

Alternate Democratic Institutions Panchayats of India: Away from the Western Ideas of Democracy

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ABSTRACT

It is a fallacy to believe that democracy originated in Ancient Greece, it wasn't truly democratic by today's standards, however it was something that philosophers and thinkers of the enlightenment could hark back upon to deliver us the modern concept of western democracy. Indeed, it is a western democracy only and not a true world democracy that it should be, it failed to consider the democratic traditions that have existed all across human civilizations past and present, Institutions that have existed through millennia and continue to do so. The thinkers of western Europe used the romantic ideas of Greek democracy and tried to create an alternative to the despotic monarchies that existed at that time in Europe, but all they managed to do was substitute heredity with elections, the power institutions of the government as they were during the reign of monarchs continue to remain bureaucratic and powerful.

This paper tries to examine the alternative institutional structure of Panchayats by looking at the cases of two Pani Panchayats, one Van Panchayat, one Kashtkari Panchayat and the Khap Panchayats of North West India; how they have evolved historically, and how and why are they socially embedded creating a natural basis for establishing direct democracy at the grassroots level. Upon the investigation of the above cases, it is found that not only do Panchayats divide and decentralise the exercise of power, but it also provides indigenous institutional legitimacy to such exercise. It enhances the participation of not just all, but more specifically the participation of the marginalised sections of the society (women and untouchables) in their local decision-making processes. The examination of the Khap Panchayats and their historical evolution also points to the fact that social institution of Panchayats is not perfect, and they require rationalised restructuring in order to achieve its goal of establishing truly democratic institution at the grassroots level. Finally concluding that a socially embedded democratic institution like the Panchayat in India that has evolved with the society itself is a more suitable democratic institution, which can form the basis of a truly responsible democratic government.

Keywords: Decentralization, Democracy, Panchayats, Participation, Solidarity.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The idea of democracy is one of the major cornerstones of modern western thought. And yet the recent experiences in the west show a marked decline in its acceptance and more so a crisis of faith in its ability to translate the will of the people into governance (Graeber, 2013). Moreover, it can be seen very often in public discourses that popular opinion about something is not the correct opinion, and even though it is patently clear, are we to accept it as the will of the people in a democracy, or should we try to change the public opinion and create consensus (Mair, 2002)? Who decides whether an opinion is right or wrong? What does western democracy adhere to; *will of the people* or *will of the majority*? Is it really the majority, or is it always inevitably the minority? What will happen to a democracy when the minority (which almost always is an electoral majority) is alienated consistently over a long period of time (Donovan & Bowler, 1998)?

The idea of modernity in the west gave rise to not just *laissez faire* but at the very same time the idea of communism and socialism. These are two diagonally opposing ideologies, both a result of enlightened modern thinking, and both sociologically and philosophically accepted? Yet, neither has been able to find a solution to the problems of our society or economy. The concepts of personal liberty and freedom may have been able to limit the power of the monarch (England) or in some cases even overthrow monarchy (France), and restored the rights (Human Rights) that ancient humans surrendered in return for safety and

protection of the community life, but they have still **failed in transforming the character of the government from being powerful to being responsible**. And therein lies the biggest failure of western democracy (Israel, 2009).

Western concept of democracy is divisive in character, it divides the society into majorities and minorities, it divides the people on the basis of political ideologies and most importantly it divides the people into vote banks (Ash *et al.*, 2017; Benjamin, 2008). The concept of “Divide and Rule” was devised by the Europeans to extend their colonies in Asia, Africa and South America, however there is little doubt that those in power in the European Democracies have continued to use the very same policy in order to retain power in their own countries (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2004).

The foundation on which European democracies have been established has been the exercise of power by the ruler. This concept of exercise of power was borrowed from the monarchies of the past which were despotic and bureaucratic in character and whose existence depended on the exercise of such power. The democratic institutions that form the basis of these European democracies are also bureaucratic in character and work only to enhance their power structures (Jones & Sergot, 1996).

