

Role of Panchatayi Raj Institutions in Rural Development : A Critical Assessment

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Since independence, the focus of Indian government has been on the overall development of country. In the earlier Five Year Plans the main thrust for development was laid on agriculture, industry, communication, education, health and allied sectors. Though this yielded positive results in the beginning, still it was realized that the all-round development of the country is possible only through the development of rural India. Keeping this in view, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have been introduced under the 73rd Amendment Act of the Constitution of India in 1992. Rural Development includes measures to improve the rural infrastructure, improve income of rural households and delivery systems pertaining to education, health & safety mechanisms by strengthening the democratic structure of society through the PRIs. Government of India has taken many steps to develop rural India and for this. PRIs are expected to play an important role in rural development in India after independence. An attempt is made in this paper to critically assess the role of PRIs in rural development. It has

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been suggested that PRIs must be given adequate powers to use resources and undertake integrated rural development by improving their functioning.

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1. Introduction

Recent interest in the study of rural social structure and the changes within it stems out of their far-reaching influence on the patterns of economic development and social change in the Third World. A decisive break from the colonial and semi-feudal past is being witnessed in these areas as leading to the changes in economic motivation, a heightened political consciousness, and an increased social awareness. Rural societies have, thus, become a prolific area of inquiry for the social scientists in general globally as well as in India today.

It is now generally accepted that economic development cannot be adequately understood in isolation from the social framework within which it takes place. This is particularly true of the underdeveloped countries of Asia where economic organization has a lower degree of autonomy than in the industrial societies of the West and is, therefore, more closely intermeshed with a variety of social institutions whose functions are partly economic and partly non-economic (Myrdal, 1968). Indeed, in many sectors of these societies it is by no means easy to differentiate between economic and other social institutions in terms of clearly defined functions.

Rural development has always been an important issue in all discussions pertaining to economic development, especially of developing countries, throughout the world. In fact, rural society is not static. It has been changing fast. The changes have been more rapid during the last decades of 20th century and the first two decades of 21st century. It is quite interesting to mention that not only in India but in almost all the Third World countries, much amount has been spent on rural development. It has been stressed by social scientists that key to country's development lies with the development of rural people. International agencies have provided focus on the economic development of the rural society. Social scientists have made intensive studies on various aspects of rural life (such as caste, class and family, education, industry, cooperatives and entrepreneurship) in India as a result of various schemes and policies.

Rural development planning has gained prominence in recent times because of the growing realization that benefits from development have, by and large, bypassed large segments of rural society. The first organized effort to solve the problem of rural India was made through the Community Development Programme in the year 1952 and National Extension Service in 1953. With the rural planning in India becoming an area of prime importance for the government of India, the Ministry of Rural Development was formed to accelerate rural development. At the same time, it was also recognized that the organization and structure of the process of planning have to be modified, so that policies and programmes reflect the development needs of rural areas.

This is the reason that on the completion of first five years of the CDP, the planning Commission appointed a high-ranking study committee headed by Balwant Rai Mehta, Chief Minister of Gujarat. This team pointed out both positive results and inadequacies in the implementation of the programme. This committee considered decentralized planning very important in a country like India and recommended Panchayati Raj for rural areas, where majority of the population lives. The prime objective of Introduction of Panchayati Raj Institutions (herein after referred as PRIs) was to create another layer of government and political representation at the grass-roots level so that the development plans are formulated and implemented by the elected representatives in India with better governance.

Before discussing and critically evaluating the Role of PRIs in rural development, it would be pertinent to clarify the concept of rural development and PRIs first.

2. Concept of Rural Development

In simple words, development refers to growth, evolution, stage of inducement or progress. This progress is mostly gradual as it occurs in sequential phases and there is increasing differentiation. "Development" usually means improvement, either in the general situation of the system, or in some of its constituent elements. It also refers to the over all movement towards greater efficiency and complex situations.

Rural development is a collective process, which aims at improving the well-being and self-realization of people living in rural areas. It designates the utilization of approaches and techniques

under one single programme, which rally upon local communities as units of action to bring change from the traditional way of living to progressive way of living. Rural development is the process of improving the quality of life and economic well-being of people living in rural areas. According to Agarwal, rural development is a strategy designed to improve the economic and social life of rural poor.¹

Rural development as a concept means all round development of rural areas. In this sense, it is a Comprehensive and multi-dimensional concept that includes agriculture and allied activities—rural and small scale industries and skills, socio-economic infrastructure, community services and facilities, and above all human resources in rural areas.

As a phenomenon, rural development is the result of interactions between various physical, technological, economic, socio-cultural and institutional factors. Rural development as a strategy is a scheme designed for the economic and social welfare of a specific group of people (the rural poor). Rural development as a discipline is of interdisciplinary nature intersecting agriculture, social behaviour, engineering and management sciences.

