



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Strengthening Panchayat Raj In Madhya Pradesh: An Appraisal Of Key Initiatives

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Abstract:

Panchayats in Madhya Pradesh State as a form of grass root structures had historical beginnings yet regional differences were present in their functioning when the State was formed in 1956. The State created by merging Madhya Bharat, Vindhya Pradesh and Bhopal State inherited an assorted system of polity and governance. The laws in operation in the newly consolidated central region were diverse. The process of decentralization in Madhya Pradesh right from its inception was thus not simple but complex. The Madhya Pradesh government took several steps and initiatives to consolidate and establish an institutionalized local governance system. The Panchayat Acts were enacted to bring uniformity in structure and functions throughout the State. The Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Raj Evam Gram Swaraj Adhiniyam, 1993 marks a defining stage in establishing New Generation Panchayats with a strong integrated three-tier structure in the State. The article highlights and reviews the several ingenious efforts which have given dynamism to decentralization and makes suggestions to further strengthen the Panchayat Raj in the State.

Key Words: Gram Swaraj, e- governance Initiatives, Panchayats Best Practices, Right To Recall, Right To Information

I. INTRODUCTION

Madhya Pradesh is among the frontline States in implementation of three tier Panchayati Raj system and has spearheaded a number of initiatives in empowering and strengthening Panchayats. The process of decentralization in Madhya Pradesh right from its inception involved intricacies that required to be resolved administratively and legally. Panchayats as a form of local structures had historical and socio cultural roots yet differences were present in their functioning across the Central region. Caste and village panchayats as local organizations existed along with tribal communities which had their own system. During the transitional phase of Statehood from 1947 to 1956 the unwieldy laws in operation gave rise to several complicated problems. As an outcome of linguistic reorganization in the country the Madhya Pradesh State was formed on 1 November 1956. The State was created by joining three geographical areas namely Madhya Bharat and Vindhya Pradesh with the former Nawab ruled Bhopal State. This resulted in a inter mixed structure of governance. In this contextual background the initiatives and efforts of the State are commendable in the form of enactments and regulatory rules to transfer 'power to people' and to further democratic decentralization.

A Brief Background of Panchayats 1950-1993 : Madhya Pradesh has a rich but diverse political and administrative history. From ancient, to medieval times several prominent historical dynasties like the Mauryan, Gupta, Harsha, The Sultanate and the Mughals ruled over different parts of Central India. In 1861 during the British rule a Province was formed which was later given the name " Central Provinces and Berar" on 24 October 1936. Under the British till 1947 the Princely rulers held varied degrees of autonomy with own rules regulations applicable to their areas. Post independence amidst this diverse background, the formation of a new State was faced with geographical integration. In 1950 when India became a Republic, Madhya Pradesh was created from the former British Central Provinces and Berar and the princely states of Makrai and Chhattisgarh, with Nagpur as the capital of the State (Ranglal,1951). Each of these had different pre-existing sets of laws at the time of merger.

After coming into existence in 1956 the Madhya Pradesh government took several steps and initiatives to consolidate these local governance Acts and establish an institutionalized system. In 1962 The Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Act was passed to bring about decentralization to set down a foundation of three-tier structure. This elementary attempt aimed to bring uniformity in Panchayat structure and functions throughout the State. In 1981 another Panchayat Act was passed to restructure and streamline the existing system. This Act was repealed by The Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Act of 1990 which aimed at ensuring effective involvement of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the local administration and development activities.

The New Generation Panchayats Post 1993: The 73rd Constitutional Amendment 1992 introduced a new phase in the development of local self government institutions in the country. The State Governments consistent with the core spirit of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment 1992 (CAA 1992) enacted The Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Raj Adhiniyam, 1993. The implementation of the 1993 State Panchayat Raj Act marks a new stage in decentralization process and in establishing a framework to increase effective participation of all sections of rural society in local issues. The State taking timely action fulfilled the legal requirements to constitute the following :-

- a) In 1994 The State Election Commission was formed as an autonomous body.
- b) As early as 1994 The MP Rajya Vitta Aayog Adhniyam was enacted so that The State Finance Commission could be set up.
- c) The ' District Planning Committee Act 1995' was enacted by the State legislature to give effect to Article 243 ZD of the Constitution .

