

PANCHAYAT RAJ IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

In the backdrop of sporadic violence in Jammu and Kashmir state, Panchayat elections concluded on a satisfactory note. The results, in comparison to the last elections to Panchayats in which people had participated overwhelmingly, this time project a moderate but an incoherent picture. In Kashmir valley, the incoherent picture of participation is quite glaring. In view of the available data, it emerges that the people in some districts were zestful in ensuring the strengthening of these institutions. However, in some areas the response of the people was lukewarm. The perception that the districts which witnessed a poor response were responding to the calls of non-participation from the separatist conglomerate, is not accurate. The apprehension of violence and insecurity might have contributed in keeping sections of people away from participation in some areas but that does not provide the complete explanation.

It is well established that Panchayat Raj institutions are the bedrock of edifice of an egalitarian democratic order. It equally provides opportunities at grass roots level to the people to participate in the socio- economic developmental processes and creates a space for their political participation. In Jammu and Kashmir, these institutions have a special significance in view of the fact that it was the only state in the Union of India which abolished the feudal order and gave 'land to tiller'. This revolutionary measure warranted establishing Panchayat Raj institutions with a vigor involving people in rural areas in their socio- economic development. The negligence on this score provides answer to many a predicament of Kashmir situation. Fact remains that pledges of political authority relating to devolution of power have remained hollow in the state. It has resulted in disenchantment in which people have lost faith in the pledges made by respective governments from time to time. It has blurred their perceptions towards policies and motives of governments in the state. The high functionaries of the state who live in capital cities of state remain oblivious to the needs and expectations of rural

population. This state of affairs has bred disenchantment and loss of faith on the part of rural masses which need to be addressed seriously.

Post 1984 elections, when National Conference Party was returned to power, the government made a pledge to empower Panchayat Raj institutions in a big way. An expert committee examined the issue and made recommendations to the government to implement its promise. However, these recommendations remained confined to paper only due to resistance on the part of legislators who grumbled that they would lose power which would ultimately impact their future political prospects. It may be recalled that during the debates on the devolution of power the experiment of Karnataka was branded as a success story which was claimed to be repeated in Jammu and Kashmir. Rest is the history. It needs to be recognized that in view of topography, climate and opportunities of livelihood, rural areas have special requirements. The model of decentralized planning and implementation of schemes related to this process which are loudly announced periodically have not been able to meet these requirements due to lackadaisical attitude of governments. The growing population of educated and qualified young population is feeling suffocated. It may not be surprising that sections of this young population are seeking refuge in orthodoxy and distorted religious ideology. The sway of information and communication revolution and its impressive impact is adding to their frustration. No worthwhile initiative has been devised to address this vital problem in the state.

Recently, the Governor (presently the state is under President's rule) announced that some new departments, like education and health, would be allocated to Panchayat institutions in the state. There are areas like agriculture, public works and small scale industries which should have been assigned to Panchayat institutions. The exclusion of these sectors brings forth the superficial approach of bureaucratic structures, as advisors, advising according to gestures of those who wield the political power. However, the pronouncement of the Governor, though welcome, will be judged by actual functioning of the system. There is equally an urgent need to monitor this functioning

and bring it to the general public awareness. There is equally an urgency to restore the faith in the government which has been lost due to hollow sloganeering. The results from some districts, like Kupwara (53.8%) and Baramulla (56.9%) indicate that rural population responds positively to political actions on the ground. This could nudge political parties to harness the possibilities of positive and effective political actions on their part in inducing people towards participatory democratic functioning of the system.

It is an irony that J&K regional political parties have been clamoring for devolution of power from the Union to the state. According to them, the disenchantment in the state in general and Kashmir valley in particular has been due to erosion of their autonomy. Let this process start at bottom levels from within the state. It needs to be recognized that the model of a comfortable 'tenure based' government without adequate performance would add, rather than solve the problems in Jammu and Kashmir State.

Riyaz Punjabi

We wish our Readers a blissful HAPPY NEW YEAR.