

# Remembering Nehru and the first generation panchayats of Nagaur

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Inaugurating the first generation panchayats in Nagaur in Rajasthan on October 2, 1959, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said,

*“After we became independent we established the rule of the people. Every citizen of India was given the right to vote. The people enjoyed the right to elect their representatives to the State legislatures and to the Lok Sabha. It was a step in the right direction, but real democracy did not come into being with it. India will make progress only when the people living in the villages will become politically conscious”.*

On that occasion, President Rajendra Prasad said in his message,

*“I am glad to know that the Government of Rajasthan is taking a big step forward on October 2, in the direction of decentralisation. This is an experiment which would interest deeply not only the people of Rajasthan but those of other states also”.*

Apart from the fact that Pandit Nehru laid the foundation of Panchayati Raj in Nagaur, Rajasthan assumes significance in many ways. Some of the outstanding legislations which involved empowerment of rural people, for instance, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and the Right to Information (RTI), have had their beginning in the State.

Pandit Nehru's trip to Nagaur was preceded by the enactment of the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act of September 2, 1959. The three-tier system for panchayats was adopted on the basis of the recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee.

The implementation of the Act came into effect from October 2 when the Panchayati Raj was formally launched from Nagaur. Soon after, Andhra Pradesh launched on October 11 in the same year, while Assam, Karnataka and Madras launched it in 1960. Maharashtra initiated in 1962 and West Bengal in 1964. Gradually, rest of the States, too, followed the wave.

In 1995, I visited Nagaur to study the working of panchayats in this historic district. I talked to people at different levels. I found that the panchayat samiti inaugurated by the first Prime Minister did not make any impact on Nagaur. After 35 years it was a saga of failure. And, now after 50 years, it is still an account of disappointments.

All the reasons one hears for the failure of the system elsewhere were repeated by senior leaders in the area: limited powers, illiteracy, lack of education, severe financial constraints, irregular elections, unsympathetic bureaucracy, an all powerful sarpanch who had control over finance and rampant corruption. MLAs never wanted to give powers to the panchayats although Mohanlal Sukhadia gave prominence to pradhans. The MLAs were terribly afraid of becoming powerless and worked to sabotage it. As Nirmal Mukherji said, “At a deeper level, the real villains are feudalism and patriarchy. So, as long as these remain the organizing principals of rural society, little good can be expected from self governing panchayats”.

Nagaur was not an exception. It was rather the rule. All over India the first generation of Panchayats were undermined in the same process that Nagaur found itself in. I also visited the Shadnagar Panchayat Samiti near Hyderabad which was also inaugurated by Pandit Nehru on 11 October 1959 and gave another historic speech. The Panchayat Samiti fared quite well between 1959 and 1964. But since then it declined. Both in Nagaur and Shadnagar I found moribund panchayats. Whether it is dominant castes and entrenched vested interests in Nagaur or in Shadnagar, they never wanted to change the status quo and crucial aspects of development like education, free and fair elections, improving the status of women.

Everyone believed in the 1970's and 80's that if the provision of panchayats is included in the Constitution, there will be a radical change. Sixteen years have passed after the 73rd Amendment became operational since 1993. Though Seventy Third Constitutional Amendments paved the way for rural development and strengthened self governments, what is the situation today as far as panchayats are concerned? Except for two states (Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand) there are elected panchayats at district and below in all the states of the country. About 3.2 million and women are elected, but they have no idea about their rights and responsibilities. Unless the political leaders at all levels, MPs and MLAs, as well as the government officials from top to bottom take a positive stand, the 73rd Amendment will remain on paper; Gandhiji's and Nehruji's dream will remain unfulfilled.

□ *The writer is Director, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi*