

CONTESTING LEGACY OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN INDIA : THE PERCEPTIONS OF GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR

PRATAP CHANDRA SWAIN¹

¹Associate Professor & Head, Dept. of Political Science, Indira Gandhi Govt College, Tezu, Arunachal Pradesh, INDIA

ABSTRACT

Local government works as a self-governing system that stops any kind of strong and autocratic rule at the grassroots level. In India, the concept of local governance has roots that date back to the colonial period and has different philosophical ideas behind it. Gandhi believed in a decentralized political system based on moral and spiritual values, and he dreamed of villages being self-sufficient and self-governing. Gandhi saw village swaraj, through the panchayat system, as a real example of non-violence in political and socio-economic matters. On the other hand, Ambedkar thought that Gandhi's ideas were too narrow and asserted that democracy could not be separated from social justice and the caste system needed to be removed for true democracy in India. Thus, Gandhi and Ambedkar had different views on panchayati raj. However, the system of local government in India has been built on Ambedkar's principle of an egalitarian village society and the Gandhian concept of gram swaraj. The different legacies of Gandhi and Ambedkar, on local governance, have made the panchayati raj in India both democratic and inclusive.

KEY WORDS: Gandhi, Ambedkar, Local Government, Gram Swaraj, Panchayati Raj, Decentralization.

INTRODUCTION

Local government is a traditional system where people in a local area come together to look after their local needs and help develop their community. The term 'Local Government' means that local people manage issues related to their daily lives. This system comes into being when local people need a body for addressing common issues like health, education, and economy. This body is known as local government. Here, the idea behind local government is to give power to people at the local level, which helps in creating a democratic setup at the grassroots. In this way, local government brings democracy closer to the villages and the people living there. This becomes very important for building political and economic democracy. Local government works as a self-governing system that stops any kind of strong and autocratic rule at the village level.

In India, the panchayati raj system constitutes rural local government, making sure that people at the village level have a say in matters that concern them. This system helps link villagers with the state government. The concept of local governance in India has roots that date back to the colonial period and has different philosophical ideas behind it. Many Indian thinkers and leaders have contributed to how local government is understood. Two of the most important figures are Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Gandhi believed in a decentralized political system based on moral and spiritual values, and he dreamed of villages being self-sufficient and self-governing. He called this concept as 'Swaraj' which is

more than simple independence—it included moral and economic freedom for villages. On the other hand, Ambedkar thought that Gandhi's ideas were too narrow. He asserted that democracy could not be separated from social justice and the caste system needed to be removed in the interest of true democracy in India. He supported using laws and institutions to bring about change. Gandhi and Ambedkar had different views on panchayati raj. Gandhi saw it as a way to bring villagers into the political process, whereas Ambedkar cautioned that it would lead to localism and communal problems. Their different ideas have shaped the way local government works in India today. In this context, the present paper looks at how both these leaders had different views on the principles of local governance in India.

METHODOLOGY

It explores how these arguments have influenced the system in place now. The study uses a qualitative, evaluative, and historical approach, relying on secondary data from online sources such as government websites, academic journals, and other published material. The data is analyzed to understand how the ideas of Gandhi and Ambedkar have been used in India's local governance system.

Conceptual Framework

Theoretical understanding shows that local government is both a traditional and a modern concept. It is formed by laws set by the state and thus becomes an integral

component of the body politic. However, the local government is universally acknowledged as a grassroots democratic institution. Scholars have examined local government through various lenses, with J. J. Clarke (1948, p. 1) providing a functional definition: "Local Government is that part of the government of a nation or state which deals with mainly such matters as concern the inhabitants of the particular district, or place together with those matters which parliament has deemed it desirable should be administered by local authorities subordinate to the central government". As per the Encyclopedia Britannica, "local government refers to the authority to determine and implement measures within a limited area that is smaller than the entire state" (Vol. 14, pp. 261-262). Similarly, D. Lockard (1968) defines local government as "a public organization authorized to formulate and implement a limited scope of public policies within a relatively small territory that serves as a subdivision of a regional or national government". In the simplest terms, L. Golding (1955, p. 9) defines local government as "the management of their own affairs by the people of a locality". Indian scholars such as B. K. Gokhale (1972, pp. 1307-08) define local self-government as "the administration of a specific locality by its residents through representatives elected by them". Furthermore, K. Venkatarangaiya (1969, p. 1) comprehensively observes that "Local Self-Government is the administration of a locality, village, city, or any area smaller than the state by a body representing local inhabitants, possessing a significant degree of autonomy, raising at least part of its revenue through local taxation, and spending its income on services considered local and thus distinct from state and central services". Local government possesses a significant legal and statutory character.

