REVISITING GANDHIAN IDEA OF DECENTRALIZATION AT THE TIME OF COVID 19: KERALA MODEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to explore the relevance of the lost legacy of Gandhi in the context of the Gandhian idea of decentralization at the time of the most challenging health crisis in the world, the pandemic COVID 19. The impetus to the idea of democratic decentralization was first witnessed during the 73rd Constitutional Amendment which came out with the constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions and evolved three-tier system of Panchayat. The credit goes to the BalwantraiMehta Committee which was set up in 1957 and recommended the three- tier structure of interconnected local self-government. The idea was the endowment of PRIs with the necessary power for the implementation of social justice and welfare programmes. However, it is a bitter reality that centralization remains at the centre ignoring the envisioned objective of decentralization. Gandhi talked about overall holistic village development, where he tried to establish a close link between positive transformation through various programmes and village governance through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). Both went not parallel to each other but enclosed in each other. It thus becomes important to identify this correlation in the role of decentralization in tackling the most difficult crisis in human history. This paper thus is a modest attempt to examine the Kerala way of fighting COVID from the perspective of the Gandhian idea of decentralization. Kerala is known for its successful model of decentralization; many times this angle is ignored or remains unacknowledged in analysing the outcome.

KEYWORDS: *Gandhian Approach, Gram Swaraj, Panchayati Raj, COVID 19 Kerala Model, Gandhian Relevance*

INTRODUCTION

The world is a stage that witnessed the drama of government and governance in its varied forms. These range from Federal government, Anarchy, Republic, Capitalist, Communist, Dictatorship, Monarchy, etc. Out of these and many unmentioned, democracy holds a special place and repute. This is because of its special feature to install people with power through indirect representation. Our school text defines democracy as government of the people, by the people and for the people. We have grown listening to this. Our youth days passed observing this and in adulthood, we becoming an active part of this phenomenon called democracy. People thus have their stake in putting up their development and welfare priorities which have a direct bearing on their wellbeing. In the Indian context which is diverse and at the same time complex, democracy is further refined with the addition of grassroots democracy, here political decentralization in the form of Panchayati Raj

Institution (PRIs) holds a special place. Way back in 1907Royal Commission on Decentralization was set up. The Commission came out with its recommendation in 1909 which reads "It is most desirable, alike in the interests of decentralization and in order to associate the people with the local tasks of administration that an attempt should be made to constitute and develop village panchayats for the administrations of local village affairs." Alike today all the recommendation of Committee largely remained confined, on papers. During the pre- independence period there where many subsequent but not substantive work done in this context. Some of these included Punjab Village Panchayat Act (1935), Mewar Gram Panchayat Act (1940), Marwar Gram Panchayat Act (1945), Wadia Village Panchayat Act (1946), etc. Under many of these attempts, only limited villages were covered with limited functions. This was basically in legislative terms under the aegis of foreign rules which had already subjugated the nation with less or no intention to empower the people. The Indian National Congress which was wedded to the idea of Gram Swaraj introduced by Mahatma Gandhi distanced itself from it when India got independence. A village which was viewed as a unit of local self-government and social and political change suddenly failed to acquire any place in the first draft of the most important document of independent India, the Indian Constitution. After noticing the disappointment of Gandhi due to neglect of India of his dream an amendment was inserted as Article 40- Organization of Village Panchayat in Part IV of the Constitution- Directive Principles of State Policy. The most important unequivocal propagation of Gandhian idea of decentralization under the fold of Gram Swaraj will be dealt separately in the consecutive section, in continuation let's understand the ensuing progress after the inclusion of Article 40. In this context, M. Aslam aptly said "This provision of the Constitution was primarily advisory in nature and therefore not taken seriously both by Central and the State Governments. It is a fact that the Indian State, immediately after attaining independence, was more committed to industrialization and rural transformation through economic growth than democratic decentralization through Panchayati Raj." The failure of the Community Development Programme (CDP), 1952 came heavy on the government and therefore to analyse the impact a review Committee under the chairmanship of Balwantrai G. Mehta was constituted in 1957. It was clear that the non-existing delivery mechanism at the grassroots level led to the lesser public participation and gave a top-down approach to CDP. This was the reason that it remained far behind the expectations that were associated with it. Thus, the Committee made a strong entreaty to establish elected local bodies in the form of Panchayat Raj for the initiation of devolution of power. It was then the need for resurrecting the Panchayati Raj came in light. The Committee thus stated "Development cannot progress without responsibility and power. Community Development can be real only when the community understands its problems; realizes its responsibilities; exercises the necessary power through its chosen representatives…." There were many other Committees which time and again came into existence .However, the idea was cemented with a concrete step, under The Constitution (73rd Amendment Act), 1992. It came into effect from April 24, 1993. The amendment included an exhaustive feature to empower the third-tier of government. It included gram sabha, uniform three-tier system (village, intermediate and district level), reservation of seats (SC/ST and women), direct elections and conduct of elections, development activities, etc. The irony is that the necessity of Local Government is seen differently by different Governments both at Centre as well as State. Very few states have emerged in establishing a model of PRIs which is worth attention while others still stand far behind. In the aftermath of 73rd and 74th Amendments even after three decades, it is seen that PRIs are reduced to the level of a vehicle for delivery of government programmes with minimal fiscal power. However various policymakers and scholars have stressed the role and importance of this semiconscious extension of government, it is clear when T. R Raghunandan opined "We need a robust LG system that will help us to cope with the challenge of India transiting from largely rural to a substantially urban country over the next 20 to 25 years and this might necessitate constitutional changes." This need is never felt so hard before the recently COVID 19

