

PANCHAYAT RAJ: A WAY TOWARDS LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

The Panchayati Raj system in India is frequently recognised as the most significant decentralisation mechanism for ensuring that democracy is really democratic and responsive. The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act of 1992, which took effect on April 24, 1993, gave Panchayati Raj institutions constitutional standing. After the 73rd Amendment took effect, the process of political empowerment of Panchayats was largely finished. While all states and union territories hold panchayat elections on a regular basis, women, SC, ST, and OBC receive reservations based on their population proportion in each panchayat. Main focus of this article is to establish a critical observation regarding panchayet raj system with special reference to West Bengal.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, decentralisation, democracy, development, governance

Introduction:

In India, the Panchayati Raj system is often regarded as the most important decentralisation tool for guaranteeing true democracy and responsiveness. The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act of 1992, which went into force on April 24, 1993, granted constitutional status to Panchayati Raj institutions. As a result, this day represents a turning moment in the history of governmental decentralisation to the people. The impact of the 73rd Amendment on rural India is apparent, since it has irreversibly altered power dynamics. The process of political empowerment of Panchayats was substantially completed when the 73rd Amendment went into force. While panchayat elections are held on a regular basis in all states and union territories, women, SC, ST, and OBC are given reservations depending on their demographic share. Several Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSSs) programmes are implemented directly through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), most notably the flagship National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). Efforts are being made to determine how much authority and responsibility has been devolved to Panchayats. This is the subject of a research being conducted by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. In order for our country to achieve inclusive democracy and progress, PRIs will be critical.

Panchayati Raj System in West Bengal:

West Bengal was one of the first Indian states to implement a three-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) for rural local government. The state's current generation of Panchayats was created in 1978, 15 years before the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution.

From the beginning, the State Government, which is always open to new ideas, implemented need-based modifications in the Panchayat structure.

- Village Gram Sansad, Panchayat Samiti Block Sansad, and Zilla Parishad Sansad.
- The opposition leader chairs the District Council in each Zilla Parishad.
- Gram Sansad Unnayan Samiti
- Opposition members in Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti Standing Committees.
- Each Panchayat tier's subsidiarity principles must be determined.

- Mapping of activities to be carried out by three-tier Panchayats for 28 of the 29 subjects included in the Indian Constitution's Eleventh Schedule.
- Empowering Standing Committees and Sub-Committees to create and implement their own work plans and budgets
- Establishing a Panchayat Window in the State Budget for departments with significant money flowing to Panchayats.
- Annual self-evaluation of all three tier Panchayat bodies using score-based performance evaluation schedules, with incentive grants given to the best performing Gram Panchayat in each Block, best performing Panchayat Samiti in each District, and best performing Zilla Parishad in the state under two headings:
 - 1) Institutional functioning and good governance;
 - 2) Revenue mobilisation and resource usage based on self-evaluation scores that have been verified.
- All three-tier Panchayats use a double-entry accounting method.

(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panchayati_raj and https://finance.wb.gov.in/writereaddata/Annual_Report_2014.pdf)

The state's PRIs have become more spontaneous over time and have had a favourable influence on achieving economic growth and ensuring social justice for everybody. However, West Bengal Panchayats still have a long way to go before they can really become people's institutions and the driving force behind rural people's holistic development. This document outlines a vision for such institutions as well as a plan for achieving that objective.

The roadmap was a difficult undertaking to design. We initially created a draught version and solicited comments from any individuals and organisations that were interested. We got a large number of responses from both inside and outside the state, from institutions and people. All of the input has been carefully analysed, and the majority of it has been adopted, both in text and spirit, based on its application in the plan devised. We want to express our gratitude to all of the people who helped us design the final Roadmap.

Economic development and social justice implementation:

It all starts with a land reform agenda, as well as better natural resource management and improved land usage. The enhancement of livelihood options in non-farm sectors follows. Following then, the actions connected to poverty alleviation and social fairness, as well as social security measures, were expressed. All of this must be accomplished through bottom-up planning procedures, and the technique for doing so has been outlined. These activities will be supplemented by a Panchayat-Private Partnership based on the social marketing idea.

For the quickest availability, money is transferred electronically to Panchayats:

Harmonization of Acts and Rules Relating to Panchayat Administration. This includes suggested revisions to 32 Acts, including six Central Acts and twenty-six State Acts, that are required for Panchayats to really become people's institutions. Adjustments to the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973, and the Rules developed under it would be made to match the envisaged dimension of Panchayat operation.

