

## RELEVANCE AND USE OF ICT IN GRASSROOTS' PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATS

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**Abstract:** *The panchayats represent democratic decentralized governance in India. The lowest tier of the panchayats – the gram panchayats – were envisioned to provide opportunities to the rural grassroots for participation in the governing process from taking decisions to preparation, implementation and supervision of various development programs. To strengthen the grassroots democratic process gram sabhas (under the 73rd constitutional Amendment Act, 1992) were formed as nodal bodies for approval and sanction of work done by the gram panchayats. The gram sabha provides a platform to the villagers to meet and discuss their problems and also ensure accountability of gram panchayats. The functioning of these gram sabhas has, however, not been smooth and they have come under much flak due to lack of regularity and transparency. There have been various suggestions and efforts to improve the participation of the grassroots in the panchayat process but conventional methods have not been very successful. The concept of e-Panchayats and the endeavor to use information and communication technologies to allow for e-Governance at the grassroots level has been gaining ground in these circumstances. The objective of this paper is to explore the use of Information and Communication technology (ICT) tools in the panchayats especially at the elementary level for better governance, participation and development. The paper will investigate the tools that are being used for the invoking of digital panchayats, their effectiveness and will also suggest alternative tools that can be used for the above purpose*

**Key words:** *panchayat, gram panchayats, ICT, e-Panchayats, grassroots, democratic process.*

### **Introduction**

Local self-governments in India has a chequered history starting from self-sufficient and self-governing village communities that survived the rise and fall of empires in the past to the three-tier institutions of governance set-up with Constitutional support in modern times. In the ancient times self-governing village bodies that gradually became a council of five persons or panchayat were functional at the grassroots level in all villages. There was gradual decline of the autonomy of the panchayat system during the medieval period. The main reasons were

casteism and feudalism and a rise of a new class of feudal chiefs who acted as intermediates between the rulers and the people. The British colonial rulers did not give panchayats priority as units of democratic decentralization and the feudal chiefs (the zamindars and their officials) continued their strangulation over the rural masses. After independence the emphasis of the Father of the Nation on self-governing panchayats could not ensure their constitutional validity at the initial stages. It took several decades for panchayati raj to blossom from a non-justiciable part of the Constitution (under the Directive Principles of State Policy) to a legally binding institution. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of India, 1992 was a landmark Act that enabled decentralized and participative governance through Panchayats in the rural areas. The focus of panchayats shifted from mere executioners of development projects to policy makers on various issues of local development.

The panchayats are capable of ensuring good governance through a decentralized administrative set-up and an equitable societal system by the way of distributed resources. But despite the good intentions the operation of the panchayats has been much criticized. While the development work achieved by the panchayats has been varied, the participation of the rural masses in the panchayat activities has been non-committal. The convention of universal adult franchise in modern representative democracies is adopted here too but what follows is stoic inaction on the part of the voters. The process of empowerment of the masses through the panchayat system remains a far cry. There has been limited thrust by the central and the state governments to utilize the panchayat system for the participation of the rural masses in the governing process. The active and effective participation of the masses require comprehensive knowledge and information on the panchayat system. This is a challenging task when one considers the representative structure of the panchayat system. Even the lowest tier of the panchayat system – the gram panchayat comprises of 7 to 20 members (depending upon the population of the village) representing around 750 to 25000 of villagers. There is provision for the institution of a gram sabha comprising of all the adult voters of the village. The gram sabha is compulsorily scheduled to meet twice a year if not more and is empowered to contribute to the decisions of the gram panchayats. But the transparency of the decision-making process in the gram sabha meetings is doubted as the usual scenario was the pre-determined consensus to a decision arrived at the gram panchayat meeting. It is this intrusion on democratic participation that has spurred the Panchayat ministry to issue advisory directive to all state governments to make a full video-and-audio-graphic record of all gram sabha meetings and proceedings therein and the members present. To attain decentralized & participatory local self-government through Panchayati Raj Institutions there is a need to develop virtual participation in panchayat governance.

### **Use and relevance of ICT for grass root participation**

This is the age of information and communication technology (ICT) and the application of ICT tools in various social, economic and administrative fields is on the rise. Recognizing the significance of e-Governance, the Government of India has introduced various administrative reforms and initiated many measures at the institutional level to further its prospect. The effort is minor if we take into consideration the need for effective and viable usage of ICT tools at the panchayats, which represents the first level of government interaction for over 75% of the Indian populace<sup>1</sup>. The objective of this paper is to ascertain the role of ICT in the promotion and extension of participation of masses in the local governance process.

