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Mahatma Gandhi's Scheme of Decentralization and Local Governance in Contemporary India

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Abstract: Most of the developing nations (including India) are still struggling for efficient use of their resources. In order to overcome physical and administrative constraints of the development, it is necessary to transfer the power from the central government to the local authorities. Distribution of power for improves the management of resources and community participation which is considered key to sustainable development. Advocates of decentralization argue that decentralized government is source to improve community participation in rural development. Decentralized government is considered more responsive towards local needs and development of poor peoples. There are many obstacles to expand the citizen participation in rural areas. There are many approaches for the decentralized development, but all have to face the same challenges. Present paper is an attempt to highlights the various elements of decentralization as well as scheme of local governance in contemporary India from the Gandhian perspective.

Keywords: Decentralization, Local Governance, Democracy, People's Participation, Rural Development, Centralization.

I. INTRODUCTION

Governance is about the processes by which public policy decisions are made and implemented. It is the result of interactions, relationships and networks between the different sectors (public sector, private sector and civil society) and involves decisions, negotiation and different power relations between stakeholders to determine who gets what, when and how. The relationship between government and different sectors of society determine how things are done, and how services are provided. Governance is therefore, much more than government or good government and shapes the way a service or set of services are planned, managed and regulated within a set of political, social and economic system.

In the last decade, the concept of 'democratic local governance' has become an integral part of local development approaches, and has provided a basic rationale for donors' support to decentralization reforms and local government capacity building. The very concept of 'good governance' at local levels denotes quality, effectiveness and efficiency of local administration and public service delivery; the quality of local public policy and decision-making procedures, their inclusiveness, their transparency, and their

accountability; and the manner in which powers and authority are exercised at the local level. While local government is the essential institutional building block for local governance, the wider governance sphere comprises a set of state and non-state institutions, mechanisms and processes, through which public goods and services are delivered for citizens and through which citizens can articulated their interests and needs, mediate their differences and exercise their rights and obligations.

The concepts of local governance and decentralization, at many times used interchangeably are related but different concepts. Decentralization is primarily a national political, legislative, institutional and fiscal process. While local governance can be realized by decentralization processes. For example, if local governments are expected to provide services formerly offered through national organizations- it may or may not be accompanied by decentralization, representative or participatory democratic processes, transparency, accountability or other defining characteristics of 'good' local governance. Local governance and decentralization evolve in a constantly shifting political and social context. Holistic methods of analysis- such as the Open System Approach-can yield a sense of how many different elements interact and affect each other. This approach entails prioritizing political analysis; drawing connections across different aspects of local governance and decentralization as well as to related political and public reform processes, and encouraging coordinated action by development partners¹. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2008) has a holistic approach to defining the field of local governance and decentralization by using the concepts of *decentralized governance for development*². Decentralized governance is not a panacea or a quick fix. The key to human development-friendly decentralized governance is to ensure that the voices and concerns of the poor, especially women, help guide its design, implementation and monitoring³.

Mahatma Gandhi's(1869-1948) concept of democratic decentralization bears the stamp of his passionate belief in non-violence, truth and individual freedom. He calls it *Panchayati raj or village swaraj*. He wants to see each village a little republic, self-sufficient in its vital wants, organically and non-hierarchically linked with longer spatial bodies and enjoying the maximum freedom of deciding the affairs of the locality. Gandhi wanted political power to be distributed among the villages in India. He preferred the term *swaraj* to describe what he called true democracy. This democracy based upon freedom. Individual freedom in Gandhi's view, could be maintained only in autonomous, self-reliant communities that offer opportunities to the people for fullest participation⁴.

