

Unanimously Elected Panchayats: A Threat to Democracy?

VARSHA BHAGAT-GANGULY*

Democracy, Local Governance and Election

In theoretical debate, Panchayati Raji Institution (PRI) as a democratic institution definitely has assumed importance in bringing about development and social change from below in rural areas, specially after the Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 (CAA). However, regarding the functioning of PRI, various studies have shown that in the absence of devolution of powers—fund, functions and functionaries—most PRIs operate as poor adjuncts to the bureaucracy and higher level governments. By keeping PRIs starved of infrastructure and manpower, state governments effectively ensure that the expenditure of CSS funds remains in their control. Most states have just completed the formality of devolving functions and mapping activities through laws, rules and executive orders but have not followed this up with effective devolution of functionaries and funds.¹ In addition, the Right to Education Act surpasses the role of village panchayat and governance of water also is taken care of by a parallel body; this has generated confusion and cynicism against PRIs, their role and effectiveness. Issues related to the reservation quota for women as well as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and also the issues related to their participation, representation, performance as elected representatives and the dismal scenario of social justice through PRI have come to the fore. With regard to performance of elected women representatives (EWR) in terms of proxy-functioning, corruption by their male-mates and limitations of forward caste women for not taking up issues of social justice of the disadvantaged sections have added negative feelings for PRI as an institution that can bring about social change, all-inclusive development and ensure social justice. With such ailments of Panchayati Raj Institutions in rural areas reported, many ruralites raise a question, 'Is Panchayati Raj necessary and does it play an important role in local governance and Indian democracy?'

In the given scenario, how we conceptualise democracy is important. Do we conceptualise democracy as a dynamic system that brings about desired change and achievement of the ideal that our Constitution offers us or is democracy a system for governance that fulfils the needs of the people? Theoretically, election in representative democracy plays a crucial role, that is, for the Parliament and Legislative Assembly, but can the same rule apply to the system for local governance, that is PRI? If yes, can election be considered a vital element for election of competent representatives, who will in turn ensure grass-roots development? Do we also look for changing the leadership through election, as the system of rotation and reservation offers an opportunity for change of leadership? Does this rotational reservation system facilitate different sections of society to contest election? If 'political representation through election' occupies high importance for strengthening democracy, especially the grass-roots democracy, then is PRI one of the central concerns.

What could be our response where there is 'no election' for PRIs, based on arguments like saving election expenses, help in reduction of litigation, selection of candidate through a process of consensus and, thus, bringing peace, harmony and brotherhood in the village and so on? What would be the course of debate on 'whether election should be considered essential for PRI—the PRI as an emblem of democracy and governance or not'?

The paper provides an overview of historical development of unanimously elected panchayats and the present situation in different states in India. It initiates discussion on 'whether election should be considered essential for PRI' based on 'samaras yojana' in Gujarat state as well as in other states, like Andhra Pradesh (AP), Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab, and its linkages with democratic values and norms. Unanimous election as a strategy has posed several questions and threats to

Fellow, IAS Shimla

democratic institutions, which are briefly mentioned here. It also touches upon a debate whether, in absence of devolution of financial and administrative powers, a unanimously elected panchayat can become more effective and efficient for rural development than the panchayat with elected representatives; and whether a trend of forming all women panchayat (AWP) or all women samaras panchayat (AWSP) can bring about women's empowerment that strengthens democracy.

Unanimously Elected Panchayat and Financial Grant and Incentives in Different States

After CAA in 1992, each state government had to enact state Panchayati Raj Act (PRA) along with rules and regulations. Though as per article 243-E of CAA 1992, it is mandatory to hold election every five years, many state governments have manoeuvred to either put off or to delay election for PRIs. The election was made mandatory as many states, prior to CAA, had mismanaged—either prolonged postponement of the election in the name of inadequate financial resources or inadequate representation of different sections of society. There are two major strategies used by different state governments vis-à-vis panchayat election—one, postponement of election; and two 'unopposed election' or 'unanimous election', which is promoted with financial grants and other incentives based on population criteria of the village panchayat (VP). The amount of financial grant and incentives varied across the states though grant based on population remained a standardized criterion.

