

## Transparency in the Functioning of Gram Panchayats: Need of the Hour

**Dr. Rajiv Kumar**

Assistant Professor of Public Administration  
Government College for Girls, Palwal (Kurukshetra) Haryana  
Corresponding Author Email: [rajivgckalka@gmail.com](mailto:rajivgckalka@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

Panchayat works at the village level for the economic and social development of the village. Substantial participation of people in Panchayat Raj Institution's efforts improves the status of rural areas as a whole. Facilitating rural residents' involvement and participation in panchayat's affairs enhances development initiatives. The primary aim of the present paper is to highlight the importance of the Panchayati Raj System and to analyse transparency and system of Panchayat in villages. The paper also discusses that the Right to Information act gathers and brings on record all the official data of villages which is otherwise difficult to be excavated and maintained at the village level due to a lack of resources. This leads to the maintenance of Transparency and better governance at the village level. A similar role is played by the citizen's charter. It has been suggested that the public's voice, awareness and participation is needed in local self-government organisations to operate well and for development programmes to be carried out effectively. This is possible only with effective

coordination and by making sure the public has access to all the information, they need about the government's workings.

Keywords- Gram Panchayat, Sabha, Local, Panchayati Raj System, Transparency

### INTRODUCTION

Transparency is the practice of making information, processes, and decisions accessible, visible, and understandable to all stakeholders. It is a critical component of good governance and is essential for promoting accountability, participation, and trust in public institutions.

Gram Panchayat is the local self-government institution in rural areas of India. It is the foundation of the Panchayati Raj system and is responsible for delivering basic services and implementing development programs at the village level. Gram Panchayats play a significant role in promoting rural development and ensuring the welfare of the local community.

Transparency is a very important element in the functioning of Gram Panchayats. It ensures that the decisions made by the Panchayats are fair, accountable, and inclusive. The Gram Panchayat is required to disclose information related to its functioning, such as the budget, expenditure, and audit reports, to the public. This information is usually made available through notice boards, public meetings, and other forms of communication.

Transparency in Gram Panchayats is also important for promoting public's participation and engagement in local governance. It allows the community to hold the Panchayat accountable for its actions and decisions and to provide feedback on the functioning of the Panchayat.

Overall, transparency is a critical component of good governance in Gram Panchayats. It promotes accountability, participation, and trust in local institutions, and helps to ensure that the needs and aspirations of the rural community are adequately addressed.

### **Panchayati Raj System**

The local government system in India is referred to as Panchayat. The word Panchayat literally means a group of Five. A panchayat, in simple words, can be defined as a council consisting of five responsible senior members of a village representing the village. In Panchayati Raj, village councils make decisions and carry them out independently of other villages. The body works at three different levels: the Gram Panchayat, which works at the village level, the Block Panchayat, which works at clusters of villages and lastly, the District Panchayat working at the District Level. This is the three-tier system of Panchayati Raj working toward the development of a section of society. The powers and responsibilities of Panchayat are provided in the provisions of the Amendment Act 1992. (*Accountability and Transparency of and to Village Councils Need Improving :: IRC, n.d.*)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Accountability and transparency of and to village councils need improving :: IRC. (n.d.). Accountability and Transparency of and to Village Councils Need Improving :: IRC. Retrieved December 7, 2022, from <https://www.ircwash.org/news/accountability-and-transparency-gram-panchayats-need-improving>.

Gram Panchayat is the basic unit of administration, contributing to the good of the community. In most cases, there are between seven and thirty-one people involved.; Occasionally, a group is larger but never has less than seven members. The council leader is known as the Sarpanch, while the other members as Gram Panchayat Sadasya.

The fundamental premise of the Panchayati Raj Act is openness. Citizens have the legal right to learn about and weigh in on any development or governance issues that affect them. Panchayati Raj has characteristics such as Right to Information, Citizen Charter, Social Audit, and Performance Audit to achieve this goal and comply with legal transparency requirements. While the Ombudsman and the Tribunal have been established, much more work needs to be done to improve efficiency at the regional level, which is necessary for maintaining decentralisation and expanding democratic intervention.

India's population is equal to 17.7% of the total world population, and currently, the population of India is 1,412,903,336.<sup>2</sup>

**TABLE 1. STATE-WISE DETAIL OF GRAM PANCHAYAT IN INDIA<sup>3</sup>**

S. NO.	STATE/UT	No. of Village	No. of village panchayat
1	ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLAND	560	70
2	ANDHRA PRADESH	17949	13325
3	ARUNACHAL PRADESH	5484	2108
4	ASSAM	27917	2197
5	BIHAR	45414	8170
6	CHANDIGARH	0	NA
7	CHHATTISGARH	20577	11656
8	DELHI	222	NA
9	GOA	411	191
10	GUJARAT	19034	14359

<sup>2</sup>Id 1.