hit India. The compromised state of health and other welfare delivery system is forcing us to revisit the Gandhian vision of Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Institutions. The relevance of the same is apparent in the successful COVID 19 model of state of Kerala which is acclaimed by the entire world.

GANDHI'S GRAM SWARAJ THROUGH THE LENSES OF HIS PRINCIPLES

One cannot understand Gandhian thoughts without understanding Gandhian principles. The set of principles that Gandhi talked about are not exclusively associated with a particular field such as political, social, spiritual, etc. These are the universal principles that are prerequisite to make the foundation of change stronger as the unit of change is always an individual. It will be obscurantism if we talk of Gandhian idea on decentralization without knowing the behavioural essentials that he advocated for every human being. His idea of an egalitarian society based on the decentralization of power was founded on nonviolent social order. He called such a society an Ahimsak Samaj. Therefore, one cannot forgo with nonviolence and truth. It has to be intrinsic with regular practice for self-mastery. Only an Ahimsak Samaj can enable a socio- economic and socio- political structure that protects the self and harness a healthy conducive relation with self. Here an individual is at the centre and society is at the periphery, yet both influence and get influenced by each other. The change starts at the centre which then transcends towards the edge. The Gandhian idea of Swaraj is comprehensive which also comprises Gram Swaraj. Swaraj not only means political freedom but it also means regulation of self. This same principle of regulation of self when applied to a collective order such as village then it means a self-regulated an autonomous village republic. It is in this context "Gandhi proposed a decentralised production system and self-sufficient village side by side with individuals who have attained self- control" .Gandhi said "I hold that without truth and nonviolence there can be nothing but destruction for humanity. We can realize truth and nonviolence only in the simplicity of village life…." Gandhi introduced a detailed plan of people-centric change which not only indicated the areas that needed improvement or replacement but at the same time he presented a picture of a future order. The new socio- political order will be in more equilibrium. Gandhian ideas of Gram Swaraj were critical to the role of power-sharing. This was both in the social as well as political arena as the latter influence the former. The concentration of power leads to exploitation, sectarianism, subjugation, and skulduggery. Gandhi wanted the delineation of power across the political hierarchy. He wanted to use it as a subversive object to give impetus to his greater concern of social justice and people's participation in welfare objectives. It was indeed his pragmatism. "The swaraj based polity comprised small, cultured, well -organised, thoroughly regenerated and self- governing village communities. They would administer justice, maintain order and take important decision, and would thus not merely be administrative but also powerful economic and political units." The one very important point of reflection here is that Gandhi not only viewed it as an administrative unit but a more powerful economic and social unit. He well knew that in the absence of decision-making power the resource distribution is meaningless. He had this ubiquitous fear that with no decentralization of power, his plan of action such as village health, sanitation, economy, and overall development will remain unachieved. This was the reason that where ever he talked about village development, he did talk about the decentralised model of the village government where Panchayat had a special place. Gandhi in his writing and speech eulogise an empowered village republic through village panchayats. He thus said "Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or Panchayat having full power." He further added, "My idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity." This account unabatedly establishes the fact that decentralization had an important place in the Gandhian plan of action. The importance and role of Panchayat Raj therefore need to be understood in a more detailed manner.