MP was able to conduct the first round of Panchayat elections before other States. A Task Force set up by the Planning Commission on (PRIs) made positive note of the following efforts :

- 1.The activities of Panchayat were clear in distinction from that of the State.
2. Transfer to PRIs 18 Subjects/Departments.
3. In the programmes that are transferred the officers and employees are under the PRIs at the respective level.
4. Panchayat karmi(Secretary) is hired by Gram Panchayats. The Janpad Panchayats and Zila Parishad can employ Shiksha Karmis.
5. The development works sanction limit at the three levels is Rs.Ten lakhs by Zila Panchayat , Seven lakhs and Rs.Three lakhs by Janpad Panchayats and Gram Panchayats respectively.
6. Merging of District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs) with Zila Panchayats.

Madhya Pradesh since 1993 has a well established three tier local governance structure as mandated by Article 243 of the Constitution. There are 52 District Panchayats , 313 Intermediate Panchayats and 23066 Gram Panchayats in Madhya Pradesh (Local Government Bodies of India). The State government has made great efforts exhibiting political will to not only bring uniformity in the Panchayat Raj system but to empower Panchayats by making it more effective by new enactments, policies and reforms. The trail blazing initiatives taken by the State are enumerated below.

II The Key Initiatives:

1. **Policy Initiatives:** The Policy formulated by legislature regarding the PRIs was declared and placed before the house as aims and objects of the Act. In terms of policy initiatives as stated in the Preamble The 1993 Act was".. to ensure effective involvement of the Panchayat Raj Institutions in the local administration and development activities."The legislature thus formulated a policy giving reservation and representation to women and SC/ST in the State based on their population amended by The 'Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Raj (Sanshodhan) Adhiniyam, 2001' (Act No. 3/2001).The object which necessitated this amendment mentioned in the statement of objects and reasons "is to ensure comprehensive development of villages through decentralization to establish a system of direct democracy."
2. **Establishing Gram Swaraj:** The Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Raj Adhiniyam, 1993 was amended in 2001 and renamed as 'The Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Raj Avam Gram Swaraj Adhiniyam, 1993.' The State Government in renaming the Act attempted to revitalize the grass root governance system in furtherance of Directive Principles contained in Article 40 of the Constitution. It realized the constitutional mandate of empowering the Panchayats to effectively function as units of a self-government. The commitment to Gandhian ideology as a principle was reflected in the insertion of Gram Swaraj to "organise village panchayats and endow them with necessary powers and authority."
3. **Three Tier Structure:** A pyramidal super structure of three distinct levels was visualized by the State Legislature. The 1962 Act provided a basic three-tier structure framework of Panchayats applicable to the entire State. The A. Mehta Committee report advocated the two-tier system with a Zila Parishad at the district level, and below it, the Mandal Panchayat consisting of a group of villages with a total population of 15,000 to 20,000. The State government followed major suggestions but chose to retain the three-tier system of Panchayati Raj. The MP 1993 Act maintained the Zila Panchayat at the District and Janpad Panchayat at the Block level. The village level Gram Panchayat continued. The present structure appears more suitable for a State with diversity, the percentage of rural population and large geographical area.
4. **Integrated Panchayat System:** The Panchayat Acts establish three levels without primacy or hierarchical order between the tiers. The roles and responsibilities of each level of governance are clearly outlined and the integrated system works with supervision of lower tier by the upper tier. The subjects and functions under the jurisdiction of each tier are defined with coordination of activities requiring administrative and financial approvals from the higher tier. The Block or Janpad Panchayat is made a mediating - coordinating tier between the village and Zila.The Zila Panchayat serves to connect Panchayat at Block level and the Government with overall supervision. In the State greater coordination among the three tiers is attempted through representation of 1/5 Sarpanchs to Janpad Panchayat and Janpad Panchayat Adhyakshas to Zila Parishad.
5. **Elections/ Constituencies:** The government has made efforts to establish democratically elected Panchayats. To allow the new generation Panchayats to function effectively periodic elections in the State with the passing of the Act in 1994 were held. The delimitation of constituencies for elections were done timely so that marginal groups were ensured representation.
6. **Reservation Of Seats For Women :** The Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Raj Avam Gram Swaraj (Sanshodhan) Adhiniyam 2007 raised reservation of seats for women from 33% to 50% much earlier than most other States thus encouraging women to play greater role as elected representatives in rural development work and management of Panchayat affairs. In the year 2020 out of total 392981 PRI representatives in Panchayat the total elected women representative were 196490 in the State (Pib GOI,2020).
7. **Periodic Review and Amendments:** The government periodically reviewed the functioning of the Panchayats to bring uniformity in the system in the State and made necessary amendments accordingly. The 1993 Act has been amended frequently to remove obstacles in implementation and to improve the functioning of the system. The various Amendments made the existing

provisions more relevant to ground realities. Incorporation of the new changes added to the effectiveness of the system framework .

