

Panchayati Raj Institutions in India: An Overview

Moumita Saha Roy

Former Student, Department of Political Science, University of North Bengal, Raja Rammohunpur, Siliguri, Darjeeling, PIN – 734013, West Bengal, India.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20241252>

ABSTRACT

The Panchayati Raj is a political system prevalent throughout South Asia, particularly in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. It is a form of local self-governance. To extend democracy to rural India, the system of Panchayati Raj was established in India. The Panchayati Raj system is not a new concept and hence it is considered as one of the best ways of governance in rural India. However, the system of Panchayati Raj, despite deriving their powers and existence from the Constitution of India, faces many challenges in its day-to-day functioning due to various reasons, and hence this third tier of government has not been able to serve them for which it was introduced in India. It means that the system has been experiencing difficulties. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 provided Constitutional status and institutional framework to panchayat to strengthen grassroots democracy through elected self-governing local bodies in rural areas. This paper discusses the historical background and structure of Panchayati Raj in India and the challenges that the present Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) face in their proper functioning. The paper also observes women's participation in PRIs and recent initiatives in panchayat governance.

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

INTRODUCTION

It is now widely accepted that self-governing institutions at the local level are essential for national growth and effective people's participation. They are an integral and essential part of the democratic process. 'Grassroots of Democracy', based on small units of government, enables people to feel a sense of responsibility and inculcate democratic values. It also provides a unique scope to participate in public affairs, including developmental work. Participation is a component of every political system, whether traditional or modern, democratic or totalitarian, large or small.

Panchayati Raj Institutions and grassroots units of local self-governance have been considered as tools for socio-economic transformation in rural India. It is identified as an institutional expression of democratic decentralization in India. Local governments can be more responsive to local needs and make better use of resources by being closer to the people. The democratic decentralization system known as Panchayati Raj; is considered an instrument to ensure democracy and socio-economic transformation.

Mahatma Gandhi advocated that India live in her villages. Indian independence must start from the bottom, thus making every village a republic or panchayat, enjoying full power. He remarked that twenty men sitting at the center could not work true democracy. People of every village have to work from below. These dreams lead to the inclusion of Article 40 in the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution of India. Approx five decades after

independence, in 1993, the Government of India took a revolutionary step by making Panchayati Raj Institutions a part of the Constitution.

From 1957 to 1986, many committees including *Balwantrai Mehta* (1957), *K. Santhanam* (1964), *Ashok Mehta* (1978), *G.V.K. Rao* (1985), and *L.M. Singhvi* (1986) made several recommendations to the center. The resulting concept was introduced as a bill (64th Constitutional Amendment Bill) in the Lok Sabha in 1989. Though this bill could not be enacted, the idea was translated into the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992, which has brought about an innovation in grassroots politics in the country. It was hailed as a historic step in the empowerment of the people not only to ensure their more effective participation in the electoral process at the grassroots level but also to entrust them with a greater role in decision-making and developmental functions in matters of their immediate concern.

The Panchayati Raj system is the three-tier structure of rural local government set up at the Village, Block, and District levels for implementing the scheme of democratic decentralization. At the village level, the institution is known as Gram Panchayat. The block-level institution is generally known as Panchayat Samiti in some States/UTs. It is also known by other names such as Taluk Development Board in Karnataka; Panchayat Union in Tamil Nadu; Kshetra Samiti in Uttar Pradesh; Janapad Panchayat in Madhya Pradesh; Commune Panchayat in Pondicherry etc. The institution at the district level is commonly known as Zila Parishad except in Assam, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. In Assam, this national body is called Mohkuma Parishad whereas in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, it is known as District Development Council. These institutions exist at various levels in all the States/UTs except Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and, Lakshadweep, where the Panchayati Raj system is yet to be constituted. Balwantrai Mehta Committee proposed a three-tier (Village Panchayat,

Panchayat Samiti, and Zila Parishad) system of Panchayati Raj. There is no uniformity regarding levels in all states. However, the structure and functions have been changing over the years.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. The following are some objectives of the study-
2. To study the historical background of PRIs in India.
3. To highlight the problems and challenges faced by PRIs in the current situation.
4. To examine the role of women in PRIs in India.
5. To find out recent initiatives in Panchayat Governance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methods used for this research are analytical. It is based on secondary data. Secondary data are collected from different books, articles in various journals, newspapers, Panchayati Raj websites, etc.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA

The origin of the word 'Panchayat' can be traced back to the phrase '*Pancha panchavanusthitah*'; which refers to the existence of Gram Sanghas, also known as Rural Communities. The Panchayati Raj is an institution that dates back to the beginning of Indian civilization. It has existed since ancient times and has exercised effective authority over the civil and judicial affairs of rural communities throughout that period. Numerous ancient texts, such as the Rigveda, the Manu Samhita, the Dharmashastras, the Upanishads, the Jatakas, and others, make comprehensive references to the panchayat form of administration, which is used in local governance.

The oldest reference to panchayat is found in the Shanti Parva of Mahabharata. This reference is derived from the word Pancha, which refers to an institution of the five

(Pancha panchavanusthitah). Both Pancha and panchavanusthitah are semantically close to the panchayat. Another source that describes these village councils is Arthashastra, which was written by Kautilya around 400 B.C. The Arthashastra provides a detailed description of the system of village governance that prevailed in its historical period. During this time, the Adhyaksha, also known as the headman, was in charge of overseeing and controlling all aspects of village governance.

The Panchayati Raj (Rule of Village Committee) system is a three-tier system in the state with elected bodies at the Village, Taluk, and District levels. This ensures greater participation of people and more effective implementation of rural development programs. There will be a Gram Panchayat for a village or group of villages, a taluk level, and a Zilla Panchayat at the district level.

EVOLUTION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA

The Panchayati system in India is not a purely post-independence phenomenon. The dominant political institutions in rural India have been the gram panchayat for centuries. In ancient India, panchayats were generally elected councils with executive and judicial powers. Foreign rule, especially Mughal and British, and natural and forced socio-economic changes undermined the importance of the village panchayats. In the pre-independence era, however, the panchayats were instruments of upper caste dominance over the rest of the village, which furthered exacerbating divisions based on socio-economic status or the caste hierarchy.

The evolution of the Panchayati Raj System, however, found a culmination after independence after the drafting of the Constitution. As indicated in Article 40 of the Constitution of India- *“The state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable*

them to function as units of self-government”.

There were several committees appointed by the Government of India to study the implementation of self-government at the rural level and recommend steps in achieving this goal.

The committees appointed are as follows:

Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, Ashok Mehta Committee, G. V. K. Rao Committee, L. M. Singhvi Committee.

Balwant Rai Mehta Committee and Panchayati Raj

The committee was appointed in 1957 to examine and suggest better working for the Community Development Program and the National Extension Service. The committee recommended the establishment of a democratic decentralized local government, known as the Panchayati Raj.

Recommendations by the Committee:

- Three-tier Panchayati Raj system: Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zila Parishad.
- Directly elected representatives to form Gram Panchayat and indirectly elected representatives to form Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad.
- Planning and development are the basic objectives of the Panchayati Raj system.
- Panchayat Samiti should be the executive body and Zila Parishad should act as an advisory and supervisory body.
- District Collector to be made the chairperson of the Zila Parishad.
- It also requested the provision of resources to assist them in discharging their duties and responsibilities.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee further revitalized the development of panchayats in the country, with the report recommending that the Panchayati Raj institutions play a substantial role in community development programs across the country. The objective of the Panchayats thus was democratic decentralization through the effective participation of locals with the help of well-planned programs. Even the then Prime Minister of India,

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru defended the panchayat system saying, “*Authority and power must be given to the people in the villages....Let us give power to the panchayats*”.

Ashok Mehta Committee and Panchayati Raj

In 1977, the committee was appointed to suggest measures to revive and strengthen the decaying Panchayati Raj system in India.

The key recommendations are:

- The three-tier system should be replaced with a two-tier system: Mandal Panchayat (a group of villages), and Zila Parishad (district level).
- The district level is the first supervisory level after the state level.
- The Zila Parishad shall be the executive body and responsible for planning at the district level.
- The institutions (Mandal Panchayat and Zila Parishad) should have the power of compulsory taxation to mobilize their financial resources.

