

# The Role of the Local Elite in the Politics of Rural Development



**Rusiram Mahananda**

Associate Professor,  
Deptt. of Political Science,  
Deen Dayal University,  
Gorakhpur

## Abstract

Politics in post-independent India has created a battle field where the forces of modernity and tradition are in opposed sides. Politicization and mass participation have taken the competing norms to every corner of the society including our rural India. But the political discourse even at the lowest level of the system display elements of both the moral and the rational worldviews. The fusion between the modern and the traditional in order to create an endogenous modernity is one of the main challenges that India faces today. The crucial intermediaries in this process of social change and developmental process of the economy are the local elites. They are political actors, situated at the interface of the modern state and traditional society. They use the double language of the state and society, of modernity and tradition and of individuality and group solidarity. They are engaged in a two way interpretation of norms and political demands. Their ability to combine institutional action and radical protest is little understood in cross cultural studies of development. These local elite have been either vilified or ignored by both the rival groups of classic development planners as well as advocates of peasant revolution. The former, top-down theories of development have routinely assumed that knowledge, technology and capital accumulating at the top of the system will trickle down to the bottom in due course through the process of modernization. The failure of the nature and course of economic development to live up to these expectations is blamed on the meddlesome middlemen who obstruct the functioning of rational plans. On the other hand, the advocates of radical reform see an ally of repressive structures in local elites who defend backward social and economic systems. The main thrust of development theory avoids mentioning local elites altogether, expect to point them out as the enemies of economic development and social change. The present study considers the local elite as indispensable for our rural development strategy.

**Keywords:** Local Elite, Politics, Rural Development.

## Introduction

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, India has made significance achievements in food production, health sector, higher education, media and mass communication, industrial infrastructure, information technology, science and defense. Economic growth has included development of heavy industry and technology (and more recently encouragement of industry with export potential), and drastic increases in grain production. Land distribution has improved significantly, and there has been considerable progress, particularly in the last decade in other forms of social and economic development (improvement in regional disparities, attention to weaker section, increase in education, etc.). Moreover, India has maintained her status - in fact as well as in name - as the world's largest democracy and 6<sup>th</sup> largest economy. However, it would be foolish to underestimate either the absolute number of the poor or the levels of poverty, malnutrition, employment, illiteracy and internal conflict which the country faces. Nevertheless, to some analysts, the depth and breadth of India's progress is striking<sup>1</sup>. A large group of Indian economists despair of the benefits of development ever reaching the poor and needy. In addition to their structural executions from the growing sectors of the economy, even public welfare provisions hardly reaches the targets. For it is alleged that standing between the deprived and the state is a human wall of the locally powerful and socially dominant called local elite who have managed to corner most if not all the fruits of development<sup>2</sup>.

These local elites or 'kujee netas' as they are generally referred to in India's rural setting are political actors, situated at the interface of the

modern state and traditional society. They are from among the beneficiaries and in some cases they are also, the victims of society and economic development. They use the double language of the state and society, of modernity and tradition and of individual rationality and group solidarity. They generally interpret norms and political demands in double ways. They occupy a position close to the bottom of the power structure that links India's 6,00,000 villages with her capital cities. But as a group, they are perhaps not among the most deprived members of the rural society. They are a socially mixed groups, drawing in many cases substantial representation from the lower social strata and their actions determines the course and context of the process of development and indirectly but crucially the legitimacy of the state<sup>3</sup>. By virtue of their position as leaders in thought and action, they are capable of inspiring effective programs of social change. At any rate, they have a deciding voice in determining the path of development. The success of developmental programmes depend upon their capacity for arousing popular enthusiasm and the extent to which they can muster support from people in the countryside, which in turn, depends upon the close bond between local elite and the rest of the population through social organization, political parties and mass movement<sup>4</sup>. That may be the reason Mountstuart Elphinstone, the then commissioner of the Deccan when Western Maharashtra were annexed by the British in 1818 had understood that orderly government could not be maintained without the support of the rural elite and he sought at every step to ally British rule with what he regarded as the rural aristocracy, the hereditary village officers as well as the great and small jagirdars. Similarly, from studies such as those of Anil Seal and J.H. Broomfield we learn to see Indian Independence not simply as the replacement of European imperialism by Indian nationalism and democracy but also as a complex process of elite circulation<sup>5</sup>.

