

Empowering Rural Democracy in the Bay Islands: Investigating the Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) in South Andaman District

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyse the issues and challenges faced by Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the Bay Islands, with a specific focus on the Andaman District. The objectives of the study include understanding the structural, administrative, and fiscal complexities encountered by PRIs, examining the adequacy of budgetary allocations, assessing the state of infrastructure and social schemes, and exploring the influence of linguistic dynamics on local politics. The present study employs a methodology that entails a thorough examination of extant literature, official reports, and pertinent data sources to acquire insights into the predicaments and obstacles encountered by Public Rural Institutions (PRIs) in the Bay Islands. The research paper concludes that PRIs in the Bay Islands encounter several critical challenges, such as inadequate budgetary allocations, infrastructure etc. which hamper their financial and functional autonomy. Overall, this research paper provides insights into the issues and challenges faced by PRIs in the Bay Islands and offers recommendations for addressing these challenges to strengthen local self-administration and promote inclusive and participatory governance.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Andaman & Nicobar Island (A&N Island), Bay Island

INTRODUCTION

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) of India have been recognised as agents of socio-economic change in rural regions, reflecting the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi in establishing dynamic republics in each village (Packel, D. 2008).

The implementation of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system has enabled the involvement of the populace in the revitalization of rural areas, thereby contributing to the success of India's democratic model on a global scale. The journey of PRIs witnessed a significant milestone with the constitutional recognition through the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, on April 24, 1993.

The noteworthy characteristics of the Act encompass the creation of a standardised three-tier Panchayati Raj framework for all states and union territories, periodic Panchayat elections held every five years, reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women (not less than 50%), and the appointment of State Finance Commissions to ascertain the fiscal authorities of the Panchayats (Bates, 2005). Panchayats are bestowed with significant duties, including devising strategies for economic growth and equitable distribution of resources, executing programmes about the areas enlisted in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution, and imposing charges and levies to ensure financial inclusivity. The rural populace bears a significant responsibility to ensure that Panchayati Raj institutions efficiently mobilise resources to facilitate socio-economic advancement within their respective regions (Murthy, 2021).

The Panchayati Raj Act is noteworthy for its provision of reserving 33% of seats for women in Panchayats across all tiers. The aforementioned provision has considerably enhanced the standing of women residing in rural areas and has resulted in noteworthy modifications in the operations of these local-level organisations (Nandal, 2013).

In addition, it is mandatory to reserve seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in every level of the Panchayati Raj System. The act of reserving a portion of resources or opportunities holds significant importance in promoting the advancement of underprivileged communities residing in remote regions, thereby guaranteeing their equitable participation and growth. Over time, Panchayats have engaged in various developmental initiatives aimed at empowering vulnerable and disadvantaged populations, by offering opportunities such as primary education, training, and essential healthcare services that are crucial for personal advancement and progress (Ramya Tarh 2014). Panchayats have effectively

collaborated with non-governmental organisations, voluntary groups, and local agencies to implement human resource development programmes throughout the nation (**Satpute, 2023**).

Over the past thirty years, the noteworthy accomplishment of Panchayats has been their ability to facilitate social mobilisation and encourage participation in development initiatives. The Panchayati Raj system has facilitated the involvement of individuals through mechanisms such as Gramme Sabha, which serves as an open platform for deliberation on development initiatives at the village level. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution has facilitated a significant transfer of power and responsibilities to regional entities, with a focus on decentralisation and citizen involvement in community-based governance (**Kumar, 2015**). Citizen participation can be regarded as a forum in which individuals partake in decision-making procedures and actively engage in local affairs (**Jaiswal, 2021**).

Development of PRIs in Andaman and Nicobar Island

The development of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands has provided a significant opportunity for rural communities to actively participate in the democratic setup and administration of the region. As of now, the Union Territory consists of two Zilla Parishads, seven Panchayat Samities, and 70 Gram Panchayats, with a total of 858 elected representatives across these institutions. (**Murthy, 2021**)

While there is no reservation for Scheduled Castes (SCs) in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Scheduled Tribes (STs) also do not have reservation due to the insufficient number of notified STs in each constituency. The Nicobarese community, having their own tribal council, addresses the day-to-day matters specific to their needs. However, one-third of the seats are reserved for women in each tier of the PRIs.

