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A PERSPECTIVE ON PANCHAYATI RAJ ELECTION AND POLITICAL PARTIES

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Abstract

Rural Local Self Government is now days reinvigorating the ethos of Democracy in villages. The fundamental principle behind the local self Government is the decentralisation of power. Democracy has an intrinsic relationship with election. To many extents political parties are completing the process and strengthening the democratic system too. In India rural local self government is providing opportunities to the common people, marginalised sections to participate in the governance process. The paper throws light on the contestation of candidates in rural local self government without party lines in Odisha. The underlying thought behind conducting the election without party basis is to keep away the involvement of political parties from the village politics. The paper examines whether the provision is being followed in letter and spirit. The paper stresses upon how the interference of political parties has significantly undermine the crux of the whole idea of decentralisation of power through local self Government.

Keywords: Political Parties, Rural Local Self Government, Panchayatiraj, Democracy.

Introduction

Author's Note: The paper has been written based on Author's field experience conducted for PhD, in different parts of Odisha for related purpose. Now-a-days the informal role of political parties in panchayatiraj system became an open secret in rural Odisha, every individual living in rural Odisha is experiencing the similar scenario.

Political parties are fundamental in modern politics, often their role and significance are taken for granted. It has turned to be the major organizing principle of modern politics. Parties are the crucial link between the state and civil society, similarly between the institutions of government and the groups and interest that operate within society. A political party is a group of people, organised for the purpose to obtain the power through election.

Dearth in Decentralisation of power within parties

As the political parties play very essential role in democratic politics, so a significant question arises in the context of power scenario within parties. Though the organisational structure of parties provides vital clues about the distribution of power but practically do they function as democratic as their organising principle or they simply entrench the dominance of leaders and elites. There are numerous study on internal party democracy, prominent among them are the arguments of Mosei Ostrogorski's in his work "Democracy and the organization of political parties", in which he commented that the representation of individual interests had lost out to the increasing influence of the party machine and control lies with the caucus of senior party figures, same kind of view was expressed in "Political parties" by Robert Michels, a prominent elite theorist who analyse the power structure of the German SDP and he argued, despite the party's formally democratic organization, power was concentrated in the hands of a small group of party leaders.ⁱ

The same scenario can be expected in Panchayatiraj institutions if the parties are formally or informally taking part in the electoral process. Community participation and group interest may be sidelined and party will be in a dominant position to fulfil its own objective.

The representation process is intrinsically linked to elections and voting. In modern times election becomes a necessary condition for political representation. Some thinkers such as Joseph Schumpeter have gone to the extent of giving essential place to election and portrayed "election as the very heart of Democracy." For him Democracy is a means, where the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men, who are to rule them." So, he identified it with elections and specifically with competitive elections. In democratic states, elections are the principal source of political recruitments because parties nominate candidates, taking account of different criteria.ⁱⁱ The whole idea of Panchyatraj system resembles with the principle of democratic decentralisation of decision-making power. In other words, it can be put in a very simple terms that the central purpose of Panchayat raj system is to include people of at the grass root level in the process of decision making.



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Views on Panchayatiraj Election in Party lines

It had been a question even before independence, to what extent political parties should participate in Panchayati raj elections. There are two prominent schools of thought on the subject of participation of political parties. One suggested about apolitical Panchayat bodies and another was against the idea having Local bodies election on apolitical basis.

The Sarvodaya idea given by Jayaprakash Narayan which believed that parties had corrupted the whole idea of the Panchayati Raj system and more concentrated on self party interests, political party should not involved in panchayat bodies. He kept Panchayati raj institutions as non-political bodies. Sarvodayees considered consensus as the best formula for arriving at any decisions. As majority of our people are illiterate and ignorant, it is easy to made them forfeit in the contest for power by political parties and pressure groups. They wanted to rebuild India's Democracy on the idea of Gram Samaj, and preferred indirect elections for representation at each level that is at the samiti, district, state and all India level at the bottom and top tiers. In 1961 Jaya prakash Narayan was chairman in "All India Panchayat parishad" and was critical of political parties because he believed that they will be hindrances for self-government and the liberation of local initiative. For J.P, local self-government cannot be formed within a system with competing political parties. He advised the states to work for uncontested elections and also rewards to villages electing their panchayat without contest. His ultimate idea was "partyless Democracy". The Sarvodaya school was criticised as visionary and it would lead the path to totalitarianism.