PANCHAYAT RAJ A GANDHIAN PRAGMATISM

It is evident that Gandhi's favour of panchayat was hard- nosed one. It is equally a subject of enquiry that even after having an army of Constructive Workers for restructuring the social order; what made Gandhi glued to the idea of Panchayat Raj? It is thus important to understand the ideal. Power equation is centric in his thought, it is clear when he said "Let India live for this true picture, though never realizable in its completeness. We must have a proper picture of what we want before we can have something approaching it. If there ever is to be a republic of every village in India, then I claim verity for my picture in which the last is equal to the first or, in other words, none is to be the first none the last." Gandhi envisioned panchayat as a unit of governance, policy initiator, legislator, and even local law, and order were included under its jurisdiction. This prissily means the complete autonomy of panchayats. This was intended to strengthen the power of people. Here the public opinion mattered the most. Representation of people's voices by their representatives at the lowest strata of government will surely ensure their empowerment. Therefore, the dent caused by the centralization of power at the higher level will reduce steadily. Gandhi advocated prioritizing the need of the people depending on their local realities through the channel of the village panchayat. He also talked about shouldering the responsibilities of these felt needs through the channel of village panchayat with a participatory approach where people play an active role. In his scheme of panchayat, accountability was the heart of the matter. The power to question the elected panchayat members by the common man was democratic and much ahead of that time. His idea of Panchayat Raj was inspired by Indian tradition and culture but not confined within its authoritative preview. It was influenced by the democratic ideas where people's power is significant. This layout is clear in Gandhi's own words when he said, "The government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat of five persons, annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualification. These will have all the authority and jurisdiction required. Since there will be no system of punishment in the accepted sense, this Panchayat will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office…" he further added, "the greater the power of the Panchayats the better for the people." The social reconstruction of Gandhi went under the umbrella of the 19-point Constructive Programme. The exhaustive list indicated areas of change. These were rural oriented. The task was thus viewed as the moral responsibility of every Indian to achieve the goal of Poorna Swaraj through nonviolence and truthful ways. Many youths and Gandhian in both pre and post-independence worked for this endeavour under the branding of Constructive Workers. Though Gandhi delegated these works largely to all and yet it had grown with its ilk that is village panchayats. Emphatically and consistently he pointed out the functions of panchayat many of these can be presently found under the subject of panchayat jurisdictions. Some of these were local dispute settlement, cattle improvement, soil improvement, quality of foodstuff grown, health and sanitation, education, water, etc. He explained its functions and power and kept the objective clear when he said "My purpose is to present an outline of the village government. Here there is perfect democracy based upon individual freedom. The individual is the architect of his own government." Impeccably Gandhi's intend came clearer when he went to an extent of changing the role of Congress. He perceived its role dedicated to social construct remaining apolitical in free India. In the draft of a new constitution for the Indian National Congress which Gandhi prepared a day before his demise on 29th January 1948 (It is often referred as his Last Will and Testament), in a strenuous manner, he stressed the need and importance of the third tier of government in newly independent India. He said, "The AICC resolves to disband the existing Congress organization and flower into a Lok Sevak Sangh under the following rules with power to alter them as occasion may demand. Every Panchayat of five adult men or women being villagers or village minded shall form a unit…..As the final formation of provinces or districts is still in a state of flux, no attempt has been made to divide this group of servants into Provincial or District Councils and

jurisdiction over the whole of India….It should be noted that this body of servants derives their authority or power from service ungrudgingly and wisely done to their master, the whole of India." Conspicuously Gandhi was an ardent supporter of devolution of work and power and thus outlined the decentralised model in the form of PRIs.

