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Panchayat Raj in Andhra Pradesh

(From Our Special Correspondent)

The first anniversary of the introduction of panchayat raj was observed throughout Andhra Pradesh on November 1. It was announced by the State Minister for Planning that on that day about 10,000 new village projects, covering about 20,000 villages and costing about Rs 3 crores were initiated in different districts — projects which involved people’s initiative and participation in a specific programme of benefit to the concerned village. Undoubtedly there was considerable enthusiasm, mostly self-generated among the villagers but partly generated by the advance official publicity accorded to the proposed observance.

By the end of September 1960, community development programmes were introduced in 305 blocks covering an area of about 69,000 square miles with a population of about 19 lakhs. Twenty-one pre-extension blocks were inaugurated on October 2, 1960, bringing the total number of blocks in which the programmes are under implementation to 326. In 271 of these blocks, panchayat samitis have been constituted up-to-date. It is proposed to cover the entire State with community development programmes by the end of 1963. There are at present 1,286 village panchayats in the State and new panchayats have to be elected in the Telangana area. There are 20 zilla parishads, which form the third and highest tier in the panchayat raj structure.

DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION

The fundamental change that panchayat raj introduced on November 1, 1959, was that samitis composed of popularly elected panchayat presidents with a few non-officials nominated to represent unrepresented sections like women, the scheduled castes and backward classes or local "experts," had replaced the previously existing block development committees. The Block Development Officer was the central figure in that set up with a few non-officials revolving round him as satellites while in the new set up the panchayat samiti president, elected from among the members of the samiti, constitutes that central figure with the B D O, the extension staff and the village level workers as the satellites — major and minor — revolving round him.

This organisational and institutional change answers the description of the scheme as "democratic decentralization," because the Andhra Pradesh Government, having earned the compliment of being the first of the two States in the country to have implemented the scheme, is following it up by devolving on the panchayats, panchayat samitis and zilla parishads responsibility for the formulation and implementation of more and more programmes of development for the benefit of the local population. It must be said to its credit that Andhra has set the scheme going in a spirit of sincerity and willingness to help.

One may feel that the pace at which the transition from community development under official guidance and supervision (with the cooperation of non-officials) to community development through self-help and self-reliance of the village community (and reflected in the elected panchayats and samitis with the official administrative agency playing a mainly executive role), is being brought about is somewhat too precipitate. A crash may come if brakes are not applied at some strategic points and in a judicious manner. It is, however, quite possible that such prognostications will not find an echo in official or governmental circles. The scheme has been set in motion: obviously it cannot be controlled too much nor can its self-propelling character be artificially cheeked.

An objective and dispassionate evaluation of the working of the panchayat raj in Andhra Pradesh in its various aspects alone can either justify or dispose of the apprehensions and objections on the score of its precipitate extension. But that will have to wait for some time. In the first place, one year is too short a time to assess the value, significance and success of a scheme of dimensions and ramifications as the panchayat raj scheme.

In the second, part of this time was taken up by the panchayat samitis and parishads to settle down to their work, understand the scope of their powers and responsibilities and to formulate plans and so on. By now in the overwhelming majority of samitis and zilla parishads this process has been completed. They know where they stand and what they are expected to do and what they can, in fact, do or not do.

What is, therefore, possible and what is necessary at this stage is an examination, in a very broad way, as to how the rural population covered by the samitis are reacting or are reacting, both in terms of physical participation in, local development activities for which the initiative is being taken by popular bodies and of bringing a new attitude and outlook to the tasks that community development work through self-effort calls for.

