CHAPTER V

PANCHAYATI RAJ AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The term 'Panchayati Raj', which is popularly used in our country, includes two words, 'Panchayati' and 'Raj'. 'Panchayat' means a group of 'Panches', who are representative leaders of the people at the village level. The word 'Raj' in this context means government. The term 'Panchayati Raj', therefore literally means 'Government of People's Representative Leaders'. In this sense, it is an expression of the essence of democracy as internationally understood. As a matter of fact, the word 'Panch' reflects the democratic ideals or spirit inherent in the concept of Panchayati Raj.

Gandhiji once remarked: "True Democracy cannot be worked by 20 men sitting at the center. It has to be worked from below by the people of every village."1 Unless active participation of rural population in developmental activities, democracy is bound to fail, especially in a country like India where majority of the people live in villages. It was keeping this reality in view that grass-root democratic institutions were established all over the country as a follow-up of the Directive Principles of State Policy in our...

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constitution. Needless to say, the Panchayati Raj is the most important democratic organisation for the all-round uplift of rural India at the grass-root level as well as India as a whole.

"The primary objective of Panchayati Raj is to establish an integrated structure of local democratic or self-governing bodies linking the village within the district and to make the Village Panchayat a unit of planning and execution of all schemes of rural development. Secondly Panchayati Raj aims at developing the initiative of the local people and create conditions for maximum popular participation. Thirdly it seeks to develop sound leadership at all levels in the district necessary for the success of democratic institutions. And finally it seeks to provide at the instance of Panchayati Raj bodies a development oriented and efficient administration."\(^2\)

In accordance with the principle of democracy, democratic decentralization was accepted as the key to the planning process. "Efforts have been made from time to time to activate the system of Panchayati Raj so that these bodies could facilitate participatory process at the grass-root level besides meeting the local needs and aspirations of the rural masses in general and poor, in particular".\(^3\) In order to further improve the working of the system of Panchayati Raj the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act,


1992, was passed which came into operation with effect from 24th April 1993, to provide a constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj institutions and strengthen them by making suitable provisions for durability, continuity and reservation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women, and making appropriate managements for regular elections. The 73rd Amendment Act, 1992, provided for activation of the institution of Gram Sabha, establishment of village panchayats at the village, intermediate and district level, reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes at each level in proportion to their population, and 33 per cent of seats reserved for women. It also provided for a term of five years for every elected body. Besides authorising the panchayats to levy, collect and appropriate suitable local taxes, it also provides for making grants-in-aid to the panchayats from the consolidated funds of the state. As per the provision of the Schedule XI of the constitution, the panchayats have been devolved to prepare their plans/schemes in respect of 29 subjects for their economic development and social justice and to implement their schemes/programmes. The panchayats will thus have a regular existence like any other democratic institution.

It may be remembered that the Panchayati system as a form of rural administration has been in vogue in India since Vedic times. Since time immemorial, it has always been playing a key role in dispensing social justice and solving minor disputes. Foreign invasions recurring in Indian history down the centuries had little impact on the traditional Panchayati system. The system enjoyed
autonomy with little interference from kings and feudal lords that had ruled in various parts of India throughout history. With the arrival of the British a vast political change took place in the country. The British interfered in the internal affairs of the country in order to establish their own political supremacy. At a time when the kings and princes were only willing servants of the British, the Panchayati Raj as a system of local self-government was totally ignored and whatever was done was only in the interests of the foreign rule. However, Lord Ripon had done a commendable job in the introduction of local self-government and under the Ripon resolution of 1882, attempts were made to revive this village institutions. Accordingly Panchayats and Local boards were set up in the provinces of British India. The members were either purely nominated or elected by narrow electorates. But as soon as India achieved independence, the first organised effort to tackle the problems of rural India was through the community development programme which was started on 2nd October, 1952. The programme was based on an integrated approach to the various aspects of rural development. Under the programme each state was divided into blocks under the supervision of a Block Development Officer. It was hoped that this would promote active participation of the people in community work.

