



Role of panchayati raj system in strengthening grassroots democracy in India

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Abstract

The Practical implementation of the Panchayati Raj Act in independent India is undoubtedly proving to be a “Role Model” in the direction of democratic decentralization. In the last three decades, these institutions have not only kept the rural culture alive but also moving the villages towards self-reliance. Through these institutions, not only all the sections have been able to get proper representation but also the emerging rural leadership is constantly receiving new challenges and new opportunities as well. Under the Panchayati Raj Act, for the economic, social and community development of rural India-powers, funds and responsibilities were transferred to the Panchayati Institutions. Today, through the participation of rural people, the process of development and planning is being conducted smoothly by these institutions. These institutions are not only identifying the resources available at the local level but continuous efforts are also being made to fulfill the local needs of all the communities. Today these institutions are developing infrastructure in rural India through technology and management. Gradually, transparency and accountability in the works of Panchayati representatives is also increasing. Thus we can say that this emerging new leadership is proving helpful not only in creating a clean and bright picture of rural India but also strengthening our democracy and democratic character.

Keywords: rural development, self-reliant, decision-making, democratic-decentralization, new leadership, women’s reservation

Introduction

Panchayati Institutions based on the concept of “Panch-Parmeshwar” and the spirit of democratic decentralization are considered historical heritage in India. Today more than 60% of India’s Population resides in rural India and about 6.5 Lakh Panchayati Institutions are playing an active role in rural India. The current changing picture of rural India indicates the diligence and activism of this new Panchayati Leadership. After the implementation of the three-tier Panchayati raj system through the 73rd constitutional amendment, today all most every Panchayati institutions seem to be moving continuously in the direction of Mahatma Gandhi’s Goel of “Gram-Swaraj”. our country, the practice of celebrating Panchayati Raj Day on 24th April every year should be started from the year 2010. Today, due to the attainment of proper leadership position in these Panchayati institutions to all the common people including women and tribal, backward classes, there has been a positive change in the picture of rural India and it seems that rural India is continuously moving in direction of inclusive development. Today’s various schemes related to rural development are being implemented by the central and state government through Panchayati institutions and the new digital leadership of these institutions seems to be moving forward in the direction of successful implementation of these schemes.

Objectives of Research Paper

The Following 2 Objectives have been set for the analysis of this research paper-

1. To know the nature of Panchayati leadership and their changing role
2. To Find out the challenges faced by this leadership and offer suggestions to solve those challenges.

Research Methodology

This research paper is completely based on secondary data, which is available on various books, Journal’s and periodicals. For the analysis of this research paper -observational, comparative and historical study methods have been used. According to the need, materials have also been collected through Government & Non-Government websites.

Review of Literature

The matter of serious concern which is emerging from the review of research literature is that “Three decades of the implementation of Panchayati raj system are almost nearing completion but the pace of rural development through these institutions seems to be very slow. It is also important to note that the conditions of these

institutions are almost different in each state and Uts. Many researchers have presented their views regarding Panchayati Raj System and grassroot leadership but most of the studies have either been confined to a particular state or through these studies, the actual depiction of the functioning of the Panchayati institutions has not been possible. Although it is true that through the 73rd constitutional amendment, the important role of Panchayati institutions in rural development programs is clearly visible but “Due to the Prevalence of works, the work area of Panchayati institutions is becoming increasingly fast and the responsibility of Panchayati leadership is also increasing continuously”(Mohapatra, 2012) ^[1]. It is also believed that the Panchayati Raj system has created a new democratic structure in this country. As a result, “not only democratic strength has been achieved at the grassroot level but governance and administration have reached the door of the people” (Palekar, 2017) ^[2]. We know very well that in every 5 years, about 32 lakh people’s representatives are elected to the Panchayati institutions,” But this leadership should give new life to the three-tier Panchayati raj institutions because the goal of accountability towards the people has not been fully achieved” (Satyanarayana & Shivanna, 2020). ^[3]. Similarly, it has also been concluded that “By reserving the place for women, an attempt has been made to establish a balance between men and women from the point of view of Panchayati representation” (Tiwari N 2011) ^[4]. Now the idea is also being presented that the Panchayati leadership has started deciding the policies itself at the local level keeping in mind the local priorities (Veena, 2021) ^[5]. In view of the different findings of various studies, an attempt was made to identify the nature of new Panchayati leadership, their functioning and their changing roles.

