

**PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA; ISSUES AND CHALLENGES****Nitin Mohod**

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Abstract

The introduction of PRIs in India after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was a watershed moment. It was believed that this would change the face of the rural landscape across the country which was lacking in even basic necessities. It was also affirmed by the policy makers that this would help in realizing the long-cherished dream of the framers of the constitution of making the last person on the periphery of the society a stake holder and participant in the process of his development. In the last decade, the working of the PRIs has shown deep routed fault lines which have acted detrimental to the goals envisaged in the constitution of India. A very large section of the society has been deprived of a water, electricity, education, health and as a consequence, decent standard of living. The paper takes a look at the major issues and problems faced by the Local Self- governments, particularly the Gram Sabha and the Gram Panchayat.

Key words: *PRI, local self-government, village, Gram Sabha, rural development, weaker section, decentralisation, empowerment, democracy*



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Introduction

The introduction of the Panchayati Raj system in India after the Constitution (seventy-third amendment) Act, 1992, heralded a new beginning of rural development and empowerment in the country. It was a bold step towards steering the rural landscape with hope of development, growth and prosperity. As per the 2011 census, almost 69 percent of the Indian Population lives in the villages spread across the length and breadth of the country, where majority of them do not have access to basic survives which are necessary for having a decent standard of living. The central idea behind the Panchayati Raj system was to initiate rural development which would bring about a transformation in the lives of the people staying in these areas.

Rural development, means an overall development of rural areas in social, economic, political and cultural spheres in order that people could lead on a pleasing life (Pandit and

Kulkarni 2012, 160). It's a broad, comprehensive term that takes in its thought the socio-economic and political development of the agricultural areas. It includes measures to strengthen the democratic structure of society through the PRIs also as measures to enhance the agricultural infrastructure, improve financial gain of rural households and delivery systems relating education, health and safety mechanisms (Mishra, Akhtar & Tarika, 2011).

The steps initiated under the Panchayati Raj system were seen as a panacea to the stagnation, underdevelopment, lack of services like drinking water, electricity, health, primary education, roads, connectivity, and impoverishment which marred the rural expanse across the country.

The introduction of PRIs was initiated with multiple objectives, primary being strengthening the democratic roots with involvement and participation of people in the formulation and implementation of rural development programmes.

The primary objective of rural development is to enrich the quality of the rural masses, particularly the poorer and the weaker sections. The implementation of democratic decentralization through the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) was meant to give an opportunity for local initiative and participation in the developmental activities

The functioning of the PRIs in the initial period was met with enthusiasm in implementation of various schemes, development programmes and there was optimism both in the people at whom they were targeted and the implementing agencies.

Entrusted with the task of promoting rural development in India, generally conceived as a multi-sectoral activity it includes, besides agricultural development, rural industries, the establishment or improvement of social overhead facilities or infrastructure, such as schools, clinics, roads, communication, water supply, markets, welfare sources, improved nutrition, literacy, adult education etc. The primary objective of rural development is to enrich the quality of the rural masses, particularly the poorer and the weaker sections. The implementation of democratic decentralization through the Panchayat Raj Institutions was meant to give an opportunity for local initiative and participation in the developmental activities.

The working of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the last decade has thrown up a host of issues which have come to play a detrimental role in the efficient implementation of state policies at the grass root level. These inadequacies which have surfaced and identified have become impediments in the effective working of the local self-government institutions and become a cause of serious concern in the entire process of decentralisation of power, rural development and empowerment of the inhabitants in the rural areas across the nation.

A host of issues have been identified which are plaguing the effective working of local self-government institutions across the country. The following paragraphs will bring out the malaises which have crept in the working of the PRI's.

In the first place, Article 40 of the Constitution which enshrines one of the Directive Principles of State Policy lays down that the State shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government. In the light of the experience in the last forty years and in view of the shortcomings which have been observed, it is considered that there is an imperative need to enshrine in the Constitution certain basic and essential features of Panchayati Raj Institutions to impart certainty, continuity and strength to them.

At every level of statehood, the level of authority differs in the role and its subsequent function. While the powers between the center and the state are different, the gram panchayat rules are the major authority that forms the base in all villages and rural areas. This legislative body frames the laws and rules for the rural population. The people under the gram panchayat are meant to follow the laws and other projects of social and political importance.

Secondly, the working of the panchayats in the states have been restricted due to the fact that the powers which are pertinent for the PRIs to function effectively, implement development schemes, carry out welfare measures are subject to the whims and wishes of the respective state legislatures. It has been left to the state governments to decide upon the devolution of actual powers and responsibilities to be entrusted to the PRI's.

Few states have not yet rested and delegated the powers to the panchayats to the true meaning and spirit of the 73rd constitutional amendment. Even if the functions have been delegated, the required powers to execute the said functions are not with the PRIs.

Thirdly, the expression, 'institution of self-government' has not been elaborated. The lack of clarification has made it difficult for the PRIs to exercise its authority and control to carry out the responsibilities entrusted to them. Moreover, in some of the cases the delegation of authority by the states to the PRIs is incomplete and hence it creates unwanted confusion in the actual working of the local self-governments. It has also been observed that the higher-level bureaucracy is not willing to give up its power and authority to the local administration and in many places the control of the PRIs is tightly under the higher ups in the state administrative apparatus.

