



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Reforms in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Study of New State of Telangana in India

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### Abstract

Devolution of powers, responsibilities and resources to local government promotes better delivery of public services. Devolution of powers deepens democracy and enhances the legitimacy of the political system for promoting peace and prosperity in a plural society like India. Devolution also promotes legitimacy, transparency and accountability of the local government and security and participation of the people in local decision making. It generates incentives for people to own the local government, since newly assigned responsibilities and resources are relevant to them. It promotes representative and responsive grass root level leadership. It also generates allocative and productive efficiency and accelerated better service delivery.

*Key Words: Decentralisation, Devolution, Local Government, Panchayati Raj*

### Introduction

The success of democracy depends on genuine decentralisation. People can gain their democratic rights through this system of local self-government. Power may be effectively decentralised through this system, and each individual can have the opportunity to completely develop his or her personality. The best centres for transmitting democratic concepts and instruction are local self-government institutions. People prefer democracy because they wish to live in a free and equal society. Local self-government gives people the opportunity to participate in democratic processes. Local problems can only be adequately and appropriately addressed and handled by these local self-governments. It also relieves the central and state governments of their onerous responsibilities and establishes democracy in a broader environment. Because members of local self-government are citizens, they are more likely to recognise and comprehend the significance of local issues than administrators of the State or Central government, and they are better able to address them. Members of local self-government have close and personal interaction with the people. Naturally, it is devoid of corruption and acts in a genuine social welfare manner. Local self-government institutions are significantly more useful than state or central government in implementing various economic planning at the local and regional levels. It also encourages residents to participate actively in various government operations. Ultimate conclusion is that the local government is the basis of democracy. Local government

is essentially a method of getting various things done for the benefit of the community. It is a practical business. If we view local government from this point of view, we are more likely to see its real nature than if we think of it as a school of democracy (Venkatarao. V, 1965:7).

### **Local Government and Local Democracy**

Lord Bryce in his famous work on Modern Democracies has laid down that “the school of democracy and the best guarantee for its success is the practice of local self - government (Lord Bryce, 1971:150). Underlying the importance of local government in free democratic India, Jawaharlal Nehru had said “Local Self-Government is and must be the basis of any true system of democracy. Robson also opined that democracy on the national scale can function healthily only if it is supported and nourished by democratic local government (Hoshiar Singh, 2004:8). Local government can be said to “encourage citizenship or democracy and to promote ‘political education’ in its widest sense. It does this by involving large number of people in the political decision-making process. While people may find the affairs of a modern state too large and complex to understand, they will perhaps more easily and naturally participate with their neighbours in helping to manage local community affairs (Tony Byrne, 1990:7).

According to Bailey (1999:359) the local government performs the following important roles in a democratic set up (I) Pluralism- the existence of local government prevents over concentration of political power and avoids a tendency towards centralized autocracy; (II) Participation- the existence of local governments encourages the active involvement of the citizens in democratic self-governance; and (III) Public Choice- local governments provide services tailored to the varying needs of different localities. Local needs and preferences should be locally defined. Local government enables a better match of policies with local conditions and preferences.

The local government bears the responsibility of providing the local services to their residents. These services are financed with the help of local taxes. In India, the distribution of functional responsibilities and revenue sources between federating units, i.e., central and state is made as per the constitutional provisions. The state transfers some of its powers to local units to render public services to their residents. This distribution has been made in such a way that elastic sources of revenue have gone to central and state governments, and few resources are left with local grants. At the same time functions of the local governments have increased. This leads to the serious problem of imbalance between their expenditure and revenue. Among local governments, the positions of urban local governments specially become worse because of rapid urbanization and industrialization. The local governments are supposed to provide more and more services to their residents while, on the contrary, the state governments impose limits on local governments to raise the revenue resources, viz., restriction on property tax rates, and restriction on the raising of debts (Mehta L.R., V.P. Bharadwaj, 1983: 72).

## Concept of Decentralisation

The concept of decentralisation is not new to India. However, this has been a subject of intensive debate since 1970's, when the orientation and structure of development planning changed from growth to redistribution with growth. Decentralisation refers to a situation in which lower – ranking decision – units acquire all powers and responsibilities and have control over the determination of their goals and targets (Sundaram, K.V., 1997:31). Because of this, it is now a well recognised doctrine since local resources are to be harnessed, local needs to be consulted, and local knowledge is needed. By and large, it is thought that decentralisation would improve government and administrative responsiveness to the public and increase the quality and quantity of the services it provides at the local level. Administrative responsiveness implies that, in government, the administrative machinery at a particular level has to be strong and responsive enough not only for delivering the goods to the citizens effectively but also to act to the satisfaction of all concerned (Pradeep Sahni and Vayunandan. E, 1992: 4). Wider implementation of decentralisation is essential for the success of developmental efforts. The Pre-fixing of the word “democratic” widens the idea and the implication of the term “decentralization”. It amounts to the transfer of powers to those bodies which are not only democratically constituted by the people but also function democratically, i.e., at every stage of their working, and for every single work of theirs, they are responsible to the people, who in their turn, possess the power of censuring their conduct when they so please (Bhatnagar, 1974:15 and 16). It is attempted to differentiate the communist concept of democratic decentralization and the democratic concept of democratic decentralization. According to him the democratic centralization which is an innovation of the communists, means democracy in constitutions and centralization in the decision. Under this system, people are free to elect their rulers but once people have elected them and approved of the broad outline of their policy, they cannot question them for the decision that they take. They must accept them. Democratic decentralization, on the other hand, confers upon the people full freedom, both regarding election of the leaders and the making of the policies and their execution.

