

Panchayati Raj System towards Changing Rural India

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ABSTRACT

Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) is a system of rural local self-government in India. The Panchayati Raj Institutions play a major role in the socio and economic development of people at the grassroot level. It is changing the traditional power structure in Rural India. It represented a historic opportunity to change the face of rural India. A three-tier structure of the Indian administration for rural development is called Panchayati Raj. The aim of the Panchayati Raj is to develop local self-governments in districts, zones and villages. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj is a branch of the Government of India looking after the ongoing process of decentralisation and local governance in the States.

Key words: *Panchayati Raj, rural, local, development, government, constitution, Institution and village.*

INTRODUCTION

Panchayati Raj is the oldest system of local government in the Indian subcontinent. Panchayati Raj was a pious dream of our great leader Mahatma Gandhi who wanted to strengthen the democracy at the grassroots level by this system. In our country, 70 per cent of the population is in rural areas and the panchayats have been the backbone of the Indian villages since independence. Panchayati Raj refers to the system of rural local self-government in India. The Gram Sabha consists of all registered voters living in the area of a Gram Panchayat and is the organization through which village inhabitants participate directly in local government.

The History of Panchayati Raj: The history of Panchayati Raj goes back since the days of our independence. Efforts were made to strengthen the system of Panchayati Raj in order to give citizens a sense of participation in the nation building programme. It was in pursuance of this objective that community development programme was launched in 1952. It was an effort to provide and encourage development and employment in rural areas, use of scientific methods of agriculture, encourage cotton and small scale industries among other things.

Different Committees Reports Regarding Panchayati Raj: To evaluate the effects of community development programme Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was set up in 1953 that suggested setting up of Panchayati Raj Institutions. The underlying idea was to usher in an era of 'Democratic Decentralisation'. Few other committees that were formed on Panchayati Raj were: VT Krishnamachari, 1960; Ashok Mehta Committee, 1977; GVK Rao Committee, 1985; LM Singhvi Committee, 1986. Finally, in 1993 through 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, Panchayati Raj Institutions were established.

Three Tier Structure of Panchayati Raj: The 'Constitution provides for a three tier structure of Panchayati Raj. The District Panchayat or Zila Parishad at District level, a Block Panchayat at the intermediate level and a Gram Panchayat at the village level. In most of the states, members of Gram Panchayat constitute a body called Gram Sabha and all the voters of this constituency are members of this body. Gram Sabha is not a tier of the system. It doesn't have any executive function and operates only as a recommending body. "Economic development, strengthening social justice and implementation of Central and State Government Schemes including those 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule."(Alok V.N and Chaubey P.K. 103)

Areas of Work of Panchayat: Almost all the states have delegated powers and responsibilities in varying degrees to the Panchayats. Article 243G of the Constitution has broadly outlined areas of functions for preparing plans for socio-economic development of their areas. These areas are explicitly highlighted in the 11th Schedule of the Constitution. The functions highlighted are ensuring safe drinking water, maintaining community assets, health and sanitation, rural electrification, physical infrastructure viz roads, bridges, waterways etc.

There are many changes that these institutions have brought about. Under Articles 40 and 246 (3), the Constitution grants powers to the states to make laws to enable the functioning of the self-government units. Haryana and Rajasthan are the states who mandate to fix minimum education qualification for those contesting in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI's). In August 2015, the Bihar Assembly also passed amendments making it mandatory for candidates contesting Panchayat Polls to have toilets in their homes.

Through Gram Panchayats, activities in MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) are handed out and auditing of work is done. MGNREGS has brought a sigh of relief for rural populace as rural distress was brewing due to unemployment. MGNREGS has come a cog in the wheel of growth and development. Gram Sabha acts as a pivotal body that is involved in building infrastructure and providing employment to people in rural areas. "In a federation the powers and functions of the government are divided among two governments. In India it is the Union Government and the various State Governments. However, with the passage of 73rd and 74th amendment act of the Constitution of India, in 1993 the divisions of powers and functions have been further trickled down to Local Self Governments (Panchayat at Village levels and Municipalities and Municipal Corporations in towns and large cities). As such India now has not two but three tier of Governments in its federal setup" (<https://panchayat.gov.in/>)

Different Schemes Implemented by It: Many State and Central Government schemes have been implemented at the grassroots level by these bodies. Schemes of rural housing (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana), rural electrification (Gramin Vidyut Abhiyantas), health and sanitation (ICDS and Swachh Bharat Mission), physical infrastructure (Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana) etc., have made conspicuous difference in rural areas.

