

AN OVERVIEW OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Panchayati Raj is a governance structure found across South Asia, especially in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. It represents a type of local self-administration. Panchayati Raj was implemented in India to bring democracy to rural areas. The Panchayati Raj system is an established idea and is viewed as one of the most effective forms of governance in rural India. The Panchayati Raj system, although its powers and existence come from the Constitution of India, encounters numerous challenges in its daily operations for various reasons, which is why this third tier of government has been unable to fulfill its intended purpose in India. It indicates that the system has been facing challenges. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 granted Constitutional status and an institutional framework to panchayats, aimed at enhancing grassroots democracy via elected self-governing local bodies in rural regions. This document explores the historical context and framework of Panchayati Raj in India, along with the issues that current Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) encounter in operating effectively. The study also notes women's engagement in PRIs and new efforts in panchayat administration.

Keywords: Constitution, Democracy, India, Panchayati Raj, Self-governance, Women.

INTRODUCTION

It is now broadly recognized that local self-governing institutions are crucial for national development and meaningful public involvement. They are a crucial and necessary component of the democratic process. 'Grassroots of Democracy', founded on minor government units, allows individuals to experience a sense of accountability and instill democratic principles. It also offers a distinct opportunity to engage in public matters, such as developmental initiatives. In every political system, be it traditional or modern, democratic or totalitarian, large or small, participation plays a vital role.

Panchayati Raj Institutions and local self-governance grassroots units are viewed as instruments for socio-economic change in rural India. It is recognized as an institutional manifestation of democratic decentralization in India. Local authorities can better address community needs and utilize resources more effectively by being nearer to the citizens. The Panchayati Raj system of democratic decentralization is viewed as a means to promote democracy and facilitate socioeconomic change.

Mahatma Gandhi promoted the idea that India should inhabit her rural areas. Indian independence should originate from the grassroots, establishing each village as a republic or panchayat with complete authority. He noted that twenty individuals gathered at the center could not achieve genuine democracy. Inhabitants of each village must labor from the ground up. These aspirations resulted in the incorporation of Article 40 into the Directive Principles of State Policy within the Indian Constitution. Around five decades post-independence, in 1993, the Indian Government made a groundbreaking move by incorporating Panchayati Raj Institutions into the Constitution.

Between 1957 and 1986, numerous committees such as Balwantrai Mehta (1957), K. Santhanam (1964), Ashok Mehta (1978), G.V.K. Rao (1985), and L.M. Singhvi (1986) presented various suggestions to the center. The resultant idea was presented as a bill (64th Constitutional Amendment Bill) in the Lok Sabha in 1989. Although this bill was not passed, the concept was incorporated into the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992, resulting in a transformation in local politics in the nation. It was celebrated as a significant advancement in empowering the populace, not only to guarantee their more active involvement in the electoral process locally but also to give them a larger role in decision-making and developmental activities regarding issues that directly affect them.

The Panchayati Raj system is a three-level framework of local governance in rural areas established at the Village, Block, and District tiers to execute the democratic decentralization initiative. At the community level, the organization is referred to as Gram Panchayat. In certain States/UTs, the block-level institution is commonly referred to as Panchayat Samiti. It is referred to by various names, including Taluk Development Board in Karnataka, Panchayat Union in Tamil Nadu, Kshetra Samiti in Uttar Pradesh, Janapad Panchayat in Madhya Pradesh, and Commune Panchayat in Pondicherry. The district-level institution is generally called Zila Parishad, except in Assam, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. In Assam, this national organization is referred to as Mohkuma Parishad, while in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, it is named District Development Council. These institutions are present at different levels in all States and Union Territories except for Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Lakshadweep, where the Panchayati Raj system has not been established yet. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee recommended a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj comprising Village Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zila Parishad. There is a lack of consistency in levels across all states. Nonetheless, the organization and roles have evolved over the years.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The following are some objectives of the study

1. To investigate the historical context of PRIs in India.
2. To emphasize the issues and difficulties encountered by PRIs in the present scenario.
3. To explore the involvement of women in PRIs across India.
4. To discover current efforts in Panchayat Governance

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The techniques employed for this study are analytical. It relies on secondary data. Secondary data is gathered from various sources like books, journal articles, newspapers, and Panchayati Raj websites

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA

The term 'Panchayat' derives from the phrase 'Pancha panchavanusthitah'; which signifies the presence of Gram Sanghas, or Rural Communities. The Panchayati Raj is a system that originates from the early days of Indian civilization. It has been present since ancient times and has wielded significant power over the civil and legal matters of rural communities during that entire period. Various ancient writings, including the Rigveda, the Manu Samhita, the Dharmashastras, the Upanishads, the Jatakas, and more, extensively reference the panchayat system of administration utilized in local governance.