Under the community development programme, it was expected that the people should take the responsibility of governing themselves and should have authority to take decisions about their needs and developmental activities. “The Community Development
Approach has to be an essentially democratic approach as it will draw large masses of the people as active partners in the task of developing the vast country. For, only thus can this gigantic task be accomplished. The Community Development approach, while it will depend on the democratic process, will at the same time also help to strengthen it. There is, therefore, complete inter-relationship between Community Development and the progress of democracy; they are two sides of the same coin. Both are process of human development. It is for this reason that the Community Development Programme came to focus attention on the importance and urgency of democratic decentralization. Democratic Decentralization must not be understood as merely the creation of Local Self-Government Institutions of the people at different levels or as the transfer of real power to the people. Its object is to give vitality to the whole democratic process and to provide to a new born democracy a wider and firmer base.⁴

But somehow the programme did not work well because the desired cooperation of the villagers to the whole programme was not up to the mark. In 1957 Balwantrai Mehta Committee was set up to review the working of Community Development Programme. The Committee submitted its report by the close of the year and recommended the establishment of Panchayati Raj system. In fact, the whole notion of Panchayati Raj in India is based on the recommendations of Balwantrai Mehta Committee.

Following are the basic principles on which the Panchayati Raj institutions are based:

a) Panchayati Raj should be a three-tier structure of local self-governing bodies from the village to the district.

b) There should be a genuine transfer of power and responsibility to these local self-governing bodies.

c) Adequate resources should be transferred to these bodies to enable them to discharge their responsibilities.

d) All development programmes at the local levels should be channelled through these bodies, and

e) The whole system of panchayati Raj should be such as would facilitate further devolution and dispersal of power and responsibilities in the future.  

It was felt that there could be no rigidity about the pattern of rural local self-government in view of vastness of the country and the diversity in different parts. So modifications could be made retaining the basic structure of the Panchayati Raj. The Panchayati Raj was first inaugurated in Rajasthan on 2nd October 1959, and since then this system has been adopted now by almost all states.

5 ibid, PP. 119, 120.
Just as Panchayati Raj system evolved out of efforts at democratic decentralisation of power, the success or failure of the system depends to a great extent on the decentralisation of planning. Hence, efforts have been made for undertaking decentralised planning, especially at the district level, since the time of the Fourth Plan. Decentralised planning, however, derives its rationale of centralised national and state level planning. The centralised plans by pass weaker sections and backward sub-regions, do not take care of the local problems, do not use local resources and hardly produce goods and services needed by the local people. Also, since the centralised plans are prepared primarily by bureaucracy and do not allow people and their organisations to participate in the planning process implementation is less likely to be cost effective.

Decentralised plannings, being planning undertaken at the grass-roots level by involving local people and their organisations, are well-suited to plan for the development of backward sub-regions and weaker sections. Local problems are resolved by utilizing the locally available resources. Development projects are attuned to the needs and aspirations of the people. Since people and their organisations are involved in the planning process, planning becomes people directed, people's need-oriented, and implementation is likely to be cost effective. What is more, local level planning creates an environment where people, their elected representatives and bureaucracy work together and thus help build local planning expertise.
Having said all this, it is necessary to add that "centralised and decentralised planning are not antithetical. Rather they are complementary, one cannot exist without the other. While the centralised macro plans can take care of the macro needs of the state and national economics, decentralised district plans with their focus on local problems meet the local needs. Hence, both should operate simultaneously and both should be meshed properly if better results are expected from planning for development of the sub-regions and weaker sections."\(^6\)

Decentralised planning process is not totally different from that of the centralised planning. The differences seen are in respect of the focus (one focusing on local economics and the other on national/state economics) and in respect of the role given to people in the planning process. These two points of differences make a lot of difference to the planning process under decentralised planning. For, the philosophy underlying the latter is that people by their initiative and effort should identify their development problems and solve these problems on their own using local resources and local wisdom. The process implied in this endeavour can be described as follows:

The local governments identify the needs and the aspirations of the people, identify and assess the locally available natural and human resources which may be used for meeting these

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needs and aspirations. By matching the needs and the available resources they formulate local level development projects. Having formulated a series of such projects, and given the resource base, they priorities them for implementation. The projects selected for implementation are linked with the various departmental programmes in an integrated area development framework so that local development becomes sustainable. Wherever a hierarchy of rural local governments are working, the development plans of these governments are properly meshed with each other. Where rural and urban local governments work together to promote the development of the local region such as a district they integrate their plans with each other. And finally, the integrated district and rural government plans are further integrated into the state and national level plans.

