



DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION AND GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE: EVALUATING THE VILLAGE SECRETARIAT SYSTEM IN ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA

Racheti Anusha

Central University of Rajasthan, Rajasthan

Abstract

Democratic Decentralization promotes planning by the locals, allowing institutions to respond to the needs and priorities of the people at the village level. This research examines the Village Secretariat System in Andhra Pradesh, India, which is regarded as an exemplary case of democratic decentralization. Drawing on government reports, policy documents, academic literature, and independent evaluation studies, the study assesses the system's strengths, gaps, and challenges. Findings highlight strengths, including ease of access to services, efficient welfare delivery, effective grievance management, and active citizen participation. However, gaps remain, including insufficient training, limited digital services in rural regions, poor intra-departmental collaboration, and low public awareness. Challenges such as staff overload, delayed grievance redressal, and political interference significantly weaken efficiency and accountability. Addressing these requires targeted capacity building, advanced digital infrastructure, streamlined grievance mechanisms, stronger interdepartmental coordination, and sustained community engagement.

Keywords: Democratic Decentralization, Grassroots Governance, Village Secretariat System, Citizen Participation, Service Delivery.

Introduction:

Decentralization has become the dominant paradigm in Asia since the 1990s (Ghuman & Ranjith, 2013). Beginning as a broad movement in the 1960s, it had seized the imagination of policy reforms around the world by the 1970s and never really looked back (Bardhan & Mukerjee, 2006; Faguet, 2004; Rondinelli, 1981; Rondinelli et al., 1983; Ter-Menassian, 1997). Decentralization devolves decision-making authority from higher to lower levels of government; it's the shift towards Decentralization. Decentralization is attributed to the failure of centralized planning to meet people's basic needs, alleviate poverty, address regional disparities, and utilize scarce resources efficiently (Johnson, 2003). The fundamental motive of Decentralization is to enhance the delivery of public services, even though the driving forces behind it differ from nation to nation (Shah & Thompson, 2004). According to empirical data, Decentralization has mixed consequences on the provision of public services (Ahmad, Devarajan, Khemani, & Shah, 2005). In certain instances, Decentralization has led to better service delivery, especially in India (Gupta & Gumber, 1999; Mehrotra, 2006; Sjahrir & Kiskatos, 2011; Heller, Harilal, & Chaudhuri, 2007; Mahal, Srivastav, & Sonan, 2000). During the latter half of the 1990s, the focus shifted, leading to the adoption of the term 'governance,' which refers to exercising political power in managing a nation's affairs. Through decentralized decision-making, development becomes more participatory, responsive, and effective in improving the quality of life in rural areas. The most accepted definition of Decentralization is the process that transfers political, administrative, and fiscal responsibilities from the centre to local organizations (Rondinelli, Nellis, and Cheema, 1984). Rondinelli and Cheema have identified four main types of Decentralization based on the experiences of developing countries: deconcentration, delegation, devolution, and privatization (Rondinelli & Cheema, 1984). In this context, Decentralization and devolution are critical institutional reforms that foster efficient, accountable, and transparent governance (Smith, 2007). Pradhan Bardhan thinks that the main reason behind the widespread Decentralization is the loss of legitimacy of the central state and the belief that it can bring a range of benefits directly to the local people. He also argued that the technological changes have made the services closer to the local rural population (Bardhan, 2002). Decentralization is widely regarded as an effective governance tool that enhances public service delivery by enabling local governments to cater to the needs of their communities (World Bank, 2014). The main motive is to bring governance closer to citizens, fostering a direct relationship between the administration and the public (Praveen Kumar & Parvati, 2023).

Although Decentralization has been extensively examined within India's governance discourse, there is a notable lack of focused research on the Village Secretariat System of Andhra Pradesh, a recent and distinctive institutional innovation



aimed at transforming service delivery and strengthening grassroots governance. Existing literature largely overlooks the system's role in enhancing administrative efficiency, promoting digital access to services, and fostering participatory governance. This study seeks to address this gap by empirically evaluating the functioning, outcomes, and challenges of Village Secretariats in delivering public services and deepening democratic Decentralization. Specifically, the research aims to assess the extent to which the system embodies core principles of Decentralization, such as devolution of authority, accountability, inclusivity, and responsiveness. It also explores the integration of digital tools within this framework and their impact on transparency and citizen engagement. Drawing on secondary data from government reports, policy documents, and academic studies, and through primary data collected through the interviews with the villagers, the study generates evidence-based insights into the successes and shortcomings of the system. Given the scarcity of academic evaluations despite the system's ambitious policy of delivering over 540 essential services at the village level, this research is highly relevant to public administration and rural development. Ultimately, the study contributes to the broader discourse on local governance reforms in India and offers practical implications for strengthening decentralized service delivery models across states.