In the states of West Bengal, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh (AP), the governments have a record of postponing panchayat election for three months. The Government of Gujarat (GoG) in June 2000 had postpostponed the panchayat election by ordinance using subsection 2 of section 257 of the state Panchayati Raj Act. For Gujarat, the issue of postponement of election is settled by a Supreme Court judgment in the case of the Ahmedabad Municipal Councillor Mr. Kishansinh Tomar V/s. Gujarat State that elections cannot be delayed except for natural calamities like floods or earthquakes.² The Andhra Pradesh Government had filed a Special Leave Petition (SLP) in 2012 before the Supreme Court of India for postponement of panchayat election. The Supreme Court passed interim orders in February 2013 to the Government of Andhra Pradesh to conduct elections to panchayats and the state conducted election in June 2013.

The unanimous election as well as financial incentive for unanimously elected panchayat dates back to 1960s when only a few states had adopted Panchayati Raj system for local governance. In 1960s, the Government

of Andhra Pradesh had introduced incentive in the form of cash awards, ranging from Rs 2,500 to Rs 5,000, to villages electing members and sarpanches unanimously and awards amounting to Rs 25,000 to panchayat samitis which elect their office-bearers unanimously. As a result, about 6,000 villages in different districts have formed panchayat bodies without a contest; the cash award was promoted as a fund to be utilised by the panchayats for local development works.³ In 2006, the Andhra Pradesh Government announced financial incentives for unanimously elected village panchayat after its initial launch in 1960s. The incentives announced by the government are Rs. 15 lakhs each for VP with 15,000 population or more and Rs. 5 lakhs for the VP having less than 5,000 population. The AP Government has released Rs 146.50 crore for 2,924 VPs by 2010 as part of financial incentives to the VPs. Again, in the recent 2013 election, the AP government has promoted unanimous election and of total 21,144 village panchayats, 2,623 (12.4%) have formed unanimously elected panchayats; 299 VPs less compared to the previous election. There is a 35 per cent hike in grants for panchayats elected through 'unanimous election' in AP compared to the previous panchayat election.

In Rajasthan, in 1960-61, the Pradhan of a panchayat samiti was elected by the sarpanches of village panchayats in the jurisdiction of the samiti and the co-opted members of the samiti. There were 7,394 village panchayats and 252 panchayat samitis. In 1960-61, 25 per cent of the elections of panches and sarpanches were unanimous; of sarpanches, 38.8 percent were elected unanimously. But unanimous elections of panchayat samiti pradhans were rare. In most cases, there were keen contests for the office of pradhans. This election was called 'indirect election' and was promoted with the argument that direct elections are expensive. These elections witnessed the worst features of indirect elections. None of the contestants for the office of pradhan spent less than what an average Assembly candidate spends (actual expenditure, not that submitted to the returning officer). Another unhappy feature of indirect elections also manifested itself—political and other pressures as well as money played a deciding role in them.⁴

The Government of Haryana and Punjab had launched a scheme for unanimously elected village panchayat with financial incentives in 2008 like the Government of AP. The people of eight villages in Chittoor district of AP never exercised their franchise to elect sarpanch and upa-sarpanch for the past three decades. For the seventh consecutive time, the Samireddypalle village panchayat in Pakala mandal of Chittoor district unanimously elected

sarpanch, upa-sarpanch and ward members⁵. Bohara village in Aur block of Navanshahr district in Punjab has reported unanimously elected village panchayat since its inception⁶. In Haryana, financial grants were offered⁷ to unanimously elected panchayat and, as a result, many VPs opted for unopposed election; for instance, 372 panchayats in Karnal district were elected unanimously. The State Election Commissioner Dharam Vir said, "40 per cent of council members, over 3 per cent of council headmen have been elected unopposed and 1.4 per cent members of panchayat samitis (council committees) have been elected unopposed. A total of 15,579 panches (council members) out of 38,596 contestants have been elected unanimously, whereas 134 sarpanches (headmen) out of 3,971 candidates and 25 members of panchayat samitis out of 1,792 have already been elected unopposed."⁸

In Punjab, a total of 2,806 village panchayats were elected unanimously. In Punjab, Rs 2 to 3 lakh was to be given to each unanimously elected village panchayat based on population as announced in 2008. However, the Government of Haryana and Punjab had not released money to pay the incentives announced at the time of election. The High Court of Haryana and Punjab had ordered in April 2013 for the release of financial grant within three months.

