

Panchayats Alone Are Not to Blame

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Poromesh Acharya, in his article 'Education: Panchayat and Decentralisation, Myths and Reality', published in *EPW* (February 23, 2002), has squarely blamed the decentralised mechanism or the panchayats for the significant decline in primary school education in certain regions of West Bengal. Some illustrations from the article are taken to reiterate why I choose to differ from the author's viewpoint.

The first paragraph gives the reader the impression that the Indian Constitution (73rd and 74th constitutional amendment) was amended to facilitate decentralisation of education management through the panchayats. It is a well known fact that the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts have a wider purpose to be fulfilled. In the first para, the author goes on to say that the "panchayats have been conceived to be the third layer of government and are supposed to be entrusted with the responsibility of implementing universal and compulsory free education". The fallacy of pre-73rd amendment period was to perceive local bodies as implementing agencies of programmes of higher tiers of government. The constitutional amendments have clearly stated panchayats to be self-governing institutions. That a majority of the state governments are yet to enable their panchayats to be local self-governments is a matter of continuing concern.

Since the author has focused on West Bengal, it would be worth mentioning that in the West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1973 as amended in 1994, primary education

comes under "other duties" of gram panchayats. In fact, it has been rightly stated in the article that the relationship between the different levels of panchayat bodies and different levels of bodies of primary education, such as district primary school council (DPSC) or board is not stated anywhere in the Act. This is a major concern raised by development activists – that of the existence of parallel structures which undermines the spirit of functioning of both bodies. It thus appears contradictory on the one hand to state the ambiguity in the role of the DPSC and the panchayat, and on the other to attribute it to the inefficiency of the panchayat system.

Under the sub-heading 'Primary Education: Decadal Growth', it is said that the decadal growth of primary education in terms of child population, scholars, schools, teachers, student-teacher and student-school ratios, in the past two decades when the panchayat system was in full operation was not at all encouraging. It would be farcical to state that panchayats are responsible for this state of affairs, when it is an obvious fact that panchayats have no adequate powers to act. The author himself has stated in some parts of the article that panchayats have few powers.

It is also worth remembering here that in West Bengal, the universalisation of primary education as a policy appeared quite late, during the tenure of the Left Front government, in 1998-99. Moreover, in the post-73rd amendment period, it is seen that the gram panchayats do not have any role in the recruitment of teachers or management of primary education. The DPSC has the duties of construction, repair of schools, decision in the matter

of establishing new schools, winding up old ones, all matters relating to appointment of primary teachers, among other tasks.

Refusing to recognise panchayats as self-governing bodies, state governments deny them a fair share of powers: to blame panchayats for the sorry state of affairs is a totally unfair judgment.

The author has based his arguments that primary education in West Bengal is languishing both in qualitative and quantitative terms, on a study done in six gram panchayats in 1995. This was also the year when the panchayati raj system in accordance with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act just came into being. Therefore, it needs to be stated here that the study was conducted at a point of time when the structure of the panchayats, as envisaged by the 73rd amendment, had just come into play. Of course, it is widely acknowledged that the pre-73rd amendment panchayati raj in West Bengal under the Left Front government had played a progressive role – especially in enabling social transformation through land reforms.

A study was conducted by PRIA and its partners in 14 states across the country on the devolution of powers to panchayats with regard to primary education, and West Bengal was one of the states. Various examples have been cited in the study where panchayats played an effective role in monitoring the functioning of schools. Though panchayats have little role to play in the formal educational set-up, it was also found that they were playing a crucial role in organising and monitoring the functioning of 'shishu shiksha kendras' (SSKs), in villages where there are no schools or have locational disadvantages. The number of SSKs has far exceeded the government target. In 2001-02, the number of SSKs rose to 11,077 with about 6,48,000 students enrolled and 21,719 'sahayikas' and 450 academic supervisors. During the year, the state government had spent Rs 17.31 crore for SSKs till December 2002. This becomes relevant in the background of panchayats taking up a major role.

In fact, though the study (by PRIA) in general concludes that state governments have not provided adequate powers to the panchayats, it also emphasised that where panchayats and community took the lead, the results in the field of primary education in villages were positive. Kerala, with a history similar to that of West Bengal in terms of ideological persuasion, provides

examples where certain panchayats have taken initiatives like teacher training, developing a revised curriculum, training modules, setting up of library and lab and other activities.

The contradictions and confusion are strikingly apparent in the conclusion of the article. Firstly, the ruling state government is blamed by stating that two decades of left rule in West Bengal was not a bliss, particularly for primary education, despite a decentralised structure of primary education administration. Even while raising the concern of a decentralised structure, it is said in the very next sentence that both political and administrative bureaucracy was in full command despite the so-called administrative decentralisation and that panchayats and the DPSC were really implementing the command from above. This is followed by piling blame on the political party in power and how panchayats in West Bengal are not village panchayats but party panchayats. Finally, it is mentioned that primary teachers, who form a major group of panchayat members, are involved in an unholy power game. As is evident the conclusion has brought up a number of factors, which are not analysed in a cause-effect relationship, but are treated separately. What one gathers from the article is that the author is quite unhappy with the undue influence of the political party. The whole blame, however, is put squarely on the panchayats. The logic of the conclusion does not appear to be concrete. Is one to conclude that the process of decentralised democracy should be protected/insulated from political party influence?

The introduction to the article states that panchayati raj institutions (PRIs), instead of spearheading the decentralisation of the education process, have become a tool in the hands of major political parties. Seen from a different angle, it can be said that political parties and state governments, instead of enabling panchayats to function as self-governing institutions, are making them mere tools in their hands. Isn't it utopian to assume that a process of decision-making at the village/panchayat level would be free of conflict and power play? Is a village community completely harmonised and sufficient in itself? Such an assumption would in effect negate the very basis of providing reservations for marginalised groups (women, dalits) in panchayats, which provides the entry point for such groups to participate in decision-making. ■■