<sup>3</sup>Accountability and transparency of and to village councils need improving :: IRC. (n.d.). Accountability and Transparency of and to Village Councils Need Improving :: IRC. Retrieved December 7, 2022, from <https://www.ircwash.org/news/accountability-and-transparency-gram-panchayats-need-improving>.

11	HARYANA	7602	6220
12	HIMACHAL PRADESH	21253	3615
13	JAMMU AND KASHMIR	6856	4291
14	JHARKHAND	32726	4345
15	KARNATAKA	30715	5958
16	KERALA	1666	941
17	LADAKH	250	193
18	LAKSHYADWEEP	27	10
19	MADHYA PRADESH	55785	23066
20	MAHARASHTRA	44504	27923
21	MANIPUR	3856	161
22	MEGHALAYA	7053	NA
23	MIZORAM	864	NA
24	NAGALAND	1641	NA
25	ODISHA	52135	6794
26	PUDUCHERRY	127	108
27	PUNJAB	12782	13241
28	RAJASTHAN	46767	11272
29	SIKKIM	482	198
30	TAMIL NADU	18482	12524
31	TELANGANA	11226	12769
32	THE DADRA AND NAGAR HAVELI AND DAMAN AND DIU	101	38
33	TRIPURA	898	591
34	UTTAR PRADESH	109220	58189
35	UTTARAKHAND	17317	7791
36	WEST BENGAL	41001	3339

The above table shows the significance and strength of Panchayati Raj in India where more than 70% of the population lives in villages. So the role of Gram Panchayat becomes very important in our country.

### **Gram Panchayat**

Gram Panchayat is a local self-government institution in rural areas of India. It is the lowest tier of the Panchayati Raj system, which was introduced in India through the 73rd amendment to the Constitution in 1992. The term "Gram" means village, and "Panchayat" means a council of five members.

The Gram Panchayat is responsible for the governance of a specific geographical area, typically a group of villages. It has the power to make decisions on matters related to local issues such as rural development, water supply, sanitation, health, education, and infrastructure development. It also plays a significant role in promoting local democracy and empowering rural communities.

The Gram Panchayat is composed of elected members who are known as Panchayat members. The members are elected by the eligible voters of the area, and the election is held every five years. The number of members in a Gram Panchayat varies depending on the population of the area, but there must be at least five members and not more than fifteen members.

The head of the Gram Panchayat is called the Sarpanch, who is elected by the members of the Panchayat. The Sarpanch is responsible for conducting the meetings of the Panchayat, implementing the decisions taken by the Panchayat, and ensuring the overall development of the area.

Thus, the Gram Panchayat is an essential institution for rural governance in India, responsible for the development and welfare of the rural areas. It is an integral part of the Panchayati Raj system, which aims to promote local democracy and empower rural communities.

### **Role of Gram Panchayat and need of transparency in the working of Gram Panchayat**

Gram Panchayat plays a pivotal role in the rural development of India. It is the smallest unit of local self-government in rural areas and acts as the foundation for the entire Panchayat system. The primary role of Gram Panchayat is to provide basic amenities and services to the people

living in the village. These amenities and services include sanitation, drinking water, primary education, health care, and infrastructure development.

Apart from these services, Gram Panchayat is responsible for the overall development of the village. It formulates and implements various development plans and programs in consultation with the people of the village. It also collects taxes, manages funds, and maintains records for all activities in the village. In addition, Gram Panchayat is responsible for ensuring social justice and maintaining law and order in the village.

However, there have been instances where the functioning of Gram Panchayats has been questioned due to lack of transparency in their working. Many times, the decision-making process and allocation of resources have been influenced by local political leaders or people in power. This leads to corruption and nepotism, which ultimately affects the overall development of the village.

Therefore, the need for transparency in the working of Gram Panchayat is essential. It will ensure that the decisions made are in the best interest of the village and not influenced by any external factors. Transparency in Gram Panchayat can be achieved through various means such as making information regarding the functioning of Gram Panchayat available to the public, conducting regular audits, and involving the community in decision-making processes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In accordance with the paper written by **Buch**, which discusses the origins and organisational framework of the Panchayat Raj, The paper highlights various roles of the Panchayati Raj in forming a regulatory government at the village level. However, she also notes that the Panchayat Raj structure's outlines and power have not been completely stable throughout time. The Royal Commission on decentralisation suggested creating and strengthening village panchayats to handle rural matters in 1907. This was thought to be essential for decentralisation and for connecting citizens with their government's work on the ground. She has also cited the proposal for a three-tier Panchayat Raj system made by the B.R.Mehta Committee. She has also described the role of the Gram Sabha in the larger Panchayat Raj structure., as established by the 73rd amendment. (**Buch 2012**).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Buch Nirmala (2012), Gram Sabha &Panchayati Raj. Social Action, Vol.62, Pp. 49-52.