There has been a scheme in Gujarat since 1992 for unanimous election and after 2001, it was revised and named as 'Samaras Yojana' ('of common interest' or 'all substances submerged into one form'). The Government of Gujarat had promoted uncontested 'selection' of candidates in place of the normal processes of 'election' through a government resolution (GR) on July 14, 1992. The increase in the reward money under the erstwhile "Binharif (uncontested) Election" Scheme for the VP was a whopping hike (5,000%), from Rs. 2,000 to Rs. 60,000 to Rs.100,000. This led to a controversy in 2001. Samaras yojana was revised in 2006 and 2011, along with the revision in financial grants⁹ and other incentives to be provided to the VPs opting for unanimous election or uncontested elections with 'consensuses'. As per announcement on November 29, 2011, the 'financial incentive' under the scheme has increased from Rs. 2,00,000 to 5,00,000 plus other incentives under varying conditions to 'Samaras' Panchayats, such as solar panels for streetlights and an additional room to be built in primary schools.

The Government of Gujarat has announced special incentives for All Women Samaras Panchayat (AWSP). The village panchayat opting to be a Samaras Panchayat for the first time and AWSP, not having Class 8 in the primary school, will be given priority to provide this class.

The village panchayat opting to be a Samaras Panchayat for a consecutive term/second time and AWSP will have 25 per cent increase from the previous year's financial incentive; it will also be provided funds for construction of a CC road. The village panchayat opting to be a Samaras Panchayat for consecutive terms/third time and AWSP will have 25 per cent increase from the previous year's financial incentive; it will also be provided funds for facility of solar streetlights.

In 2001 election in Gujarat, over 3,900 village panchayats 'voluntarily' opted for Samaras scheme, mainly due to whopping hike in award money as financial grant. In 2006, of 10,509 VPs, 2,869 (27.3 per cent) opted to be Samaras Panchayats and in 2010, total 2,147 (20.4 per cent) became samaras panchayats. Of total 2,417 samaras panchayats, 254 are AWSP and of the rest 1,893 VPs, 800 panchayats have been declared Samaras for the first time, 472 for the second time and 621 panchayats have been declared Samaras for the consecutive third time. Thus, there is a drop of almost 50 per cent in the number of VPs opting to be Samaras or unanimously elected panchayat compared to Samaras Panchayat in 2001.

Similarly, in AP, there were 2,924 VPs that opted for unanimously elected panchayats and in 2013 election, 2,623 have unanimously elected panchayats, where there is a drop of 299 (11.4 per cent) panchayats compared to the previous election.

There were more than 300 unanimously elected panchayats during the last election in Himachal Pradesh, while this time only 110 Gram Panchayats in the state have been chosen unopposed. As per the government policy, each unanimously elected panchayat will be given a cash prize of Rs 10 lakhs and total of Rs 11 crore was to be disbursed by the state government.¹⁰

One of the reasons for the drop in number of VPs opting to be unanimously elected panchayat across different states could be that the expectations to be fulfilled through Samaras panchayat remained unfulfilled, mainly the financial aspect and development work based on the grant for Samaras panchayat. The Election Watch Front (EWF) of AP has expressed doubts about unanimous election to 2,623 panchayats across the state. The Front has demanded the government to order an inquiry into the money power that worked behind the unanimous elections. The members have warned the state government saying, "Otherwise, democracy will turn into moneyocracy". Similar warnings are expressed by the observers in AP, "Auctioning sarpanch posts is a subversion of the democratic process. The government says it is illegal but ironically, the government has a decades-old scheme that offers financial incentives to

gram panchayats where there is unanimous election. However, such observations and doubts need to be researched further in spatial-temporal, cultural terms and across different communities and tribes."¹¹

'No election' is an Erosion of Democratic Values

The Samaras Yojana implies unanimous selection of the panchayat members and it denies election, which is one of the essential components of a democratic process. The foremost concern is the role of the State Election Commission (SEC), as the SEC is responsible for conducting free and fair elections to the village panchayats. The SEC, in an interview, expressed its inability to interfere in the matter as the Samaras scheme was a state government scheme over which the Election Commission had no jurisdiction. In this situation, Samaras Yojana seems to be a smart move of the ruling party in Gujarat and similar to the other states launching the scheme for unanimous election along with financial grant and incentives to the VPs. Thus, Samaras Yojana denies the basic democratic rights of the people as voter, yet the constitutionally empowered body like the SEC is not able to intervene and, thus, its area of operation also faces shrinkage.