The vehicle that was most ideal to initiate both political and economic democracy at the grassroots level was the *Panchayati raj system*. Gandhi's tours all across the country reinforced his convictions that India would benefit if the villages were governed by village *panchayats* based on the principle of "Simple living and high thinking". These were village republics which were self-contained and self-reliant and having all that people want. These were the institutions where minimum standard of living could be accorded to all human beings. An individual had maximum freedom and opportunity to develop his personality to the greatest extent. In these republics there would be a diminution of the state and the roots of democracy depend. According to him centralization cannot be sustained as a system without adequate force⁵. The affairs are to be managed by *panchayats* consisting of five persons elected annually. Gandhi aimed at the individual the centre of the local administration. People are expected to take personal interest and turn up in large numbers at the meeting to

deliberate problems of common interests such as village industries, agricultural production, obligation and planning⁶.

Gandhi made it very clear that concentration of either economic or political power would violate all the essential principles of participatory democracy. To check centralization, Gandhi suggested the institutions of village republics both as institutions of parallel politics and as units of economic autonomy. Village is the lowest unit of a decentralized system. Politically a village has to be small enough to permit everyone to participate directly in the decision-making process. It is the basic institution of participatory democracy. The technical skills of the villages will be fully developed, there will be no dearth of men with high degree of skill and artistic talent. There will be village poets, village artists, village architects, linguists and research workers⁷. Gandhian decentralization means the creation of parallel politics in which people's power is institutionalized to counter the centralizing and alienating forces of the modern state. According to Gandhi, utilization of the local resources is quite fundamental to the development of the *panchayati raj* system, the *panchayats* with the *gram sabhas* should be so organized as to identify the resources locally available for development in the agricultural and industrial sectors. Gandhi wrote, "democracy becomes an impossible thing until power is shared by all, but let not democracy degenerate into mobocracy"⁸. Each village a little republic, self-sufficient, enjoying maximum freedom for deciding the affairs of the locality⁹. Gandhi was proposed a scheme of government under the Gandhian Constitution beginning from the primary unit the village *panchayat* to the level of the All-India *panchayat*, with the powers being assigned to all levels of the government¹⁰. These villages should not only be self-sufficient but also capable of defending themselves, even, if need be, against the whole world¹¹. In his presidential address at the Belgaum Congress, Gandhi said that the *panchayat* was only a right medium for securing cheap justice but also an instrument for avoiding reliance on government for the settlement of mutual justice¹².

The Evolution of Village Panchayat

The idea of decentralized polity was deeply rooted in Indian culture and ethos. This was related to the basic Indian attitude to the role of centralized state and its institutions on the lives of people. As most of the aspects of both individual and social life were governed by socio-religious institutions, the state got only the minimal role in the entire scheme of things. The power of the king was limited to providing protection and delivering justice. Even there the king's power was hedged by several institutions. On the one hand he has to imbibe an act on the basis of *Raj Dharma* which was well defined and well delineated. Any violation of *Raj Dharma* could create serious problems for the king and could even endanger his power and positions. Kautilya's classic work *Arthashastra* clearly explains the position of a king as the servant of the state. He observed: A king has no personal likes; it is the likes of the subject that should be followed by him; the welfare of the subjects was the main concern of the king. The *Arthashastra* also mentions that during that period, village was the basic unit of administration. More importantly, the decision-making process at various institutional levels including the village was democratic and the bulk of power governing people's life remained in the hands of various levels of people's councils. Even in the early Vedic period, there were four types of councils, viz, *Sabha*, *Samiti*, *Vidhata* and *Gana*, of which women were allowed to attend only two, *Sabha* and *Vidhata*. The duty of the king was to protect the people, in which he was assisted by the *Purohita*(chaplain) and the *Senani*(army

chief). In the Vedic period *Grama* (Village) was the basic political unit. Above the *Grama*, the higher political units were *Vish* and *Jana*. The king carried out the administration with the consent and approval of the people. Subsequently, in Buddha's time the old tradition of decentralized polity and active participation of the people in the decision-making process through dialogue and discussion and voting continued uninterrupted. It is true that during those days the kingship was hereditary. But most of the day-to-day decisions regarding governance were taken by village assemblies and such decisions of village assemblies were respected by the king.

