



Cover Page



ROLE OF PANCHAYATI RAJ IN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The earth is facing alarming deterioration of its life supportive eco system and the very existence of man depends on how effectively this challenge is to be tackled. There is clear-cut evidence that atmospheric temperature is gradually increasing since the beginning of industrial revolution in the 1850's and since the mid of 19th century when rapid industrialization went on at a much larger scale, man became an active user of nature in many respects. Man's struggle towards a better life and a higher standard of living through higher consumption of natural resources i.e., land, water, air, flora and fauna etc. has resulted in increasing use of technology in daily life without considering the ill effects on the environment. The modern man does not protect his environment and is solely responsible for its pollution or degradation. The environment is seriously degraded due to industrialization and deforestation and there is imbalance and disharmony in our eco system. Some of the major forms of pollution of environment are:

- **Air pollution:** Air is getting polluted as 1.8 billion tons of carbon dioxide spew into air every year by burning of coal and movement of automobiles.
- **Water pollution:** water pollution too is producing health hazards. Millions of tons of untreated domestic and industrial sewage are thrown into the rivers, canals, tanks and seas thus polluting water.
- **Noise pollution:** Sound of auto mobile and industries have created noise pollution.
- **Soil pollution:** Soil pollution is another form of pollution. Excessive use of chemical fertilizer and pesticides is poisoning the ground water and soil. According to the report of World Health Organization (WHO) every year at least five lakhs of people suffer from pesticides poisoning all over the world.

The need of hour is to prepare suitable strategies for environmental management to save our earth. As the earth is changing at a threatening speed, so many initiatives are being taken by the world leaders for securing sustainable development and ensuring a future of prosperity and security to its citizens. The government at the centre is suggesting ways and means but people at the village level must realize the ways and means to their way of life to get better quality of life. Furthermore, it has been realized that unless all the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) namely, Gram Panchayats, the Panchayat Samiti and the Zilla Parishad are involved actively in delivery of basic services to the rural populations in the country, nothing substantial can be possible. Therefore, protection and preservation of the environment must go hand in hand with the basic minimum needs.

The 73rd Indian Constitutional Amendment Act making Panchayats at three levels 'Institution of self-government has also provided a list of subjects to be brought under the Panchayats. Among the 29 subjects mentioned in the 11th Schedule, land improvement, land consolidation, soil conservation water management, social forestry, minor forest produce non-conventional energy sources, sanitation and maintenance of assets, are subjects to environmental management.

After 50 years of independence there was a statutory vacuum at the local level for planning and implementing programmes which protect the life and property of the people and improve their quality of life. The idea was that whatever the people's needs were, they could be dealt with from the top, the relics of an imperial structure, through the departments and their officials. Now we know that this approach has never been sensitive to local necessities. If we accept Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as the defacto third tier of governance, all administrative, planning and implementation activities should converge at the district level from the Gram Sabhas, village Panchayats and Block Samitis. The constitution has made provisions for this in Article 243. Peoples' representatives taking decisions by the experts, is the ideal situation to protect the environment and ecological balance. Here are some measures in which Panchayati Raj plays a vital role for the protection and preservation of the environment, disaster risk reduction, weathering climate change etc.

Creation of Environmental awareness: Creation of environmental awareness is a very essential function of Panchayats as these bodies are responsible for the development and maintenance of sanitation and cleanliness and its management in a particular area under that panchayat. Now with the empowerment of the Panchayat bodies they can play a catalytic role in terms of raising the awareness at the grassroots level. Panchayats can be the appropriate institutions to create awareness in the local people because Panchayats and village organizations are the people who have direct contact with the inhabitant people, know the problems of the area, have the potential to pursue the villagers and they can make a confidence in the local people. They can also efficiently manage various critical problems of community life like, decision making and managing interpersonal conflicts etc. The Panchayats are the



Cover Page



appropriate institutes to deal with the environmental awareness because they can inculcate the sense of participation for saving the environment among the local people. The Panchayats can extend their organizational help in planning of various activities to save environment for degradation and to improve the environment conditions, like watershed management, joint forest management, plantation, bio-gas plants, bio-composting, non-conventional energy sources etc. Panchayats can form groups of individuals devoted to upgrade the environmental conditions in the area. They can also help in providing the resources to these activities which are provided to them for rural development. As the governing body of the village, Panchayats also can organize the environment awareness workshops in the area.

Afforestation and Ecological Development: The role of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is considerable in the field of afforestation and they will be benefited the most by these schemes. The afforestation and other ecological development activities will help the Panchayats to exploit their natural resources in a better way. The Panchayats can play a key role in implementing these activities as they are the most appropriate institutions who can create a feeling of participation among the local people. They can form the groups of local people who can help in the development, implementation and functioning of the programme by doing some activities like selecting the species of trees which should be planted in the area, then the land which should be used for afforestation and ecological development activities, planting trees, then saving the existing and newly planted trees by night patrolling, soil conservation, protecting the species present in the area etc.

Social Forestry: Forest is an important natural resource which performs regulatory function by regulating the climatic condition. It performs productive function by producing food, fuel, important medicines and timbers. It performs protective function by protecting landscape from soil erosion and floods. Besides, conserving them, Panchayats by the help of Ministry of Rural Areas can adopt the Joint Forest Management Programme and Social Forestry in their villages. Panchayats can create awareness among the local people to conserve and increase the forest cover and can initiate a feeling of participation among the local people to join hands to protect and increase the forest cover of their area. Panchayats are the best suitable groups to initiate Joint Forest Management Programmes because they are the people who know how much important forests are for a rural economy. Forests are the basic natural resource available to them and with the help of local people Panchayats can increase the forest cover and can exploit this natural resource in a healthy way. Panchayats can also help by using their organizational skills by planning and organizing community groups which can help in the integrated forest management through performing activities like shift wise night patrolling of their forest area for its protection; adopting soil conservation practices like terrace farming, mulching, crop rotation, plantation of wind breaks; adopting proper timber cutting practice and so on.