What is the role of the judiciary, the executive and the voters in such situation? The field experiences show that the government officers go round the villages asking people to opt for Samaras Yojana and whenever the interested contestants approach them, they dissuade them from contestation. As a result, two parallel processes and outcomes are observed—first, the information people had about Samaras Yojana is actually passed on by the government officials and, therefore, people do not have an independent opinion of their own about the importance of election and how to bring about the desired development through elected panchayat members; and second, in an overall financially deprived state, financial grant and other incentives become tempting for people to opt for Samaras Yojana, which also leads them to be in the good books of the government and the ruling party.

Thus, on the one hand, the government officials shape the minds of the voters and the voters are wooed in the name of development of the village with financial support. On the other hand, opting for Samaras panchayat for once or for consecutive elections, people undermine their role as a voter, an awakened and active citizen; the citizenry shrinks and democratic values to be inculcated are eroded.

When a democratic process is being compromised, it may have a negative impact in the long run. Moreover, with financial incentives, it promotes moral and financial

corruption. This process also hijacks the Panchayati Raj endeavour; the nexus between the political leader and the government officials actually violates democratic norms, resulting in a complex psychosis of voters—a mix of fear of deprivation and penalization for not supporting the dominant political process to bring about development in the village. One of the senior social activists shared an insight, "Offering incentives, disincentives to voters and issuing veiled threats to promote the practice violates the democratic process and more sinister, perhaps, is the accusation by some that the move is a ploy by the predominantly pro-Hindu government to get its right wing supporters into panchayat office." The Sarvodaya leader, Chunibhai Vaidya, remarked on Samaras Yojana of GoG that "pressing for unanimous elections was dangerous because it permitted the dominant communities to take control of the village panchayats. Of course, that was the BJP leaders' game plan. And a minister one at that. When Modi made a mockery of local democracy by giving monetary incentives from the exchequer to do away with the democratic contest, no BJP spokesperson in New Delhi questioned him. Any effort to create a culture of 'manufacturing consent' undermines the very roots of local democracy and tends to stunt the silent revolution under way in our villages with ordinary people taking control of their lives."¹²

The spirit of democracy gets further hampered when social and political domination plays to its best. In seeking consensus, traditional social structure and hierarchy come into play. While sharing grass-root experience, Sita Rabari of Kachchh district of Gujarat state said, "Men of upper caste groups wielding political and social clout usually decide on the 'consensus' candidate...The poor and illiterate villagers are often forced to accept the recommendations of the *mamlatdar* (block revenue officer) and withdraw from contest." When someone from her community wanted to contest, he was asked to pay Rs 1 lakh (the samaras grant promised by the government)."

When a reserved seat for a woman or a scheduled caste or scheduled tribe is announced, about 70 per cent of the village initiate process of consensus and opting for Samaras Yojana, wherein participation and opinion of the women and other marginalized groups of the village community is rarely taken into consideration. The village Bohra in Punjab has never felt the need of casting their vote during the panchayat polls since its inception and now they are keeping the tradition intact, as the post of sarpanch of the village panchayat is reserved for the SC category. The Samireddypalle village panchayat of Chittoor district in AP also opted for unanimous election, as the seat was reserved for scheduled caste candidate.

The operation of the scheme, thus, makes a mockery of the democratic and electoral system with the open "auction" of panchayat posts and bodies.

SWATI's¹³ report reveals, "No election indicates lack of leadership and also that the 'traditional' occupiers of seats in the panchayat bodies are extremely powerful. This 'power' could be due to factors such as caste, class and political affiliations. Thus, it promotes the culture of proxy Sarpanch. In the absence of open category candidates, a higher number of OBCs is selected with almost no SC candidate; this points towards the relative power that the OBCs have over the SC candidates. Systematic exclusion of people from the lower caste and class from the panchayat bodies is observed...Shades of saffron could be seen around samaras bodies."

The Hunger Project (THP) has been engaged in capacity building with the elected women representative through non-governmental organisations (NGO) in Gujarat. THP opined on Samaras Yojana, "The scheme in fact, counteracts the democratic values as consensus is arrived at without the participation of women and other marginalized groups of the village community. Desirous and deserving candidates are forced to opt out of the elections; they and their families are threatened and put under tremendous pressure. Providing incentives to have no elections is also a violation of the constitutionally mandated right to political participation. Moreover, incentives of financial and developmental benefits to the Samaras villages discriminate against villages that opt for the electoral process for identifying their representatives, which is perfectly legal and does not violate any laws. The Samaras scheme is essentially a strategy of the political parties to conjure up their vote bank and ensure that administrative power is in the hands of people owing allegiance to their particular political party."