According to Robert Chambers, “Rural development is a strategy to enable a specific group of people, poor rural women and men, to gain for themselves and their children more of what they want and need. It involves helping the poorest among those who seek a livelihood in the rural areas to demand and control more of the benefits of rural development. The group includes small scale farmers, tenants and the landless.”²

The United Nations defines Rural Development as “.....a process of change, by which the efforts of the people themselves are united, those of government authorities to improve their economic, social and cultural conditions of communities in to the life of the nation and to enable them to contribute fully to national programme.

Rural development is a national necessity and has considerable importance in India because of the following reasons³ :

1. About three-fourth of India’s population live in rural areas, thus rural development is needed to develop nation as whole.
2. Nearly half of the country’s national income is derived from agriculture, which is major occupation of rural India.
3. Around seventy per cent of Indian population gets employment through agriculture.

4. Bulks of raw materials for industries come from agriculture and rural sector.
5. Increase in industrial population can be justified only in rural population's motivation and increasing the purchasing power to buy industrial goods.
6. Growing disparity between the urban elite and the rural poor can lead to political instability.

The objectives of rural development are as follows :

1. To increase the availability and widen the distribution of life-sustaining articles,
2. To raise standards of living and
3. To free from servitude and dependence.

Thus, it is evident that rural development refers to the process in which efforts are made to promote and accelerate economic development in rural areas through natural and human resources, technology, infrastructure, institutions and organizations and government policies and programs. Its objective is to provide employment to the rural poor and bring quality in their lives by making rural people self-reliant. It is a process of transformation of the entire rural social system with the aim of developing good living conditions.

3. Panchayati Raj Institutions

In India, there is a mention of village panchayats or other similar institutions addressed by the same name from the earliest times. Panchayats have been mentioned in the early times from Rigvedic literature till the time of the arrival of the British. The inspiration of Panchayati Raj is derived from the traditional 'Panch Parmeshwar' i.e. God speaks in five Panches. This means that the payment of the five Panchas is the payment of God. After independence, special interest has been taken in the reorganization of Panchayats. The village has always been conceived as a self-reliant autonomous government. It has always been an effort that the villagers can take all their decisions on their own.

Panchayats are rural political institutions as they are related to the power structure at the village level. Although the Constitution of India does not have a separate provision for the political organization of Panchayati Raj, the Directive Powers of the State Governments

provide for the reorganization of Panchayats so that the village can function as a self-governing unit. Village Panchayats have the right to collect land tax, provide security, settle disputes and public welfare.

Panchayati Raj means the governance of villages by Panchayats so that villages can be rebuilt. Radhakumud Mukerjee has called the village panchayats as the gods of democracy. In fact, Panchayati Raj is concerned with the democratic decentralization of power. Therefore, Panchayati Raj can be called a method of making people participate in its welfare work in a democratic state. It is a mechanism for the development of administrative autonomous government at the local level. After independence, the role of Panchayats was accepted to make people more and more involved in governance. It was hoped that these would provide opportunities for self-government to the rural society. Therefore, the system established for the development of rural society and to give democratic form to economic and other activities is called Panchayati Raj. Some consider it as an agency of administration, expansion of democracy at the lower level and also a manifesto of local rural government. After independence, Panchayati Raj system was established in India. It decentralized political and economic power. According to Rajni Kothari, "The national leadership had a visionary task - the establishment of Panchayati Raj. Due to this the Indian polity is getting decentralized and their unity is also increasing by the creation of a single local institution in the country. Pt. Nehru said that "the rights should be handed over to the people of the villages. Let them do the work, even if they make a thousand mistakes. No need to worry about it. Give authority to the Panchayats." Balwantrai Mehta, in his study, suggested a three-tier system for the Panchayati Raj system. Under this scheme, there are Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayats at the lower level and Zilla Parishad at the higher level and there are area committees in between these two.

After independence, the Uttar Pradesh government first passed the 'Uttar Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1947' in the country. This act was passed by the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly on June 5, 1947 and by the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council on September 16, 1947. The Governor General of India gave assent to this act on 7th December, 1947 and since then it is applicable in Uttar Pradesh. Similar Acts have been passed in all the states. Presently the form of

Panchayati Raj in India is based on the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution, 1993 AD. It is estimated that at present there are 2,26,108 Gram Panchayats, 5,736 Panchayat Samitis and 457 Zilla Parishads functioning in India in which about 34 lakh public representatives are working.