G. V. K. Rao Committee and Panchayati Raj

The committee was appointed in 1985 by the Planning Commission. It recognizes that development has not been seen at the grassroots level due to bureaucratization leading to the Panchayat Raj Institutions being addressed as ‘*grass without roots*’. Hence, it has made some key recommendations, which are as follows:

- Zila Parishad is the most important body in the scheme of democratic decentralization.
- Zila Parishad will be the main body for carrying out development programs at the district level.
- The district and the lower levels of the Panchayati Raj system are to be assigned specific planning, implementation, and monitoring of the rural developmental programs.
- The post of District Development Commissioner will be created. He will

serve as the chief executive officer of the Zila Parishad.

- Elections to the levels of Panchayati Raj systems should be regular.

L. M. Singhvi Committee and Panchayati Raj

The committee was appointed by the Government of India in 1986 with the main objective of recommending steps to revitalize the Panchayati Raj systems for democracy and development. The committee made the following recommendations:

- The committee recommended that the Panchayati Raj system should be constitutionally recognized. It recommended constitutional provisions to recognize free and fair elections for the Panchayati Raj systems.
- The committee recommended the reorganization of the village to make the gram panchayat more effective.
- It recommended that village panchayats should be given more funding for their activities.
- Judicial tribunals will be constituted in every state to adjudicate the election of Panchayati Raj Institutions and other phenomena relating to their functioning.

All these factors add to the argument that panchayats can be very effective in identifying and solving local problems, involving the people in the villages in developmental activities, improving the communication between different levels where politics takes place, developing leadership skills, and in short helping the basic development in the states without making too many structural changes. Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh were the first states to adopt Panchayati Raj in 1959, followed by other states later.

Though there are variations among states, there are some common features. In most of the states, for example, a three-tier structure including Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and the Zila Parishad at the district level have been institutionalized. Due to the sustained effort

of civil society organizations, intellectuals, and progressive political leaders, the Parliament passed two amendments to the Constitution- the 73rd Constitution Amendment for rural local bodies (Panchayats) and the 74th Constitution Amendment for urban local bodies (Municipalities) make them 'institutions of self-government'. Within a year, all the states passed their acts in conformity with the amended constitutional provisions.

STRUCTURE OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

After the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, we have in every state a three-tier Panchayati Raj structure at the Village, Block, and District levels.

Gram Panchayat (GP)

Throughout the country, Village Panchayat is the basic unit in the structure of Panchayati Raj. As Gram Panchayats have been in existence in the country since ancient times, almost all states have recognized their importance. It is also felt that as Panchayats are closer to the community, they will ensure more direct participation of the people in the implementation of development programs. All the seats in a GP are filled by persons chosen by direct elections from the territorial constituencies in the Panchayat area. Seats are reserved for scheduled castes and tribes as well as women. The size of the Gram Panchayat fluctuates generally from state to state. In states like West Bengal, Kerala, and so on, a Gram Panchayat averaged about 20000 persons, while in many different states, it was about 3000.

Panchayat Samiti (PS)

Panchayat Samiti is the next important body in the Panchayati Raj structure. In almost all the states, Samitis has been given an important role. The voters in the area directly elect their representatives in a Samiti. The state may provide a representation of the chairperson of the Village Panchayat, MPs, MLAs, and MLCs.

Thus, the structure of Panchayat Samitis varies from state to state. However, seats are reserved for scheduled castes, tribes, and women.

Zilla Parishad (ZP)

Zilla Parishad has been established as the third tier at the district level in all the states. The structural pattern of Zilla Parishad is similar to that of Panchayat Samiti. Voters directly elect their delegates from their constituencies. These seats are reserved for scheduled castes, tribes, and women. The State Legislature may provide by law representation of the Chairpersons of the Panchayat Samitis, MPs, MLAs, and MLCs.