Theoretical Framework

In India, transferring functions to constitutionally created local governments is regarded as Decentralization (Rajashekar, 2022). In Indian discourse, most hear that Decentralization means the transfer of three Fs – functions, functionaries, and finances from the central government to elected governments at the district, sub-district, and village levels. People's participation in decision-making should be a necessary component of Decentralisation for it to be really democratic. The theoretical premise is that local government, which is located close to citizens and thus has knowledge of their situation, will be in a better position to assess citizens' needs and preferences, prioritise them, formulate decentralised plans that reflect citizens' needs and preferences, and effectively implement them for the development of a locality and its people (Oates, 1972). Participation in village panchayats, village assemblies, and electoral processes enables low-income residents to hold the local government accountable and contribute to improving and delivering effective service (Praveen Kumar & Parvati, 2023). If this does not happen, people will be excluded from the process of development, co-option, and benefit capture through decentralised governance (Hirschman, 1970; Lakha, Rajasekhar, and Manjula, 2015; Rajasekhar, Devendra Babu, and Manjula, 2018). Though the terms "decentralisation" are sometimes used interchangeably, there are significant differences between them. Deconcentration is the first type of decentralisation, which can take two extreme forms (Rondinelli, 1981). At one extreme, it is simply a shift of the responsibility from the central government to personnel situated in outside offices, who may not be granted the authority to select how these responsibilities should be done. At the other extreme, a field administration structure is established in which staff, while still under the ministry's supervision and control, make regular decisions and adjust the implementation of central instructions to local conditions, subject to guidelines. The second type of decentralisation is delegation, which entails transferring or establishing wide authority to plan and implement specific operations to an institution that is technically and administratively competent to carry them out (Rondinelli, 1981). Organisations to which tasks are delegated are indirectly controlled by the central government, although the latter retains ultimate authority for the functions. The third and most drastic form of decentralisation is devolution, which means strengthening or creating an independent local government.

The characteristics of devolution are that a local government (a) will have autonomy and be outside the direct control of the central government; (b) will have clear or legal jurisdiction where it will undertake functions; (c) will be given powers to raise resources to undertake functions; (d) will be developed as an institution that, in the perception of local citizens, will deliver services to satisfy needs and on which they have an influence; and (e) will have reciprocal obligations to the higher level government and will be accountable to its local citizens. It should be underlined that the central (or higher levels of government) will have supervisory and budgetary authority, while the local government will act in accordance with national development strategies and policies.

Rondinelli, Nellis, and Cheema (1983) offer another form: privatisation. According to them, privatisation occurs when the central government relinquishes responsibility for certain functions and transfers them to, among other things, voluntary



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organisations, cooperatives, religious organisations, parallel organisations, and interest groups (farmers' cooperatives, credit associations, mutual aid societies, village development organisations, women and youth clubs), or when private enterprises perform these functions. The transferred tasks will include the production of commodities and the provision of services (which were previously handled by the central government or its agencies), as well as service supervision.

These forms can alternatively be viewed as a hierarchy of decentralisation sorts, from least to most desired. Deconcentration is considered the least acceptable kind. At the same time, devolution is considered as firmly and legally establishing local government on the ground, as was done in India through the 73rd and 74th CAAs with the establishment of Panchayat Raj and municipalities. Privatisation, as a form of decentralisation, is widely disliked throughout India. However, privatisation trends can be seen in the transfer of functions to parallel institutions, voluntary agencies, farmer-producer organisations, and so on. According to Falletti (2005), one type complements the other; implementing the weakest form will result in a demand for stronger forms of decentralisation.

