

## Evolution And Reform Of Grass-Root Government In Assam

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### *Abstract:*

In India, especially after independence, rural development has become one of the country's government's most crucial concepts and goals. For this purpose, Panchayat Raj Institution has become an essential mechanism of Rural Development as it has played a very significant role in the development of rural areas. It is mainly machinery responsible for developing villages with the active participation of rural people in democracy. Being the world's largest democracy, India needs people's participation as a must for its steady and healthy development. Assam has seen its Panchayati raj budding since the ancient times of Pragjotishpur, Ahom Rule and British Rule, after which its present position has come into being. The Assam Panchayat Act 1994 was the response to the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Act 1992 regarding rural and urban administration. As a result, people at the village level started participating in local affairs, overcoming the hurdles, and a considerable change has been seen explicitly in rural participation and development. The paper discusses the evolution of the Grassroot government in Assam and highlights the reforms over time.

Keywords: Evolution, reform, rural government, Panchayat Raj, Assam.

### **Introduction**

The term 'governance' means the system by which an organisation is controlled and operated and the mechanism by

which the system and its people are held to account. Rural governance has become imperative for improving the quality of life and economic well-being of people living in rural areas. It has traditionally centred on using land-intensive natural resources such as agriculture and forestry.

Rural Development as a concept is relative and involves a positive and systematic change in the physical quality of life of the people in the rural areas of a country. This positive change encompasses economic as well as social aspects. Therefore, rural development connotes economic growth and the equitable distribution of gains made from economic growth. In other words, it implies growth with justice. It also encompasses material and social welfare and equitable distribution of income and opportunities. Rural Development indicates a qualitative improvement in living conditions, particularly for those affected by poverty, illiteracy and poor health. The word rural development generally refers to the improvement in the standard of living, decreasing inequalities of income distribution and the capacity to sustain continuous improvement to overcome the fights for getting basic needs.

The federal system in India provides for the constitutional devolution of powers between the centre and the states. The local self-governments rest as the third tier or level of government under the state's exclusive domain. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional amendments (amendment of Article 243) in 1992 constitutionalised the local governments in India and made them the institutions of self-government. The local self-government has a crucial role in strengthening the panchayat raj institutions, involving and increasing the active participation of local people in the resource management, developmental needs and decision-making process and would provide opportunities for the empowerment of the people in local areas.

Most people in India live in rural areas and largely depend on the Central and the State, which are historically characterised as 'centralised, bureaucratic, corrupt and non-transparent'. In many parts of rural India, there had been an ongoing rift between the people and the government (s). The people in rural areas neither have proper access to the information regarding the developmental plans, schemes and actions of governments nor have any effective means to influence the policies, programmes or resource allocations for their

development. The necessities of the people in health, sanitation, clean water, education, family planning, employment and overall development could not be solved by the centralised administration and top-down bureaucratic interventions. Consequently, it is felt that the critical needs and problems of the people in rural areas can be provided for and solved only with local initiation, responsibility, accountability and local governance in action. To meet the emerging challenges of globalisation, liberalisation and decentralisation, it has become necessary to enhance the capacities of local government authorities to assume responsibilities for delivering essential services to the local people and mobilise local resources. It has become imperative to intensify the capacities of the citizens and empower them through primary education, access to information and technology, empowerment of women and disadvantaged groups and strengthening the efforts to build and develop self-reliance and participatory institutions such as Panchayati Raj Institutions.

In India, the Panchayat Raj Institutions are the most crucial concept from a political and developmental perspective. The institutions have been playing a critical role in the development of rural areas. It is a machinery of the state government for the overall development and upliftment of villages. Panchayat is a participatory democracy that helps empower the rural people and weaker sections of society through the democratic participation of the government with their representatives elected. Panchayat Raj implies the democratic decentralisation of powers and functions at the grass-root levels. The village Panchayat, described as a 'little republic', was not based on legislative support custom based on static arrangement, traditional bound sustained an interest between landholders and tillers. The role and function of PRI in rural development are the most critical and relevant. It is the leading way of development from the grassroots to the main level of our country.

