

The Historical Background of Local Elite in India



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Abstract

The phenomenon of local elites emerged from the historical process of state intervention of development process in India. It has been evident in the pre colonial and colonial history that the state through intermediaries has created dependencies of all sorts among the larger rural masses. After independence the Nehruvian socialist policy and the idea of the independent peasant producer were intertwined in the policies of land reforms. With the introduction of Gandhian approach in the name of panchayatiraj, the myth of the nuclear village and community development programme, emphasis was given on the rational individual as the basis of voting decisions. It was the ability of such individuals to identify both parties and candidates which determined the pattern of voting behaviors of the people. The market was the another driving force which gave much emphasis on production, consumption, credit and communication. The central planning and bureaucratic implementation also aimed at achieving the same objective. In this crucial period, the local elites of the society who were less numerous, performed all political functions, monopolized power and enjoyed the advantages that power brought, whereas the villagers who were more numerous were directed and controlled by the local elites. After the passages of time the process became legal, their method became arbitrary and violent, and the local elite supplied the villegers with material means of subsistence and instrumentalities that were essential for the survival of the modern state.

Keywords: Local Elite, State Intervention, Development Process.

Introduction

The history of local elites traced back to the historical process of state intervention and developments process in India. The long draw colonial rule delayed Indian entry into the field of world development. Despite the growth of urban industrial sector, the economy remained predominantly agrarian at the time of independence. Rural population, involved mostly in low productivity labour, amount to 85 percent. The bulk of the 3 million labour force was working in agriculture based jute and cotton industries.¹ Organic structure of foreign and Indian capital differed little; about 13 percent of the total number of enterprises as well as 35 percent of the total work-force was controlled by foreign monopolies and colonial administration.²

In the midst of these circumstances characterised by colonial policy of laissez-faire, the early post-independence years were marked by 'ad hocism' in social and economic policies till the establishment of planning commission in 1950. A process was then initiated to actualize economic equality through economic and social planning. Bureaucratic institutions were altered, extended and geared to break out of the constraints imposed by the imperial framework of the economy.

Internal and external demands imposed upon the colonizers during closing years, had began to compliment the bureaucratic undertaking of development with participatory development. The changed state power took the lead from this point and adopted rural development strategies in an ideological frame work of harmony of interests and classes based on the principle of balance of old economic forces and new political forces. It is generally believed that its economics policies were flavored with keynsian remedies although the state hardly claimed neutrality. A re-examination of the path of development, in the present context, places state in an interventionist role.

Rich farm lobby is now held as getting best benefit in terms of term.³ Myriad success and failures have been the outcome through state-intervention in decades of planning. The state as a whole and its sub-structures has formed democratically. The process of development has

also been initiated, effected and manipulated by class-intervention. Socially, politically and economically powerful and privileged classes have gained while the weaker classes, the official targets of development, could not gain as much as proposed by the development schemes.⁴

It has been evident in the pre-colonial and colonial history that the state through intermediaries has created dependencies of all sorts among the larger rural masses.⁵ The state abolished the legal class of zamindars but could not eliminate them as bases of rural power structure. The nexus of these classes with bureaucratic administration created impediments in development. The unresponsive or selectively responsive spiritualism of bureaucracy, which could not remain uncorrupt in an inflationary economy at large, emerges as the detrimental process of rural development.

Review of Literature

Rural India was affected as much by attempts to change its political and economic from. In the year early 1950s almost every state in India was affected by land reforms. In the year 1951 the institution of highly localised territorial constituencies were introduced and in 1960s government policies were made for the steady expansion of the market for agricultural commodities and rural labour force. All such initiatives were introduced with a definite objective. The socialist policies of Nehru and the idea of the independent peasant producer were intertwined in the policies of land reforms. With the introduction of Gandhian approach, in the name of panchayati raj, the myth of the nuclear village and community development were juxtaposed with an equally powerful belief in the rational individual as the basis of voting decisions. Much emphasis was given on the ability of such individuals to identify both parties and candidates which determined the pattern of voting behavior of the people. At the same time the market was promoted as the driving force behind production, consumption, credit & communication. In the same spirit the central planning and bureaucratic implementation also aimed at achieving the said objective. This model was basically a top-down one, which was formulated at the apex of the system and applied in a highly standardised form that took very little interest of our diversified social and economic structures.⁶