On the other-hand, western european philosophers, have consciously ignored the democratic, quasi-democratic or even proto-democratic institutions that have existed for millennia in the so-called uncivilized parts of the world, where monarchies were not as powerful as they were in Europe, and their influence on society was not as far reaching as it was in Europe. As Muhlberger & Paine (1993) point out that historians generally believe that the history of the world is the parade of empires and kingdoms of Europe, and if historians concentrate solely on empires, on those who command armies, collect taxes, and engrave vainglorious inscriptions on cliff-faces, they will continue to believe that politics has almost always been a matter of despotism and bureaucracy, varied only by lapses into anarchy.

This lack of interest among western historians and philosophers, in the insignificant, lacklustre and moribund life of the common folk in the countryside has led to a defective understanding of democracy in the west. Democracy is not about how the monarch’s powers were curtailed, how the government was organised, how tax was collected or how the feudatories were reigned in; it is about how small communities of common folk organised their own lives in the remote villages or tribal settlements or even nomadic settlements. How they made collective decisions that affected their entire communities and how these decisions were implemented in the absence of a king to exercise power.

II. CASE STUDIES

In order to substantiate the foregoing arguments, I present a few cases from India that highlight the cultural embeddedness of (Direct/Participatory Democracy) Panchayats in the Indian society at various levels. Wherever Panchayats have failed to achieve its objectives, it is not because of the failure of the institution itself but that of the failure *either* to culturally establish its roots artificially *or* the social deviances that have resulted from the differentiation in the Indian society. In order to understand the first of the failures, we start with two case studies conducted in two diagonally opposite states of India; Maharashtra and Orissa , and both relating to *Pani Panchayats* (or specific Panchayats relating to the sharing of water resources). One of them hugely successful and the other a complete failure. In the first case, the government simply provided a platform for people to come together discuss debate and find solution to their own problems and in the other case the government enacted a law to formulate and regulate the Pani Panchayats in the modern equitable sense (Deshpande & Reddy, 1990; Sahu, 2008). In the second case, bureaucracy took control of the Panchayats and not only did it fail, none of the ideas of modern social equity could be implemented on the other hand in the first case, as Elinor Ostrom had predicted in her Nobel Prize winning work on the commons, people themselves established and followed rules of equitable sharing (Ostrom *et al.*, 1999).

A. First Case Study (*Pani Panchayats of Maharashtra*)

The first case study was published in 1990 in the Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics by Deshpande and Reddy and dealt with the spontaneous formation of Pani Panchayats in the drought affected villages of Pune District in Maharashtra state in 1972-73 (Deshpande & Reddy, 1990). The case study refers to a note left by a young government engineer working on irrigation in these areas, pointing out very clearly that the solution provided by the government were pure temporary and *ad hoc* and the problems could never be solved through normal bureaucratic channels. Hindu temples in India are usually built either on top of a hill or on the banks of some water body. In this case, as well, it started with implementing rainwater-harvesting techniques onto the temple pond and this led to a threefold increase in the harvest on the temple lands. It is not easy to effect social change, but in rural Indian society, demonstration has a big impact and not soon after this, the first *Pani Panchayats* spontaneously formed to share the cost of upgrading technology and

the sharing of the water resources. People sat down to devise 5 principles¹, which formed the basis of these panchayats, and it automatically ensured equity in a hugely stratified society based on caste and economic inequalities (Deshpande & Reddy, 1990).

To argue however, that these social divisions were eliminated by the formation of these panchayats would be oxymoronic. Of the 61 panchayats, studied 31 were exclusively of the dominant class and 3 exclusively of the backward classes, only 27 had mixed memberships. Another important result of the study was that 36 of the 61 panchayats received government subsidy but they were clearly less efficient than the ones that did not receive the subsidy (Table II from the case study is annexed as appendix 1 below). Simply the *Panch* could not effect any modification to the workings of the Panchayat, but a majority of all members of the Panchayat could only make such decisions. Some of the quantifiable benefits to accrue from the formation of *Pani Panchayats* were that the yield per acre increased almost 3 times, crop intensity increased from 100% to 283% in some cases and the average wages quadrupled (Table III from the case study is annexed as appendix 2 below). The study lists out five reasons for the success of the *Pani Panchayats* and three of those are purely economic reasons; however, there are two more reasons for success that it lists out namely, **homogeneity** and **equity** (Deshpande & Reddy, 1990).

