

The Essence of Local Self - Governance in India

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, often emphasized that India lives in villages and unless the village life is re-energized, the nation as a whole cannot make progress. In India, the system of panchayats has a long history. We also find references of Gram Panchayat in ancient and medieval literatures. The Article 40 of the Constitution of India, which affirmed that 'the state shall take steps to classify Village Panchayats and to award them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as the units of self-government,' paved the way for the introduction of Panchayati Raj. It mainly aimed to promote democratic participation, involve villagers in the development efforts and simplify the administrative burden on the states. This system was also considered necessary for the growth of a strong democracy in India. The structure of Panchayati Raj varies from state to state. Some states have three-tier structure, whereas some have two-tier structure. A few states have only single-tier structure at the village level. In this background it is necessary to study the essence of local self-governance in India. It is a descriptive study. The data were collected through the literary review, journals, secondary sources and Primary sources. Structured Interview schedule was prepared to collect the primary data from the Panchayat villages of Namakkal Block at Namakkal District in Tamil Nadu.

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi says that India lives in villages. Unless the villages are governed properly India cannot step forward. The Article 40 of the Constitution of India declared that 'the state shall take steps to examine village Panchayats. Power and rights were given to the village Panchayats. This paved the way for the introduction of Panchayat Raj system in India. In India, the system of Panchayats has a lengthy history. We also find references of Gram Panchayat in ancient and medieval literatures. This research paper highlights the essence of local self- governance in India. A case study was done in the Namakkal Block of Namakkal District , Tamil Nadu state in India. This paper was composed by reviewing the literature and examination of the Primary and secondary sources. Based on the case study analysis and the secondary data the findings, suggestions and conclusions were given.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the historical background of Panchayat Raj Institutions.
2. To study the organization, structure and functions of Panchayat Raj in India.

Methodology of the Study

This is a descriptive study. A structured interview schedule was prepared and primary data was collected from the Panchayat Presidents of Namakkal Block at Namakkal district in Tamil Nadu. Further the data were interpreted and analysed for the findings.

Review of Literature

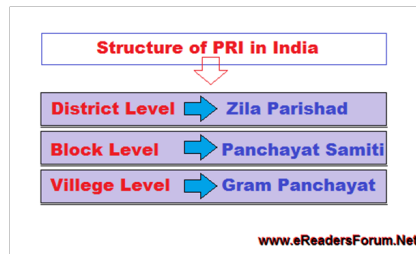
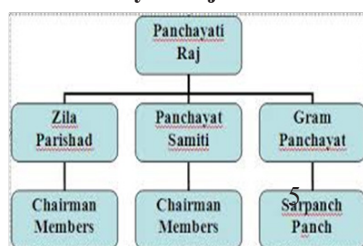
Meaning and Definition of Panchayat Raj

The panchayat raj” is a South Asian political system mainly in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. It is the oldest system of local government in the Indian subcontinent. The word “panchayat” literally means “assembly” of five wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the local community.

The Historical background of Panchayati Raj system in India

The institution of Panchayati Raj is not new to India. It existed since earliest times. We get sufficient references about the Panchayats in Manusmriti, Arthashastra and the Mahabharata. With the assumption of power by the British and the acceptance of policy of centralization, the Panchayats suffered a temporary hindrance. But soon the British realised the value of this institution and the Decentralization Commission recommended its report in 1907. During the 1920’s Mahatma Gandhi made a strong appeal for introduction of self - government in the villages with a view to improve their economy. In 1947, one - third of the villages of India had traditional Panchayats and their functioning was not up to the mark. The Community Development Programme was launched in October 1952 to seek people’s participation and involvement in the task of rural renovation. In January 1957, a team of study Community Projects and National Extension Service, headed by Balwant Raj Mehta, was appointed. The National Development Council affirmed the basic principles underlying democratic decentralization.

