E-Governance at the Grassroots: Assessing the Role of the e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project in Empowering Panchayati Raj Institutions

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Abstract:

In today's technologically advanced world, the notion of e-governance (electronic governance) and the utilisation of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to provide services to the general public have garnered significant traction. The Government of India, together with several state governments, has implemented numerous e-government initiatives to facilitate the transition from governance to good governance through the utilisation of ICT. E-Panchayat is one of those initiatives, which is a technologically advanced and adaptable digital platform and workstation that has been specifically developed for and implemented in every Panchayat to enhance grass-roots democracy by equipping individuals with information and knowledge. This article aims to examine how well e-governance helps promote citizen-centered local self-government, which is characterised by efficiency, responsiveness, cost-effectiveness, and an approach that focuses on results to speed up rural development. It also depicts the use of ICT by Panchayati Raj institutions to provide effective public service delivery to the rural masses; the resulting characteristics and associated difficulties have also been stressed. Additionally, it also looks into the role of e-Panchayat as a comprehensive tool for improving the functioning of the Panchayati Raj system.

Keywords: E-Governance, ICT, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Service Delivery, e-Panchayat, Local Self-Governance, Panchayat Enterprise Suite.

Introduction

The principle of self-governance is a revered ideal in Indian society and significantly influenced ancient India and its democratic framework. Grassroots self-

governing institutions in India can be traced back to prehistoric times, corresponding with the advent of civilisation. In contemporary times, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) function as local governmental bodies tasked with grassroots governance in rural regions of the nation. These institutions are the third level of federalism in India's government structure. The PRIs, which are the rural local governments, serve about two-thirds of the country's population. These grassroots governmental institutions enhance the significance of democracy and facilitate essential public engagement in the socio-economic transformation of the nation. These bodies are regarded as the fulcrum of administration and the centre of social life. Consequently, PRIs have emerged as the cornerstone of our democratic framework.

Mahatma Gandhi championed Panchayat Raj as the "cornerstone of India's political framework". Sir Charles Metcalfe, the provisional Governor-General of India (1835-36), referred to Indian village communities as "the little republics". Currently, these little republics are referred to as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in rural regions. The 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 granted constitutional legitimacy to these institutions, enabling them to operate as local self-governments within the third tier of governance in India. They have been granted significant authority to manage their affairs, including the

responsibility to plan for their regions and collect income for their sustenance. These institutions currently execute a diverse array of functions. Improving the management functions and administrative capacities of these bodies is essential to optimising service delivery and enhancing the overall welfare of rural populations.

E-governance has accelerated in the past two decades in developing countries, particularly in India. Electronic governance refers to the application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) by governmental entities, such as the World Wide Web, intranets, wide area networks, and cloud computing, which can transform interactions with citizens, businesses, and other governmental bodies. E-governance significantly contributes to fostering democratic culture, processes, and civic ideals essential for a democratic government. The objective is to ensure citizens have access to information and knowledge regarding the political process, services, and available options, while promoting the transition from passive information consumption to active citizen engagement through informing, representing, encouraging voting, consulting, and involving citizens.

The expanding role of ICT has led to the creation of many e-governance programs and applications aimed at the development of rural areas. Information and Communication Technology plays a significant role in the administration of PRIs in numerous domains, including

accounting, agricultural development, finance, property records, and procurement. Thus, e-Panchayat is a necessity in the current context. E-Panchayat is a functional and dynamic digital platform and workspace developed for each Panchayat. The primary aim of e-Panchayat is to empower citizens of each panchayat with both bottom-up and top-down information and content. It offers significant potential for rural populations nationwide by seeking to convert PRIs into emblems of modernity, transparency, and efficiency. It can function as an empowering instrument for the populace at the grassroots level and significantly enhance participatory democracy within that context.

Objectives

1. To explore the relevance and importance of e-governance in PRIs.
2. To understand the concept of e-Panchayat and its significance.

Methodology

This article is descriptive in nature and is based on secondary data sources, including governmental documents, reports, websites, scholars' books and articles, newspapers, journals, magazines, and both published and unpublished research works that focus on various aspects of e-governance in Panchayati raj institutions. The accessible secondary data is used only for study purposes.