Dredging and Cleaning of water bodies: Dredging and cleaning of water bodies is as much essential as resource development of an area. The role of Panchayats is crucial in this field as it has a responsibility to manage the natural resources of its area and therefore, they are the suitable authorities to perform this job. Dredging and cleaning of water bodies is necessary because the villagers use water from these water bodies either for drinking purposes, for irrigation or for feeding their animals. The water used for drinking purposes is not treated at all as villagers are illiterate and do not know the significance of treating the drinking water. This could result in spreading of various water borne diseases and could even cause epidemics and Panchayats would be most affected by these problems. Panchayat can form group of individuals to carry out time to time dredging and cleaning of water resources of the area. Time to time inspection of the water bodies should be done by the Panchayats to check the working of the groups. Panchayats can also help by using the funds allocated by the govt. for rural development in this field so that clean drinking water can be made available to the rural people where municipal water supply is not available. The Panchayat should take initiatives to create awareness among the villagers about the safe drinking water and the importance of treating water before drinking. Cleaning of water bodies will not only solve the environmental and health problems of the area but also give an aesthetic appeal to the area.

Waste Water Collection and Disposal: Waste water disposal is becoming a major problem for Panchayats as eroded and ill-managed drain and sewer courses may pollute the sub surface water sources also. Though, the Panchayat Acts have provisions for maintenance of an efficient drainage system but in reality, nothing much is being done in these areas. In some areas either there is no drainage system or either choked or inefficient systems exist. Public drains and sewer systems continue to get jeopardized because of ignorance of village Panchayats and low priority of these tasks. Panchayats can design a small sewerage system in their villages for the betterment of the sanitary conditions of the area. Panchayats can also work for the proper disposal of the waste water by constructing soak pits and small treatment plants etc.

Creating community-based Bio Gas Plant: Bio gas is generated from anaerobic digestion of Jet waste, farm slurry, night soil and certain industrial effluent streams. Bio gas is an important solution to the present energy crisis especially in rural areas. This is an environmentally clean technology which can replace kerosene oil used in the villages mainly for lighting and partially for cooking. It



Cover Page



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is estimated that 150,000 plants of bio-gas will save 600,000 tons of wood equivalent energy every year. Panchayats can be benefited a lot from this innovative technology without much technical expertise. The bio gas offers a cheap and efficient means of cooking fuel. It can also benefit in solid waste management of the panchayats by using organic wastes, night soil cow dung etc. thus helping in its basic function of sanitation and hygiene maintenance. The compost produced from these plants can serve as an excellent bio-fertilizer and is economically viable option for the village people.

Use of Bio Composting Technique: Development of Agricultural sector and panchayat development are complementary to each other, therefore, to realize panchayats full-fledged growth agricultural sector is necessary to be developed. But the technique used for exploiting the natural resources for increasing the productivity is making the soils infertile and the use of pesticides is directly affecting the human health. Organic farming is the key for solving these problems. It is the organic farming only which can help the soil to regain its fertility. Bio Composting is a process in organic farming in which all type of organic wastes is transformed into the manure by different processes. Panchayats can play a vital role in creating awareness and implementing the bio-composting techniques in the villages and to the farmers also. Panchayats can help in providing funds to the farmers who will adopt this technique. This technique will help the farmers to save the cost of the fertilizers and manure and there is not much technical expertise needed. Bio composting will help the Panchayats by saving the cost of treatment of organic waste which give an aesthetic appearance to the area. Bio composting can be done in centralized basis in the village also which will be handled by the Panchayats and will help Panchayats to earn revenues and also help in development of village.

Fuel and Fodder Development: Forest are the main source of fuel and fodder to some backward villages in India and they have no other solution to it. But in these areas' forests are dying at rapid speed due to man handling of natural resources. As this is one of the functions of the Panchayats to manage and solve the problems related to fuel and fodder. Therefore, the initiatives are now taken by the Panchayats of the areas to manage the forests, these are called 'Van Panchayats' councils made up of five elected people who set rules for forest use. Most villages have allocation rules that limit the time in which villagers can harvest fodder, usually 2-12 weeks also. They ensure that only dried and fallen branches of the trees should be taken for use. In areas where technologies are available in the similar field, Panchayats can also help the local people to avail those technologies. They can create awareness among the local people about the importance of the new technologies like bio-gas and LPG etc. which are very efficient fuels than kerosene and fuel wood. Panchayats can also help local people in better utilization of the resources available through the use of technology like improved Chulha, solar cooker etc. This would not only help the local people but it will also save the environment from degradation as these techniques are not only pollution free and eco-friendly but also reduce the health problems in the area. Panchayat can also help in developing new techniques of fodder supply which can reduce the problem of over grazing in the forests and fields.

Conclusion

'Save Earth' is the cry of the present day. Global warming, melting of glaciers, rising of sea level, dramatical change of climate etc. all these lead to affect many species of both flora and fauna. All the nations have come together on a common forum to devise means to cope with this phenomenon, which threatens to play havoc with the lives of the people across the globe. So this is the need of hour to think and act accordingly from the grassroots democracy to the top levels for a green environment and need to preserve our few surviving resources.

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