Gram Sabha

An important feature of the structure of panchayat at the village level is the Gram Sabha. It is the highest village assembly and sole of PRIs, having legal status under the law. It consists of all the adult persons registered as voters in the electoral roll of a village comprised within the area of Gram Panchayat. In West Bengal, Gram Sabha is called as the Gram Sansad. Gram Sabha has an alternative importance in West Bengal. Here each voter of the Gram Panchayat forms the Gram Sabha. Under the Constitution, panchayat can have only three levels. The Gram Sabha is not a level of the Panchayati Raj structure. It does not have any official capacity and works as a suggesting body as it were.

Gram Sabhas usually meet 2 to 4 times each year; however, they may meet when important. In some states, the dates of these assemblies are changed (Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, etc.) while in other states the dates are settled by the Gram Panchayat. The topics to be discussed at the assembly can be far-reaching but should include important inspiration. Annual Action Plan and Budget, Annual Accounts and Annual Report of the GP, choice of beneficiaries for various social administration programs (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, various Pension Schemes to name a few), approved evidence

of planning of Annual Plans for development programs of Gram Panchayat (MGNREGA), dealing with Audit reports, investigation of Gram Panchayat performance, and more.

CONSTITUTION AND PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

Constitutional provisions relating to the establishment, powers, and responsibilities of the panchayat were introduced through the 73rd Amendment in 1993.

Under **Article 243B** of the Constitution, there shall be constituted in each state, panchayat at the village, block, and district levels by the provisions of Part IX.

Article 243C empowers states to make provisions through law for the composition of panchayat, subject to the provisions of Part IX of the Constitution.

Article 243D reserves both seats and leadership positions for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Women.

Article 243E provides for a normal term of five years for the panchayat and a gap of not more than six months between the expiry of the period and the conduct of the elections for the next term of the panchayat.

Article 243F empowers the state government to make laws providing criteria for the disqualification of candidates from panchayat elections.

Article 243G describes the powers and responsibilities of the panchayat.

Article 243H speaks of the funds of the panchayat and their powers to impose taxes. Here too, the State Legislature may by law, authorize and set out procedures for the panchayat to levy, collect, and appropriate such taxes, duties, tolls, and fees. The state legislature may assign to a panchayat such taxes, duties, tolls, and fees levied and collected by the state government for such purposes.

Article 243I states that every five years a State Finance Commission shall be constituted to review the financial position of the panchayat and to make recommendations to the Governor.

Article 243J the State can legislate concerning the maintenance of accounts by the panchayat and their audit.

Article 243K invests the authority to prepare electoral rolls and conduct elections in the State Election Commission.

Article 243L which speaks of the creation of the State Finance Commissions has wording similar to Article 275 related to the Constitution of the Finance Commission regarding recommendations to the President as well as the distribution of the net proceeds of taxes between the Union and the states and other related matters.

Article 243N sets a one-year limit for continuing any provision of any law relating to panchayat immediately before the commencement of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1992 (73rd CAA), which is irrelevant to the provisions of Part IX.

Article 243ZD creates committees for District Planning at the district level, which shall consolidate the plans prepared by the panchayat and the municipalities in the district and prepare a draft development plan for the district as a whole. This committee has a composition that gives representation to both members of the panchayat and municipalities in the district.

THE 73RD CONSTITUTION AMENDMENT ACT, 1992

Under the leadership of P.V. Narasimha Rao, who served as Prime Minister at the time, the Congress government presented a new bill on the Panchayati Raj in September 1991. It came to be known as the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 and came into effect on April 24, 1993. Through this act, the Panchayati Raj system came under the equitable part of the Constitution, forcing the government to adopt the system.

The 73rd Amendment Act provides for more demoralization, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, and betterment of the functioning of the panchayat in the country. The 73rd Amendment provides for similar guidelines regarding urban areas. These Amendment Acts provided a framework and guidelines to all states for formulating their

policies on the devolution of panchayat and urban bodies.

