

Enhancing Public Services through Panchayat in West Bengal: Strategies and Impact

Dr. Sanjit Pal

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, NBPCM, Kolkata-700131,

E-mail: sanjitpal76@gmail.com, Contact No. 9883310908

Abstract : *Governments around the world are tasked with providing public services, which are critical to meeting the needs of citizens and promoting development. In India, Panchayati Raj Institutions, or PRIs, are crucial to the provision of public services. This is particularly true in West Bengal, where they act as pillars of local governance. PRIs deliver the power and ensure that government programmes and services reach even remote areas, thereby empowering villagers through direct participation in decision-making processes. This article examines the transformational impact of PRIs in West Bengal, focusing on health, education, sanitation and services. It analyses the achievements, successes and challenges of these organisations in depth, highlighting initiatives such as the Nirmal Bangla Mission and the Duare Sarkar scheme, which aim to enhance citizen engagement and service delivery. By examining the structured approach to local self-governance, this article underscores how PRIs not only improve service efficiency but also foster inclusive development, resonating with the aspirations of rural India. Understanding the role of PRIs is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders dedicated to strengthening public services and empowering communities across the nation. This study is part of a Minor Research Project sponsored by the ICSSR, titled “Impact Assessment of Duare Sarkar in Service Delivery: A Case Study of South 24 Parganas District, West Bengal.”*

Keywords: *Public service delivery, Panchayati Raj Institutions, West Bengal, local governance, community empowerment*

Introduction

Delivering basic services to the citizens is the main objective of government. In fact, the performance of a government is judged on the basis of efficiency in service delivery. It acts as the primary link between citizens and their government, designed to meet the needs of citizens and promote development. Public service delivery refers to the process by which governments provide essential services to their citizens. An extensive number of services are included in

public service, such as infrastructure, health, education, law enforcement, and social welfare. One of the major institutional mechanisms for providing these essential services in India is the Panchayati Raj Institute (PRI). Particularly in West Bengal, PRIs are pillars of local governance, crucial in developing public infrastructure and promoting local development. PRIs promote transparency and accountability, by involving villagers directly in the decision-making process. Health, education, sanitation and infrastructure are key areas where PRIs have had a significant impact. This article examines the transformational impact of PRIs in West Bengal, examining their successes, challenges and future potential for improved public services.

The Development of Panchayats in West Bengal

The Panchayati system in West Bengal traces its origins back to the British era, when efforts were made in the late nineteenth century to establish a framework for self-governance. This process started with the Bengal Choukidari Act of 1870 by Lord Mayoⁱ. Later, on May 18, 1882, India's Viceroy Lord Ripon, passed a resolution that inspired the establishment of government at the grass-roots level.ⁱⁱ However, the Bengal Local Self-Government Act of 1885, which introduced a three-level system for rural Bengal, did not fully meet the goals of Ripon's 1882 resolution. This act created a district board, local boards, and union committees but did not fully democratise these institutionsⁱⁱⁱ. The first major step in establishing local self-government in Bengal was the enactment of the Bengal Village Self-Government Act of 1919^{iv}. This act introduced association boards comprised of elected adult males responsible for collecting local taxes, though the electorate was limited.

After independence, the panchayat system started replacing the union boards. The West Bengal Assembly passed a resolution to establish Gram Panchayats in 1954. Three years later, the West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1957, which superseded the 1919 Act, introduced Gram Panchayats, Anchal Panchayats, and Gram Sabhas.^v Although the Balwantrai Mehta Committee suggested a three-tier panchayat system, initially West Bengal ignored this suggestion. Union Boards gradually gave way to Anchal and Gram Panchayats until 1964, at which point the former Union Board and District Board organization continued. In an attempt to improve local administration, the West Bengal government established Anchalik Parishads at the block level and Zilla Parishads at the district level in 1963 with the introduction of the Zilla Parishad Act of 1963^{vi}.

