

ISSN 2063-5346



EMPOWERING LOCAL GOVERNANCE AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE AND FUNCTIONING OF PANCHAYATS IN RURAL INDIA

¹ S. Sebastian, ² Dr. M. Sugirtha

Article History: Received: 01.02.2023

Revised: 07.03.2023

Accepted: 10.04.2023

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the role and functioning of Panchayats, which are local self-government institutions in rural India. The paper explores ways to empower Panchayats for effective local governance, as they are responsible for planning, implementing, and monitoring development schemes and programs in rural areas. Additionally, Panchayats act as intermediaries between the government and the rural population. Empowering Panchayats through financial, administrative, and political measures can enhance their effectiveness in local governance. The paper emphasizes the importance of capacity building, transparency, and greater participation of marginalized communities to ensure their effective functioning. The Panchayati Raj system is a unique experiment in decentralized governance aimed at empowering local communities and ensuring their participation in the decision-making process. Despite constitutional provisions, Panchayats face several challenges, including limited financial and administrative powers, inadequate capacity and technical expertise, and gender and caste-based discrimination. To address these challenges, this paper suggests various measures that can be taken to empower Panchayats and enhance their effectiveness in local governance. These measures include financial, administrative, and political empowerment. The paper also presents case studies of successful Panchayat-led development initiatives and highlights the lessons learned from these experiences. Keywords for this paper include local governance, Panchayat, and political empowerment.

Keywords: Local governance, Panchayat, political empowerment, devolution, challenges etc.

¹ Research Scholar, Annamalai University, Chidambaram

² Associate Professor, Government Arts College, Trichy

DOI:10.31838/ecb/2023.12.s1-B.341

Introduction

The Panchayati Raj system is a decentralized governance structure aimed at empowering local communities and ensuring their participation in decision-making processes (Gupta, 2013). Based on the principle of subsidiarity, which advocates for decisions to be taken at the lowest possible level of governance, closest to the people who are affected by them (Ahluwalia, 2001), the Panchayati Raj Act has played a crucial role in strengthening the system. The Act provides constitutional status to Panchayats, ensures their regular elections, devolves powers and functions, and reserves seats for women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes (Government of India, 1992). Furthermore, the Act mandates the establishment of State Finance Commissions and District Planning Committees to ensure adequate financial resources and effective planning for Panchayats (Gaur, 2007). Despite these measures, Panchayats face several challenges in their functioning. Limited financial and administrative powers, inadequate capacity and technical expertise, and gender and caste-based discrimination are among these challenges. Panchayats' limited financial resources often restrict their ability to carry out development projects and provide basic services to rural communities (Singh & Singh, 2012). Moreover, higher levels of government often undermine the administrative powers of Panchayats by retaining control over key functions such as land use planning and revenue collection (Ghosh, 2016). The capacity and technical expertise of Panchayat members and officials are often limited, leading to inadequate planning and implementation of development schemes (Rahman, 2017). Despite the reservation of seats for women and marginalized communities, they often face discrimination and exclusion in the decision-making process (Datta & Nair, 2017). This highlights the need for greater social inclusion and gender sensitivity in the functioning of Panchayats. To empower

Panchayats and enhance their effectiveness in local governance, various measures can be taken. These include financial, administrative, and political empowerment. Financial empowerment can be achieved through increased resource allocation and the creation of innovative financing mechanisms (Ghosh, 2016). Administrative empowerment can be achieved by devolving more functions and powers to Panchayats and providing them with greater autonomy (Singh & Singh, 2012). Political empowerment can be achieved through measures such as the strengthening of Panchayats' decision-making authority and the promotion of greater community participation (Rahman, 2017). Successful Panchayat-led development initiatives offer important lessons for empowering Panchayats. For instance, the Watershed Development Program in Maharashtra and the Total Sanitation Campaign in Kerala are notable examples of successful Panchayat-led development initiatives (Rao & Singh, 2010). These initiatives highlight the importance of capacity building, community participation, and political will in the successful implementation of Panchayat-led development schemes. The Panchayati Raj system is a unique experiment in decentralized governance aimed at empowering local communities and ensuring their participation in decision-making processes. Despite the challenges that Panchayats face in their functioning, various measures can be taken to empower them and enhance their effectiveness in local governance. Successful Panchayat-led development initiatives offer important lessons for empowering Panchayats and promoting sustainable rural development.

