Panchayati Raj System in India: Present Status, Issues and Future Prospects

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Abstract

India has remarkable achievements in continuing the Panchayati Raj system. Panchayati Raj has been an integral part of our culture and civilization. The working of Panchayati Raj Institutions since 1959 has been viewed as a success in a few states and a failure in most of the states. It means that the system has been experiencing ups and downs. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 provided Constitutional status and institutional framework to Panchayats to strengthen grassroots democracy through elected self-governing local bodies in the rural areas. It has been 29 years since the Panchayati Raj Institutions came into existence. This paper attempts to understand the evolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions as units of local governance, their roles and responsibilities, achievements, and way forward.

Key Words: Panchayati Raj System, 73rd Amendment Act, Current Status, Future Challenges and Prospects

Introduction

The concept of Panchayati Raj is not new to India. Panchayats have been in existence in India since ancient times. Institutions of Panchayats were usually elected bodies in ancient India with executive and judicial powers. The structure and functions of these local institutions underwent drastic changes from time to time. During the Mughals, panchayats were highly centralized and were used for trading functions and collecting taxes. During the British Administration, several commissions and committees such as Simon Commission and Royal Commission recommended the devolution of powers to Panchayati Raj institutions. However, under colonial rule, the Panchayati Raj institutions could never become independent. They were controlled by the state authorities. Mahatma Gandhi (father of the nation) was the staunch advocate of the Panchayati Raj. It was the tenet of his vision of economic development in India

After independence, India adopted the modified version of the traditional village Panchayats in the form of rural local self-government. Mahatma Gandhi aspired to empower the villages so that they may attain Swaraj or self-government. Dr. Ambedkar, on the other hand, considered that local Panchayats had little prospect of success because communities in India were caste-ridden. When the Indian Constitution was

being framed, the 'Village Panchayats' were placed in the Directive Principles of the State Policy (Article 40) of the Constitution and states were to endow the Panchayats with powers and authority to enable them to function as units of self-government.

The first organized effort to address the problem of rural governance was initiated in 1952 through the Community Development Programme, to bring democratic socio-economic development to the rural people. However, the initiative did not take off as planned due to the lack of an effective instrument for people's involvement.

The Government of India established several committees to investigate the implementation of self-government at the rural level. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) recommended a three-tier system of governance for Panchayats; the Ashok Mehta Committee (1977) suggested a two-tier system at the ground level of governance; the G.V.K Rao Committee (1985) advised that elections in local governments be held regularly, and the L M Singhvi Committee (1986) emphasized the need for constitutional recognition of local self-government.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992

The amendment added Part IX and Eleventh Schedule to the Constitution. The Eleventh Schedule contains 29 functional elements of the panchayats. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 came into effect on April 24, 1993. With this act, the Panchayati Raj System comes under the scope of the justiciable portion of the constitution, forcing governments to adopt the system. It further stipulates that the election process for PRIs shall be conducted independently of the State Government's wishes. The Constitution also provides for the reservation of seats for women and underprivileged groups, the regular flow of finances through the State Finance Commission, and the periodic conduct of elections by the State Election Commission.

Conformity Laws of the State

The Constitutional Amendment Act envisages political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization. States have adopted laws and created norms that specify the Panchayat structure and functions within the wider constitutional framework. At present, tere are 660 District Panchayats, 6,836 Block Panchayats, and 2,55,479 Gram Panchayats in India. These Panchayats provide a diversified, broad, and broad political base for inclusive and participatory growth. Though the state's political decentralization is complete, the administrative and fiscal decentralization is still in the works, with the steady transfer of functions, functionaries, and cash to local governments.

Representation of women in the Panchayats

Article 243D of the Constitution requires that not less than one-third of the seats be allocated for women in the Panchayats. Though the Constitution provides just one-third of seats to women, 20 states have

included 50 percent reservations for women in their separate State Panchayati Raj Acts. Including women in politics is a form of positive discrimination. There are currently 31.87 lakh elected representatives in the country, with 14.54 lakh of them being women. Around 19% of all elected representatives are from Scheduled Caste communities, while 12% are from Scheduled Tribe ones.

Functional Responsibilities of the Panchayats

The Constitution requires the nodal role of the Panchayati Raj Institutions to provide basic civil services at the local level. The functions of the Panchayats can be classified into three categories which are as follow:

Mandatory Functions: Local governments' primary tasks have typically been the operation and maintenance of public facilities. The obligatory functions are the fundamental functions that Gram Panchayats must carry out under the requirements of the act. The majority of the necessary tasks are civic and regulatory. There is no other agency that can carry out these tasks.