The recent panchayat election in Andhra Pradesh reported by the daily newspaper described, "Reports of auction of Sarpanch posts have turned out to be a cause of concern. No less than 13 villages are under the scanner for auctioning the post of Sarpanch to the highest bidder with bids ranging from Rs. 5-7 lakhs to even Rs. 32 lakhs and Rs. 50 lakhs in some cases.... Often, elders convince the villagers to auction sarpanch posts and once the highest bidder is chosen no other candidate submits nomination and he is elected unanimously. The money raised through auctions is apparently used for uplift of villages. But most rural bodies are flush with funds under various Central and state government schemes and hence the argument for village development funds does not hold water. The money raised through auction cannot be kept in any bank account. The state government also

has a scheme under which Gram Panchayats get Rs 5 lakh if elected unanimously which also boosts such auctions. The SEC is considering recommending to the state government that this provision be withdrawn." In addition to this, M. Padmanabha Reddy of the Forum for Good Governance said, "The sarpanch posts for gram panchayats close to urban areas are particularly advantageous since illegal layouts get approved and the land mafia and sand mafia are also at play."¹⁴ One of the elected women representatives, Mahalakshmi admits she 'won' the sarpanch post by paying Rs. 8,25,000 in Shyvalyapuram gram panchayat in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. The State Election Commission has a list of at least 26 gram panchayats in Andhra Pradesh where villagers had decided to 'sell' the post of sarpanch to whoever would pay the highest amount. Shyvalyapuram doesn't figure in the list.¹⁵ Pravina, a woman sarpanch of a Samaras village panchayat in Gujarat shared, "After I was unanimously elected in 2006, my father-in-law invited the entire village for a meal, to celebrate. We must have spent about Rs 2 lakhs for this event."

While comparing the unanimously elected panchayat and elected panchayat, it is clear that when an election is held, the village people choose a person who they know and will work for them, as they are aware of the person's background. The elected sarpanch wants to perform better than his previous one and, thus, there is growth, whereas Samaras takes away such opportunities from village people and slowly but steadily, essence of democratic spirit fade away.

The Chief Minister of Gujarat shared his view on Samaras Yojana, "When the entire village reposes confidence on the unanimously elected panchayat, the elected body functions with greater zeal. When the country elects its President unanimously, it is dubbed the victory of democracy but when a village elects its entire panchayat unanimously in Gujarat the opposition calls it murder."

Politics of Unanimously Elected Panchayat and Samaras Yojana

The idea of unanimous election is continuously propagated through party cadre and government offices but why are they accepted by rural residents? Because this idea serves different purposes. There is a persistent tendency, at least among a section of the population, to support those who hold power. There is a consensus that economic development should go on and it would bring about desirable social changes. As against the 'spread effect' of economic development, raising questions or

asking for contestation and protest, creates 'displacement syndrome'. Therefore, any effort to question those who hold power or to contest is viewed with suspicion and disdain, and rarely supported. As a result of this general disapproval of raising voice and contest, its potentiality as a factor of change has been neglected.¹⁶ The ruling parties take advantage of such mindset and the vibrancy of democracy starts receding and battered in the long run.

Though village panchayat polls are not fought on party symbols, at the time of the results to arrive, major political parties start claiming victory of their supported candidates in majority of panchayats across all states where more than one party has some ground. This happens because Panchayati Raj as a local governance institution is also seen as an institution that facilitates cadre building for the political party. Match-fixing between different political parties also ensures that only single candidates are in the fray.

In the absence of substantive development agenda, such as ensuring devolution of powers, fund, function and functionaries, the political parties take populist measures and propagate them with catchy phrases that are considered progressive, such as women's empowerment and social justice. These two are popular ideas to keep the women and the marginalised communities closer to them.

There is an image of respectability that is being built around these bodies; for instance, a cheque (grant) being given at a public function and local daily newspaper covering the event. Such functions have been organized by the respective ruling party in Gujarat, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh.

With financial grants and incentive for unanimously elected panchayat, the focus shifts to the development work in the village, in a largely finance-starving scenario. Thus, 'unanimity' is equalised as 'unity' and 'financial support' as 'development'. Such illusionary but stylish moves of the ruling political party keep people away from more pertinent problems like democratic rights, participatory democracy and top-down development approach, not questioning the functioning of administrative macros. Moreover, it also subtly promotes the idea that the term for any panchayat is for five years; so why should we get unnecessarily into long-term planning and development? Thus, people think about short-term gains and short cuts to remain in power.