After independence the creation of the development block was an another administrative innovation which worked as an intermediate unit of development administration situated between the village and the district. The development block was paralleled with up to fifty villagers and on the average about 80,000 inhabitants, but it did not always overlap with the sub-district revenue units called tehsils or talukas, nor with police circles. Each block was expected to provide 'an area large enough for functions which the village panchayat could not perform and yet small enough to attract the interest and service of its populations.'⁷ This new spatial unit of development administration which provided the vital face to face contacts between farmers & administration, produced another group of change

agents called the extension officers, a new kind of civil servant who had technical expertise and well trained in the art of persuasion.

But despite all the initiatives, the blocks could not performed it's expected functions. Unlike the tehsil or the village, they could not established their identities as territorial units. Besides, as soon as the scheme was implemented, the original community development programme was subverted with bureaucratic rules and regulations. In addition to this, with a intention to encourage popular participation, the community development officers patronized the local populace as their colonial masters had done earlier. The local people remained on uninvolvement and the desired development objectives were not achieved.⁸ To over come this difficulty, in 1957 the committee on plan projects of the National Development Council appointed a special group under the chairmanship of Balwantrai Mehta. The Mehta report recommended that developmental programmes would be implemented through a three tiers system of decentralised government, ensuring both democratic participations and bureaucratic expertisations. As a result of this Panchayati Raj was borned, a remarkable experiment in democratic decentralization. It's intention was to provide for the decentralisation of administrative functions and the politicisation of planning. At the same time, implementation of development programmes by officials and local leaders jointly.

Panchayati Raj was a system of three tiers structure below the state government. At the gross-roots level there was the village Panchayat or Councils. It's members or panchas were elected on the basis of universal adult franchise. But the Sarpanch or Panchayat Chairman was directly elected by the villagers or indirectly elected by the other panchas. At the block level there was Panchayat Samitis or Council Committees, whose members were consisted of the Sarpanchas and of certain other co-opted and ex-officio members-women, representatives of scheduled castes and tribes and leaders of co-operative societies. The members of Panchayat Samitis from among themselves elected a chairman who was called Pradhan or President. These Chairman of the Panchayat Samitis with in a district formed the Zilla Parishad or District Association. Additional members were again co-opted in the Zilla Parishad to give proper representation to women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Besides all local members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and Members of Parliament (MPs) were also included as the ex-officio members of the Zilla Parishad. And the Zilla Parishad elected its own presiding officers, who was called the Pramukh.

The most important structure in the Panchayati Raj system was its middle tier, the Panchayat Samiti. Because it was this block-level unit which was responsible for the development functions of the area, especially for preparing preliminary plans and for implementing the community development schemes. The samiti also controlled most of the development resources, including tax monies and

material inputs, and how these were allocated and used. The Zilla Parishad on the other hand was essentially a coordinating and advisory body. But the powers of the village panchayat was less substantial in comparison to the other two higher structures.⁹

Another important innovation in the area of development policy formulation and implementation was the introduction of a number of voluntary organizations called Co-operatives. A history of experiments with Co-operatives is observed throughout the century.¹⁰ Initially Co-operatives were formed to provide credit to farmers and to rural agro industrial ventures. The Second Five Year Plan added marketing, warehousing, trading and other economic functions of its citizens to encouraged co-operative movement. However, following the findings of Sir Malcolm Darling, who was appointed in the year 1957 to evaluate the progress of the co-operative movement, it was decided to make a closer links between Co-operatives and the Panchayati Raj system. Again in the year 1958, the National Development Council resolved that co-operatives should be organized from the village level up wards and should become responsible, along with village panchayats, for economic and social development of the area. In the same year the ministry of Community Development and Co-operation was created to established a link between the co-operative movement and other development programmes of the government. Besides, in 1959 the congress party adopted its famous Nagpur resolution on co-operative farming. Ultimately, in the early 1960s, the Ministry of Community Development and Co-operation was extended to include special responsibility for Panchayati Raj.¹¹

