

The Transformative Role of Panchayat Raj Institutions in Grassroots Educational Development in India: A Critical Analysis Nagendrappa K.T.

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ABSTRACT:

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is a major landmark in the democratic history of India as it has laid down a strong constitutional framework for grassroots democracy and decentralized governance through PRIs. This paper reviews the PRIs in fostering education at the grassroots in a critical perspective on their constitutional obligation, practical experiences and systemic constraints. The study indicates that, although PRIs have had transformational impacts on literacy and school attendance as well as infrastructure where effective leadership exists alongside community participation, their potential has been severely compromised by the “Three F’s” – inadequate financial independence, incomplete functions decentralisation and capacity deficit. Comparison of Kerala and West Bengal models underscores that officialdom do not always mean what they say, with the “Kerala model” being lip service to decentralization with restricted administrative devolution, whereas the focused approach in West Bengal had helped in delivering rapid infrastructure expansion, but has fallen short on overall literacy objectives. The paper ends by positing that hanging the constitutional vision and ground realities cannot be addressed without fiscal empowerment, real functional devolution, capacity enhancement, stronger community oversight and political interference. It is only through systemic changes like these that PRIs can potentially become catalysts of change in bottom-up educational reform in India.

KEYWORDS:

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Grassroots Educational Development, Constitutional Mandate, Decentralized Governance, Devolution of Functions, Gram Swaraj, 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

Introduction:

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 enabled introduction of decentralized governance system in India via Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Despite the transformative potential PRIs have for reforming education in context where there is strong leadership and community engagement, it remains largely ineffective due to lack of financial autonomy, only partial devolution of functions, and administrative shortfalls. Such examples of Kerala model and West Bengal indicate the nuances of decentralisation. Downward to upward drive from constitutional vision needs fiscal empowerment, participatory devolution of responsibilities, creation of capacities at the local level, augmentation of community oversight and elimination of political intervention so that PRIs are able to become real trigger agencies in the transformation of education practices at the grassroots.

Aim, Objective and scope of the study:**Aim:**

This paper attempts to assess critically the role of PRIs in fostering and steering educational policy at the grass-roots level in India, through a discussion of their constitutional legitimacy, operational constraints and systemic bottlenecks.

Objectives:**The aims of this study are as follows:**

1. Examine the constitutional provisions and the transfer of powers to PRIs in the domain of education sector.
2. Analyse functional responsibilities of the higher and lower PRI tiers (Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, Zila Parishad) in school management.
3. Use the “Three F’s” framework to identify and label the key PRIs in education interventions.
4. Show good practice case studies and comparisons with state system to illustrate best practice and what is achievable in the system.

Scope:

This paper will be concerned with the era post 73rd Amendment delving into the PRIs participation in primary, secondary and vocational education. The review of literature relies mostly on Indian experience,

recognizing variations in the implementation of the Act in different states but striving to establish general trends and challenges that impact grass-roots educational development.

The Structure and Functional Devolution of PRIs:

1. A Three Level System: Decentralization at Work

The 73rd Amendment provided for a uniform three tier Panchayati Raj system. At village level, it is known as the Gram Panchayat at intermediate or Block level and Panchayat Samity at district level. This model is compulsory for all states with a population of more than two million and voluntary for smaller ones. An integral part of the Panchayati Raj is a three-tiered system: Gram Panchayat (village level), and Panchayat samiti (block level) and Zila Parishad district level, although it is also present in several remote regions. Apart from the Gram Sabha, all other institutions are formal local government bodies. Every village with adult suffrage even an illiterate person without no criminal charges is a member of Gram Sabha. It is the only grass-roots democratic institution in Panchayati Raj actually exists.

2. Unlocking the Potential of the Grassroots: The Eleventh Schedule

The state governments have the legislative authority to define what constitutes the PRIs. Eleventh Schedule lists 29 subjects which may be devolved to the panchayats, from agriculture and poverty reduction to health and education. This constitutional arrangement held the possibility of development from below, with local communities being able, through their elected representatives, to assume direct control over local matters.

Role of PRIs in Education:

1. Strengthening School Infrastructure and Facilities

PRIs play a prominent role in the construction and maintenance of school buildings, an important aspect of bottom-up educational development. It is their job to build school buildings, ensure basic facilities like toilets and hand pumps for drinking water, and run Anganwadi centres. But the extent of PRI participation in infrastructure procurement is not equal everywhere. In one institution less than 20% of the PRI members were engaged in the exercise, where their input was more or less confined to building separate toilets for girls and boys and putting up a hand pump for drinking water. This analysis further found that no PRI member worked

on boundary walls, school rooms or kitchen for mid-day meal.