## Panchayati Raj Institutions:

The term ‘Panchayati Raj Institutions’ is used extensively to describe the local governments in India. Translated into English, it means the ‘Rule of the Panchayati’ i.e. the rule of an assembly of villagers. However, the use of the term Panchayati Raj Institutions’ does not best on an image of legal authority that is independent and substantially autonomous of State and Union Governments. Therefore, there is a need to use the term ‘local self-government’ instead of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Many are used to describe ‘local self-government’ such as deconcentration and decentralization. Deconcentration involves redistribution of administrative responsibility within the Central Government. Decentralisation implies sharing of a part of the governmental power by a Central ruling group with other groups, each having authority within a specific area of the state. There is a subtle difference between decentralization and local self-government. Local self-government involves the participatory aspect. In contrast, decentralization, according to many, focuses much more narrowly on the administrative side. In short, the local self-government is a decentralised form of governance with participatory elements (Jayaprakash Narayan and P.Sanjay, 2004, p.678). Local democracy is sometimes treated as synonymous with ‘decentralisation’, but the two are in fact quite distinct.

In particular, decentralisation is not necessarily conducive to local democracy. In fact, in situations of sharp local inequalities, decentralisation sometimes heightens the concentration of power and discourages rather than fosters participation among the underprivileged. To illustrate, in some tribal areas where upper caste landlords and traders dominate village affairs, the devolution of power associated with the Panchayati Raj amendments has consolidated their hold and reinforced existing biases in the local power structure.

In recent times, there is an increasing realisation that genuine decentralisation leads to development. It is also felt that decentralisation of power to the local units of government and management is one of the best ways of empowering people; promoting public participation and increasing efficiency. According to Human Development Report (1993) where decentralisation has taken place, it has often been fairly successful in encouraging local participation, increasing accountability of local officials, reducing the costs and increasing efficiency. Decentralisation can help to mobilise resources, introduce locally and regionally diverse solutions and promote equitable growth by bringing the poor into mainstream development (Gopinath Reddy . M, 2003:1284).

### **Decentralisation in Telangana State**

The issue of decentralisation in Telangana State must be discussed by taking inputs from its parent State i.e., united Andhra Pradesh (AP) since the young State has not yet made any legislation regarding PRIs. All the legal provisions of PRIs in the united AP are applied to Telangana State. Decentralisation experience in AP shows that though the State is one of the old States in creating PRIs, the service delivery assigned to them is negligible. All the tiers of panchayats have been assigned large numbers of functions. But none of them has financial or administrative resources under their control to execute the functions. The Madhava Reddy Committee Report on Local Bodies as part of the exercise of Vision 2020 plan in united AP, had envisaged the empowerment of local bodies to manage services and create mechanisms for local communities to articulate their demands.

In Telangana, out of the 29 subjects of PRIs, only 17 subjects have been transferred to PRIs by the State government . Out of that, six subjects (agriculture, drinking water supply, minor irrigation tanks, social forestry, primary and secondary education and khadi and village industries) are provided funds and only two subjects (drinking water supply and minor irrigation tanks) have functionaries. Still, there are many subjects along with either functions (12) or funds (23) or functionaries (27) yet to be transferred to PRIs in the State. This situation of united AP in 2003 has not yet changed in Telangana State even after its formation in 2014.

So far, the functions and responsibilities to the PRIs pertaining to agriculture extension are restricted to the selection of beneficiaries to various agricultural implements at the block/ mandal level; no such funds are devolved at the GP level (Sitaram 2000). On similar lines, a large number of subjects mentioned in schedule I and three subjects under schedule II of the Act have not been devolved to the PRIs so far except some residuary powers. If transfer of functions followed by devolution of finance, as listed in schedule II, takes

place in the form of real decentralisation, the entire picture of local bodies will undergo drastic changes (AP SFC Report 1997). This process of devolution has not been initiated in Telangana State.