Other terms commonly used in the literature include political, administrative, and fiscal decentralisation. Political decentralisation refers to the extent to which the central government delegates political governance functions to the local governments. Political decentralisation is measured using variables such as representation through elections, articulation and representation of interests, involvement, and contestation. Administrative decentralisation refers to the degree to which local governments have autonomy over administrative staff from the central government. This is judged in terms of the local government's ability to attract and discipline employees. Fiscal decentralisation, defined as the extent to which the central government has delegated financial functions to the local government, is measured in terms of revenue mobilisation and expenditure autonomy (Schneider, 2003).

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative, secondary-source-based research design to examine the implementation and effectiveness of the Village Secretariat System in Andhra Pradesh, utilizing a descriptive and analytical approach to explore its contribution to democratic decentralization and grassroots public service delivery. Data were sourced from government publications, administrative reports, policy documents, evaluation reports issued by the Department of Village and Ward Secretariats, and the Sachivalayam portal, alongside independent assessments from bodies such as NITI Aayog, the World Bank, and the Centre for Policy Research, as well as peer-reviewed journal articles, newspaper reports, and think-tank publications. Sources were identified through a structured search of government and institutional repositories and academic databases, covering material published between 2019 (the year the Village Secretariat System was introduced) and 2024. Sources were selected for inclusion where they provided empirical evidence, evaluative findings, or documented outcomes specific to the Village Secretariat System's functioning, rather than general commentary on decentralization. The collected material underwent qualitative content analysis to identify core themes, including service accessibility, citizen participation, administrative efficiency, digital governance, and implementation challenges.

Discussions

Decentralization and Public Service Delivery in Andhra Pradesh

India has implemented several reforms since its independence to strengthen institutional frameworks, encourage more public participation in government, and decentralize authority. Decentralization is a well-known initiative for strengthening local development, public service delivery, and governance. It entails giving community-based groups or lower governmental levels administrative, financial, and political authority so they may successfully handle local demands (World Bank, 2000). The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution, which gave Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and urban local authorities more authority, formalized Decentralization throughout the country. Andhra Pradesh is recognized as a model state for economic reforms and good governance. It was also among the first two states in India to implement the Panchayati Raj system, following the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee. In 1959, a structured three-tier system comprising Village Panchayats, Panchayat Samithis, and Zilla Parishads was introduced (Ramulu & Ravindra, 2011). The



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state government enacted the Andhra Pradesh Panchayat Samithi and Zilla Parishad Act of 1959, followed by the Andhra Pradesh Gram Panchayats Act of 1964.

Andhra Pradesh, located in southeastern India, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, economic diversity, and political significance. The state was initially formed on October 1, 1953, becoming the first Indian state to be created on a linguistic basis, with Kurnool as its initial capital. This formation resulted from the persistent demand for a separate Telugu-speaking state, demanding the separation from the Madras Presidency (Rao & Reddy, 2016). Later, in 1956, the State Reorganization Act merged Andhra with the Telangana region from the former Hyderabad State, thus forming a unified Andhra Pradesh state with Hyderabad as its capital (Government of India, 1956). Due to economic and low development distress from the people of the Telangana region, this unity did not last long, and they demanded Telangana as a separate state. The socio-political tensions and demands for regional autonomy led to the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh on June 2, 2014, resulting in the formation of Telangana as a separate state, while Amaravati was designated as the de facto capital of the residual Andhra Pradesh (Government of India, 2014). This division was driven by issues of governance, resource allocation, and cultural identity, profoundly impacting the political landscape of southern India.

On January 26, 2022, the Government of Andhra Pradesh proposed the creation of 13 new districts through a draft notification under the Andhra Pradesh Districts (Formation) Act, 1974, Section 3(5). After close observation, considering public objections and suggestions, the final notification was issued on April 3, 2022, and the new districts took effect on April 4, 2022. The reorganization increased the total number of districts from 13 to 26, subdividing the state into three distinct cultural regions: North Andhra, Coastal Andhra, and Rayalaseema.

The Village Secretariat System represents a significant governance reform to ensure the last-mile delivery of public services, increase administrative efficiency, and enhance transparency in rural areas. Village Secretariats function as one-stop centres, directly providing welfare scheme enrolment, grievance redressal, and certifications to citizens, eliminating the need to travel to distant district offices. However, the system tried its best to reach its goal, facing challenges like bureaucratic inefficiency, limited accessibility, and inequitable service distribution in rural communities (Government of Andhra Pradesh & Raj, 2019). Andhra Pradesh, the forerunner of governance reforms, has introduced the Village Secretariat System, marking a significant milestone in the Decentralization of governance and offering an interesting case study for understanding grassroots governance in India (Andhra Pradesh Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2022). By analysing the system's achievements and limitations, this research contributes to the discourse on Decentralization, rural development, and enhancing public service delivery in emerging economies (World Bank, 2000; Shah & Shah, 2006).

