



Panchayati Raj and people's participation: A special focus on north east India

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ABSTRACT

The basic principles behind the adoption of Panchayati Raj as a system of local self-governing bodies in the rural areas of the country was that of taking democracy back to the grass root level. This, at length, was also meant to promote people's participation in the management of local affairs in a manner that will lead to self sufficient and self reliant village communities of responsible villagers. The North East India consists of eight states-Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Sikkim covering more than eight per cent of the total area and four per cent of the total population of the country. A large part of the North East India is governed by the fifth and sixth schedules of the Indian constitution. At present five of the eight non-sixth schedule states of North East viz., Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Sikkim, and Tripura have introduced Panchayati Raj as the system of local self government for rural areas except certain areas within their respective territories where they have opted for Autonomous District Councils. Studies carried out in number of state all over India found that, by large, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have not yet become the real institutions of self governance largely due to lack of people's participation, especially women, the poor, and other marginalised groups. However, Panchayati Raj and people's participation cannot be separated from one another. There is an organic relationship between the two in the sense that there can be no meaningful and healthy existence of one in the absence of the other. The PRIs are basically meant to promote self governance and self sufficiency on the part of the people. This obviously requires that people should come forward and participate in the management of their own affairs.

The basic principles behind the adoption of Panchayati Raj as a system of local self governing bodies in the rural areas of the country was that of taking democracy back to the grass root level. This, at length, was also meant to promote people's participation in the management of local affairs in a manner that will lead to self sufficient and self reliant village communities of responsible villagers. In other words, the significance of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) was to be seen not only in that it seeks to build up a system of local government, however well organised and decentralised it may be, but also in that it seeks to tackle the problems of building democracy and mobilizing the entire potential manpower resources of the country for purposes of economic and social progress at the grass roots level¹. Indeed, it was the lack of people's participation in the community development programmes that

made the Balwant Mehta Committee suggests initiation of PRIs in the country. The committee realised that the popular participation in the community development programmes enlisted through advisory bodies was not adequate. As such, it felt the need for a separate set of statutorily created institutional arrangement to make the popular participation meaningful and effective. The committee observed that there was need to discover or create a representative and democratic institution which will sustain the local interest, supervision and care, necessary to ensure that expenditure of money upon local objects conform with the needs and wishes of the locality, invest it with adequate power and assign to it appropriate finances, which would evoke local interest and excite local initiative in the field of development. Accordingly, the committee insisted that such a body should be statutory, objective, and