

e-Panchayat in Rural West Bengal: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

Panchayat as a concept has an emergence, which can be traced back to the concept of ancient Indian administration. However, its evolution has taken place throughout, as per the changing rulers and the ruling styles. Nonetheless, the functionalities and objectives remained almost the same. The e-Panchayat is one such model of Panchayat which rose from the integration of Information and Communication Technology and the traditional Panchayat System. The main motive of this was to facilitate efficient, transparent and accountable Panchayat services to the rural populace.

The e-Panchayat's implementation gets impacted by several aspects. This study encompasses some of those aspects, which were identified through observation and inference. Further, the identified aspects were probed in order to identify one of the major aspects that has a greater impact, and the study is directed towards the lack of awareness amongst the rural masses.

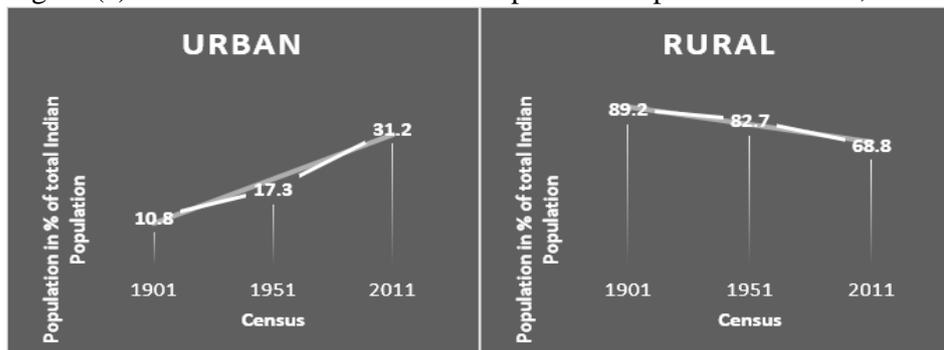
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Introduction

The concept of Panchayat Raj has been deeply immersed in the culture and tradition of the rural India. By no means, it is a new concept (H & Kadam, 2017). They are not just institutions of political participation; rather they are the institutions of economic and social development also. In order to ensure development of villages at the grass root level, the state governments created numerous PRIs (Gumber, Gautam, Dhiman, Singh, & Bist, 2014). The effectiveness of the Panchayat Raj and people's cooperation are identified as the major aspects on which, the country's future with respect to the democracy and the country's real development, is dependent. It is also expected to be a catalytic agent of integrated rural development (Thanikasalam & Saraswathy, 2014).

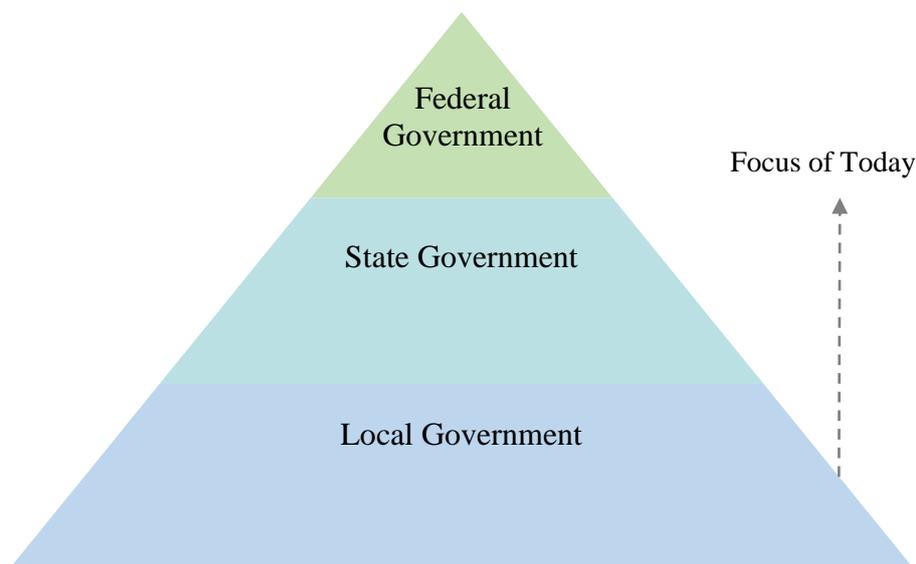
Panchayati Raj Institutions play a very crucial role in the field of rural development. They have been serving the rural populace since its establishment, catering to various needs of the rural regions. Especially, in a country like India, where the majority of the population resides in the villages or the rural regions, the role of PRIs become a vital element for the overall evolvement. As per the census of 2011, the rural population of India totals up to 83.3 Crore, which accounts to 68.84% of the total population of India. The Figure (a) portrays the trends in the Rural-Urban Population as per Census 1901, 1951 and 2011. The PRIs being the lowest tier of the governance system, as shown in the figure (b), they are the face of the Government for the people and vice-versa. In simple terms, they are the interface between the people and the government. The eventual launch of e-Panchayat as a Mission Mode Project, in various states of India at various capacities, has made yet another impact in the field of local self-governance.