B. Second Case Study (*Pani Panchayats of Orissa*)

That homogeneity and equity are the most important factors becomes amply clear by the next case study, which was published in 2008 by Sahu in the Journal, *Development Local/Global Encounters* and dealt with the enactment of Orissa *Pani Panchayat Act* in 2002, and its impact (Sahu, 2008). One of the most important differences between the first case and this second one is that in this case the government established these panchayats for water sharing in a region of surplus water resources. The people had no need for this kind of an institutionalised redistribution of power through legal means; however, the state did it only to reduce its own burden of water resource management. It was assumed that a market-oriented approach would be most appropriate and economical for the state. However, this approach meant that water resources became commodities to be sold to the highest bidder and it clearly favoured the economically dominant section of the society. The state outsourced four major functions to these *Pani Panchayats*; (i) Planning and maintaining of irrigation systems, (ii) Crop planning, (iii) Regulation of water demand and collection of fees, and (iv) Dispute resolution (Sahu, 2008).

As seen in the previous case study, the *Pani Panchayats* of Maharashtra developed spontaneously, were largely comprised of socially homogenous groups and were democratic in their decision-making processes based on equity (Deshpande & Reddy, 1990). On the other hand in the case of *Pani Panchayats* of Orissa were externally imposed through an act of the state, where there was no such need, the membership was legally binding and forced upon and instead of sharing the water resources were treated as commodities to be sold (Sahu, 2008). Difference that is even more important was that the decision-making process was bureaucratically established and suffered from the usual malaise of bureaucratic organisation. As a result, in Orissa, the marginal and landless farmers were completely excluded from the benefits of the scheme, as they were unable to afford it. It was like the state setup the irrigation systems at its own expense exclusively for the benefit of the dominant castes. Even the participation of the dominant classes faded over time because Orissa being water surplus, expenditure on maintenance of state installed irrigation systems were no longer deemed profitable (Sahu, 2008). The Dispute resolution mechanism was so riddled with corruption and nepotism that the hegemony of the upper castes soon became the dominant factor. However, one of the most important findings of this cases study was that when the specialised *Pani Panchayats* failed to resolve conflicts, the state bureaucracy or courts did not resolve it, but instead the people chose to bring their disputes to the more traditional and culturally acceptable Village Panchayats for resolution and such decisions of the Village Panchayats were honoured (Sahu, 2008). The findings clearly point to the fact that the reasons for the failure of *Pani Panchayats* in Orissa was that, they were externally established and were not based on voluntary acceptance of principles of **equitable sharing** of scarce resources, and also because the membership was not voluntary, the **homogeneity** of the Panchayats could not be ensured, which led to further differentiations in an already differentiated society. Fig. 1 below highlights the main differences in the findings of the above two cases studies.

¹ There was an upper limit on how much land a family could irrigate ensuring equity between small and big farmers. The rights were not attached to the land so hostile acquisition of marginal farmlands could not accrue any additional benefits. This also meant that even landless labours who were members of the Panchayat were given water rights to be utilised in whosoever's land they chose to till. Moreover, most importantly the farmers voluntarily agreed not to cultivate crops like paddy, banana or sugarcane on land that was benefitting from the *Pani Panchayats*.

Pani Panchayats

State – Maharashtra (Draught) State – Orissa (Surplus Water)

- Small communities (Average size was 30 families)
 - Council comprised of a Head and 5 members
 - Membership was voluntary
 - Decisions made by simple majority
 - Benefits Accrued:
 - Crop Intensity went up from less than 100% to 283%
 - Production increased 4 to 6 times
 - Employment related outmigration stopped completely
 - Wage rates quadrupled
- Orissa Pani Panchayat Act, 2002
 - State established the Water User Associations
 - Functions:
 - Planning of Operation and Maintenance
 - Crop Planning
 - Regulation of Water Supply
 - Dispute Resolution
 - Results:
 - Social Elites benefited to the exclusion of poor
 - Marginal Farmers are in a state of Deprivation
 - Diverse Group Membership led to disputes
 - Heterogeneous and Scattered command areas led to failure of irrigation potential

Fig. 1. Differences in the success of the two *Pani Panchayats*.