General Functions: In addition to the civic and regulatory tasks of Gram Panchayats, the PRIs are responsible for the overall planning, implementation, and monitoring of all developmental programs. For example in Kerala, 14 general duties such as social awareness, relief operations, response mobilization, statistical data collection, legal awareness, and so on have been included.

Sectoral functions: As democratically elected local governments, the Panchayati Raj institutions play a vital role in resolving the rural community's different socio-economic demands. Sectoral Functions or Agency Functions are those undertaken by several line departments with the agreement of Gram Panchayats. According to the Constitution, Panchayats will plan and implement programs for economic development and social justice in the 29 topics enumerated in the XI Schedule.

The flow of Funds to Panchayats

Article 243-1 of the Constitution establishes State Finance Commissions (SFCs) to assist in the framework of inter-governmental fiscal relations at the state level. The State Finance Commissions are mandated to assess the financial status of the Panchayats, identify budgetary gaps, and make appropriate recommendations to the Governor for resolving the same through tax devolution and state grant-in-aid. State Finance Commissions ensure a consistent flow of revenues to Panchayats by outlining revenue-sharing arrangements between states and PRIs.

Decentralized and Participatory Planning

The Panchayats are empowered by the Constitution to develop and execute plans for economic development and social justice. Several attempts have been undertaken by the Government of India and State Governments over the last 28 years to realize the constitutional mandate by allowing Panchayats to construct decentralized participatory plans. Kerala was the first state to embark on the decentralization

process. The "People's Plan Campaign" was launched in 1996 to increase democracy and improve planning. Following that, the state agreed to devolve 35-40 percent of plan money to Panchayats to execute local-level projects. Through the People's Plan Campaign, Panchayats were given the chance to develop and implement their plans across several developmental areas.

Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP)

In 2015, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj announced broad guidelines for the development of Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP). Following the guidelines, states released their own Gram Panchayat Development Plans guidelines to meet the demands of their Gram Panchayats. Following a careful examination of the plans made by Gram Panchayats, it was noticed that significant sectors like agriculture, health, education, women and child development, and so on were underrepresented. To modify the guidelines, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj formed a committee comprised of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, line Ministries, State Governments, NIRDPR, and SIRDPRs in 2018. As a result, updated Gram Panchayat Development Plans Guidelines were published in October 2018. Ministry of Panchayati Raj has also introduced a framework for the preparation of Block and District Panchayat Development Plans in 2020.

People's Plan Campaign (PPC)

Every year, from the 2nd of October to the 31st of December, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj organizes a People's Plan Campaign to construct the Gram Panchayat Development Plans known as 'Sabki Yojana Sabka Vikas', across the country. This campaign is co-facilitated by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, the associated Central Ministries, State Panchayati Raj departments, facilitators, and frontline workers from 29 line ministries. Each campaign is a thorough and systematic planning effort involving Panchayats and necessary line departments. Structured Gram Sabha meetings are held during the campaign to prepare the Gram Panchayat Development Plans.

Recent Initiatives in Panchayat Governance

e-Gram Swaraj portal: With an emphasis on e-Governance operations, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has implemented e-GramSwaraj (https://egramswaraj.gov.in/), a single site for effective monitoring and assessment of Panchayati Raj projects. On National Panchayati Raj Day, April 24, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled it (National Panchayati Raj Diwas). The program enhances Panchayat reporting and tracking by offering a single interface for recording Panchayat information. Furthermore, the Ministry has implemented an Electronic Fund Management System that integrates e-Gram Swaraj with PFMS (eGSPI). Panchayats have mandated the eGSPI for the use of Central Finance Commission monies. All Ministry of Panchayati Raj schemes have been on-boarded on eGSPI as of April 5, 2021, and only online payments are authorized across all three tiers of the system.

Spatial Development Planning: Gram Manchitra,' a unified Geospatial platform introduced in 2019, aids in visualizing different developmental tasks to be undertaken across the 29 sectors and provides Panchayats with a decision support system throughout the planning process. This application is also linked to the Socio-Economic Caste Census report, Mission Antyodaya reports, and spatial and non-spatial data from other ministries and departments. Spatial planning increases service transparency and quality in rural locations. From 2021 onwards, the Gram Panchayats' planning approach will be evidence-based, using spatial planning.