#### **Review of Literature**

In the realm of social sciences, the term elite is placed in a specific context. One is treated as a member of the elite strata in that particular field or branch in which one is better placed vis-à-vis the rest of one's companions. For Pareto, elite is a value-free term inclusive of all those who score highest in scales measuring any social value or commodity, such as power, riches and knowledge. Pareto uses the word in its etymological sense (Italian, aristocraiu) meaning the strongest, the most energetic, and most capable for good as well as evil. Though he is dealing mostly with economic and political elites, he is ready to extend the use of term to religion (the most holy), to art (the most artistic), and even to ethics (the most virtuous) - to all those who constitutes the highest stratum in society. The highest stratum, according to him, constitutes two classes: a governing elite comprising individuals who directly or indirectly play an considerable part in government and a non-governing elite, comprising the rest<sup>6</sup>.

Mosca uses the term "elite" in a restricted sense and by elite, he means the ruling class. In a celebrated passage, he writes:

In all societies - two classes of people appear - a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolies power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first, in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent, and supplies the first, in appearance at least, with material means of subsistence and with the instrumentalities that are essential to the vitality of the political organism<sup>7</sup>.

He emphatically says that in all countries, "the management of Public Affairs is in the hands of minorities of influential persons, to which management, willingly or unwillingly, the majority defer. He refers to two political facts. In every Political organism, there is an individual who is chief among the leaders of the ruling class. Under special circumstances two or three may discharge the functions of supreme control. Nevertheless, that person or those persons may not always be the persons who hold power according to law. Secondly, in every political organism, pressures arising from the discontent of the masses who are governed, from the passions by which they are swayed, exert a certain amount of influence on the policies of the ruling, the political class<sup>8</sup>.

Mosca's disciple, Michel proposes a law governing all social organizations and he calls it "the iron law of oligarchy." He doesn't merely say, like Mosca, that organizational ability grants power but he stresses that the very structure of any organized society gives rise to an elite. Michel's formulation is "who says organization, says oligarchy". Like Max Weber before him, Michels insists that mass members cannot control the large-scale organization of modern age. Leadership is technically indispensable. "At the out set, leaders arouse spontaneously, their functions are accessory and gratuitous. Soon, however, they become professional leaders, and in this second stage of development they are stable and irremovable. Michels says leaders are "bourgeoisified", strangers to their class, and the party hierarchy becomes an established career offering a rise in social status as well as income. Psychologically, Michels says that the majority is apathetic towards public matters. Interest and influence in the party are represented by pyramid - voluntary party officials, a large stratum of those attending party meetings, a large stratum of enrolled members and finally a large basis of non-members who merely vote for the party. The majority is only too glad to have others take on political responsibilities. Even revolutionary agitation has to be under taken by a small minority on their behalf. Such apathy, submissiveness, and deference provide ideal conditions for the few with the interest and the organizational ability to lead. Michels insists that the rule of the oligarchy is in the same sense applicable to all organizations including the organization of state<sup>9</sup>.

Under the impact of Pareto, Mosca and Michels, a large number of studies have been made which may be divided into two broader categories of elites<sup>10</sup>. To the first category belong Burnham and Djilas who are mostly concerned with the socialist countries. To the second category belong Mills and Lasswell primarily for the reason that they are the best exponents of the US society.

Burnham agrees with Marx that control of production gives rise to political power, social prestige as well as wealth and also that capitalism is in its decline<sup>11</sup>. But his explanation for the cause of its decline as well as the future setup is different. The capitalists, having originally been managers of their own enterprises, left this activity to professional managers and after sometime, didn't even finance, rather fed upon the profits without contributing to production. In the end, the capitalists ruling class is displaced by the technically indispensable managerial elite. Before Burnham, Veblen had also drawn the picture of the capitalists being replaced by the 'engineering' of the technological specialists<sup>12</sup>.

Djilas in 'The New Class' depicts how after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, a new class, previously unknown to history, had been formed. This new class, according to him, is the bureaucracy - "the party of political bureaucracy". This class has the characteristics of earlier ones as well as some new characteristics like idealism of its own. The new class of Djilas arises from the proletariat and works as the champion of that class. The new class obtains its power, privileges, ideology and its customs from one specific form of ownership- collective ownership - which the class administers and distributes in the name of nation and society. Thus its chief weapons are industrialization and development of production. All changes initiated by the communist chiefs are dictated first of all by the interests and aspirations of the new class, which, like every social group, lives and reacts, defends itself and advances, with the aim of increasing its power. Having achieved industrialization, the new class can do nothing more than strengthen its brute force and pillage the people. It ceases to create. Djilas foresees, "when the new class leaves the historical scene and this must happen - there will be less sorrow over its passing than there was for any other class before it"<sup>13</sup>.

However, C. Wright Mills sees power in society as attached to institutions and defines the power elites "as those who occupy the command posts. He distinguishes three major elites in the USA - the corporation heads, the political leaders and the military chiefs. Refuting the comment that the elites in a functioning democracy are neither close - knit nor united, Mills insists that they are, in fact, a cohesive group, and he supports his view by establishing the similarity of social origins, the close personal and family relationship and the frequency of interchange of personnel between the three spheres. Mills describes the American society as a mass society in which the power elite decides all important issues and keeps the masses quiet by flattery, deception and entertainment<sup>14</sup>.

For Lasswell, "The study of politics is the study of influence and the influential" and "the influential are those who get the most of what there is to get". Most of what people want to get are termed by Lasswell as values and according to him, the basic values are: deference, income and safety. Those who get the most of these values are the elite, the rest are the masses. Elites may be compared in terms of class as well as skill. Indeed, they differ as they command different values. For example, an elite of deference is not necessarily an elite of safety. Lasswell discusses the method by which the elites are protected or superseded. According to him, the fate of an elite is profoundly affected by the ways in which it manipulates the environment; that is to say, by the use of violence, goods, symbols and practices. "An elite defends and asserts itself in the name of symbols of the common destiny. Such symbols are the 'ideology', of the established order, the 'utopia' of counter-elites. By the use of sanctioned words and gestures, the elite elicits blood, work, taxes, applause from the masses". He finds the various forms of violence to be a major means of elite attack and defense. He further talks of personality and attitude groups and discusses the meaning of social change for the relative ascendancy of such formations. An elite is subject to domestic attack when it fails to bring in prosperity. The security of elites is bound up with shifts in goods and prices. Hence, elites resort to rationing or pricing to direct the flow of goods and services. Challenging elites practice withdrawals of co-operation as a means of heightening the will to power of the disaffected. However, Lasswell felt that the insecurities of the contemporary world sharpened by the vicissitudes of rapidly expanding and rapidly contracting economy, faster the conditions of perpetual crisis which favors the seizer of power by the agitator, and the retention of power by the man of ruthless violence<sup>15</sup>.

#### **Aim of the Study**

The present study makes an attempt to examine the role of the local elite in rural development programme and which particular theories i.e. socialist or capitalist is most applicable to India.

In Indian context B.R. Ambedkar In one of his speeches to the constituent Assembly (4<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1948) he made his viewpoint of village very clear.

No doubt the village communities have lasted where nothing else lasts..... But mere survival has no value.. what is a village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism....? Why should the village become the locus of the political structure? Why would we want to entrust political rule and development to it? Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes will be oppressed by the upper caste ruling elite. In fact, upper castes will have total control in an unregulated decentralized system<sup>16</sup>.

Even more than two centuries back in the Federalist Papers (No. 10), James Madison expressed the view that local governments are more prone to capture : "The smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it; the fewer the distinct parties and interests, the more frequently will a majority be found

of the same party; and the smaller the number of individuals composing a majority, and the smaller the compass within which they are placed, the more easily they concert and execute their plans of oppression. Extend the sphere and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the right of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength to act in unison with each other<sup>17</sup>.