These schemes have been implemented with the assistance of the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Similarly, Gram Panchayats have worked as the first response entity during the times of disaster. Mock drills, awareness programme have enabled these bodies to respond quickly during the needful times. "Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayati Raj as the foundation of India's political system, as a decentralized form of government in which each village would be responsible for its own affairs" (Khanna. B.S, 87)

Significant Role Played by Panchayati Raj Institutions to Transform the Face of Rural India: Panchayati Raj Institutions have broken the caste, age and gender structures of village. No higher caste people, old members and males are at the helm of decision-making. The provision of 33% reservation for women and provision for reservation for SC ST in the body has enabled villagers and the government to achieve parity in the village. This has broken the age old structures and has mainstreamed the marginalized.

Among the states that already follow 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj are Bihar, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra. The reservation of seats for women, Scheduled Castes and Tribes in Panchayats is a welcome step, for it would make the institution of Panchayat more democratic, representative and balanced. "Elections for the members of the Panchayats at all levels take place every five years. The Panchayats must include members of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the same proportion as in the general population. One third of all seats and chairperson posts must be reserved for women, in some states half of all seats and chairperson posts" (Misra Sweta. 105)

Similarly, in the field of agriculture, these bodies have contributed enormously. Awareness about organic farming, soil health card scheme has been implemented with the help of Gram Sabha. Similarly, many infrastructure projects, animal husbandry activities, fisheries etc, have been carried out by these bodies. Cooperatives like AMUL were conceived at these levels. Therefore, pooling of resources and efforts has been their hallmark.

Similarly, concepts of social forestry, agro forestry have been encouraged by panchayats. The government has planned to set up formal markets which would remove the intermediaries. So, that the maximum share of profit lands in the hands of farmers, Panchayats will be an enabling factor in this scheme. Also, Panchayats have mandate to make plans and implement them in the areas of small scale industries, food processing industries, khadi and cottage industries. These industries require proper planning and financing. With coordination among Central, State and Panchayat level bodies it will help in realizing the full potential,

Challenges Faced by Panchayati Raj institutions: Panchayati Raj in India has not been an absolute success. Its functioning all these years has demonstrated numerous shortcomings. These include

- (i) The inadequacy of funds has stood in the way of successful working of the Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- (ii) The tendency on the part of the higher structure to treat the lower structure as its subordinate is markedly visible.
- (iii) Participation of the people hardly happens in reality since the key administrative and technical positions are manned by the government officials.
- (iv) The performance of Panchayati Raj Institutions has been vitiated by political cum caste factionalism, rendering developmental projects into chimeras.
- (v) These bodies also experience several administrative problems like politicization of local administration, lack of coordination between the popular and bureaucratic elements etc.

These structural and functional issues, which have created impediment in realizing the full potential, need to be dealt with strong hand.

Strengthening the democratic process at the village level, the fundamental objective of this local governance system is to implement rural development projects as per the need of the local community and being implemented by the community. The citizens within the Gram Panchayats directly elect the representatives at the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), from village level to block level to district levels. The village community puts up their development needs in front of the Gram Sabha at Gram Panchayat level. After discussions, the need based development projects are implemented in the villages. In other ways, Gram Panchayats function as a local government at the village level.

CONCLUSION

Panchayati Raj Institutions are responsible for resolving disputes and providing a forum for village-level decision-making. Panchayati Raj Institutions have enormous potential to transform the face of the rural India. But, there are some structural and functional issues which have created impediments in realising the full potential. Thus, the Panchayat System in India assumes a very significant role. This system is quite rational, practicable and in perfect harmony with the spirit of democracy and should be further strengthened and encouraged. It should be made economically viable and self-sufficient by providing adequate resources, funds and generous grants.

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