

Good Governance at Grass-root Level

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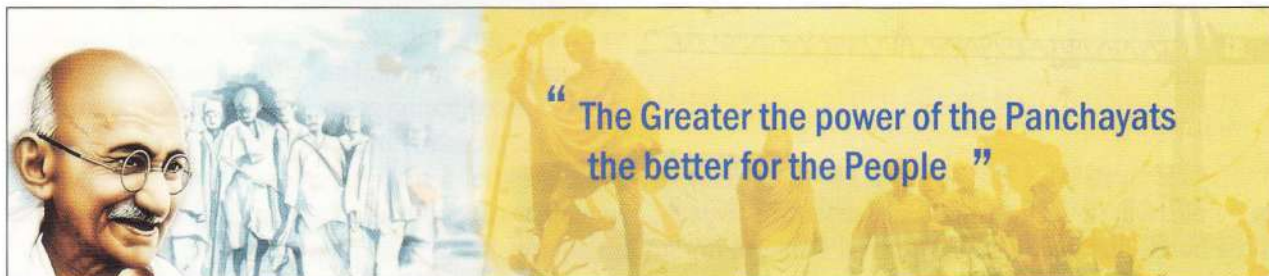
Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are the most important and potent tools provided by the Indian Constitution to empower the democratic values on the grass-root level. These institutions make sure that the weaker sections of the society get their due in the socio-economic development process. Moreover, Panchayati Raj devolves the planning power to the beneficiaries themselves which in turn, ensures the optimum use of public resources in favor of the rural population.

India is a unique country in many ways, and this has been reiterated by noted scholars from across the globe, time and again. So whenever the growth model of the country is debated, it is strongly argued that the development rationale of this country should not be thought of and planned in the formats defined and formulated by Western world under the influence of its own circumstances. In this context, a number of references could be drawn in favor of, and against the complex structure of socio-economic and political system that the architects of post-independence modern India successfully developed over the years. Our parliamentary system seems to be influenced by the British political system. But, not the same could be said about the most primary unit of our democratic system – that is village level governance model. This model is called Panchayati Raj governance system, which is structured in 3-layers. Part IX of the Indian Constitution is the section of the Constitution relating to the Panchayats. It stipulates that in States or Union Territories with more than two million inhabitants there are three levels of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs):

1. the Gram Panchayats (GP) at village level
2. the Mandal Parishad or Block Samiti or Panchayat Samiti at block level, and
3. the Zila Parishad (ZP) at district level.

Rural Governance System: Indian Context

PRI in its modern avatar was introduced in India through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 to build democracy at the grass roots level and was entrusted with the task of rural development in the country. But, roots of this model of governance can be traced back to many centuries in the Indian history. As far back as in Rig Veda, Sabha, Samiti and Vidatha were mentioned as the units of local self-units. As per the details of these powerful units, the contemporary kings needed to take approval from these units in many instances. In Ramayan, the village level unit of governance used to be called as Janpad, while there used to be a caste panchayat all across the kingdom each of them was represented in the council of ministers in the king's court by one elected person. In later periods, 'Shanti Parva' in Mahabharata, Manu Smriti and Kautilya's Arthshastra also had references of rural units of governance in contemporary times. The history of rural governance in India remained strong in almost all the time periods till around 5th century AD when the Gupta dynasty fell down.



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Central power system weakened and so did the local system of governance. Later in dynasties like Delhi Sultanate, Mughal empire, rural governance system was reinstated to some extent.

Panchayati Raj in British India

Panchayati Raj Institutions found their modern form mostly in British Raj when in 1870 Mayo resolution was brought into. Through this resolution, local institutions were bestowed with more power and their scope of functioning was also enhanced. The Mayo resolution was in fact, promulgated as a result of the first independence war of 1857. The objective was to decentralise the taxation system to grass root levels. Mayo resolution was followed up by democratic framework of these institutions through Lord Rippon's laws in 1882. Then in 1907, for the first time in British India, the need of panchayats on village level was recognised by a Royal Commission chaired by CEH Hobhouse. In next some decades many more laws were passed to strengthen the identity and authority of village panchayats.