Village Secretariat System: An Overview

The Government of Andhra Pradesh, through the Village Secretariat System, has brought the services closer to the doorsteps of the people by integrating Governance tools and ensuring the participation of the local people according to their needs while making decisions by prioritizing citizen-centric administration (Reddy, 2021). This system laid the foundations for more responsive, transparent, and inclusive service delivery by employing village volunteers and leveraging digital platforms. Though the system has tried to deliver services to the maximum level, it still faces challenges, such as bureaucratic inefficiency, capacity building, resource constraints, uneven implementation across the region, and coordination issues between multiple administrative departments. It examines the challenges faced during implementation and assesses the system's effectiveness on governance outcomes, such as service accessibility, transparency, and citizen empowerment. It also discusses the model's applicability to various situations and offers suggestions for improving it.

Objectives of the Village Secretariat System

The Village Secretariat System in Andhra Pradesh was introduced with several key objectives aimed at enhancing governance, improving service delivery, and addressing the needs of the local population. Some of the primary objectives include:



Decentralized Service Delivery: Establish a decentralized model to provide public services and address grievances at the grassroots level, ensuring that government services are easily accessible to the rural population.

One-Stop Solution: Create a comprehensive and integrated one-stop solution for citizens to access various public services, eliminating the need for multiple visits to different departments. **Inclusive Approach:** Bridge the gap in reaching the most vulnerable and marginalized communities by ensuring that government benefits and services reach those most in need.

Efficient Resource Allocation: Optimize the allocation of resources by deploying functionaries based on each village's specific needs, thereby increasing service delivery efficiency.

Digital Transformation: Digitize the functioning of the secretariat system to improve overall governance, streamline processes, and accelerate the delivery of services such as property tax payments, welfare scheme registrations, and grievance redressal.

Community Engagement: Engage local communities actively by recruiting village volunteers who can act as intermediaries, raising awareness about government schemes, identifying household needs, and facilitating the enrolment of households in various programs.

Empowerment of Local Governance: Strengthen the capacity of local governments by ensuring the effective transfer of funds and powers, empowering them to handle a broader range of subjects in both rural and urban areas.

Monitoring and Accountability: Implement a universal dashboard to monitor the status of public services, ensuring transparency, accountability, and efficient tracking of the progress of various initiatives.

Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Introduce 'Navaratnalu,' a set of nine welfare schemes aligned with the SDGs, demonstrating a commitment to sustainable development and improving the overall living standards of the people of Andhra Pradesh.

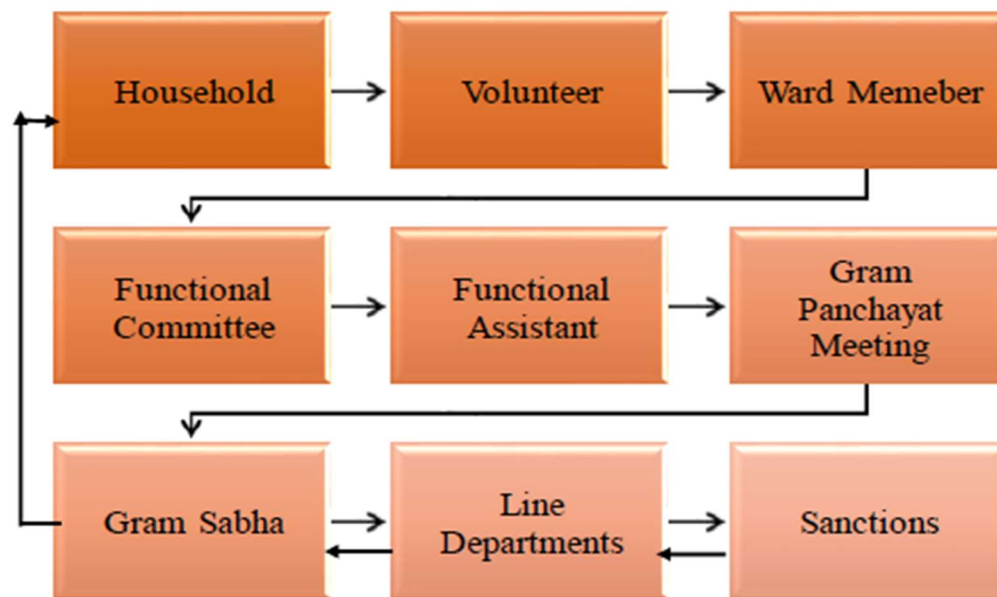
Structure and Functioning of the Village Secretariat System