8. **Gram Sabha Provisions:** The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 emphasized the Gram Sabha to be a fundamental unit of local self governance. The 'Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Raj (Sanshodhan) Adhiniyam, 2001' empowered the Gram Sabha by assigning the body with a key role in effective functioning of panchayats. The aim was to empower Gram Sabhas to ensure greater community participation in decision making and implementation. The amendment proposed constituting Standing Committees and Adhoc Committees of the Gram Sabha and necessary provisions were made for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and women members. A constitution of Gram Kosh was provided to enable the Gram Sabhas to achieve economic self-sufficiency and necessary power to impose tax. GoMP in 2001 constituted the Gram Nirman Samiti and the Gram Vikas Samiti to plan and implement programs, replacing the separate village-level committees.
9. **Social Audit:** Gram Sabha plays major role in social audit, in certifying the quality and utility of the Project, beneficiary identification etc and utilization of expenditure. According to The State and Human Development The Road Covered (2002), Gram Sabha is to hold compulsory meetings every quarter "to enable the social audit of the development activities" by people.
10. **Right To Recall:** In 2001 Madhya Pradesh became the first State to introduce the Right to Recall (Post 1993) on being dissatisfied with the performance of Sarpanch or Panch of Gram Panchayat. The Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Raj Avam Gram Swaraj 1993 Adhiniyam was amended with the objective to ensure greater accountability of elected representatives to the local voters and to the Gram Sabha as a body. A Sarpanch or a Panch can be recalled by a secret ballot and by a special majority prescribed in the Act.
11. **Right To Information:** The Right to Information Act (2005) provides citizens to secure access to information under the control of public authorities. The Madhya Pradesh Information Act includes Panchayat bodies thereby empowering citizens to access records and obtain information to hold Panchayats accountable. The importance of RTI in Panchayats lies in empowering citizens for ensuring that public resources are used effectively and transparently. The right to information is inferred in Article 19 of the Indian Constitution.
12. **Rationalization of Panchayat Legal Framework:** The 73rd CAA 1992 outlined the general principles and framework of a law and left it to State legislature to frame own Act and corresponding rules and regulations. The government has made extensive efforts to rationalize the existing rules/legislations of governing departments and draft new rules etc to conform with the MP Panchayat Raj Evam Gram Swaraj Adhiniyam 1993. The government initiatives to implement and enforce the provisions of the Act and ensure that Panchayats perform their functions are evident inframing of by-laws, orders, notifications and detailed guidelines .
13. **Devolution:** To empower rural governance making a clear distinction between Panchayat activities for development and that of the State Sector is necessary. The GoMP has taken action to ensure the effective devolution of functions, functionaries and funds to PRIs in 18 Subjects/Departments. A Panchayat Sector Window in the budget has been established and the Panchayat component of a department is identified and indicated local body-wise in the State budget. According to Statistics of PRI, Devolution study 2015-16 the overall ranking of MP State was nine in the tier wise improved index.
14. **ICT and e- governance Initiatives:** In 2017 e-governance was initiated from Dhar District in the State. MPAPIT as the nodal agency promotes e-governance and Technology. NIC software (Panchlekha) is being used. E-Gram Suvidha (GIS based MIS) links village maps. ICT in PRIs is increasingly used for effective execution and monitoring of rural development programs. The ICT software Applications constitute the Panchayat Enterprise Suite comprising of eleven Software Applications viz. PRIA Soft, Plan Plus, Panchayat portal etc . MP has achieved 100% adoption Status for Application in - Local Government Directory (LGD). Village panchayats have adopted

PRIA Soft.The State has been awarded for its pioneering initiatives in E-governance(Businessline,2018).