The dominant Bengali community, representing more than one-third of the total population of the islands, holds significant influence in all three tiers of the institutions, including the position of Pradhan. In past Panchayat elections, both the Congress party and the BJP have successfully won the majority of seats, with Bengali representatives capturing more wards compared to other major communities such as Tamil, Telugu, Hindi-speaking locals, and Ranchi residents in Zilla Parishads and Panchayat Samities. However, proportional representation has not been implemented for key positions such as Adhyaksha, Up-Adhyaksha in Zilla Parishads, and Pramukh and Up-Pramukh in Block Samities. (**K. Biswas & Bannerjee, 2023**)

With the creation of another district and the second Zilla Parishad for the Middle and North Andaman district in 2008, political manipulations and the influence of money power have increased significantly. In recent years, rather than prioritizing merit, members of PRIs have been serving their vested interests, leading to a disturbance in social harmony and the multi-linguistic unity among the islanders. Additionally, the unrestricted influx of population has further contributed to these challenges.

These developments highlight the need to address issues such as proportional representation, the role of money power, and the preservation of social harmony and unity within the PRIs of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Strategies should be devised to promote transparency, merit-based selection processes, and equal opportunities for all communities to participate effectively in the local governance and development of the islands.

OBJECTIVES

1. To evaluate the structural, administrative, and financial complexity concerns and challenges faced by Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the Bay Islands, with a focus on the Andaman District.
2. To investigate how the Andaman District's budgetary allocations, infrastructural and social programmes, and language dynamics affect the operation and efficacy of PRIs in the Bay Islands.

Issues and Challenges Faced by PRIs in Bay Islands

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in A & N Island has struggled with structural, administrative, and fiscal complexities. (**John & Uchi Jain, 2008**) Some of the complexities will be discussed below: -

Inadequate Budgetary Allocation

The Panchayats are democratic entities that operate at the local level and require reinforcement through the efficient transfer of functions, finances, and functionaries (3Fs) in alignment with the principles of subsidiarity and Panchayat centrality

(Kumar, 2019). The implementation of this approach would ensure the convergence of various schemes and the consolidation of resources via the comprehensive planning of Panchayats (**Maji, 2015**). For Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to effectively carry out their duties as outlined in Schedule XI of the Indian constitution, it is imperative that they possess both financial and functional autonomy (**Murthy, 2021**). The World Bank posits that fiscal autonomy is a fundamental component of decentralisation, and the effective fiscal empowerment of local government autonomy is imperative for its sustainability (**Ratra & Dahiya, 2022**).

The standing committee on rural development and Panchayati Raj (2022-2023) in its 31st report, has identified a concerning budget shortfall for the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) in Andaman and Nicobar Islands for the fiscal year 2023–2024. Enhancing Panchayats' Capabilities for Good Governance and the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the MoPR's top priorities for the coming year. However, the allocated budget for the MoPR falls considerably short of its requirements, posing obstacles to the Ministry's ability to effectively implement its initiatives. (**Standing committee on rural development and Panchayati Raj, 2023**)

Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), the MoPR's umbrella programme, also seeks to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to achieve SDGs. However, the Ministry of Finance's inadequate funding allocation hinders the MoPR's efforts to empower and strengthen PRIs. Compared to the proposed budget of Rs. 1169.69 Crore for 2023-24, the approved budget of Rs. 1016.42 Crore for 2023-24 may necessitate expenditure cuts and hinder the Ministry's ability to completely realise its priorities.

In addition, the **Committee, 2023** anticipates to be apprised of the steps taken by the Ministry to address these budgetary concerns. The state-by-state and union territory-by-union territory distribution of RGSA funds from 2019-20 to 2022-23 reveals that no funds have been allocated to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This emphasises the need for adequate budgetary support to be extended to the region in order to facilitate the implementation of initiatives targeted at bolstering PRIs and promoting sustainable development in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Infrastructure and Social Schemes