C. Third Case Study (*Kashtakari Panchayat*)

The third case study is that of the *Kashtakari Panchayat* of the waste pickers in Pune District, published in 2005 by Chikarmane and Narayan. It is unique in the sense that it spontaneously developed out of a need to organise workers to protect their livelihood. Not only is it a panchayat but it is also registered as a trade union and is the only Panchayat of any kind in India, with female membership figures in excess of 70% (Chikarmane & Narayan, 2005). It has a 15 member council instead of the traditional five member and because its membership is almost twice that of traditional panchayats, it uses a system of nominated representation instead of direct participation of all members in the decision making process. 80 members are nominated not elected (75 women and 5 men) from different areas of the city to represent the members from those regions in the decision making process of the panchayat and since they are not elected, they do not have any term in office, the members who nominate them can remove and replace them at any time that they feel appropriate (Chikarmane & Narayan, 2005).

The case study points out at the reasons for the formation of this panchayat and its subsequent impact. Exclusively women waste pickers formed this panchayat, and men subsequently joined it, after they realised the benefits of the membership. The reason women preferred to be involved in the job of waste picking instead of more economically viable option of domestic help or construction worker, was the independence in this work and little to no chance of sexual harassment at workplace. Some private corporation saw profits in waste management and tried to exclude these women from their livelihood, which resulted in them uniting and forming the panchayat to drive the private corporation out of business (Chikarmane & Narayan, 2005). The case study lists detailed narratives of the incidences where, the panchayat not only protected the interests of the members against corporations and state institutions, but also helped resolve their own conflicts. Some of the areas in which the Panchayat achieved tangible results were (Chikarmane & Narayan, 2005):

- 1) Protesting against Police corruption and extortion;
- 2) Ensuring Justice and Equity;
- 3) Challenging stereotypes;
- 4) Recognition of waste pickers as workers to get benefits under existing labour laws and municipal statutes;
- 5) Claim over state social security schemes like medical insurance, education etc...;
- 6) Starting their own cooperative store recycling waste;
- 7) Doorstep collection and urban solid waste management;
- 8) Mobilisations against Rape, Child labour, Child marriage and other socio-political issues;
- 9) Rising against Domestic Violence;
- 10) Setting up a credit cooperative to provide social security to members;
- 11) Group life and medical insurance schemes.

It must be pointed out that, this panchayat again rose spontaneously from within the population and was

borne out of a necessity and solidarity of affected people rather than some democratic institution supplanted over them by law. It was not instantly recognised or accepted and the fact that its membership grew from mere 800 to more than 5000 in less than a decade itself bears a lot on its growing acceptability. Another factor of success, as listed in the previous two case studies, was the homogeneity of the membership, it was not only a panchayat established by women waste-pickers, it was a panchayat established by women members of the lowest of castes in India. Men were allowed into the panchayat on a limited basis at a later stage and still only hold an insignificant minority in the workings of the Panchayat² (Chikarmane & Narayan, 2005).

D. Fourth Case Study (Van Panchayats of Uttarakhand)

The last case study measures the impact of Panchayats on forest bio-diversity. It was conducted by HNB Garhwal University in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand in 2003-04 and published in 2008 (Negi *et al.*, 2008). Even though the case study never mentions it, specifically it indirectly highlights the socio-cultural embeddedness of Panchayats in the traditional Hindu Society of India. In simpler terms, and like all other Indic religious denominations, Hindus are also pacifists and have a deep-rooted respect for every living thing as embodiment of God on earth. Therefore, it will not be surprising to any Indian that the rural population living in the forests of Himalayas have been able to maintain a comparatively higher level of sustainability in relationship to their environment even in comparison to the heavily funded state projects of similar kind. The case study starts with pointing out that only 12% of all forests were covered by Panchayats in the state of Uttarakhand, the state government directly managed the rest and though the overall plant density in the state forests was higher, it was accrued to the fact that state forests were unpopulated. The Panchayat forests had higher plant biodiversity and were more effective in soil and water conservations as well (Negi *et al.*, 2008). This again provides more credence to Elinor Ostrom's seminal work on the commons and clearly shows how a socially embedded institution like Panchayat can create solidarity and sustainable resource sharing arrangements with minimal state involvement (Ostrom *et al.*, 1999).