PRIs and E-Governance (ICT)

PRIs have experienced numerous transformations, particularly regarding their roles and functions. In the age of globalisation, PRIs must redefine their role as catalysts and facilitators, which include actively engaging with local communities to promote sustainable development and empower citizens in decision-making processes. Consequently, the enhancement of Panchayati Raj Institutions as self-governing entities at the grassroots level is essential for a more substantive democracy. In this context, genuine efforts must be made to significantly improve the knowledge, skills, and competencies of PRIs through the use of ICT. The central and state governments have implemented a significant number of e-governance initiatives since the 1990s. These approaches provide significant potential to foster more accountable, responsive, and citizen-centric Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). E-governance projects are relevant in participatory planning, taxes, education and training, and service delivery, as they enable greater citizen engagement and transparency in decision-making processes. Through openness, accessibility can be ensured for the citizens to know about 'what is being done, will be done and has been done' by the state and its agencies. The constructive utilisation of e-governance can enhance the efficiency and efficacy of PRIs.

The efficacy of every organization relies on the synergy between its delivery mechanisms and the supported laws and procedures, which enable it to fulfil its functions and perform its designated role.

ICT involvement can enhance this process and support development by disseminating knowledge, boosting productivity, transcending geographical limitations, and promoting procedural transparency. E-governance enhances the availability of information with efficiency and dependability, hence facilitating improved decision-making, fostering innovation, and promoting transparency in social auditing. This process also necessitates increased openness and transparency in operations by diminishing corrupt practices in the PRIs. Electronic governance or ICTs can enhance the local self-governance (Panchayati Raj Institutions) in several specific manners:

- It generates 'efficiency benefits' in the policy cycle. Through the acquisition, transfer, and management of complex policy-related information and data, it assists decision-makers in making well-informed decisions.
- It enhances the delivery of services by local governments.
- It improves the interface between government and civil society by expanding access to government information and enabling dialogue as well as public feedback on government programmes and performance.
- It promotes the empowerment of citizens through their broader participation in the planning, implementation, and management of development programmes.

- It strengthens transparency and accountability by displaying transactions, progress of work, future plans, and actions, thereby providing greater access to information for the general public.
- It increases the effectiveness and efficiency of services delivered directly by the government and its agencies.
- It facilitates better coordination among different functional departments of the government and Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- ICT also contributes to enhancing the legitimacy and acceptance of Panchayati Raj Institutions among their stakeholders.

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj is committed to promoting the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to support Panchayats in functioning effectively and to empower Panchayat functionaries to utilise technology in their routine administrative activities. Over the years, the Ministry has worked in collaboration with State Panchayati Raj Departments to strengthen and improve governance mechanisms related to Panchayati Raj administration.

Figure 1: Evolution of Digital Local Governance in India
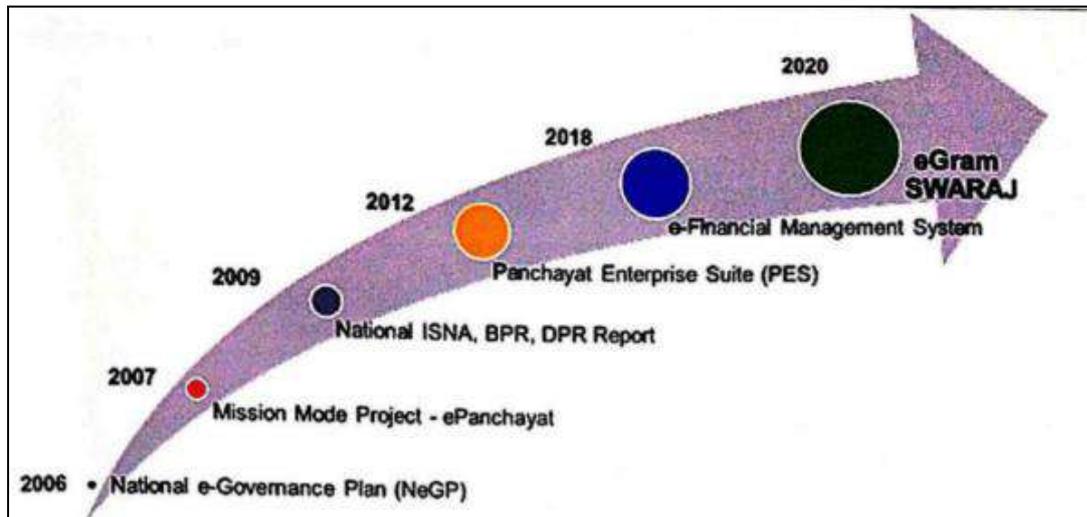
Source: Digital Local Governance, Yojana (November 2021)