With the emergence of the Left-Front government led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in 1977, the situation in West Bengal underwent a dramatic change. Unlike other Indian states, the West Bengal government was designed to hold regular, party-based elections.^{vii} West Bengal has been notable for holding regular, timely Panchayat elections every five years since 1978. In conformity with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, key modifications to the Panchayat Act in 1992, 1994 and 1997^{viii} reserved seats for women and SC/STs and resulted in more accountability representation. The current Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal works as a three-tier structure, consisting of Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Zila Parishads. It also includes additional components like the Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad^{ix} to improve accountability and public participation, particularly in the delivery of public services. The contributions of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) can be analysed in several key areas:

Healthcare Delivery through PRIs

In West Bengal, healthcare delivery through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is an integral part of the public health system, ensuring effective access of essential services to the rural population. One of the main tasks of Gram Panchayats is the management of Primary Health Care Centres (PHCs) and sub-centres. These local agencies ensure the efficient management of resources, the efficient utilisation of healthcare professionals, and the quality and efficiency of services. Formation of Rogi Kalyan Samitis (patient welfare committees) has been an important initiative, with community participation in the governance and management of health facilities^x. Maternal and child health services are a major focus area of PRI in West Bengal. Through schemes like Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)^{xi} and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)^{xii}, PRIs play a crucial role in mobilising pregnant women for antenatal cheque-ups and ensuring that children receive adequate nutritional support. PRIs involves in extensive vaccination programmes, individual and community cleanliness drives, and disease control measures. PRIs also focus on curative healthcare services, by running dispensaries staffed with homoeopathic and Ayurvedic doctors. As of 2009, there were 930 homoeopathic and 154 Ayurvedic dispensaries managed by Gram Panchayats, providing an essential layer of healthcare support to rural communities^{xiii}. By ensuring that health materials are supplied adequately and services are delivered efficiently, PRIs strengthen public accountability in the health sector. They also play a pivotal role in family planning initiatives, raising awareness and distributing materials to promote responsible family planning practises.

Education and Literacy Programs:

Education is another area where Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have contributed significantly to education and literacy in West Bengal. Traditionally, administration of primary education was under the jurisdiction of the state school education department, supported by the District Primary School Council (DPSC) and the West Bengal Board of Primary Education (WBBPE)^{xiv}. However, persistent issues such as insufficient infrastructure, teacher shortages, and limited accessibility to formal schooling in rural areas encouraged the state government to seek alternative approaches. The Constitution Amendment Act No. 73 of 1992 empowered Panchayats responsible for the administration of primary education, with the aim of to decentralise governance and increase local accountability^{xv}. This has created opportunities to enhance the education system to suit local needs. However, the major defect of the 73rd Amendment is the absence of a clearly defined mandate for Panchayats in respect of various organs of educational development^{xvi}. In addition to this provision, the 86th Constitutional Amendment of 2002 recognised education as a fundamental right^{xvii}. After this amendment, the role and responsibility for primary education became the constitutional responsibility of Gram Panchayats. However, it was left to the particular governments of the states to decide how much power should be given to the panchayats.

The West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1973 assigned various functions to the gram panchayats, including supervising construction and maintenance works, maintenance of primary schools, public awareness, arrangement of registration, provision of mid-day meals and other projects^{xviii}. In West Bengal, gram Panchayats allocates land for building primary school facilities, while Panchayat Samitis offer financial aid to schools within their blocks. The important reforms brought about by the introduction of the Sishu Shiksha Karmasuchi (SSK) in 1997, aimed at decentralising primary education management by empowering local communities and Panchayats to establish and manage informal education centres known as Sishu Shiksha Kendras (SSKs)^{xix}, which provide alternative education for children who do not attend regular schools. These centres, governed by Managing Committees of local guardians and Panchayat members, were set up in areas lacking formal schools. At least three members of the committee must be women. This committee is constituted every year at the meeting of the ‘Gram Sansad’ (ward level village assembly of the panchayat system of West Bengal). The committee selects local women who meet the necessary educational qualifications to serve as teachers on a contract basis. These teachers are supervised by a board of trustees, while the community is responsible for the school’s infrastructure. The gram panchayat facilitates the

whole process and helps the management committee to deal with local issues. The Panchayat and Rural Development Department of the Government of West Bengal administers the programme, provides funds, organises teacher training and monitoring the curriculum^{xx}. This community driven model improved access to education, boosted enrolment rates, and ensured regular teacher attendance, enhancing education quality.