According to Sushil Kumar's "PoornaSwaraj Through Gram Swaraj" (2011) essay, rural development is the foundation for national progress. Agriculture is the backbone of India's economy. When we think of "rural," we think of agriculture. As a result, the progress of India's economy, culture, and society as a whole rely on the progress of rural India. Furthermore, he has pointed out that we are now endowed with a wide variety of natural resources, including energy, intellect, and indigenous expertise. However, we are not seeing any tangible progress. That's why getting to the bottom of it via research is vital. When facts are examined, it becomes clear that centrally framed development programmes have a negative impact on actual outcomes, even when all resources are available in rural areas. **(Kumar 2011).**<sup>5</sup>

A paper titled "Rural Development Through Gram Sabha," shows that Gram Sabha and its actual implementation in rural areas are important for resolving these issues and achieving tangible progress toward the growth and prosperity of rural communities and the nation at large. He outlined the challenges that Gram Sabha faces. These included, among other things: a lack of provisions for compulsory attendance of Gram Sabha, which leads to low participation from villagers; a lack of meeting allowance for villagers, which discourages them from attending Gram Sabha so that they don't have to miss out on their daily income; and so on. **(Balramji 2011).**<sup>6</sup>

Khera (2021) emphasizes the importance of transparency in ensuring the effective functioning of Gram Panchayats. She argues that Gram Panchayats can be more accountable and responsive to the needs of their constituents if they are more transparent in their decision-making processes and finances<sup>7</sup>.

Rao and Tandon (2018) throws light on the role of technology in promoting transparency in Gram Panchayats. They argue that the use of technology, such as the internet and mobile phones, can facilitate the exchange of information and improve access to information, thereby promoting transparency in Gram Panchayat governance.

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<sup>5</sup> Kumar Sushil (2011), PoornaSwaraj Through Gram Swaraj. International Referred Research Journal, Vol. III, Issue-33, Pp. 42- 44.

<sup>6</sup>BalramjiSoni Santosh (2011), Rural Development Through Gram Sabha, ShodhSamikshaAurMulyankan, Vol. III, Issue-33, Pp. 43- 46.

<sup>7</sup> Mohanty, B., & Biswal, R. K. (2018) Decentralization, Participation, and Transparency: Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India. Journal of Developing Societies, 34(1), 73-98.

## **Aims and Objectives**

The present research paper unfolds the following aims and objectives:-

1. To highlight the importance of the Panchayati Raj System
2. To analyse transparency and the system of Panchayat in villages.
3. To give suggestive measures for improving and building Transparency at village level governance.
4. To identify the role of NGOs and Society in promoting Transparency in Panchayats

## **Role of RTI, Citizen Charter, NGOs, Gram Panchayat Representatives, and Society to increase transparency in Gram Panchayat Operations**

Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005 plays an important role in improving transparency in Gram Panchayats in India. RTI enables citizens to ask information from government and public authorities, including the Gram Panchayats, about their functioning, activities, reports decision-making processes and various programs being run by the government. It helps to enhance transparency and accountability in the functioning of the Gram Panchayats. It also helps in reducing corruption and malpractices in Gram Panchayats, and in promoting good governance.

A citizen charter in a Gram Panchayat plays a crucial role in promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance. The main role of the citizen charter is to inform the citizens about the different services that Gram Panchayat provides, their rights, and the ways to access these services. It also improves service delivery, empowers citizens, and strengthens democracy.

NGOs are organizations that are independent of the Government and work towards promoting social causes. They can play a significant role in promoting transparency in the working of Gram Panchayats by raising awareness about the importance of transparency and accountability<sup>8</sup>. They can also work closely with Gram Panchayats to ensure that they are following the guidelines and regulations laid out by the Government. NGOs can help in creating a system of checks and balances to ensure that the Gram Panchayat is functioning efficiently and transparently.

Representatives of Gram Panchayats, such as Sarpanches and Panchayat members, are elected by the people to represent their interests. They play a significant role in ensuring transparency

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<sup>8</sup> Kaur, J., & Bhatia, S. S. (2018). Role of Gram Panchayats in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals in India. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 61, 167-178.



in the functioning of the Gram Panchayat. They can also help in providing information to the people about the decisions taken by the Gram Panchayat and the reasons behind those decisions. They can also work towards creating a culture of openness, clarity and transparency in the Gram Panchayat by encouraging discussions and debates on important issues.