E-Governance Models

ICT-enabled Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) should not be understood merely as the computerisation of administrative offices; rather, they involve a broad range of activities and stakeholders. Such a system creates a four-dimensional interface, which includes the following models:

P2P (Panchayat to Panchayat): This interface involves the sharing of data and electronic exchanges among the different tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions. It may also include horizontal information sharing with other agencies operating within the same geographical jurisdiction. A District Panchayat Local Area Network (LAN) would connect PRIs at the district, block, and village levels, while the district would be linked to higher levels of government through the internet. The District Management Information System (DMIS), operating on a bottom-up approach, would function through this LAN. Such a P2P interface would contribute to improved resource coordination, comprehensive planning, and the more effective implementation of development programs.

P2B (Panchayat to Business): This interface involves interactions between PRIs and businesses, including the sale of PRI-related goods to the public and the procurement of goods and services. It requires the development of electronic catalogues for purchases, electronic tendering processes, and the online publication of contract awards and terms. Such mechanisms enhance transparency and accountability in the financial and administrative transactions of PRIs.

P2G (Panchayat to Gram Sabha): The P2G interface represents one of the
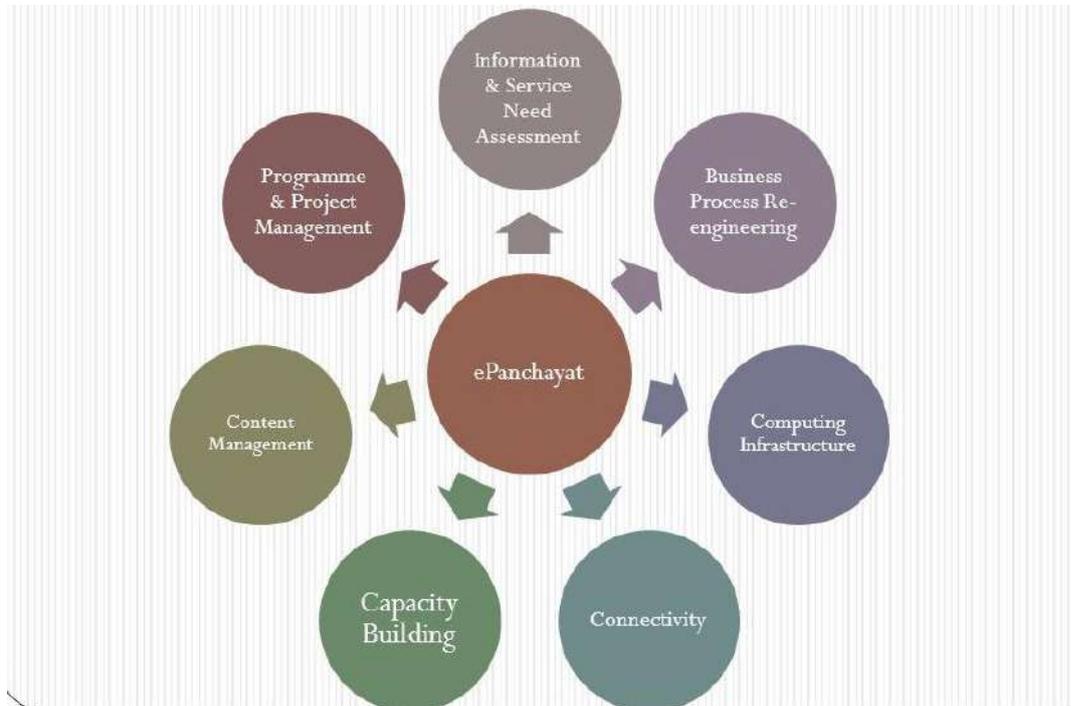
primary objectives of the e-Panchayat initiative. Initially, this interface may involve the dissemination of information related to government schemes, procedures, and application forms. At a more advanced stage, citizens may seek information regarding various laws and regulations governing Panchayat functioning. Subsequently, people may attempt to obtain details about the flow of funds and other administrative matters, eventually questioning decisions and their rationale. E-Panchayats can facilitate these processes by promoting information dissemination, transparency, and accountability, thereby strengthening the role of the P2G interface as an effective instrument of democratic decentralisation.