Discussion and Findings

India is counted among largest and major democratic nations of the world. In fact, the success and significance of any democratic nation can be based on the decentralization of power. The three-tier Panchayati raj system is proving to be a milestone in the direction of democratic decentralization. This system is not only creating democratic character among the people and the people’s representatives, not only creating new leadership but apart from this, it is also, providing experience to the public and their representatives for participation in higher democratic institutions. In view of the expansion of the work of these institutions, the ministry of Panchayati Raj has also been constituted by the Government of India on 27 may 2004. At present, Panchayats have been placed in the “State List” under the prevailing constitutional provisions. That is, the Panchayati institutions continue to function under the prevailing laws of the respective state and union territory.

In fact, apart from being a democratic nation, India is also village dominant nation. The soul of India, resides in the villages and Panchayats have been the basis of the system since ancient times in rural India. To understand the role of Panchayati institutions in rural development, we must first know the status of rural population and the contribution of that population to the Indian Economy.

The population of rural India in the last three decades can be easily understood through the following table-

Table 1: Rural Population

Units	1991	2001	2011	2020 (Estimated)
Rural Population (In Crore)	62.9	74.2	83.3	89.7
Ratio of Rural Population	74%	72%	69%	65%

Source: Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation

It is clear from the discussion of the above table that along with the increase in Population, the Population of rural India is increasing. But due to the increasing trend of Urbanization, the proportion of rural population is gradually decreasing. It can also be said that about two-thirds of India’s population still resides in rural India. Similarly, the share of rural India in the economy and workforce of our country is also very important, which has been discussed under the following table-

Table 2: Share of rural areas in India’s Economy and workforce

Unit	1993-94	1999-2000	2004-05	2011-12
Economy	54.3%	48.1%	48.1%	46.9%
Workforce	77.8%	76.1%	74.6%	70.9%

Source: Nitti Ayog, 2017

It is clear from the discussion of the above table that the average contribution of rural areas in the economy of our country is about 49.35%. The data also shows that this contribution is gradually decreasing. Still, it can be said that almost half of our economy is from rural India. Similarly, if we analyze the rural workforce, we find that on an average, 74.85% of the rural workforce is contributing significantly to our economy. It is also true that gradually the percentage of this contribution is also decreasing.

Similarly, along with the increase in the rural population, the number of PRIs is also increasing, which has been describe in following table-

Table 3: Number of PRIs

Unit	2005	2010	2015	2020
District Panchayat	539	584	594	659
Intermediate Panchayat	6103	6312	6332	6829
Village Panchayat	233886	238054	248154	255487
Total	240528	244950	255080	262975

Source-Yojana, November, 2021

It is clear from the analysis of the above table that with the expansion of urbanization, new districts, new tahsils and new blocks are being formed, due to which the number of PRIs is increasing. Where in 2005 the total number of PRIs was about 2.41 lakhs, while in 2020 this number has increased to about 2.63 Lakhs.

The natural result of the increase in the number of PRIs is that the number of elected representatives is also increasing, which has been discussed in the following table-

Table 4: Number of Elected Representatives

Year	Elected Representatives (in lakhs)	Elected Women Representatives (In Lakhs)	Percentage of Elected Women Representatives	Percentage of Elected Male Representatives
2005	27.82	10.42	37.46	62.54
2010	28.51	10.48	36.75	63.25
2015	29.17	13.42	46.00	54.00
2020	31.65	14.53	45.91	54.09

Source: Yojana, November 2021

Above table shows that after the year 2010, due to increase in women's reservation by many states, the average percentage of elected women representatives has increased. It is worth noting that 50% seats have been reserved for women in Panchayati institutions by 21 states, as a result of which efforts have been made not only to increase the capacity of women representation but the path of women empowerment was also paving itself. According to the provisions of the constitution and its spirit, a provision has been made about the reservation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes for all post and places in Panchayati institutions at each level. Similarly, in every reserved and general category, at list one third that maximum 50% of the seats and posts are reserved for women. On the basis of this form of Panchayati system, it can be said that a large number of Pinch, Sarpanch and office bearers are probably elected for the first time and holding public post. In short it can be said that not only all the sections have got representation at the lower level of the governance system but new rural leadership has also emerged.