The Ministry of Panchayat Raj in the status report of the e-Panchayat Mission Mode stated that it “has been adopting a multi-pronged strategy to implement the provisions of Part IX of the Constitution .....One major strategy has been to harness the potential of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools for e-Governance in Panchayats. The objective has been to make Panchayats more efficient, transparent and symbols of modernity by leveraging ICT at the cutting edge level to ensure transparency and accountability in their functioning through disclosure of information, social audit, efficient delivery of services and improving internal processes and management of Panchayats.<sup>2</sup>E-Panchayat was conceived as a Mission Mode Project (MMP) under National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) with the primary objective of introducing and institutionalizing e-governance in Panchayats. The primary aim was to transform Panchayats into efficient units and to strengthen their business

functions and processes with the ultimate goal of ensuring effective local area development and prompt and efficient service to common man. As per official figures, there are approximately 2,50,000 Panchayats in India mapped by the National Informatics Centre and Ministry of Panchayati Raj on the ministry website under the project called e-Panchayat<sup>3</sup>. In the introduction of this paper it has been pointed out that though there have been several initiatives to ensure mass participation in the local governance process the effort is not full-proof.

### **Gramsabhas and people's participation in local governance**

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the Indian Constitution included the Gram Sabha or village assembly as a deliberative body to decentralized governance along with a three-tier structure of Panchayats from village to the district. Article 243(b)<sup>4</sup> defines Gram Sabha as “a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of the Panchayat at the village level”. The Gram Sabha was formed to enable each and every voter of the village to participate in decision- making at local level. It is a constitutional body consisting of all persons registered in the electoral rolls of a village Panchayat and a mechanism of direct democracy.

In spite of this the operation of the gram sabhas has come under much criticism. Kurian (2000) commented in a thesis on The Structure and Functioning of Gram Sabhas: A Study focused on the District of Kottayam that the functioning of Gram Sabha in most places makes even their ardent supporters skeptical of their invigorating role.<sup>5</sup> Both the frequency of Gram Sabha meetings (one to four in a year) as well as the quorum required for the conduct of such meeting (one-third to all existing members) varies from state to state<sup>6</sup>. The functions of the Gram Sabha also vary from state to state though there are certain common functions. The implementation of such functions can lead to a very active participatory democratic institution. So though there is legal provision in panchayati raj for regular meetings of the gram sabha including all members to discuss relevant issues and the gram sabha is supposed to play an important role in preparing village plans and deciding development priorities in the village, it is arguable whether this active and important role of the gram sabha has been realized in reality. In many villages, gram sabha meetings have been reduced to a mere formality. Dogra (2009) commented the gram panchayat pradhan assembles a few people whom he knows and passes that off as a gram sabha meeting<sup>7</sup>. This is not uncommon in the Indian village scenario dominated by discriminations and caste politics. In many villages, Gram Sabha members did not even know that they were in any and if so in what committee meetings which were anyway rarely held<sup>8</sup>.

Buch (2012) commented, “Gram Sabha meetings can take place in a fruitful manner only when there are institutional mechanisms to make people aware about the importance of participation (like campaigns supported by governments)<sup>9</sup>. The Ministry of Rural development declared 1999-2000 and 2009-2010 as the Year of the Gram sabha emphasizing the need of this body in the local governing set-up. The government realized the potentiality of gram panchayats but this proved to be a symbolic gesture rather than leading to actual empowerment of the grassroots. According to Mahi Pal (2009)<sup>10</sup> the declaration confined to paper because with some exception in a few states like West Bengal and Kerala, nothing worthwhile happened in making Gram Sabha a vibrant institution at local level on account of absence of power, lack of awareness, apathy of the villagers, lack of enthusiasm and absence of freedom on the part of this body. There is a need to throw light on the powers of the gram sabha in this context. As pointed out earlier the gram sabha is like the fulcrum of the Panchayati raj system. Article 243-A of the Central Act does not specify the functions and powers of a gram sabha except to say that “A Gram sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the legislature of a state may, by law, provide”<sup>11</sup>. This enabling provision has largely resulted in giving predictable functions to the gram sabhas such as to endorse, to recommend, to suggest, to consider annual accounts and administrative reports and audit notes, etc. Implementation of the suggestions and recommendations of the gram sabhas could be ignored by the Gram Panchayats as the se are not binding on the latter<sup>12</sup>. It is important, therefore, that the gram sabhas are empowered in the true sense and approve and sanction all work and activities to be taken up at the gram panchayat level. As Mahi Pal

(2009)<sup>13</sup> specified provisions should be made in the Panchayat Act to enable gram sabhas to play a role of a planner, decision-maker and auditor.