In Telangana, unlike Mandal and Zilla Panchayats, Gram Panchayats (GPs) are under the control of the District Panchayat officer (DPO). The executive officer of the GP works under the extension officer (EO), Divisional Panchayat Officer and District Panchayat Officer, who are all answerable to the District Collector. Parallel bodies in the form of a number of community based organisations (CBOs) for managing various subjects like natural resource management (water users' associations, watershed committees, Vana Samrakshana Samities) and social sectors (school education committees, mothers' committees), etc., are hindering the functioning of GPs. There are two schools of thought prevalent today for and against panchayats and parallel bodies. Those, who are on the side of Panchayats, argue that benefits from user committees managed natural resource projects, such as forest, watershed management, are not sustainable in the long run.

After the funds from the projects are extracted, committees are abandoned and the livelihoods base of the poor remains more or less the same. Those who argue for management by CBOs, feel that multiplicity of committees are helpful for getting more benefits from the government. The villagers see this as an opportunity to ensure the development of their villages through involvement of a large number of government departments. The bureaucracy too favours these committees as it is able to have a greater say in the implementation of the programmes through these committees. The convergence of CBOs and PRIs needs to be given a serious thought. The various development departments need to be brought under the control of PRIs for enabling them to discharge functions enshrined in the 11th Schedule (29 items) as well as to become institutions of self-government. The ground reality existing in the Telangana State is that a majority of line departments in villages do not function under the control of GP but they run parallel with community participation undermining the constitutionally vested powers of GPs. A separate 'Panchayati Raj Cadre' has not been created. Further, the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), which commands sizeable resources, functions independently of PR bodies. Similarly, there are a few other State level development corporations like Scheduled Caste Corporation, Backward Caste Corporation, Women Development Corporation which work independently of PR bodies. Unless these bodies/agencies and their finances are brought under the GP's purview, it is difficult to call Gram Panchayat as an institution of self-government. Telangana Panchayat Raj Bill, 2018 was aimed at making the gram panchayats achieve prosperity, clean and green. The Panchayat Raj movement was supposed to bring unity among villages but the villages have now become highly politicized and Panchayati elections were now witnessing violence. The bill is comprehensive and it envisages making villages self-reliant, clean and green, The Telangana government taken initiatives for adding functions to the panchayat's garbage dump yards, crematorium and burial grounds.

**Conclusion:**

The mandal system in Telangana has made significant progress in providing delivery of public services. Recently, the government of Telangana has strengthened the personnel system of PRIs. Telangana Panchayat Raj Act, 2018 provides a clear institutional and governance structure for GPs while also specifying the powers, roles and responsibilities, and accountability standards for key functionaries. This has strengthened the functioning of GPs and helped improve service delivery. The role and responsibilities of mandal system is increased according to the new act. Appropriate supervision and controlling powers given to Mandal system. The government has also focused on accountability for outcomes and improved service delivery to citizens. The transparency and accountability in the mandal administration is increased with the frequent supervision and monitoring of the mandal level officers on Gram Panchayats. With the effective monitoring and supervision of Mandal Panchayat Officers (MPOs) on the functioning of Gram Panchayats, the effectiveness of delivery of public services are drastically increased. The utility of technology is reduced the delays in delivery of public services. Panchayat Secretary and Mandal Panchayat Officer apps are more useful to prevent the delays in mandal administration. The quality of basic services i.e., sanitation, health, education, roads etc. are increased. With the introduction of Palle Pragathi programme, the infrastructure and funds are increased to Gram Panchayats. Various activities like cleaning of roads and drains, identification of low-lying areas, bailing out of water from low lying areas, identification of old and dilapidated houses and offices, demolition and cleaning of debris, filling up of old and unused open wells, etc., are the key areas this programme.

However, the research has identified some policy gaps. In many places, the elected representatives of the PRIs facing dominance from elected representatives. With the increase supervision and monitoring powers of mandal officials create gap among the PR institutions and question the relevance of gram panchayats. For the effective implementation of PR Act, the Government has also built the infrastructure for GPs to function effectively. At the formation of the state, there was a requirement of buildings for 8,351 GPs. Of this, 3,554 buildings were sanctioned under the MGNREGS programme and 1,774 have been completed so far. Currently, 6,765 GPs have been equipped with computers, printers and other equipment, and out of these 1,245 GPs have internet connectivity. It was observe that in many areas facing lack of panchayati building and infrastructural problems. In many areas facing poor infrastructure and Internet problems and some places delays identified delays in delivery of public services due to poor internet facility. Another issue is inadequate staff, recently, the government of Telangana has recruited panchayat staff, but they are inadequate to fulfil the present requirements. In many areas citizens facing problems with insufficient technical knowledge of staff. Still, some villages have facing Kacha roads and improper sanitation and health facilities due to misuse or fund diverted issues. Gram Sabha meeting are not held regularly and politicians interfering identification of beneficiaries of social security schemes. Finally, panchayats suffering from delays in release of funds to the PRIs from state and central governments. Due to insufficient funds panchayats do not perform properly in their activities. Frequent delays highly impacted in the development at grassroots level.

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