Significance of the Act

- The Act added 'The Panchayats' Part IX to the Constitution, and added the Eleventh Schedule, which consists of the 29 functional items on panchayats.
- Part IX of the Constitution contains Article 243 to Article 243 O.
- The Amendment Act enacts Article 40 of the Constitution, (Directive Principles of State Policy), which mandates the state to organize the village panchayats and give them powers and authority to function as self-governments.
- With the Act, Panchayati Raj systems come under the purview of the justifiable part of the Constitution and mandates states to adopt the system. Further, the election process in the Panchayati Raj Institutions will be held independently of the state government's will.
- The Act has two parts: mandatory and voluntary. Mandatory provisions must be added to state laws, which include the creation of the new Panchayati Raj systems. On the other hand, voluntary provisions are at the discretion of the state government.
- The Act is a very significant step in building democratic institutions at the grassroots level in the country. The Act transformed representative democracy into participatory democracy.

Salient Features of the Act

1. **Gram Sabha:** The Gram Sabha is the primary body of the Panchayati Raj system. It is a village assembly consisting of all registered voters within the area of the panchayat. It shall exercise such powers and perform such functions as may be prescribed by the state legislature. Candidates can refer to gram panchayat and gram panchayat jobs, on the government's official website – <https://grammanchitra.gov.in/>

2. **Three-tier system:** This Act provides for the establishment of the three-tier system of Panchayati Raj in the states (Village, Intermediate, and District level). States with a population of less than 20 lakhs cannot constitute the intermediate level.
3. **Election of members and Chairperson:** Members at all levels of the Panchayati Raj are directly elected and the Chairperson at intermediate and district levels is indirectly elected from among the elected members. At the village level, the state government elects the Chairperson. The Chairperson of the Panchayat and other members of the panchayat, whether or not directly elected from the regional constituencies of the panchayat area, have the right to vote in the panchayat meeting.
4. **Reservation of seats:**
 - **For SC and ST:** Reservation to be provided at all three tiers by their population percentage.
 - **For backward classes:** The state legislatures are also given the provision to decide on the reservation of seats in any level of panchayat or office of chairperson in favor of backward classes.
 - **For women:** Not less than one-third of the total number of seats reserved for women, and not less than one-third of the total number of offices for chairpersons at all levels of the panchayat are reserved for women.
5. **Duration of Panchayat:** The Act provides for five-year term tenure at all levels of the panchayat. However, the panchayat can be dissolved before the expiry of its term. However, fresh elections for the formation of the new panchayat will be completed before the expiry of its five-year duration.
6. **State Election Commission:**
 - The commission is responsible for the preparation of voter lists and supervision, direction, and control of the panchayat elections.

- The state legislature may make provisions for all matters relating to elections to the panchayats.
7. **Powers and Functions:** The state legislature may confer necessary powers and authority on the panchayats to enable them to function as institutions of self-government. Such schemes may contain provisions related to the functioning of Gram Panchayats. The implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice may be entrusted to them, including those about the 29 matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule.
 8. **Finances:** The State Legislature may-
 - Authorizes panchayats to levy, collect, and appropriate duties, taxes, tolls, and fees.
 - Assign to a panchayat taxes, duties, tolls, and fees levied and collected by the state government.
 - Arrange for disbursement of grants to the panchayats from the consolidated fund of the state.
 - Provide for the formation of funds for depositing all money of the panchayats.
 9. **Finance Commission:** The State Finance Commission reviews the financial condition of the panchayats and makes recommendations for the necessary steps to be taken to supplement resources to the panchayat.
 10. **Audit of Accounts:** The state legislature may make provision for the maintenance and audit of panchayat accounts.
 11. **Application to Union Territories:** The President may direct the provisions of the Act to apply to any union territory subject to such exceptions and modifications as he may specify.
 12. **Exempted states and areas:** The Act does not apply to the states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and certain other areas. These areas include-
 - The scheduled areas and the tribal areas in the states.
 - The hilly areas of Manipur, for which a Zila Parishad exists.
 - Darjeeling district (West Bengal), for which Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council exists.
- However, Parliament may extend this section to these areas subject to the exceptions and modifications it specifies. Thus, the PESA Act was enacted.
13. **Continuance of existing law:** All the state laws relating to panchayats shall remain in force until the expiry of one year from the commencement of this Act. In other words, the states have to adopt the new Panchayati Raj system based on this Act within a maximum of one year from 24 April 1993, which was the date of the commencement of this Act. However, all the Panchayats existing at the commencement of the Act shall continue until the expiry of their term, unless dissolved by the state legislature sooner.
 14. **Bar to interference by courts:** The Act bars the courts from interfering in the electoral matters of panchayats. It declares that the validity of any law relating to the delimitation of constituencies or the distribution of seats in such constituencies cannot be questioned in any court. It further stipulates that no panchayat election shall be questioned except by an election petition presented to such authority and in the manner provided by the state legislature.

