

BOOK REVIEW:

DEMOCRACY, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT: A PANCHAYATI RAJ PERSPECTIVE BY DR. ANJAN KUMAR BHANJA, 2017, PUBLISHED BY AUTHORS PRESS, NEW DELHI

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Democracy, development and governance have been topics of interests to academicians and practitioners worldwide. These are interrelated and interdependent concepts which affect people's lives in many ways. In the Indian context, Panchayati Raj is the most crucial institution through which aspirations related to democracy, governance and development could be realized.

The book under review has four chapters. However these chapters have been further divided into various sub-chapters and parts. The introductory chapter 'Democratic Decentralisation, Governance for Development and Panchayati Raj tries to establish and explain interrelationships of democracy, governance and development. Part one of this introductory chapter helps readers understand various concepts of governance such as difference between government and governance, need for governance, concept of good governance, factors contributing to good governance, criteria to evaluate good governance and its indicators, dimensions of good governance etc. The book has described socializing dimensions, aggregating dimensions, executive dimension, regulatory dimension and adjudicatory dimension to assess governance. Part two of the first chapter traces interrelationship between the governance and development. Doing so, the author explains linkages between democratic governance with human development and sustainable development too. In this part, various types of governance identified by UNDP such as economic governance, political governance, administrative governance and systematic governance have also been defined. Further, the author

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discusses needs and rights approaches to development. Explaining the importance of Panchayati Raj in the context of good governance and development the author asserts that Panchayati Raj system has been designed to realize dreams of democracy through good governance and development in rural areas. In part three of the first chapter, an analysis of governance in contemporary India has been done. While doing so various initiatives towards good governance such as citizen's charter, grievance redressal system, use of information technology and e-governance, Right to Information Act 2005, people's participation through decentralisation have been described. Author has also explained the governance challenges including dominant gaps such as information gap, capacity gap, fiscal gap, administrative gap and policy gap and also suggests various actions on people's part as well as government to overcome these governance challenges. In this context, examples good practices from other countries as described in various case studies have been given. While this chapter has touched upon various concepts related to governance, descriptions are only introductory in nature and for detailed and deeper understanding on these concepts, readers will have to refer to books focusing on these aspects exclusively.

In the second chapter titled 'Panchayati Raj in India: Evolution and Practice' the author has dealt with the various dimensions of Panchayati Raj system in India including role of panchayats, women empowerment, evolution of Panchayati Raj, issues related to panchayats, critique of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, constraints of Panchayati Raj Institutions etc. While tracing evolution of Panchayats, author goes back to self-governing village institutions of 'Sabha' mentioned in the Rigveda and travels through periods of Manusmriti, Kautilya's Arthshastra, Balmiki's Ramayana, Indian freedom struggle and Mahatma Gandhi's Gram Swarajya, various committees such as Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, Ashok Mehta Committee, GVK Rao Committee, LM Singh Committee and 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. Author while discussing democratic decentralization, the author argues that it positively influences systems of local governance despite challenges such as difficulties of coordination and planning, elite capture etc. PRIs have role in ensuring easy, speedy and quality delivery of public goods and services to meet development aspirations of hitherto marginalized groups in rural and tribal areas.

Participatory governance ushered in by Panchayats has led to universalisation of democratic culture in rural India. While discussing issues of Panchayati Raj, the author lists out shortcomings of 73rd CAA, inadequacy of financial resources and bureaucratic apathy, poor participation in Gram Sabha etc. The chapter also does a SWOT analysis of Panchayati Raj system in India and prescribes guarding against its enemies: politicians without commitment, officials without accountability, landlords and feudal elements and contractors.

While first two chapters are largely based on review of existing literature on governance, decentralization and Panchayati Raj, the third chapter titled 'Performance, Problems and Prospects of Panchayati Raj: A Case of the West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh' is based on a micro-level study on the delivery potential of Panchayati Raj bodies in West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. Chapter makes an effort to understand the Performance of Panchayats with the help of how the PRI functionaries in the district have understood their responsibilities, how they coordinate with the people and authorities towards rural development, how they experience challenges in meeting people's expectations and what suggestions and ways forwards they offer. Author has taught in the Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar and in the Government College, Doimukh and has first-hand experience of functioning of Panchayati Raj system in Arunachal Pradesh. The chapter suggests that PR system can be real vehicle of change and development in tribal areas. First part of this chapter presents a profile of Panchayati Raj in Arunachal Pradesh in general and West Kameng district in particular and the second part of this chapter tries to understand the people's relationship with panchayats from performance perspective. Author argues that people of West Kameng have accepted Panchayati Raj and introduction of panchayats has led to their advancement. There is co-operative co-existence of traditional Gaonbura system and modern Panchayati Raj system in the district. However he cautions that such co-existence could be sometimes counter-productive. Author suggests that functioning of Panchayati Raj could be improved with adequate funds, salary for PR functionaries, motivation of villagers, social ties between leader and people, specifications of powers and functions, periodic meetings, transparent functioning, consensus and

collective decision-making, proper allotment of BPL and storage and procurement of agricultural produce. Although this chapter is based on micro study of West Kameng district the generalizations made with regard to functioning of Panchayati Raj system are not adequately supported by empirical evidences.

Fourth and concluding chapter provides a summary of concepts and ideas discussed in previous chapters in an integrated manner. The chapter decalres that emphasis of the book has been to work out an understanding of why governance matters and why it engages the attention of people and their elected governments. The chapter also revisits important matters for considerations, appreciation for the Panchayti Raj in West Kameng district, reasons of failure of Panchayati Raj in certain cases and suggestions for improving it.

Overall, the book covers a whole range of dimensions and debates on democracy, governance, development and Panchayati Raj system. Although largely descriptive and analytical, the book also provides a glimpse of micro level functioning of Panchayati Raj system. Wide range of concepts, macro and micro analysis makes this book a valuable reading for students, researchers, academia, civil society and policy makers with interests in governance, development and Panchayati Raj in India.