P2E (Panchayat to Employees): This interface covers aspects such as work guidelines, rules and regulations, salary structures, and training modules for Panchayat functionaries. Local government officials, including elected representatives, are expected to be familiar with the Panchayati Raj Act, the rules framed under it, and the various orders issued by different government agencies. ICT enables easier access to updated documents and information, thereby supporting more informed decision-making within Panchayati Raj Institutions.

E-Panchayat MMP

E-governance in Panchayats is intended to be achieved through the implementation of the e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project (MMP). Under the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP), introduced in 2006, the Government of India proposed the use of technology to significantly transform the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), making them more transparent, accountable, and efficient as decentralised self-governing institutions in the country. To achieve this objective, the e-Panchayat, or Electronic Panchayat Mission, was launched by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj in 2018 as one of the Mission Mode Projects. The project encompasses all major functions of Gram Panchayats, including planning, monitoring, implementation, budgeting, accounting, social audit, and the delivery of civic services such as the issuance of certificates and licences. Furthermore, as the government seeks to create a 'digitally inclusive society', it is essential that grassroots institutions involved in public welfare effectively utilise the technological tools available to them. Under the e-Panchayat mission, financial support is provided to the National Informatics Centre Services Inc. (NICSI) to ensure central-level assistance for the maintenance of e-Panchayat applications. During the financial year 2022–23, the expenditure allocated for the e-Panchayat mission amounted to ₹15 crore.

Figure 2: Components of e-Panchayat

Source: Ministry of Information Technology, Government of India.

Objectives of e-Panchayat

Under the Digital India Programme, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj is implementing the e-Panchayat MMP in all States and Union Territories. The primary objective of the e-Panchayat initiative is to strengthen e-governance in PRIs across the country and to improve transparency, accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness in governance and service delivery at the grassroots level. The project also seeks to promote greater citizen-centric functioning within these institutions. To achieve this objective, the e-Panchayat MMP focuses on automating the internal workflow processes of nearly 2.45 lakh Panchayats across India. This initiative is expected to benefit around 30 lakh elected representatives along with several lakh PRI functionaries involved in the administration of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Under the e-Panchayat Mission, the government intends to utilise ICT for the following purposes:

- Automation of the internal workflow processes and core functions of Panchayats.
- Enhancement of service delivery to citizens.

- Capacity building of Panchayat representatives and officials.
- Facilitation of social audit mechanisms.
- Promotion of transparency, accountability, efficiency, and compliance with the Right to Information (RTI) within Panchayats.
- Strengthening the governance of local self-government institutions by encouraging greater public participation in decision-making processes.

Measures of e-Panchayat

The Ministry ensures that the digital infrastructure and tools developed under the e-Panchayat MMP are accessible and user-friendly for all Panchayats, including those located in rural and remote areas, through several measures. These include:

- Development of low-bandwidth, mobile-responsive web applications to facilitate easier access.
- Capacity building of Panchayat officials under the RGSA programme through State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs) and other training institutions.

- Development of the Meri Panchayat mobile application to enhance transparency in Panchayat governance by making information related to planning, activities, expenditure, and progress of works publicly accessible.
- Coordination with the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) and State Governments to ensure internet connectivity through the BharatNet programme.