PESA ACT OF 1996

The provisions of Part IX do not apply to the Fifth Schedule Areas. The Parliament may extend this Part to such areas as it may specify with such modifications and exceptions. Under these provisions, Parliament enacted the Provisions of the Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas Act, known as the PESA Act or the Extension Act.

Objectives of the Act:

- To extend the provisions of Part IX to the specified areas.

- To provide self-rule for the tribal communities.
- To have village governance with participatory democracy.
- To develop participatory governance consistent with traditional practices.
- To preserve and protect the traditions and customs of the tribal people.
- To empower panchayats with powers tailored to the needs of the tribal.
- To prevent panchayats at a higher level from taking over the powers and authority of lower-level panchayats.

Because of these constitutional steps taken by the union and state governments, India has moved towards what has been described as '*Multi-Level Federalism*', and more significantly, it has widened the democratic base of the Indian polity. Before the amendment, the Indian democratic structure through elected representatives was limited to the two houses of Parliament, state assemblies, and certain union territories. The system has brought governance and issues redressed to the grassroots levels in the country but there are other issues too. These issues, if addressed, will go a long way toward creating an environment where certain basic human rights are respected.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

Women constitute almost 50 percent of the world's population but India has shown a disproportionate sex ratio whereby the female population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not great as equal to men in all places. In Western countries, women have equal rights and status with men in all occupations. However, gender distribution and discrimination are found in India even today. The paradoxical situation is such that she was sometimes considered a goddess and at other times merely a slave.

The report of the committee on the status of women in India recommended statutory status for all women's panchayats with clearly demarcated functions, resources, and

active links with Gram Panchayats. However, it was apprehended that all women panchayat may also lead to marginalization of gender issues on women's concerns and would not be reflected in these bodies. Therefore, it was thought that collective empowerment through representation in the democratic process would give them a voice and a feeling of solidarity. New interest groups and issue-oriented groups will emerge giving rise to new local women leadership actively participating in the decision-making and mobilization. This became a reality with the enforcement of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act and a large number of women joined the election fray as candidates at the grassroots level.

The goal of decentralization of power through the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was only half achieved without removing gender imbalance and bias in local self-government institutions at the grassroots level. Moreover, women in India have been waiting for this rightful share of political power. The constitutional guarantee of equal political rights has been achieved only partially due to the socio-economic setup of Indian polity. Women were exercising only the right to vote meekly. Equal opportunities to hold political offices and positions rarely came to them. They remained marginalized politically, socially, and economically and subjected to various types of oppression.

However, the prevailing situation calls for serious thought and programs to realize the provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which opened the door to opportunities for women on various fronts. The policy of political empowerment of women aims at eliciting their active participation in the decision-making process in these institutions. However, the goal of political empowerment of women does not end up only with their induction into the power position in PRIs. After being elected for positions in these institutions, their real role begins.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FACED IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA

A detailed inquiry was carried out from the members of PRI whether they have been experiencing any problems from different groups of people in the functioning of the Panchayat activities and its meetings. Discussing with respondents I found some problems and challenges that were discussed below:

1. **Lack of Computer-Based Knowledge and Infrastructure:** In some instances, the lack of skills in computer usage leads to quickly diminishing standards of efficient working. The government has launched the e-panchayat project in about 360-gram panchayats. The project of e-governance is to provide citizen-centric services electronically, maintain a database of resources of the gram panchayats, and transparently access gram panchayat data and services.
2. **Poor Coordination among Different Administrative Bodies:** There is a lack of proper cooperation and coordination between the people and the officials. In addition, Gram Pradhan experiences shortcomings due to poor coordination among different administrative bodies. The failure of officials to discharge their duties effectively and efficiently has resulted in delays in developmental activities and underutilization of funds. Furthermore, the Panchayati Raj bodies face various administrative hurdles like politicization of the local administration, absence of coordination and differentiation between the popular and bureaucratic officials, lack of good opportunities, promotions, and incentives for those involved in the administration, etc.
3. **Male Dominance:** There is a general explanation that women's non-participation is due to women being oppressed by male domination. It must be recognized that men do not prevent women from participating in politics and

at the same time, they do not support or encourage women to participate in politics. The 75 percent of men do not encourage women even to take up jobs. The reason given by them is that the present unemployment among men is largely because women may displace men in the political field as they have done in certain job opportunities.