2. Implementation of National and State Education Programs

PRIs play an integral role as the main executing agency for national and state level educational programmes, at the local governing level. Not least of this is the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 which obliges local government, such as the panchayat, to provide free and compulsory education and set up schools where there are none. PRIs also play a vital role in the effective implementation of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). Engagement of PRI in the Mid-Day Meal programme: In case of priesthood, since the presence of temple has never been a problem in any village, there always existed a sort of mutual acceptance and hence cooperation to some extent PRI members are very much involved at various levels from distribution to monitoring quality through regular checks. The success of PRIs in these functions is contingent on their capacity to resource and make available machinery of the State for implementing the schemes.

3. Fostering Community Participation and Accountability

The constitutional obligation of PRIs to govern local issues opened a window for extended involvement of the community in education. Involvement of the community is important, because it will stimulate a sense of ownership, focus on accountability and relevance of educational services to local requirements. In this regard, institutions such as the VECs and SMCs play pivotal roles. These bodies are to oversee schools' performance, allocate resources, provide policy leadership and ensure the integration of each school with its community.

Challenges and Limitations: A Critical Evaluation:

Despite their constitutional obligation and successes, PRIs are confronted by some serious systemic deficiencies that have inhibited its performance in educational development. These restrictions are generally known as the "Three F's": Funds, Functions, and Functionaries.

1. Funds: The Perennial Financial Dependency

One of the major issues that affect PRIs is their lack of financial independence. They are heavily dependent on grants from the central and state governments as their own tax resources account for a mere 1 per cent of their total income. This financial reliance does not enable them to take

their own independent stand and to finance the local projects adequately. The recommendations of the State Finance Commissions, intended to advise financial devolution, are mostly ignored with even “meagre” transfers being made. This issue was compounded by the fact that with the Fifteenth Finance Commission’s recommendation for cutting back untied grants to PRIs from 85% in the Fourteenth to 60%, dependence on centrally sponsored schemes also increased. Such reliance on pre-established schemes tend to reduce PRIs as mere implementing bodies rather than proper self-governing institutions.

2. Functions: The Issue of Incomplete Devolution

Devolution as a constitutional vision is usually only achieved in part. Several state governments are wary of giving up complete control over the 29 subjects in listed in the Eleventh Schedule, and sensitive areas such as education and health would continue to be largely central (and state) dominated. This half-hearted devolution of power and authority results in bureaucratic intervention and constrains the autonomy of PRIs. It also faces a huge challenge from the sprouting of “Parallel Bodies” (e.g., Khap Panchayats), generally better resourced than PRIs, which impinge upon the sphere of activities that are legitimately within PRI domain and thereby weakening it in terms of authority and morale.

The political influence would also taint the integrity of the system. Local political leaders get what suits them best, and elected officials may have personal or party interests that take precedence over the greater good of the people of Miami. According to another source “money may be assigned as a result of political factors rather than on the basis of community needs and is thus used inappropriately.”

3. Functionaries: The Administrative Deficit

likes of secretaries, engineers and data operator are scarce making PRIs impotent in performing as efficient service provider. One of the biggest issues is the little administrative control they have on their teachers or, in some cases, no disciplinary opportunity even when misconducts occur. Unofficial interference faced in teacher transfers and teachers being used for non-teaching tasks have influenced their performance. School education is something that elected representatives should be able to take care of it but they lack capacity building.

It is a vicious circle due to financial difficulties and lack of full

devolution of functions. The dependence on grants at higher-levels make PRIs to function as lower rung agencies and also let them lose control over its decisions. This flow of funds in a top-down manner entrenches a bureaucratic framework, one that goes against the principles of local self-governance envisaged by the 73rd Amendment. Political meddling and lack of distinction between bureaucrats and elected members lead to 'dysfunctional politics', therefore preventing efficient governance and education delivery. This systematic undermining of the democratic ethos of PRIs has held them back from real change.

Case Studies and Comparative Models of Decentralized Education:

In order to properly grasp the role of PRIs we must go beyond constitutional design and consider how they worked in practice. Comparative case studies of various state models, and an accounting of successful individual cases, demonstrates the promise as well as systemic constraints of the system.

1. The Kerala Model: Fact and the rhetoric

What's more, Kerala is frequently hailed as a role model for decentralised governance thanks to high literacy rates and successful PRI reforms that have put local bodies in charge of key services like education and health. Yet a sober study of the state's education sector shows that "the rhetoric of decentralisation... has not matched the reality". Though the state has devolved certain educational activities as part of empowerment to local bodies, including quiz competition or going on a field trip-when the school was given money to do so-the basic responsibility for running human and material resource at the school level remains with schools and not local government. It suggests that while Kerala has progressive educational outcomes, the reality of the devolution era in education is more complex and restricted than commonly held perceptions.