Nowadays, people's participation in government affairs is considered one of the critical aspects responsible for the healthy growth of democracy worldwide. More extensive participation always ensures the success of democracy in almost all countries worldwide. It is evident that to trace the trajectory of the origin, evolution and reform of the PRIs and rural development in Assam, we have to go through the pages of the ancient and modern history of Assam, particularly the

British period and the developments taken place after independence. A glance at these periods would help us understand the base of Local Government and Administration in Assam.

### **Objectives of the paper**

The primary aim is to analyse the evolution of panchayat raj in Assam and the reforms that have taken place over time.

### **Methodology of the study**

The descriptive and analytical method has been used to explain the evolution and reforms of Rural Development in Assam. To write this paper, secondary sources like books, journals, articles, data from the colonial government have been used.

### **Evolution and reform of rural Government in Assam**

Historically, the governing body was a mixture of tribal and non-tribal institutions in Assam. The system existing during the Ahom reign is the origin of the Panchayati Raj System in Assam. In Assam, during the ancient period, the administrative divisions were similar to that of the Guptas. The 'bhukti' was probably the largest division, and the term was used in the sense of a Province. During Vaidyadeva's time, the bhukti pragjyotisha, which included the mandala Komura, stood for the central unit or home province.<sup>1</sup>

The evolution and reform of rural Government in Assam will be highlighted in three periods:

#### **Ahome rule:**

The Ahoms ruled Assam for nearly six hundred years, between 1228-1826 AD. The Ahoms built an elementary form of Panchayat for handling local matters within the social structure and a system of local administration for local governance. The panchayats during that time were generally set to settle disputes of locals and were constituted by the chosen elderly and experienced villagers. Nevertheless, the personal rule of the feudal nobles who constituted the top hierarchy of Ahom administration and a monarchy system left a clouded influence on such local bodies and their decisions. The 'mel' and 'Khel' systems prevailed in medieval Assam and are still in Assam's rural society. The general meaning of mel is a meeting, an assembly or a tribunal; in Ahom times, it meant a state dinner

given by kings to their ministers and principal officers during which important political affairs were also discussed. Khel means a clan or fraternity. People belonging to various castes were required to work in one Khel. It led to the growth of a feeling of fraternity among them. The society of Assam during those days was a combination of several territorial and vocational khels. People belonging to various khels were settled in each village, providing evidence of a functioning democracy within their limits.<sup>2</sup>

### **British period**

A new era to the history of Assam was brought by the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826, 24 February) between the British East India Company and the Burmese. Through the Treaty of Yandaboo, Assam came under the rule of the British East India Company. The British imperial power ruled Assam from 1826 to 1947. The rural development programmes of Assam gained prominent status during that specific period. Assam became a vital region of North-East India during the colonial period and a crucial source of income because of the introduction of western education and religion, the development of better transportation and communication systems, expansion of the tea, coal and oil industries. For these reasons, some rural development activities existed in Assam during colonial times. They included education, transportation, communication, better health and medical facilities. On the other hand, despite these developments, there were some problems and limitations in the rural development programme of colonial Assam.<sup>3</sup>

Numerous acts were promulgated relating to the local self-government during British rules in India, such as the Road Cess Act of 1871, Assam Local Rates Regulations of 1879, and many others. In 1881, the Government of India proposed specific reforms for local boards, including an increase in the strength of non-official members from one-half to two-thirds. Then the Assam local self-government act 1915 was passed.

A brief history of the evolution of local government during the British period has given below<sup>4</sup>:

The British officials hardly had any opportunity to appreciate the values of these institutions. In the nineteenth century, the activities of the British government in the Indian countryside had been mainly confined to the work of revenue settlement.

However, they established the institutions of local self-government for their convenience. The first and primary step in this regard had been started by the Government of the Presidency of Bombay. In 1802, They attempted to associate the panchayats with the administration of justice. In 1816, The Government of the Presidency of Madras followed suit. In the same period, the Bengal scenario was dominated by the Government of Bengal Regulation of 1813, which empowered the magistrate to constitute a panchayat with one or two members elected by the respectable inhabitants of the locality. Under this Regulation, the Panchayat was given minimal power to appoint and control the chowkidars and to levy and collect taxes to pay their salaries. In 1816 the Regulation above was extended; in 1856, it was further extended to cover any town, suburb or bazaar. However, neither of these Acts was extended to any place in Assam. After that, the Bengal Village Chowkidari Act of 1870 empowered the District Magistrate to constitute a panchayat in any village if the majority of adult male residents applied in writing for the same. Under this Act, a panchayat consisted of not less than three and not more than five members. They could be partly elected and partly nominated or wholly nominated for three years. In Assam, before partition, the Village Chowkidari Act was implemented only in three districts viz, Sylhet, Goalpara and Cachar. Since these panchayats were not democratically elected through universal adult suffrage, these cannot be rightly equated with an experiment in decentralisation.