THE RELEVANCE OF PRIS UNDER KERALA'S FIGHT FOR COVID 19

After the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the Eleventh Schedule was added. It presented a detailed list of as many as 29 functions that are to be devolved by states to the Panchayat Raj Institutions. It was then left on the discretion of states to decide the ways and means as well as the timeframe to achieve this objective. Though it was enacted at the level of centre, the main authority in terms of devolution was vested at the level of states. Unfortunately, the political and bureaucratic will of different states remained divided on this front. At the same time state of Kerala was fortunate enough to realize this need much earlier than other states. The remarkable step in this direction took place in 1996when the Left coalition government came in power. It took an audacious decision to devolve 35 percent of plan funds to local bodies. It was a promise of an unprecedented level of financial flows to PRIs. The process used the epistemic of a Marxist party, State planning board, and Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP). Efforts were made for roping the opposition in the state assembly. Thus, in the language of John Gaventa Kerala moved towards utilizing its "invited spaces" for development planning. The most noticeable was the Kerala People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning. The mechanism and module for this were unambiguously clear "Village assemblies listed problems, then elected task forces drew up projects that were prioritized by village and municipal elected council members. Democratically elected development block councils and district councils processed the local proposals and added projects to fill in gaps or reduce conflicts. Special allotments were set aside for projects aimed at former untouchable castes and for projects designed to benefit women. Innovative accounting procedures and high levels of transparency are widely believed to have helped limit rent-seeking and to have led to significant improvements in physical infrastructure throughout the state." Decentralization of health services found a special place under Kerala People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning. A considerable improvement in public investment in health was noted. The assemblies which were organised at both urban, as well as rural areas identified health as a priority sector. After gathering the local data, a detailed Panchayat Development Report (PDR) was formed. The report comprises a different subject which included health as one of the subjects later became base for creating the list of project areas. It is also noted that capacity building of the local community went hand in hand. Various seminars, training, meetings, and campaign brought the people in the loop. It is thus necessary to analyse Kerala's response to COVID 19 in the context of both past and present. The efforts of decentralization percolated to the sector of public health and have a positive bearing on the contemporary health sector of Kerala. It succeeded in establishing a culture of decentralization by transmitting it to common people.

Past COVID 19 pandemic there is an increase in realization to rework the area of governance. The hit and try method cannot be applied to risk the life of millions. Therefore, there is a need to closely monitor, understand, modify, and replicate the success stories. Indeed, the Kerala state leadership needs a generous appreciation for handling this health emergency at its best. Apart from emphatically administering the lockdown, deploying the dedicated state health workers, dealing with empathy, and firmness with the informed state citizen; there is something more to this success model. This unacknowledged subject is the role of Kerala's decentralization model in tackling COVID 19. The Former Secretary, Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, Karnataka, and Former Joint Secretary, Ministry of Panchayat Raj, Government of India, T.R Raghunandan rightly said in his piece in The Hindu, " Kerala's panchayats were COVID-19-ready because years ago,

they stepped in as caregivers for the old, the weak and the marginalised. From their flexible funds, panchayats feed the destitute through their Ashraya programme, and run free day-care centres for the mentally and physically challenged through 'Buds' schools. These are initiatives in which the government later participated in, but the initiatives were those of the panchayats themselves. Moving from that to taking care of those affected by COVID-19 has been an easy transition."

