



Impact Of Digital India On Panchayati Raj Institutions

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Abstract

To transform India into a knowledge-driven economy and empower society through technology, Digital India is the government of India's flagship initiative by the Prime Minister of India on July 1, 2015, and currently, in the 9th year of its journey. Digital India is a revolutionary digital platform to modernize and empower PRIs through effective and transparent governance services. It offers an extensive range of digital tools and services that simplify the functioning of rural governance, allowing it to provide accountability and inclusive political participation of the citizens at the grassroots level. It narrows the urban-rural gap by introducing the digital era and empowering rural communities. With the advent of Digital India, the new phase evolved in terms of inclusive development and citizen-focused governance. This article highlights the principles and goals of Digital India and how it revolutionizes Panchayati Raj Institutions with the socioeconomic approach at the local level of governance.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions, Digital India, Governance, urban-rural gap, rural empowerment, political participation, ICT.

Introduction

The use of ICT is thought to have a revolutionary effect on the legal system, the state's current institutions, and the way government operates overall procedures are becoming more transparent and efficient and citizens are better served overall. With the incorporation of ICT into Government and governance both have experienced increased connection and better enhanced democratic procedures at all political levels, a focus on the needs of the consumer, and state and faster exchanges. In addition, labor costs and bottlenecks have decreased.

ICT applications in the context of local self-governance promise to improve the provision of public goods and services by enhancing the procedures and administration of government and reinterpreting long-standing conventional ideas. The face of India, the Panchayats, which are increasingly more accountable, are becoming the symbol of good governance.

Within this aspect, the government of India launched a new project called Digital India, which consists of several initiatives meant to guarantee that villagers can access government services online and that they

receive benefits. Other names for digital India include e-India, Online India, and Transformational India. It's a dispersed neologism that promotes ICT use to deliver and enhance services, dealings, and exchanges between the government, and the private sector at the local level. This initiative by Prime Minister Narendra Modi not only helped in gaining knowledge of computers but also directed the youth to make it a job opportunity for them.

As part of the effort, high-speed internet networks will be connected to rural communities. Three main elements comprise Digital India: creating a safe and reliable digital infrastructure; providing digital government services; and encouraging widespread digital literacy. It benefits from and facilitates other important Government of India programs such as BharatNet, Make in India, Startup India and Standup India, industrial corridors, Bharatmala, Sagarmala, dedicated freight corridors, UDAN-RCS, and E-Kranti.

By giving local communities, the tools to highlight and communicate their unique social, cultural, and economic practices, histories, and struggles, the digital platform aims to strengthen the voices of the people at ground level. Additionally, the website would serve as a gateway for regional content for national and international audience through a bottom-up content push and vice versa. Furthermore, the gateway would serve as a versatile platform for communication and information that highlights regional content, culture, best practices, support neighborhood concerns, and introduce e-commerce to Panchayat Villages. Digital Panchayat provides a forum for representatives of panchayats to communicate with people throughout the globe.

Development of the Panchayati Raj System

The historical evolution of Panchayati Raj may be traced back to an era in Indian history when local authority was vested in panchayats or traditional village councils. However, as centralized administration emerged because of British domination, these indigenous systems saw a decline during the colonial era. The 1959 suggestions of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee helped measures to fortify and revitalize local administration gain traction after independence. After that, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 marked a significant turning point in the history of the state when Panchayati Raj was granted constitutional recognition, making them the third tier of government and endowing them with legal standing. This amendment aimed to promote decentralization of power, democratic participation, and local development.

Later revisions that emphasized decentralization and the inclusion of marginalized persons in governance further solidified their significance. This historical trajectory highlights India's shift towards decentralized, grassroots participatory governance by showing how Panchayati Raj grew from traditional village councils to organizations recognized by the constitution.

The highest authority in charge of district-level planning, budgeting, and coordination is the Zila Parishad. It oversees many panchayat samiti. Each level has specific authorities and responsibilities designed to ensure grassroots participation, effective program implementation, and tailored solutions to local issues. Aiming to democratize governance, promote community involvement, and address local needs, the hierarchical structure of PRIs delegated decision-making authority to the lowest levels of administration. This strategy encourages responsive and inclusive local government.