Structure of Panchayat Raj Institution



About the Structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions

The structure of Panchayati Raj varies from state to state. Some states have three-tier structure (Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at block level and Zilla Parishad at district level), whereas some have two-tier structure (Gram Panchayat at village level and Panchayat Samiti at block level). A few states have only single-tier structure at the village level. In Rajasthan, the Panchayati Raj model is of three levels, viz., Gram Panchayats (village level), Panchayat Samitis (block level) and Zilla Parishads (district level). The chairperson of Gram Panchayat is known as Sarpanch, of Panchayat Samiti, Pradhan and of Zilla Parishad, Zilla Pramukh.

Functions of different levels of Panchayat Raj Institutions in India

Gram Panchayat

Gram Panchayat is the base or bottom tier of the Panchayat Raj system. It is the first executive tier having jurisdiction over a village or group of villages. The members of the Gram Panchayat -the Panchas and Sarpanch (chairman) - are directly elected. Their number in each Panchayat varies from 5 to 31 according to population of the concerned village (s). In addition to the elected Panchas and Sarpanch, there is a condition for co-optation of two ladies, and one SC and ST member each, if they have not been elected as Panchas.

The main functions of the Gram Panchayat are:

Law and order

Maintenance of peace and agreement in the Panchayat circle.

Civic

Construction of wells, ponds, water reservoirs and distribution tanks; construction of public streets, public latrines and maintenance of roads, etc.

Welfare

Famine and flood aid work, welfare programmes for women, children, handicapped and weaker sections.

Administrative

Collection of funds, maintenance of records, budget and accounts, registration of births and deaths, etc.

Commercial

Supervision of community orchards, grazing ground, etc.

Developmental

Preparation and execution of plans for the promotion of agriculture, irrigation, co-operatives, cottage and small-scale industries. The main sources of income of panchayats are the grants from government, taxes on buildings, vehicles, etc., octroi on goods and animals, pilgrim tax, etc.

Panchayat Samiti

It is the middle tier of the PR system - between Gram Panchayat and Zilla Parishad. This is composed of Sarpanchas (ex-officio members) of all the Gram Panchayats within a block along with MLA of the area. In addition to these ex-officio members, there are some co-opted members- two women, one SC and ST Representatives each, if they have not already been elected as primary members. The chairperson of the Panchayat Samiti is called Pradhan. He is elected by the members of the Panchayat Samiti amongst themselves.

The main functions of the Panchayat Samiti are

- Agriculture - formulation of plans of development of agriculture, tree plantation and soil
- conservation
- Animal husbandry
- Health and sanitation

- Education - running primary schools
- Communication -construction and maintenance of inter-panchayat roads, etc.
- Co-operation - promotion of co-operative societies;
- Development of cottage and small-scale industries; and
- Miscellaneous work.

The main sources of income of Panchayat Samiti are annual grants by state government, share from land revenue, proceeds from taxes, fees and loans, contributions, etc.

Zilla Parishad

It is the apex body of the PR system located at the district level. It is also known as District Development Council in some states.

It is composed of

- Chairpersons/Presidents of Panchayat Samitis within its jurisdiction;
- MPs, MLAs, and MLCs of the area;
- Members representing women, SCs and STs are co-opted if they are not otherwise members;
- Representatives of co-operative societies, municipalities of the area.
- Some persons having experience in the field of administration, public life or rural development.

The membership of the Zilla Parishad remains in the range of 40 to 60 persons. The elected head of Zilla Parishad is known as Zilla Pramukh (President). He is elected either directly or indirectly from amongst the members of the Zilla Parishad. Zilla Pramukh works through committees which look after specific works like education, planning and finance. The main sources of income of the Zilla Parishads are grants-in-aid from the state government, share in the land revenue and other taxes like the cess.

