

THE ROLE OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT: MEASURES TO IMPROVE THEIR FUNCTIONING

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ABSTRACT

The socio-political changes expected from the introduction of Panchayati raj system have not fulfilled and remained largely unfulfilled for long. More importantly the objectives like social equality, gender equity and changes at the grassroots level leadership envisaged as the main objectives of panchayati raj are not achieved in a meaningful manner. There is a need to change the system of planning at all India level. A gradual shift from sectorial planning to area planning is necessary in the context of increasing people's participation in the planning process. The panchayats must be given adequate powers to use resources and undertake integrated local development. This paper is intended to emphasize the rural development role of panchayats and measures to improve their functioning.

KEYWORDS: Panchayati Raj System, Rural Development, Grassroots Level Planning

INTRODUCTION

Panchayati raj institutions form the third strata of the decentralized structure of the government of India, the two being the Central government and State government. The introduction of panchayati raj as the third tier of decentralized administration is indeed one of the most remarkable social and political reforms since independence. There, however, are many daunting challenges which panchayat bodies face today. Across the states there is a lack of genuine devolution of funds, functions and functionaries to the panchayati raj institutions. Moreover, there are social challenges which work against the emergence of leadership from the marginalized sections of society like dalits, women and tribals. Added to this there is lack of role clarity among the three organs of panchayat system.

The socio-political changes expected from the introduction of Panchayati raj system have not fulfilled for long. More importantly the objectives like social equality, gender equity and changes at the grassroots level leadership envisaged as the main objectives of panchayati raj are not achieved in a meaningful manner. In this context it was realized that the marginalized sections like women, and other backward classes in the society continued to face many hurdles and found it difficult to participate at the grassroots level development process.

SHORTCOMINGS OF THE PANCHAYAT RAJ SYSTEM

- Uniformity of the panchayati raj system undermines the unique history, culture, traditions and consequent structures of local government.
- Representation of Members of parliament and State Legislatures is often counter-productive. There are clashes of

interests between the Legislatures and Panchayati Raj Representatives particularly for getting votes.

- The Seventy-third amendment act does not define clearly the role of political parties. It does not specify that political parties can enter the election arena in their formal capacity.
- The 73rd amendment act does not speak about the relationship between the panchayats and local bureaucracy.
- The 73rd amendment act does not explain specific grounds for the dissolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions. This gives scope for the state to dissolve panchayati raj institutions on political considerations.

The panchayati raj system has a number of positive features. However, despite these positive features, the elite control over the system, apprehension of the state level leaders of challenges to their positions and lukewarm response of bureaucracy have not allowed the panchayati raj institutions to function as real democratic institutions with peoples participation. Studies from different states in India show that some states have been active in implementing Panchayati raj institutions. But the unequal social structure and rigid caste system prevalent in Indian villages coupled with power-hungry local bureaucracy kill the spirit of the system.

EXEMPLARY STORIES OF PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM IN INDIA

After the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act all states in India initiated the process of radical democratic decentralization. Some states are ahead of other states in implementing the Panchayati Raj Institutions. In some states the system has played a pivotal role in changing the traditional

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power structure dominated by the local elite bureaucratic network. In other states the system has led to the empowerment of hitherto marginalized sections of society like women, SCs, STs and other backward classes.

For example, in Kerala there is a model of decentralized planning with people's participation and an innovative model for allocation of funds for the Panchayati Raj Institutions. There the local governments belonging to upper tiers do not have any control over the lower tiers. Panchayat presidents in Kerala are very clear of their role in providing services and developing panchayat plans and implementing them. They play an active role in the proper running of day-care centres and primary schools and health sub-centres. Panchayati Raj Institutions in Kerala have initiated the process of participatory natural resource management, watershed management and adult literacy programmes. Participation of women and marginalized sections of society in the development process has led to their empowerment to a great extent.

However, Kerala is also not free of elite capture of political power at the grassroots level. Over politicization and interference of local political party leaders has often affected the functioning of panchayati raj institutions and making them less objective and more partisan.

Madhya Pradesh is another state which has shown activism in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Madhya Pradesh has used the district planning provisions of the 73rd amendment act to pass decision making powers to the districts. It has also empowered the Gram Sabha to carry out the functions of the Gram Panchayat through numerous committees under the Gram Swaraj. The Madhya Pradesh Panchayati Raj model is characterized by the committee system at the local level managed by members of the Gram Sabha and other higher levels.

However, the Madhya Pradesh model of Panchayat system is not free of flaws and drawbacks. The system is not functioning well due to lack of awareness among the people and members and due to bureaucratic indifference to provide technical guidance to the representatives over the powers and responsibilities assigned to them. Thus, the panchayat raj representatives have underutilized the powers and functions delegated to the committees.

The elite control over the system has not allowed the panchayats to function as per the objectives enshrined in the Constitution of India. The need of the hour is to evolve a comprehensive system of panchayati raj institutions. For this, the panchayats have to perform these important roles:

➤ The Panchayats, keeping in mind the decentralization of administrative powers, should encourage self-governance and mass participation in their working.

➤ They should have to contribute to strengthen planning process at the micro level and overall rural development.

➤ They should have to help masses to have access to the highest level of decision making process.