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India have numerous challenges that impede them from providing effective local government. Lack of resources and limited financial autonomy are major problems that result in inadequate funding and a dependency on state governments for financial support. Apart from financial limitations, elected representatives and officials in People's Republics (PRIs) must improve their level of competence since they lack the administrative expertise and training required to properly organize and execute development initiatives.

Moreover, these organizations' functional autonomy is often compromised by the frequent disruption of their decision-making processes brought about by political intervention and administrative obstacles. Another critical issue is the equitable representation of women and marginalized communities, where cultural hurdles and societal prejudices hinder their active engagement and representation. Furthermore, the lack of connectivity and technological infrastructure in rural locations makes it difficult to use ICT for quicker governance processes and citizen involvement. Ensuring transparency, accountability, and effective monitoring methods in PRIs remains a challenge. These problems must be handled to improve PRIs' capacity for governance, encourage equitable development, successfully address local demands, and maintain grassroots participatory democracy.

Digital India

The country is becoming one of the developing world's strongest economies and has achieved incredible progress in science and technology. The way that knowledge, information, and communication technology are distributed has had a major impact on how Indian society has developed. The result of the changes brought about by information and communication technology is the Digital India plan. The groundbreaking idea of Mr. Narendra Modi's government is Digital India. The Indian government is taking the initiative to integrate its departments with the Indian populace. Its goal is to guarantee that citizens may access government services electronically by cutting down on paperwork. A plan to provide high-speed internet networks to rural communities is also part of the project. It's an attempt to turn the nation into a knowledge economy that is empowered by digital means.

The Digital India program is built around three key vision areas:

1. Digital Infrastructure as a Core Utility to Every Citizen:

- Providing everyone with access to high-speed internet.
- Grant everyone a unique digital identity (Aadhaar) to promote simple and safe internet communication.
- Providing access to bank accounts and mobile phones to facilitate involvement in the digital economy.

2. Governance and Services on Demand:

- Integrating services across agencies or legal jurisdictions in a seamless manner.
- Enabling real-time service access via mobile and web platforms.
- Ensuring that people have the digital tools necessary to communicate with their government.

3. Digital Empowerment of Citizens:

- Universal digital literacy.
- Internet-based resources that are available to everyone.
- Digital services available in Indian languages.
- Digital platforms that collaborate to enable participatory government.

Key Components of Digital India

To accomplish the objectives of the program, several projects and initiatives are included in Digital India. Some of the major components include:

1. **BharatNet:**

The goal of BharatNet is to give all 250,000 Gram Panchayats in the nation access to high-speed broadband. To bridge India's digital divide between urban and rural areas, it is the largest rural broadband project in the world.

2. **Common Service Centers (CSCs):**

CSCs serve as access points for residents living in rural and isolated sections of the nation to get vital public utility services, social welfare programs, healthcare, financial, educational, and agricultural services.

3. **e-Governance:**

The program comprises e-Kranti, which seeks to use IT to revolutionize the way government services are delivered, as well as several other initiatives that support e-government, like the UMANG app, which gives users access to a variety of government services through a single mobile app.

4. **Digital Locker:**

With the help of a specialized cloud-based platform called Digital Locker, physical documents can be avoided by issuing and confirming documents and certificates online. It makes it easier to access crucial papers at any time and from any location.

5. **Aadhaar:**

With Aadhaar, the world's largest biometric ID system, every Indian citizen has a unique identity. It is essential to the direct benefit transfer (DBT) program because it makes sure that welfare benefits and subsidies go straight to the people who are supposed to receive them, reducing corruption and leaks.

6. **MyGov:**

With the use of the citizen engagement platform MyGov, Indian citizens are encouraged to contribute to governance by sharing their thoughts and recommendations on various topics and policies.

7. **Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA):**

Six crore rural families are to become digitally literate under PMGDISHA, allowing them to access information, knowledge, and skills via digital channels.

8. **Smart Cities Mission:**

The goal of this mission is to create 100 smart cities—urban regions that are more livable, sustainable, and inclusive—by utilizing digital technology to enhance infrastructure, services, and governance.