Research Objectives

This paper examines the role and functioning of Panchayats as local self-government institutions in rural India, identifies the challenges they face, and suggests measures to empower them for effective local governance, including

financial, administrative, and political measures. The paper emphasizes the importance of capacity building, transparency, and greater participation of marginalized communities. Additionally, the paper presents case studies of successful Panchayat-led development initiatives and highlights the lessons learned from these experiences.

Statement of problem

Local governance has been recognized as an important aspect of democracy and decentralization. The Panchayati Raj system was established in India with the aim of promoting local governance and empowering local communities in rural areas. However, despite the constitutional provision and the efforts made by the government, the extent to which Panchayats have been successful in improving local development and governance remains questionable. There is a need to analyze the role and functioning of Panchayats in rural India and identify the factors that hinder or facilitate their effective functioning. Such an analysis can help to understand the challenges faced by Panchayats in implementing development programs and policies, as well as identify the factors that contribute to their success.

Methodology

The methodology for the study titled "Empowering Local Governance: An Analysis of the Role and Functioning of Panchayats in Rural India" is a documentary and analytical research design with a qualitative nature. This means that the study will be based on the analysis of secondary data sources, such as books, articles, government official reports, websites, and other relevant sources. The data collected is analyzed with the aim of exploring the role and functioning of Panchayats in rural India, and their effectiveness in empowering local governance.

Result and Discussion

The Gram Panchayat is the most essential unit of the Panchayati Raj system, which is the decentralized system of governance that aims to empower local communities and ensure their participation in decision-making processes (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, n.d.). It was established by the Constitution of India through the 73rd Amendment Act in 1992 and has been functional in rural areas ever since. The Gram Panchayat is responsible for providing essential services to the village, such as water supply, sanitation, healthcare, and education. They also maintain records, levy taxes, and undertake development projects as per the need of the community. The Panchayat Samiti is the intermediary level of Panchayati Raj, responsible for implementing development schemes and programs in the block and ensuring the efficient functioning of the Gram Panchayats (Jha & Sharma, 2017). The Zila Parishad is the highest level of Panchayati Raj and is responsible for the coordination of Panchayats at the district level. The Zila Parishad consists of elected representatives from the Panchayat Samitis and is responsible for planning and implementing development programs and monitoring their progress (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, n.d.). The Panchayati Raj system has been instrumental in promoting local governance and decentralization of power in India. It has provided a platform for rural communities to participate in the decision-making process and address their local issues effectively.

Despite the measures taken to strengthen the Panchayati Raj system, several challenges continue to impede its smooth functioning. One of the most significant challenges is limited financial and administrative powers (Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Panchayats often lack adequate financial resources to undertake development projects and provide essential services to the rural population. This is further compounded by

the limited administrative powers of Panchayats, as higher levels of government often retain control over critical functions such as land use planning and revenue collection. Another challenge faced by Panchayats is the inadequate capacity and technical expertise of its members and officials, which can lead to ineffective planning and implementation of development schemes (Kerala State Planning Board, 2018). Additionally, despite the reservation of seats for women and marginalized communities, they often face discrimination and exclusion in the decision-making process, indicating the need for greater social inclusion and gender sensitivity in the functioning of Panchayats (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2017.).

To overcome these challenges, various measures have been suggested, such as providing greater financial and administrative powers to Panchayats (Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority, 2019), enhancing the capacity and technical expertise of its members and officials (Maharashtra State Rural Livelihoods Mission, n.d.), and promoting greater social inclusion and gender sensitivity (Bandyopadhyay, 2010). These measures, if implemented effectively, can go a long way in strengthening the Panchayati Raj system and empowering local communities in India.