Data Analysis

Distribution of the Panchayat Presidents in Namakkal District, Tamil Nadu state

Table

Number of General Women Panchayat Presidents	Number of SC Women Panchayat Presidents	Number of ST Women Panchayat Presidents	Total Number of Women Panchayat Presidents
74	32	6	112

There are 112 Women Panchayat Presidents in Namakkal District. Out of them 74 are General Women Panchayat Presidents, 32 are Scheduled

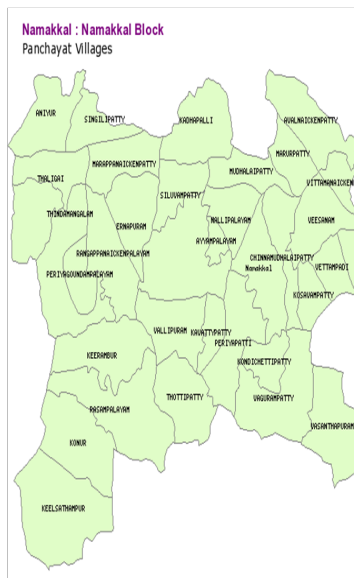
Caste Women Panchayat Presidents and 6 are Scheduled Tribe Women Panchayat Presidents.

Table

Number of General Men Panchayat Presidents	Number of SC Men Panchayat Presidents	Number of ST Men Panchayat Presidents	Total Number of Men Panchayat Presidents
161	36	13	210

There are 210 Men Panchayat Presidents in Namakkal District. Out of them 161 are General Men Panchayat Presidents, 36 are Scheduled Caste Men Panchayat Presidents and 13 are Scheduled Tribe Men Panchayat Presidents. Collectrate office, Namakkal District, Tamil Nadu.

Her son is the head of the family. He has studied up to tenth standard. His occupation is agriculture. The annual income of the family is around 60 thousand rupees. The President owns two and a half acre tank irrigated land of value 2 lakhs. In addition to 2.5 acre well irrigated land of 2 lakhs rupees. They also have a non- cultivable land of 2 acre of Rs. 1 lakhs 50, 000. She has 2 houses of 1 ½ acre of Rs. 1 lakhs. It is a terrace house. They get 3000 Rs as house rent.



Political Background

The Panchayat President became aware of the politics at the age of 20. She entered the politics at 30 years. Her political interest was due to the mass media and news paper. The President belongs to the DMK party. Her son is the union secretary in the DMK party. His political interest was due to his own personal interest and political parties. His political ambition is to acquire position higher than the present one.

Social Background

The president has participated in the socio political activities. She has fulfilled the basic amenities of the public. During the election campaign the candidate had promised to fulfill the welfare schemes of the people.

**Case study of Vatampatti Village Panchayat
Personal Profile**

The respondent Mrs.Arukani is the President of the Vatampatti Village Panchayat of Namakkal Panchayat Union in Namakkal District. It is a general woman Panchayat. She is an elected candidate who has secured 2600 votes. She has won the election with a difference of 800 votes. She is 75 years old. She belongs to backward caste. It is the majority caste in that village. The respondent is a Hindu which is the majority in that region. She is an illiterate. She has no occupation. She is married and lives in a joint family. Their residence is within the Panchayat area.

Village Profile

There are 7 hamlets in this village. The total population of the village is about 9000. There are 900 Schedule caste people. Hinduism is the majority and there are 50 Muslims and 50 Christians. The Village Panchayat consists of 9 ward members. There are 6 male candidates and 3 female candidates. They differ in the age group from 30 to 50 years. Four members are from BC category and five members

from SC category. Among the ward members 3 are illiterate, 3 are of primary level, 1 has done IT, 1 has completed B.Sc and 1 has completed BE. Their occupation is agriculture, cooli and business. The vice President is an Engineer. Other than the ward members there is one clerk he has pursued a BA degree. There are 2 sweepers and 4 tank operators in this village Panchayat.