Mahatma Gandhi was a fierce proponent of the idea of Panchayati Raj. He strongly pleaded for decentralisation of powers. He viewed independence of India as a whole to begin at the villages and wanted every village to be self-sustained and capable of managing its own affairs. But, there were many counter views also. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar himself was opposed to the idea of panchayati raj. He believed that the villages represented regressive India, a source of oppression. He argued against panchayats as he was apprehensive about the continuation of caste hegemony. Further, he opined that villages in India were caste-ridden and had little prospects of success as institutions of self-government. As a resultant of these debates, panchayats could find a mention only in Article 40 of the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution initially.

Panchayati Raj in Independent India

Panchayati Raj being a part of directive principles was never got a standard structure on pan-India basis. But, some states started implementing it under different names and concepts at local levels. In 1952, Community Development Programs (CDPs) were started on national level, but it could not cut much ice. To understand the reasons of its

failure, a committee headed by Balwant Rai Mehta was constituted in 1957. This committee concluded that CDP was not able to achieve its objectives because of the lack of public participation in it. So, the Mehta committee recommended the formation of 3-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) – Gram Panchayat at village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Zilla Parishad at the district level. After that, multiple committees were formed on the issue of local level governance which made dozens of recommendations. Some or other parts of these recommendations got inserted in the legislation and the modern form of PRIs started taking structure. Then in September 1991, a comprehensive amendment was introduced in the form of the Constitution 72nd Amendment Bill. Later 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments together paved the way of local self-governance in rural and urban India. The 73rd Amendment actually added Part IX titled "The Panchayats".

Panchayat is constituted on the basis of Gram Sabha – the basic unit on village level – where all the adult members are registered as voters. Article 243 of the Constitution deals with the process and structure of the constitution of PRIs. According to the article 243B, the panchayats function at the level of village, intermediate block/taluk/mandal and district except in the States where the population is below 20 lakhs. Article 243C (2) states that all the seats of a panchayat needs to be filled by direct election. Article 243D deals with the reservation in panchayats.

Panchayati Raj : A tool for Empowering Weaker Sections

According to the 2019 records, there are 6614 block panchayats, 630 zilla panchayats and 253163 gram panchayats. PRIs have played a significant role in the political empowerment of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments required that no less than one-third of the total seats in local bodies should be reserved for women. At 1.4 million, India has the most women in elected positions. Studies show that greater female representation in local level government system has ensured reporting of crime against women at a greater number. Also, districts with female sarpanchs have made significantly greater investment in basic amenities like drinking water and public goods. Along with women, it has also been playing an important role in strengthening

weaker social groups like ST/ST and OBC. Seats and sarpanch/pradhan positions are reserved for SC/ST and OBC candidates. By giving representation to these deprived sections of society, PRIs have cemented the foundation of Indian democracy.

Governance by People for People

Gram Panchayat Institutions are the primary entities which take care of all the basic needs of the public. Maintaining water sources, village wells, tanks and pumps, street lighting and drainage system – all come in the purview of gram panchayat. PRIs being run by the elected representatives of the village only can always identify the problems at the grass root levels more efficiently, and thus reduce burden from the State administration. PRIs have 3 sources of funding: grants received from the local bodies, funds from the centrally-sponsored schemes and funds received by the state governments on the advice of State Finance Commissions. Although, PRIs are governed independently, the rules of their governance are formed by the state government.

There are two categories of work that PRIs are supposed to do. One is mandatory category and the other is optional. Optional set of work depends upon the available resources with a PRI. Here are some works that are optional for panchayati raj: establishment of reproduction centers for animals, promoting agriculture, plantation alongside the roads, welfare of new born and mother etc. Under mandatory category comes following set of works: primary health, construction of public wells, construction of public toilets, social health and primary and adult education, vaccination, irrigation, supply of potable water, rural electrification, hygiene, maintenance of public pathways etc. In the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the scope of work for PRIs was further enhanced to include services at the time of natural calamity, preparing annual development plan for panchayat area, implementation and review of poverty alleviation programs, annual budget and removing encroachment from public land. Not only administrative works, but also in managing the law and order situation, panchayats are playing commendable role. Many villages are too distant from police stations and for any villager to seek resort to police against any petty crime could be challenging. In those areas, panchayats take action against the culprit and try to create an atmosphere

of justice. In some states, Gram Panchayats also take up tasks related to sustainable energy sources, public distribution system etc. They are empowered by State Legislatures.