Figure (a): Trends in the Rural-Urban Population as per Census 1901, 1951 and 2011



Source: (Chandramouli, 2011)

Figure (b): Tiers of Government



With a rural population of 6.22 million (68.12% of total population of West Bengal), the state of West Bengal has to provide to the needs of vast masses. And yet it could achieve it with the help of the local bodies, which facilitate the smooth functioning at the grassroots level. The Government of West Bengal has taken various measures to ensure that the local bodies are efficiently carrying on the local self-governance, and the issues at the grassroots level could be answered to in a more effective manner, as the PRIs are nearer to the people than the State or the Central Government bodies.

West Bengal is one of the states of India, which has adopted the e-Panchayat programme in its (e-Panchayat's) nascent stage. Even after more than a decade since its launch, it is still taking its baby steps to reach the masses in the rural West Bengal. The fault cannot be assigned only to a certain factor. This study attempts to recognise those factors. This

study is based on the data from the secondary sources and the note-making done in the process of observations during the pilot study.

The interactions that were conducted during the course of the study have provided various insights related to the study. These individual insights were then put together inside a frame to understand the major issue and various aspects that can provide solution to it.

Approach to Panchayat

During the pilot study in five of the villages across two districts in West Bengal, it was found that there exists a misperception regarding the word “Panchayat”. In the course of the interactions that took place during the visit, it was found that the “Panchayat” is referred to the elected representatives, and not to the organisation. This had led to the altogether a different approach to “Panchayat”.

West Bengal is known for its dynamic political scenario that is prevalent in almost all the parts of the state. Political parties play a very vital role in almost all the functions of the Government. The parties are supposed to be the representatives of the people to the Government, or rather it can be said that they are the voice of the people. However, the scenario changed eventually, when the representatives of the people became representatives of the Political Parties and people started forgetting their role.

Aspects impacting the implementation of e-Panchayat

Based on the observations and note-making done during the study conducted on the 5 villages from 2 districts of West Bengal, the following aspects have been identified which were creating the discrepancy in the smooth implementation of e-Panchayat in the concerned area.

1. Attitude of people towards the government:

Although the concept was introduced with a noble motive, the reality turned out to be against expectations. The Local Self-Governance was initiated with an idea to enable the people to have a say over the governance. However, the people’s say is lost because of the growing difference in the attitude of the people towards the Government. The democratic governance concept has melted down to mere voting right, which is perceived as an additional duty rather than right. This attitude has created the gap in between the Governance body and the people.

2. Fear of involvement in political issues:

In the process of interactions with the residents of the villages, it was observed that most of the common people were scared to speak about Panchayat when they were asked for. It was understandable as there were instances of political turmoil that the people encountered in the region during the elections time. This made most of the people have second thoughts regarding expressing anything related to the Panchayats. This fear amongst the people has made, to some extent, the direct participation in the governance still an elusive attempt.

3. Lack of information about the policies/project:

The people are not informed about the benefits that they can get due to many policies. Rather than knowing what is meant to be theirs, they just take what comes to them. Though there are some people who fight for what is theirs, but it is generally a not-so-prevalent scenario. This is mainly because they do not have adequate knowledge of what is meant for them and from where it is coming. The interaction with one of the concerned person, who is responsible for ensuring the delivery of the benefits, revealed one of the attitudes towards this issue. He said, “What is the necessity that they (beneficiaries) should know how or why they are getting the benefits? They are just getting it (benefits), and that is enough.” With this attitude, there are very less chances of the citizens, who are less-informed, to know about the benefits that they are receiving or should be receiving

due to the implementation of various policies. Hence, this is yet another issue hindering the overall progress of many policies.

4. Lack of taste for the internet services:

Many people in the remote areas still do not have a taste for the internet services. When asked if they own a smart phone, or if they use internet, the answers were more in negative than in affirmative. When probed more about this issue, it revealed that they do not feel the necessity for availing them. However, it is a very rare chance to encounter such a situation in today's scenario. Nonetheless, this can still act as a barrier that needs to be addressed. Hence, mere ensuring the availability of the resources is not enough. They (resources) must be used for the required purpose.