Responses with regard to 29 subjects in Panchayat Raj Institution

They are aware of the drinking water scheme. They have one hand pump, 5 open well, 5 power pump, 4 mini power pump, 75 public taps, 13 storage tanks of different capacity, and 160 individual tap connections. They maintain a pond as the water resource. The rural electrification scheme is implemented. There are 300 street lights and 3 solar lights in the Panchayat area. There is no Television centre. A community hall is in construction. They do implement the health and sanitation scheme. Drainage facility is accessible in the street. 95% of the houses are provided toilet facilities. There are 16 public toilets. The environment is maintained well. The Panchayat has taken steps to plant trees in the street. Around 800 trees have been planted under this maintenance of environment scheme. The education scheme is well practiced. There are 2 government elementary school, 1 primary school, 1 High school, 1 Library and 2 noon meal centers. There is no adult education. An Agriculture college is established in this area. Handicraft training is provided for the eligible students. There is one post office. Transportation facility is provided for the public. Cement and tar road is available here. The Tar road is of 9 kilometer length and the Cement road is of 3 kilometer length. There is a public distribution system in this village. White colour and green colour card are distributed, according to the needs of the people. There are 12 temples in this Panchaya village. Further the Self help group forms their own organisation.

About the Grama Sabha meeting

People participate in the grama sabha meetings. Around 150 members do participate in the meetings. It is conducted during the government holidays like

May 1st, August 15th and so on. The grama sabha approves the village Panchayat budget, it approves the audit report of the village Panchayat, reviews the progress of all schemes entrusted to village Panchayat and approves the list of beneficiaries of various schemes. The Panchayat meeting is held 4 times in a year. All the development aspects of the village Panchayat are discussed in the meeting. In addition all the government programmes are also discussed in the meeting. The decision taken by the Panchayat members are displayed for public vision. Further, detail information is provided regarding the resolutions passed by the Panchayat.

Administration of the Panchayat

The records on Panchayat administration are maintained properly. The monthly and yearly reports of Panchayat administration are prepared and submitted to the concerned officials. All the decision taken in the grama sabha meetings are implemented in time. In addition all the people have equal seating arrangement in gramasabha meeting without any discrimination. The public express their views in the gramasabha meeting. The depressed class people and the women participate in the gramasabha meeting. Further the grama sabha meeting is conducted without any interference of politics, caste and religion. The women are provided employment through handicrafts. The schedule caste people have separate temple for their worship.

Fund details

The Panchayat collects taxes from the public. The tax amount collection is around 84,000 per year. Four types of taxes are collected. The total grant of government scheme fund for the Panchayat is about 1,50,000 Rs. The president gets a salary of 1000 Rs per month as DA. 100 Rs is the sitting charge in Panchayat for the president and Rs 25 is paid as the sitting charge for the other members.

Significance of the Study

Majority of the population is found in the villages in India. Only if the grassroots is given importance the nation will progress. Hence this study aims in studying the organization structure and functions of Panchayat raj in India.

Delimitations of the Study

This study is restricted only to the Panchayat raj Institutions in India. The other areas like Municipality, corporations and the urban administration is not covered in this research paper.

Findings from the study area

- Both men and women take part in the administration of Panchayat raj Institutions in India.
- There is more male domination in the administration of grassroot governance.
- Most of the women leaders are name sake leaders.
- Fund is not adequate to perform the functions of the grassroot governance.

Suggestions

- Women Panchayat officials have to be given equal importance like the male officials.
- Sufficient fund should be provided to the grassroot governance to maintain the welfare measures.
- The central and the state government should concentrate in giving effective training programmes for Panchayat officials.
- The venue for the meeting may be arranged in the nearby places, so that it would be convenient for the Panchayat leaders to attend the meeting without any difficulty.

Conclusion

Thus, to conclude, it can be stated that the devolution of power to the people without essential development of character, training and capacity had been found to be a curse in the functioning of democratic institutions in our country. In the beginning, responsibility for the planned development of the country through CDP and cooperative institutions was imposed on the people who were expected to discharge them in PRIs who were mostly uneducated and untrained mass of people. But there is a great change now in this condition with great possibilities to strengthen the roots of democracy.⁸ Thus Panchayat raj Institutions play effective role in developing the welfare of the nation in general. To build a better India the grassroot governance should be made very powerful and efficient.

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