The earliest mention of panchayat is located in the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata. This reference comes from the term Pancha, signifying an establishment of the five (Pancha panchavanusthitah). Both Pancha and panchavanusthitah are meaningfully related to the panchayat. Another reference detailing these village councils is the Arthashastra, authored by Kautilya around 400 B.C. The Arthashastra offers an in-depth account of the village governance system that existed during its historical period. At that time, the Adhyaksha, referred to as the headman, was responsible for supervising and managing every facet of village administration.

The Panchayati Raj system consists of three levels with elected representatives at the Village, Taluk, and District tiers. This guarantees increased involvement of individuals and a more efficient execution of rural development initiatives. There will be a Gram Panchayat for a village or a collection of villages, a taluk level, and a Zilla Panchayat at the district level.

PROGRESS OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA

The Panchayati system in India is not exclusively a post-independence occurrence. For centuries, the gram panchayat has been the primary political institution in rural India. In ancient India, panchayats were typically elected assemblies possessing executive and judicial authority. Colonial domination, particularly by the Mughals and British, along with both natural and imposed socioeconomic shifts, weakened the significance of the village panchayats. During the pre-independence period, the panchayats served as tools for upper caste control over the remainder of the village, thereby deepening divisions rooted in socioeconomic status or caste hierarchy.

The development of the Panchayati Raj System reached its peak post-independence with the creation of the Constitution. According to Article 40 of the Constitution of India, "The state will take measures to establish village panchayats and provide them with the necessary powers and authority to operate as units of self-government."

The Government of India appointed various committees to examine the execution of self-governance in rural areas and suggest measures to attain this objective. The committees that have been appointed are: Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, Ashok Mehta Committee, G. V. K. Rao Committee, L. M. Singhvi Committee.

ORGANIZATION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

Following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, each state now has a three-tier Panchayati Raj system at the Village, Block, and District levels.

Gram Panchayat (GP)

Across the nation, the Village Panchayat serves as the fundamental unit within the Panchayati Raj framework. Since ancient times, Gram Panchayats have existed in the country, and nearly all states acknowledge their significance. Panchayats, being closer to the community, are believed to facilitate greater direct involvement of the people in executing development programs. Every seat in a GP is occupied by individuals selected through direct elections from the local constituencies within the Panchayat region. Seats are allocated for scheduled castes and tribes along with women. The dimensions of the Gram Panchayat vary typically from one state to another. In states such as West Bengal, Kerala, etc., a Gram Panchayat typically comprised around 20000 individuals, whereas in several other states, it averaged about 3000.

Panchayat Samiti (PS)

The Panchayat Samiti is the subsequent significant entity within the Panchayati Raj framework. In nearly every state, Samitis play a significant role. The constituents in the region directly choose their representatives in a Samiti. The state might offer representation for the chairperson of the Village Panchayat, MPs, MLAs, and MLCs. Consequently, the organization of Panchayat Samitis differs from one state to another. Nonetheless, seats are allocated for scheduled castes, tribes, and women.

Zilla Parishad (ZP)

The Zilla Parishad has been created as the third level at the district tier in every state. The organizational structure of Zilla Parishad resembles that of Panchayat Samiti. Voters choose their delegates directly from their respective constituencies. These seats are allocated for scheduled castes, tribes, and females. The State Legislature can establish by law the representation of the Chairpersons of the Panchayat Samitis, MLAs, MLCs, and MPs.

Gram Sabha

A significant aspect of the panchayat structure at the village level is the Gram Sabha. It is the paramount village assembly and the only one of PRIs, possessing legal recognition under the law. It includes all adult individuals listed as voters in the electoral roll of a village that falls within the jurisdiction of the Gram Panchayat. In this context, every voter of the Gram Panchayat constitutes the Gram Sabha. According to the Constitution, a panchayat can consist of only three tiers. The Gram Sabha does not represent a tier of the Panchayati Raj system. It lacks any official authority and operates as a recommending entity, so to speak.