The major achievements of all the three innovations, namely the introduction of the Developmental Block, Panchayati Raj and the mobilization of development efforts through the Co-operative Movement, was to make a distinguish between policy formulation from policy implementation particularly below the district level. According to the process of democratic decentralization, authority and initiative for development policy was placed in the hands of the people representatives, it's focus was on the panchayati raj institutions, where as the function of implementing policies adopted by the Panchayat Samitis was given to the bureaucracy. Further the role of the bureaucracy was again confined to the older functions of tax collection, land settlement and records maintenance. Law and order were disassociated from the administration of development projects and were given to a newly, democratically accountable government departments. On the other hand, the of real assimilation of real power in the hands of Panchayati Raj bodies attracted political parties to local elections, created a direct links between the Panchayati Raj bodies below the District level with Ministers and party organizations at the state level.¹² The overall impact of all these measures provided a new organisational foci to interests and social groups, below the district level. It widened the room for maneuver for local elites in their attempts to incorporate their demands in the local developmental

agenda. As it was understood that representation in the panchayati raj structure was crucial for social group to have its objectives put on the agenda, the importance & depth of Panchayati Raj along with its associated institutions grew in times.¹³

Thus, the introduction of Panchayati Raj institutions in rural society in the 1960s greatly influenced the process of agenda setting at the local level. Firstly, it institutionalized the provision for a local 'input into the bureaucratic plans and targets that had hitherto been the most compelling element of the local development agenda. Secondly, by providing formal representations to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes through the policy of reservations, Panchayati Raj institutions also generated a process of institutional participations. Besides, this process also opened up the local institutions to be used by the lower social strata to put their demands on the local agenda. As a result of all these changes, the process of agenda setting became at least partly accessible to social groups those who were hitherto outside the boundary of the old-style social notables. The process of incremental diffusion of power, achieved in the central and regional political arenas in the 1950s spread to the local level in the 1960s. Since the developmental plans were primarily aimed at the social groups who were at the bottom of our social pyramid, to make development plan successful, those who were responsible for implementation of policy became highly sensitive to the wishes of those who were not satisfied with the pace or the direction of development.¹⁴

This room for maneuver in the agenda setting for the development of local area was exploited by the local elite who used their personality to create a place in local politics through the manipulation of the flow of development resources. On the other hand, under the expansive logic of political competition, local institutions were opened up to give proper representations to various social group who had hitherto been excluded from effective participation. The process through which the local development agenda was formulated & the items that were appeared on the agenda provided an insight into the local development environment, the state of social mobility in the local political arena.

The creation of such political administrative structures at the bottom of the administrative hierarchy provided for a meeting point between the state machinery and our rural society. Leaders who were active below at the district level not only voiced their supports for government programmes but made a link between the government and the common man. Along with their traditional tasks of distributing patronage among supporters and communicating popular grievances to government agencies, local elite shouldered the responsibility for new tasks of decision making. They mobilized local resources and generated public support for official programmes.¹⁵

A great deal of hard work was done by the local elites to scurry around from office to office, to fill forms and lobby govt. officials; to work on their behalf supervising construction labour; to fill forms and keep accounts; arrange elaborate "site visits" when officials

or politicians come to the village. Besides, all these things and they also attended to villager's everyday concerns – they took a sick person to hospital, often in the middle of the night, and they kept up one's contacts among doctors; they worked hard to have someone's govt. pensions approved and paid out in time (to know the associated rules and the people in charge in the tehsil and block offices); they got someone a loan sanction from a bank - they badgered, pestered, entreated, implored, threatened, cajoled and bribed, if necessary - and they did all these things day in and day out.¹⁶

The constitution seventy-third amendment act, 1992 further strengthened the position of the local elites by introducing representative democracy at the grass-roots level. It was a milestone in the history of rural local government. It was an act of political and administrative decentralisation and relaxed the local populations from the dictates of bureaucrats and politicians at the top. Though, the law was enacted by the center, it empowered the state legislature to create rural local government by law and endow the panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government. The act made some novel provisions like direct election by the people in the same manner as at the union and state levels; reservation of seats for SC/ST and women; an Election Commission to conduct election; and a finance commission to ensure financial viability of these institutions.