15. **SVAMITVA (Started 24th April 2020):** This scheme aimed to survey the villages areas in the country and with improvised technology map them. The aim is to demarcate inhabited land . To provide "Record of Rights" to every rural household owner the scheme covers numerous aspects using latest surveying drone-technology in collaboration with Ministry of Panchayati Raj and The Survey of India. The State Panchayati Raj and State Revenue Departments are copartners in implementing the scheme. According to a Press Release in MP the scheme has successfully completed drone surveys in all Abadi i.e. inhabited villages reaching saturation point.
16. **Transparency In Functioning:** New initiatives are being taken to bring more transparency in functioning and 'promote disciplined governance practices' with introduction of 'biometric attendance tracking' and mandatory quorums and digitalization of Panchayat meeting notices and proceedings.

IV Contentious Issues:

However, a few well meaning endeavours undertaken by the government in the State has generated conflict due to opposing perspectives. The initiatives failed to have the desired effect as the legality of the amendment and provisions contained therein were challenged as follows:

a) Gram Sabha Quorum:- A well intentioned venture of the State government in 2001 by an amendment to the 1993 Panchayat Act was to fix Gram Sabha quorum to as "not less than one-fifth of the total number" of the members. In addition to empower and mobilize women and weaker sections for such every meeting of Gram Sabha at least 'one-third were to be women members' and in proportion to their population in the Gram Sabha Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were to be represented. Though it was a special provision introduced to ensure the presence and active participation of marginalized sections the effort generated controversy. As reservation in seats were already provided the Court held that it was not "within the ambit and sweep of protective or affirmative discrimination." A further reservation apparently amounts "to reservation within reservation." The 'Gram Sabha' can become non-functional on non attendance of said categories of persons leading to lack of quorum.

b) The Two Child Norm: In the year 2000 the two-child norm was made under Section 36(D) of Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Raj and Gram Swaraj Act, 1993 applicable to members of PRIs for contesting and holding panchayat post from Jan 2001. The norm was intended to bring into focus population growth and encourage small family size. The violation of the two-child norm led 1140 out of 2122 disqualifications amounting to 54% of total disqualifications. Majority of those who were disqualified happened to belong to SCs/ STs/ OBCs. The restrictive provision was considered discriminatory as it excluded from its purview MPs and MLAs. Though the Courts upheld the norm it was widely criticized for adversely affecting women and a violation of human rights .The two-child norm in PRIs "tended to link political aspirations and legally prescribed fertility choice' (Dak,2009) and gave rise to several societal and political malpractices. The Madhya Pradesh government withdrew the provision in 2005.

c) Incentives for Unanimous Elections: The MP government has offered cash incentives to Panchayats for uncontested elections for different posts . The amount offered is Rs 5 lakh for Sarpanch, for the entire Panchayat Rs 7 lakh . If a woman is unanimously elected Rs 12 lakh will be given to the Panchayat.In 2022 Elections 690 Sarpanchs, 157Janpad (Block) Panchayat members and 2,27,41 Panch posts were elected unopposed (SEC). In Madhya Pradesh as per the data provided by the SEC the number of unopposed elections appear sizeable in constituencies and home district of ministers including former CM. The offer of incentives has been denounced as encouraging manipulation, domination of elite groups, being against right to universal suffrage, 'participatory democracy'and contrary to the objectives of the 73rd CAA 1992.

V Conclusion:

Overcoming several challenges arising from social, political and economic conditions prevailing in different parts of the region a uniform structure of three tier PR institutions has been successfully set up in the State. Democratic reform efforts in Madhya Pradesh "have progressed from conceptualisation to mobilisation to institutionalisation" (Mahor, & Singh 2012).

The provisions of the post independent Panchayat Acts in Madhya Pradesh clearly indicate the commitment of the State government to establish, reorganize and rejuvenate the grass roots governance system both by policy and legislations including periodic amendments. The rotation system accompanied by reservation of wards for women aimed to encourage more active participation in governance and develop leadership among the marginalized sections.