Mid-Day Meal Programme:

The role of panchayats in the mid-day meal programme is an ideal example of the local governance in providing the service delivery to the common people. The Central government launched this Mid-Day Meal Programme on 15th August 1995, which was originally named the ‘National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE)’^{xxi}. Following a Supreme Court judgement on November 28, 2001, in which it mentioned, “*We direct the State Governments/Union Territories to implement the Mid-Day Meal Scheme by providing every child in every Government and Government assisted Primary School with a prepared mid-day meal.*”^{xxii} As a result, some states began implementing this scheme. The primary objectives include increasing enrollment, improving attendance, reducing dropout rates, and enhancing children’s nutritional levels. Initially, students were given uncooked food, which didn’t help the scheme meet its goals. So, in January 2003, West Bengal introduced the Cooked Mid-day Meal Programme^{xxiii}. Since then, it’s been successfully implemented in all eligible schools. In October 2007, it was retitled the “National Programme of Mid-Day Meal in Schools,”^{xxiv} now commonly recognised as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. In September 2021, the scheme underwent a significant renovation and was renamed as ‘Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman’ (PM POSHAN). The revised programme is designed to run for five years from 2021-22 to 2025-26, with a budget of ₹ 1.31 billion^{xxv}. The government aims to help 11.80 lakh children learning in 11.20 lakh schools in India^{xxvi}.

In West Bengal, Panchayats are crucial for effective execution of the Mid-Day Meal programme. Panchayats monitor the scheme at the village level, ensuring that food is prepared hygienically, served on time and adheres to nutritional standards set by the government. With the restructuring under PM Poshan, panchayats are also involved in monitoring the nutritional status of children, working with dieticians posted in schools to monitor students’ BMI, weight and haemoglobin levels. Panchayats play an important role in providing and maintaining essential cooking facilities. This includes purchasing cookware, serving plates, and other necessities. Village Education Committees (VECs) play a decisive role in overseeing and

ensuring the effective execution of the necessary infrastructure for the midday meal program. This Committee is responsible for receiving and managing funds for kitchen shed construction, coordinating with various development programmes^{xxvii}. The government encourages the establishment of vegetable garden on school campuses, with active participation from students. Panchayats facilitate the creation and maintenance of these gardens, which serve as a source of vegetables for the Mid-Day Meal, thereby enhancing the nutritional value of the meals.

Panchayats have an important role to play in redressing complaints related to mid-day meals (MDM). At the panchayat level, a grievance redressal committee is formed in the mid-day meal (MDM) programme. These include the heads of Educational Institutions, Culture, Information and Sports and Food and Supply Committees of the concerned Panchayat Samitis, as well as Gram Panchayat Pradhans and School Sub-Inspectors at Block level. This committee investigates all complaints about MDM and ensures corrective action is taken within 30 days of receiving the complaint^{xxviii}. Moreover, panchayats have a significant role to play in creating awareness about the scheme among parents and communities. They conduct meetings and workshops to inform the community about the benefits of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, inspiring parents to send their children to school.

Rural Sanitation & Waste Management

The role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are crucial for implementing and managing sanitation and waste management programs, which are essential for improving public health and environmental sustainability. Central government introduced Swachh Bharat Mission (Clean India Mission), on 2nd October 2014^{xxix} to eradicate open water and develop solid waste management across India. Recognising the urgent need for local governance in achieving these ambitious objectives, the West Bengal government launched Mission Nirmal Bangla with the objective of eradicating open dumping and improve sanitation infrastructure to achieve a clean and hygienic India in line with the broader objectives of the Swachh Bharat Mission^{xxx}. As lower-level governance bodies, PRIs play a vital role in the implementation of the Nirmal Bangla Mission. One of the main responsibilities of GPs under the Nirmal Bangla Mission is the construction and maintenance of private household toilets and community sanitation facilities. In addition, GPs have been tasked with the management of solid and liquid waste within their jurisdictions. The management of solid waste involves the collection, separation and treatment of household waste, community and central levels. Liquid waste management initiatives include the construction of soak pits and kitchen gardens, as well as the

implementation of more sophisticated treatment solutions like inline treatment plants and constructed wetlands where necessary. The PRIs actively involve community stakeholders including civil society organisations (CSOs), women's self-help groups (SHGs)^{xxxii} and educational organizations in sanitation campaigns GPs conduct regular sanitation education programmes and promotional campaigns to promote sanitation and hygiene culture among the rural population. In addition, PRIs are responsible for monitoring and evaluating mission progress in the community.