West Bengal's Rural Local Governance Evolution:

In the pre-independence era, colonial authorities established Panchayats with willing participants, allocating specific palliative tasks. Those Panchayats frequently served as a buffer between the rural people and their numerous issues. Following the recommendations

of the Balwant Rai Mehta committee, the first generation of post-independence Panchayats evolved in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The following were the main issues with these establishments:

- Panchayats, especially those in the top levels, had a large number of members who were indirectly elected and hence were not totally representative.
- These institutions' functional missions were not clear nor consistent.
- they were governed and regulated by the State Government's designated executives on a variety of topics.
- The institutions were almost entirely relied on insufficient government payments and subsidies, and they had very few opportunity to develop their own financial resources.

The second generation of Panchayats, which were constituted in 1978 under the auspices of a new Act, The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 (West Bengal Act XLI of 1973), gave the institution fresh vitality. Direct elections in all three levels by universal adult franchise, to be held at regular intervals, have been made necessary [sections 7, 96, and 141], with no authority's discretionary right to postpone such elections indefinitely. Tax and non-tax revenue collection powers are clearly specified. In comparison to prior Panchayats, the functional realm of the Panchayats is more clearly defined. The new law allows the Panchayat to expand its reach into a wide range of activities that affect rural living.

The Panchayats' powers and functions include almost every element of rural life and livelihood, and they've long been regarded as the most trustworthy vehicle for rural development.

Panchayat entities have been entrusted with all poverty alleviation programmes financed by the Indian government's Ministry of Rural Development (major portion to the Gram Panchayat). Despite the fact that the Panchayat is not carrying out the plan, it has been tasked with picking places and beneficiaries in any programme or initiative aimed at providing benefits to the underprivileged, including SCs and STs.

The Panchayats have been given the job of aiding the state in improving the nutrition of children and mothers, as well as taking action to enhance the nutritional condition of the poor on their own. During this time, the West Bengal Panchayat Act was amended to provide Panchayats explicit functional responsibility for undertaking different projects as stipulated in the Constitution's Eleventh Schedule. Despite having more rights and duties, the Panchayat's main function in the 1980s and early 1990s was mostly limited to acting as a delivery vehicle for the Central and State Governments' programmes, and their own initiatives were not of high quality.

Activities of the State's PRIs:

The 1978 Panchayat election created a precedent by breaking new ground in two areas.

First, political parties were permitted to run for Panchayat elections using their party emblems for the first time in the country.

Second, all three layers were subjected to direct elections. In another manner, the Panchayats established in 1978 differed from the rest of the country. The new Panchayat leadership was mostly drawn from the middle peasants and professional groups like as school teachers. Those who rose to the top of these organisations were not from the typical upper crust of rural life, the landed aristocracy. The state was devastated by one of the worst floods in its

history in 1978, shortly after the new Panchayat bodies were created, displacing thousands of people.

In comparison to several other states and the national average, West Bengal has an extremely high rate of rural poverty. Rural poverty in West Bengal fell from 63.1 percent to 48.8 percent between 1983 and 1988. From 1973-74 to 2004-05, West Bengal was second only to Kerala in terms of the rate of reduction in rural poverty.

The Panchayats were instrumental in achieving land reforms by identifying beneficiaries and assisting them in obtaining and maintaining ownership of vested property. Other positive benefits of land reform on output and productivity include bringing "calm to the countryside" and fostering an investment-friendly environment.

West Bengal's food grain output increased at a pace of 6.5 percent per year between 1981 and 1991, the highest among the country's 17 main states. Since 1996-97, the state has produced twice as much food grain as it did in 1981-82. All of them let a huge number of rural residents escape the grips of severe economic poverty. The State Panchayats have been entrusted with the administration of all direct programmes aimed at reducing rural poverty. Since 1978, they've been in charge of all federally funded poverty reduction programmes, starting with the Food for Work and Integrated Rural Development Programs.

According to the Bureau of Labour Statistics, the average daily salary rate in India has climbed from Rs. 10 in 1981-82 to more than Rs. 55 in the recent two decades (BLS). This is due to a rise in labour demand as well as an increase in agricultural land productivity and cropping intensity. Wages climbed at a faster rate in the 1990s than they did in the 1980s. West Bengal has the greatest rate of pay increase among all states between 1979 and 1993.