Once 'no election' and 'consensus' process for selection of panchayat members starts and is repeated every five years, it is accepted as a norm, thus maintaining the status quo in which the traditional structure of caste, class and male domination remains unquestioned in the village.

The hegemony of the elites is maintained without opposition, which actually facilitates various nexuses between political leaders, government officials, village or community leaders and political parties and so on.

The entire process of Samaras panchayat remains centralised—from top to bottom; right from the announcement to the award of cash to the AWSP everything is decided by the ruling political party and the panchayat body awaits the reward. In most cases, the CM distributes it in large gathering, which is portrayed as these sarpanches and panches are honoured by the state rather than a political populist action.

Does All Women Panchayat bring Women's Development?

The idea of unanimously elected panchayat has developed a new form, that is, All Women Panchayat (AWP) and All Women Samaras Panchayat (AWSP). As the state provides financial grant and other incentives to AWP and AWSP as well as portrays them as symbols of women's empowerment, it is necessary to examine them critically from democratic as well as from women's empowerment frameworks, such as, does AWSP lead to women's empowerment as claimed by the government? Does it any way become different from unanimously elected panchayat in absence of devolution of financial and administrative powers? Or, is it just another populist political move?

Efforts for the idea of 'Women in Development' (WID) in 1990s and later as Gender and Development' (GAD) and 'Rights-Based Development' (RBD) in 2000s were put in for women's participation in development programmes initially. The idea of RBD is used for women's empowerment through PRI, as reservation quota ensures at least one-third women elected representatives (EWR).

The formation of AWP or AWSP implies that women are taking decisions—right from their selection through consensus or unanimous election to implementation of development programmes in the village. Does it mean that the EWRs enjoy physical mobility, resource mobilisation, approaching government officials and the political or elected leaders like MLA and MP, and make their presence felt in the public arena? Several studies on PRI and EWRs' empowerment have shared positive results and have described them as the beginning of empowerment with yet a long way to go.¹⁷

The trend of AWP shows steady increase in its numbers across different states in India. In Himachal Pradesh, Kamru village panchayat in Kalpa block of Kinnaur district opted to be AWP in 2010. In Gujarat, of 2,147

panchayats that have been declared as Samaras, 254 are AWSP. In 2006 election, there were only 20 woman Samaras village panchayats.

Regarding AWSP, SWATI's report with regard to nature of participation of women shared that visibility of women in such processes cannot be labelled as women empowerment; no women was consulted prior to her selection as sarpanch or ward member in Samaras panchayat. A bias due to the perceived inability of women to absorb information might be a factor which excludes them from various activities, such as meetings with government officials, organising and conducting meetings with panchayat members and so on. The support received by these women can depend on several factors and non-performance in these scenarios would be easy to prove or show as the women are not actively engaged in the work. Moreover, in case a conflict arises with the panchayat body, it is easier to create support against women-led bodies.

Threats to Democratic Functioning

Not organising election definitely hampers democratic spirit and makes democratic space narrower, yet no avenues are available to counteract it. Promoting unanimous election with financial grants and other incentives or in form of a scheme, is such a populist measure by the ruling party in different states of India that it remains out of the purview of the State Election Commission, cannot be challenged legally and yet the domination and control of the state government continues over the funds and functionaries. Thus, the culture of dependence prevails among the PRIs.

The ruling party gives its colour to the PRIs with various processes, for instance, issuing financial awards in public function to honour the panchayat members that opted for unanimous election; propagation of message through administrative machinery and message of either saffronisation or playing caste cards. The hegemony of the upper castes, class and men over women is maintained, as 'no election' pose no challenge to existing structure of dominance.

In discourse of unanimous election, 'unanimity' is equalised as 'unity' and 'financial support' as 'development'. Such illusionary but stylish moves of the ruling political party keep people away from more pertinent problems like democratic rights, participatory democracy and top-down development approach, and dependence on administrative macros continues.

The trend of 'money-crazy' in unanimously elected panchayats is increasingly a threat, as money overrides contestation and representation through election.

If these menaces are taken as changing forms of democracy as they are, this form of democracy will not address even governance issues in rural areas, the all-inclusive development and enlivened democratic spirit will be a far cry.