According to Jennings (1945), local government is typically defined as "governance by the most significant authorities, which are generally encompassed within statutory definitions of local authorities". However, despite its legal standing, the institution of local government faces an ultimate limitation. As W. A. Robson (Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 9, p. 574) rightly observed, "local government entails the conception of a territorial, non-sovereign community possessing the legal right and the necessary organization to regulate its affairs". As summarized from the preceding discussion that the institution of local government is an organized politico-legal entity that works as a representative body for the civic development of its locality. As Prof. S. R. Maheswari (1998, p. 4) succinctly notes, "local government enhances the resilience, strength, and richness of democracy by fostering diverse political experiences and establishing itself as a hub of creative democratic action". It has been rightly observed that "the practice of local government is the best guarantee for the success of democracy. No nation can establish a stable

democracy without a strong foundation of grassroots democracy".

GANDHI'S PERCEPTIONS ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Gandhi holds a unique position in India as a thinker, social reformer, economist, political philosopher, and lifelong seeker of truth and non-violence. The people of India, out of respect and love, refer to him as Mahatma. During the national movement, Gandhi transformed the Indian National Congress into the People's Congress and turned the national movement into a mass movement through his moral tools of Ahimsa (non-violence) and Truth. His main ideas are found in his writings such as 'An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiment with Truth', 'Panchayati Raj', 'Satyagrah in South Africa', 'Sarvodaya', and 'Hind Swaraj'. He also edited 'Young India', which was later renamed 'Harijan' and became his voice.

LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND GRAM SWARAJ

Gandhi deeply focused on gram swaraj (village self-rule) and village panchayats. He proposed a new political idea of a 'village-centered life' known as Gram Swaraj. He stressed importance on the need for internal governance as early as 1909 in his book 'Hind Swaraj' or 'Indian Home Rule'. He believed in empowering people through self-governance. Within the framework of village self-rule, he introduced the idea of an 'oceanic circle', opposing the 'pyramidal structure of society', placing the individual at the center of society (Harijan, July 28, 1946). He described this structure as one where life is not a pyramid with the top sustained by the bottom, but an oceanic circle where the individual is always ready to sacrifice for the village circle, eventually forming one life of individuals, never aggressive, but always humble and sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle they are part of (Chakraborty, July - September, 2008, p.595).

Gandhi envisioned a decentralized political community where villagers would have political and economic freedom. His cherished idea of 'gram swaraj' imagined a self-sufficient village republic. Since majority population of India live in villages, he placed gram swaraj as core of his social, political, and economic philosophy. His main concern was to create a blueprint for the panchayati raj that would bring major changes to rural India. According to him, gram swaraj would be the essential framework of this system, ensuring self-sufficiency by meeting the basic needs of individuals and boosting self-respect and pride. Gandhi stated, "My idea of Village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic independent of its neighbors for its basic needs and yet interdependent for many others where dependence is necessary. Every village should grow its own food crops and cotton for clothes. It should have a reserve for cattle, recreation, and playgrounds for all. If there is more land, it can grow useful money crops, excluding

harmful things like ganja, tobacco, and opium. The village will have a theater, school, and public hall. It will manage water supply through controlled wells and tanks. Education will be compulsory up to the basic level. Every activity should be on a cooperative basis. There should be no caste system with graded untouchability. Any village can become such a republic without much interference, even from the government whose only connection with villages is collecting revenue. Modeling such a village may take a lifetime. Anyone who loves true democracy and village life can take up a village, treat it as their world, and find good results" (Gandhi, CWMG 76 (1979): 308).