5. Inadequate awareness amongst the elected representatives

Not only the common people, but even the elected representatives of the region are unaware of the existence of e-Panchayat policy. Many a times, the representatives are unaware of their duties. For them, being elected means gaining power. The e-Panchayat was a well-implemented project in the region as per the records. However, the ground realities were revealed when the study was conducted with the village residents. The updating is not taking place in the awareness levels of the people regarding various policies. Many of the policies, which are launched to ease participatory governance, are unable to reach their expectations because the beneficiaries are not even aware of their existence.

6. Lack of conviction:

In some cases, even if the administration aims for the better implementation, the ones who execute it also need to be in sync with it. Some may feel it to be burdensome and might lack the conviction to work towards it. This is prevailing in some regions where the concerned people lack the motivation to go for an extra mile. This causes the discrepancy in the flow of delivery of the services to the intended user.

7. Lack of adequate knowledge:

Dearth of adequate knowledge regarding the policies is not only applicable to the citizens but also to the employees who are concerned with the policy implementation. In some cases, the technical or the overall knowledge relating to the policies might not be up to the mark. There are certain areas where there is negligence to improve the skills on the part of the employees. This can hamper the policy implementation.

The above reasons were obtained from the inference made out of the interactions and observations made in the course of the study. In the next section, these aspects are discussed in the context of the study.

Discussion

For any policy or project to deliver the expected outcomes, it is very crucial that the system is in place. For a system to be in place, each element needs to be taken care of that it makes its adequate contribution. Even if one element is not up to the expectations, the system cannot deliver the expected results. Hence, even if the benefactors are in alignment with the policy implementation, if the beneficiaries are not aligned in the same direction, there can be a discrepancy in the overall functioning of the policies.

It is not enough if the policy or the project is merely in place. It is equally important that the beneficiaries must make use of it. And in order to do it, they must be aware of it. Therefore, the lacunae in the success of the project boils down to one of the major aspects- 'Awareness'. It is this aspect that plays a vital role in determining whether it makes the project or breaks it.

The project was well-implemented in the region as per the records. However, the ground realities were revealed when the study was conducted with the village residents. The updating is not taking place in the awareness levels of the people regarding various policies. Many of the policies, which are launched to ease participatory governance, are unable to reach their expectations because the beneficiaries are not even aware of their existence. Nonetheless, in the course of the interactions with the residents of the villages,

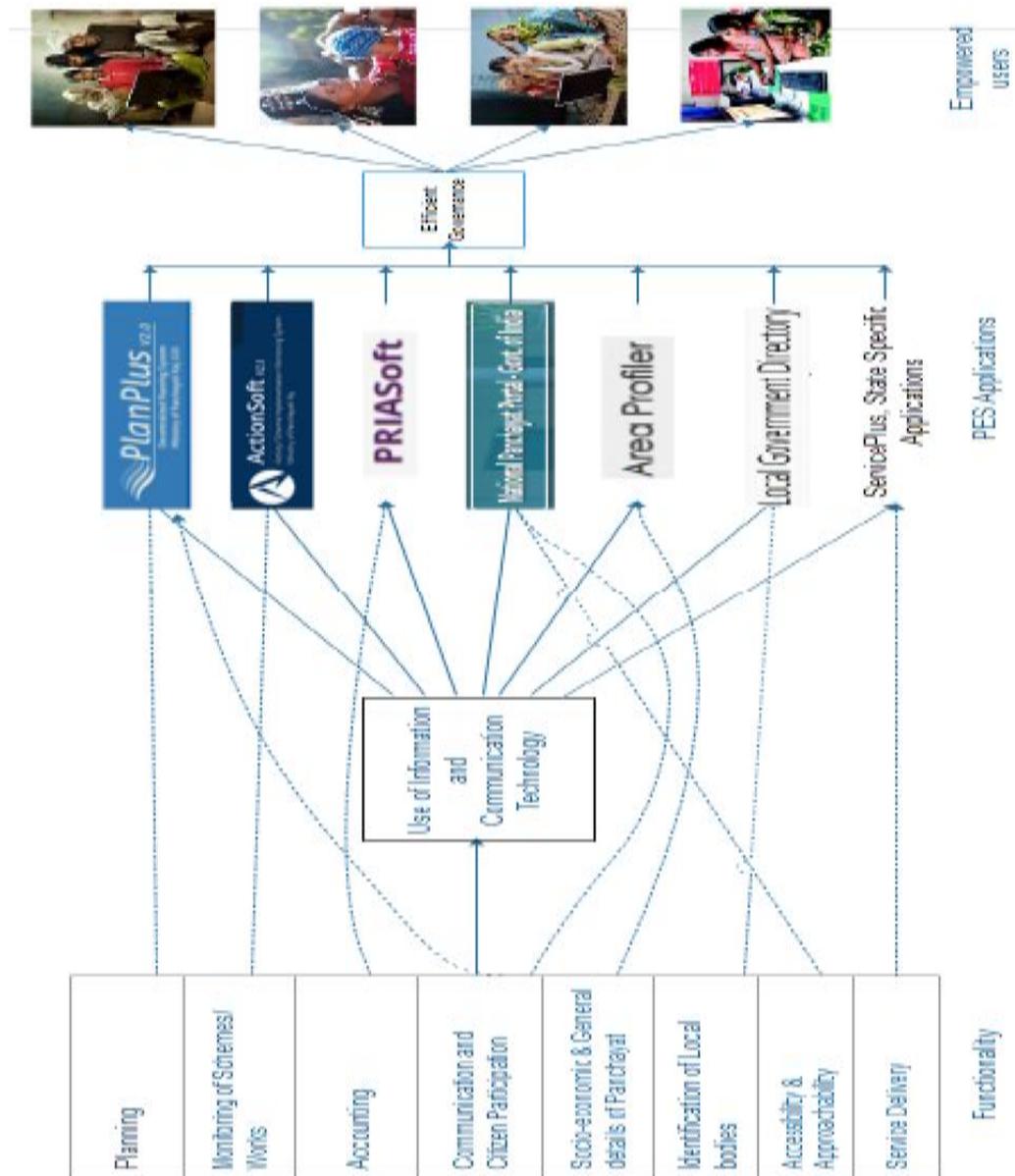
it was found that there was no orientation done for them when the e-Panchayat project was launched.

The literature so far has shown a picture of empowering the people through improved access to information, building up transparency with regard to the planning, accounting, budgeting, and also by delivering the intended services efficiently, through the integration of ICT with the functionalities of the traditional PRIs. Users can avail the access to the above system through the means of various Panchayat Enterprise Suite (PES) Applications or the State Specific Applications pertaining to the respective functionality(s). These applications can ensure effective governance. Consequently, the users can be empowered.

The functionalities of the Panchayat refer to the functions of the Panchayat that are necessary for the local governance. These functionalities are then integrated with the ICT and applications are created for the respective functionality. These applications are the CCSs, which were introduced in the year 2012. Using these CCSs, the users can avail the functions that a traditional Panchayat offers. These will help the citizens to participate in the Governance and in turn, it can help in making the governance more effective. When governance will be effective, it will lead to an empowered citizen as the Participatory Governance allows the citizen to voice out their views in the decision-making process. The Figure (c) shows the model that is the pictorial representation of the above.

To understand why a system is unable to reap the expected results, it is crucial to understand the setup. Once there is a holistic view of the system, then the reality can be compared against the expected scenario.

Figure (c): Model showing Empowerment intended through e-Panchayat



This will provide the insights regarding the gaps that are existing in the system. It is these gaps that hinder the flow of functioning and hampers the overall performance of the project/policy. The identification of gaps will help in shooting the arrow at the target with precision rather than blindly shooting it.

In this case, the issues identified have revealed that though the reasons are several, but it could be boiled down to one particular, i.e., ‘Lack of adequate knowledge/information’. However, the gaps need to be filled in order to facilitate the flow of delivery of intended services without any hindrance. The issues identified can be solved by addressing the need to spread awareness amongst the rural populace. However, the gaps need to be filled in order to facilitate the flow of delivery of intended services without any hindrance. The issues identified can be solved by addressing the need to spread awareness amongst the rural populace.

Conclusion

The e-Panchayat project is fully implemented in pen-and-paper. However, the implementation of it is still not as effective as anticipated. There are various reasons to which this drawback can be affiliated. The identification of these aspects, which are preventing the desired results from materializing, can prove to be helpful in

controlling their effect on the implementation of e-Panchayat to a moderate level. The smooth implementation of the e-Panchayat is necessary in order to empower the rural populace through the easy access to the information regarding various elements in the Governance. When grassroots level of the administration can take care of itself through participatory governance, the Government at other levels can focus on the greater aspects of governance. This will also fulfill the dream of Mahatma Gandhi, who dreamt of having an empowered rural regions or villages through self-governance.

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