubt that in an affirmative answer to the question lies the future both of planned development and democracy in this country.

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