In the light of the above description of the district planning process, the following principles are adopted in the functioning of the Panchayats. These principles are as follows:

1. Planning should be people's need and local resource based

2. Planning should be people directed in the sense that they should have a say in unidentified needs and fixing priorities.

3. Within this framework, the focus of the plan should be on developing backward sub-regions and weaker sections.

4. Implementation of the projects and the monitoring of their process should be cost-effective.
5. Finally, the development targeted should be sustainable.\(^7\)

With a view to associating people in grass-root governance, various solutions have been considered from time to time. The constitution of India gave specific importance to the institution of village panchayats by enjoining that it shall be the endeavour of the state to take steps to strengthen the village panchayats. Accordingly, statutory village panchayats came into being in different states in India. Thus, a three-tier structure of Panchayati Raj based on the concept of organic linkage was considered as a natural choice for building up an institutional structure which was to be closer to the people. The assumption was that village panchayats as the representative bodies in village communities and the extension of the processes of local democracy to the people in a real sense would require that the panchayat functions as its executive body to give a concrete shape to the local needs and aspirations of the people.

There was a time when the traditional system of village administration in Assam enjoyed its hey day. Those were the days of community life, which was essentially based on democratic values. People were simple and innocent, untainted by the ills and vices of so called modern civilisation. Mutual respect and cooperation governed their day-to-day life. People regarded themselves as part of the community life, and not as individuals living in isolation. Whenever some of their neighbours were in distress, they

\(^7\) ibid, PP. 578, 579.
used to come forward in a body to their help and rendered the best possible services. They helped one another in cultivation, harvesting, building houses, etc. and went together for fishing, marketing etc. Also, the people had great respect for authority. Naturally, the Gaonburahs were the supreme authority in all matters of village life and they had the final word in settling all disputes. This was possible through their dedicated service and impartial attitude towards the village community. The religious leaders were also well versed in every aspect of religion. It was free from politics. Nobody can deny the fact that for the overall development of the rural community, effective participation of the people through their own institution is essential. In the traditional villages of Assam mutual assistance, collective participation etc., were common not only in the social festivals but also in any and every effort for village development. Above all, the ‘Namghars’ and ‘Satras’ were not only religious places but also common platforms for discussing freely and frankly the various public grievances and problems and finding out suitable solutions to them on the basis of consensus of the public, village headmen and the religious leaders. Eminent scholar Dr. Maheswar Neog has rightly termed the ‘Namghars’ as ‘Little Parliament’. The four Satras exist in Assam, viz., ‘Auniati’, ‘Garhmur’, ‘Dakshinpat’ and ‘Kamalabari’ in Majuli, the biggest island in the river Brahmaputra, bear witness to this fact even to this day. On the whole, traditional village administration in Assam enjoyed stability and self-sufficiency in those relatively primitive days of community life. It is an irony of fact that the people of Assam displayed at their best democratic sentiments at a time
when they were totally in the dark about democracy. Today, everybody talks of democracy. Democracy has become the order of the day. But democratic values have been trampled to the ground. Today most people are busy with their own interests and they do not care for others.

"The values in the society change from time to time. Along with it the nature of the social problems is also changing. Each generation is like one nation accompanied by its own peculiar problems and aspirations. There is a vast gap in theory and practice of the moral principles and social laws, the services available and the services needed. Further each individual/group tries to justify its action in its own way."\(^8\)

"The beginning of the present Panchayati Raj System in Assam is associated with the arrangement of Chowkidary system in the villages for the protection of life and property of the people. The Chowkidari system required the villages to provide some arrangement for collection of taxes and payment of salaries to the Chowkiders to secure service from them."\(^9\) Before 1870, there were certain regulations to administer the system. In 1870, the Chowkidari Panchayat Act was passed and it provided for the establishment of Panchayat in any village consisting of more than sixty houses. The responsibility to create any Panchayat in a village

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\(^8\) Hazarika, Niru: Village Administration in Assam: in Reddi, P.S. (ed.) 'Savant’s Mission' (V. Venkata Rao Commemoration Volume); Gauhati University, Guwahati, 1995; P. 79.

\(^9\) ibid, P. 79.
was entrusted to the District Magistrate. However, provision was made to establish Panchayat for more than two villages provided they were continuous to one another. A Panchayat might also be established if the residents of a village requested the Magistrate to do so. The functions of the Panchayat were confined to the Chowkidari system only.