III. PARTICIPATION AND SOLIDARITY

Panchayats have been a part of Indian village society for more than 3000 years now, the earliest mention of these village councils can be found in the most ancient of Indian religious texts the *Rig Veda* about 1200 BCE. No matter what the king did throughout his kingdom the villages were always ruled by the elected, nominated and accepted council of elders, who formed a link between the village government and the king. In India, historians even doubt that Athens was the first democratic society in the world as there are literary evidence to suggest that the *Lichhavi* and the *Sakya Republics* (origin 1000 BCE – 500 BCE) had existed in the erstwhile state of Bihar (India) much before democracy was established in Greece (Mathew, 1995).

Over the centuries, the structure of the Panchayats has changed, but because very early in the process of its evolution it got the acceptance of religious and cultural traditions of our society, it has continued to remain an integral part of the Indian society. The status of the Panchayats was elevated to be equal to God and even today in every Hindu religious ritual, including marriages and funerals, which are common to all societies around the world, are incomplete without invoking the *Panch Parmeshwar* or acceptance of Panchayat as God. Elevation of Panchayats into the status of God has created the problem of Dogma; people just accept the panchayats' dictat as gospel. Many of the social evils that have existed in India over the centuries like caste disabilities, or untouchability, or child marriages can also be linked to the acceptance of the panchayats and its decisions, which were based on practices, which could find religious justifications in the scriptures (Dhagamwar, 2009).

During the period between 500 CE and 1000 CE, when most of the Hindu religious scriptures, with the exception of the Vedas, were compiled and the religious practices were ritualised, panchayats played a very important role in ensuring that these religious practices were not only justified but also embedded in our society to such an extent that even today in the information era, reformers find it exceedingly difficult in getting rid of these practices (Heimsath, 2015). The sanctions imposed by the *Panch Parmeshwar* was absolute and failure to abide by that could lead to excommunication from the society. Even in the modern times today, in the remote villages of India, the decisions of the panchayats hold more sway than a judgement passed by a court of law established by the constitution of India. The acceptability of these decisions is so absolute that it does not even need to be executed, it is self-executing. Once a decision is made the village, community executes it collectively, without exceptions (Yadav, 2009).

As pointed out above, this kind of dogmatic acceptance of the decisions of panchayats have resulted in social disabilities. Caste system found its justification in the panchayats and even within the overall

² It must be pointed out that the social makeup of Indian society is still very much patriarchal, which is also borne out by the fact that even in a Panchayat made up of 75% women the head of the panchayat is still a man.

panchayats in the villages, there formed sub-groups called caste panchayats, which took care of the local needs of the various castes within the village (Chowdhry, 2004). At some point during its evolution, the caste panchayats of the more powerful castes started discriminating against the weaker lower castes and subsequently this led to villages being formed based on castes. It divided the society, and there were upper caste villages and there were lower caste villages with little contact between the two, giving rise to the concept of untouchability (Jodhka, 2002). However, no matter what the social status of the caste panchayats, they continued to exist at every level of society and continued to form a link between the village administration and the King.

These panchayats form a unique governmental institution, where the entire village community exists as the *Gram Sabha* (village assembly) which elects a group of 5 (five) elders which forms a panchayat (five-member council) and this council carries out all governmental functions including those of legislature, executive, judiciary and tax collection at the village level. The panchayats not only performed legislative or administrative functions but also ensured justice. The king may have been the source of law, but the real justice was only ever meted out by the *Panch Parmeshwar* and in consultation with the entire village community (Meschievitz & Galanter, 1982). Even though, these decisions were usually based on religious justifications, reason played a very important role in arriving at these decisions. Though religious scriptures concretised the idea of right and wrong or what was acceptable or unacceptable within the society, they were always open to challenge and interpretation through *Shastrarth* (enlightened debate among scholars on matters of religion, science and philosophy) and *Dogma per se* never found any takers in the Indian society (Sinha, 2012).