Similar views have been expressed in more recent times, in developed and developing countries alike. For instance, Grant McConnell echoes Madison's arguments while pointing to the serious discriminatory effects of decentralized democratic politics in the U.S.<sup>18</sup> In India this socialist conception of elite view is well supported by Thomas Pantham, Surjan Singh Sharma, Hetukar Jha, M.L. Sharma, A.C. Sinha, G.K. Liten, George Methew, Ramesh Nayak and others.

Thomas Pantham discusses the role of the elite in economic modernization and social transformation in India. He analyses how economic modernization has been distorted by the lack of commitment of the elite to its modernizing role. Although the state is committed to an interventionist and modernizing program, as is evident through the statement of objective of the different five-year plans. Pantham, therefore, goes to examine the social bases of state power and how these affect state action. On account of the distorted development of the Indian bourgeoisie, the national movement, which it had spearheaded, did not clearly resolve the contradictions between pre-capitalist and capitalist mode of exploitation and between national bourgeoisie and the form of neo-colonialism. The political elite choose the route of conventional progress rather than the role of modernized radicals. The distortions in economic development in India were characterized by stagnation and inflation and by a syndrome of low output and high inequality. Pantham believes that through investment in mass literacy and mass mobilization we should be able to usher in mass oriented polity in place of the present elite manipulated polity<sup>19</sup>.

Surjan Singh Sharma examines the pattern of oral communications between the traditional elites and the peasants in western U.P. In this context he examines the social position of the rural elite, the messages communicated by them to the peasants and the patterns of interaction between the elite and the masses. Sharma on the basis of the study formulates three meaningful hypotheses.

1. The better the elites are exposed to mass media, the more distorted messages they communicate.
2. The less informed elites communicate a variety of messages and
3. Messages neutral to the interest of the elites are communicated in the original form whereas messages negative to their interest are distorted<sup>20</sup>.

Hetukar Jha deals with the contradictions between the elite and masses in Mithila in a historical

perspective. The elite castes in Mithila are the Brahmans and the Kayasthas while the masses are composed largely of lower castes and Harijans. These two categories are sharply divided there being no middle class. The elite group has a very weak orientation, a high tendency of making strongly worded promises, lacks team orientation, and has a high tendency of manipulating power and holding others responsible for the misery of common people in Mithila. It has also failed to mobilize masses which are largely isolated. In making demands for Mithila the needs of the masses are completely ignored. Thinking or doing anything for Mithila or Mithilies is in the opinion of the masses, the sole concern of elite castes only. Jha makes an attempt to understand the contradictions in terms of socio-economic conditions prevailing in Mithila Society through the ages<sup>21</sup>.

M.L. Sharma's contribution specially refers to recruitment of elite among the Munda, one of the largest tribes of Chotanagpur. Sharma uses the reputational approach for purpose of elite's identification. He has examined the various reasons for the influence enjoyed by the Munda Elite and in this their involvement in politics and social work ranks the highest. However, reputation as intellectuals, government service, possession of land and wealth and traditional leadership also provided avenues to elite hood<sup>22</sup>.

A.C. Sinha makes a study of the aristocracy in the three Himalayan Kingdoms of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. He details the political culture obtaining there. In that context he studies the evolution of aristocracy and also the role played by the British Indian Empire in their emergency. The aristocracies as has been shown in the paper affect the quality of political development in each kingdom. An analysis of the power structure and political behavior of the aristocracies may throw light on the process of elite emergence, particularly in dominantly traditional society<sup>23</sup>.

G.K. Liten has reservations about the effects of devolving authority to elected village governments in India<sup>24</sup>. George Mathew and Ramesh Nayak have expressed in terms of the oppressive power structure in many villages. They describe the recent experience of certain local village governments in central India that have been subverted by local elites. In their views this experience indicates the earlier pessimism of Babasaheb Ambedkar, concerning the prospects for local democracy in India<sup>25</sup>.