During the British regime, the traditional system of Panchayat suffered a great setback as the foreign rulers had little interest in the welfare of the native people. Although the British were in favour of granting limited power to the local self-government institution, whatever was done in that direction was only to serve their own interests. However, the year 1909 was a turning point in the history of Panchayat system in India as well as for Assam. It was in that year the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Decentralisation, 1907 were accepted. The commission put forward a powerful plea for the resuscitation of the village administration in India. Since then attempts had been made to establish informal village authorities. The Commission also suggested that more power should be conferred to the Panchayat.

The Government of Assam accepted the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Decentralisation and made an attempt to delegate more powers regarding sanitation, water supply etc. These provisions were incorporated in the Local Self Government Act, 1915. But the Panchayat established under
this Act faced a lot of administrative and financial problems due to conflicts amongst the residents of different parts of the same village.

In 1926 the Assam Rural self-Government Act was passed. The main purpose of this Act was to provide an administrative system in which the villagers could participate for solution of their own problems. The members of the Panchayat were elected on adult franchise. In the beginning the Panchayats were given very few functions and provision was made in the Act for increase of the functions in course of time. But the villagers were unable to run the administration of their own affairs.

In 1948, the Assam Rural Panchayat Act provided for a two tier Panchayati system. Under this Act Primary Panchayats and Rural Panchayats were formed. The Rural Panchayat would be serving more than one village and the administrative area of the Primary Panchayat would be a village. Under this Act, 2656 Primary Panchayats and 422 Rural Panchayats were established. But this Act also failed to serve the villages satisfactorily.

On the basis of recommendations of Mehta Committee, the Assam Panchayati Raj Act of 1959 provided for establishment of Mohkuma Parishad, Anchalik Panchayat and Gram Panchayat in the rural areas of Assam. Mohkuma Parishad was an advisory body at the top of the system and Anchalik Panchayat was the middle tier and at the lowest level there was the Gram Panchayat.
There existed 2605 Gaon Panchayats, 121 Anchalik Panchayats and 20 Mohkuma Parishads. The Anchalik Panchayat could not function effectively and as a result in 1972, it was abolished. There existed 2605 Gaon Panchayats, 121 Anchalik Panchayats and 20 Mohkuma Parishads. In 1972 two-tier Panchayat system was introduced and the number of Gaon Panchayats was 714 and Mohkuma Parishads 32. Mohkuma Parishad was entrusted with the executive functions in the fields of public health, education, welfare, agriculture, small-scale industry, cooperative society, etc. The Gaon Panchayat was entrusted with several developmental functions.

In 1986 the Assam Panchayat Act was passed and it introduced the three-tier Panchayat system. Under this Act 2486 Gaon Panchayats, 217 Anchalik Panchayats and 43 Mohkuma Parishads were established in the rural areas of Assam. The Mohkuma Parishads have been entrusted with the following functions:

a) Security and approval of the Budget of the Anchalik Panchayat.

b) Review of the work of the Anchalik Panchayat.

c) To guide and coordinate the activities of the Anchalik Panchayat.

d) To advise the Government in distribution of funds.
Thus the Mohkuma Parishad again became an advisory body in 1986.

In 1990, the Government of Assam issued an Ordinance by which the Assam Panchayat Act XVII of 1986 had been renamed as Principal Act. This Act stated that if in the administrative area of the Gaon Panchayat the number of population of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Plains) is 33.3% or more than the total population, in that case the President of the Gaon Panchayat must be elected from amongst the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes people. Further, 30% of the total number of seats of the Panchayati Raj must be reserved for women.

The Panchayat elections were held in Assam in February, 1992 after a gap of about thirteen years. This election may be considered as a landmark in the history of Panchayati Raj in Assam. It brought in new ideas and social values. The Assam Panchayati Raj Act passed during the rule of Asom Gana Parishad in 1986 replaced the Panchayat Act of 1972 and re-introduced the three-tier system provided by the Panchayati Raj Act of 1959. But no election was held under this Act of 1986. Only in 1992 the Congress government initiated steps to hold elections. The government delimited the administrative area of Panchayat constituting one Gaon Panchayat for every 6,000 to 10,000 people and thus increased the number of Gaon Panchayats from 714 to 2486. Another quoted feature of Panchayati system in Assam is that for the first time in the history of local self-government in Assam Tea
Gardens have been included in 1992 within the Gaon Panchayat area with a view to see that the employees of the tea gardens are not deprived of their legitimate right to participate in the local self-government and get actively involved in democratic activities for their own uplift. The Anchalik Panchayats were re-introduced by forming 196 such bodies. The Mohkuma Parishad has become a policy making and supervisory body.