Besides, there were concepts of *Kul Dharma*, *Varna Dharma*, *Ashram Dharma* etc. which went a long way to regulate people's life without much interference from the king. The king was primarily collecting some revenue in kind which was used to support his role at the central level. Apart from that, bulk of the power rested with the people. It must be noted that this was not decentralization from the above. It was actually a bottom to top approach with the result that residual power remained in the hand of people and not the king. Moreover, the bulk of the people lived in the villages, so the village *panchayat* became the symbol of popular sovereignty. The democratic process of people's participation in all decision-making was not confined only to the village level. It extended even to the levels of towns. Gramani was the head of the village as well as of the town. But during the Medieval and Mughal periods, self-government traditions of ancient India simply withered away under the military despotism of the Sultanate of Delhi and the Mughal Empire.

In the British rule, the administration of local services and affairs came under the bureaucratic control. However, the British administration was aware of the importance and persistence of the village system. Sir Charles Metcalfe, the then acting governor-general of India, in his famous minute of 1830, wrote: 'India's village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds revolution, but the village community remains the same. This union of village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of India. Karl Marx while writing about 'the British rule in India'¹⁴ in 1853 quoted extensively from a report prepared by the official report of the British House of Commons of Indian affairs¹⁵ which underlined the centrality and distinct features of the village system. The village system was managed by a number of functionaries and worked as an autonomous socio-political unit.

Gandhi's System of Village Governance

Gandhi was aware of the uniqueness and centrality of villages in the national life of India. He strongly believed that the salvation of India lies in the revival of idyllic nature of the village life and the way of management of its day-to-day affairs. At the same time, he wanted to bring the old system in tune with the modern life by removing excretions which has gathered in the course of historical development. In other words, Gandhi was no revivalist as he wanted revolutionary changes based on the original system of the village life and its governance. It was very well reflected in his writings on an ideal village system. He depicted the picture of an ideal village of his dreams which would be self-sufficient and self-reliant in its very nature. He writes: "My idea of village *swaraj* is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants

and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary.”¹⁶ Thus, the first concern of every village will be to grow its own food crops, and cotton for cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children.

Gandhi indicated that Western mechanism of democracy was not suitable for India. This meant that India must seek its own institutional framework to realize the values of democracy. The institution of the village *panchayat* which had provided a democratic structure at the grassroots level for centuries in India, showed him the direction. The institution of *panchayat*, for him, was the fundamental unit of democratic decentralization. Literally, *panchayat* means an assembly of five persons. Several historians hold that the members of *panchayat* in ancient India were elected by the villagers themselves.¹⁷ However, his ideas about the organization of the *panchayat* were not entirely based on the system prevalent in ancient India. These developed as a result of his lifelong Indian public life, his commitment to non-violence and the situation created by his struggle for freedom. He was not satisfied with the organization of the *panchayats* that followed in wake of the non-cooperation movement. He suggested the following points about the working of the *panchayats*:

- i) “No *panchayat* should be set up without the written sanction of Provincial Congress Committee;
- ii) A *panchayat* should in the first instance be elected by a public meeting called for the purpose by beat of drum;
- iii) It should be recommended by the Tehsil Committee;
- iv) Such *panchayat* should have no criminal jurisdiction;
- v) It may try civil suits if the parties to them refer their disputes to the *panchayat*;
- vi) No one should be compelled to refer any matter to the *panchayat*;
- vii) No *panchayat* should have any authority to impose fines, the only sanction behind its civil decrees being its moral authority, strict impartiality and the willing obedience of the parties concerned;
- viii) There should be no social or other boycott for the time being;
- ix) Every *panchayat* will be expected to attend to;
 - a) The education of boys and girls in its village;
 - b) Its sanitation;
 - c) Its medical needs;
 - d) The upkeep and cleanliness of village wells or ponds;
- x) A *panchayat*, that fails without just cause to attend to the requirements mentioned in clause ix with six months of its election, or stands self-condemned for any other clause, appearing sufficient to the Provincial Congress Committee, may be disbanded and another elected in its place.”¹⁸