The state government of Andhra Pradesh has created a separate Grama Sachivalayams and Ward Sachivalayams (GSWS) department for monitoring and looking after the functioning to deliver services to the people's doorsteps in the rural and urban areas (GSWS Act) (Government of Andhra Pradesh, 2023). It constitutes the Special Chief Secretary/ Principal Secretary at the state level as the head of the department; for overseeing the functioning of the department, he will be assisted by a commissioner/ Director who will be responsible for the day-to-day functioning of the department through the district administration. He reviews the performance of Grama/ Ward Sachivalayams periodically. He takes necessary steps to streamline the functioning of sachivalayams, including the recommendations for disciplinary proceedings against the functionaries whenever appropriate. He will be assisted by the Director of AP State Institute of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj (APSIRDPR); the Director is responsible for the day-to-day working of the APSIRDPR and works through Regional Extension Training Centres and also takes care of training and review of periodical training of the functionaries and the staff of the GSWS department and the Director is assisted by an additional staff like Service Providers and Consultants on a contractual basis or deputation and at the local grassroots level there are 14 village secretariat functionaries these include the Panchayat Secretary, Village Revenue Officer (VRO), Village Surveyor, Engineering Assistant, Welfare and Education Assistant, Energy Assistant, Digital Assistant, Agriculture Assistant, Horticulture Assistant, Animal Husbandry Assistant, Fisheries Assistant, Mahila Police (Women Protection Secretary), and Health Assistant. Each functionary specifically addresses the village's various administrative, developmental, and welfare needs, strengthening decentralized governance and improving public service access from line departments like Panchayat Raj, Education, Revenue, Health, Police, etc. In addition to these village-level functionaries, there were village volunteers who brought services closer to the doorsteps of citizens in the village (Praveen Kumar & Parvati, 2023).



The village secretariat system in Andhra Pradesh is well known as Grama Sachivalayam in villages and Ward Sachivalayam in urban areas. In Andhra Pradesh, the Village Secretariat system was introduced as part of administrative reforms aimed at Decentralization and effective governance at the grassroots levels. The new system is modelled on the lines of Gandhiji's Grama Swarajya, which aims to decentralize administration and provide services at the doorsteps of the citizens. Eleven thousand one hundred fifty-eight village secretariats and 3,786 ward secretariats have been established statewide. (Abraham, 2023) A village secretariat is established for every 2,000 residents. The State Government claims to provide 540 services at the doorsteps of people in all villages across the state through Village Secretariats, which would act as a bridge between the government and the people. As shown in the Figure 1 below, the process begins with households approaching local volunteers, who then bring their matters to the ward member. These concerns are reviewed by the functional committee, which works alongside a functional assistant and is further discussed in the Gram Panchayat meeting. The issues and proposals move to the Gram Sabha, which guides the line departments responsible for implementation. After departmental review, necessary sanctions are granted, and information or benefits flow back from the line departments, completing the cycle as they reach households again, ensuring continuous grassroots governance and service delivery.

Figure 1: Process Flowchart of Village Secretariat System in Andhra Pradesh.



Source: Village Secretariat Management & Regulations Manual (Government of Andhra Pradesh, 2019).

These secretariats function as multi-functional service delivery points. Village Secretariats deliver a range of government services directly to the citizens. This includes revenue-related services, Panchayat Raj, rural development, agriculture, education, health, and various welfare programs, especially Navarathnalu, the nine welfare schemes of the Jagan Government 1. YSR Raythu Bharosa 2. Arogya Sri 3. Pensions 4. Housing 5. Fees Reimbursement 6. Alcohol-free Andhra Pradesh 7. Jala Yagnam 8. Amma Vadi 9. YSR Aasara-Cheyutha. The services provided by Village Secretariats cover a broad spectrum, including issuing certificates (income certificate, residence certificate, caste certificate), facilitating social welfare schemes, handling land-related matters, and more.



Results and Analysis

Improvement in Service Delivery

The Village Secretariat System has significantly improved the accessibility and efficiency of government services in rural Andhra Pradesh. With over 540 services delivered at the village level, citizens now benefit from easier access to essential public services, such as pension distribution, ration supply, health services, and education-related benefits. This localized delivery mechanism has minimized the need for villagers to travel to mandal or district headquarters, thus saving time and reducing costs (Amarnath & Menon, 2019).

. The presence of functionaries such as the Digital Assistant, Health Assistant, and Welfare and Education Assistant has played a pivotal role in making these services more accessible.

However, the study also found inconsistencies in service quality and delivery timelines. Some villagers reported delays, unresponsiveness, and incomplete knowledge among functionaries, which affected the system's credibility. Additionally, there was uneven dissemination of information regarding available services, leaving many eligible citizens unaware of their entitlements.

More Efficient Welfare Delivery

The integration of the Village Secretariat with welfare schemes has led to substantial improvements in the targeting, efficiency, and transparency of social protection programs. The secretariat staff, in coordination with Village/Ward Volunteers, are tasked with door-to-door service delivery, enabling real-time identification of beneficiaries and ensuring that no eligible household is left out (Andhra Pradesh Planning Department, 2021).

Schemes like Amma Vodi (financial support for children's education), YSR Pension Kanuka, and Rythu Bharosa have been disbursed more effectively through this grassroots infrastructure. Reports from NITI Aayog and the Accountability Initiative show that the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) ecosystem has strengthened through this system, reducing leakages and middlemen in the delivery chain (Abraham, 2023). Additionally, the database generated at the village level supports data-driven governance, allowing the government to map development indicators and respond with localized interventions. The World Bank (2021) observed that such models enhance fiscal decentralization by allowing frontline workers to operate with greater autonomy and accountability, a core tenet of democratic governance.

Enhanced Grievance Redressal Mechanisms

One of the standout features of the Village Secretariat model is its localized grievance redressal mechanism. Citizens can file complaints and track the resolution of their grievances at the secretariat itself, eliminating the often intimidating and inaccessible process of navigating district-level bureaucracy. Digital dashboards and MIS tools help in monitoring grievance redressal timelines and officer responsiveness.

The *Spandana* portal, integrated with the Village Secretariat system, ensures that complaints submitted are routed to the appropriate authority and resolved within a stipulated timeframe. According to government data, over 5.2 million grievances were received and resolved within the first year of implementation, with a high satisfaction rate (Government of Andhra Pradesh, 2021). This system promotes transparency and fosters trust between the state and its citizens, an essential pillar of grassroots democracy. By making grievance redressal more participatory and responsive, it strengthens the accountability loop in decentralized governance.

Increased Citizen Engagement

The Village Secretariat system has revitalized citizen participation in governance, a key objective of democratic decentralization. Through regular interface with volunteers and local officials, citizens now have direct channels to voice



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their needs, feedback, and complaints. The village-level functionaries also facilitate social audits and community meetings, thereby institutionalizing participatory governance (Praveen Kumar & Parvati, 2023).

The Gram Sabha, traditionally underutilized in many panchayats, has been reactivated in many villages under this system. Functionaries are mandated to provide service delivery reports during these meetings, enhancing transparency and inviting public scrutiny. Civil society organizations such as PRIA and Azim Premji University have noted that this model enables a bottom-up feedback loop where policy adaptations are made based on grassroots realities (Gowda & Shashikumara, 2024).

Moreover, digital literacy and community awareness have improved due to consistent interactions between volunteers and households. Volunteers serve as both service agents and democratic facilitators, strengthening the political consciousness and agency of rural citizens, especially women and marginalized groups.

Transparency and Accountability Issues

Despite the system's aim of transparency, the study found limited awareness among villagers regarding grievance redressal mechanisms and monitoring processes. Although biometric attendance and online portals are in use, many citizens are unaware of how to lodge complaints or track the status of their applications. Additionally, some secretariats had allegations of corruption and favouritism, primarily where oversight was weak (Abraham, 2023).