The year 1882 marked another milestone in the process of development of local self-government in India. In that year, the Government of India issued a resolution which came to be known as Lord Ripon's Resolution of 1882 and contained the following:

- a) Political education is the primary function of local government;
- b) Rural boards are to be set up similar to municipal boards;
- c) The unit of administration is to be minor, i.e., Sub-division;
- d) All boards should contain a two-thirds majority of non-officials who should be elected whenever possible;
- e) Control should be exercised from without rather than within;

- f) The Chairman of local boards should be non-official whenever possible.

The above resolution had no reference to village panchayats. Nevertheless, it led to the passage of new Acts in different provinces of India. In Assam, a province with hills and isolated valleys, instead of District Boards, Subdivisional boards were set up as the units of rural administration. Nevertheless, little initiative was taken to provide effective machinery for managing village affairs until the Royal Commission on Decentralisation appointment in 1907.

The Royal Commission on Decentralisation reviewed India's entire system of local self-government. It recognised that in the more significant part of India, the village constituted the primary territorial unit of government organisation, and from the villages, larger administrative entities were built-up. The Commission had opined that the foundation of any stable structure which shall associate the people with the administration must be the village where people know one another and have interests connected on definite and well-recognised objects like water supply and drainage. The Commission had also stated that the minor success of the efforts in the rural self-government field had been because it had not been built up from the bottom. The Government of India did not take any steps to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission for about six years.

Then in 1915, a resolution was passed stating that the smallness and inelasticity of local revenues and the difficulty of devising different forms of taxation were some factors that retarded the growth and development of Local Self Government (LSG). At the same time, many provincial governments passed legislation to set up panchayats in the villages. In Assam also, following the recommendation of the Royal Commission, the Assam Local Self Government Act was passed in 1915. The Act empowered the Chief Commissioner to constitute a village authority. The members of such authorities could be wholly appointed or wholly elected, or partly appointed and partly elected for three years. The Act authorised the Chief Commissioner to fix the number of elected or appointed members. The Act further provided both for the election and nomination of the President. Accordingly, in 1918, 70 village authorities were established in Assam. The number increased to 80 in the next year. Out of these, 60 had

non-official elected Presidents. At the same time, by the Government of India Act 1919, the subject of local self-government was transferred to the Provincial Government. Diarchy had brought about specific significant changes in the country's local self-government.

In 1924, to suggest amendments to the Assam local self-government Act, 1915, the Assam legislature Council appointed a committee. In keeping with the Government of India Act of 1919, the Assam Legislative Council passed the Rural Self Government Act of 1926. The Act provided that every village should have a village authority consisting of not more than nine members elected based on an adult manhood franchise for a term of three years. It also provided for the election of the President from among the members. That the Act of 1926 could not function successfully due to financial constraints was evident from the number of village authorities, who were 133 in 1946-47 and came down to 85 in the next year. However, this state of affairs continued with minor changes till India attained independence. Thus, despite the formal establishment of rural government, panchayat institutions under the British proved to be a complete failure..

#### **Since independence<sup>5</sup>**

After India gained independence, the Centre and State Governments passed many Acts regarding local government. They are as under-

#### **The Assam Rural Panchayat Act 1948**

The Act was passed to achieve the village governments' overall development. The Act provided for dividing rural Assam into several rural Panchayat areas. Each rural Panchayat consisted of several villages. Again, each village had a primary Panchayat. In the primary Panchayat, all adult persons had the right to vote. The Act empowers the main Panchayat to establish an executive authority.