Digital India and Panchayati Raj Institutions

According to the Ashok Mehta Report from 1978, "PRIs are dominated by economically and socially favored elements of society and have enabled the establishment of oligarchic tendencies giving poor benefits to weaker sections..." The usefulness of PRIs for typical villagers has been severely damaged by corruption, inefficiency, a lack of care for protocol, political meddling in daily operations, local allegiances, motivated acts, and power concentration rather than service conscience. In 1977, the Janata Party Government established a committee to investigate the inadequate performance of the Panchayati Raj system nationwide. Ashok Mehta was designated as the committee's chairperson. After examining the previous PRI system, the committee reported to the government that PRIs needed to be restructured.

According to Article 40 of the Constitution, the State must form village Panchayats and give them the authority and powers they may require operating as autonomous political entities. Gram Sabha is therefore envisioned under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act as the cornerstone of grassroots democracy. A Gram Sabha may use its authority and carry out village-level duties as specified by a State's legislative. Every individual listed as a voter on the village Panchayat's electoral registry constitutes a Gram Sabha. As a result, it serves as the village's general body, with the Gram Panchayat serving as its executive body.

Gandhi acknowledged that the people in every village must work together to establish true democracy, rather than having a few individuals at the top dictating how it should be done. Therefore, the primary goal of Gram Sabha is to empower the people to plan and decide for their own village's development; nevertheless, Gram Sabha must first approve any actions taken by Gram Panchayat.

To empower people and hold the panchayat accountable, an engaged Gram Sabha is essential. A Gram Sabha guarantees direct and participatory democracy and serves as the village's legislative body. "My idea of Village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic," said Gandhi. The village government possesses all the necessary power and jurisdiction. Panchayats will therefore consist of the legislative, judicial, and executive branches together. People in the Gram Sabha must be informed of their rights and all government initiatives and programs designed with them. The irresponsible sarpanch rules Gram Sabhas. There are moments when Gram Sabha appears powerless and incapable of controlling Gram Panchayat.

In India, most people reside in villages and other rural areas. They lack access to fundamental services including financial inclusion, healthcare, and education. The government does not offer rural residents access to current information or services. Information and communication technology have been implemented by the government to enhance the rural administration, as information and communication technologies have enhanced human intelligence and transformed contemporary living. The NIC, Hyderabad launched the e-governance program in Panchayati Raj Institution, also known as e-Panchayat, to raise the standard of the panchayat government. One piece of software that works well with the Gram Panchayat information system is called e-Panchayat. It is citizen-centric and web-enabled, which promotes the digital panchayat.

A useful and active digital platform and workstation that is powered by the internet and made specifically for every panchayat in India is called a "Digital Panchayat." It enhances public service while empowering citizens with top-down and bottom-up information and content delivery by building a digital data house at its level. Encouraging panchayat tourism and local produce e-commerce, helps the panchayat economy expand and creates an ICT environment in each panchayat. To enable panchayat representatives to frequently update and maintain the panchayat material, the government created a comprehensive Panchayat Digital Platform and provides training in IT skills and platform management. With the help of digital panchayats, rural government might become more accountable and transparent.

Gram Sabha is empowered by Digital India. Through the project, e-governance transforms the administration into a transparent, responsible, efficient, and effective system that every citizen may readily use from home. Every single individual is eligible to participate in local decision-making. The Gram Sabha serves as the Gram Panchayat's watchdog. They might exercise control over the Gram Panchayats by overseeing and keeping an eye on its operations. Through the Internet or e-governance, all members of the Gram Sabha have access to all information regarding the operations of the Gram Panchayat and can effectively participate in meetings. Thus, the Gram Sabhas can periodically conduct social audits of the Gram Panchayats.

A social audit is the process by which public entities communicate information about the resources they use for development efforts with the public, usually through public platforms. Put differently, social auditing is the process of keeping an eye on and managing Gram Panchayat through inquiries to the panchayat members regarding contentious matters related to its activities. Gram Panchayats are required to clear up any doubts members of the Gram Sabha may have regarding the misappropriation of public funds. It facilitates the efficient operation of village-level government. It enables people to impose openness and accountability. The Gram Panchayat and Sarpanch can therefore be controlled using social audit. It may improve the

Gram Sabha's ability to oversee Gram Panchayat operations. Therefore, Gram Sabha is a direct democracy institution.