Svamita Scheme

With the aim of giving household owners in inhabited rural regions of villages a "record of rights" and issuing property cards to property owners, the SVAMITVA (Survey of Villages and Mapping with Improvised Technology in Village regions) Central Sector Scheme was implemented. The SVAMITVA system has been put into place in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which are made up of 141 villages, to address the issues with land ownership and documentation in rural regions. The SVAMITVA plan is being implemented in the islands, however there are some difficulties. The geographical complexity of the area is one of the biggest obstacles because the islands are dispersed and have different topographies. Accurate surveying and mapping are made more difficult by this, especially in rural and difficult-to-reach places. Additionally, the islands' distinctive demographic makeup which includes a mix of native communities and immigrants from different regions of the nation presented linguistic and cultural difficulties in the scheme's implementation. Despite these challenges, the SVAMITVA scheme has made significant progress in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, generating 7,409 property cards. (**Daily Telegram, 2023**)

Bharat Net Connectivity

Bharat net project is implemented by Ministry of telecommunications in a phase manner to create a network to connect all Gram panchayats with broadband.

Table 1. Number of GPs with Panchayat Bhawan and with Computer

	No. of GPs/ TLBs With Computer	No. of GPs/ TLBs with Bhawan
A & N Island	271	59

Table 2. Number of GPs with Active Internet Connection

	Total RLBs	Active Internet at RLBs as on 21-01-2023

A & N Island	70	27
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The Bharat Net connectivity scheme has played a significant role in improving internet access and connectivity in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. According to Table 2, out of a total of 70 Gram Panchayats/Territorial Level Bodies (TLBs) in the region, 27 have active internet connections as of 21st January 2023. This indicates a positive outcome of the Bharat Net initiative in bridging the digital divide and bringing internet connectivity to a substantial number of rural areas.

Additionally, Table 1 provides information on the availability of Panchayat Bhawans and computers in the Gram Panchayats/TLBs. It shows that out of the total GPs/TLBs in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, 59 have Panchayat Bhawans and 271 have computers. These infrastructure facilities contribute to enhancing the accessibility and utilization of digital services and technologies in the local governance setup. To further enhance the Bharat Net connectivity in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, it is crucial to continue expanding the network infrastructure and ensuring the availability of reliable and affordable internet services in all the remaining Gram Panchayats. This will enable the local communities to benefit from digital initiatives, access online information and services, and actively participate in the digital economy. (**Standing committee on rural development and Panchayati Raj, 2023**)

Linguistic Dynamics

The role of language and community dynamics has been a key and decisive factor in the politics of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, particularly the influence of the Bengali community. The leaders belonging to major linguistic groups such as Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, and the local-born community play an active role in mobilizing their respective communities during elections, both at the local body and parliamentary levels. The Bengali community, in particular, has always held a crucial position in the local political landscape, and its leaders have been actively involved in representing their community's interests in various institutions. These dynamics present both opportunities and challenges for the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the Bay Islands. While the active participation and representation of different linguistic and community groups can foster a sense of inclusion and diversity, it can also lead to political fragmentation and the prioritization of community interests over broader developmental goals. Ensuring effective governance and decision-making within PRIs requires navigating these complexities and promoting a harmonious balance between community representation and the overall development of the islands. (**K. Biswas & Bannerjee, 2023**)

Remedies- A Course of Action

To address these issues and challenges, it is essential to provide adequate funding to PRIs so that they can fulfil their responsibilities and implement effective development initiatives. Access to information, services, and participation in the digital economy will be improved by bolstering infrastructure, particularly internet connectivity, and expanding digital services. It is crucial to leverage technology effectively, ensure adequate resources and manpower, engage with local communities, and tailor the implementation strategies to the unique context of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. In addition, promoting dialogue and cooperation between linguistic and community groups can facilitate inclusive decision-making and ensure that community interests align with broader developmental goals. By addressing these issues and challenges, PRIs in the Bay Islands can play a pivotal role in accomplishing sustainable development, promoting participatory governance, and enhancing the well-being of the local communities as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the Bay Islands of Andaman and Nicobar are confronted with a number of critical issues and obstacles that impede their effective operation and the implementation of development initiatives. By addressing these issues and challenges, PRIs can fulfil their role as democratic institutions, promote participatory governance, and contribute to sustainable development in the Bay Islands. It requires a collaborative effort from government authorities, stakeholders, and community members to ensure that PRIs are empowered to address the needs and aspirations of the local communities effectively. With the implementation of appropriate remedies, PRIs can emerge as strong agents of positive change, fostering inclusive growth, and enhancing the quality of life in the Bay Islands.

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