Role and Functioning of Panchayats

Panchayats play a crucial role in ensuring local empowerment and development (Mohanty, 2015). By providing an avenue for direct participation in governance, Panchayats enable rural communities to voice their concerns and have a say in decision-making processes. Through their grassroots-level presence, Panchayats are better equipped to identify and address the unique needs and challenges of their communities, promoting localized development. To ensure the effective functioning of Panchayats, several measures need to be taken. The capacity

building programs should be initiated to enhance the skills and knowledge of Panchayat members (Planning Commission, Government of India, 2013). This will enable them to perform their duties effectively and efficiently. Secondly, greater transparency and accountability should be ensured in the functioning of Panchayats. This can be done by regular audits and inspections of their activities, and by making information on their activities and expenditure available to the public (Rajasthan State Legal Services Authority, 1998.). Thirdly, greater participation of women and marginalized communities should be ensured in the functioning of Panchayats (Tamil Nadu State Election Commission, 2017). This will ensure that their voices are heard and taken into account in the decision-making process. Panchayats act as a check on government officials and agencies, ensuring accountability in local governance (Sridharan, 2017). By virtue of their democratic mandate, Panchayats are empowered to monitor the functioning of government departments and hold them accountable for any lapses or shortcomings. This serves as a critical mechanism for ensuring transparency and reducing corruption in local governance.

Empowering Panchayats

There are several ways to empower Panchayats and enhance their effectiveness in local governance. Firstly, financial empowerment can be achieved through devolution of funds and resources from the central and state governments (Mohanty, 2015). This will enable Panchayats to carry out development projects and provide basic services to the rural population. The administrative empowerment can be provided by delegating more powers and functions to Panchayats (Sridharan, 2017). This will enable them to take decisions on local issues, prepare plans and budgets, and implement programs according to local needs. The political empowerment can be

achieved by increasing the participation of Panchayats in the decision-making process at higher levels of government (World Bank, 2018). This will ensure that the voices of rural communities are heard and taken into account in the policy-making process

Financial Empowerment:

Devolution of funds and resources from the central and state governments is a crucial step towards empowering Panchayats (Shukla & Bose, 2019). It enables them to carry out development projects and provide basic services to the rural population. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act mandates that at least 30% of the funds collected by the state governments for rural development should be transferred to Panchayats (Government of India, 1993). However, in many cases, this provision is not implemented effectively, and Panchayats face a shortage of funds and resources. To address this issue, the government should ensure timely and adequate transfer of funds to Panchayats and provide them with access to financial institutions for loans and credit.

Administrative Empowerment:

Delegating more powers and functions to Panchayats is essential for their effective functioning (Sinha, 2020). It enables them to take decisions on local issues, prepare plans and budgets, and implement programs according to local needs. However, in many cases, Panchayats face administrative challenges, such as limited capacity, lack of technical expertise, and bureaucratic hurdles (Debbarma, 2017). To address this issue, the government should provide Panchayats with the necessary technical and administrative support, such as training programs, capacity building initiatives, and access to information and communication technology.

Political Empowerment:

Increasing the participation of Panchayats in the decision-making process at higher levels of government is crucial for ensuring that the voices of rural communities are heard and taken into account in the policy-making process (Kumar & Dubey, 2020). The government should provide Panchayats with a platform to interact with higher levels of government, such as state and national legislatures, and participate in policy-making discussions. Moreover, the government should ensure that Panchayats have a voice in the planning and implementation of development programs at the local level, such as District Planning Committees, which are mandated under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act.

Challenges and the Way Forward:

Despite their important role in local governance, Panchayats face several challenges in their functioning. One of the main challenges is inadequate funding and resources, which limits their ability to implement development schemes and programs effectively (Sarkar & Bhattacharjee, 2019). Another challenge is the lack of capacity and skills among Panchayat members, which affects their ability to perform their duties effectively. Lack of transparency and accountability is also a challenge, as it can lead to corruption and misuse of funds (Mukherjee & Bhattacharjee, 2019). Finally, there is often resistance from higher levels of government to devolve power and functions to Panchayats, which limits their autonomy and ability to take decisions on local issues. Here are some additional challenges that Panchayats face in their functioning:

Lack of adequate training and support:

Many Panchayat members are elected without any prior experience or training in local governance, which can make it difficult for them to perform their

duties effectively. Moreover, they may not receive adequate support from the government or civil society organizations in terms of training, technical assistance, and resources, which can limit their ability to implement development programs (Kumar & Dubey, 2020).

Limited participation of marginalized groups:

Panchayats are often dominated by privileged groups, such as landowners or dominant castes, which can lead to exclusion and marginalization of other groups, such as women, Dalits, and Adivasis. This can result in biased decision-making and inadequate representation of the needs and interests of marginalized communities (Sharma, 2016).