Ensuring access to safe drinking water is essential in addition to other responsibilities of Panchayati Raj institutions. They manage local water resources, build and maintain water infrastructure, and implement sanitation measures. By promoting community participation and raising awareness, PRIs have significantly improved water quality and sanitation standards, reduced waterborne diseases^{xxxii}, and PRIs support agricultural development by providing extension services, agricultural inputs supply, and credit and market facilitation. They also provide rural development programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)^{xxxiii}, which provides employment and income security to rural households.

Challenges in Public Service Delivery

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in West Bengal face several challenges that hamper their ability to deliver essential public services effectively. The main issue is the financial crisis. Despite constitutional provisions on budget allocation, PRIs often struggle with inadequate funding and rely heavily on delayed or inadequate support at higher levels of government. Such financial failure these obstacles limit their ability to carry out important development projects, manage infrastructure and meet the needs of local communities, which are important between requirements and complicate the role they provide for the Condition of Diversity again due to operational inefficiencies arising. Bureaucratic red tape, delayed decision-making and lack of transparency hinder timely implementation of projects and services. Overlapping responsibilities across departments creates confusion and inefficiency, and undermines effective governance at the grassroots level. For the PRI in West Bengal, political intervention poses another key challenge. Local government is often subject to political influence, and decisions are swayed more by partisan considerations than by the needs of the community. Such interventions discourage qualified individuals from participating in local governance, further undermining leadership quality and perpetuating inefficiency and bias in service delivery. Challenges in different sectors are also significant. Despite the involvement of self-

help groups in disease surveillance and health vaccination, underfunding and staffing gaps persist. In education, although PRIs have increased enrolment and improved quality of education, their role in proper school management is limited due to systemic centralisation. Central food the programme includes issues related to quality control, race-based discrimination and nutrition.

The Government of West Bengal has implemented several initiatives to improve service delivery in various sectors. To ensure timely, transparent and accountable delivery of services to citizens, the West Bengal government enacted the West Bengal Civil Service Rights Act, 2013.^{xxxiv} This includes all government departments including Panchayats. Moreover, in order to address panchayat problems in delivering services to common people, the government has launched the important governance scheme called Duare Sarkar on 1st December 2020 with the aim of providing public ownership increased involvement to improve service delivery. Led by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, Duare Sarkar, which means ‘government at your doorstep’, represents a significant shift towards making essential government services accessible and meeting the needs of both rural and urban populations equally. The primary objectives focus on the timely delivery of citizen-centric services through the community-level camps and addressing locally identified gaps in infrastructure, manpower, and services through Paray Samadhan^{xxxv}, a sub-programme. This initiative highlights the state government’s commitment to decentralising administrative functions and empowering Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Empowered PRIs actively engage with citizens, seek their feedback, and tailor services to meet local needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of West Bengal's Panchayat Raj system is evidence of its vital function in improving public services and transforming local governance. Through decentralization and grassroots empowerment, these institutions have fostered community participation, transparency, and accountability in service delivery. By bridging the gap between government policies and local needs, they have effectively addressed issues ranging from healthcare to infrastructure, education to sanitation. The journey hasn't been without challenges, yet proactive measures in capacity building and resource allocation have bolstered their effectiveness. As West Bengal continues to navigate socio-economic complexities, the Panchayati Raj institutions emerge as linchpins, embodying democratic ideals and ensuring equitable development across its diverse landscapes. Their resilience and adaptability underline

their indispensability in shaping a more inclusive and responsive governance framework, where citizens are not just recipients but active stakeholders in their own development. As we look ahead, sustaining this momentum requires ongoing support, innovation, and a commitment to strengthening the foundations of local governance, echoing the keywords of empowerment, participation, transparency, accountability, and inclusivity.

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Society Language and Culture