Broadly it can be said that the transition is going on smoothly and without much dislocation. All reports suggest that there is commendable and encouraging response to efforts to introduce and popularise new and improved techniques in agricultural practices designed to increase agricultural production, notably in the use of fertiliser and improved seeds. The adoption of the Japanese method of paddy cultivation, and of improved implements for agricultural operations. For all measures intended to facilitate improvement of irrigation sources and utilisation of local irrigation potential such as minor irrigation tanks, wells, tubewells and pump-sets, there is ready response. There is enthusiastic participation by the cultivators in the tasks essential to improve existing irrigation sources and to create new ones. While this feature is common to all samiti areas, it is especially pronounced in blocks in stage II. (which have had the advantage of community development programmes for four, five or even six years in some cases.) and in a large number of stage 1 blocks (in which these programmes had been instituted 2 or 3 years back).

Next to the programmes of agricultural development, other programmes or items of development work which evoke the largest, measure of participation from the villagers.
are broadly in the following order: village communications, such as the laying of approach roads; schools for the village children, and primary health centres. For programmes formulated by panchayat samitis in respect of those village needs, cooperation and participation of the village population assumes the form of not only producing the "matching" contribution provided for under the scheme but also of voluntary gifts of land or buildings. The matching contribution is made in a number of cases in cash collected from among the population of the entire samiti area but more commonly it is in shramadan or contributions in kind. The general pattern of participation indicates that villagers willingly make gifts or otherwise co-operate when a project is specifically for the benefit of their village.

There is, again broadly speaking, sufficient warrant for the feeling that while earlier under the community development programme and presently under the panchayat samiti, rural development, projects which have an economic content receive high priority and evoke response from the villagers, programmes for social education in general, and those for producing psychological changes in the outlook of the villagers on social and community welfare in particular, receive little attention and evoke poor response.

This is inherent in the scheme itself, under which increase of food and agricultural production and next to it creation of employment for the idle or under-employed are expected to receive prior consideration. But to the extent that social education and social welfare activities, which can prepare the minds and change the outlooks of the village population for understanding and discharging responsibilities which devolve on them or which provide opportunities for the improvement of the domestic environment and conditions of life of the village are essential, the unimportant and obviously secondary place accorded to them is disconcerting. These activities are not altogether absent in samiti areas; in fact the schematic budgets for these bodies provide for social education and there are men and women social education organisers in the administrative staff under the samitis. The duties of the male social education officers, however, are very much undefined and they are used as odd job men by the samiti presidents and B.D.Os. This position requires immediate modification, if the rural population are to derive the maximum benefit from democratic decentralisation. The word "democratic" in that expression should be invested with meaning and significance by systematic efforts to inculcate the proper spirit and outlook among the rural population, on which ultimately the success of decentralisation would depend.

The broad question, and one to which very little attention has been paid in all that has been said in praise of panchayat raj in Andhra Pradesh during the anniversary celebrations, is how far the village projects initiated on November 1 would be completed and to what extent provision has been made, in terms of both allocation of funds and enrolment of local co-operation, for that purpose? Also related to it is the wider question of how far programmes and projects and works of local development, initiated in some of the earlier established or stage 2 blocks are being continued and what provision is made for the proper upkeep and maintenance of those works and projects and for their continuance?

There is no dispute about the importance of their continuation and upkeep and there is no doubt that the extent to which this is being done represents the real and permanent effect that community development programmes have produced. There are murmurs that in the absence of adequate financial resources with the samitis in stage II, and in view of the reluctance of the samitis to impose fresh taxes to augment their resources and on the part of the people to pay additional taxes, continuation and maintenance work is impeded, indirectly these murmurs imply a plea to the State Government to make adequate grants-in-aid to the samitis and the village panchayats to prevent a situation in which while development is progressing in some areas and new programmes are being undertaken by samitis in stage stagnation does not overtake the so-called advanced samitis.

One last but vital point. It is of the highest importance to ensure that the panchayats, panchayat samitis and zilla parishads, at their respective levels, do not become the contesting grounds for political partisans belonging to the rival groups within the Congress Party in Andhra Pradesh or to other rival political parties. It would be an evil day for panchayat raj and would be the end of all the hopes and expectations that its introduction has inspired, if political rivalry or factionalism invades these local self-govern-