In India the capitalist view of elite doctrine is subscribed by Emanuela Galasso, Martin Ravallion, Niranjana Pant, Sachchidananda A.K. Lal, Subrata Kumar Mitra and others. Emanuela Galasso and Martin Ravallion study targeting biases in schooling programs in Bangladesh, and find that intra district targeting biases in schooling programs in Bangladesh, and find that intra district targeting failures were less severe than inter district targeting failures, suggesting that local governments exhibited stronger redistributive preferences than did the central government<sup>26</sup>.

Niranjan Pant discusses the resources and role of neighborhood elites in urban locations. The three roles that the elite have to perform are as mediators with the outside world, arbitrators in neighborhood conflicts and as one activating his own resource network to help the common man<sup>27</sup>.

A.K. Lal deals with such educated Harijans as have emerged as top achievers in their own society. They are clearly distinguished from the scheduled caste mass. They are characterized by modernizing ideas and provide much needed help to alleviate the lot of others. They act as carriers of stimuli and communicators of new ideas. They are the standard bearers of change for the community. They are the important rallying points for fulfillment of the urgent demands of the community. They activate action sets and networks for various purpose some of which include helping their most disadvantages brethren<sup>28</sup>.

Anthony Carter writes one important feature of Indian Politics is the fact that power in the countryside is distributed unequally. Carter believes the stability and instability of political alliance in India can be explained simply by reference to the elite nature of Indian Politics<sup>29</sup>.

Subrata Mitra, explores the attitudes of the goan ka netas - local elites in the rural setting in India. He analyses the process through which the gaon ka netas conceptualize the basic problems that confront them, the forms of intervention, including radical protest, with which they seek to improve their lot and the overall implications of their action for the institutional structure and the legitimacy of state in India. Here he finds the resilience of Indian democracy in the complex political repertoire of her local elites and their remarkable blend of institutional participation and collective protest. He suggest that India's local elites are a crucial hinge group whose ability to incorporate newly emerging social forces into the political arena and to ease out old style notables is the critical determinant of the stability, legitimacy, and expansion of the state<sup>30</sup>.

A thorough examination of different developmental programmes of the Bargarh district<sup>31</sup> as I have done in my study show that the measure beneficiaries of the developmental programmes are the local elites. The elites do not have any traditional, charismatic and legal source of power to control the common people but whatever power local elites posses today, it is mostly obtained through controlling public good and services. The elites are hardly any innovation to propagate among the masses. But mostly they are interested in local politics. Majority of the villagers believe that lack of commitment of the elites to its modernising role and lack of commitment of the administrative machinery of the state are most responsible for distortions in economic development in their areas. The villagers believe that grass-root democracy can not do away with functional elitism rather grass-root democracy perpetuates functional elitism in society. Hence, elite system can not be a instrument of change in the socio-economic and political system, rather social bases of power structure affects the state action frequently.

### Conclusion

However, the elites argue that for its very success grass-root democracy can not do away with functional elitism. Local elites are the friend, philosopher and guide of the village community. Local resources can be best assessed and aptly utilized by local elites. In the opinion the villagers it is the local elites who are responsible for thinking or doing anything for development of their area. Interview with government official also makes it clear that local elites are most ever of the local problems. Local elites are the appropriate persons to define the 'local needs' upon which all people are agreed. Besides the knowledge of local needs help the local elite to use consensus approach in the decision making process in rural politics. On the basis of this analysis we can conclude that local elites are inevitable part of our rural development strategies. As Niranjan Pant discuss, the three roles that the local elites perform most are as mediators with the outside world, as arbitrators in neighbourhood conflicts and as one activating his own resource network to help the common man. In the words of Subrata Mitra the study agrees that the local elites are a crucial hinge group whose ability to incorporate newly emerging social forces into the political arena and to ease out old style notables is the critical determinant of the stability, legitimacy and expansion of the state. Therefore, inspite of all their evil practices, we can say, rural elites are necessary for the survival of our grass-root democracy.

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