

Panchayats and Human Rights

The billionaires who need no change in the status quo are but a handful, to be counted in the thousands at most. But those who are losing out as a result of the aggravation of inequity in social and economic spheres can be counted in the thousands of millions in this country. The problem for the persons in power is how to pacify mass anger and create a sense of involvement of broad masses, in participatory democracy. So official democrats in India remain busy round the year to propagate, in diverse ways, what they call the largest democracy in the world. For the people enjoying power and privilege, democratic space seems to be expanding in leaps and bounds while for the socially disadvantaged it is simply shrinking despite multiplication of government sponsored democratic and quasi-government institutions. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) that monitors violation of human rights across the country is a unique manifestation of modern democratic culture but this paper tiger cannot bite, notwithstanding its overwhelming authority and reach. Also, its endeavour to make people aware of their rights is at best exercised in air-conditioned seminar halls with limited impact on a few human rights watch bodies that, of late, have mushroomed, mostly with localised agendas.

Participatory Democracy at the grassroots level or the idea of Panchayati Raj got boost after the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution that should have strengthened the structure and functioning of the Panchayats, widened the representative base of democracy in India. NHRC organised a seminar on 'Panchayati Raj and Human Rights' in July this year with a view to involving Panchayats to promote human rights and increase awareness among broad masses about their rights and duties. The concept is fine. Incidentally it was the sixth such national seminar. Nobody knows when they will organise the seventh to take the stock. But the ground reality in respect of Panchayat functioning, not to speak of violations of human rights, presents a totally dismal scenario.

In truth rural people look reluctant to see panchayats as their own democratic institutions that could empower them in real terms. The reason is simple. Panchayats are one more area of politics and political rivalry as well. The misuse of power, poverty and social disparity virtually deprive the basic masses of their basic human rights. Panchayats today are mini-assemblies even in some states where a little bit of transparency exists. What was sought in the 73rd amendment is one thing. But what gets translated into action is quite another. Panchayats have not become a cradle for social development as envisaged in the Amendment. NHRC believes that Panchayats can be the harbinger of social revolution and that they can effectively remove the social evils from the society. But revolution is already a dirty word, thanks to so many insurgencies including the maoist insurgency. Honour killings continue to take place in many parts of north India and Panchayat can do little to prevent this social menace. Nor can they stop witchcraft in some tribal communities. If Panchayats are viewed as the administrative set ups for de-centralisation and devolution of political power, they have failed miserably. Some stray examples from Kerala and West Bengal do hardly justify their claim of panchayat success.

Panchayats function in partisan way and empowering the vulnerable sections of society, particularly women and socially backward communities is a remote possibility because political parties have a broader agenda of making governments in states and at the centre by utilising panchayats as vote-catching machines, 73rd amendment or no amendment. It has already been institutionalised and violence is now a part of the game called panchayat politics. How panchayats discriminate against supporters and sympathisers of opposition parties is now an open secret. Even BPL cards and job cards are issued by panchayat

bosses on consideration of party loyalty. Nobody expects panchayats, given political atmosphere in the country today, would protect human rights of the deprived. Instead of empowering the poor, they are actually trying to pit one section of the marginalised against another, only to defeat the very purpose panchayati raj—devolution of power and empowering of the rural people at the grassroots level. A goal of involving panchayats to champion basic human rights cannot be reached by just focusing on 73rd amendment to the constitution and organising a grand gathering of celebrities. □□□