4. Opponents against Reservation for Women:

- Women become targets of attacks by anti-social elements when they step out of their homes or go outside their village for work, meetings, etc.
- They mention that whenever women hold elected offices, the male officers are the ones who 'dictate' what is or what is not to be done. They took control of the entire situation and women elected representatives became the helpless victims of officialdom.
- These opponents contend that even if women are elected in large numbers, the power equation will never change.

Hence, it indicates that all the women know about the current political parties in the society but some of them know it by name, some by symbols. It can be seen that, now women are not only limited to household work only, but also they are gradually empowering themselves. Earlier they were only aware of weaving, cooking, brewing of liquors, etc., but the implementation of the Panchayati Raj Act made them aware of the whole process of change in the society. They are playing an active role in the Panchayats for rapid development strengthen their unity and to assert their right.

5. **Lack of Awareness:** The lack of awareness in implementing Panchayati Raj is caused by bureaucratic delays, political interference, economic factors, and societal influences, which make Panchayati Raj ineffective. The Sarpanch and Panch of the village do not adequately raise public awareness.
6. **Less Literacy Rate:** The illiteracy rate among men and women in the country is

very high. The condition of women is worse. This creates problems for better implementation of Panchayati Raj in the country.

7. **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.
8. **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.
9. **Corruption at all levels of Administration:** Corruption is a major challenge and concern in India. It can be found in all administrative systems and affects 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.

RECENT INITIATIVES IN PANCHAYAT GOVERNANCE

e-Gram Swaraj Portal: With an emphasis on e-governance activities, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has implemented e-GramSwaraj (<https://egramswaraj.gov.in>), a single site for effective monitoring and evaluation of Panchayati Raj schemes. On National Panchayati Raj Day, April 24, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated it as National Panchayati Raj Diwas. The program improved Panchayat reporting and tracking by offering a single interface for recording Panchayat information. Further, the Ministry has implemented an Electronic Fund Management System, which integrates e-

Gram Swaraj with PFMS (eGSPI). Panchayat has mandated the eGSPI for the use of Central Finance Commission monies. All schemes of the Panchayati Raj Ministry have been on-hiked on eGSPI from April 5, 2021, and only online payments are allowed across all three tiers of the system.

Spatial Development Planning: Gram Manchitra, a unified Geospatial platform launched in 2019, helps visualize various developmental tasks across 29 sectors and provides Panchayats with a decision support system throughout the planning process. This app is also linked to the Socio-Economic Caste Census report, Mission Antyodaya report, 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 Panchayat planning approach will be evidence-based, using spatial planning.

Online Audit of Panchayat Accounts: On April 15, 2020, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj launched the 'Online Audit' application as a major institutional change. Audit-Online not only allows 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 paragraphs, and much more. Initially, this application was used to conduct an online audit of Panchayat finances for the 14th Finance Commission for the financial year 2019-20. These actions, together with the Social Audit, will help to enhance the Panchayat's 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 Panchayat: From 1 July to 15 August 2021, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has launched a countrywide campaign called "Meri Panchayat, Mera Adhikaar- Jan Sevaayein Hamaare Dwaar", and Gram Panchayat 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. The National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR) were instrumental in developing a model Citizen Charter for Panchayats and assisting PRIs in drafting the charters.