Consequently, each primary Panchayat had an executive body with a minimum of 9 and 15 members, including the President and vice president of the Primary Panchayat. A rural development officer under the district's Deputy Commissioners looks after these Panchayats' functioning at the village and Mouza levels. However, the Act could not function properly because all rural Panchayats and basic



Panchayats were not constituted in village areas. Due to this Act, 422 Mouza Panchayats and 2656 Primary Panchayats have been established.

#### **The Assam Panchayat Act 1959**

This Act was passed in response to the recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee. In Assam, this Act established a three-tiered Panchayati Raj system. These are Mahkuma Parishads at the sub-divisional level, i.e., Anchalik Panchayats at the intermediate level and the Gaon Panchayats at the village level. The Gaon Panchayat was the executive body of the Gaon Sabha. It consisted of not more than eleven and not less than nine members. They elected directly based on the adult franchise. Under the Act, Mahkuma Parishad, created at the sub-divisional level, replaced the erstwhile local board. The Mahkuma Parishad was formed with the President of the Anchalik Panchayats, the parliament members, the state legislative assembly, the deputy commissioner, and the sub-divisional officer.

#### **The Assam Panchayati Raj Act 1972**

This Act was amended and replaced the Assam Panchayat Act 1959. Under this Act, the Government of Assam wanted to abolish the intermediate-level Anchalik Panchayat and centralise more and more power at the sub-divisional level, Mahkuma Parishad. The Act introduced a two tiers Panchayat system- Mahkuma Parishad at the sub-divisional level and Gaon Panchayat at the lower level. Under this Act, the management of the Panchayati raj system was extended to the tea garden areas. The Gaon Panchayat had 15 members, including a president elected directly.

On the other hand, the vice president was chosen from among the Gaon Panchayat members. One councillor was voted to the Mahkuma Parishad by the electorates of Gaon Panchayat. Among the councillors, the Chief Executive Councilor and Deputy Chief Executive Councilor were chosen. The Act also clearly stated the formation of certain standing committees. There was also the provision for representing S.C. and S.T. people, including women at both levels.

#### **The Assam Panchayati Raj Act 1986**

The Assam Panchayati Raj Act 1972 was replaced by this new Act. The features of the Act are as under-

- 33% of the total seats of each tier of Panchayats were reserved for women candidates.
- The number of members of the Gaon Panchayat was reduced to ten.
- President of the Gaon Panchayat was directly elected, and the vice president was elected from amongst the members.
- Reintroducing the three tiers system of the Panchayati Raj system, viz. Gaon Panchayat at the village level, Anchalik Panchayat at the block level, and Mahkuma Parishad at the sub-divisional level.
- One member of the Gaon Panchayat represented S.C./STs if their population was up to 33.33 per cent.
- Inclusion of tea garden areas to provide them with an opportunity to participate in the local self -Government.

#### **The Assam Panchayat Act 1994**

The Assam Panchayat Act 1994 was introduced to incorporate the provision of the 73rd Amendment Act 1992 of the constitution and replace the Assam Panchayat Raj Act 1986. The Act extends to the rural areas of the whole of Assam except the autonomous districts, which come under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution of India. According to the Act, the structure of the Panchayat System is (a) Gaon Panchayats, (b) Anchalik Panchayat and (c) Zila Parishad. It also is mentioned that the Act has provided for the constitution of two Commissions: the Finance Commission and the State Election Commission, and the reservation policy for the S.C., S.T. and women as per the Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. In the following sections, we have discussed only the basic structure of the local Government in Assam.

(a) **Gaon Panchayat**<sup>6</sup>- The state government may declare a village or an inhabited area having a population between 6000 and 10,000 as a Gaon Panchayat. The people directly elect the President and the ten members of the Gaon Panchayat. One Vice President is elected from among the members of the Gaon Panchayat. The Gaon Panchayat is needed to meet at least

once in two months. It works through three standing committees, namely

1. Development Committee 2. Social Justice Committee 3. Social welfare Committee Some essential functions of the Gaon Panchayat are-

- To prepare an annual plan for the development of the Gaon Panchayat areas,
- To prepare the annual budget,
- Mobilisation of relief in calamities,
- Organised voluntary labour and contribution to community work,
- To maintain essential statistics of the villages.