In 'Hind Swaraj', Gandhi described local government as a concept or philosophy with two aspects: first, it refers to the self-rule of the individual, which is essential for human life and personal freedom. Second, it implies self-government, which is fundamental for organizing a modern nation rightly. Gandhi primarily envisioned a decentralized setup through panchayati raj, where numerous villages would be governed. Through his model of swaraj, he aimed to create a 'bottom-up' approach to build democratic decentralization from the grassroots. Ultimately, the panchayat bodies can be completely free from the control of the center, state, or any other authority. Under this system, every individual in the village would have the freedom to shape their political, social, and economic life.

Gandhi saw each village as a small republic, self-sufficient in its basic needs. These republics should be organically connected with larger local bodies and have maximum freedom to decide local matters. Moreover, the village republics were to be self-contained and self-reliant, possessing all that people need. These institutions should ensure the basic minimum for all people in the village and provide sufficient freedom and opportunity for personal development. Explaining how village republics would function, he emphasized the importance of self-governance and the organic connection of local bodies with the villages.

Gandhi said, "The village government will be run by a panchayat of five people chosen by the adult villagers, both men and women, who meet certain basic qualifications. Since there will be no system of punishment in the usual way, this panchayat will act as the legislature, the court, and the executive all at once, working for one year. Here, there is perfect democracy based on individual freedom. Each person is the builder of their own government. The law of non-violence guides them and their government. They and their village can stand up against the strength of the world" (Gandhi, 1942, p. 26). In reality, Gandhi believed that village republics were the best way to bring politico- economic democracy to the village level. He called panchayati raj as true democracy, saying, "panchayati raj represents true democracy realized. We would regard the humblest and the lowest Indian as being equally the

ruler of India with the tallest in the land." (Misra, 2012). Gandhi strongly believed that India would benefit if the "villages were governed by village panchayats" on the principle of "simple living and high thinking."

According to Gandhi, the system of panchayati raj would facilitate to bring about social and political change by involving local people in making decisions and creating policies. In this context, the gram panchayat played crucial role in achieving sustainable development (Jain, 2005). Panchayat bodies should take on many different tasks for village development. "The panchayats need to look after improving cattle to increase milk production in the village. Panchayat plays a vital role in land improvement and growing food. The panchayats should create a clean environment by making organic compost, which will help the land grow better. Gandhi opposed cinemas and expected the panchayat to organize traditional games for entertainment. The gram panchayat has a big role in stopping the use of alcohol and drugs in the village. The panchayat should remove untouchability. It should also work to build brotherhood among people of different religions like Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, and others" (Gandhi, 1959). In matters of disputes, panchayats can settle village conflicts without spending money, and they can ensure quick justice without needing police or the military (Bakshi, 1991).

Further, panchayats, as local governments, have freedom within the structure of democratic decentralization. In Gandhi's thinking, giving power from the center to local units is a vital part of the panchayat system. Decentralisation of power is the central objective of the panchayat system, and it would go a long way to empower the village people. Gandhi said, "Freedom must start at the bottom. Every village would then have complete powers as a republic or Panchayat." Gandhi expected panchayats to bring back the honesty and dignity of the people.

At the same time, Gandhi believed that "poorna swaraj" (complete self-rule) must be given to every village in India. In this context, he believed that until the villagers are given full independence in their rights, it is impossible to imagine an independent democratic India. He strongly believed that if India demands poorna swaraj, then the government must give gram swaraj (village self-rule) to the villagers, who make up more than 85% of the population. He warned that perfect swaraj can never be materialised by giving powers and privileges only to a few. Instead, it can be achieved by giving poorna swaraj to the villagers.

Thus, Gandhi saw village swaraj, through the panchayat system, as a real example of non-violence in political and socio-economic matters. He contributed his philosophical ideas to improve the village panchayat, which are still relevant

in the 21st century. The gram panchayat should be strengthened to create a model of participatory democracy that fulfills the Gandhian vision.

