



Democratic decentralization or bureaucratic hegemony: A study of grassroots democracy under Panchayat Raj institutions

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Abstract

Panchayati Raj Institutions work as an instrument for strengthening the grassroots democracy where all the people participate in the decision-making process of the government. However true performance of the Panchayati Raj Institutions yet to be achieved. One of the major reasons for this is the dominating presence and influence of the Public Officials or the Bureaucrats in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Keeping in view, the paper tries to analyses the role of the Bureaucrats in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. It is mainly based on the secondary data existing from the research articles, books, policy document which tries to explore the link between the local elected representatives and bureaucrats in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The paper argues that how excessive bureaucratic control can weaken the democratic process and marginalize the role of the elected representatives in the functioning of the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Therefore, balanced relationship between the local representatives and bureaucrats is required for the true functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions at the grassroots level.

Keywords: Grassroot democracy, Panchayati Raj Institutions, bureaucrats, and decision-making process

Introduction

After the Independence of India, one of the major challenges for the government was to establish a decentralized democratic government. Because in India more than 50% of the people were lived in the village areas of India and their participation in the democratic process was important for establishing the decentralized democratic government in India. Although the local governance bodies were existed in the Indian political system before independence but it was mainly based on the ancient model which was dominated by the upper caste elite group in the society. After independence, the central government tried to redefine the structure and function of the Local governance. Therefore, the government constituted different committees for the proper functioning of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) at the local level. These committees were Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, Ashok Mehta Committee, G.V.K, Rao Committee, L.M. Singhvi Committees ^[1]. Except the Ashok Mehta Committee all the committees were recommend for the establishment for the three tier structure of Panchayati Raj Institution ^[2]. On the recommendation of these committees the PRIs got the constitutional status through the 73rd constitutional amendment act 1992 ^[3]. The Act gives autonomy to the PRIs to establish a real participatory democracy at the village level, which help the local village people to directly participate in the decision-making process. Through it, power is distributed from central level to the local level. This decentralization process is important for practicing better governance and improving functions of the Panchayat bodies at the village level. This amendment recommends for regular election in the PRIs, establishment of State Election Commission for conducting election process at the local level, provide reservation to the marginalized section of the society (SCs, STs, and Women) to contest in electoral process of the PRIs and outline a functional domain through the Eleventh Schedule aimed for a better village administration at the grassroots level ^[4]. The goal of the localization of administration is to establish a

responsive and accountable government at the village level providing participatory service to local communities. But after three decades of constitutionalization of PRIs yet its fail to achieve all its objective due to several reasons, including the dominance of elite power, lack of resources and proper devolution of power ^[5]. Therefore, its lacks in proper functioning at the local level which harms the decentralization of power and the democratic process in India.

In India's political system bureaucracy occupies an important position and it plays a significant role in the whole process of decentralization. In PRIs, bureaucracy or the government officials are the unelected members and are involved in the proper functioning and planning of the PRIs mainly in the second tier and third tier viz. Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad respectively ^[6]. They provide technical and administrative support to the elected representatives in the PRIs, on the other hand their dominance and excessive control in the administrative department; control over financial resources limits the role of the elected members in the PRIs. The public officials such as Block Development Officers, district collectors, Panchayat Executive Officers control and influence the policy making process of PRIs. Although there is a constitutional and legal provision for devolution of power and financial autonomy in the function of the PRIs but in actual practices, all the functions and policy making are carried out by the state and district administration ^[7]. The presence of the Government officials in function of the PRIs create challenges in the accountability of the functioning of PRIs. The Gram Sabha provides an meaningful contribution towards better functioning of local administration. In Gram Sabha, all the voters of village panchayat are directly involved in the functioning of PRIs ^[8]. But because of the excessive bureaucratic control over the planning and paperwork of PRIs, the role of the Gram Sabha is minimized ^[9]. The presence of bureaucracy is necessary. Its ensure the stability, accountability, and policy execution in the

functioning of the PRIs. However, there should be a mutual understanding between the elected representatives and the public officials for the smooth functioning of the Panchayati Raj Institution. Each should know their limitations. Therefore, this paper critically analyzes the Role of the Bureaucrats in the PRIs.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the role of bureaucracy in the functioning of the PRIs.
2. To explore the relationship between the local elected representatives and bureaucrats through the PRIs.
3. To examine the dominance presence of bureaucracy in the PRIs affects the functioning of the marginalized section of the society including the elected representatives belonging to the SCs, STs and Women.

Research Questions

1. How far the true functioning of PRIs are prevailed as an instrument of grassroots democracy in the presence of bureaucratic control?
2. How the dominant nature of bureaucracy in the PRIs limiting the role of local elected representatives in the functioning of PRIs?
3. How the hegemony of bureaucracy Hegemony does affects the true functioning of democratic process at the local level?

