

## **Panchayati Raj and Rural Development in India**

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**ABSTRACT:** The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) to the Indian Constitution (1992) clearly intended that Panchayats should be institutions of self-government through which the people would participate in the process of planning for economic and social development, as also in the implementation of schemes and programmes for these purposes. The structures designed to facilitate these processes are Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) at three (or in some cases two) levels. The test of any development programme of decentralization is arguably the actual powers and function that are devolved to the institution of local government and the autonomy they enjoy in the exercise of these. Are the Panchayats actually utilizing their power to perform the developmental goals? Each state has their own Panchayat acts and according to that act, in many states, governments can omit, add, or amend any power by an executive order. In most states, Panchayats do not have an exclusive functional domain, as line departments continue to carry out developmental functions and are funded accordingly. There are so many facets to the issue of grassroots governance and decentralization in India and it is very important because of more than 65 percent of India's population is rural and its fate and future are decided by PRIs. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the significance of PRIs in India, particularly of Maharashtra state, and its role in rural development. The paper mainly aims to discuss the challenges and problems faced by the PRIs in its performance of and suggestions for their improvement.

**KEYWORDS:** Panchayati Raj, Rural Development, 73<sup>rd</sup> CAA, Maharashtra, India

### **INTRODUCTION:**

India has the largest concentration of rural population than any other country in the world. Development of villages is development of country. It is the dream of every Indian to see a developed India. But it is hard to build a developed India if we ignore the 65 percent of rural

India and keep them away from the fruits of development. For the purpose of rural development, Panchayati Raj worked as an institution and a catalyst in India. “Perhaps the most extensive effort in “democratic decentralization for development” was the Indian legislation enabling states to establish local representative institutions, the “Panchayati Raj” (Montgomery, 1979: 61). Panchayati Raj, the third sphere of government has changed drastically after the 73<sup>rd</sup> CAA that has set a new legal paradigm for rural local government. It is especially the founding values and specific objects of the new constitutional amendment that had an unprecedented impact. It has been argued by a number of authorities that decentralization build up democratic institutions like Panchayati Raj at the local level, and helps delivery of basic needs to rural areas. In the welfare state like India and in the wake of introduction of various development programmes, administration is expected to function as a catalytic agent of development and change. It is more so at the grassroots level; it becomes highly relevant in items of redressal and amelioration of grievances of the common-man, and proper use of resources, so that the ideal of bridging the gaps among various sections becomes possible. It is a matter of common belief that the administration at the grass root level has not measured up to the expectation of the general masses. It is so, because of the fact that either it is under heavy influence of political leaders or it treats itself as the top brass of the society and fails to develop confidence among masses for a rural development.

The Panchayati Raj introduced in India in the wake of the Balwantrai Mehta committee report in 1957 and followed by other important committees like Ashok Mehata Committee (1977), G. V. K. Rao Committee (1985), and 1986’s L. M. Singhvi Committee (Aslam, 2011: 9-35.). Though the Panchayati Raj have been in existence for a long time, it has been observed that these institutions have not been able to acquire the status and dignity of viable and responsive people’s bodies due to a number of reasons including absence of regular elections, prolonged super sessions, insufficient representation of weaker sections and women, inadequate devolution of powers and lack of financial resources. Therefore, the 73<sup>rd</sup> CAA has been made and it clearly intended that Panchayats should be institutions of self-government through which the people would participate in the process of planning and rural development. The structures of Panchayati Raj institutions in Maharashtra at three levels: the *Gram Panchayat* (at the village level), the *Panchayat Samiti* (at the block level), and the *Zilla Parishad* (at the district level). The bedrock

of this pyramidal structure would be the *gram sabha* (or village assembly), composed of all citizens eligible to vote, and so the foundation of local democracy and the ultimate forum of accountability. The establishment of these institutions was mandatory, as were the provisions relating to the reservation of one-third seats (at every level and among the chairpersons of these bodies) for women; and the reservation for the weaker sections. Though the amendment specified that the powers devolved to panchayats would be among those listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution, it was left to the states to decide which of the subjects on that list they would devolve (Jayal, Prakash and Sharma, 2007: 1-27).