Three-tier system of Panchayati Raj system has been implemented in most of the states : Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level and Zilla Parishad at the district level. Village level institutions are addressed by the name of Gram Panchayat in all the states. Panchayats have been reorganized at the local level in most of the states at three levels : (a) Gram Sabha, (b) Gram Panchayat and (c) Nyaya Panchayat. Gram Sabhas are established in villages with different population in different states. In Punjab, Gram Sabha is established in villages with a population of 500 or more, whereas in Uttar Pradesh this number has been fixed at 250. In most of the states Gram Sabha has been formed in the village whose population is 250. If the population is less then two or three nearby villages are merged. There should be no natural barrier between them. Membership of the Gram Sabha is optional. It is necessary for a member of the Gram Sabha that he should be 18 years of age or more and should not be a leper, lunatic, insolvent, punished and an employee of the State Government. The Gram Sabha meets twice in a year - first immediately after the Kharif crop is harvested and the second after the Rabi crop is harvested. In the first meeting, the budget is presented and in the second meeting, the income and expenditure of the last year are accounted for and various development plans are discussed. The Gram Sabha elects a Pradhan (President) and an Up-Pradhan (Vice President) whose term is now five years or up to the term of the elected Gram Sabha. It is necessary to take the approval of the Gram Sabha for all the works and plans.

The executive body of the Gram Sabha is called the Gram Panchayat. Its members are elected from amongst the members of the Gram Sabha and their number depends on the population of the village. Earlier thirty to fifty-one members were elected but now this number is from nine to fifteen. All members are elected for five years. The head of the Gram Sabha is also its head. The members of the Gram Panchayat elect one of the members as Up-Pradhan, whose term is for one year. The meeting of the Gram Panchayat is held once in a month and if one-third of the members wish, they can request the

Pradhan for a meeting at any time and thereafter the Pradhan is required to convene the meeting within fifteen days. The President can be removed from his office by a motion of no-confidence by a two-thirds majority. The Pradhan presides over the meeting of the Panchayat and if the Pradhan is absent in any meeting, the Up-Pradhan performs his responsibilities.

Nyaya Panchayats have been established at the third level to provide affordable justice system to the villagers. A Nyaya Panchayat is established on four or five Gram Panchayats, the number of which is between twenty and twenty-five, that is, each Gram Panchayat elects four or five members and sends them to the Nyaya Panchayat. The Panchayati Adalat has an elected Sarpanch who is nominated by the District Magistrate at times. In addition to the Sarpanch, an assistant Sarpanch is also elected and both these office bearers must be educated. The term of each Panch of the Nyaya Panchayat starts from the date of his becoming Panch and lasts till the term of the Nyaya Panchayat is over. Civil and criminal cases are heard by these Nyaya Panchayats in the respective villages. Generally, the Nyaya Panchayat is divided into four or five Nyay Peeths, which settle disputes and disputes related to their village. The decision of this court can be appealed against in a court of law. Courts of law may also, on finding that a case is liable to be tried by a Nyaya Panchayat, transfer a case to a Nyaya Panchayat of competent jurisdiction, except as provided in sub-section (4) of section 55 .

Thus, Panchayati Raj institutions are main body of village local government that play very a significant role in development of village especially primary education, health, agricultural developments, women and child development and women participation in local government etc. One can say that PRIs 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.⁴ The primary objective of establishing PRIs as the third tier of the government is to increase democratic participation, to better articulate local needs and priorities, and to ensure a more efficient use of local resources along with greater accountability and transparency.

4. Achievements and Limitations of Panchatayi Raj Institutions in Rural Development

PRIs, initiative for democratic decentralization, have been quite successful politically at grass-root level in India. In other words, they are system of rural local self-government in India. The Panchayats are expected to play an important role in rural development in India, particularly after independence. Plan documents of both the central and state governments and various committees have emphasized the importance of these bodies in the polity. The implementation of rural development programmes through the PRIs has brought a radical change in the socio-economic conditions of the rural tribal people.⁵

PRIs can decide the local priorities and prepare the development plan. According to the available statistics, there are 2,60,512 PRIs in the country, 2,53, 268 village panchayats, 6,614 intermediate panchayats, 630 district panchayats, approximately 31.0 lakh of elected members of PRIs out of which 13.75 lakh are women representatives. Rs. 54077.80 crore were allotted by FFC as basic grant and 6609.33 crore as performance grant in 2019-20. Capacity building and training to the elected representatives of PRIs and other stakeholders has been the main thrust of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj.

Besides, the ministry has incentivized the best performing Panchayats recommended by the State Governments/Union Territories since. The awards are given on the National Panchayati Raj Day (NPRD) celebrated on 24th April every year. As PRIs are the cornerstone of local self-governments and peoples' participation, the Ministry has been providing all type of support for building up and continuously striving to strength PRIs through financial support for attaining decentralized, participatory local self-government and to ensure inclusive development with social justice, and efficient delivery of services.

