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"Panchayati Raj Issues and Challenges"

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Abstract

Panchayati Raj is crucial for participatory governance in rural India. This study analyzes issues stemming from the 73rd Amendment, which created a three-tiered system of Gram Panchayats. Challenges to grassroots governance include lack of financial autonomy, limited administrative capacity, low citizen participation, neglect of gender and social inclusion, and weak accountability and transparency. Local governance faces hurdles in service delivery and planning across health, education, and livelihoods. The study suggests reforms to improve financing, capacity building, participatory planning, and digital governance. Panchayati Raj institutions play a key role in fiscal development and empowering the rural poor. Despite existing provisions, democratic participation and service delivery remain inadequate. Policy alternatives emphasize financing models, capacity-building programs, and data-driven governance. Women's and marginalized communities' participation is vital for self-governance, along with effective deliberative spaces and training for elected representatives. (Venu Menon, 2007)

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, participatory governance, rural India.

1. Introduction

Panchayati Raj is a system of rural self-government in India, derived from 'Panch' (five) and 'Ayat' (to manage). It consists of five elected representatives, including the Sarpanch, empowered by the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution. Starting in Andhra Pradesh, the Village Panchayat has existed for 60 years. Discussions on democracy and representative government were led by reformers like Gandhi and Ambedkar. With over 80 percent of India's population living in rural areas, the

establishment of Panchayati Raj in 1959 became crucial for an agricultural economy. It is regarded as a foundational aspect of democracy and a large-scale direct democracy experiment. Panchayati Raj aims to enable the rural poor to develop local solutions, encouraging participation in rural development and improving living standards. (Venu Menon, 2007)(Borah, 2012)

2. Historical and Legal Framework of Panchayati Raj

The origin of local self-governance in India dates back to the Rig-Veda (3500 BC). Post-independence, the government aimed to implement socio-economic changes and poverty alleviation through a community development programme in 1952 focused on local leadership. This was followed by a three-tier panchayat raj system in 1959, reinforced by amendments in 1960 (Amendments 73 and 74). Article 40 of the Indian Constitution mandates panchayat raj establishment, and the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, provides constitutional validation. Articles 243 to 243 ZE in Part IX address panchayat raj institutions. The Eleventh Schedule lists 29 subjects for these institutions. Established by state legislatures, panchayat raj comprises the gram panchayat, panchayat samiti, and zilla panchayat. Article 243H allows state legislatures to empower panchayats to levy and collect taxes, while Article 243I mandates forming a state Finance Commission to assess panchayat finances. Article 243 ZC establishes district planning committees (DPC) with elected representatives to consolidate village and intermediate-level plans into a district draft. Panchayati raj elections were conducted in Assam following the 73rd amendment in 1992, and more responsibilities were given to panchayati raj institutions in 1994. Despite these developments, many issues remain unresolved (Borah, 2012). (Venu Menon, 2007)(Borah, 2012).

3. Functional Mandates and Administrative Architecture

The Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) have a range of functions outlined in Part IX of the Constitution, including economic development, social justice, plan implementation, and environmental preservation. Specific local development functions, such as sanitation and water supply, are referenced in the Twelfth Schedule. District panchayats manage sectors like agriculture, forestry, housing, electrification, education, and health care. Although not listed in the Twelfth Schedule, PRIs have defined roles in irrigation and public health maintenance. To support effective governance, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) proposed a Dedicated Panchayat Development Grant for transparent use in districts. The Eleventh Finance Commission's differentiation of grants based on PRIs' functional viability is beneficial. Fund distribution may follow a formula reflecting each sector's significance, released based on PRIs' performance. A sunset clause could promote self-reliance among PRIs, while a Municipal Interface in urban areas, where PRIs are impractical, may enhance service quality.

4. Critical Issues in Panchayati Raj

Panchayati Raj serves as a foundation for local self-governance in rural India but faces several critical challenges. These issues affect local governance more broadly, acknowledged by the central government and featured in the Union Budget. Financial autonomy is a key issue, with inadequate own-source revenue, limited alternative funding, insufficient grants, and minimal fiscal devolution leading to dependency on non-discretionary grants. The second issue pertains to capacity and training, as analysis of 339 State Rural Livelihood Missions highlights a demand for training across sectors, yet gaps in institutional learning processes persist. The third issue is local governance and citizen participation, where Panchayati Raj institutions serve as vital links between government and citizens. The lack of effective forums hinders planning and grievance redressal. Finally, gender equity, social inclusion, and accessibility are critical for participatory democracy. Though women's representation has increased, barriers still limit their agency in Gram Sabha meetings, and mechanisms for access by marginalized groups remain essential. (Venu Menon, 2007)

4.1. Financial Autonomy and Resource Mobilization

Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) and their dependence on grants from inter-governmental transfers persist as critical issues nationwide. The constitutional directives of panchayati raj (PR) within the Indian polity obligate the State to devolve the necessary financial power for fulfilling the functions specified in the Eleventh and Twelfth Schedules (Bandyopadhyay, 2014). Yet, directly mobilizing own-source revenues for augmenting funds remains a substantial challenge in rural local governance. Moreover, the financial viability of PRIs and their functioning at the grassroots level are seriously impeded by inadequate fiscal devolution from State Governments. Consequently, PRIs continue to remain highly reliant on the transfer of grants from state governments rather than raising their own revenues through own-source taxes and levies.

4.2. Capacity, Training, and Administrative Competence

Registering the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution in 1992 and enacting corresponding Panchayati Raj acts were key milestones in Local Self-Governance. These empowered Panchayati Raj institutions to operate as grassroots governance mechanisms through legislative actions. Their functions expanded via subsequent amendments covering various sectors such as agriculture, irrigation, education, health care, and rural development, leading to a notable enhancement in delivery mechanisms. However, empowerment slowed over time, leaving many institutions dormant. Post-independence, the State Government identified this as a significant challenge, with efforts focused on institutional functions as recommended by the Karpur Committee and a high-powered committee led by Puneet Bahl. (Ndletyana et al., 2008)

4.3. Local Governance and Citizen Participation

Citizen participation in local governance, particularly through forums like Gram Sabhas, is crucial but remains low, even in Kerala, despite initiatives promoting Participatory Planning. Studies highlight the marginalization of specific groups, like women and Scheduled Castes, in these processes. Participatory forums often serve as grievance redressal rather than proactive planning spaces. While Panchayati Raj elections are essential for promoting participation, the quality of local democracy has not markedly improved. Privileged groups continue to dominate the agenda, leaving marginalized voices unheard. The concept of constituency panchayats is underutilized, leading to elections viewed as lacking proper constituencies. Even where Participatory Planning exists, it has often been partial and has regressed to traditional methods over time. (Jafar, 2014)(Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010)

4.4. Gender, Social Inclusion, and Accessibility

Three tiers of Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) have been established in rural areas under the 73rd amendment of the Constitution, with state acts enforcing a minimum of 50% reservation of seats for women. This aims to ensure women's representation in rural development. However, social barriers impede women's active participation. Limited financial resources and decision-making power restrict PRIs' effectiveness. Women's involvement in governance can transform politics by integrating their perspectives. Local governance must address women's specific needs in education and labor division. Equal political status for women promotes gender equality as a goal, challenges the male-dominated view of politics, and fosters greater inclusivity. This transformation is crucial for rural areas to participate effectively in democracy and mitigate associated challenges. (P A & T Neena, 2017)

4.5. Accountability, Transparency, and Anti-Corruption Measures

Principle 7 of the Panchayati Raj System emphasizes that "The working of the Panchayati Raj System should culminate into a higher degree of accountability, transparency and non-corruption," which is vital for building public trust and effective governance in India. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj introduced the "Panchayati Raj Dashboard" in August 2021 to promote public accountability and social audits. Ensuring accountability in public finance is essential for successfully executing rural development programs and combating corruption. The government has implemented measures like Annual Audits, Performance Audits, and Social Audits to improve scheme implementation. However, there are shortcomings at the Gram Panchayat Level, necessitating reforms. The Ministry has allocated funds for Grievance Redressal Mechanism to enhance digital infrastructure in Gram Panchayat. (.M. Adagbabiri, 2015)(Kagaba, 2018)

4.6. Inter-Governmental Coordination and Coordination with District Administrations

Panchayati Raj, India's three-tier rural governance structure, has advanced significantly since its 1959 establishment, especially after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (CAA) Act, reinforcing democratic decentralization. The Indian government has enacted the Panchayati Raj (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 (PESA) to implement this system effectively in Scheduled Areas, focusing on the needs of tribal communities. This system is crucial for rural development, and various issues it faces have significant implications for governance in these areas. The Planning Commission of India identified eight key issues affecting Panchayati Raj's functionality, essential for the effective operation of local self-governments. Attention to these issues is critical now. Most guidelines for sectoral schemes, programs, and projects (SPP) originate from the Union Government and often become diluted when transferred for implementation by different tiers of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) at the State level. Tasks determined at the State level might lead to misalignment, where a higher tier is expected to fulfill responsibilities meant for a lower tier before fully completing its own. This necessitates inter-tier alignment in planning and coordination in SPP implementation. Achieving consensus on SPP selection for Sarpanch, Gram Panchayat, Block Samiti, and Zilla Parishad, shared vision for prioritization, agreement on allocation, and periodic reviews of SPP delivery quality is essential. (Steytler & Jordan, 2005)