➤ Panchayats should ensure that poor and marginalized people are empowered and must protect them from all forms of exploitation.

➤ The members of the Panchayats should be trained to their new roles. This is because they have inadequate knowledge of the Panchayat Act and its provisions, objectives, functions of the Panchayat raj bodies and dynamics of rural society. The local bureaucracy should be made more committed to the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

REFORMS AND MEASURES REQUIRED IN PANCHAYATI RAJ BODIES FOR MORE EFFECTIVE FUNCTIONING

Review powers and responsibilities from Centre to the Gram Panchayat Levels

The Union Government at the highest level of the Indian federal structure has the responsibility to encourage and nurture effective panchayats at the grassroots level of the federal pyramid. A rational pattern of devolution of powers to the panchayat bodies should be adopted and for this a review of the entire gamut of powers and responsibilities from Central government to the Gram Panchayat level is necessary. However, in India, the establishment of a strong Panchayati Raj Institutions has never been a ground for demand for greater autonomy by the states. A strong state does not automatically mean that the state would have an active network of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Centralized Planning and Local Autonomy

The system of centralized planning which the government of India has been following since long severely constrains local autonomy. Panchayat Institutions in India seem to act as the agencies of the state governments rather than units of local government as they are not provided with adequate funds and powers of implementation. There is a need to change the planning system at the all India level. Panchayats should be provided with adequate untied funds besides some say in prioritization which can make local planning more meaningful. The number and scope of centrally sponsored schemes should also be curtailed both in range and volume. A gradual shift from sectoral planning to area planning appears necessary in the context of people's participation in the planning process.

Periodic Review

The union Government should initiate the system of periodic review of the powers and functions delegated to the Panchayats by the state government in the context of freedom

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available to the state government for implementation of programmes in the development field. The Planning Commission (now NITI Ayog) itself can initiate the process of activating the District Planning Committees to perform their functions as provided under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The Central Government can verify whether the district Planning is carefully followed or not by the state government while finalizing state plan outlays. This will put some pressure on the Panchayati Raj Institutions to prepare local level plans in time taking into consideration the local needs and aspirations.

Financial Adequacy and Discretionary Funds

Adequate finances and untied funds are essential for effective discharge of functions assigned to any panchayat. It is essential for the Central Finance Commission to make liberal use of the provision to augment the finances of the Panchayati Raj Institutions so that the availability of funds can be linked with efficient discharge of functions assigned to Panchayat bodies by the respective state governments. A substantial provision of untied funds would also help in the implementation of innovative programmes for the benefit of the people by the local governments.

Functions of the Panchayats should be Clearly Specified

The 11th Schedule of the Indian Constitution was added by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992. The Schedule contains 29 functional items relating to the Panchayats. However, the Constitution does not spell out in detail the functions of each level of panchayats, especially with reference to 29 subjects that have been listed in the 11th Schedule. This has been left to the discretion of the state governments, the progress on actual transfer of functions (as distinct from subjects listed in the 11th Schedule), there is considerable variation across states in term of progress.

The functions to be performed at each level of panchayats must be clearly identified. This would call for simultaneous amendments to the subject-matter legislation to enable the assumption of such functions by the panchayats. A clear delegation of powers may have to be given in matters not covered by the legislation such as anti-poverty programmes, preparation of local plans, construction of roads etc. the panchayat institutions should be given specific powers to pool resources and undertake integrated local development. There should be no requirement to get any approval from higher levels of bureaucracy in the Panchayati Raj Department or in any other government department.

Monitoring Through Audit

There should be an objective monitoring system in the Panchayati raj system. Monitoring should be only through annual performance reports and through audits. The individual

decisions of the panchayats should not be subject to review or revision by the bureaucracy or by the minister at the state level. Panchayats should have control over the staff working for them for the efficient discharge of functions. The panchayats can be empowered to hire their own staff over a period of time.

CRITICAL ASSESMENT

The Task Force on Devolution of Powers and Functions upon Panchayati Raj Institutions (MoRD Ministry of Rural Development) in its assessment of Indian decentralization found that most of the states had satisfied only the basic requirements relating to the transfer of powers, functions, functionaries and financial autonomy of the Panchayats.

Oommen's (1999: 157- 58 comparison of 12 Indian states concludes that most of the states had amended their existing panchayat legislation in order to satisfy the mandatory provisions of the 73rd Amendment Act. Following concerns were raised by him:

- Village Panchayats have been delegated functions without adequate administrative, financial and technical support.
- With the exception of Kerala and West Bengal, Panchayats lack discretionary powers over spending and staff.
- There is lack of clarity and differentiation of functions among Panchayats and other levels of government.
- States reserve the right to assign and withdraw functions to and from Panchayats by 'executive decree'
- Panchayats at all levels have inadequate powers of taxation.
- Panchayats lack autonomous budgeting powers.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative to review Panchayati raj bodies in the era of globalization and liberalization. Local initiatives and development efforts can enhance competitiveness and income generation among the village communities. Thus, rural urban divide can be minimized by using panchayati raj institutions as an effective catalyst for making villages self-reliant and competitive. Thus, revival of panchayati raj system should not undergo another eclipse on earlier pattern. There has to be genuine commitment to Panchayati Raj as political value and ideology.

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