2. The West Bengal Model – A Focused Strategy:

Unlike in the PRI dominated states, West Bengal has its own distinct and specialized variant of education. State established a distinct, independent two-tier system framed by the West Bengal Board of Primary Education (WBBPE) and District Primary School Councils(DPSCs). Contrary to school governance in other states, where schools are the responsibility of general local bodies, that in West Bengal is exclusively for primary education and DPSCs are responsible for operations, postings and

monitoring.

3. A paradox of west bengal and the state's system of primary education:

Comparative study with kerala (2005–2014 decade) The statistics indicate that the infrastructure development in West Bengal was faster than in Kerala in primary education, looking at number of primary schools per thousand children and average students–classroom ratio. But for all this, the literacy rate of West Bengal (77%) is well behind that of Kerala (93.9%). This “disization” underscores an important reality: the provision of bricks and mortar is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for educationally excellent schools. The effectiveness of the Kerala model is rooted in a long tradition of social reform, and sustained political targeting on primary education not just in terms of schools but also teacher quality, community involvement, and pedagogy. The priority of the West Bengal model for higher education, symbolised by its top order universities, had denied attention to primary education system development despite an enviable infrastructure.

4. Stories of Success: From Local Leaders to Holistic Development

The practical potential of PRIs is well–captured in the stories of successful people. The story of Smt. Sampatiya Uikey, woman party leader from Madhya Pradesh is no different. Starting her career as a Sarpanch, she has worked towards achieving 100% literacy in her village by organising adult literacy classes and making 100% child entry with minimum dropout. As Zila Panchayat President, she ensured that every panchayat had a well–built Anganwadi Bawan. The success story of Smt. Mamta Devi from Himachal Pradesh who, though belonging to a marginalised community changed the face of her Panchayat developing it into a “model developed panchayat” is another testimony for leadership at the local level. Though not without limitations, these examples illustrate the potential of decentralized governance if it is led, prioritizes and initializes community conversation as well as taking steps to overcome systemic challenges.

Table 1: Comparative Models: Kerala vs. West Bengal

Feature	Kerala	West Bengal
Governance Model	PRI-centric (decentralization via PRIs)	Specialized Board (WBBPE/DPSC)
Primary Focus	Primary and Secondary Education	Higher Education (historical focus)
Literacy Rate	93.9%	77.08%
Infrastructure (2005–14)	Less developed primary infrastructure	Faster growth in primary schools and improved pupil-teacher ratio
Key Insight	Decentralization was not the only reason – social reform and continued political commitment led to higher literacy rate.	Better infrastructure may not automatically make better literates, so adoption of a whole-some approach to be an effective tool for education.

Recommendations for Enhancing Effectiveness:

Several interventions are needed to bring the constitutional dream closer to reality on the ground, and it is provided by several kinds of support that local governments can offer PRIs so that they may play their full part in educational development:

1. Financial Empowerment:

PRIs financial dependence requires reversing the trend by increasing untied grants, and equipping them to be able to raise their finances through local taxes and user charges. This will provide the flexibility required to finance works as per local needs and not be confirmed by exposure of the norms under centrally sponsored schemes.

2. Real Powers and Functions to States:

All the 29 subjects enumerated in Eleventh Schedule must genuinely be devolved upon states. This also involves devolution of key administrative and disciplinary powers regarding educational functionaries, specifically teachers, to PRIs leading to greater local accountability and agency.

3. Capacity Building and Training:

There is a need for both mandatory as well as long term training

for elected members and support personnel. Such programmes should teach governance, financial management as well as digital literacy, so they have the necessary knowledge to manage pedagogical processes and spend wisely.

4. Strengthening Community Oversight:

The function of community-level bodies, such as the Village Education Committees/School Management Committee should be strengthened through devolving decision-making power and resources to hold the system responsible.

5. Mitigating Political Interference:

By the inclusion of transparent tools which includes that of social audit and e-platform of governance, intervention should be done to curtail political influence thereby ensuring money is used for the benefit and interest of community rather than a person, object or party.

Conclusion:

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has provided a statutory status to the PRIs in India. Although PRIs have the potential of bettering education with effective leadership, financially they are handicapped and administrative devolution is also partial. Contrasting models of decentralisation in Kerala and West Bengal mirror the challenge – Kerala has little devolution despite rhetoric, West Bengal accomplished infrastructure growth but had poor literacy. Fiscal autonomy, functional devolution, capacity building and minimal political intrusion is need of the day to let PRIs work for bringing in educational change.

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