The Santhanam committee (1964) was appointed to study the elections to panchayats, The committee's recommendations were given below;

1. There should be no legal provision for prohibiting political parties from influencing Panchayati Raj elections.
2. No political party symbols should be issued in any election to Panchayati Raj institutions.
3. In relation to Panchayati Raj institutions, no representations from political parties should be entertained.
4. Official recognition should not be given to political party grouping among members of panchayati raj bodies.

Except the first recommendation other threes were in conformity with the Sarvodaya ideas. But on the question of unanimity in elections, the committee took a strong stand against the Sarvodaya line, saying there will be no provision of cash prizes or material inducements or incentives should be offered for unanimity in panchayati raj elections. The committee also believe that contests will be both healthy and educative and villages where the concern and consensus for unanimity, it supposed the continuing domination of the traditional authorities and the systemic suppression of the new spirit of youth.

The appointment of Ashok Mehta committee on 12 December 1977 and submitted the report on 21 January 1978 to prime minister Moraji Desai, the report clearly stated that political parties should be allowed to participate at all level.

West Bengal was the first state in context to put into practice the Ashok Mehta committee's recommendations. Political parties were officially recognised in the local elections. Though there were no unanimous opinion among the political parties. In 1987 Karnataka election to panchayats also held on party lines.ⁱⁱⁱ

One can argue that, party discipline will necessarily restrict the freedom of its representatives and the real power will captured by the hands of leading politicians and that party organisation instead of elected representatives. There are also evidences of these tendencies in various states. In India among the rulling parties, there may be chances of the tendency to adopt an ostrich like policy on official contestation of local elections. The Panchayat elections held in Utter Pradesh on 5th june 1988, without the official participation of political parties, are an burning example that, it is an open secret that these independents are not so independent. If a party finds that it has no base, it may support an independent candidate.^{iv}

Some argue that only official party participation will prevent lumpens taking over politics. Therefore, panchayati raj institutions should be seen as nurseries for political leadership. Yong blood will attracted to them if elections are based on political ideology and inspired by the state as well as the national political leadership.

A worldwide comparative study of men and women in politics states that 'part of the answer to the limited representation of women should be sought within political parties, especially in their hierarchy and electoral politics. As to women they knew that they are often numerous among grassroots activists and they are beginning to react against the very narrow space in which they remain confined when it comes to power structure.



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During the last few years suggestions have been made to have partyless elections particularly at the panchayat level. The depoliticization of panchayati raj bodies to counter the vices that have crept into the political system has often been suggested. Political parties are an integral part of a democratic system and one cannot visualise panchayats as systems of self-governance without emphasising the necessity of democratically-elected representatives. The flip side of the argument that women should be kept away from dirty party politics is that in some places men used the same arguments to select consensus candidates’.

Odisha Panchayatiraj Election and political parties

I want to make it clear that, political parties do not play a direct role in the elections of Panchayats at lowest level in Odisha. The candidates do not have affiliations to any political parties and also, they do not use any party symbols. This may vary in other parts of India, but in Odisha, political parties are not supposed to play any active role in Gram Panchayats. It is indeed interesting to see that this policy of reservation for women in Gram Panchayats in Odisha was first initiated by the Janata Party, but the political parties are not allowed to be involved either in the campaigns or to offer any other form of support to the candidates.

But now days, the ground reality tells a different story. A large number of participants reveal about the hidden truth of politicisation of posts through partylines. So, it is in pen and paper that only election of members of Zilla Parishad are held on partylines under section-6(4) of Odisha Zilla Parishad Act,1991. All other election to PRIs are held on non-party lines. Nevertheless, they are taking decisions which are political in nature and working in positions that are considered to be political. They are known to be the political heads and members of the Gram Panchayats. What I want to argue here is that, although they are not formally working for certain political party or affiliated with any political organisation, but their allegiance to political parties or any particular party leader is very systemic, if someone looks into it in terms of legality, it is difficult to define but it is hardly impossible to rule out, if someone is living within the ambiance, where it is a matter of everyday’s discourse.