Gram Sabhas typically gather 2 to 4 times annually; nevertheless, they can convene when necessary. In certain states, the timings of these gatherings are modified (Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, etc.), whereas in other states, the Gram Panchayat determines the dates. The subjects to be addressed at the assembly can be extensive but must encompass significant motivation. Annual Action Plan and Budget, Annual Accounts and Annual Report of the GP, selection of beneficiaries for different social welfare schemes (such as Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, various Pension Schemes), validated proof of planning Annual Plans for developmental initiatives of Gram Panchayat (MGNREGA), managing Audit reports, evaluation of Gram Panchayat efficacy, and more.

SAMPLE AND PANCHAYATI RAJ ORGANIZATIONS

The 73rd Amendment, enacted in 1993, introduced constitutional provisions regarding the creation, authority, and duties of the panchayat.

According to Article 243B of the Constitution, in each state, panchayats will be established at the village, block, and district levels through the regulations outlined in Part IX.

Article 243C grants states the authority to establish laws regarding the composition of panchayats, in accordance with the stipulations of Part IX of the Constitution.

Article 243D allocates both seats and leadership roles for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Women.

Article 243E mandates a standard duration of five years for the panchayat, with a maximum interval of six months between the end of the term and the scheduling of elections for the subsequent panchayat term.

Article 243F grants the state government the authority to enact laws that establish criteria for disqualifying candidates from panchayat elections.

Article 243G outlines the duties and authority of the panchayat.

Article 243H addresses the financial resources of the panchayat and their authority to levy taxes. In this instance as well, the State Legislature can legally permit and outline the processes for the panchayat to impose, gather, and allocate those taxes, duties, tolls, and fees. The state legislature can designate to a panchayat various taxes, duties, tolls, and fees imposed and gathered by the state government for those purposes.

Article 243I mandates that a State Finance Commission be formed every five years to assess the financial status of the panchayat and provide recommendations to the Governor.

Article 243J permits the State to enact laws regarding the upkeep of accounts by the panchayat and their examination.

Article 243K assigns the responsibility for creating electoral rolls and organizing elections to the State Election Commission.

Article 243L, which addresses the establishment of the State Finance Commissions, has phrasing akin to Article 275 concerning the Constitution of the Finance Commission, particularly regarding recommendations to the President and the allocation of the net tax proceeds between the Union and the states, along with other pertinent issues.

Article 243N establishes a one-year timeframe for maintaining any law concerning panchayats that was in effect just prior to the enactment of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1992 (73rd CAA), which does not pertain to the stipulations of Part IX.

Article 243ZD establishes committees for District Planning at the district level, tasked with integrating the plans developed by the panchayat and municipalities within the district and formulating a draft development plan for the entire district. This committee is structured to ensure representation for both panchayat members and municipal representatives in the district.

THE 73RD AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION ACT

In September 1991, the Congress government, led by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, introduced a new bill concerning the Panchayati Raj. It became recognized as the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 and took effect on April 24, 1993. By this action, the Panchayati Raj system became a fair section of the Constitution, compelling the government to implement the system.

The 73rd Amendment Act ensures greater empowerment of marginalized groups, improved functioning of panchayats, and further demoralization in the country. The 73rd Amendment outlines comparable regulations concerning urban regions. These Amendment Acts established a structure and directives for all states to develop their policies regarding the devolution of panchayat and urban bodies.

PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA

An extensive investigation was conducted among PRI members to determine if they have faced any issues from various groups regarding the operation of Panchayat activities and its meetings. In conversations with participants, I identified several issues and difficulties that are elaborated on below:

Insufficient Computer Skills and Infrastructure: In certain cases, inadequate proficiency in using computers results in rapidly declining levels of effective performance. The e-panchayat project has been initiated by the government in approximately 360 gram panchayats. The e-

governance initiative aims to deliver citizen-focused services online, keep a record of resources belonging to the gram panchayats, and facilitate transparent access to gram panchayat data and services.