This initiative of democratic decentralization has actually provided the right of 'Swaraj' to the people; inspired the people to manage their own affairs, which leads to the development of social and political consciousness; helped in developing a sense of responsibility among the people and developing the ability to work; helped in timely and speedy disposal of all tasks by reducing the delaying tendencies of bureaucracy and in ending economic and

social exploitation; developed the spirit of mutual aid and cooperation among the people; reduced the pressure of the central and state governments on local problems; provided a solid foundation for the establishment of democratic traditions; and awakened and developed a sense of self-respect in the public.

PRIs have given an opportunity to get involved in the development programmes. It is generally held by various scholars that while the PRIs have been successful in creating another layer of government and political representation at the grass-roots level, they have, by and large, failed to provide better governance. Studies on PRIs have also shown that female political representatives in local self-government makes women more likely to come forward and report crimes. In the districts with female Sarpanchs, significantly greater investments have been made in drinking water, public goods.

PRIs have been successful in co-operative village management, rural extension programmes, community development, abolition of intermediaries, land reforms, democratic decentralization, poverty alleviation, additional investment in agriculture, irrigation, small scale and cottage industry, introduction of new technology in agriculture, the maintenance of sanitation and hygiene in the villages, provide drinking ware facilities and so on to some extent.

However, it may be mentioned the PRIs are suffering from many limitations and grey areas, which need to be addressed at priority level. These are :

1. The lack of adequate funds as panchayats have not been able to enlarge the domain to raise their own funds and they are even so starved for funds that they are often unable to meet even payroll obligations.
2. The interference of local MPs and MLAs in the day-to-day functioning of panchayats which adversely affects their performance.
3. Very little devolution of authority and unscientific distribution of functions to PRIs without adequate administrative, financial and technical support as the transfer of various governance functions are not mandated, but left to the respective state legislatures.
4. PRIs also suffer from structural deficiencies i.e. no secretarial support and lower levels of technical knowledge, lack discretionary powers over spending, inadequate powers of taxation

even for subjects falling within their purview, autonomous budgeting powers etc., which ultimately restrict the aggregation of bottom up planning.

5. Lack of clarity and differentiation of functions among PRIs as state executive authorities have proliferated to carry out these functions and indifference as well as neglect remains prominent on the part of state governments
6. Presence of adhocism, i.e. lack of clear setting of agenda in gram sabha, gram samiti meetings and no proper structure.
7. Proxy representation in case of women as their husbands are on the fore front. Concepts of Pradhanapati amply demonstrates this. The same is the case with members.
8. Some of the PRIs do not have their own building and they share space with schools, anganwadi centre and other places.
9. Social challenges which work against the emergence of leadership from the marginalized sections of society like dalits, women and tribals. The marginalized sections of society like women, other backward classes and SCs/STs continue to face many hurdles and find it difficult to participate at the grass-root level development process.
10. Deficiency in the 73rd Amendment Act as it does not define clearly the role of political parties, does not speak about the relationship between the panchayats and local bureaucracy, does not explain specific grounds for the dissolution of PRIs etc.
11. Half-heartedly implementation of major rural development programmes (like MGNREGA, SGRY, IAY, RGGVY, TRYSEM and DWCRA etc.) of the state and central governments through PRIs.
12. Inability of the three-tiers to operate as functional authorities as it has been observed that the hierarchical domination and predominance, "fitters down step by step from Zilla Parishad to Panchayat Samiti and from them to the Village Panchayats".

Thus, the PRIs have not been an absolute success. They have to take a number of measures to ensure that the benefits of these special schemes reach the real poor instead of the intermediaries. People belonging to weaker sections have to be given priority in the development efforts so that the benefits of planned investment can go to the relatively backward sections of the community.

5. Conclusion

It may be concluded that the socio-political changes expected from the introduction of PRIs have not been fulfilled to a large extent. This has resulted in the non-fulfilment of the objectives like social equality, gender equity and changes at the grassroots level leadership envisaged in PRIs. Now that there are millions of elected representatives giving voice to Indians at the grass-roots level, these representatives need clear mandates of local functions, and the ability to raise their own revenue, to foster better local governance. Without the functions and finances, PRIs will only be an expensive failure. There is need for bottom up planning especially at the district level, based on grassroots inputs received from Gram Sabha. It is also important to have clarity in the assignment of functions and the local governments should have clear and independent sources of finance. To solve the problem of proxy representation, social empowerment must precede the political empowerment by setting some minimum qualifications for Panchayat elections.

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