A Journey Towards Self Governance:

The establishment of Panchayats as local self-government entities necessitates the State Government's approval of relevant policies. In West Bengal, such transformation has been gradual all along, but with the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, it received a push. There was discussion on whether capacity building should come before or after increased devolution.

The process of decentralisation needed to be further deepened and strengthened, and the Panchayats needed to become more effective institutions for economic growth and social justice. The modifications stipulated that Panchayat bodies contact with the public on a regular basis, and those proper interactions exist between the different tiers of the Panchayat.

The Panchayats became more entrenched in rural culture, and they began to influence decisions made by line departments about their activities, which were overseen by several Sthayee Samitis (Standing Committees) at the higher and middle tiers. This also assisted them in identifying their position in departmental coordination and becoming involved in planning with available resources for holistic growth.

The State Act, as well as the constitutional mandate, empower Panchayats to draught development plans based on available resources and to carry out economic growth and social justice initiatives [section 19(1)]. Additional organisations, such as the State Finance Commission, supported the process by allowing them to judge independently and advise resource transfers to the Panchayats as a consequence of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution.

To address the aforementioned demands, the following efforts have been implemented in the state, including required amendments to the Act and Rules: -

- Six Sthayee Samitis (Standing Committees) were in place at the Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti levels when the current generation Panchayats were established. The titles of the former Sthayee Samitis were changed to reflect some new themes in 1992,

and four new Sthayee Samitis were founded. In 1984 and 1997, the name of the Sthayee Samitis was also modified. Despite being answerable to the main body, these organs act as the executive arm for carrying out programmes and strategies across a wide range of fields.

- At the Gram Panchayat level, five Upa-Samitis (Sub-Committees) were formed in 2003. They have comparable roles to the Sthayee Samitis.
- Opposition members are represented in each Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Sthayee Samiti, according to agreements made in 2003.
- Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad accountability forums Block Sansad and Zilla Sansad were formed in 2003.
- Gram Unnayan Samitis (Gram Sansad Development Committees) are the Gram Sansad's executive branch and act as an extension arm of the Gram Panchayat. The Gram Sansad is responsible for their formation.
- It has been stressed that the Gram Sansad must approve all significant Gram Panchayat efforts, and that some projects should begin at the Gram Sansad level.

A District Council for Panchayats was formed in 1994, with the Chairperson being the leader of the largest opposition party in the Zilla Parishad. The Council has the ability to investigate whether all Panchayat entities in the district adhere to financial norms and propriety in their working environments. The Council may issue a request for records or conduct an inspection of relevant information before making recommendations.

These steps aided the State's Panchayats in gaining greater power as local self-government units. However, there is still need to improve the Panchayats' institutional components in order for them to function more successfully as local self-government organisations.

Strengthening democratic functioning of the panchayats:

Panchayats are democratic institutions that operate under the direction of elected officials. However, they cannot constantly be expected to focus on the people's goals and ambitions, as well as their needs and demands, unless they have frequent and intimate contact with them. This chapter explains how the Panchayats' democratic functions will be reinforced and expanded to allow for more widespread and effective community engagement.

Village-level participation:

Gram Unnayan Samiti would be the village's representative body, always interacting with the public and maintaining contact with the Gram Panchayat. The State Government does not need to delegate functions because such micro-level operations are already planned and conducted by the Gram Sansads. At least 20% of the citizens will participate in Gram Sansad meetings, and they will be able to assist in the creation and execution of Gram Panchayat programmes. People's lack of awareness of the governance structure and the Panchayats' duties and obligations is a major hindrance to their involvement. The state government will take steps to ensure that critical information is disseminated, with a focus on public interests. The initiative would also entail raising public awareness about the Panchayats' role in the operation of the government.

Organizing the Poor for Panchayat Participation:

In the State, the Self Help Groups movement, particularly among women, has acquired a lot of traction, with more than seven lakh Self Help Groups created. Organizing the poor into groups will be strengthened even further so that by the end of the Eleventh Plan, every poor rural household will have at least one member in a Self-Help Group.