CONTESTING VISIONS OF AMBEDKAR

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, known as Babasaheb, was a great patriot, social thinker, educator, administrator, political leader, social reformer, parliamentarian, and constitutionalist. As a champion of social justice, he addressed issues of freedom, human equality, democracy, and socio-political emancipation in the Indian Constitution. As a revolutionary social reformer, Ambedkar had great faith in democracy and the moral basis of society. Despite growing up in poverty and facing social stigma, he achieved great educational and philosophical heights. However, with his strong commitment to social reform and egalitarian thinking, Ambedkar opposed Gandhian idea of panchayat system as a form of local governance.

Ambedkar looked at local governance based on Metcalfe's observation about village communities: "Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down. Revolution succeeds to revolution. Hindoo, Pathan, Mogul, Maratha, Sikh, and English are all masters in turn but the village communities remain the same. In times of trouble, they arm and fortify themselves. A hostile army passes through the country. The village communities collect their little cattle within their walls, and let the enemy pass unprovoked" (Ambedkar, 1948, November 4).

In the face of such facts, it was Ambedkar who responded : "If this is the role which village communities have had to play in the history of their people, on what terms can anyone be proud of them? Because they have survived everything there are may be good reasons to be proud. But to be only proud of survival of anything without looking at the plane on which they survive cannot be true pride. On low, selfish plane, on that plane they may have survived. I hold that these village republics have been the undoing of India. I do not see, therefore, the grounds for the protagonists of provincialism and communalism, at the same time, to be protagonists of village panchayat. To call the village anything else than an abode of localism, an embodiment of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism would be to be merely ironical! I rejoice that the draft of Constitution has rejected village system and made the individual the unit"(Constituent Assembly Debates, 1948).

Ambedkar had harsh criticism against the Gandhian concept of panchayat systems as they are nothing but continuations of caste domination whereas he did not reject the idea of decentralization of power but he was dissatisfied with the existing condition of the village people in view of the intense problems in the social, economic, and cultural spheres(Ambedkar, 1948/2014, p62). He noted that higher caste Hindus

do not like the participation of untouchables or adivasis, hence the democratic form of this representation of panchayat bodies lack egalitarian nature; villages are ruled by higher-caste members and at the village level it is almost impossible for dalits and other marginalized communities and majority communities to live with common resource at hand (Ambedkar, 2014/1948, p.62). They cannot stay along with higher caste at villages; in majority of the places untouchables were compelled to live in the borders and stay as an outsider(Ambedkar, 1932, Oct 6). He further noted that "as far as equality and liberty are concerned the village is a most appropriate place for practice". He observed 'the people are under bondage of caste, equality of man's status. These society do not admit equality but grade everything according to high and low caste. And this society will not be in a position to adopt a feeling of justice towards other that is very obvious'. Ambedkar's main concerns as such were with the village governance and power sharing between upper caste and lower castes, particularly depressed class. The dominant castes and dalits have not been participating at equal footing in panchayat body. The power continued with upper caste and the dalits were confined to marginalized position((Ambedkar, 1932, Oct 6, p 2).

Ambedkar rejected the institution of Panchayat because the villages have always been traditional and conservative which meant a power game dominated by upper caste people. Because Ambedkar realized that a village run along traditional lines could be a means for upholding caste distinctions, using the institutions for maintaining their power grip on weaker section; these had the power of discriminating between groups. He viewed such an institution functions as a means of perpetrating discrimination and therefore opposed its adoption in the Indian Constitution. In line with this, he characterized Village Republic as ' Ruination of India' (CAD,1948, Volume VII, p.39).

Year's of being left out, dalits had no representation in village councils. For him the answer to change this pattern seemed quite clear: equality in power by allowing participation of all depressed sections would lead to democracy(Jaffrelot, 2005, p. 112). The traditional panchayat, in his analysis , could not perform the job of a modern government. And because of that he suggested implementation of affirmative action or reservation to include all marginalized, weaker, and powerless people. He argued that an affirmative action could assist in a fair democratic practice in an unjust system ((Ambedkar 1935, vol-3). He strongly supported that representation without consideration of one's class etc, would not make the government a truly democratic body, and therefore to get out of the problem of representing all classes, there should be reservations in local power structure .

DISCUSSION

Although, Ambedkar had no conflict with the idea of decentralization of power through local government but still his stern caveat was “I would never be able to countenance the principle of self-government for India unless I was convinced that every self governing institution in the country has the machinery with it to protect and secure the rights of the depressed classes” (Ambedkar, 1930/2014, p45).