(b) **Anchalik Panchayats**<sup>7</sup>- According to the Act, for each Development Block, there will be an Anchalik Panchayat, a corporate body. The President and vice-president of the anchalik Panchayat are elected by the members of the Anchalik Panchayat. The Anchalik Panchayat will consist of the following:

- One member from each Gaon Panchayat is to be directly elected from the territorial constituency of the Gaon Panchayat under the Anchalik Panchayat.
- The President of the Gaon Panchayats under the Anchalik Panchayat.
- Local members of Parliament and members of the legislative assembly.

Some essential general functions of the Anchalik Panchayat are

- To prepare the annual budget for the development of the Anchalik Panchayat and submission to Zilla Parishad for approval,
- Preparation of an annual Plan in respect of the scheme entrusted to it under the Act or any other work assigned to it by the state government or the Zilla Parishad,

- To consider and consolidate the Annual Plans of all Gaon Panchayats under it and submission of consolidated Plan to the Zilla Parishad;
- Performing functions as may be entrusted to it by the government; and
- To assist the government in the mobilisation of relief in calamities.

The fund of the Anchalik Panchayat mainly consists of grants made by the Central and State Governments and a share of land revenue. It may also receive contributions and grants from the Zilla Parishad and raise loans. An Anchalik Parishad also has tax-raising power. It can levy a surcharge on land revenue at the rate of two paise per rupee, tax on profession, trade, manufacture and production; levy fee for cinema hall, brick kiln, sawmill, rice mill, confectionary and bakery, private fisheries and other. In addition, it can levy tolls at any toll bar established on the road or in respect of a ferry under its management.

It can also borrow money from the government or banks and other financial institutions with the prior permission of the State Government. The State Government shall appoint the Executive Officer of Anchalik Panchayat, who shall be the ex-officio Secretary. Other staff will be either appointed or deputed by the State Government. Anchalik Panchayat is expected to play the leading role in rural development. Nevertheless, again its tax-raising powers are minimal. Its success will depend on the corporation received by it from the Block Development Office and the loyalty of its staff, who would happen to be government employees. If the Block Development Officer is appointed the Executive Officer of the Anchalik Parishad, it may facilitate the coordination of activities and tighten bureaucratic control.

(c) **Zilla Parishad**<sup>8</sup> - For every district, there shall be a Zilla Parishad having jurisdiction over the rural areas of the district. It shall consist of the following members:

- The members of the Z.P. are directly elected from the territorial constituencies of the district.
- The President of Anchalik Panchayat of the district concerned and

- Local members of Parliament and members of the Legislative assembly.

The tenure of the Zilla Parishad is five years. The President and the vice-president of Zilla Parishad shall be elected directly from amongst the elected members of the Zilla Parishad. The meeting of the Zilla Parishad shall hold at least once every three months. The government shall appoint an officer as Chief Executive officer of Zilla Parishad whose position should not be under the rank of additional deputy commissioner of a district. It shall have four standing committees (a) general standing committee, (b) finance and audit committee, (c) social justice committee and (d) Planning and development committee.

Some essential functions of Zilla Parishad are-

- Construction, renovation and maintenance of minor irrigation works,
- Publication of statistical and other information relating to activities of Panchayat institutions,
- Opening and maintenance of agricultural farms and marketing agencies and infrastructure;
- Promotion of social and farm forestry,
- Construction and maintenance of roads other than national and state highways.

The Zilla Parishad shall always be under the State Government's tight grip as per the Act's provisions. The annual budget of the Zilla Parishad would become effective only if approved by the State Government. At every step, the activities of the Zilla Parishad are likely to be controlled by the authorities in the State capital, and the arrangement is far from the ideal of democratic decentralisation. In a State like Assam, where different linguistic, ethnic and religious groups live side by side and where separatist tendencies are open, many problems could be contained if Zilla Parishad could be developed as vigorous institutions representing local autonomy and fulfilling local aspirations for development.

### **Conclusion**

The preceding discussion shows that the present panchayat system is more comprehensive than the past in terms of its

powers and functions. The introduction of more power and functions to the present panchayat system leaves us a ray of hope that the panchayat raj system will play an essential role in rural development soon. However, a tendency towards centralisation and reluctance of the Central and State Governments to delegate absolute power to lower-level governments is evident. Rural self-government, self-reliance and community development are challenging goals to be achieved in the existing environment.

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