The Digital India initiative would lessen localized corruption. Online applications are available for birth, death, income, and other certifications. It will be accessible to the public and eliminate the need for middlemen or dishonest staff members. Enhancing the process of building capacity plays a significant part in the Gram Sabha's empowerment. "The respective state government shall take steps to organize village panchayat and enable them with such power and authority as may be needed to enable them to function as the unit of self-governance," states Article 40 of the Indian Constitution. Only through e-governance can corruption-free self-governance be developed. Therefore, the government must actively support ICT-enabled administration.

Because it offers services anywhere, at any time, ICT-enabled administration will save money on services and save citizens' time. People can always use public services whenever they have additional time. The program's main goal is to provide public services to everyone, with a focus on rural areas. The plan will increase public service delivery's certainty and speed. The public expects responsiveness to their requests, sophisticated internet services, and flexible, convenient interactions. These panchayats will save time and money because of the Digital India program. There shall be transparency in all government operations and panchayat operations. As a result, the government may transfer funds without any leaks and the panchayats can readily obtain all the information they need. It will lessen corruption and do away with the middlemen who encourage further bribery or corruption.

Digital technology will facilitate information sharing, hence elevating and improving public involvement and citizen satisfaction levels. The government plans to provide broadband and Wi-Fi access to every one of the 2.5 lakh Gramme Panchayats. The villages will prosper in information storage and will enable villagers to participate in meetings of the Gram Sabha and make decisions. The Gram Sabha sessions are held to promote direct democracy. For example, the government of Andhra Pradesh introduced e-Panchayats, or panchayats based on electronic knowledge. It belongs to the project for e-governance. Its design has considered every need a Gram Panchayat has for information and knowledge management. At the village level, it offers all the Gram Panchayat's information.

All the functions at the Gram Panchayat level are covered by its almost thirty primary modules. Gram Panchayat Administration is one of its modules, which makes it easier to provide many kinds of information services about Gram Panchayat. It offers the following: meeting minutes, the Gram Sabha schedule, agenda updates, certificates, licenses, bill payments, the panchayat functionaries' attendance tracking system, the registration of births, deaths, and marriages, among other events; property tax; law and order; government orders; and so forth. All this information could aid in the Gram Sabha's empowerment. Gram Sabha may easily monitor and keep an eye on Sarpanch and Gram Panchayats. Therefore, Gram Sabhas oversees and manages the Gram Panchayat. In the long run, it might be a "means" to control such initiatives.

With the help of Digital India, rural administration will be able to adopt e-governance, which will allow citizens to actively participate in political and governmental discourse by sharing their expertise and thoughts. E-governance, according to UNDP's definition in 2005, is ICT that improves information and service delivery, encourages increasing public input into decision-making, and improves the effectiveness, accountability, and transparency of government. Therefore, improved citizen-government communication is facilitated by digital governance. ICT can be applied to improve democratization, citizen empowerment, and good governance. It enhances Gramme Panchayat and government efficiency. The Indian central and state governments launch several e-governance initiatives for rural areas under the NeGP, including e-Chaupal, Gyandoot, Akashganga, Drishtee, and Lokmitra. These initiatives are working efficiently in remote areas to raise villagers' political knowledge.

Challenges

In a UN survey on e-government, India ranks 124th [out of 190] despite having the third largest internet user base because our governance is neither service-oriented nor participative. Additionally, since "policymaking" is not analytics-driven, there is a persistent shortage of transparency. To deliver broadband access to all 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats nationwide, UPA-II approved the National Optical Fibre Network (NOFN). The government established Bharat Broadband Network Limited (BBNL) to oversee the development, management, and operation of NOFN. Dated February 25, 2012, it was incorporated as a special-purpose vehicle. The NOFN has the power to change a wide range of facets of our lives, including data, video, internet, and phone services in various fields like health, education, and e-governance. The NOFN was being built by BBNL, to offer high-quality, cost-effective, safe, and dependable connections throughout India. In three blocks encompassing 58 Gram Panchayats across three states, it had started experimental projects. These Blocks included Panisagar (North Tripura, Tripura), Parvada (Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh), and Arian (Ajmer, Rajasthan). However, due to several issues, the pilot project was unable to produce a dynamic outcome. Consequently, Digital India might have to deal with the following kinds of difficulties:

1. **Lack of commitment:** Recently, Telecom Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad acknowledged that the optic fiber project has made almost "no progress" during the previous three years. It indicates that the endeavor lacks commitment. This project was started by the Indian government in 2011, but it has remained in the same state ever since it was incorporated. The representatives of the government are neither showing interest in the project nor supplying the minimal infrastructure needed to finish it. If the project is implemented with a lack of enthusiasm, it will be inefficient. However, the minister went on to say that the project will still be carried out by the government using public sector organizations Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL), Power Grid Corporation, and RailTel, with the prime minister himself serving as a monitor.
2. **Content Development:** Our Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, has an "ambitious" project called Digital India. However, creating content is its biggest obstacle. Expert panels must be assembled in the fields of public health, education, and other fields in which it wishes to provide services material. With 22 officially recognized Indian languages and only 6% of its population fluent in English, India is a multilingual nation. For widespread acceptance, all content ought to be written in the native tongue. A comprehensive consultation procedure would be necessary, affecting the citizens' actual uptake of the service. It will function well in several states thanks to its multilingual elements. Developing pertinent material that piques citizens' interests is the hardest endeavor.
3. **Digital Literacy:** Gram Sabhas are experiencing a brain drain due to urbanization development. Most educated people from rural areas go to cities in quest of quality healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Due to this, some individuals are having an impact on the Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayats. In addition to stating that economically and socially favored groups predominate in Gramme Panchayats and Gramme Sabhas, Ashok Mehta also discussed the weakening of PRIs. The people living in rural areas lack an understanding of emerging technology and are nearly illiterate. However, according to Telecom Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad, the government will soon begin work on the "Disha" project, improving digital literacy. The average person will receive computer and digital training under this project in their native tongue.
4. **Weak infrastructure:** The main obstacle to the initiative is the outage of electricity in rural regions. In most places, state administrations are still unable to supply energy on a 24-hour basis. If Digital India is launched and every Gram Panchayat is linked via Wi-Fi or the internet, they are worthless until there is a power outage that keeps the computers and kiosks running.

Suggestions:

The Digital India initiative ought to be easy to utilize. To facilitate universal access to all information and services, the project's contents ought to be comprehensible and straightforward. It'll be pointless due to the challenging topic. The state administration ought to assist the specialists in creating the content and carrying out the project successfully. Stated differently, the focus should be on citizens rather than technology. The government must work together to improve citizen services since the main obstacle is that each department operates independently, with its networks, data centers, and other infrastructure.

The government needs to link Wi-Fi on Mobile Tower using the Omni device and work to produce Wi-Fi-enabled computers at the lowest possible cost because energy fails in rural areas. Each state government ought to support solar energy projects for the issue to be resolved and the project to function effectively.

Through the project, the government can give panchayats all the money they need directly—without the need for middlemen or other routes, which result in money leakage.

An important initiative that will link every community in our nation is the Digital India Project. It is highly beneficial for both public engagement and rural development. If the project is carried out successfully and efficiently, Gram Sabhas will be empowered and ensure transparency and accountability of Gram Panchayats.

Conclusion:

To further close the gap between the digital "haves" and "have-nots," Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced the Digital India Programme on August 15, 2014. He referred to it as the "digital revolution." Its goal is to provide high-speed internet services and broadband connectivity to all 2.5 Gram Panchayats through Wi-Fi. For e-governance, e-education, telemedicine, electronic harvesting services, and other purposes, the Indian government seeks to connect the most remote and rural places. Panchayat Digital seeks to cover all of Gram Panchayat's information requirements from the staff and citizen perspectives.

In summary, by reducing process costs, the Digital India project helps to improve Gram Panchayat e-administration. It will boost the effectiveness and efficiency of panchayats. Through the project's link to the government, rural residents and the Gram Sabha will be empowered and direct government to citizens. Because this programme will specifically address the link between public agencies and other organisations, it will usher in the e-society. Thus, the Digital India project has the potential to drastically alter the political landscape of local self-government. Intellectual, institutional, and material capability may be developed by the project.

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