Inadequate legal framework:

Certainly, inadequate legal frameworks also pose a challenge for Panchayats. The legal framework governing Panchayats is often unclear and inadequate, which can lead to confusion and conflict over their roles, powers, and responsibilities. This can limit their ability to carry out their functions effectively and efficiently. Moreover, there are many overlapping laws and regulations at the central and state levels, which can lead to further confusion and hamper the functioning of Panchayats.

There is a need for a clear and comprehensive legal framework that defines the roles, powers, and responsibilities of Panchayats at the local level. The legal framework should also provide for greater autonomy and flexibility for Panchayats to take decisions on local issues and implement development programs according to local needs. Moreover, the legal framework should be harmonized at the central and state levels to avoid overlapping laws and regulations that can hinder the functioning of Panchayats.

Limited access to technology and information:

Many Panchayats lack access to modern technology and information systems, which can make it difficult for them to collect, analyze, and disseminate data on local development needs and priorities. This can lead to ineffective planning and implementation of development programs (Ghosh & Singh, 2019).

Political interference and corruption:

Panchayats are vulnerable to political interference and corruption, particularly at the local level. This can lead to misuse of funds, biased decision-making, and limited transparency and accountability in their functioning (Mishra & Samal, 2017).

Addressing these challenges is crucial for empowering Panchayats and enhancing their effectiveness in local governance. It requires concerted efforts from the government, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to provide the necessary support, resources, and legal framework to enable Panchayats to function effectively and equitably.

Case studies of successful Panchayats

The institution of Panchayats in India has been hailed as a crucial step towards decentralization and participatory governance. Despite facing numerous challenges such as inadequate funding, lack of political will, and poor capacity building, Panchayats have been successful in implementing various development programs in different states of India (Kumar & Bhattacharya, 2021).

One such example is the success of Panchayats in Kerala, where they have been able to implement various development programs such as rural electrification and water supply due to their strong financial and administrative powers (Kumar &

Bhattacharya, 2021). Similarly, in Rajasthan, the Panchayats have played a critical role in promoting women's empowerment and participation through the provision of reserved seats and capacity building programs (Deshpande & Dongre, 2019). In Maharashtra, the Panchayats have been successful in promoting sustainable agriculture and rural livelihoods through the implementation of organic farming and watershed development programs. These programs have led to improved soil health and crop yields, thereby increasing the incomes of farmers and contributing to rural development (Kumar & Bhattacharya, 2021). The Panchayats in Himachal Pradesh have been successful in promoting eco-tourism and conservation of natural resources through the implementation of community-based tourism programs. These programs have led to increased employment opportunities and income generation in rural areas (Kumar & Bhattacharya, 2021).

In Tamil Nadu, the Panchayats have also been successful in promoting women's empowerment and participation through the provision of reserved seats and capacity building programs. Additionally, gender-sensitive development programs such as the provision of safe drinking water and sanitation facilities have improved the health and well-being of women and girls in rural areas (Deshpande & Dongre, 2019). Lastly, in Gujarat, the Panchayats have been successful in promoting community-led disaster risk reduction and management through the implementation of early warning systems and evacuation plans. They have also partnered with civil society organizations and government agencies to develop disaster preparedness plans and enhance the capacity of local communities to respond to natural disasters (Kumar & Bhattacharya, 2021).

These case studies demonstrate the potential of Panchayats to promote sustainable and inclusive development in rural India through innovative and

participatory approaches. They highlight the importance of empowering Panchayats through financial, administrative, and political measures and addressing the challenges they face in their functioning. By supporting the institutionalization of Panchayats and strengthening their capacities, India can ensure more effective and equitable rural development.

Recommendations

1. Provide adequate financial resources to Panchayats to plan, implement and monitor development programs effectively
2. Build the capacity of Panchayat members to ensure they have the technical expertise to carry out their responsibilities effectively
3. Establish transparent and accountable systems for fund allocation and utilization to avoid corruption and mismanagement of resources
4. Encourage the participation of marginalized communities in the decision-making process of Panchayats through the provision of reserved seats and capacity building programs
5. Promote the participation of women in Panchayats through the provision of reserved seats and capacity building programs
6. Address gender bias in the functioning of Panchayats by implementing gender-sensitive development programs
7. Develop partnerships between Panchayats and civil society organizations to promote community participation and enhance the legitimacy of Panchayats
8. Strengthen the institutional framework for Panchayats to ensure their autonomy and independence from political interference.
9. Develop mechanisms for conflict resolution and grievance redressal within Panchayats to address disputes arising from development programs.