These efforts aim to promote inclusive and efficient digital governance at the grassroots level.

PES (Panchayat Enterprise Suite)

Under the e-Panchayat initiative, the Panchayat Enterprise Suite has been introduced. PES consists of twelve core common applications, which are illustrated in the figure below. However, in the present scenario, the system is functioning with ten core applications, while Audit Online and the Geographic Information System (GIS) are still under consideration for implementation.

Figure 3: Core Common Applications of PES
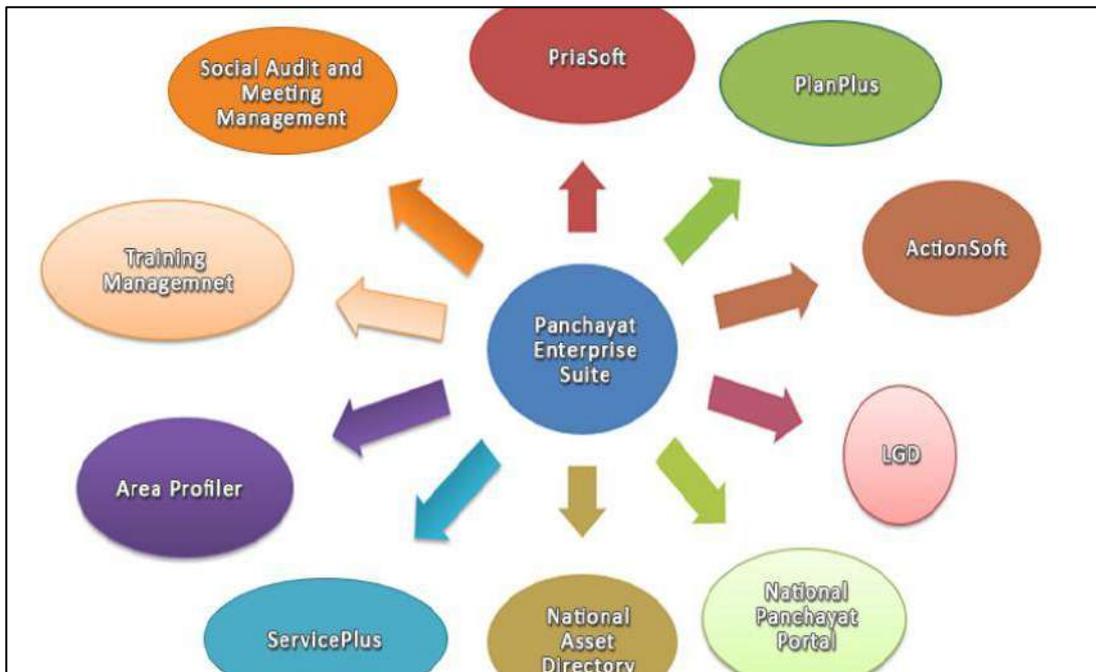
- **LGD (Local Government Directory):** This application provides comprehensive information on local self-government institutions along with a unique identification code. It also maps Panchayats to their respective Assembly and Parliamentary constituencies.

- **Area Profiler:** This module maintains detailed profiles of village Panchayats, including information related to demographics, geography, socio-economic conditions, natural resources, infrastructure, and details of elected representatives.

- **PlanPlus:** This application assists Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), Panchayats, and other line departments in preparing annual as well as perspective development plans.

- **PRIASoft:** This system maintains records of receipts and expenditures through voucher entries and automatically generates cash books for financial management.

- **ActionSoft:** This application facilitates the monitoring of financial and physical progress under various development programmes.

- **NAD (National Asset Directory):** This module maintains detailed information regarding assets available at the local level.

- **ServicePlus:** It is a metadata-based service delivery platform that enables the provision of various public

services across different states in India.

