
Democracy At Grassroots: Panchayat Elections In Kashmir

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Backdrop

The recently held Panchayat elections in Jammu & Kashmir state (J&K) were widely covered by the media and commented upon nationally as well as internationally in view of the political turmoil in the state on one or the other count for the last one or two years. However, the overwhelming and enthusiastic participation of people in Kashmir province sprang a great surprise for analysts and activists equally. That the participation percentage touched 80% had neither been anticipated nor visualized even by the journalists and politicians in the field. In Kashmir province, in some areas, the participation percentage went up to 90%.

The Panchayat elections in the entire state were held in 16 phases. These elections which envisaged the

election of hundreds of *Panchs* (*members of Panchayats*) and *Sarpanchs* (*heads of the Panchayats*) involved huge preparations and the engagement of manpower in large numbers. This mammoth preparation was aimed at, as explained by the officials engaged in conducting the Panchayat elections, to ensure transparency and credibility to the elections apart from addressing the security concerns. It is not for the first time that the Panchayat elections were held in the state. These elections had been held in the past also. However, what was new this time was the level of participation on the part of common people and the profile of the persons who contested these elections. It is equally important to note that the participation which enhanced the credibility of these elections was so high that even the separatist elements in the state had to appreciate and approve of it publicly.

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Our Universe

In order to view the entire development from the angle of grassroots activism, we decided to visit the Kashmir valley and interact with different sections of society to comprehend and analyze the phenomenon. It may be mentioned that the Kashmir province is constituted by 12 Assembly constituencies which include two constituencies of Leh and Kargil respectively in Ladakh division of the state. The Panchayat segments are spread over these Assembly constituencies. However, in our reckoning, the Panchayat elections in 9 Assembly constituencies in rural Kashmir which return 38 members to state legislative assembly were crucial and generated a great enthusiasm among rural folk to participate in the Panchayat elections. We randomly choose 5 village Panchayat segments in each assembly constituency to have a frank discussion with the people of different walks of life to comprehend the factors responsible for this huge turn out. Thus, it constituted the universe of our study which we found was representative enough. It may be noted that sometimes perceptions generated by the media are quite at variance with the ground realities. Moreover, generalizations offered by some analysts are not always in tune

with the factual situations. Thus, our observations and the consequent analysis may be appreciated in view of its empirical basis.

The New Electorate

It may be recognized that the rural areas including the border hinterland in Kashmir, as in the rest of the country, has not remained immune to the processes of advancement in education for the last about six decades of Independence. Thus, the facilities of education from primary to the college level has provided an opportunity to a fairly large number of young persons to pursue their studies in the rural areas. The setting up of two satellite campuses of Kashmir University in the two districts of Anantnag in south Kashmir and Baramullah in north Kashmir respectively have further widened the opportunities of higher education for younger generation of rural areas of Kashmir. These opportunities aside, the young aspirants have also been moving outside the Valley and seeking admissions in the universities and professional institutions outside the state. Thus, a new crop of educated and qualified young persons has emerged seeking social and political assertion. It is this new generation which played a big role in motivating and goading the people to actively

participate in these elections. A large number of young and educated people, including graduates and post graduates contested elections for Panchayats and won. In some places we found that senior retired officials of education and revenue departments had contested and were returned to the Panchayats. We came across a young person with an MBA degree who had contested and won the election. The women were equally active in these elections and in some places they contested and were returned to the Panchayats. It was refreshing to learn that in some villages the women from minority Pandit community had contested and won the elections to become the Panchas or *Sarpanchas* of the Panchayats.

Challenging Traditional Bastions

The Panchayat elections in Kashmir, generally speaking, have thrown a big challenge to the traditional political leadership on two counts. One, the bulk of the candidates who have made it to the Panchayats are educated new faces. Second, the participants defied the covert nudge of the traditional political leaders including sitting members of the legislature of their respective areas in voting in favour or against a particular candidate ,

causing a great embarrassment to the traditional political parties and the traditional political leadership equally. It may be argued that these elections were held on non-party basis. However, to suggest that the political parties do not wield influence in such situations would be an oversimplification. Be that as it is, the traditional parties have faced the major brunt of this shift in the voting pattern in rural areas.

The Impact

The impact of Panchayat elections in Kashmir may be analyzed from the two perspectives. These perspectives may be of some help in future policy planning of the state in general and Kashmir valley in particular. In the first place, it may be emphasized that the common people have endorsed in clear and unequivocal terms their recognition and faith in democracy. The educated young voters are unanimous in their perception, based on their experience that even 'sham democracy is better than chaos and instability'. They are determined to strengthen this process and move ahead to make their contribution in the development and progress of the state through the basic democratic institutions. This experience has raised their expectations in playing their role in higher democratic institutions in the

state in future. They perceive that through these elections the politics of manipulation, confusion and the emotional exploitation of gullible masses has given way to an emerging healthy and constructive political atmosphere. There is an urgency to strengthen this perception.

The Panchayat elections have provided a basis to restructure the basic units of participatory democratic institutions at the grassroots level. These basic units hold special significance for Kashmir in ensuring peace and bringing out people from the trauma of violence and instability. These basic units, if empowered effectively and genuinely, would be the genuine representative structures for planning and execution of developmental, educational, environmental and other related matters and emerge as instruments to address the grievances of the people. These units would also be the basic laboratories to produce experienced and genuine leaders of future.

The Yoke

The dream of an effective Panchayat system in the J&K state at the grassroots, despite the rosy picture which has emerged after the recently held Panchayat elections,

can not be realized unless the Panchayat institutions are released from the yoke of executive control in terms of devolution of financial and administrative powers. In the Federal scheme of Indian Constitution this issue has been left to the states and it is in this context that different states of India have taken different positions on the issue. The effective devolution of financial and administrative powers to Panchayats has been a perennial issue in J&K since the adoption of Panchayati Raj Act, 1989. There have been demands across the state that the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution of India should be extended to the state in its letter and spirit. There is a demand that the J&K state Panchayat Act should be brought at par with the Central Panchayat Act which empowers *Panchas* and *Sarpanchas* effectively and makes the Panchayati Raj institutions autonomous. Many amendments have been introduced to this Act since 1989. However, the devolution of real powers to the Panchayats has remained elusive. For instance, the functions of Block Development Councils, which are the real representative institutions of Panchayat raj have been reduced to "supervision and monitoring". The real financial and executive power along with the authority of allocation has been provided to the District

Planning and Development Boards. The two main functionaries of this Board, viz; Chairman, is nominated by the government, and the other , the chief executive, is the District Development Commissioner. The Chairman of the Block Development Council is just one member of the Board. Thus it is not too far to conclude that the conglomerate of enthusiastic *Panchas* and *Sarpanchas* would find themselves situated somewhere in the toothless institutions as helpless creature.

The Model

The J&K state should emulate Harayana government which has announced that 'all funds or grant-in-aid under all schemes would be transferred directly to the bank

accounts of the Gram Panchayats and they would grant administrative approval for all works to be undertaken under various schemes without any limit.' It may be mentioned that these funds and grants-in-aid include funds from the state Finance Commission and Central Finance Commission. The Harayana government has further announced that 'instead of Deputy Commissioner, the president of Zila Parishad shall be the Chairperson of the District Rural Development Agency'. This model is already operational in many states of India which has made the Panchayati raj institutions as vibrant institutions of social and economic change at the grassroots. The J&K state in general and Kashmir valley is awaiting this model. ■