In 1994 the Assam Panchayat Act was passed in conformity with the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution. The main provision of the Act is a three-tier Panchayati Raj Institution consisting of Zilla Parishad, Anchalik Panchayat and Gaon Panchayat. In the Gaon Panchayat area there will be a Gaon Sabha consisting of persons registered in electoral rolls relating to a village or group of villages. The Gaon Sabha shall consider three matters; (a) the report in respect of Development Programmes of the Gaon Panchayat relating to the proceeding year and development programmes proposed to be undertaken during the current year, (b) the promotion of unity and harmony among all sections of society in the village and (c) other matters as may be prescribed.

The State Government may by notification declare any local area comprising a revenue village or a group of revenue village or a forest village or a tea garden area or hamlets forming a part of revenue village or for forests village or tea garden area to be Gaon Panchayat with a population of not less than six thousand and not more ten thousand. The Gaon Panchayat shall be consisted of ten
members to be directly elected by the voters of the territorial constituencies of the Gaon Panchayat area.

For each Development Block there shall be an Anchalik Panchayat. Every Anchalik Panchayat shall consist of:

a) One member from each Gaon Panchayat to be directly elected from the territorial constituencies of the Gaon Panchayat under Anchalik Panchayat;

b) The Presidents of Gaon Panchayats falling within the jurisdiction of the Anchalik Panchayat;

c) The members of the House of People and members of the Legislative Assembly representing the constituencies which comprise wholly or partly, the Anchalik Panchayat.

For every district there shall be a Zilla Parishad having the areas covered by Municipal Board or Municipal Corporation will be excluded from the jurisdiction of Zilla Parishad. It will consist of:

a) the members directly elected from the territorial constituencies of the district;

b) the President of the Anchalik Panchayats;

c) the members of Houses of People and members of Legislative Assembly.
Thus the 1994 Act provides for direct election of all the three tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions. It also provides for reservation of seats for women and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. As regards the functions, all the functions provided by the earlier Acts have been incorporated in the Act.

For the first time provision has been made in 1994 Act for the constitution of Finance Commission and State Election Commission for Panchayat Bodies. The Finance Commission shall consist of a Chairman and two other members. The Commission shall have the following functions:

a) to call for any record from any officer or authority;

b) to summon any person to give evidence or produce records;

c) such other powers as may be prescribed

The superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of electoral and the conduct of all elections to the Panchayat shall be vested in a State Election Commission consisting of a State Election Commissioner to be appointed by the Governor.

The much awaited Panchayati Raj election in Assam was held in the year 2001. Accordingly, Zilla Parishad at the district level, Anchalik Panchayat at the block level and Gaon Panchayat at the village level have been formed and 29 state subjects are being handed over to them by the state government. These 29 subjects are:
1. Agriculture including agricultural extension;

2. Land improvement, implementation of land reforms, land consolidation and soil conservation;

3. Minor irrigation, water management and watershed development;

4. Animal Husbandry, dairying and Poultry;

5. Fisheries;

6. Social Forestry and farm forestry;

7. Minor forests produce;

8. Small scale industries, including food processing industries;

9. Khadi, village and cottage industries;

10. Rural Housing;

11. Drinking water;

12. Fuel and fodder;

13. Roads, culverts, bridges, ferries, waterways and other means of communications;

14. Rural electrification, including distribution of electricity;

15. Non-conventional energy sources;

16. Poverty alleviation programme;
17. Education including primary and secondary schools;
18. Technical training and vocational education;
19. Adult and non-formal education;
20. Libraries;
21. Cultural activities;
22. Market and fairs;
23. Health and sanitation, including hospitals, primary health centres and dispensaries;
24. Family welfare;
25. Women and child development;
26. Social welfare, including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded;
27. Welfare of the weaker sections and in particular of the SC and ST;
28. Public distribution system and
29. Maintenance of community assets.