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

CONCLUSION

The institutions of Panchayati Raj are a milestone in the journey of administrative institutions at the grassroots level. Panchayati Raj Institution is not a new term in political structure; it has existed at all phases wherever the culture of administration developed. Panchayats have played a significant role in the development of rural areas in India. The Panchayati Raj system faces several hurdles as mentioned above. However, it is high time to take specific corrective actions to ensure truly representative governance. These issues can

be tackled, but people's cooperation is needed to accept these changes. The traditional way of thinking still prevailing has to be gradually eradicated so that people can understand the meaning of this system properly.

It concluded that the Panchayati Raj system, which emerged 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1992, has a long history behind it. India has the largest democratic process in the world. The Panchayati Raj system is one of the techniques and powerful tools of Indian democracy. As of 2019, 664,369 villages are there in India. Therefore, providing effective services for infrastructure development at the village level is the main objective of the Government of India. In the globalization era, competition has been increasing from country to country in the fields of economic, social, political, technology, etc. Nowadays the development concept has become a challenge to the Indian democratic system. The Panchayat Raj Institution's vital role in becoming a successful Indian democracy as well as the local government is the backbone of the Indian democracy.

Declaration by Author

Acknowledgement: None

Source of Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: No conflicts of interest declared.

REFERENCES

1. Amitabh, B. (1998). Revitalising Panchayati Raj: Role of NGO's. Economic and Political Weekly, 33(16), 881-882.
2. Bhatt, A., Dalapati, T. K., and Sisodia, Y. Z. (2018). Two Decades of Panchayat Raj in India: Experiences, Issues, Challenges and Opportunities. Rawat Publications.
3. Bajpai, A., and Verma, M. S. (1995). Panchayati Raj in India, a New Thrust. Sahitya Prakashan.
4. Buch, N. (2010). Gram Sabha and Panchayati Raj. Social Action, 62(January-March).

5. Chakrabarty, B. and Pandey, R. K. (2008). Indian Government and Politics. SAGE Texts.
6. Joshi, R. P., and Narwani, G. S. (2002). Panchayat Raj in India: Emerging Trends across the States. Rawat Publications.
7. Dharmaraj, S. (2008). Panchayati Raj System in India. Abhijeet Publications.
8. Fadia, B. L. and Fadia, K. (2023). Indian Government and Politics. Sahitya Bhawan Publication.
9. Ghai, K. K. (2019). Indian Government and Politics. Kalyani Publisher.
10. Ghosh, P. (2021). Indian Government and Politics. PHI Learning Pvt. Ltd.
11. Goel, S. L., and Rajneesh, S. (2003). Panchayati Raj in India: Theory and Practice. Deep & Deep Publications.
12. Gupta, D. (2006). Reinvigorating Panchayat Raj System in Madhya Pradesh. The Indian Journal of Political Science, 67(1), 97–108. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41856196>
13. Kumar, G. (2006). Local Democracy in India – Interpreting Decentralization. Sage Publications.
14. M. Aslam, (2021). Panchayat Raj in India. National Book Trust.
15. Mahajan, Y. G. (2019). Panchayat Raj System. Current Publication.
16. Maheshwari, B. (1963). Studies in Panchayati Raj. Metropolitan Book Company.
17. Rashmi, A. (1997). Role of Women in Panchayati Raj. The Administrator, 41(April-June), 115-126.
18. Shahi, R. C. (2019). Panchayati Raj Institutions and Rural Development. World Heritage Inc.
19. Sharma, S. (1994). Grass Root Politics and Panchayati Raj. Deep & Deep Publications.
20. Shekhar, A. (2012). Role of Women in Panchayati Raj. Anmol Publishers.
21. Sikligar, P. C. (2020). Panchayati Raj and Rural Development. Blue Rose Publishers.
22. Singh, L. B. (2019). Issues and Challenges in Functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions for Sustainable Development: A Case Study. International Journal of Science Technology & Society, 4(1-2).
23. Venkatraman, A. (1989). Proposed Constitutional Amendment on Panchayati Raj - Some Reflections. The Indian Journal of Political Science, 50(3), 402–408. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41855443>
24. Venkatesan, V. (2002). Institutionalizing Panchayati Raj in India. Institute of Social Sciences.

How to cite this article: Moumita Saha Roy. Panchayati raj institutions in india: an overview. *International Journal of Research and Review*. 2024; 11(12): 471-483. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20241252>
