



REVIEW ARTICLE

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN EMPOWERING PANCHAYATI RAJ – A MINI REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The need and demand for good governance has increased with the rapid expansion of the economy and the growing awareness and assertion of rights by an increasingly educated population. Accountable, participatory and good governance is critical for ensuring social inclusion. The significant rise in expenditure on programmes for social inclusion in recent years needs to be matched with improved implementation for enhanced impact at the local level. The role of Panchayats, the constitutionally mandated local self-governments at the grassroots level, is critical in this context.

INTRODUCTION

As per the Constitution, a three tier structure of Panchayats is in place across the country, excepting areas where Part IX of the Constitution does not apply. There are nearly 2.5 lakh elected Panchayats and 28 lakh Elected Representatives (ERs). The Constitution leaves it to the discretion of the States to devolve funds, functions and functionaries (3Fs) to the Panchayats and States vary a great deal in the extent to which they have devolved powers to Panchayats and equipped them with adequate manpower, infrastructure including office space and furniture, modern equipment, training, etc., to enable them to perform their functions. A illustrative list of functions which can be devolved on the PRIs is given in Schedule XI of the Constitution. Traditionally, Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSSs) and Additional Central Assistance (ACAs) have been developed along the jurisdictional lines of the Ministries and Departments, based on vertical management decision systems. In such vertical implementation structures, it is difficult to ensure that context-specific measures to address the issues at hand in a holistic manner are taken up. Only through Panchayats, which are constitutionally mandated local democratic institutions, can people's participation and accountability to people be ensured. A strong Panchayati Raj system is critical for good governance.

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Government Programme for Empowerment of Panchayati raj

The Rajiv Gandhi Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyan

The RGPSA will strengthen the Panchayati Raj system across the country and address critical gaps that constrain its success.

RGPSA seeks to

- Enhance capacities and effectiveness of Panchayats and the Gram Sabhas;
- Enable democratic decision-making and accountability in Panchayats and promote people's participation;
- Strengthen the institutional structure for knowledge creation and capacity building of Panchayats;
- Promote devolution of powers and responsibilities to Panchayats according to the spirit of the Constitution and PESA Act;
- Strengthen Gram Sabhas to function effectively as the basic forum of people's participation, transparency and accountability within the Panchayat system;
- Create and strengthen democratic local self-government in areas where Panchayats do not exist;
- Strengthen the constitutionally mandated framework on which Panchayats are founded.

Powers of Gram Sabha through Panchayats Act, 1996 (PESA)

The Provision of Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 (PESA) extends Part IX of the Constitution with certain modifications and exceptions, to the Fifth Schedule areas of 9 States viz Andhra Pradesh (AP), Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh (HP), Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh (MP), Maharashtra, Odisha and Rajasthan. The Gram Sabhas under PESA are deemed to be 'competent' to safeguard and preserve the traditions of their people, community resources and customary mode of dispute resolution. The Gram Sabhas further have:

- Mandatory executive functions to approve plans of the Village Panchayats, identify beneficiaries for schemes, issue certificates of utilization of funds.
- Right to mandatory consultation in matter of land acquisition, resettlement and rehabilitation and prospecting licenses/ mining leases for minor minerals.
- Power to prevent alienation of land and restore alienated land.
- Power to regulate and restrict sale/ consumption of liquor.
- Power to manage village markets, control money lending to STs.
- Ownership of minor forest produce.
- Power to control institutions and functionaries in all social sectors.
- Power to control local plans and resources for such plans including TSP, etc

Panchayat Mahila Evam Yuva Shakti Abhiyan (PMEYSA)

Participation of women in the Panchayats was facilitated by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment which mandated one- third reservation of seats at all three tiers of Panchayats for women. The Panchayat Mahila Evam Yuva Shakti Abhiyan aims to build on the substantial representation of women and youth in Panchayats so that they use their collective strength more effectively. It supports the efforts of the many isolated, strengthen their unity and provide a forum for continued training. PMSA provides women with specific kinds of support which goes beyond the usual training given to PRI representatives.

Panchayat Empowerment and Accountability Incentive Scheme (PEAIS)

The Panchayat Empowerment and Accountability Incentive Scheme (PEAIS) is a Central Sector Plan Scheme implemented by the MoPR since 2005-06. The scheme aims at encouraging states to adequately empower Panchayats and put in place systems for bringing about accountability of the PRIs. Performance of states in these respects is measured through a Devolution Index (DI). Token awards are also given to the states, which rank high on DI, for which the annual provision is currently Rs.31 crore for the year 2011-12.