**Gandhiji and Village Raj**

Mahatma Gandhi's vision of 'Ram Rajya' is epitomised in his vision of an ideal Indian village. He was not only a dreamer, he was also a practical man of the world. He had concrete plans
and objectives for the all-round development of rural India. According to him, rural development in the truest sense involves two major objectives—economic development by eradicating poverty and moral development by raising the human values of the people like truth, non-violence, love and fellow-feeling. According to Gandhiji, self-help is the best helps. To achieve real 'Swaraj' every villager must grow his own food crop and cotton for cloth. Self-sufficiency is the keynote of economic development. Thus every village should have a reserve for cattle, a playground for adults and children. The village will maintain a theatre, a school and a public hall. For health and hygiene, the village will have its own water supply and sanitary system. Gandhi considered the supply of pure water to the villagers as noble service accompanied by the incalculable benefits to the suffering humanity in the rural areas of the country. The neglect of it is responsible for many of the diseases by the villagers. He also emphasised on due care to be taken about balanced diet.

Village sanitation received top priority in Gandhi's scheme of rural reconstruction. He was in favour of easy, economic and effective method of solving the problem of rural insanitation. "To him sanitation was the most important part of village administration scheme. It is the effective way of dealing with disease, since for him nature is the first physician, which is continuously repairing what man has damaged."\(^{10}\)

\(^{10}\)ibid, P. 82.
Strong citizens can only build strong nation, he believed. Again, education will be compulsory upto the final basic course. Every activity will be conducted on the co-operative basis. Non-violence and Satyagraha must be the only means for settling any dispute or solving any problem. Production of such harmful items as ganja, tobacco, opium, etc., must be totally stopped. The government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat of five members annually elected by the villagers on the basis of adult franchise.

For Gandhi, self-sufficiency is the hallmark of rural development. It is a must for economic and spiritual uplift of mankind. All the requirements of life especially food and other necessities of life must be grown or manufactured in the village itself. Sericulture and cottage industry are the foundation of rural economy. Development of village industries will eliminate exploitation of the masses. The most important industries, which can be easily started in any village, are khadi, hand grinding, hand pounding, paper making, match making etc. All these can be achieved only through education and training.

Gandhi recognised the importance of Panchayat system as the most effective unit of local self-government. True democracy cannot be achieved without active and whole-hearted participation of the rural people in administrative affairs. Through the Panchayats, the people will realise their own strength and resist
the dominance of the Zamindar, the Rajas and the Capitalists. It was also his firm conviction that the Panchayat would play a decisive role in removing the imbalance of power between the rural and urban areas. According to him, instead of concentrating political power in big cities, it should be distributed among the thousands of villages of India, which would carry on the government of the country through voluntary co-operation. The function of the Panchayat would cover aspect of life of the small community since its task is to transform village from a dung heap to a tiny garden of education where the simple and honest village folk would pleasant live enjoying the bliss of peace and justice, and above all, freedom from fear.

In Assam socio-religious environment of the traditional villages was quite fertile for the development of the rural community under the scheme depicted by Mahatma Gandhi. Silk industry has been a part and parcel of Assam economy since time immemorial. The Mulberry, Eri and Muga silk worms were very familiar domesticated insects which produced the bulk of silk. Availability of food plants and favourable climate helped the growth of this industry in Assam. The traditional villagers took personal care and interest for the growth of sericulture resulting satisfactory advancement. It was almost obligatory for every village house to rear and weave silk fabric. Muga and silk were not only a means of livelihood, it was an integral part of Assamese life and culture. Every Assamese women took pride in weaving native silken dresses.
But with the onslaught of big industries, local products have ceased to attract the young generation, as a result of which native arts and culture are gasping for their last breath.

Tea industry in Assam is known to each and every country of the world. But the notable part of the tea industry in Assam is that it could not attract the rural people for employment. Assam has the unique distinction of having the largest area under tea cultivation. It produces more than fifty percent of total tea in India. The tea industry feeds about a million people who are dependent on it for livelihood. This tea community consist of persons belonging to Bihar, UP, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madras, etc. The members of this tea community though come from different parts of the country with different language and culture are living together without any social constraints. The profession and easily available essential commodities, similar living standards are compelling them to maintain a strong social tie.