Panchayats has been playing an increasingly significant role in rural development. Therefore, government has been giving high priority to rural development and is accordingly implementing a number of programmes through panchayats, aimed at sustainable and holistic development of the rural areas. Rural development has been the main plank of India's development strategy from the very beginning of the planned era. Nevertheless, even today, the key issues clustering over the whole spectrum of rural transformation and development of rural India both in the realm of theory and policy making virtually rest on the ability of our planners and administrators to minimize the persistent poverty, vast illiteracy, acute unemployment and deep-rooted disease from the rural areas and also to maximize the growing demands of the basic needs of the rural population for improving their living standard and thereby making the process of their development more vibrant and self-sustainable. But in its limited interpretation, rural development has come to mean a direct attack on rural poverty, through special employment programmes, land reforms and area development programmes, measures to provide potable water supply, rural housing and rural sanitation. The task of rural development implies all round development concerning the fuller use of local resources and skills, availability of credit, application of science and technology for modernizing rural industries and institution building.

#### **MEANING AND CHALLENGES OF PANCHAYATI RAJ:**

Panchayati Raj is a strategy designed to improve the economic and social life of a rural poor. It is undertaken at the grass-roots level. It involves local people and their organizations. Being closer to the people, it directly meets their needs and aspirations and is thus best suited to enlist people's participation. It is extending the benefits of development to the poorest among those

who seek a livelihood in the rural areas. The group includes small farmers, tenants and the landless (Gupta, 1995:36). Despite making spectacular progress in various fields, India still faces poverty, unemployment, ignorance, and socio-economic inequality. New economic forces are bringing with them new opportunities for development and for contributing to nation-building. It is, however, important to ensure that our growth is inclusive and that we do not leave anyone behind, and that the benefits of development reach everyone, particularly the rural masses that have not been effectively touched by the efforts of six decades of freedom. Hence, development of rural poor is emerging as the main target of Panchayati Raj and it is seen as a relative, continuous, and complex process of positive change to be set in motion guided towards the objective of eradicating hunger, disease, injustice, exploitation, and related ills that affect vast sections of rural India population. Thus, Panchayati Raj as a concept and as a practice is not confined to the economic growth and modernization but also includes the issue of equity in the process of distribution and accessibility to goods and services at affordable levels (Malik, 2006: 56-7). With the establishment of the Panchayati Raj, we have to build up a well-organized administrative and political agency to implement the rural developmental programmes. It was expected that these institutions would play a vital role in planning and development of rural areas. They are the backbone of rural planning and development.

India has completed 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2012-2017); but still the planning is far effective in India. In our planning process exact identification of the basic problems has not been done. Planning has essentially remained centralized and vertical. Local problems never receive adequate attention. Consequently, the developed areas become more and more developed while backward regions remain backward. Every region has its specific problems and calls for a potential specific strategy of development suited to its requirements, but such detailed planning is difficult. Therefore, our whole attitude to planning should reorganize and it should be made from below, based on the felt needs of the rural masses and the potentials of the regions. But the Panchayati Raj in India is suffers from deficiency in staff having expertise and specialization. The system also lacks the much needed participation culture and therefore neglects effective communication, joint consultation, and democratization. Hence, it continues to suffer from favoritism, nepotism, overlapping, corruption etc. In short, the present Panchayati Raj has failed to ensure participation of people and their organization in the development process. The

important issue in the Panchayati Raj is accountability. If Panchayati Raj is to be accountable only to the superior command at the district and state levels as is case at present, administration cannot be responsive to the needs and aspirations of the local people. As such Panchayati Raj ought to be made accountable to the rural people.

