

## GANDHI'S GRAM SWARAJ – STILL A DISTANT DREAM

There are times in history when we are at the crossroads and the fate of a nation hangs in the balance. This is such a time for India and Karnataka has to make some hard choices. Shri Siddaramiah and his government can decide to go the Modi way [they have already demonstrated such tendencies] and subvert our Democratic Republic, extinguish dissent through fear and seduction, transforming it into an authoritarian regime; or resurrect from the grassroots, the sovereign, socialist, democratic republic we were meant to be and show India and her people the true meaning of 'development', one that is inclusive and based on social justice.

The villages, not the Corporate Houses, of India should be the foundation of our democracy and establishing Panchayat Raj or Gram Swaraj as envisioned by the Mahatma, Jayaprakash Narayan and Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia and argued for so eloquently by Rajiv Gandhi would be the first step.

Panchayat Raj found its first home in Karnataka. Eminent people like Shri Abdul Nazir Sab, Shri Ramakrishna Hegde, Shri M Y Ghorpade, and Shri L C Jain, took the baton forward battling great opposition to establish this alternate system of governance based on an entirely different social construct to the atomised and inorganic view of society that is a result of industrialisation and the new economic order.

JP describes Gandhi's sociological thought on this subject as an *"organic or communitarian view that puts man in his natural milieu as a responsible member of a responsible community. This does not treat man as a particle of sand in an organic heap, but as a living cell in a larger organic entity"*. He goes on to say that to accomplish this task it is necessary to discover new *"political and economic institutions"* and he urged *"the protagonists of panchayat raj [to look] beyond the hackneyed phrases of political and economic decentralisation, fondly hoping that parliamentary democracy plus a large measure of local self government would perform the trick and usher in peoples democracy of their dreams"*.

This was the frame within which the Ramesh Kumar Report and Amendment Bill were drafted. They are a ground breaking set of amendments that if legislated will take Local Governments to a higher plane and set a new bench mark for the Nation to follow. It will also influence the way Governance is practiced in larger tiers of government rooting out corruption, the culture of patronage and the corporate-communal binary among other things and ensure that development plans are designed through the participation of 'all' and not the select 'few'. It is radical in its approach, but then this was required in order to honour and respect the true spirit of Gram Swaraj.

With this a rare historic opportunity has presented itself to the Congress party in Karnataka with the forthcoming Panchayat Raj elections and less than half a term to prove their worth. It is up to the Panchayat Raj Minister to rise to the challenge. Such legislation can put

Karnataka once more on the front ranks of Panchayat Raj in the country and this government could go down in the annals of history as the one who after 66 years for the first time since independence made a reality of the Mahatma's dream for Indian villages.

This Ramesh Kumar Committee was set up to suggest remedies to the existing Act that has been mangled over the past 20 years through hundreds of executive orders by myopic Ministers and bureaucrats, reducing it to a mere State controlled delivery system manned by officials rendering people powerless. Schemes have been centralised, the bureaucracy strengthened and all the rights, powers and autonomy of the Panchayats and Gram Sabhas systematically taken away.

After careful scrutiny, State wide consultations with all stake holders and very deep and detailed deliberations over a year, the Committee suggested 88 amendments to the existing Panchayat Raj Act 1993 that would ensure that Local Governments and more importantly, the people through their Gram Sabhas are masters of their own destiny.

The report and the Amendment Bill were presented to the State Government more than seven months ago. It was not tabled in the Belgavi Session though the RDPR Minister promised to do so. The opposition and several members of the Congress party raised questions to which the government stated that it would be tabled in the subsequent session. Instead, at a Legislative Party Meeting in what now appears a bid to buy time, a Cabinet Sub-Committee was set up to scrutinise the committee's recommendations. Till date it is not known if they have completed their task.

In a meeting with members of the Core Committee H K Patil gave us his word that the Sub-Committee, of which he is the Chair, would complete its work before the 20<sup>th</sup> of March and the Amendment Bill would be tabled in the Budget Session. As it happened, only three of the eighty eight amendments saw the light of day along with one of the Ministers own making – the compulsory voting amendment, on the very last day.

When questions were raised again on the floor of both Houses, the Government explained that as the Panchayat Raj elections were soon approaching which could not be postponed, only the amendments pertaining to the elections had been tabled. The ones selected were: a full five year term for Presidents and Vice Presidents; the reservation and rotation of seats once in ten years (two terms) for all tiers; and guaranteeing 50% reservation for women.

If that was the case, then several other amendments pertaining to the elections, such as the single member constituency; the state funding of all Panchayat elections; the ban on the sale of liquor during the election; the election process to be completed in seven working days; and that the State Election Commission as the authority responsible for de-limitation, reservations and the disqualification of members should also have been tabled.

Again, the opposition and several members of the ruling party demanded a special session to discuss the Ramesh Kumar Committee recommendations in its entirety. The Minister, without conceding the need for a special session, stated that the remaining amendments would be tabled in due course. But till date there is no sign of that happening.

It therefore very surprising that the Government can make time for an urgent special session for the trifurcation of the BBMP, despite the court rulings and the Governors dissent, a move that is considered by many activists as a retrograde step.

But we have to take into account the fact that politicians will only change something if it's to their own advantage and self interest overrides principles.

We can only hope that this is not so.

If H K Patil is a man of his word and has shed his feudal roots he will call for a special session at the earliest conceding the right of our elected representatives to examine the Amendment Bill in its entirety before they decided what is best for Panchayat Raj in Karnataka.

If Siddaramiah is true to his professed ideological leaning he will make the right choice and act on this, proving to the people of Karnataka that they have voted him in for the right reasons.

If the Indian National Congress believes in Rajiv Gandhi's vision for rural India and not in just using his name to garner votes, it will assert its authority like it did in the Ravi case and direct the State Government to table the Ramesh Kumar Report without delay.

But we can only hope. Ultimately history will be the judge of this government and the forthcoming Panchayat Raj elections an acid test.

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