4.7. Information, Communication, and Technology Integration

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is crucial for empowering Panchayati Raj institutions through government initiatives for e-Governance and online service accessibility. However, many citizens are unaware of these efforts. ICT can create informed citizens and support the watchdog roles of citizen groups. Direct contact between planners and the poor aligns programs with grassroots needs. Effective ICT strategies demand hardware, connectivity, and policy guidelines. Projects offering information and knowledge improve economic decisions, yet high costs for basic IT devices and local-language software hinder rural connectivity goals. ICT tools can boost social networks, empowerment, job creation, and micro-enterprises. Building information-rich societies is essential for poverty alleviation and sustainable development. The Rajasthan government's Digital Panchayat initiative includes a digital workstation for document signing and local dialect data translation. Odisha's NREGS Mobile App enables payment tracking and grievance reporting. Although these steps enhance information flow to panchayats and skill development for representatives, surveys show low availability and usage of mobile applications for monitoring services. (Paul Okinyi & Nyanchama Nyabuto, 2015)(W. N. C. K. Palagolla & P. R. Wickramarachchi, 2019)

4.8. Service Delivery, Planning, and Implementation Gaps

Panchayati Raj operates through three tiers: Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Zilla Parishad at the district level, each with powers defined by the Constitution's Eleventh Schedule, covering subjects like water, health, and education. However, PRIs encounter significant gaps in service delivery. Key responsibilities like elementary education and public health predominantly fall to the State Government and Zilla Parishad. PRIs have minimal roles in sanitation and public distribution systems, with Gram Panchayats having limited involvement in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. This reveals a systemic gap in service planning and delivery where PRIs play a minor role. While Gram Panchayats focus on sanitation and waste management, the disparity between the importance of these services and available resources grows. PRIs are heavily reliant on State planning for schemes, resulting in over 80% of initiatives being 'top-down,' with less than 20% being 'bottom-up.' Furthermore, 34 State-sponsored schemes operate simultaneously across various departments with minimal oversight from the Panchayati Raj Department. (Prasad Mohapatra, 2015)

5. Sectoral Challenges within Panchayati Raj

A sector-specific investigation reveals that issues in panchayati raj financing, training, participation, gender inclusion, administrative competence, transparency, accountability, and digital integration can be separated from governance issues in health, education, and livelihoods. State committees in panchayati raj, other than those focused on health, education, and livelihood, exhibit capacity weaknesses. The highest governance-related capacity demands are in health and education, necessitating state governments to bolster support functions for panchayati raj agencies in these sectors. Health care delivery faces constraints like poor care quality, service delays, understaffing, and infrastructure issues. In education, challenges include poor primary education quality, lack of secondary schools, inadequate monitoring, high dropout rates, and ineffective management of the midday meal programme. To enhance livelihoods, establishing a multi-stakeholder institutional framework is essential for implementing the National Rural Livelihoods Mission. The revised District Sector Investment Programme should embrace joint planning and potential consolidation in service delivery with NGOs and the private sector.

6. Reforms, Innovations, and Policy Alternatives

Rural development is tied to local communities, necessitating public participation and leadership support. Women's roles are pivotal, particularly as heads of Gram or Selected-level societies. To enhance women's empowerment and foster participatory development, India initiated the 'Panchayati Raj System' in 1959, marking a significant decentralization in rural governance. This three-tier system, established by the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act of 1992, includes village assemblies and committees that empower citizens to engage in their local governance. Currently,

1,386,000 elected representatives drive grassroots governance through the Panchayati Raj Institute (PRI), emphasizing power decentralization, participatory development, and women's empowerment as key goals for advancing rural India. (Venu Menon, 2007)

6.1. Financing Models and Resource Allocation

The recent emphasis on the third tier of local governance has led to the development of Panchayati Raj (or Gram Swaraj) as a democratic institution in rural India, stemming from the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution. This system holds significant potential for grassroots democratic arrangements, fostering self-governance and empowerment. However, numerous studies reveal serious shortcomings and challenges within the Panchayati Raj framework. Effective implementation will only occur if contemporary issues impacting local self-governance are identified and addressed. Originating in 1959, Panchayati Raj aimed to enhance participatory democracy in villages. The 73rd Amendment, enacted on April 24, 1993, sought to democratize local governance, establish a grassroots governance tier, and empower communities to address their own needs through development initiatives. Despite two decades of empowering these institutions, the essence of Panchayati Raj has not fully permeated rural areas, as higher-tier interests continue to dominate. Thus, a systematic approach is crucial to identify key issues related to Panchayati Raj and provide policy recommendations to advance its establishment. (Bandyopadhyay, 2014)

6.2. Capacity Building and Institutional Strengthening

Capacity-building programs for elected representatives tend to be general and unstructured. A proposed initiative consists of short modules covering specific themes (e.g., training on public accounting, preparation of project proposals, etc.) supplemented with a mentorship program involving exposure visits to neighbouring panchayati raj institutions, participatory planning in panchayat wards, peer group discussions, and the development of training plans for other elected representatives. Evaluation would involve a participatory exercise undertaken approximately one year later to assess improvements in participant performance and related outcomes (P Wani et al., 2012).