10. Develop monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the impact of development programs implemented by Panchayats
11. Encourage the use of technology to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of Panchayats
12. Develop linkages between Panchayats and other local governance structures to promote better coordination and collaboration
13. Develop partnerships between Panchayats and the private sector to promote entrepreneurship and job creation in rural areas
14. Promote sustainable agriculture and rural livelihoods through the implementation of organic farming and watershed development programs
15. Promote eco-tourism and conservation of natural resources through the implementation of community-based tourism programs
16. Promote community-led disaster risk reduction and management through the implementation of early warning systems and evacuation plans
17. Develop partnerships between Panchayats and academic institutions to promote research and knowledge sharing
18. Provide technical assistance to Panchayats to promote innovation and learning from successful case studies
19. Develop communication and awareness-raising campaigns to increase the understanding and appreciation of Panchayats among local communities
20. Develop mechanisms for feedback and citizen engagement to promote transparency and accountability in the functioning of Panchayats.

Implications of the Study

Several things can be gleaned from this research into improving local administration in India's rural areas by examining how Panchayats work. First, the

research emphasizes the significance of Panchayats in fostering sustainable and inclusive rural development. It stresses the importance of giving Panchayats the resources, authority, and political support they need to do their jobs.

In order for Panchayats to do their jobs well, the study's authors say, capacity building, transparency, and more engagement from marginalized populations are crucial. It suggests equipping Panchayats with the necessary tools and knowledge to efficiently design, implement, and track development initiatives. Panchayats can improve their openness, accountability, and citizen participation with the help of civil society organisations and other stakeholders.

As the study shows, the state's involvement in assisting and directing Panchayats is crucial. It suggests making sure that Panchayats have access to what they need. Involvement of civil society organisations and other stakeholders in Panchayats' operations is another area that the state may aid in.

Women's empowerment, sustainable agriculture, eco-tourism, and community-led disaster risk reduction and management are all advocated as means by which the Panchayats might fulfill their promise as effective agents of change in rural India. The research suggests that Panchayats should create programmes to increase women's leadership skills and provide reserved seats for them. Better crop yields and farmer incomes are predicted through the use of sustainable agricultural practises and the promotion of soil health through collaboration with civil society organisations and farmers' associations. Similarly, the report suggests collaborating with local communities and tourism operators to improve the industry's sustainability, which in turn would boost the number of jobs available and the amount of money generated. Finally, the report suggests improving local community preparedness for natural catastrophes by

developing early warning systems and evacuation strategies.

Significant implications for promoting sustainable and inclusive development in rural areas may be drawn from the study on empowering local government through an investigation of the role and functioning of Panchayats in rural India. It suggests promoting women's empowerment, sustainable agriculture, eco-tourism, and community-led disaster risk reduction and management; empowering Panchayats through financial, administrative, and political measures; and enhancing transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. The study highlights the significance of civil society organisations and other stakeholders in the operation of Panchayats, as well as the state's role in supporting and guiding them.

Conclusion

The analysis of the role and functioning of Panchayats in rural India has highlighted their crucial role in promoting local governance and development. The successful case studies demonstrate the potential of Panchayats in implementing innovative and participatory approaches to sustainable and inclusive development. However, several challenges such as inadequate resources, capacity gaps, and political interference hamper their effective functioning. Thus, it is essential to empower Panchayats through financial, administrative and political measures, and ensure their effective functioning through capacity building, transparency, and greater participation of marginalized communities. The involvement of civil society organizations and other stakeholders can further contribute to enhancing transparency, accountability and citizen participation. The State must provide support and guidance to Panchayats and ensure that they have access to all the necessary resources and information. By doing so, we can pave the way for more inclusive and sustainable development in

rural areas, and strengthen the legitimacy of Panchayats as instruments of change.

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