As I have worked in my study it is agreed that The elite though less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the villagers who are more numerous are directed and controlled by the elites, in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent, and supplies the first, in appearance at least, with material means of subsistence and with the instrumentalities that are essential to the vitality of the political organisms. The management of public affairs is in the hands of the elite, to which management, willingly or unwillingly, the villagers defer. Whatever power local elites possess today, it is mostly obtained through controlling public good and services, but they do not have any traditional, charismatic and legal source of power to control the common people.¹⁷

Aim of the study

In the present study an effort is made to analyse the historical necessity of local elites in the rural development programs of India. Simultaneously the study attempts to know why do a particular leader is made elite in the society.

In the study a majority of 68 percent of the villagers (SC/ST : 8 percent, OBC : 23 percent and General : 27) are of the opinion that grass-root democracy perpetuate functional elitism in society. They argue that the elites are most organized group in the society. Grass-root democracy again adds to their advantages conferring more power upon them. They give high promises but there is wide gap between their assurances and activities. Their individual interest in prior to any community interest. They execute the policy of the govt. with a biased

approach. The working of the panchayati raj system shows that they are interested to work only where there is flow of money but not radically. The voice of the common is also given a passive hearing and the illiterate mass are not in a position to influence the state machinery. The frequent interactions between the elites and administrative officials rather provides more opportunities to strengthen their nexus. The elites not only try to satisfy the aristocratic wishes of officials but provide all secret information to police. And the villagers say in Lanka every body was a demon nobody was different. Hence elite system can not be a instrument of change in the socio-economic and political system, rather social bases of power structure affects the state action frequently.

However, the elite have given a contradictory statement against the villagers. They argue that for its very success grass-root democracy can't do away with functional elitism. Local elites are the friend, philosopher and guide of the village community. Local resources can be best assessed and aptly utilized by local elites. Grass-root democracy provides more opportunities for political participation to each and every community. People have an open choice to choose their representatives with new ideas and ideology. Emerging leader's particularity younger one, can be inserted into politics. The elites defend that even though social bases of power structure affects the state actions still it is not confined to any particular caste and category. Whereas the elites of SC/ST and OBC categories thrust upon the nexus between elites and local officials to the General category, the elites of General category ascribe castism in politics to elites of SC/ST and OBC categories. But elites as a whole believe that elite structure can be a instrument of change in the socio- economic and political system of the country.

It may be due to the technical requirement of the organization or the incapability of the rural masses, but local elites are inevitable. When a simple question is asked to know, whom do the village people think is responsible for thinking or doing anything for development in their area ? The majority of the opinion are in favour of the local elite. Just like Hetukar Jha who deals with the contradiction between the elite and masses in Mithila in a historical perspective, in my study also it is observed that the elite group has a very weak orientation, they have a high tendency of making strongly worded promises, but they lacks team orientation, and has a tendency to manipulating power and holding others responsible for the misery of common people in the villages. They have also failed to mobilise masses who are largely isolated. In making demands for villagers the needs of the masses are completely ignored. But in the opinion of masses, thinking or doing anything for villages or masses is the sole concern of elite castes only.¹⁸ In my analysis 68 percent of the respondents strongly advocate for the elite class who can think or do anything for the development of their area. The idea is more clear, when interview is under taken with the concerned block officials. They are asked to reply why in a particular situation they have drawn the attention of the local elites? They reply that it is the local elites

who are most aware of local problems. When an objection is raised against the local elites that they may be biased in their approach to deal a particular problem? The officials defend that there is a particular point called 'local needs'¹⁹ upon which all people are agreed. The local elites can not undermine this local needs and there lies their importance.

The knowledge of local needs forces the local elite to use consensus approach in the decision making process in rural politics. Anthony Carter believes the appearance of consensus serves to exclude the non-elite public from knowledge of and participation in political decisions²⁰. When members of the political class decide among themselves who will sit on the Managing Committee of the cooperative credit society or on a village panchayat the rest of the people are deprived of the power of their votes. Consensus procedures also allow the political elite to make their decisions in secrecy behind a facade of unanimity. Meetings of the Grampanchayat and Panchayat Samities are open to the public including members of press. But meeting of the Panchayat officers and elites are private. The claim that an election such as that of a cooperative credit society chairman is nirvirodh (without opposition) is used by elite leaders to prevent the public from learning that there are decisions within the elite and from knowing who supported whom. If such information were available to the public it might limit the elite's freedom of action. By the use of consensus decision making procedures elite leaders maintain the unity of large coalition. In Grampanchayat and Panchayat Samiti policy decisions are left to the samiti members and administrative officials. Unity is maintained among samiti members by dividing patronage more or less equally and by allowing each member to control the distribution of patronage in his own constituency. If conflicts do arise they are settled in private.²¹