With the nationwide lockdown and extended lockdown as per the state's need and requirement the already existing active PRIs in Kerala took a leading role in filling the void between citizen and service as well as citizen and state officials. This enabled the system to go on rather than standstill at the time of lockdown. Also, this dispensation on the ground came out with district and village level COVID task force for immediate work and action. This was made possible in a limited time as there was just delegation of tasks. This skipped the creation of the whole system of delivery as it was existing in the form of PRIs. With regular training and capacity building exercise, the PRIs in Kerala are capable to do this massive task with small training of basics of COVID. With active people's participation, the change can be seen on the ground. The COVID task force includes health workers (doctors, midwifes, Asha workers, etc.) as well as Panchayat level staffs. Already familiarized faces make this task smooth reducing the trust deficient behaviour of the community. The robust combination of PRIs and health workers came in action even at the time of the Nipah virus outbreak of 2018. The team had exposure to the experience of contact tracing which proved a boon at the time of the present crisis. "This is not an unfamiliar exercise for the Health Department of Kerala which tracked over 2,500 people during the 2018 Nipah virus outbreak". This tracking exercise involved local bodies. "The State Control Cell set up 18 sub-divisions (for surveillance, training and awareness, sample tracing, transportation and ambulance, etc.), charted out the roles and responsibilities of each team, and micromanaged nearly everything, right down to roping in local self-government bodies for assistance and ensuring that families quarantined at home had adequate food and supplies delivered to them" The public health system of Kerala already had the decentralised model and approach that reached the ground and hence enabled the effective implementation of policy and programme. It not only serves as an implementing body but also enjoys autonomy in terms of fiscal decision making as well as local policy change. This also helped the PRIs to bring changes in handling the COVID crisis depending on their local challenges and realities. The strength of the local bodies is in actual strength of the common man. It is this strength that insulated Kerala and prevented it to succumb to this grave crisis. "The floods and the pandemic have given testimony for the potential of democratic decentralisation." Another uniqueness of this success model is the community kitchen which is run by the local government. Right from preparation to distribution is the responsibility of local self-government with accountability. It also shoulders the responsibility of monitoring the camps of migrant workers for constant health services and food supplies. Also, the information gathered at the transport points such as airport, railway stations, and bus stops after the screening is further passed on to its next chain that is local authorities and bodies to further take necessary steps. These functions are assigned to this third tier of government in Kerala looking to their credentials and decades of experience. Even the planners and top officials acknowledge the importance and need of PRIs. It is evident as the state health minister, KK Shailaja Teacher is reaching beyond the state office to the frontline workers and the lowest level of governance."At the core of Kerala's success in its fight against Covid-19 is the decentralisation of power and the efficient functioning of local bodies in the state. The fight against coronavirus pandemic would not have been successful despite a resourceful government, good leadership, and sufficient medical facilities, had the state failed to reach out to the people." Whether it is awareness generation, health monitoring, food supply, or stigma control, Kerala has identified and assigned potential role and responsibility to local self-government. "It is the synergy generated by integrating state government plans and programmes with the local governments, the co-operatives, women neighbourhood groups (Kudumbashree) and civil society organisations that makes Kerala distinct." Many experts, national

as well as international bodies have acknowledged the legacy of decentralization in Kerala behind its successful handling of this crisis. Dr. Shibu Vijayan who is a doctor and TB Global Technical Director with PATH, in his account to The Quint has identified four core areas that can be replicated from the Kerala Model of COVID. In the context of decentralization, he said, "The Indian state of Kerala is celebrated for its efficient response to COVID-19. Built on decades of investment in rural health, education, decentralized administrative systems, and a huge network of women's groups, Kerala has created a health care model that prioritizes empathy and responsiveness. This strong social and administrative fabric has made Kerala a prime example of how other states and countries could respond to the pandemic." On one hand we have a success model like Kerala and on the other, in the mid of this health crisis, many states are emerging as an authoritarian centralised model. This is also a bitter reality that the absence of this structure of government is glaringly evident in the results that are coming on the failure of tackling the COVID crisis by many states. It is another point of discussion that many of these states may not accept the culpability of their neglect of this important Constitutional task. Neither the government nor the administration working under them is distressed with the idea of ignominy upon them; whereas the decade of Kerala's investment in decentralization is yielding its positive result at this crucial time. Indeed, Gandhian ideas on decentralization have found its true place on the land of Kerala. It is in this context the pioneer in the areas of decentralization in their recent meet on webinar drew the attention on this point. In the very inaugural session of the webinar, it is said that India needs a national campaign to implement the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. The success of Kerala is rooted in its People's Planned Campaign. It is time for other states to start investing in people.

CONCLUSIONS

The point of elaboration culminates at a point that the decade-old Gandhian ideas on decentralization have not outlived its usefulness but it proved that it is pertinent in a contemporary health crisis. The social and economic condition of India at the time of Gandhi does not have exact resemblance with present India but this necessarily not means that the Gandhian ideas are obsolete. In particular, the essence of his thoughts on decentralization has been stressed time and again. The fact of the matter is that it lacked the will of the policy formulators and implementers to enact it on the ground. This is an insouciant approach of those who, at the higher hierarchy of government often neglect the need for decentralization. Gandhi warned about the ill of this attitude and power. He was well aware of the fault of such a governance model. Therefore, he disliked all forms of centralization of power and bureaucracy. He favoured decentralization and volunteerism to bring change in governance and society. The success of the Kerala COVID 19 model is based on its efficient decentralised model of government. It has the essence of Gandhi's vision which not necessarily need mentioning. However, this cannot be overlooked when millions are staring to the venerated government with hope. It is, therefore, necessary to revisit the Gandhian ideas in the frame of Kerala's response from the perspective of deconcentration, devolution, and delegation of power to the lowest level.

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