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The main purpose of having a conceptual framework is to analyze the relationship between the key variables in a research study. In this study the conceptual framework is based on the theory of democratic decentralization which focus on transparency and accountability, where power is devolved from higher level to the lower level for enhancing people's participation in the decision-making process ^[10]. Through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992, the Indian political process took a new turn, where it wants to strengthen the local administrative and political process and to involve the local village people in the political structure of the society, which brings responsibility and legitimacy in the work the government ^[11]. In the Indian political structure, the bureaucracy occupies an important role for executing and implementing different policies and programmed of the government. In the PRIs also the bureaucracy played a significant role in the smooth functioning of the PRIs. But in the meantime, it also creates a hierarchical structure in the administrative structure on the basis of the rule bound procedures. This administrative monopoly of the bureaucracy at the function of the PRIs creates states implementing machinery rather than an autonomous institution of self-government ^[12]. Gram Sabha is one of the institutions where participatory and deliberative democracy prevails and local people directly are involved in this process which results in better transparency and accountability in the working of the governance ^[13]. But due to the bureaucracy control on the local administrative system the role of the Gram Sabha is declining ^[14].

Role of Bureaucracy in the Panchayati Raj Institutions

The Panchayati Raj Act, 1992 recommends for creation of a threefold system within Panchayati Raj system for better transparency in the work of the governance ^[15]. The Gram

Panchayat at the village level, the Panchayat Samiti at the Block level and the Zilla Parishad at the district level ^[16]. The members of PRIs are elected members who are directly elected by the people. The government officials or the Bureaucrats are also involved in the planning and functioning of the PRIs ^[17]. At the village level there is a government official known as Panchayat Executive Officer (PEO) who work as a key administrator in the working of PRIs at the village level. The PEO maintains important records of the Panchayat and play a key role in implementing policies and programmes of the government at the local level. At the Block level, there is Block Development Officer (BDO) who is the chief executive officer in the Panchayat Samiti level ^[18]. He/she supervises all the function of the PRIs at the block level. Likewise in the District level, the District collector is also regarded as the chief executive officers ^[19]. On the one hand they provide technical support to the elected representatives for better functioning of PRI and supervise different plan and policies of government at the local level. However, their control in the administrative structure of the PRIs creates a hierarchy of position in the administrative structure of the PRIs where the role of the elected representative is minimized. Although all the developmental work is done under the presence of the elected representatives but it is properly supervised by the government officials or the bureaucrats. They approve all the plans of the government which is carried out at the local level ^[20]. All the financial mechanism are under the control of the bureaucrats. They allocate fund for the functioning of PRIs and also provides technical support to the elected representatives. we can say that the role of bureaucracy in the PRIs is indispensable. While the presence of bureaucracy provides stability in the functioning of the PRIs and their technical support help the local elected representatives in implementing different policies and programmes of the government, but their dominance presence in the all the structures of the PRIs undermine the role of the elected representative at the local level. This creates a challenge for the decentralized and democratic structure in India.

Grassroots Democracy under the Shadow of the Bureaucracy

While the role of the bureaucrats in the PRIs may create an environment for better but in reality it weakens the whole democratic structure and it impacts on the direct participation of the local people in the democratic process of India. Therefore, the grassroots democracy operates under the shadow of the bureaucracy in the PRIs. As the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 recommend for an electoral process in the PRIs, where all the eligible voters in a village panchayat choose their representatives through an electoral process who work for the development of the Panchayat but due to the influence of bureaucracy, the elected representatives could not function properly in the PRIs ^[21]. All the function of the elected representatives are depended on the approval from the bureaucrats who are involved in all the planning and functioning of the PRIs. The dominating presence of the bureaucracy does not allow the PRIs to function properly in a democratic way ^[22]. Another challenge to the grassroots democracy is the complex relationship between the elected representatives and the bureaucrats due to lack of coordination and clarity between themselves which create a problem for the

functioning of the PRIs ^[23]. Bureaucrats also dominant the financial sphere of the PRIs where all the funds allocation and auditing is done by the government bureaucrats which further reinforce the shadow of bureaucracy over the grassroots democracy ^[24]. Although the constitution of India advocated for the decentralization of power where power is distributed among all the units but due to the bureaucratic control the power in the PRIs is centralized. The elected representatives and the local people have little to say in the democratic process at the rural level. It raises question about the true form of democratic process in the local level and highlights the need to redefine the role of bureaucracy in the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Findings and Conclusion

The main objective of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is the development of the grassroots democracy through the PRIs, where all the village people who are deprived from the political participation in the decision-making process can freely and directly participate in the decision-making process. But the involvement of the bureaucrats in all the function of PRIs make this process as a centralized system where the local elected representative have less role to play in the functioning of the PRIs ^[25]. Therefore, the major findings of this paper are (I) All though the 73rd constitutional amendment act provide power to the local elected representatives in the Panchayati Raj Institutions but they totally dependent on the bureaucrats for implementing different policies and programmed of the government at the local level ^[26]. (ii) Due to the dominance presence of bureaucrats in the local administration, the role of the Gram Sabha is reduced. The paper argues that although the democratic decentralized structure provides decentralization of power in a democratic process but in real practices it is carried out by a centralized tendency which is controlled by the government bureaucracy.

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