

Role of the Panchayat for Strengthening Democratic Decentralization in India

Subhalaxmi Sahani

Guest Faculty

Department of Political Science

Rama Devi Women's University

Vidya Vihar, Bhubaneswar

Odisha, Pin-751022

Abstract

Democratic Decentralization is important for making democracy vibrant. The Panchayat plays a pivotal role in strengthening democratic decentralization in rural India, where the people at grass root level are essential part of democracy. The participation of people and the activeness of institutions are pre requisite for democracy. The local governance is no doubt in the lower level of the hierarchical structure of democratic set up but for strengthening democracy its role and functions should be emphasized. This paper intends to study about the various plans and policies implemented by the Panchayat for development. The role of Gram Sabha is also a part of discussion. Various measures are also discussed to make the Panchayat more active for a vibrant democracy.

Key Words: *Panchayat, Democratic Decentralization, Democracy and Gram Sabha*

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I. Introduction

“The Future of India lies in its Village”

- **Mahatma Gandhi**

The Panchayat connotes “Jan Bhagidari” where the people are essential part of the system which governs them. The Panchayat is at the lowest level of the hierarchical structure of democracy. In rural India, the Panchayat represents the grassroot level democracy. The success of any system depends on its grassroot structure. The grassroot structure is to be strong structurally and also with the participation of people. The Gram Panchayat is the most important part of the hierarchical structure of democracy. The Gram Sabha reflects the essence of democratic decision making.

The Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha are essential for democratic decentralization. The programmes, methods of devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities. Decentralization of political institutions, development of local leadership and strengthening the efforts for economic modernization refer to democratic decentralization (Behera, 2021).

Constitutional and Statutory Provision Regarding Panchayats

Part IV (Art 40) of the Constitution refers to the organization of Village Panchayats. In Part IX of the Constitution, 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 has been inserted which was promulgated on 24th April 1993. This Amendment Act deals with the establishment of Panchayat by the states. Provisions for Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) were passed by the Parliament in 1996 to extend part IX of the Constitution to certain exception and modifications. This legislation is significant because it extended the development, planning and audit functioning to the Gram Sabha. Secondly it endowed Gram Sabha with the management and control of natural resources and adjudication of justice in accordance with traditions and customs. These above mentioned legislations have institutionalized the Panchayat Raj. Institutions (PRIs) and provided for setting up three tiers of Panchayats (only two tiers in case of States or union Territories, (UTs) having population less than 20 lakh), which paved the way for reform in local governance in the country provision for devolution of powers and responsibilities to Panchayats for both preparation of plans for economic development and social justice, utilizing resources available with them (Article 243G) and implementation of the schemes and programmes related to twenty-nine subjects listed in the eleventh schedule of the Constitution have been provided by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment is considered as landmark because for the first time women's reservation was mandated. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj was established on 27th May

2004. The primary objective of the ministry is to oversee the implementation of Part IX of the Constitution and PESA Act, 1996. The Panchayats come under the State / UT Panchayati Raj Acts. There is partnership between the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) with states, to achieve the constitutional aspirations, pertaining to the functioning of Panchayats through policy guidance, advocacy technological support, capacity building and training, persuasion and financial support (Kumar & Khan, 2021).

Demographic Representation

In India about 65% of people and 70% of the work force lives in rural areas that contribute to about 46% of the economy. The number of administrative units of PRIs has been increasing over time in view of the increasing rural population. There is expansion of rural residential areas, creation of new districts, tehsils, blocks etc. In 2005 the number of PRIs was 2.41 lakhs. The number of PRIs has increased to 2.63 lakhs in 2020. There is huge representation of women in the arena of governance due to the reservation for women in PRIs in 2005 the number of elected representatives were 10.42 lakhs (37.46%). In 2020 the number of elected representatives has increased to more than 51 lakhs and elected women representatives to more than 14 lakhs (46%). Women Empowerment has been prioritized through enhancement of women's participation in PRIs. Provisions of 50% reservation for women in PRIs in their respective State Panchayati Raj Acts have been made by 21 State (Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telengana, Tripura, Utrakhand, and West Bengal), (Kumar & Khan, 2021).