But the first step to ensuring the effectiveness of gram panchayats is to assuring the presence of all relevant members. Here the role of information and communication tools can be examined. Nadedkar (1979) stated administrative and technological improvements in communicating and conveying of Gram Sabhas along with certain other points would increase their operational efficiency<sup>14</sup>.

### **Communication devices in the functioning of Panchayats**

Communication is still a challenge in many of the villages and remote places. The use of technology in conveying a gram sabha meeting at a village can be an effective way to ensure success of gram sabha meetings. The usual method of conveying a gram sabha meeting over the years has been announcement over the public address system from a visible location like the market place, temple or mosque, informing about the same through an advertisement in local newspapers or employing a mobile vehicle for publicity on this matter. The alternative method of communicating can be networking through the use of mobile telephones. The gram sabha members can be communicated about a meeting through SMS (short messaging service) as it is a personal as well as reliable source of communication to ensure attendance in meetings. Moreover repeated reminders through the SMS service can help in mobilizing participation in gram sabha meetings. Mobile communication can be used to inform a member of a family from whom the information to the rest of the gram sabha members in the particular family will percolate.

The important question is the accessibility and viability of mobile communication in remote and underdeveloped Indian villages. Considering the steady steps being taken by the government towards e-governance for connecting people to administration, mobile communication could be an important link in the coming days. Mobile communication can bridge the digital divide between urban and rural areas, between the information-rich and the information-poor. Mobile usage has started penetrating the rural hinterland of the country at a good pace. The rural tele-density has grown at an impressive rate from 1.9 per cent in 2005 to over 15 per cent in April, 2014<sup>15</sup>. Telecom service providers are concentrating on subscriber acquisition in the rural market. The mobile phone and associated wireless technologies can be used to tackle major problems like illiteracy which would have a cascading effect on other aspects of rural life. Telecom Regulatory Authority in India (TRAI) has initiated actions in the right direction by creating an exhaustive connectivity-map covering over 6 lakh villages in India to estimate the available connectivity in rural areas<sup>16</sup>.

The other dominant Information and Communication tool - the internet is also making its presence felt in rural areas. There were about 46 million active internet users in rural India in October 2013 and 125 million computer literates in rural India in June 2013<sup>17</sup>. Though the level of internet penetration is low there is no doubt that the use of internet content is on the increase and with its availability in local and regional languages on the rise access of internet content is seeing a substantial increase<sup>18</sup>. A supportive telecom policy and infrastructure help through public-private collaboration will promote cheap internet connectivity for rural areas and boost internet usage. The government can leverage the internet to reach more user groups, for delivering transactional service or information through the online platform. Digital inclusion of the rural population would make the administration including the panchayats more transparent and accountable and would strengthen grassroots empowerment.

The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) helps government institutions to enhance their ability to perform their tasks efficiently and effectively. But the use of ICTs assumes manifold significance when applied in the context of Panchayats. In June 2007 the Ministry of Panchayati Raj constituted an expert group under the Chairmanship of Dr. B.K. Gairola, Director General, NIC, and Government of India<sup>19</sup>. The expert group was

entrusted with the task of assessing the IT Programs of Ministry of Panchayati Raj and recommending cost effective solutions. The Committee interacted with the states to assess the existing status of computerization up to the Gram Panchayat level, including the initiatives undertaken by the State Governments. The Committee conducted field visits to some of the Gram Panchayats in the selected rural areas where some IT initiatives had been undertaken. It found that while some computerization efforts have been made by some States like Gujarat, West Bengal, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Goa viz. InfoGram@Goa, Panchatantra@Karnataka, GPMS@WB, eGrama@Gujarat<sup>20</sup> etc., these attempts were limited. They were driven by short term goals and unable to completely transform Panchayats due to lack of a holistic perspective. It was felt that a more comprehensive approach was required to make a cognizable impact on the functioning of the Panchayats. These recommendations formed the basis for the conceptualization of e-Panchayat MMP.

Three main components were identified by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj around which the entire MMP project was conceptualized. They were capacity building, computing infrastructure building and connectivity. It has already been stated in the previous paragraphs the need for the Government to create computing infrastructure in remote villages through public-private collaboration for the success of e-governance. There is also need for affordable and wide-spectrum connectivity. Information disposal at the click of a mouse would then be achievable. The MMP status report also emphasized the need for e-Panchayats for the purpose of information disclosure as it would lead to greater transparency of the local governing bodies as well as greater participation of the grassroots. Capacity building requires training of sufficient panchayat personnel at the State level as well as at grassroots levels. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj recommended training of specific number of functionaries from each tier of the panchayat system, who in turn would be utilized to train the remaining officials and panchayat members. This cascading mode would help reach as many grassroots members as possible<sup>21</sup>. The MMP status report pointed out two types of training for the institutionalization of e-Panchayats.