The people of the region mostly depend on agriculture for their livelihood. In the plains, the mode of cultivation is similar to all India pattern. The power used is derived mainly from bullock and steel hoes. For the hill tribes shifting cultivation (Jhum) is not only a means of livelihood, it is a way of life and cultural trait. The shifting cultivators do not use a plough. They clean the jungle and burn the cuttings and small holes are made with iron capped sticks, hoes or large knives and seeds of maise, cotton, chillies, etc. are
sown. Rice is also grown at places. It is generally felt that an expeditious change over wasteful method to some scientific method of cultivation can bring out a significant stability to rural economy. The high consumption of time and body energy, low production, low social status etc., have compelled the villagers to convert themselves from cultivators to the seekers of even low paid jobs in the urban areas.

"In the entire North East India Cane and Bamboo are profusely available and numerous articles of every day use were made by the members of the traditional society of the region like mats, hats, baskets, vessels, chairs, tables etc. The Naga cane crafts also include bowls, mugs and containers. In Arunachal Pradesh people made, besides ornaments, cane belts, both plain and woven."\(^{11}\)

The impact of science and technology, imposition of western techniques for development, total negligence of the state machinery and public to Panchayati Raj institution as the founding stone of modern indirect democracy etc. are responsible for non-realisation of the objectiveness of the Panchayati Raj as desired by Mahatma Gandhi.

Inspite of all these constraints which hamper the functioning of the Panchayats, it is heartening to note that the preliminary for the development of rural areas such as economic

\(^{11}\) ibid, PP. 85, 86.
practices, religious way of life, the feelings of common brotherlihood, communal and caste harmony are found everywhere in Assam. A little effort on the parts of the state government and the functionaries of the local self-government can change the whole scenario of the rural society. What requires is the development of a scientific and logical temperament to carry forward all the plans and programmes formulated for rural development and achieve its proper implementation and judicious utilisation.

After Mahatma Gandhi a serious thought was given by Rajiv Gandhi to rebuild the Indian villages. He said, “Development has to mean the development of our villages. It is the villages that must be transformed. Indeed once the villages are developed, the cities will be automatically benefited, for pressure on the cities will be lifted, the unending migration from villages to cities will checked. People, instead of fleeing from villages, will stay back and work in the villages and as a result the villages will progress. We must, therefore, shed the mentality of depending on the Government for everything. This can best be achieved through Panchayati Raj.”¹²

The realisations of the status of Panchayati Raj in modern India for building up a strong multi-coloured nation based on unity and integrity the Seventy Third and Seventy Fourth Amendments to the Constitution of India were initiated by Rajiv Gandhi. The Philosophy of the amendments is as below –

¹² ibid, P. 86.
for an institutional frame for a caring, human and responsive administration at the local level;

that administration was not adequately accountable to those whom it was designed to serve, inspite of the administrative and political wings being generally efficient and enlightened;

numerous instances and complaints of callous, indifferent, negligent even cruel responses of the district administration to the individual and/or small group/community causes;

that the lack of responsiveness of the administration was due to non-accountability;

that administration can be made responsive only if it is made representative;

conceived of a third of representative governance at the district level and below thereby bringing in a basic change in the architecture of Indian Policy;

the aforesaid idea, Parliament enacted the Seventy third and seventy fourth Amendments to the Constitution of India with the explicit purpose of transferring power to the people.
The whole philosophy centres round the human being and the administrative process. It provides more specific detail than that of Mahatma Gandhi. The recent trend in the thinking of the scholars, social workers and the public, the process and quality of personnel are occupying the first position in the context of rural development administration. The wide tour of Rajiv Gandhi of the rural areas might compel him to conceive the above idea and accordingly he initiated the movement of rural reconstruction in modern India.

To Sum up

(1) The term 'Panchayati Raj' literally means government by a group of Panches, who are representative leaders at the village level.

(2) The primary objective of Panchayati Raj is to establish an integrated structure of local democratic or self-governing bodies linking the village within the district.

(3) Panchayati system has been in vogue in India since Vedic times.

(4) The whole notion of Panchayati Raj in India is based on the recommendations of Balwantrai Mehta Committee.

(5) Decentralised plannings are well-suited to plan for the development of backward regions and weaker sections.

(6) Traditional system of village Administration in Assam was based on the higher ideals of community life. It was rooted in Chowkidari system.
(7) Real history of Panchayati System in Assam started in 1915 and culminated in 1959 following recommendations of Mehta Committee.

(8) In conformity with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994, was passed and it provided for a three-tier Panchayat System in Assam.

(9) Self-sufficiency is the keynote of Assam economy.