6.3. Participatory Planning and Local Accountability Mechanisms

Participatory planning is critical in empowering citizens and enhancing accountability, especially for panchayati raj institutions responsible for sustainable development across rural areas in India. The Madhya Pradesh gram sabha framework provides an enabling structure for participatory planning, yet only 29 per cent of gram sabhas in the state engage in regular planning. Even when these meetings occur, compliance with prescribed processes is inconsistent (Mahor & Gopal Singh, 2012). Citizen scorecards addressing the poor provision of basic amenities can serve as a supplementary mechanism to promote accountability under existing frameworks (Jafar, 2014). Both

participatory planning and scorecards can strengthen the panchayati raj system, which is vital for good governance. Greater citizen participation bolsters public service delivery and facilitates needs assessment, thereby contributing to improved development trajectories.

6.4. Digital Governance and Data-Driven Decision Making

Local body elections in India remained postponed after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can enhance stakeholder participation in the Panchayati Raj system, improving transparency and accountability between the government and citizens. Digital governance simplifies manual methods, allowing effective monitoring of panchayat functions and streamlining application tracking. Installing basic computer systems in panchayati raj institutions has accelerated decision-making by providing access to crucial records and file details, democratizing information ownership. Replacing mismanaged paper systems with automated functions enables tracking of projects at a macro level, leading to timely information for better planning. This approach nurtures district-level data banks and state-wide planning. Enhanced computerized financial information has improved budget generation, fund allocation, and social cost-benefit analyses, leading to better financial decisions. Connectivity in hospitals allows for demographic reports that support accurate health planning at state and national levels. (K Thottunkel & Varghese Kuppathanath, 2015)

7. Implementation Challenges and Change Management

Change is vital in modern governance, driven by technology, globalization, policy reforms, and economic growth. Governments are overhauling processes to remain effective and proactive. Change management, a shift from traditional methods, is essential for implementing these modifications, as resistance can arise from various sources. Successfully managing this resistance is crucial for change. Transforming service delivery is complex, as evidenced by the introduction of Panchayati Raj Restructuring, which differs greatly from past governance. A robust change management strategy is necessary to facilitate progress in the new governance model, addressing the intricacies of reforms and diverse stakeholder perspectives on outcomes and methods. (Nograšek, 2011)

8. Evaluation Metrics, Monitoring, and Impact Assessment

The monitoring and evaluation process determines the effectiveness of actions and their cost-benefit balance to improve future interventions. This cyclic assessment occurs at varying intervals throughout the tool's lifespan. Panchayati Raj (PR) institutions do not specifically measure evaluations but focus on monitoring and collecting related data. Funding flows from the center and state are regularly monitored at panchayat levels, with allocations and fund receipts displayed transparently. In Odisha, a directive has been issued to list ongoing works. PR tool reviews occur

every five years, with information on evaluation largely absent. Data related to High-Value Night (HVN) is collected and available, while reporting up to 2007 shows substantial data flow at Mandi and National Food Security (NFS) levels. Though some States and Nations are assessing PR tool implementation qualitatively, no specific Physical Framework Indicators (PFI) or Impact-Indicators exist for comprehensive studies. A tool under the National Food Security Programme has been scaled, with Impact Assessments conducted. (Thomas Mwakyusa, 2018)(Prasad Tripathy et al., 2015)

9. Conclusion

The Panchayati Raj system is crucial for rural governance but faces numerous challenges that hinder its effectiveness. Key issues include limited financial autonomy, administrative weaknesses, insufficient citizen engagement, gender imbalances, lack of transparency, and coordination problems with district administrations. These challenges lead to poor outcomes in health, education, and livelihoods. Although the system operates under the Constitution of India, its implementation relies heavily on state-level frameworks. Structural reforms, including revising the 73rd Amendment and state-specific legislation, are necessary. Suggested reforms encompass sustainable financing models, capacity-building initiatives, participatory planning with citizen scorecards, and enhanced digital governance through standards and analytics. Implementation of these reforms may encounter resistance and management difficulties. Research on this topic is scarce, and establishing evaluation metrics is particularly challenging. Indicators may focus on financing, capacity, citizen involvement, and service delivery, utilizing sources like budget documents and household surveys. Monitoring efforts can range from annual to one-time assessments depending on the reform. Given the varied responsibilities across the reform agenda, attributing broader outcomes to specific reforms is complex. Strengthening the Panchayati Raj is vital for rural development, impacting governmental initiatives, economic growth, and sustainable development goals. (Venu Menon, 2007)

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