The lack of visible performance metrics and citizen feedback channels in many villages diminishes the accountability of functionaries. Moreover, social audits and community monitoring, integral to decentralized governance, are not conducted regularly or inclusively.

Interdepartmental Coordination Challenges

Each village secretariat hosts multiple department representatives. While this structure is intended to encourage integrated service delivery, the study reveals that departments often operate in isolation, with poor coordination and communication. This has resulted in delays in multi-sectoral service provision, such as combining health, nutrition, and sanitation efforts for maternal welfare. Moreover, functionaries lack joint planning platforms, and interdepartmental conflicts occasionally hinder service implementation. This siloed approach negates the intended benefits of a holistic rural governance model (Amarnath & Menon, 2019).

Weak Linkages with Local Governance Institutions

The Village Secretariat operates in parallel to the constitutionally mandated Gram Panchayat institutions. While both aim to serve rural populations, the study found that there is often confusion regarding administrative hierarchies and responsibilities. This overlap has created tensions between elected representatives and appointed secretariat staff. In several instances, Panchayat members feel excluded from planning and decision-making processes, undermining the spirit of democratic Decentralization. The lack of clarity also affects citizens' ability to hold either body accountable for local service delivery failures.

Recommendations

1. Capacity-Building Initiatives for Functionaries

One of the most pressing needs for the Village Secretariat system is continuous and targeted capacity-building for its functionaries, including Village Secretariat staff. These actors are the first point of contact for citizens accessing public services and play a pivotal role in implementing welfare schemes, resolving grievances, and facilitating democratic participation. However, multiple studies, including evaluations by the Centre for Policy Research (CPR, 2021), have indicated skill gaps in administrative procedures, use of digital platforms, grievance resolution, and community outreach.



A comprehensive training framework should be institutionalized, focusing on functional specialization, digital literacy, rights-based service delivery, citizen engagement, and accountability mechanisms. Regular refresher courses and exposure visits can enhance on-the-ground decision-making and problem-solving capabilities. Moreover, integrating civic education into training modules will help align the work of secretariat staff with the broader goals of participatory and accountable governance (Chandrashekhar & Kumar, 2021). Collaborations with institutions like the State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD), National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR), and reputed NGOs can ensure that capacity-building is context-sensitive and impact-oriented.

2. Improving Digital Infrastructure and Connectivity

The success of the Village Secretariat system is intricately linked to the availability of robust digital infrastructure. Many services, ranging from certificate issuance to welfare scheme tracking, are digitized and require seamless access to online platforms. Yet, in several rural and remote regions of Andhra Pradesh, digital connectivity remains weak, inconsistent, or absent. The World Bank (2021) and the Economic Survey of Andhra Pradesh (2022) have highlighted digital exclusion as a significant barrier to efficient service delivery and real-time governance.

To address this, the state must prioritize last-mile digital infrastructure, including broadband connectivity, uninterrupted power supply, and upgraded computing equipment for each secretariat. Leveraging central schemes like BharatNet can ensure high-speed internet access in all villages. Moreover, the development of user-friendly service delivery applications and grievance portals, optimized for regional languages and local contexts, will improve citizen interaction and reduce dependency on intermediaries. Investments in digital infrastructure are not only technical upgrades but also instruments for promoting transparency, accountability, and citizen empowerment, key tenets of democratic decentralization (OECD, 2021).

3. Strengthening Grievance Redressal Mechanisms

Effective grievance redressal is the bedrock of accountable governance. While platforms like *Spandana* have made strides in digitizing complaint processes, ground-level evidence shows persistent gaps in resolution timelines, feedback loops, and accessibility for marginalized groups (Abraham, 2023). Many citizens, especially women, the elderly, and Dalit households, continue to face hurdles in navigating the grievance system or receiving timely redress.

To improve this, grievance mechanisms should be decentralized further and made more responsive through the integration of technology, community monitoring, and legal mandates for time-bound action. Village Secretariats must have dedicated grievance desks with trained personnel, mobile grievance camps for remote habitations, and localized dashboards to track complaints transparently. Social audits and community grievance hearings (Jan Sunwai) should be institutionalized at regular intervals to ensure inclusivity and strengthen public trust. Evidence suggests that when grievance systems are localized and publicly accountable, they not only resolve complaints faster but also increase citizen satisfaction and civic participation.

