

Grassroots Democracy in India

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Abstract:

Grassroots democracy can ensure power to the people directly. In grassroots democracy, the meaningful participation of the ordinary people is the means of sharing of power at the micro level of society. Grassroots democracy is a real form of participatory democracy through which citizens can participate in elections, governance and decision making process. It can be considered as a tendency towards designing political process where as much decision making power and authority as really is shifted to the lower level of society. In rural India the grassroots democracy has come into effect functioning and institutionalized through the Panchayati Raj institutions. Fundamental democratization in Indian villages lies in Panchayati Raj institutions.

Key words: Democracy, Grassroots democracy, decentralization, democratic decentralization, decentralized governance.

Introduction

Grassroots democracy is the real form and source of democracy, where power reaches the grassroots level of society. Only grassroots democracy can ensure power to the people directly. Grassroots democracy is the basis of the democratic system. In grassroots democracy, the meaningful participation of the ordinary people is the means of sharing of power at the micro level of society. Grassroots democracy is a real form of participatory democracy through which citizens can participate in elections, governance and decision making process. It can be considered as a tendency towards designing political process where as much decision making power and authority as really is shifted to the lower level of society. The idea of grassroots democracy is built on the basis of decentralization policy. Democratic decentralization is the main pillar of the grassroots democracy through which power (political, administrative and financial) can truly be reached to the common people of the country. Grassroots democracy really means the active popular participation (of the people) in the process of the nation-building. It (grassroots democracy) can be institutionalized and secured through the working of an efficient system of local self-government.

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Local Self-Government and Grassroots democracy

Local self-government means autonomy and autonomy designates and simplifies local government. There is a direct correlation and powerful link between localism and self-government. The great bulk of activities of self-government or so to say local government are closely associated with providing services to the common people living in close proximity who are not able to provide these services for themselves individually. Local self-government is to make its communitarian contributions arousing the common people to enthusiastic and purposeful activities as a body of self-less individuals. Therefore, self government is a necessity, not an option. It is justified because it is an effective and convenient way to provide services to the people (Mallick, 2004:78). So it can be said that local self-government is a legitimated government of the grassroots level people. It is the outcome of the idea of democratic decentralization that has empowered and developed the foundation of democracy.

Local self-government is the government of the specific local area which is formed and generated by the people of concerned area. Appadorai (1975) also defined the local government system as government by the popularly elected bodies charged with administrative and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particular district or place. Local government was further defined by Lawal (2000) as that tier of government closest to the people, 'which is vested with certain powers to exercise control over the affairs of people in its domain'. According to Stones (1963:1), 'Local Government is that part of government of a country which deals with those matters which concern people living in a particular locality'. It can be expressed as a system of decentralization of government in which many of the tasks are distributed among units, separated both physically and organizationally from the central government departments. These separated units are called local government or local authorities. The definition also connotes that a local authority is composed of the adult residents of the area if it is small enough, otherwise by representatives of the inhabitants. It must, therefore, usually be a council, which is established by the Central enactments. The power of local authority as also the way it exercises the power may be prescribed either by the constitution or by the law (Bhargava and Rao, 1978:55). Local self-government is a system of public administration at a local level, charged with the responsibility of bringing the people at the grassroots closer to the government.

Participation and Autonomy

Local self-government institutions can create a great opportunity for the people to effectively participate in the decisions making and implementation process of the government. The peoples' participation is very crucial for success of local self government. Goulding (1973:19) defines local government as the management of their affairs by the people of locality. In the view of Venkatarangaiya and Pattabhiram (1969:1) it is the administration of a locality by a body of representatives elected by local inhabitants. Robson has (Encyclopedia of social Science, Vol. 9 : 574) observed that local government pre-supposes the existence of a local authority as well as the participation of the local community in the administration of its own affairs.

'Local self-government essentially emphasizes a certain geographical area, local election or selection and measures autonomy including the power of taxation. It is an effective and convenient way to provide services as locally elected institutions are better placed to understand and interpret both the conditions and needs of local communities. Specialist agents within it provide welfare to the people, meeting the needs of the society. There is equality as people have broader opportunities for participation in policy making and liberty in mitigating the power of a single power unit in terms of division of powers. Therefore, liberty and equality promote participation and efficiency on the parts of the local people and local government. The political efficacy and capacity of local government institutions are nourished by participation, which has to contribute to the maintenance of a democratic climate in turn. The essential ingredient of satisfactory democracy is that a considerable proportion of local people should have experience of active participation in local government institutions. Institutionalization should not override or cut across the participation as it would make our democracy and local government institutions unstable'. (Mallick, 2004:78). There is a close relation between the political participation and political institutionalization. High level of political participations ensures more stability of local government institutions. J.S. Mill also expressed his view in the favour of elected local government, because local elected institutions are essential elements in a democratic system of government and it widens opportunities for political participation as well as providing for education of citizens in the practice of politics and government. He also believed that an elected local government was necessary because of its ability to oversee the affairs of the locality, based on local knowledge, interest and expertise, and make it more likely that efficient and effective local services will be provided than by other agencies and certainly by a distant central government.

Participation Democratization and Institutionalization

Local self-governments have the advantage of remaining in close touch with the people and to realize the needs of the people much better than a centralized governmental structure. Local self-governments are much more capable of meeting the regional needs than a system where administrative power is concentrated in the hands of a central state. In the local self-government people know each other, they take part in the affairs of their local areas. Greater participation of the common people in local government institutions is an approach to fundamental democratization process. In this process 'the induction of the mobilized persons into some relatively stable new patterns of group membership, organization and commitment' (Deutsch, 1961:494) is the main aspects of the local self-government institutions.

Institutionalizations of local self-governments create opportunities to the rural grassroots level people to manage their own needs and problems. People's participation not only enhances individual's dignity and community feeling at all levels, but also makes the developmental programmes more responsive and more close to the local needs. It generates a fellow-feeling among the rural people and they develop self-reliance. People have the scope to meet each other and discuss their common concerns and thereby to come to a point where they can themselves solve their problems effectively. Local self-government has a great reasonability and responsiveness to the local people as it is elected periodically by them. These governmental imitations can be managed by local affairs more efficiently than by the state and central government. Local self-governments institutions can implement the developmental programmes and make proper delivery to the basic services more efficiently and successfully as these are drafted and implemented on the basis of the requirements, aspirations and priorities of the grass root level people with their effective participation. Peoples' participation at the local level would increase the legitimacy, effectiveness and stability of the institutions of local government.

Conclusion:

The policy of democratic decentralization is very important as it makes possible the extension of democracy at the grass root level. The main aim of democratic decentralization is to establish a democratic society, where change is brought about by voluntary consent and not by the force of arms. In rural India the grassroots democracy has come into effect functioning the of Panchayati Raj institutions. Fundamental democratization in Indian villages lies in Panchayati Raj institutions. In India rural people have been provided with the opportunity formulate their preferences, to signify their preferences and to implement the development plans through their own representatives. There is a positive correlation between

participation in the local government institutions and institutionalization of these institutions. (Mallick, 2004: 79). Grassroots peoples' participations in Panchayati Raj institutions have provided the test of real participatory governance to rural people and deepening of democracy at the rural level. 'Indeed, rural progress depends entirely on the existence of an active organization in the village which can bring all the people including the weaker sections...' (Department of Rural Development, 1986 : Para 3.4). It can be reached out to backward (educationally, socially, politically and economically) people with enabling provision to assimilate them into the mainstream of democratic governance.

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