Online Audit of Panchayat Accounts: On April 15, 2020, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj introduced the "Audit-Online" application as a major institutional change. Audit-Online not only allows for online auditing of accounts but also includes tools for keeping audit records. This application aims to simplify the process of conducting audit inquiries, drafting local audit reports, drafting audit paras, and so on. Initially, this application was used to conduct an online audit of Panchayat finances for the 14th Finance Commission for the fiscal year 2019-20. From 2021-to 22, all Gram Panchayat audits will be completed online. These actions, together with the Social Audit, will help to enhance the Panchayats' financial management system. There are three parts: (a) Targeting SDGs at the village level; (b) Mapping SDGs to Functional Domains and (c) strengthening partnerships to achieve SDGs.

Citizen Charters for Panchayats: From 1st July to 15th August 2021, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj began a nationwide campaign called 'Meri Panchayat, Mera Adhikaar- Jan Sevaayein Hamaare Dwaar,' and Gram Panchayats across the country created and published Panchayat Citizen Charters. The primary goal of the Panchayat Citizen's Charter is to empower individuals concerning public services and to enhance service quality per citizen expectations. The development of a Charter lends professionalism to Panchayat operations and aids in reaching out to all segments of society without prejudice. NIRDPR was instrumental in developing a model Citizen Charter for Panchayats and assisting PRls in drafting the charters.

Celebration of Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav (lndia@75) by Panchayats: The Government of India is planning a series of activities to mark the 75th anniversary of India's independence. Panchayats throughout India are commemorating the "Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav" (lndia@75) as Jan-Utsav in the spirit of Jan-Bhagidari via outreach programs such as Jan-Samvaad and Jan-Jagran. To that end, the Union Government has designated 225 Panchayati Raj Institutes across the country as Beacon Panchayats based on their achievements in a variety of disciplines. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj asked that all Beacon Gram Panchayats establish a library to instill the habit of reading among rural youths/children. The Mahotsav gave a chance to demonstrate best practices/success stories of Beacon Panchayats and how they might be replicated in other regions of the country.

Issues and Challenges the Panchayats are Facing in India: Some of the major problems and challenges are given below:

Lack of Awareness: The lack of awareness in the execution of Panchayati Raj is caused by bureaucratic delays, political intervention, economic causes, and societal influences, which render Panchayati Raj ineffective. The Sarpanch and Panch of the village do not adequately raise public awareness.

Lack of Transparency: The Panchayati raj system is dysfunctional due to a lack of transparency in work and operation. This is a challenge to the government as a lack of openness is a source of corruption in the state's administrative structure.

Less Literacy Rate: The illiteracy rate among men and women in the country is very high. The condition of women is worse. This creates a problem in the better implementation of Panchayati Raj in the country.

Political Interference in Fund Allocation & Policy Formation to Panchayats: Political interference is prevalent at all levels of the Panchayati Raj administrative structure. It causes a lot of imbalance, inconsistency, work delays, and ineffective policy creation. Political pressure is used to provide funds to panchayats, and this pressure also affects policy creation; as a result, they are unable to develop better policies.

Inadequate Finance Allocation: The lack of enough funding for panchayat development is a major issue for Panchayati Raj. The panchayat is frequently underfunded, which contributes to negligence, corruption, and delays in job progress.

Corruption at all levels of Administration: Corruption is a major challenge and concern in India. It can be found in all administrative systems and also impacts the Panchayati Raj system. It has an impact on the growth of the Panchayati raj system. The administration should have started a campaign to minimize corruption.

Future Prospects for Panchayati Raj Institutions in India

Despite well-thought-out measures, the operation of Panchayati Raj institutions is fraught with difficulties. To make decentralized local self-government more relevant, states must be encouraged to devolve functions, funding, and functionaries to strengthen the Panchayati Raj systems. Institutional frameworks, such as District Planning Committees established to facilitate decentralized planning, must be made operational. In most states, people's engagement in Gram Sabha is quite low.

The strengthening of Gram Sabha and Standing Committees would promote more public engagement in Panchayat decision-making. To minimize duplication of activities in villages, the parallel organizations or units formed by the Central and State Governments for implementing specific programs on education, health, and so on must function under PRIs and convergence must be achieved. Gram Panchayats' Source

Revenue (OSR) ensures the long-term viability of public services. There is a need for a shift in mindset, as well as some persuading and awareness-raising about the need of increasing OSR among Panchayats.

No other entity can replace Panchayats in providing fundamental services in rural areas. Panchayats are preparing to tackle calamities and pandemics by enlisting public participation. Despite several hurdles, Panchayats, as the Third Government, is seeking to preserve the spirit of democratic decentralization alive.

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