**ROLE OF PANCHAYATI RAJ IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT:**

Though the PRIs had been in existence for a long time, but they had failed to acquire the status and dignity of viable and responsive people's bodies due to absence of regular elections, prolonged super sessions, insufficient representation of weaker sections and women, inadequate devolution of powers and lack of financial resources. The rural poor can derive benefits from welfare schemes only when they get administrative support. We have witnessed over the last seventy years that our system of administration has not been effective in establishing a link with the masses and that it has miserably failed to deliver even basic daily needs and the goods. Therefore, the present Panchayat system is become significant, which is responsible for formulation and implementation of rural development plans.

According to Census 2011, total 68.84 per cent of population of India lives in rural areas whereas in Maharashtra 54.77 percent population is rural. These figures indicate that the real India is in its villages. India's development has no meaning if the vast rural masses are not taken into consideration. Apparently, much effort has been made for the betterment of rural society in the every possible way. Priority has been given in every five year plan to the development of the rural masses. But in reality very little has been achieved in practice and this large part of our country still continues to remain in poverty and ignorance. The agricultural sector has a crucial role in the working of the Indian rural economy. Nearby 65 per cent of India's population below the poverty line lives in rural areas, and is directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture.

In Maharashtra most of the development area (like agricultural, education, social welfare, health, animal husbandry etc.) are transferred to the PRIs, which are now responsible for preparing, and implementing development plans for their own districts. But the fact is that, thousands of villages having the problems of drinking water, housing watering and sanitation facilities. Millions of rural people are roofless and hungry. Malnutrition, disease, starvation and idleness are on a high scale. They do not have medical or health facilities. The villages have remained isolated because

of the lack of a proper road transport system and communication. Comparing to rural picture urban center is growing rapidly. The development process was, however slow and uneven over the vast rural areas for a variety of reasons and this created dangerous imbalance in the country. India badly needs rapid progress in the vast countryside by changing all undesirable conditions the great poverty and rapid population increase ruled out gradualness.

**PROBLEMS IN PANCHAYATI RAJ FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT:**

In order to have an efficient and righteous administration, the PRIs must focus on its administrative performance and try to enrich and update. Here are some general observations:

1. Local people are not satisfied with the role played and the efforts taken by the state government regarding rural development. People are completely depending upon Panchayat Raj for their development. People do not have information of the various development schemes, reason was that they are not aware by the PRIs, that's why they could not able to get the benefits of such schemes. The degree of coordination between officials and non-officials is good enough. But they fail to discharge their duties selflessly and judiciously. Most of the times they ignore essential work and take interest in unnecessary activities.
2. PRIs failed to take initiative for health education, social welfare activities removal of encroachments, and necessary arrangement of water for cattle, forestation and land reforms, and also they are not making systematic planning for villages. Nevertheless, it is successful in making sufficient arrangement of primary education, roads and hospital and dispensary. Significantly, PRIs made special attempt to maintain sanitation and made available drinking water to its people.
3. It is found that there is a problem of overlapping and duplication of work. PRIs are not properly addressing the emerging problems of rural development and did not effectively implement the rural development schemes. There are the financial irregularities in the implementation of development schemes. But very few people register their complaint against officials and non-officials. It is found that the higher agencies have excessive control over the implementation of rural development schemes. And the senior officials and non-officials are not sensitive about the problems of rural development.
4. The state government failed to impart proper training to Panchayati Raj personnel. The staff who engaged in PRIs is not working honestly and sincerely. The local leaders unnecessarily

interfere in affairs of PRIs. PRIs could not succeed in encouraging people's participation. It is found that PRIs are not people oriented, goal oriented, flexible and innovative. Local people do not actively participate in development activities, and do not co-operate to PRIs. Most of the times people did not participate in the meetings of *Gram Sabha*.