As discussed above, over centuries various kinds of corruptions afflicted the Indian society and the panchayats did not remain untouched by these corruptions, but because the decisions of the panchayats had more acceptability, even today in the modern era such corruptions of the society, sometimes find accentuations in the form of *Khap Panchayats* of north-western India, where caste-based and gender disabilities are still perpetuated through these panchayats (Bharadwaj, 2012). However, in the most ancient of Indian tradition of *Shastrarth*, these decisions of the *Khap Panchayats* are still hotly debated in the light of modern ideas of enlightenment (Chowdhry, 2004; Yadav, 2009) (Bharadwaj, 2012). One of the reasons, why the decisions of panchayats in Indian villages are self-executing is because these decisions are made by the panchayats in consultation with the entire village community (Gram Sabha) whereas the constitution or law in India is imposed upon those people from above and therefore needs a machinery to execute.

Like in the west, historians in India are mostly fascinated by the march of empires and kingdoms, and there is no historical record of the evolutions of panchayats in the villages of India, but it is an example of the living memory of a society which has continued to follow its democratic traditions for thousands of years and continues to do so (Nora, 1989). In modern times, when Indians have borrowed most of the modern ideas of enlightenment and experimented with concepts like socialism, welfare state, representative democracy, equality, rule of law and personal liberty, the sole reason that democracy has not just survived but thrived in such a diverse nation; with more recognised languages than those spoken in all of Europe, multitudes of religions, and diverse cultures, is the existence of a conscious memory of a democratic institution which has been socially and culturally embedded in the Indian society over centuries (Nora, 1989; Confino, 1997).

It is important to note that the structure and constitution of Panchayats in India has changed considerably in modern times. Traditionally, individuals did not own land and therefore the ownership of the entire village rested with the Panchayat, and we did not used to have elections for the positions of the *Panch*. They were usually nominated and rotated from the elder members of the villages or in some cases chosen by a draw of lots. In the modern times, the ownership of land passed on to private persons and panchayats were delimited as constituencies with elections conducted to choose the *Panch*.

In the 1990s, the government of India formally recognised Panchayats as the grassroots level local government institution in the villages through a constitutional amendment³. This amendment also provided for a standardised structure of Panchayat and Gram Sabha across India, with special provisions for reservation of seats for the backward castes and women.

According to the 2011 census, the average population per Panchayat representative in India was 281 (Alok, 2011). This means that most panchayat representatives have a personal relationship with every single one of their constituents. Furthermore, at least in theory, since all members of the Panchayat are also members of the Gram Sabha, the entire village as a whole collectively makes all decisions about the local issues. Another important feature of this type of participation in Indian villages is that the elections of the *Panch* are politically neutral, which means that when decisions are made everybody has a sense of involvement and solidarity, *inter alia* ensuring that this grassroots institution is not divisive in character.

The reservations provided to the socially backward sections of the Indian society in posts of the

³ 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India, 1992.

panchayats means that the people of the backward classes are not only represented adequately, they get a voice and can fight for their rights which were traditionally denied to them. Panchayats, have financial powers and can spend on education, health, sanitation and even generate local employment. This gives the backward classes a real opportunity to rise up the socio-economic ladder, not just to prosperity, but it also gives them a sense of belonging to the larger community and a real prospect of upward social mobility and acceptance in the larger society. Because of the reservations to women, of the less than 3 million panchayat representatives in India, more than 1 million were women (Alok, 2011). This has also led to Panchayats focusing their attentions more on issues that are closer to home like, access to drinking water, alcoholism, domestic violence or a crèche of all the things (Jain, 1996).

IV. CONCLUSION

It would be foolish to suggest that Panchayats alone as a democratic institution would be able to realise the ideals of true democracy in any society, however it would be equally foolish not to recognise its historical contribution ensuring existence of the grassroots level democratic institution for at least the last three thousand years of Indian history. Moreover, it is utmost importance to understand its workings and the reasons for its continued existence for such a long period of time, and then applying those findings not only to enrich our existing democratic theory, but to find ways in which our existing governmental institutions can be enriched with truly democratic ideals (Mathew, 1995).

One of the most important limitation of panchayats is that it works within very congruous small societies. However, we cannot disregard the fact that all complex human societies are a compilation of these small congruous societies which have evolved over centuries (Henrich, 2011). The very existence of nation states is proof positive that we as humans look for congruity within our immediate societies (Höllinger & Haller, 1990).