Government Initiatives

- The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has developed various applications over the year to address different aspects of Panchayatas functioning such as decentralized planning, budgeting, accounting, implementation and monitoring of plans, fund transfer etc in addition to a large number of service delivery applications like issue of certification, licenses etc. These applications have been unified in a single and simplified portal called e Gram Swaraj.
- Emphasis has laid upon on basic infrastructures, e-governance, capacity building of PRIs by Ministry and States. Focus has been on information, education and communication campaign 272 backward districts was identified under the backward regions grant funds (BRGF) scheme to bridge critical gaps in local infrastructure and other developmental requirements along with the capacity building of PRIs. One of the important parts of BRGF was preparation of district plan Rs 27368 cores were provided to the States, which was utilized on a large number of projects in course of nine years.
- Rs 60750 crores and Rs 236 805 crores were recommended in interim report for 2020-21 and final report for 2021-2026 respectively of the fifteen element finance Commission for all three times of Panchayats. It necessitated preparing their respective plans at all times for effective utilization of grants. Since 2015-16 Gram Panchayat development plan is being prepared and Block Panchayat Development Plan (BPDP) and District Panchayat Development Plan (DPDP) from 2020-21.
- New scheme of Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan was launched in 1st April 2018 to develop and strength capacities of PRIs to become more responsive towards local development needs.
- The National Institute of Rural Development & Panchayati Raj (NIRD & PR) and the State Institute of Rural Developments (SIRDs) in association with large number of institutions conduct training on various themes such as constitutional and statutory provisions on the functioning of PRIs, e-Governance, financial management, commitments on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), livelihood troubles and so on.
- A new scheme named SVAMITVA has been launched by the ministry of Panchayati Raj to prepare properly records of rural people of their houses using drone surveying technology. The goal of the scheme is to cover most of the more than six lakh villages in the next five years. (Kumar & Khan, 2021)

Success Stories of Gram Panchayats

- The Dadera Gram Panchayat (Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh) was able to address the local problems of water scarcity through its Gram Sabha. In the Gram Sabha measures were decide to be taken for water conservation and rain water harvesting Jal Shakti Abhiyan was started in the Gram Panchayat. Different initiatives were taken including digging of pond, grey water harvesting by utilizing the waste water of hand pumps, rain water harvesting in public building etc. These initiatives led to the fulfillment of agricultural needs of villages and the depleting ground water level was replenished. The Gram Panchayat created a new Own Source of Revenue (OSRs) by selling the soil excavated during the creation of pond. Fish and duck farming in pond become another means of employment. The Gram Sabha of Dadera Gram Panchayat played an important role to highlight the problem, propose solution and building consensus amongst the villagers. The Gram Panchayat was empowered by generation of Own Sources of Revenue. The decision took by the Gram Sabha led to make the Gram Panchayat self-reliant and creation of sources of employment villagers (Kumar, 2021).

- Another success story is from Kerala where a village named as Budhanoor in Chengannur block (Alappuzha District) generated their Own Source of Revenue. The village consists of 14 wards. Tax collection becomes the primary focus of the Gram Panchayat for creating their own source of revenue. Consequently the Gram Panchayat constituted the standing committee on finance, secondly all the institutions persons and traders liable to pay taxes were enlisted, thirdly Kudumba Shree volunteers and employees were engaged for door-to-door collection of taxes and fourthly collection camps were also organized The Panchayat collected Rs 33,439 25 through taxes, Rs 44 700 Rental income Rs 250 141 through fee and user charges and Rs 25 949 through other sources (Sethi & Krishnan, 2021).
- Ibrahimpur village of Narayanaraopet Block has its own success story which has won several awards including Nirmal Puraskar Award and Best Gram Panchayat Award for the development activities over the last few years. The Gram Panchayat is able to provide services like safe drinking water with minimum charges, 100% sanitation facility, water conservation, organic manure and solar lights for village households. Ibrahimpur village was transformed into a model village due to intensive community involvement of youth, women, SHGs, and activeness of Gram Sabha. The Gram Panchayat has become an Open Defecation Free Panchayat by construction of toilets and door to door visits for awareness. There is ban on single-use of plastics by the Gram Panchayat. Any time water machine has been installed by the Gram Panchayat which allows locals to fill-up 20 litres cans at least two to three times a day after they swipe a card that can be recharged. There is facility of using solar energy as the Gram Panchayat is powered with three kilowatts of solar energy. Solar energy is being used by 50 houses for their household chores. Classrooms are equipped with modern facilities for digital/online classes. There is zero maternal and infant mortality rates (Yadav & Bandyopadhyay, 2021).
- In April 2013 the Supreme Court in its landmark judgments pronounced that Gram Sabhas (Village Assemblies) around Niyamgiri need to decide whether the proposed mining violates religious and other forest rights, and that the same must be considered by the government for forest clearance for mining (Kumar,2014). Consequently all 12 selected Gram Sabhas voted against the project which is considered as the country's first environmental referendum (Krishnan & Naga, 2017). Finally the tribal people were able to protect their environment and rights.

Initiatives to be taken

It is important to revitalize the Gram Sabhas as an assembly of the village. Vibrant Gram Sabhas are important for achieving India's Sustainable Development Goals at the Panchayat level. The frequency of gram Sabhas must be increased (Kumar, 2021). The Panchayats should be empowered to levy and collect taxes, tools, fees, user charges, etc. along with other activities to enhance their own source of revenue. The role of Panchayats should be clearly laid out in flagship programmes of central and State Governments. The knowledge of information and technology should spread widely (Kumar & Khan,2021).

II. Conclusion

The Panchayat is at the grassroots level of democracy. The people should be aware of their rights and duties as important part of democracy. Different plans and policies are to be popularised among the rural mass. No doubt there is representation of women in the Panchayats but the women should be empowered to take decision independently without any intervention of her family members. A proper network of implementation and evaluation of plans and policies should be given priority. Gram Sabhas should be more vibrant.

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