E-Panchayat Mission Mode Project (MMP)

MoPR has been adopting a multi-pronged strategy to implement the provisions of Part IX of the Constitution in the true spirit of co-operative federalism. One major strategy has

been to harness the potential of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools for e-Governance in Panchayats. The objective is to make Panchayats more efficient, transparent and symbols of modernity by leveraging ICT at the cutting edge level to ensure transparency and accountability in their functioning through disclosure of information, social audit, efficient delivery of services and improving internal process.

Pris and centrally sponsored schemes for poverty alleviation

Accelerated Rural Water Supply Program (ARWSP) and Swajaldhara

The main programme of the Central Government related to drinking water supply is the Accelerated Rural Water Supply Program (ARWSP) and Swajaldhara. ARWSP is aimed at ensuring a minimum availability of 40 Litres of water per capita per day (LPCD) to all rural people. Swajaldhara is a demand driven approach to augmenting water supply, with a high degree of local participation. ARWSP is now part of the Bharat Nirman approach, with a time bound strategy of tackling all habitations that are deficient in water supply. In both schemes, there is a clear thrust on putting Panchayats in the forefront of implementation of drinking water schemes.

Total Sanitation Campaign

The Total Sanitation Campaign aims at providing subsidized individual and community latrines, so as to completely eliminate open-air defecation. The program has now added solid waste management as another component of the program. Along with water supply, TSC is a program that is clearly part of the core responsibility of every Panchayat, particularly the Gram Panchayat. The guidelines of the TSC give leeway to the States to decide on the extent of involvement of Panchayats in the program.

National Rural Health Mission:

The National Rural Health Mission (NRHM 2005-2012) has been launched to improve availability of and access to quality health care and public health services, including women's health, child health, water, sanitation and hygiene, immunization, and nutrition by rural people, through making necessary changes in the mechanism of health delivery. The goals of the mission are to reduce Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) and Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) and prevent and control communicable and non-communicable diseases.

Integrated Child Development Program me

ICDS promotes integrated child development through converging basic services for improved child care, early stimulation and learning, improved enrolment and retention, health and nutrition, and water and environmental sanitation. The Scheme aims at improving the nutritional and health status of pre-school children, pregnant women and nursing mothers.

Indira Awas Yojana

The Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) is the sole program that deals with housing for the poor from the Government of India. This program gives a 100 percent subsidy, capped at Rs. 25,000 per

unit for providing houses to families below the poverty line. Beneficiaries are to construct the house and payments are made directly to the beneficiary, on the completion of certain milestones in construction. The guidelines of IAY in its present form are both Panchayat friendly and beneficiary friendly.

Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana

The Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana primarily aims to provide all weather access to unconnected habitations of up to 500 population (with relaxations for hills, deserts and tribal areas) by 2007. The Scheme mandates the development of master plans and a core network at the block and district levels, approved by the Intermediate and District Panchayat respectively. The District Panchayat is also to prepare the annual proposals in consultation with Intermediate Panchayats and Gram Panchayats, in accordance with the district's fund allocation under the Scheme.

Suggestions

- Strengthening the delivery system for services and development initiatives through Panchayati Raj Institutions
- Formulation of District and Sub-District plans at all levels of Panchayats to deliver basic minimum needs to the citizens at the grassroots level.
- Strengthening the Planning Machinery at the district and sub-district levels for pursuing such formulation, including guidelines for the DPC to consolidate such plans
- Reviewing guidelines of Centrally Sponsored Schemes and Central Sector Programs to ensure the centrality of participation by Panchayati Raj institutions from the drawing board to implementation of schemes including poverty alleviation, elementary education, rural health coverage etc.
- Development of model guidelines for conferring original jurisdiction on Gram Sabhas as envisaged in PESA.
- It is important that independent evaluation of the impact of economic development and social justice programs implemented by Panchayats is undertaken at regular intervals.

- ePanchayat MMP will be implemented in synergy with other e-Governance interventions like e-District, State Data Centre (SDC), State Service Delivery Gateway (SSDG), UID, Central Plan Schemes Monitoring System (CPSMS) etc wherever applicable.

Conclusion

Developing a strong Panchayati Raj system, essentially required to improve governance and delivery of services, involves redistribution of power, institution building and development of processes that improve accountability to the people. It requires planned and strategic interventions tied to specified deliverables on the part of States to enable them to stay committed to strengthening Panchayats and elected local bodies.

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