Our observation tells us that in the first few years of the implementation of the 73rd constitutional amendment, while the educational background of rural leadership was limited to primary and secondary education but today, in many panchayats the responsibilities of Panchayati representation are being happily carried out by highly educated and in some cases foreign educated persons. It can also be said that most of the rural leadership is associated with a basic profession like agriculture. Similarly, the representation of new blood I.e. Youth in Panchayati institutions This young leadership is taking over the reins of Panchayati institutions either with the support of political parties or because of the heartfelt desire of village development.

Through various schemes by the central government and various resources made available by the state government, not only the basic infra-structure of Village Panchayats is improving but at the same time, the successful operation of the E-Governance system is also possible. "In the year 2020, about 77.75% of the Gram Panchayats are being operated with Panchayati bhavan. Computer facility available in about 78.96% of gram panchayats, while 53.50% panchayats have internet connectivity" (6).

At present relative changes can be seen in the nature of Panchayati institutions, working style of leaders, working culture of these institutions, policy making and decision-making process of Panchayati institutions. Today the place of rural elite culture has been taken by mass political culture. While the concept of sarpanch pati (Husband) has declined, on the other hand the female leadership is facing family and social obligations as well as political pressure. While on the one hand there has been an increase in the political awareness of the people and people's representatives, on the other hand, a great difference can also be seen between the roles of urban and rural leadership, similarly, efforts to achieve economic self-reliance at the village level through self-help groups appear to be proving fruitful. Similarly, "A decentralized system of policy making and decision making is also emerging" (7).

In the present era of information revolution, efforts are being made by some Panchayati representatives to realize the concept of "Smart Village" "on the lines of "Smart City". Some thinkers believe that "due to lack of quality work capacity and adequate financial resources, Panchayati raj institutions seem very weak in terms of governance and administration" (8). But today we can say that in this era of e-governance and m-governance, the concept of e-panchayat "seems to be taking shape. At present, the important responsibility of taking all the schemes related to rural development to the doorsteps of the village people through "Digital India" "has been entrusted to the Panchayati institutions. In these circumstances, the elected representatives can also be seen

making continuous efforts towards equipping themselves technically. Similarly, Panchayati leadership is getting a huge opportunity to play an important role in schemes like Digital Literacy Mission, Ayushman Bharat Yajna, Water conservation and management and e-market plus.

It is often believed that “the socio-political and cultural environment of the village influences the functioning of Panchayati institutions to a great extent” (9), but the relative change in this environment depends on the ability of the leadership. Although it is true that in the changing environment, leadership is constantly facing new challenges. Such as lack of sufficient skill in technical work, lack of tendency to earn maximum profit through government schemes, lack of adequacy of new financial sources, lack of adequate information about government schemes, social, caste based and party based challenges, inadequate grants, lack of adequacy of employees, lack of proper training and adequate work experience, different status of Panchayati institutions in different states, lack of Digital payment facilities seems to be a hindrance in the way of smooth operation of Panchayati system. But despite all these problems, the satisfactory fact is that co-operative village management, rural development extension scheme, community development, land reforms, scientific agriculture, technical education, computerized work practices, poverty alleviation, development of small and cottage industries through self-help group, supply of pure drinking water, electricity facilities, road construction, cleaning and deepening of ponds and wells, sale of rural products at reasonable rates- in such areas the achievements of grass root leadership can be seen.

Conclusion

As the third pillar of decentralization of governance, the role and importance of Panchayati institutions and leadership in the context of rural development is increasing day by day. These institutions are discharging their role as primary institutions for the planning and decision-making process at the village level and the implementation of government schemes at the grassroots level. Gradually, through these institutions, Indian democracy is being made more inclusive and participatory. These institutions are also moving forward in the direction of establishing good governance through administrative transparency and accountability. It is extremely difficult to achieve the goal of real democracy sitting at the helm of power. Therefore, through these institutions, Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy related to Gram Swaraj is being expended. We can also say that gradually these institutions are establishing themselves as a “Small Republic “in rural India. But despite all these positive aspects, we should not forget that the golden future of these institutions and successful implementation of the policies, plans and decision process made by these institution is possible only, when these institutions have implement and adequate financial resources, their powers expend over time, they should be aware of their priorities and limitations and local groups to work with full enthusiasm and capacity.

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