NOTES

1. Banerjee, Rahul. 2013. 'What Ails Panchayati Raj?' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 27, pp. 173-176.
2. Bhat Rajesh, 2012, Status of panchayati raj in Gujarat since 2000s, a paper to be published by ISS, New Delhi.
3. C V H, 1964. Panchayat election in Andhra. *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 13.
4. Chaudhari, P.K. 1964. 'Panchayati Raj in Action: A Study of Rajasthan', *The Economic Weekly*, Annual number, February, pp. 211-218.
5. See <http://www.thehansindia.com/2013/07/18/7th-consecutive-unanimous-panchayat-election/>, accessed on July 19, 2013.
6. Correspondent, 'Sarpanch elected unanimously once again' in *The Tribune*, July 3, 2013.
7. A panchayat having a population up to 1,500 and where the panches and the sarpanch would be elected unanimously would be given Rs. 1 lakh. Panchayats where only the panches were elected unanimously would get Rs. 75,000. Similarly, panchayats where only the sarpanch would be elected unanimously would be given Rs. 50,000. Panchayats having a population between 1,500 to 4,000 and where the panches and the sarpanch would be elected unanimously would get Rs. 2 lakh. Panchayats where only the panches would be elected unanimously would get Rs. 1.5 lakh. Similarly, panchayats where only the sarpanch would be elected unanimously would be given Rs. 1 lakh. Panchayats having a population of 4,000 and above and where the panches and the sarpanch would be elected unanimously would get Rs. 3 lakh. Panchayats where only the panches would be elected unanimously would get Rs. 2.5 lakh. Similarly, panchayats where only the sarpanch would be elected unanimously would be given Rs. 1.5 lakh.
8. 40 per cent Haryana panchayat candidates elected unopposed' in *The Tribune*, June 5, 2010.
9. The financial grants can be used for community developmental works of the village for pure drinking water scheme, internal approach roads, facilities of street lights, primary school rooms, primacy treatment centres, water harvesting scheme, drainage and sewerage scheme, preliminary facilities, etc. Moreover, arrangement of water recharge, deepening and construction of ponds, digging of wells, constriction of weirs on rivers and culverts and thereby reaction of facilities of water, where there is permanent scarcity of water.
10. 'Drop in numbers of panchayats getting elected unopposed' in *HimVani*, December 20, 2010. <http://www.himvani.com/news/2010/12/20/slump-in-the-panchayats-getting-elected-unopposed/9437>, accessed on July 19, 2013.
11. 'In Andhra Pradesh, Democracy on Sale: Price eight lakhs'. <http://www.indiandefence.com/forums/social-current-affairs/29203-andhra-pradesh-democracy-sale-price-eight>

- lakhs.html#ixzz2Zlf47uj7, accessed on July 19, 2013.
12. Mathew, George. 'A dismal record of grasroot democracy' in PUCL Bulletin, September 2002.
 13. SWATI stands for Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives, which is a women's organisation, based at Ahmedabad and working in central and western Gujarat. SWATI has conducted a study in 2012, with two objectives: To understand the profile and aspirations of woman sarpanch selected in AWSP; and to assess the enabling environment which should be present for a woman sarpanch to act as a fully functional sarpanch.
 14. Chadhury, Anindita. 2013. 'Sarpanch post up for auction in Andhra' in *The Statesman*, July 19.
 15. 'In Andhra Pradesh, Democracy on Sale: Price eight lakhs'. <http://www.indiandefence.com/forums/social-current-affairs/29203-andhra-pradesh-democracy-sale-price-eight-lakhs.html#ixzz2Zlf47uj7>, accessed on July 19, 2013.
 16. This observation is originally described in the context of protest, which is adopted for questioning and contestation against the power. See Oommen, T.K. 1990. *Protest and Change: Studies in Social Movement*, New Delhi: Sage publications, p. 10.
 17. See Singh Rakesh. 2012. 'Elected Women Representatives in India, *Social Action*, Vol. 62, January – March; Datta Prabhat, 2009. Democratic decentralization through panchayati raj in contemporary India: The changes and challenges, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics, working paper no. 49; Chattopadhyay Raghvendra and Esther Duflo, 2003, 'The impact of reservation in the Panchayati raj: Evidence from a nationwide randomised experiment', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXIX, no. 9, February 28, 2004; and Buch, Nirmala, 1999, 'Women's Experience in New Panchayats: The Emerging Leadership of Rural Women', Centre for Women's Development Studies, Occasional Paper no. 35, New Delhi.