Notwithstanding to the nationalist movement's support for the panchayat system, Ambedkar's draft constitution ignored it. This was due to his conflicting views on panchayats. Gandhi criticized this omission and said it needed to be corrected immediately after India's independence. Madhav Rau from Mysore, a member of the Constituent Assembly, strongly opposed Ambedkar's stance. In the end, the advocates for including village panchayats in the constitution won. They got a modest inclusion of village panchayats in the constitution under Article 40 of Part IV relating to the Directive Principles of State Policy, which states: "The state should take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government."

CONCLUSION

Ambedkar's idea of the panchayat system has been fulfilled by 73rd Constitution Amendment Act of 1992, which provided for seat reservations and chair positions for women in panchayati raj institutions. This fulfilled Ambedkar's hopes for the representation of dalits in decision-making. His idea of decentralization was misunderstood. He was actually concerned that in a hierarchical society with unequal distribution of assets and power, giving more power to village levels would only continue the exploitation of the poor. Thus, the system of local government in India has been built on the principle of an egalitarian village society and the Gandhian concept of gram swaraj. The different legacies of Gandhi and Ambedkar have made the panchayati raj in India both democratic and inclusive. Although Gandhi and Ambedkar had serious differences in their political, social, and religious ideas, they both shared a deep concern for ending untouchability. Therefore, it is high time to move away from seeing Gandhi and Ambedkar as enemies and develop a viable narrative that brings these two important discourses closer.

REFERENCES

Ambedkar, B. R. (1932, October 6): *Evidence before the Indian Franchise Committee*. Government of India.

Ambedkar, B. R. (1935): *Writings and speeches* (Vol. 3), Education Department, Government of Maharashtra.

Ambedkar, B. R. (1948, November 4): *Speech on the draft constitution*, Constituent Assembly Debates, Official Report, Vol. VII.

Ambedkar, B. R. (2014): *Writings and speeches*, (Original works published 1930 & 1948). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra.

Bakshi, S. R. (1991): *Documents of Panchayati Raj*, Deep & Deep Publications.

Chakraborty, S. (2008, July–September): Gandhi's concept of oceanic circle and decentralization, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 69(3), 595.

Clarke, J. J. (1948): *Outlines of central government: Including the judicial system of England*. Pitman.

Constituent Assembly Debates: (1948). *Official report* (Vol. VII), Council of State Debates.

Encyclopedia Britannica (Vol. 14, pp. 261–262), Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.

Gandhi, M. K. (1909): *Hind Swaraj or Indian home rule*, Navajivan Publishing House.

Gandhi, M. K. (1942): *Panchayati Raj*, Navajivan Publishing House.

Gandhi, M. K. (1946, July 28): The oceanic circle, *Harijan*.

Gandhi, M. K. (1959) : *Panchayati Raj* (Compiled by R. K. Prabhu), Navajivan Publishing House.

Gandhi, M. K. (1979): *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)* (Vol. 76), Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.

Gokhale, B. K. (1972): *Political science: Theory and government machinery*, Himalaya Publishing House.

Golding, L. (1955): *Teach yourself local government*, English Universities Press.

Jaffrelot, C. (2005) : *Dr. Ambedkar and untouchability: Fighting the Indian caste system*, Columbia University Press.

Jain, L. C. (2005) : *Decentralisation and local governance: Essays for George Mathew*, Orient Blackswan.

Jennings, I. (1945) : *Principles of local government law*. University of London Press.

Lockard, D. (1968): Local government. In *International encyclopedia of the social sciences* (Vol. 9, p. 45), Macmillan.

Maheswari, S. R. (1998): *Local government in India*, Lakshmi Narain Agarwal.

- Misra, S. (2012). Gram Swaraj: A Gandhian concept of local governance, *Third Concept: An International Journal of Ideas*, 26(303).
- Robson, W. A. (1968): Local government, In *Encyclopaedia of the social sciences* (Vol. 9, p. 574). Macmillan.
- Venkataramani, K and Pattabhiram, M. (1969): *Local government in India*, Allied Publishers.