In short, the PRIs are conceptualised in a way that the bottom up approach could be thought of for development at local level. The idea is to get the plans ready on need basis by the same people who have to use the facilities. So, village panchayats make plans of development with people's participation. These plans are placed together with similar plans prepared by the intermediate and district panchayats. All these facts and provisions point to only one conclusion that panchayati raj institutions in their structure and conception, are meant to be a backbone of successful and good governance system.

Acknowledging the crucial role Panchayati Raj Institutions can play in the implementation of successful and good governance, the Narendra Modi-government has launched several schemes aimed at strengthening and empowering Panchayati Raj institutions in the country. Some of these schemes are:

Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP)–

A special campaign called "Gram Panchayat Development Plan" was launched with a mandate to prepare the Panchayat Development Plan (PDP) for economic development and social justice utilising the resources available to them. The PDP planning process had to be comprehensive and based on participatory process which involves the full convergence with Schemes of all related Central Ministries / Line Departments related to 29 subjects enlisted in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution. The Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) should be comprehensive and based on participatory process involving the community particularly Gram Sabha, and will be in convergence with schemes of all related Central Ministries / Line Departments related to 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution. The convergence assumes greater significance in view of the fact that Panchayats can play an important role for effective implementation of flagship schemes on subjects of National Importance for transformation of rural India.

This Ministry of Finance took the initiative of preparing model guidelines for GPDP and

circulated the same to all the States where part IX of Constitution is applicable. Based upon these model guidelines, all the states notified their State specific guidelines for GPDP. The GPDPs were being formulated and implemented by States since then, as per their respective State Guidelines. Further, in consonance with the emerging needs of holistic development of the villages, the Ministry has revised the model GPDP guidelines issued during 2015. The revised guidelines in 2018 have been put on the website of the Ministry and have been shared with States for amplifying their respective guidelines.

Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA)– With an objective to bring people propelled development at the ground level, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had launched Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), the ‘Transformation of Aspirational Districts’ program that aims to quickly and effectively transform selected districts in 2018. These districts were selected on parameters like poverty, public health, nutrition, education, gender, sanitation, drinking water, livelihood generation which are in sync with Social Development Goals (SDGs) and fall within the realm of Panchayats. RGSA was proposed to be implemented as a core Centrally Sponsored Scheme (CSS) for four years viz., from 2018-19 to 2021-22 with State and Central shares. The sharing ratio for the State components would be in the ratio of 60:40 except NE and Hilly States, where the Central and State Ratio had to be 90:10. For all UTs, the Central share would be 100 per cent. RGSA enables Panchayats to function effectively to achieve SDGs and other development objectives that require significant Capacity building efforts.

SVAMITVA (Survey of Villages And Mapping with Improved Technology in Village Areas)– On Panchayati Raj Diwas (April 24th) in 2020, the Prime Minister launched ‘SVAMITVA Yojana’ or Ownership Scheme to map residential land ownership in the rural sector using modern technology like the use of drones. The scheme aims to revolutionise property record maintenance in India. It aims to provide rural people with the right to document their residential properties so that they can use their property for economic purposes. The scheme is for surveying the land parcels in rural inhabited area using Drone technology. The survey shall cover all the 6.62 lakh villages across the country in a phase wise manner

over the period 2020 -2025.

e-Panchayat– The e-Panchayat scheme aims to bring transparency and efficiency to the functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions through the use of technology. It provides a platform for online reporting, monitoring, and management of Panchayat activities.

Deen Dayal Upadhyay Panchayat Sashaktikaran Yojana (DDUPSY)– The DDUPSY scheme was launched in 2014 to strengthen Panchayati Raj institutions by providing them with the necessary resources and capabilities to undertake their constitutional duties. The scheme aims to empower Panchayati Raj institutions to undertake planning, implementation, and monitoring of development programs.

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan– The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, launched in 2014, aims to make India clean and open-defecation free. The scheme focuses on creating a culture of cleanliness and promoting the use of toilets in rural areas. Panchayati Raj institutions play a crucial role in the implementation of the scheme at the grassroots level.

With the help of these schemes PRIs are aimed at strengthening the Panchayati Raj system in India and empowering local communities to participate in the development process to achieve the constitutional goal of successful governance at grass-root level. ■

Empowering GRAM PANCHAYATS - One Click at a Time

eGramSwaraj App
creating smart villages

Single digital platform for all Panchayat functioning

2.24 Lakh Panchayats powered with Online Payment

Over 2.55 lakh Panchayats uploaded their development plan

Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj