

The Importance of the Three-Tier Panchayat System in Promoting Education in Rural West Bengal

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Keywords: *Three-Tier Panchayat Raj, Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, Zilla Parishad, Village Education Committees, School Management Committee, Shishu Shiksha Kendras, Madhyamik Shiksha Kendras, Decentralisation.*

Abstract:

Though it took another fifty years, a major breakthrough in the history of India's education took place when the Lok Sabha, on November 28, 2001, passed the 93rd Constitutional Amendment Bill, making education a fundamental right. This bill, while emphasizing quality and accessible education, also calls for the sharing of responsibilities between different levels of government. Education being a basic right of citizens, the need for community participation in ensuring adequate and quality education for all (irrespective of class or caste) cannot be over-emphasized. It is our firm conviction that Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) has a major role to play in this regard.

This study examines the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in overseeing education in collaboration with the Education Department in West Bengal. It is based on a field study of recent trends in educational administration in West Bengal. The aim was to thoroughly analyse the connections and collaboration between the development administration and the Panchayati Raj Department in West Bengal. Additionally, it also seeks to evaluate the obstacles in promoting public participation and democratic governance.

Introduction:

The then Government of India constituted many committees and commissions, etc. for the development of education in post-independent India. These committees or commissions made some recommendations for the development of various aspects of education. Following the recommendation, many schemes were subsequently adopted to improve the overall education system, but despite this, the expansion and improvement in the quality of education have not been as expected. Again, proper supervision of educational institutions has not become possible because the power is centralized; hence, its use at the grassroots level was also difficult.

Decentralisation is considered a strategy to enhance the effectiveness of education systems and the quality of educational services by involving community members in the planning and decision-making processes.

In April 1993, the Lok Sabha of India approved the 73rd constitutional amendment through this amendment, the three-tier Panchayat Raj system got constitutional recognition. Part IX of

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the constitution includes Article 243, which specifies the constitution of the three-tier panchayat system. Arrangements were made to form ten standing committees at the zilla parishad and panchayat samiti level and sub-committees (upa-samitis) at the gram panchayat level, in which “The education, Culture, Information and Sports Standing Committee” and the “Education and Public Health” sub-committee, respectively were given the proper implementation of the education system. As a result, the local administration has a close relationship with educational institutions. The present paper attempts to examine whether the powers of educational planning and management of education, as mentioned in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, have devolved to three-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions at district, block, and gram panchayat levels in West Bengal. Further, the paper discusses strengths, and weaknesses in terms of the structures, functions, roles, and responsibilities of PRIs (Panchayati Raj Institutions) for managing education in West Bengal. The paper argues for wider research on these issues and has given the necessary roadmap for future policy and concrete strategy for the development of school education under Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Literature Review

There are different views about the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in the management of education in India. It is clear from many observations that there is a lack of administrative linkage between educational institutions and local administration. As a result, “the quality of supervision has considerably gone down due to ineffective supervision, haphazard inspection, tardiness of administration and insecurity of teaching staff” (Krishnamacharylu, 1993). Bhargava and Venkata Krishnan (1993) argue that the Panchayati Raj Institutions and the Education system lack a clear definition of their powers and functions, resulting in dual control over education (Srivastava et al., 2016; Malhotra et al., 2023; Mittal & Mittal, 2023). “In the last two decades of the last century, primary education in West Bengal under PRIs has not been at all encouraging” (Acharya, 2002). Panchayats are primarily involved in offering community support, with their role being peripheral, if not negligible, in the management and administration of education. There is poor coordination between the Panchayati Raj Institutions and the schools. PRIs are often unable to achieve the expected outcomes due to their limited authority to take on significant roles in the realm of education. However, Mathew's observation in 2008 emphasized that the empowerment of panchayats is the ultimate solution to all education-related issues at the village level. There is hardly any capacity-building programme for PRIs in school management. In spite of provisions in the guidelines that PRIs will be responsible for the recruitment and selection of teachers, they are not included in the selection committees of teachers but are simply assigned the task of posting teachers in schools from the list of selected teachers (Tyagi and Akhtar, 2009).

Objectives

The following are the research objectives:

1. The role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in the management of education in rural West Bengal.
2. To find out if there is any lack of linkage between local administration and educational institutions in rural areas of West Bengal.
3. To study the structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions from the perspectives of educational management and promotion in rural areas of West Bengal.
4. To assess the role of the standing committee of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system in expanding education in rural areas.
5. The linkage between the Right to Education Act 2009 and panchayat
6. To assess the decentralisation of power in education management and its relation to the panchayat

Methodology

The paper critically examines the linkages and coordination between the administration and the Panchayati Raj Department in the development of education and identifies deficiencies in the interface between development administration and PRIs. The study's methodology relied on survey research to gather primary and secondary data from interviews and document analysis pertaining to educational development and interface. Transcriptions of open-ended questions and interviews were made, leading to the drawing of inferences. Interviews were conducted with all the stakeholders, including officers and elected representatives of PRIs and officers of the Education Department.