Thus consensus serves the interest of the elite but not those of the electorate. It allows elite leaders to monopolies political power and to do so in private, cloaked by unanimity. It protects them from embarrassing disclosures and preserves their freedom of action. The loser in a political contest can say that he really was not defeated. The winner can say that he is the choice of every one, the right man for the job.

The role of consensus in Indian democracy is similar to the role of the theory of balance or countervailing powers in western democracies.²² Consensus, like the idea of a harmony of interests, serves as an ingenious moral device invoked, in perfect sincerity, by privileged groups in order to justify and maintain their dominant position²³. From this analysis of consensus decision making procedure F.G. Bailey draws two most important conclusions.

In the first place, the use of consensus decision making procedures reflects the fact that Panchayats and other bodies are what Bailey calls "elite councils". Elite councils are those which are, or consider themselves to be (whether they admit it openly or not), a ruling oligarchy. The dominant cleavage in such a group is between the elite council (including, where appropriate, the minority from which

it is recruited) and the public: that is to say, the dominant cleavage is horizontal. The opposite kind of council is the arena council. These exist in groups in which the dominant cleavages are vertical. The council is not so much a corporate bodies with interests against its public, but an arena in which the representative segments in the public come into conflict with one another. As Bailey notes, elite councillors do not represent conflicting interests to which they are answerable. On the contrary, they have a strong incentive to present a front of consensus and keep their ranks closed in the face of their public.²⁴

In the second place, it is clear that so far from consensus being a sign that everyone in the village is of one mind and one heart, it may be a sign that the dissidents either feared to enter the ring at all or had already been worsted by crooked means before hand²⁵. In many cases 'consensus' is a canard much like the 'unity of the village'; in reality it is the unity of the dominant group, the elite²⁶.

Conclusion

Thus from the above discussion we can conclude that the phenomenon of local elites emerged from the historical process of state intervention of development process in India. It has been evident in the pre colonial and colonial history that the state through intermediaries has created dependencies of all sorts among the larger rural masses. After independence the Nehruvian socialist policy and the idea of the independent peasant producer were intertwined in the policies of land reforms. With the introduction of new Gandhian approach, in the name of panchayatiraj, the myth of the nuclear village and community development programme, emphasis was given on the the rational individual as the basis of voting decisions. It was the ability of such individuals to identify both parties and candidates which determined the voting behavior of the people. The market was the another driving force which gave emphasis on production, consumption, credit and communication. The central planning and bureaucratic implementation also aimed at achieving the same objective. With the introduction of the development block, panchayatiraj and the mobilization of development efforts through the cooperative movement, policy formulation was distinguished from policy implementation below the district level. According to the process of democratic decentralization, authority and initiative for development policy was placed in the hands of the people representatives of the people, focused on panchayatiraj institutions, where the bureaucracy was given the limited task of implementing policies adopted by the Panchayat Samiti. The assimilation of real power in the hands of panchayati raj bodies attracted political parties to local elections, created a direct link between the Panchayati Raj bodies below the district level with ministers and party organizations at the state level. The overall impact of all these measures was to provide a new organizational foci to interests and social groups, below the district level, which widened the room for maneuver for local elites in their attempts to incorporate their demands in the

local developmental agenda. This room for maneuver in the agenda setting for the development of local area was exploited by the local elite who used their personality to create a place in local politics through the manipulation of the flow of development resources. On the contrary, under the expansive logic of political competition, local institutions were opened-up to give proper representation to various lower social group who had hitherto been excluded from effective participation. In the process through which the local agenda was formulated and the way items were included on the agenda provided an opportunity to the local elite to perform all political functions, monopolize all power and enjoy the fruits of development. Whereas the villagers who were more numerous were subject to directed and controlled by the local elite.

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