- **SAMM (Social Audit Management Module):** This application records detail of statutory meetings conducted at the Gram, Block, and Zila Panchayat levels and generates social audit reports.
- **Training Management:** This platform provides necessary materials and processes related to the training of Panchayat stakeholders.
- **NPP (National Panchayat Portal):** This portal provides a dynamic website for every Panchayat, enabling them to place relevant information in the public domain.
- **GIS (Geographic Information System):** This module is designed to present information through GIS-based spatial mapping layers.
- **Online Audit:** The primary objective of this application is to facilitate the conduct of online audits for government institutions.

E-Gramswaraj

Under the e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj introduced e-GramSwaraj, a simplified work-based accounting application designed to address various aspects of Panchayat administration and modernise their functioning. The previously existing applications that managed different Panchayat functions have been integrated into a single platform to simplify operations and improve efficiency. The e-GramSwaraj platform aims to enhance transparency in decentralised planning, progress reporting, and work-based accounting. It includes several modules related to Panchayat functioning, such as planning, budgeting, accounting, monitoring, and asset management. The accounting module provides Panchayats with digitised account books in which all details related to receipts and payments are systematically recorded. Furthermore, e-GramSwaraj is based on the concept of work-based accounting, where each planned activity under the Panchayat Development Plan can be tracked in terms of both physical and financial progress. This mechanism helps ensure sound financial management while also strengthening the credibility and accountability of Panchayats and their administrative processes.

Challenges in E-Panchayat Implementation

E-Panchayat implementation in India faces significant challenges. The application of ICT in PRIs must address several critical factors, such as regional disparities, availability of resources, software development, and the high costs involved, in order to effectively promote rural development and self-governance in the country. In this context, some of the major challenges associated with the effective implementation of e-Panchayats are discussed below:

- **Digital Infrastructure Limitations:** Many rural areas lack adequate digital infrastructure like reliable,

high-speed internet connectivity and consistent electricity, causing disruptions in service delivery and creating regional imbalances.

- **Human Resource Constraints:** There is a severe lack of skilled personnel to manage and maintain ICT systems, along with low digital literacy among panchayat members and rural citizens.

- **Resistance to Change:** The transition from traditional, manual, paper-based, and bureaucratic processes to digital, transparent systems often faces resistance from local staff.

- **Language and Content Barriers:** A major challenge is the lack of software and applications developed in local regional languages and dialects, making them difficult for local users to operate.

- **Financial and Technical Hurdles:** High upfront costs for hardware acquisition, networking, and ongoing technical support create a financial strain.

- **Maintenance and Support:** Inadequate technical maintenance support leads to inoperative computers and software issues in, sometimes, remote locations.

- **Lack of Awareness:** A significant portion of the rural population remains unaware of the available e-Panchayat services, resulting in low usage rates.

- **Data Security and Privacy:** Ensuring the security of sensitive citizen data in a decentralised, often under-secured, digital environment poses a risk.

These often result in slow adoption and operational inefficiencies.

Conclusion

In the process of national development, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have played a significant role as instruments of rural transformation. The adoption of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) initiatives promotes greater openness and transparency in administrative processes and strengthens PRIs as institutions of self-governance. ICT can improve the provision of basic infrastructure services, accelerate the approval and delivery of permits, and ensure timely and more relevant responses to information requests. Furthermore, ICT enables quick, comprehensive, and transparent impact assessments, which contribute to the effective implementation of development projects and plans. It also provides a digital platform for sharing diverse experiences and best practices related to Panchayats across the country. In this way, ICT plays an increasingly important role in assisting policymakers and administrators in efficiently managing the delivery of public goods and services at the local level. Consequently, ICT has emerged as an effective tool for bringing citizens closer to the government. The e-Panchayat system is a software platform

conceptualised, designed, and developed by the National Informatics Centre (NIC) as part of the broader e-governance initiative. It has been developed by considering the various information and knowledge management requirements of Gram Panchayats. In this sense, e-Panchayats have contributed to strengthening participatory democracy at the grassroots level. However, for effective functioning, e-Panchayat initiatives should follow an ethnocentric, need-based, and bottom-up approach. At the same time, they must overcome existing limitations in order to successfully achieve the constitutionally mandated objectives of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

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