Although, it is a limitation of panchayats that they can only work within small societies, but it can also be used as an advantage in designing a democratic structure which can ensure direct democracy at the local level, where communities are small enough to number just a few thousand individuals. In 1950 when India enacted its constitution, we created a federal structure with powers divided between the Union and the States, similar to that of the United States (Rao & Singh, 2014). In 1992, the constitution was amended to establish a three-tier federal structure and the Panchayats were given constitutional basis at the local level in the rural areas of India (Singh, 1994). This recognition from the constitution took away the consultative aspect of the panchayats, and now it is more akin to a representative democratic institution rather than a direct democratic institution that it had evolved to be.

This has resulted into declining participation of the people in the Gram Sabha, in a study conducted in 2001 almost 65% of the respondents suggested that they had never attended a Gram Sabha meeting. Only about 20%-40% were actively involved in the decision-making process. In spite, of the reservations the involvement of women and backward classes was still recorded to be low (Alsop *et al.*, 2001). Even when there was participation of women, there were instances of the male dominated village society sabotaging the work done by the women or even the male members of the family indirectly making the decisions for the women in the Panchayats (Jain, 1996). Ignorance and illiteracy of the vast majority of rural India compounds these limitations manifold. Some of the deviant and discriminatory social practices which have continued even in the modern times in India which are very clearly demonstrated by the actions of *Khap Panchayats* leading to honour killings and excommunications from social life also present with serious limitations of this institution which needs to be dealt not just from the politico-legal angle but also from social reformist angle (Bharadwaj, 2012).

However, the success of this three-tier federal structure in India also provides us with an opportunity to utilise the existing democratic theory on representative democracy, participative democracy and direct democracy, the benefits and short-comings of which have been researched in detail, to suggest a federal structure of democratic government that include all three of these at different levels, which may be able to fix some of the democratic deficits that modern democracies are facing today.

Further research may be required to understand the institutional frameworks of panchayats and its viability as a direct democratic institution at the local level within a federal structure that also includes a participative institution at the state level and a representative institution at the national level. Research may also be needed to understand the division of powers and more importantly responsibilities, amongst these different levels of democratic institutions. It will not be remiss to suggest that panchayats in India provide us with valuable basis in understanding how democracy has evolved in a social and historical setting, and furthermore it gives us social scientists the opportunity to conduct further research to enrich the existing democratic theory on direct democracies at grassroots levels.

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX 1

TABLE II: COMPARISON OF TWO GROUPS OF SCHEMES

Sr. No.	Item	Schemes with Subsidy	Schemes without Subsidy
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1.	Number of Schemes	36	25
2.	Number of Members	997	843
3.	Area irrigated (ha)		
	(i) Designed	723.21	755.93
	(ii) Actual (rabi)	377.20*	-
4.	Cost per acre beneficiary**(Rs.)	3,792	4,189
5.	Cost per acre irrigated**(Rs.)	2,091	2,924
6.	Rates of Contribution (Beneficiary:Subsidy/Voluntary labour:GGP Loan)	16:41:43	19:7:74

* Actual area irrigated is low because some of the schemes were not provided electricity connection by Maharashtra State Electricity Board and hence they have not been Operationalised.
** Cost is inclusive of subsidy from government.

APPENDIX 2

TABLE III: FARM LEVEL CHANGES DUE TO GROUP IRRIGATION SCHEMES

Sr. No.	Impact variable	Before the Schemes	After the Schemes*
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1.	Cropping pattern	Mostly food crops like jowar, bajra, maize, etc.	Maize, HYV bajra, HYV jowar, wheat, onion, groundnut, cotton, vegetables, grape wine, etc.
2.	Crop intensity	Much below 100 per cent	Ranges from 108 per cent to 283 per cent
3.	Yield per acre	Below 50 kg. of foodgrains	Between 2-3 quintals of foodgrains
4.	Net returns per acre	-	Ranges from Rs. 100 to Rs. 2,000 (All crops together)
5.	Employment	Mostly used to work on public relief works, migrate to cities/irrigated areas as farm labour.	Outmigration is stopped. On-farm work is sufficient for a family.
6.	Average money wage rates	Rs. 3/- to Rs. 5/-	Rs. 10/- to Rs. 20/-

* Ranges are given to indicate variations from scheme to scheme and draught year to normal year.

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