A few systemic constraints arising in implementation were dealt with systematically. In the State the much criticized system of Zila Sarkar ceased to operate. The interference and influence of bureaucrats and politicians has been curtailed and done away with to a large extent by modifying the system. Another barrier to women empowerment was the active emergence of "The Sarpanch Pati." To stop interference in the work of EWRs in 2020 the Madhya Pradesh government by an order declared disqualifying the elections of Sarpanchs if their spouses or family members attended official meetings etc. In every village 'Nigrani Dal' a women watch group was constituted. Capacity building Programme for leadership development, communication and monitoring skills were provided to train these watch groups. The objective was to help EWRs in official work, holding of meetings, discuss issues, prepare plans, identify beneficiary families for government schemes and duly submit applications for them.

Suggestions: Areas Where Further Measures Are Required.

The sixth round of Panchayat elections (2022) in the State have put into place 52 Zila Panchayat (875 Posts) 313 Janpad Panchayat (6771), 23012 GP (22,921 sarpanch) Panch 363,726 total 394233 (Newindianexpress, 2022). Nevertheless some areas which require consideration to improve the PRI system can be identified as below:-

1. A Clear Policy Statement: From the 1962 Act to the 1993 Panchayat Acts in terms of policy initiatives there appears to be no significant change. The purpose of the Panchayat Acts as stated in the Preamble from 1962 Act to The 1993 'Gram Swaraj' Act remains static. The MP government needs to articulate a clear policy statement to give direction and enumerate the purpose and role of Panchayats in the State.

2. Clarity in Terminology in the Act: In The Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Raj Avam Gram Swaraj Adhiniyam, 1993 the terms - Members, Punch, Office Bearers are ambiguous. A "Member" means a member of a Janpad Panchayat or of a Zila Panchayat and also a panch of a Gram Panchayat. The term "Office-bearer" (xiii) means in case of a Gram Panchayat - Panch, Sarpanch/ Up-Sarpanch and that of a Janpad Panchayat a Member, President/ Vice-President of a Janpad Panchayat. For Zila Panchayat the term means a Member/ President/ Vice-President. (India Code). Punch" (xvi) is defined as a punch of a "Gram Panchayat and is also under the term "Office-bearer". The various interpretations create inconsistencies.

3. Poll Related Violence: The polling for the three-tier panchayat polls point to rising incidents of violence, looting of polling material, assaults on the presiding officer, halting the polling that have marred elections to rural local bodies. The government had to spend large amount (Rs 5.02 lakh) on re-polling in booths.

4. Removal of Unanimous/Directly Elected Sarpanch and Panch : Another issue often been legally contested is that of a directly elected Sarpanch being removed by an indirect method by the motion of no-confidence passed by Panchs. This appears incongruent too in case of indirect removal of unanimously elected by the Gram Sabha with no provision of ratification of all the members of the Gram Sabha.

5. Clear Delineation of Roles: Roles of the State and the local government in respect of each of the subjects/functions need delineation, otherwise needless confusion and undue interference by the State will be the inevitable consequences.

6.Digitalization Maintenance of Information: The updation of websites is not periodically done. The information provided in the sites is incomplete , outdated and not satisfactory.

7. Delimitation: The delimitation of Panchayats , exclusion and inclusion by change of boundaries has raised objections and grievances in many areas. Petitions are filed in The High Court of the State objecting to the delimitation of gram panchayats (Singh,2019). The delay in 2020-2021 Panchayat elections were caused due to lack of and non updation of empirical data related to OBC reservations. The Supreme Court directed the State government to 'renotify OBC category seats' as general .

The State has a vast geographical area and underwent a major geographical readjustment in 2000 when Chhattisgarh was created as a separate State. The reorganization of boundaries of Districts is still in the process. The government's initiatives have been to improve and make effective the three tier model which has proved to be appropriate in applicability throughout the State. The State Panchayati Raj system has been acclaimed and received many awards. The different party governments in the State have exhibited commitment to strengthening and reforming local governance. However the further functioning of PRIs in the State is dependent on the " political undertaking " as well as bureaucratic cooperation to devolve powers at all levels. Apart from removing structural constraints to create a robust fundamental institutional framework the PRIs need to be supported by transfer of adequate funds, functions and functionaries .The building of administrative capacity and developing skills of elected Panchayats representatives is a vital requirement for better implementation of development schemes. Progressive guidelines for devolving more finances, powers and authority to Panchayats are encouraging but stringent monitoring systems are required to remove corruption and make PRIs more responsive and transparent to bring all encompassing transformation in rural areas.

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