Fourthly, the role played by the elected representatives in the local administration is questioned by many who have studied the working of the PRIs. It has been noted that there is undue interference in the day to day working of the gram panchayats, panchayat samiti and

zilla parishad bodies by the elected representatives of the constituency. The Member of Assemblies and Members of Parliament of the constituencies see the local bodies as their fiefdom. The interference has been particularly pointed out in the matter of deciding funding for various schemes and implementation of various programmes in the local areas. The elected representatives are reluctant to give up their control over these issues and have demonstrated a tendency to manipulate the schemes and programmes to suit their political image and advantage, even to the detriment and sometimes rendering the policy/scheme becoming useless.

Fifthly, the term Gram Sabha is defined in the Constitution of India under Article 243 (b) as the primary body of the Panchayati Raj system. It is a permanent body. 'Gram Sabha' is the Sabha of the electorate and it approves the plans, programmes and projects for social and economic development before such plans, programmes and projects are taken up for implementation by the Panchayat at the village level. It is due to this reason that the Gram Sabha is considered the fulcrum of the Panchayati Raj and village development. People use the forum of the Gram Sabha to discuss local governance and development, and make need-based plans for the village. The Panchayat implements development programs under the overarching mandate, supervision and monitoring of the Gram Sabha. All decisions of the Panchayat are taken through the Gram Sabha and no decision is official and valid without the consent of the Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha has to meet two to four times a year to resolve and pass its decisions. In spite of understanding its paramount importance and need, the meetings of the Gram Sabha are not held regularly. The meetings of many Gram Sabha's are put on hold citing flimsy reasons. It is a fact that meetings of the all adults in the Gram Sabha are only on paper and in many instances, it has become evident that the elite members in the village have exerted influence and dominance in deciding the village development plan.

Sixthly, there is a general lack of manpower in the PRIs, and absence of skilled workforce particularly at the village level. With a limited number of officials, even after the complete devolution of powers, it may become difficult for the PRIs to look after all the works assigned to them by the State government. Unless the PRIs are equipped with adequate staff to discharge their functions it will not be able to achieve the objectives for which the system was conceived.

Seventhly, the powers given to the State Election Commissions also vary from State to State. Steps have not been taken to bring a uniformity in this regard. Recommendations of State Finance Commissions (SFCs) communicated to the officials are generally found to be lacking in the implementation part.

Even though women have been assured representation in the local self-government institutions by means of reservation of seats, women representatives are seldom taken seriously and denied to work with independence. Proxy authority is exercised by men folks who get their women family member elected to various positions and power was usurped by the husband or other male member. Empowerment of women has become mere words

Apart from the above illustrated issues the Gram Sabha's across India are faced with other problems such as caste-based discrimination, gender discrimination, lack of awareness among the people, dominance of influential and moneyed individuals in cahoots with mid-level bureaucrats in the working of the Gram Sabha, Lack of transparency in the working of the Gram Sabha and its officials, muster rolls never shown to anybody and so on.

Conclusion

There are 6,38,596 villages spread over the length and breadth of India as per the 2001 census. The entire rural landscape is marred with uneven development or lack of development at all. Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, lack of basic health care services, all weather roads, power outages and host of other problems. The introduction of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act was a welcome step towards strengthening democracy, overall development and upliftment in the standard of life of the rural people. This Amendment Act accorded a strong and secure footing to the decentralisation process in India. In fact, the very momentum to the process of democratic decentralization was initiated through the introduction of this Act. However, the decentralisation process in the country has to go a long way to attain effective self-governance at the grassroot level and unfortunately, even after more than a decade of its implementation the picture remains dismal in most of the places. There is an urgent need to relook into the entire working of the PRIs and implementation of the policies and programmes.

A closer look into Article 40, 43 and 243 to 243-O of the Constitution of India would make it clear that the framers of our constitution wanted the village panchayats to be responsible for its own affairs, as well as to act as a solid foundation for deepening the roots of political democracy in the country. It envisaged encouraging development in the rural parts of the country, which is necessary to mobilize the resources in the hands of people and thus accelerate the participation of them in the decision making the process that has an effect on their daily living.

Villages in India, though they may appear similar outwardly, each village has its own set of issues, problems and needs. This can be understood more clearly by the insider, i.e.; a local, than an outsider. Members of a Panchayat are far more familiar of the region-specific

problems, and thus they are capable of taking a more informed decision in favour of the people of their village. Taking into consideration the specified needs of the village and its inhabitants, the panchayats can work accordingly. The panchayats are expected to undertake works of varied levels starting from creation of necessary institutions like primary schools, primary health care centres, to provision of safe drinking water, basic hygiene, roads, electrification of the village, employment generation and so on. Planning at the village levels, ensuring community participation, resource mobilisation, eradication of evil customs/practices and general improvement in the life of the local community and contributing towards the overall development of the society and nation building is the task entrusted to the villages through the PRIs.

The pragmatic philosophy of miniaturized participative democracy, where every man matters, is the cornerstone of developmental dynamics. The policy makers who are entrusted with this task are also well aware that the empowerment goals at Panchayat level is not even partially attained and a lot remains to be achieved. The rot which has stepped in has to be stemmed before it destroys the dream of those who fought for a society based on equality, equity, justice, brotherhood and a nation with strong democratic values. It is not an easy task, but can be achieved with procedural, legislative and most importantly attitudinal changes at every level.

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