Inadequate Collaboration among Various Administrative Entities: There is insufficient collaboration and coordination between the public and the authorities. Moreover, Gram Pradhan faces challenges due to ineffective coordination between various administrative agencies. The inability of officials to perform their responsibilities effectively and efficiently has caused setbacks in developmental initiatives and a lack of fund utilization. Additionally, the Panchayati Raj institutions encounter numerous administrative challenges such as the politicization of local governance, lack of cooperation and distinction between elected representatives and bureaucratic personnel, insufficient opportunities, promotions, and incentives for those participating in the administration, among others.

Male Dominance: A common explanation for women's lack of participation is that they are oppressed by male authority. It should be acknowledged that men neither obstruct women's involvement in politics nor do they support or promote their engagement in political activities. Seventy-five percent of men do not support women in pursuing employment opportunities. Their stated reason is that the current unemployment among men is primarily due to women potentially overshadowing men in politics, similar to what has happened in some job areas.

Critics of Women's Reservation:

- Women are targeted by anti-social elements when they leave their homes or venture outside their village for work, meetings, and other activities.
- They state that whenever women occupy elected positions, it is the male officials who 'determine' what actions should or should not be taken. They dominated the whole scenario, and female elected officials turned into powerless victims of bureaucracy.
- These adversaries argue that even if many women are elected, the balance of power will remain unchanged.

Thus, it suggests that all the women are aware of the existing political parties in society, although some recognize them by name while others identify them by symbols. It is evident that women are no longer restricted to domestic tasks, but they are progressively gaining empowerment. Previously, they were only knowledgeable about weaving, cooking, brewing liquors, etc., but the enactment of the Panchayati Raj Act made them conscious of the entire process of social change. They are actively participating in the Panchayats to enhance their unity, ensure their rights, and promote rapid development.

Insufficient Awareness: The insufficient awareness in executing Panchayati Raj results from bureaucratic hold-ups, political meddling, economic conditions, and societal pressures, rendering Panchayati Raj ineffective. The village Sarpanch and Panch do not effectively promote public awareness.

High Illiteracy Rate: The rate of illiteracy for both men and women in the nation remains significantly elevated. The status of women is more dire. This leads to challenges in improving the implementation of Panchayati Raj in the nation.

Political Interference in Fund Distribution & Policy Development for Panchayats: Political meddling is widespread throughout every level of the Panchayati Raj administrative system. It leads to significant instability, irregularities, project holdups, and inefficient policy

development. Political influence is utilized to allocate funds to panchayats, and this influence also impacts policy formulation; consequently, they struggle to create improved policies.

Insufficient Financial Distribution: The shortage of adequate financial resources for panchayat development poses a significant challenge to Panchayati Raj. The panchayat often lacks sufficient funding, leading to negligence, corruption, and delays in project advancement.

Corruption exists at every level of Administration: It poses a significant challenge and worry in India. It exists in every administrative framework and impacts the Panchayati Raj system. It influences the development of the Panchayati Raj system. The government should have initiated a campaign to reduce corruption.

CONCLUSION

The Panchayati Raj institutions represent a significant achievement in the evolution of local administrative bodies. Panchayati Raj Institution is a familiar concept in political systems; it has been present at all stages where the culture of governance has evolved. Panchayats have made a crucial contribution to the advancement of rural regions in India. The Panchayati Raj system encounters various challenges as stated previously. Nonetheless, the moment has arrived to implement concrete measures for achieving genuinely representative governance. These challenges can be addressed, but it requires people's willingness to embrace these changes. The conventional mindset that remains dominant must be gradually eliminated to enable individuals to grasp the true meaning of this system.

It was determined that the Panchayati Raj system, established by the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1992, has an extensive historical background. India boasts the most extensive democratic process globally. The Panchayati Raj system is a significant method and an effective instrument of Indian democracy. In 2019, India has 664,369 villages. Consequently, delivering efficient services for infrastructure advancement at the village level is the primary goal of the Government of India. In the era of globalization, competition has risen among countries across economic, social, political, technological, and other areas. Today, the idea of development poses a challenge to the Indian democratic system. The essential function of the Panchayat Raj Institution in establishing a prosperous Indian democracy, along with being the local government, serves as the foundation of Indian democracy.

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