Society, as a whole, has a significant role to play in ensuring transparency in the working of Gram Panchayats. Society can act as a watchdog and hold Gram Panchayats accountable for their actions. It can also demand greater transparency and accountability from the Gram Panchayats by actively participating in Gram Sabha meetings and other public forums. Society can also help in creating awareness about the importance of transparency and accountability in the functioning of Gram Panchayats. Thus, NGOs, representatives of Gram Panchayats, and society can work together to promote transparency and accountability in the functioning of Gram Panchayats. They can help in creating a system of checks and balances to ensure that the Gram Panchayat is functioning efficiently and transparently. It can be said that there is a need for greater transparency in the functioning of Gram Panchayats. This can be achieved through the involvement of various stakeholders, including NGOs, representatives of Gram Panchayats, and society at large<sup>9</sup>. The study highlights the importance of regular audits, proper documentation, and dissemination of information related to Gram Panchayat activities to enhance transparency and accountability. This paper also emphasizes the role of technology in improving transparency in the functioning of Gram Panchayats<sup>10</sup>. The use of digital platforms, such as e-governance portals, can facilitate better communication and information sharing between Gram Panchayats and their stakeholders. It provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by Gram Panchayats in ensuring transparency in their operations and suggests various measures that can be taken to address these challenges<sup>11</sup>. The suggestions mentioned above can be proved useful for policymakers and other stakeholders involved in local governance to promote more effective and transparent functioning of Gram Panchayats. There has to be a forum or grievances redressal cell for citizens to voice their concerns in order to improve the efficacy of local self-government institutions and the results of development

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<sup>9</sup> Panda, R. K., & Mishra, M. K. (2018). Empowering Gram Panchayats for Good Governance in India: Role of Information and Communication Technology. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 18(3), e1726.

<sup>10</sup> Patel, H., & Patel, H. (2017). Role of Gram Panchayats in Development of Rural Areas: A Study of South Gujarat Region. *International Journal of Applied Research*, 3(12), 452-455.

<sup>11</sup> Roy, D., & Pujari, P. (2018). Accountability and Transparency of Gram Panchayats in India: A Study in Rural West Bengal. *International Journal of Social Economics*, 45(1), 181-197.

programme implementations. This may be done with effective coordination and by making sure the public has access to all the information they need about the government's workings. The goal of the village's Panchayat is to improve the community economically and socially<sup>12</sup>.

### Suggestions

No doubt, we have various tools like RTI, Citizen Charter, Social Audit, Performance Audit and NGOs and these play a very important role in promoting transparency, but if we consider the following suggestions while using these tools, the aim of transparency in the working of Gram Panchayat can be achieved ;

1. Publicize Reports of Different Programs run by Panchayat- The Gram Panchayat should publicize financial, project and progress reports like budget, expenditure and various programmes report to make its working transparent for citizens.
2. Regular Public Meetings should be conducted- The Panchayats should conduct regular public meetings. These meetings will make the people believe that the decisions taken by Panchayat are taken honestly and transparently and the public can actively participate in the decision making process.
3. Use of Technology can be helpful in making Gram Panchayat transparent- The use of technology such as websites and various mediums of social media can also help in improving transparency. The panchayat can use these platforms to publicize various information and make the public involved and aware.
4. Grievance redressal mechanism should be created: The gram panchayat should also create a grievance redressal mechanism that allows people to report any grievances or complaints. This mechanism should be transparent, and the public should be informed of the progress regarding their complaints.
5. Involvement of Public should be encouraged- The Gram Panchayat should encourage public involvement and participation in decision making process and also conduct public hearing and consultation programs to enhance their participation.
6. Proper Training of Panchayat Members should be organised-The members of the Gram Panchayat should be provided proper training on governance, transparency, and

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<sup>12</sup> Nair, G., & Mathur, V. (2016). A Study on Transparency and Accountability of Gram Panchayats in Kerala. *Journal of Rural Development*, 35(1), 1-16.

accountability. It will ensure that they are aware of their responsibilities and can effectively carry out their duties.

7. Social Audits and Performance Audits should be conducted- Regular audits should be conducted to keep the record of utilization of funds spent on various programs.
8. Procedures of Panchayat's Working System should be simplified- The process of the Panchayat working system should be simplified to reduce corruption and bring transparency.
9. Compliance of Government Guidelines should be ensured- Compliance of Government orders and guidelines should be ensured to bring transparency and penalties should be imposed for non-compliance.

To conclude, it can be said that transparency is essential for effective and good governance at the village level. Audits, RTI, Citizen Charter and NGOs, are some provisions in the Panchayat Act that paves the way for transparency. The use of digital platforms like e-governance portals can improve communication and information sharing between public and Gram Panchayats. The paper provides valuable insights for bringing transparency in their working and suggests valuable suggestions that can be adopted to tackle these challenges. The measures and suggestions given here can definitely be useful for Government officials and policymakers involved in local governance to promote more effective and transparent functioning of Gram Panchayats.

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