Major Findings & Discussion

(A) “The Education, Culture, Information and Sports Standing Committee” of Zilla Parishad

In the case of Zilla Parishad, the Sabhadhipati (Chairman) and the assistant chairperson are ex-official members of the standing committee. Also, three to five elected representatives and two opposition representatives are members of this standing committee, depending on the number of elected members. One of the representatives is elected as the executive officer. The officers of the concerned department are also members of the standing committee, and one of them is nominated as the secretary of this standing committee. Various offices related to education, such as the District Inspector of Schools (Primary and Secondary), District project officer (Sarva Shiksha Mission), District Nodal Officer (Child Education Programme and Secondary Education Programme) officer in charge of Madrasa Education, and officer in charge of Mid-Day Meal scheme, are the members of the standing committee. In the meeting of the standing committee, various officers informed the standing committee about the various information of their department. Also, the infrastructure of the educational institution, the quality of education, and any special problems are discovered and discussed in detail in the meeting. Elected public representatives present problems or suggestions related to education in their area in this meeting. The standing committee of various Zilla Parishad can arrange visits

to educational institutions so that they can see the implementation of various decisions on the ground.

(B) “The Education, Culture, Information and Sports Standing Committee” of Panchayat Samiti

Though the same in terms of functioning panchayat samiti, the structure of the “Education, Culture, Information and Sports” standing committee of panchayat samiti differs. At this level, the Sabhapati and Saha Sabhapati (Chairperson and Vice Chairperson) are the members of this standing committee. Similar to Zilla Parishad three to five elected representatives and one elected representative from the opposition party members of this standing committee, depending on the number of elected representatives. A Karmadhyaksha is elected from among the majority party members. Similarly, officers from various education departments, such as sub-inspectors of schools, education officers, and mid-day-meal coordinators, are members of this standing committee.

All the primary schools, upper primary schools, secondary schools, Shishu Shiksha Kendras, Madhyamik Shiksha Kendras madrasa, and Jana Shiksha Kendras under a panchayat samiti are discussed in detail about the infrastructure, quality of education, etc. in this standing committee.

(C) “Education and Public Health” Standing Committee and Gram Panchayat

The “Education and Public Health” subcommittee at the gram panchayat level looks after the local educational institutions and educational matters. Pradhan and Upa-Pradhan (Chairperson and Vice-chairperson) are ex-official members of this subcommittee. In addition, one to three elected representatives are members of the subcommittee, and one of them is elected as a moderator. The gram panchayat secretary and the executive assistant are included as members of the government representatives.

Right To Education Act 2009 And Panchayat

The implementation of the education system has been significantly emphasized by the three-tier panchayat system, as stated in “The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009,” which became effective in August 2009. Section nine of the third chapter of this act states that as a local authority, the three-tier system of the panchayat is to see the set up of schools, admit children of all suitable groups in the concerned panchayat areas, ensure education for all up to the age of 14 years, develop the quality of education, and above all assess how the educational institutions in their areas are functioning.

Village Education Committee (VEC) And Panchayat

The National Policy of Education, 1986 recommended ensuring the participation of local people in the education system. Village Education Committees were formed under the guidelines of the Sarva Shiksha Mission as per the “Right of Children to Free Compulsory Education Act 2009 “ to connect the common man, i.e. the rural mass with the education

system at the village level in West Bengal. This committee had the financial power to plan and implement the overall infrastructural improvement of all educational institutions under a village council. In addition, the committee was also tasked with ensuring that all children between the ages of 14 years are enrolled in an educational institution and that they have completed their primary education.

School Managing Committee And Panchayat

Sections 21 and 22 of Chapter 4 of the “Right of Children to Free Compulsory Education Act 2009 “ deal with the school management committee. As per Section 22 of the Act, the managing committee shall plan the overall development of the school. The managing committee will include members of the local village panchayat as representatives of the local authority. The school managing committee will oversee the day-to-day activities of the school. Besides, the managing committee with financial capacity will be responsible for the development of school infrastructure, the proper implementation of the mid-day meal system, etc.

Child Education Programme And Secondary Education Programme in West Bengal

As one of the most notable examples of the role of panchayats in the education system of West Bengal, the Child Education Programme and the Secondary Education Programme have already carved their place in the educational history of the state. In the 1993 Supreme Court of India in J. P. Unni Krishnan case recognised education as a fundamental right of children. Earlier, the literacy movement had greatly increased the interest of the common people in education. Although there were primary schools, the state still had many schoolless villages where children had no primary education within their reach.

To bring children from such schoolless settlements and geographically isolated areas into the arena of education, the child education programme was started in 1997- 98 under the panchayats and Rural Development Department of the Government of West Bengal, which provided literacy from class one to four. In 1997, there were only 410 Shishu Shiksha Kendras (Child Education Centre) in the state, but later this number increased to meet the demand of the local people. In the academic year 2018, the number of Child Education Centres in the state is 1,58,004 where 10,59,059 students are studying of which 28.01% belong to the scheduled caste and 11.27% belong to the scheduled tribe.