According to Gandhi a *panchayat* does not work in isolation. It is the basic unit of the government of a country organized under a *panchayat* system, which was chalked out by Mahatma in his second speech to the federal structure committee at the Round Table Conference in 1931. He explained that in his scheme, the villages would elect their own little committees which in turn would elect the *Taluka* committee, that is, a sub-district and these would again elect the district councils which would constitute the Electoral College for provincial councils. The provincial councils would send their members to the central legislature. Illustrating his point,

he said, “we must remember that we have 700000 villages.... We have perhaps 50000 or a little more in popular India. We may have these 50000 units. Each unit would elect its own representative, and these representatives would be the electorate that would elect, if you will, representatives to the central or the Federal Legislature.”¹⁹

Later on, Gandhi’s ideas regarding *panchayat raj* or democratic decentralization were developed further by Mr. S. N. Agarwal, in his book ‘Gandhian Constitution for Free India’ and Gandhi himself stated that he found nothing in the book ‘that was inconsistent with that he would like to stand for’. Under the Gandhian Constitution, the scheme of government was briefly as follows:²⁰

- 1) First, the primary political unit was to be the village *panchayat*, whose members would be elected by the adults of the village. The *panchayat* would control *chowkidars* (watchmen), *patwaris* (the men who kept the land and tax assessment registers) and police and schools. It would also assess and collect land revenue, supervise cooperative farming, irrigation and interest rates as well as *khadi* and other village industries.
- 2) Secondly, above the village *panchayat* came a hierarchy of indirectly elected bodies. First came *Taluka* and district *panchayats*, each comprised of the *sarpanchs* (*panchayat* leaders) of the next lower *panchayats* and having only advisory powers over them. Members from district and Municipal *panchayat* would make up the provincial *panchayats*, which would elect president to serve as head of the provincial government. President of a provincial *panchayats* would comprise the All-India *panchayat*, whose president would be the head of state and of the government, which would be ministerial in character. Among the responsibilities of provincial *panchayats* would transport, irrigation, natural resources and a cooperative bank. The national *panchayat* would be responsible for such things as defence, currency, customs, the running of key industries of national importance, and the cooperation of provincial economic development plans.

In Gandhi’s connection of democratic decentralization, the higher units do not coerce or dictate the *panchayats*. But higher units get their strength and power from the lower units. Accordingly, the *panchayat* has to be the basic unit of democratic decentralization and the higher units will have to tender sound advice, give expert guidance and information and coordinate the activities of the village *panchayats* with a view to increasing the efficiency and skill of administration and public service.

Conclusion: It may be said that the Gandhian ideal of village *swaraj* was not given proper attention in the major part of post-Independence India. It is more surprising that the Constituent Assembly which primarily comprised freedom fighters and ardent followers of Mahatma Gandhi, failed to give due consideration to his concept. Gandhi had been laying all emphasis on village level democracy throughout his public life. On the eve of the Independence, India opted for the parliamentary system of governance. It was only after four decades of Independence that a fresh look was given on the issue of local self-government that resulted in the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment which came into force in 1993. It laid down the basic guidelines for *panchayat raj* which was followed by different laws and acts passed by various state government. One may recall that the Gandhian idea of decentralization was not limited to the village level but it was supposed to

cover from village to the centre. Gandhian idea of decentralized governance, sound relevant particularly in the context of criminalization of politics and endemic corruption that our nation is facing today.

The application of Gandhian ideas requires diminution of centralized state power and the power should rest in the hands of the common man. Only that level of power should go to the higher units which are absolutely necessary for regulating the national life and residual power remaining with the people themselves. Unfortunately, the Gandhian perspective on decentralized polity still remains as a distant dream in our country. If we really want to solve the problems created by the centralized system of governance, the Gandhian vision of *panchayat raj* should become the basis of Indian polity and governance.

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