5. The office of the Village Panchayat is expected to be computerized in digital age. But very few Village Panchayats computerized and in this way the Panchayati raj lacking e-governance. The failure of different rural development programmes is attributed to lack of co-ordination and communications of different developmental agencies, and different tiers of the PRIs. The development administrators who engaged in the process of rural development are dissatisfied with their working conditions. As such the performance of these development administrators has not been satisfactory.

#### **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION:**

The above scenario indicates that the demand and pressure on the systems of governance is to deliver effective services to citizens is going to increase in the days to come. But with the prevailing systems and procedures of governance the option before the governments and civic authorities are limited, which calls for redefining the processes and procedures of governance and exploring new options. Reforms that will have a greater impact on the quality of life of the individuals at affordable prices without harassment and humiliation are needed so as to give them respite from inefficiency and corruption and to enhance the credibility of the structures and systems of governance (Misra, 2005: 284-5).

The improvement of administrative system must be undertaken with serious considerations consistent with the changing conditions. In order to improve the performance and PRIs, it is suggested that regular training courses should be provided for officials and non-officials. Seminars and conference meetings for all officials at all levels should be arranged in order to acquaint them with objectives and goals of PRIs. In addition to training, the policies, objectives and goals of each agency should be stressed to the officials on various occasions and make them perform their duties satisfactorily.

The working efficiency of personnel at *Zilla Parishad* office should be improved. Further, more regular monitoring of the programmes should be undertaken. The monitoring team should visit

actual programme site. That regular monitoring should be scheduled and strictly adhered to. In addition to the earlier suggestions, improvement in the information system is required. Information distribution should be quicker and more up to date and same should be convey to every concern one. For proper and faster reciprocate information, each concerned agency must be computerized and e-connected.

PRI's have yet to develop positive conventions and traditions every attempt should therefore, be made to improve their working. The changes that are needed in the working of the PRI's are two-fold. First, they have to be further strengthened as legal and constitutional authorities and secondly, the people who are involved in their working, also needs improvement in themselves. In fact, the second proposition is more important. No matter how is the legal framework of an institution, if the people who manage it are not good, it would never achieve its objectives.

In order to overcome various problems as discussed in the above, we would like to make certain suggestions to strengthen the administrative organization of PRI's—

1. For improving the performance of PRI's, officials and non-officials needs to have certain aptitudes and attitudes. They must have concerned about the welfare and development of the people. They should be honest, open minded, knowledgeable, hardworking, enthusiastic, ethical, confident, dynamic, optimistic and modernist etc. They have to spend most of their time in the Panchayats office. They should ensure that the problems of people must be addressed seriously and regularly. In this way, their role becomes very significant regarding rural development. More attention should be given to the recruitment and training process of them.
2. Both officials and non-officials of the PRI's should learn and develop proper understanding of the laws, acts, rules and regulation for smooth functioning. Both officials and non-officials must visit regularly to the other PRI's; those proved as a successful, effective, efficient and ideal, within the districts or within the state or off the state to promote interactions for innovations and best practices. The meetings of the *gram sabha* should be regular and would be organized after adequate campaign, ensuring large scale participation of all categories of voters, particularly women and those belonging to backward class and castes.

3. The *Zilla Parishad* should promote the village panchayats to prepare their planning. There should be some modules of village level planning for the preparation of appropriate and accurate village planning. There is a need for strengthening the pattern of decentralized governance in a sense that, quality planning and proper implementation staff should be available to them. Senior officers must visit frequently to the village panchayats to motivate them.
4. PRIs should take efforts to get maximum people's participation. The participation of private sector parties, whether individuals or NGOs should be encouraged to participate in rural development. Adequate finance and sufficient infrastructure should be made available to Panchayats. Social auditing has emerged as complementary to the financial auditing. It has been given special importance in the decentralized governance to ensure its effectiveness.

Thus, the initiatives and socio-economic transformation is reshaping rural and local communities in the country. It is hoped that within a next couple of decade there will be no one below the poverty line and that all who have made transition, manage to continue their trajectory into even better and brighter futures.

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--XX--