For much the same reason, in 2002-03, the Panchayat and Rural Development Department expanded the programme vertically so that children in remote areas could ensure their early education.

Then the secondary education programme started in 2003-2004. There were 863 Madhyamik Shiksha Kendras that paved the way for getting an education with classes from five to eight. In the academic year 2018, a total of 1912 Madhyamik Shiksha Kendras (Secondary Education Centre) in the state provided education to 3,01,094 numbers of students, among whom 27.50 percent belonged to the schedule caste and 11.01% belonged to schedule tribe. A notable fact is

that while the ratio of boys to girls is almost equal in the case of Shishu Shiksha Kendras the number of girls is comparatively higher in the case of Madhyamik Shiksha Kendras. It may also be mentioned that 43.58% of children in Shishu Shiksha Kendras and 44.10% of students in Madhyamik Shiksha Kendras belong to the minority community.

Decentralisation of Power In Education And Panchayat

Generally, the administration takes the decision to establish the school, but it was decided by the common people of the villages where the Shishu Shiksha Kendras and Madhyamik Shiksha Kendras were to be set up. It was the people of the village who arranged the required land, identified prospective students, and arranged admission in the centre according to their age. Later on, they were sanctioned through the three-tier panchayat system and started getting government facilities. People over forty years of age with suitable educational qualifications were given the opportunity to teach in these centres. They are named Sahayak/Sahayaki for Shishu Shiksha Kendras and Samprasrak/Samprasrika in the case of Madhyamik Shiksha Kendras .

The three-tier panchayat also played an important role in the recruitment of these education workers. The approval of “The Education, Culture, Information and Sports Standing Committee” and “Education and Public Health” Standing Committee of the Panchayat Samiti was mandatory for the appointment of Sahayak/Sahayaki for Shishu Shiksha Kendras and Samprasrak/Samprasrika in case of Madhyamik Shiksha Kendras. In special cases, the approval of Zilla Parishad and the concerned department was required. In Shishu Shiksha Kendra or Madhyamik Shiksha Kendra, the curriculum, syllabus, and textbooks designed by the education department of West Bengal are fully followed. Also, the students studying in these centres get all the facilities, like free textbooks, mid-day meals, etc.

Initially, managing a committee of nine members for these centres was in the supervision of Shishu Shiksha Kendras and Madhyamik Shiksha Kendras, with one ex-official member from the local Gram Panchayat. After February 2013, administrative committees were created in place of the managing committee for these centres where local panchayat members serve as the chairman of the administrative committee.

Although initially started temporarily, these two programmes gained such popularity that in 2013 Shishu Shiksha Kendras and Madhyamik Shiksha Kendras received the status of ordinary primary and primary school, respectively by the Department of Education, Government of West Bengal.

The transformation of power from central to local government is called decentralization. As a result of this decentralisation of power in the education system, elected representatives of the three-tier panchayat system can directly participate in the management of the education system. Consequently, schools have been able to connect with people today. Day-to-day issues such as what are the infrastructural needs of an institution, how is the quality of education there, which teachers are irregular in the school and what is the quality of the mid-day meal, etc. can only be

monitored by the local people. In this regard, the public representative associated with the three-tier system of panchayats is performing their responsibilities. Apart from this, the panchayat system helps a lot in the celebration of various anniversaries like Independent Day, Republic Day, and Manifestation Day in schools and in organising cultural programmes and sports competitions, etc.

Conclusion And Suggestions

Although the three-tier Panchayat system has a close relationship with the development of educational institutions and the quality of education, its various manifestations are observed in different places. At present, many educational institutions in the state are supported by panchayats, and the desired goal can be achieved through the intensive training of elected public representatives of the three-tier panchayat system on educational needs and panchayat issues.

Panchayats also help in improving physical infrastructure and providing some of the non-academic support for the Sishu Siksha Karmasuchi as well as the formal system of education. However, there has been very little formal devolution to the Panchayats of functions related to formal education in West Bengal, and the Panchayats mostly play facilitating roles.

Every school encounters various challenges. While certain problems were exclusive to particular schools, there existed a set of issues that were shared among all of them. The government mandated that all primary schools accept every child in their vicinity. This led to a high student-teacher ratio and subsequently, a decline in the quality of education provided at the schools.

The current understanding of the field realities strongly contradicts the anticipated outcomes of decentralizing educational administration. According to Noronha, 2003, it is true that the decision-making process has come down to the local level. Nevertheless, the means to implement these decisions have not been provided to the decision-makers at the local level.

The examination of the VEC formation process reveals that, on certain occasions, individuals with limited education are involved in the formation. Despite the potential ethical concerns, it is likely not preferable to appoint such individuals as decision-makers.

It is important to ensure that there is no overlap in functions when empowering the panchayat system across the three tiers. By clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of each tier, we can effectively enhance the impact of this evolution.

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