More party politics than local Governance

Undoubtedly one can argue that involvement of political party increases voters turnout by creating awareness through campaigning and mobilising people to exercise their franchise. The underlying thought behind the local governance is involvement of people in welfare activities of their own areas, providing them opportunities to understand the problem from the ground and work for the betterment of their localities. Involvement of political party officially or unofficial divides the people into different fractions in such a way that spreads irrational hostile attitude, hatredness and negativity among rural people. Rural life is based on community living in a very cooperative way. The cunningness and sometimes the foul play of parties instigate the people to behave as each other’s enemy. Over indulgence of Political parties in every activities from election campaigning to fixing the assignment of tender for construction of different developmental activities have left the grassroot politics suffocated. Besides the local representatives, the day today community lives of people are largely affected by the fractionalism in villages.

Political scenario in panchayats

A gram panchayat, which is the lowest level of rural local self government headed by a Sarpanch, is responsible for the administration of agriculture, irrigation, animal husbandry, drinking water, sanitation, roads, primary healthcare, small-scale industries, social welfare, education and other voluntary functions in the village which has been enlisted through 73rd Constitutional Amendment and granted enormous power to the ‘Sarpanches’. Similarly the panchayat samiti is entrusted with welfare functions headed by a chairman indirectly elected by the panchayat samiti members and Zilla parishad is headed by chairman with similar kind of responsibilities. Article 243C of part IX declares that the legislature of a state may, by law, provide for the representation of the house of the people and the members of the legislative assembly of the state representing constituencies which comprise wholly or partly a panchayat area at a level other than the village level, in such Panchayat; and similarly the legislature of a state may, by, law, provide for the representation of the members of the council of states and the members of the legislative council of the state, where they are registered as electors within a panchayat area at the intermediate level, in panchayat at the intermediate level; a panchayat area at the district level, in Panchayat at the district level.^v Hence, from the above provision it is understood that political representatives such as MLAs and MPs, can be members in Rural Local self Government. The very nature of the works done by the elected local representatives are political as well as the presence of state and national elected representatives made the whole scenario necessarily political. In fact, PRIs should be seen as nurseries for political leadership. Young blood will be attracted if elections are based on political currents – if not ideology, and inspired by the state-level as well as national leadership.^{vi}

Impact on Women And Marginalised Section

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment provides 33% reservation for women in Panchayatiraj. But the government of Odisha has raised it to 50% which is an exemplar step taken in the direction of inclusive political development. Local government plays an influential



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role in grassroots level development through responding to local needs. It gives the structural framework for women’s participation in political decision-making and provided an opportunity to bring women to the centre of local development and develop new grassroots level leadership. The defined objective of providing enough space to the women in the sphere of rural politics does not seem to take place on the ground due to the involvement of political parties, money, muscle power and violence. Though officially the use and involvement of the above mentioned aspects are prohibited in the panchayatiraj system, but in practice things take its own course where the use of the given aspects are very usual. As a result women in general do not feel comfortable to participate in the election of Panchayats. Though some of the women take part in the electoral politics of rural region, they are usually from the backgrounds that have some sort family connection with the political parties. And those who entered to the electoral politics without well connected family background often face difficulties in carrying out the developmental work effectively and actively. Similarly, the marginalised section has been given opportunity through reservation to participate, for their equal representation in local bodies. Often it has been seen they are chosen by the local elites and party members before election and the campaigning expenditure, other kind of back up of these candidates are bear by the party, so the consequence is the unquestioning obligation to the party leader. They are bound to be in the clutches of the party. The involvement of party in panchayati raj election sometimes makes them helpless. The over dominance of parties can’t be ruled out while considering the official inclusion of political party in quest of democratic Local Government Bodies.

Conclusion

The Aristotelian dictum “Man is a political animal” is unequivocally a perennial and prevailing aspect of life and in context to make the election in party line, one can raise a simple question, where the whole nation is ruled by political parties, then how can Panchayats will be free from political influence and grow without party line? It should not be ignored that all governance whether local, national or global every sphere is interwoven with each other. Nobody can be truly aware of national issues unless someone is conscious about local issues. There is no second opinion that political experience from Gram Sabha will help someone to explore other political aim and can be achieved effectively through the involvement of political parties and it leads to large number of political participations. Being a rural resident, I have ample of scope to personally observe the everyday happenings of elections in rural pockets and a suggestion that often strikes to my mind is how to keep in order the changing dynamics of village politics? There should be a check and balance to political parties so that they would not endanger the harmony and community living of village people. If it is not checked today, then there will be more violence, negativity, hatredness among people. The official involvement of political parties will necessarily limit the freedom of its members through its party discipline. The real power may remain in the hands of the leading politicians and which is practically the party organization, instead of the elected Panchayats.

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