- Basic Computer Training to elected representatives and staff of Panchayats to create awareness and basic understanding on the usage of computers.
- Training on Panchayat Enterprise Suite (PES) applications. An Enterprise Suite addresses all the functions of an enterprise and presents an integrated view of the enterprise to the users by ensuring seamless flow of information from one functional area to another. Under the PES training scheme panchayat officials are trained in several PES applications to ensure institutionalization of these applications at the grassroots level<sup>22</sup>.

In spite of these initiatives there was a gap with respect to the bearing on the end users. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj asserted sustained and up-to-date training would be provided to end users, including audio assisted light-weight navigational CBTs (Computer Based Tutorial) facility<sup>23</sup>. It further claimed the user manual has been prepared in such a way as to integrate it seamlessly with the software so that the end user gets contextual, online help. But CBTs and user manuals have been prepared in English which will prove to be a big stumbling block for the end users. It is unusual that when internet content in regional languages is becoming increasing popular and have caused more people to access the net, training material for panchayat members are in the Queen's language. This training material can help master trainers during State & district level training programs but would not be of much help to grassroots. Similarly there are several software applications for transacting the various businesses of the panchayats but without computer literacy common people would not be able to access those applications.

Therefore there is a need to first create ICT infrastructure and capacity within the Panchayat administration followed by training of local citizens in the use of the ICT infrastructure and then integration of the ICT facility with the need and requirement of the end users.

### **Conclusion: Digital Panchayats and their implications**

We have reached the conclusion that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can lead to digitalization of gram panchayats. Though digital empowerment by itself does not ensure the effectiveness of gram sabhas and

ground work needs to be done to realize the full potential of digitalization yet having a web interface at the Panchayat level connected to all the grassroots members has tremendous relevance and utility in the local governing process. The objective of e-Panchayats is to empower citizens of every panchayat with bottom up and top down information content. The Digital panchayats would improve development and governance public service delivery at Panchayat level through information on policy programmes and implementation. They can help provide data on Panchayat workings, budget allocation, developmental projects, names of office bearers, funds utilized and resource created. The power of the internet can revolutionize information sharing, governance, transparency and accountability of elected representatives at all levels from the national to the state to the panchayat. It has already been noted in the previous section that for the ICT environment to be effective there is need for training on basic computer course, internet use and web management as well as government initiative on building computing infrastructure in remote villages. The digital panchayat component includes the following points:

- a) Comprehensive online information and content platform in local language.
- b) Integrated digital platform for panchayat demography, society, culture, geography, history & economy.
- c) An e-trade and e-commerce platform.
- d) Online public grievance redressal forum.
- e) Local online resource center.
- f) Online communication and information networking platform.
- g) An e-Governance platform.
- h) A digital data storehouse.

As already pointed out the basic aim of digital panchayats is to share information top-down as well as bottom up. Though information about various government projects, funds allocated and general workings of the Panchayats percolate to the villagers intermittently, very rarely do the needs of the Panchayat members with relation to resource creation, their views on the various aspects of governance including budget allocation are communicated to the local government. A digital platform would enable information exchange between the district and sub-divisional officials, panchayat members and the villagers at the click of a mouse. This would increase transparency in the local governing process and enhance the accountability of the panchayat members to the gram sabha members and reduce corruption in the local administration. If the e-panchayats enable interaction in local languages then the participation of the citizens would be much more prominent. Online information about the various aspects of the panchayats can be made available through the digital portal. E-panchayat can facilitate the growth of the panchayat economy through promotion of Panchayat tourism and e-commerce of local produce. The digital platform would ensure an online public redressal forum. The online communication and network platform would aid governance and also serve as a resource center. E-panchayats would function as a storehouse for digital data at every panchayat level.

The grassroots participation in the working of the Panchayats has largely remained a theoretical concept with little practical relevance. The indirect representative democratic politics has ensured only voting rights for villagers in local governments. Direct participation in governance, in decision-making about their development has remained elusive. The digitalization of the panchayats would make the system more receptive and interactive for the rural population. A comprehensive digital panchayat platform generating content for the panchayat and adequate training of panchayat representatives in computer skills and management would improve the capability of the rural people in governance and lead to their empowerment.

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