Sthayee Samitis and Upa-Samitis Functioning Improvement:

Strengthen vertical decentralisation for active participation of people at the local level, particularly women from the disadvantaged community. In the operation of the Panchayats, there is also a requirement for horizontal distribution of authority and responsibility. The State Government will take steps to ensure that Standing Committees work more effectively. They have also been given guidelines on how they should operate. This is the platform for the Panchayats and the State Government to create adequate coordination and convergence of actions. The State Government's Development and Planning Department has established the government's policies and principles in this regard. Where required, such responsibilities will be accompanied by a flow of funds and technical assistance. The implementation of this technique is planned to commence in 2009-10. The Block level Standing Committees and the Gram Panchayat level Upa-Samitis would interact and integrate activities in a similar way. This will guarantee that the State's and Panchayats' actions are aligned, and it will assist Panchayats in undertaking several concurrent initiatives to achieve the same goals without duplicating each other's efforts.

- Increasing the number of political parties in opposition to the government.
- District Council and the Lokayukta are in charge of vigilance and grievance redress.
- Improving Transparency and Accountability.
- Maintaining openness in all transactions and allowing citizens to access information.

Interface between Panchayat and Civil Society:

More civil society interaction with those entities will be undertaken through the CSSP, as was described in the preceding paragraph, to make the Panchayats more responsible to the people they serve. To foster more openness in government, the government aims to guarantee that legislative duties for consultation are met to the letter and spirit at all levels.

Universal Literacy and Elementary Education-Related Services:

Even without any direct responsibilities, the Panchayats play a significant role in the enrolment and retention of children in schools. The 86th Amendment to the Constitution guarantees everyone the right to an education until they reach the age of 14. The PRIs and the state government should collaborate to achieve the aim for their whole people. This is one of the most significant sectors, since the Panchayats will be involved in a variety of activities, including devolved, agency, and collaborative functions. Access to primary school has been a fundamental barrier to education universalization. The job of sustaining community-managed elementary and upper primary education centres has been completely delegated to the state's panchayats. Around 82 percent of students in SSKs and MSKs, including SC, ST, and Other Backward Castes, come from the Minority group, with the bulk of them being first-generation students. The State Government would increase the capacity of the Panchayats in order to provide enough assistance to these institutions while keeping in mind the necessity to provide high-quality education in these locations. These institutions' infrastructures are inadequate. By the end of the 11th Plan era, SSKs and MSKs will have infrastructure on par with government-sponsored schools.

Improving the essential civic services:

- Providing Citizens with Civic Services
- Sanitation and Drinking Water Supply
- Public Health-Related Services
- Birth and death records are kept.
- The youngsters have been immunised.
- Safe Motherhood

- Preventing Malnutrition
- Prevention of Communicable Diseases
- Vector Control
- Food Safety
- Children's and Pregnant Mothers' Deaths are being tracked.
- Convergence of All Public Health Related Activities
- Providing Elementary Curative Services
- Games and Sports.
- Folk melodies, dancing, dance-dramas, and other comparable performance arts development.
- Road Connectivity.
- Panchayats to Maintain the List of Roads.
- Each Panchayat Body must prepare a prospective road plan.
- Maintenance of Roads Owned by the Panchayats.
- Street lighting under Section 21 of the State Panchayat Act.
- Irrigation, Drainage and Flood Protection.
- Habitat for Humanity, Low-Income Housing, and Other Civic Planning.
- Disaster management.

The Government's Panchayati Raj Empowerment Program:

- Gram Sabha's Panchayats Act (PESA)
- Panchayat Mahila Evam Yuva Shakti Abhiyan (PMEYSA)
- Panchayat Empowerment and Accountability Incentive Scheme (PEAIS)
- e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project (MMP)
- Rajiv Gandhi Panchayat Sasktikaran Abhiyan

PRIs and Centrally Sponsored Poverty Alleviation Programs:

- The Accelerated Rural Water Supply Program (ARWSP)
- Swajaldhara
- National Rural Health Mission (NRHM 2005-2012)
- Integrated Child Development Programme (ICDP)
- Indira Awas Yojana (IAY)
- Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana
- Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidhyutikaran Yojana (RGGVY)

Conclusion:

All of the actions outlined in this Roadmap must be facilitated, and the Directorate of Panchayats and Rural Development, as well as the Panchayat and Rural Development Department's field offices, must be enhanced as a result. NGOs and top-tier academic institutions should be involved in capacity-building projects. The Panchayat institutions must be reinforced, and services must be delivered to achieve social fairness and economic progress. Monitoring and evaluating all actions is also critical for assessing progress toward the objective. The success of establishing a more responsive and efficient Panchayat system must ultimately be measured by the people, who are the most important stakeholder in Panchayats.

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