4. Enhancing Interdepartmental Coordination and Role Clarity

A well-functioning Village Secretariat system requires seamless interdepartmental coordination across sectors such as revenue, health, agriculture, education, and social welfare. However, current operations often suffer from fragmentation, overlapping mandates, and bureaucratic silos. This hampers service delivery, causes duplication of efforts, and leads to confusion among frontline workers and beneficiaries alike.

It is essential to streamline interdepartmental coordination through clearly defined standard operating procedures (SOPs), shared data platforms, and joint review meetings at the mandal and district levels. Role delineation among various functionaries must be unambiguous to avoid administrative conflicts and inefficiencies. Introducing a unified command structure with accountability lines can help synchronize objectives and improve coordination.



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Moreover, functionaries should be empowered with decision-making authority within their domains to reduce unnecessary upward referrals and promote faster problem resolution. This will also reinforce the principle of subsidiarity, a cornerstone of decentralized governance, whereby decisions are taken as close to the citizen as possible.

5. Promoting Inclusive and Continuous Community Engagement

Democratic decentralization is incomplete without active and inclusive community engagement. While the Village Secretariat system has increased state presence in rural areas, more needs to be done to cultivate participatory governance. Evidence from field reports and scholarly studies shows that Gram Sabhas remain underutilized in many regions, and community involvement in planning, monitoring, and social auditing is sporadic. To address this, functionaries should be mandated to conduct regular Gram Sabha meetings with detailed agendas, social audit presentations, and feedback sessions. Civic awareness campaigns must be launched to educate citizens on their rights, entitlements, and the roles of various secretariat staff. Community-based organizations (CBOs), women's self-help groups (SHGs) are to act as participatory watchdogs and catalysts for grassroots planning. Inclusive participation, especially of women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other marginalized communities, should be incentivized through affirmative outreach strategies and capacity-building (Reddy, 2022).

Conclusion

Andhra Pradesh's Village Secretariat System is a significant step towards democratic decentralisation and grassroots governance. Introduced in 2019 as part of a larger administrative reform, the system has greatly enhanced rural people's access to government services by institutionalising service delivery systems at the village level. According to government reports, evaluation studies, and academic literature, the system has significantly reduced the physical and bureaucratic barriers between rural inhabitants and the state. With over 540 locally available services, the model has aided inclusive development, particularly in previously underserved and isolated communities.

However, present research identifies numerous ongoing problems. These include inconsistent service quality, a lack of awareness among rural residents about existing schemes, and occasional reports of corruption and application processing delays. Such constraints highlight the need for better accountability frameworks and more effective grievance redressal systems. Furthermore, the literature emphasises the significance of better collaboration among diverse departmental officials inside secretariats, since fragmented functioning has occasionally hampered effective service delivery. Integrating digital governance techniques like biometric identification, e-KYC, and real-time application tracking has been a significant advantage. However, differences in digital literacy and infrastructure have hindered their full potential in some locations.

In conclusion, the Village Secretariat System marks a significant step forward in enhancing state capacity and responsiveness at the grassroots level. While its achievements in reach, efficiency, and digital integration are commendable, sustained efforts are needed to address issues of transparency, interdepartmental coordination, and alignment with local governance institutions. Based on insights from secondary data, it is evident that targeted policy interventions and continuous monitoring can evolve the Village Secretariat System into a robust, participatory governance model and equitable service delivery in rural India. This model can be implemented in other states of India and around the world.

ETHICAL APPROVAL STATEMENT

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Board of Studies and the School Research Ethics Committee of the Central University of Rajasthan, Ajmer, India (Approval No.: CURAJ/2023PHDPPLG002), on 23 May 2025. All research procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards for research involving human participants, including the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable institutional guidelines. The scope of approval covered data collection through interviews with rural citizens, Village Secretariat functionaries, and mandal-level officials. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, commencing on 2 June 2025.



INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Verbal consent was obtained on 2 June 2025 by the principal researcher from rural citizens, Village Secretariat functionaries, and mandal-level officials in the selected villages of Bhimli and Anandapuram mandals, Visakhapatnam district. Verbal consent was used where the participants agreed to take part orally rather than signing a document due to varying literacy levels among participants and to ensure comfort and accessibility; consent was audio-recorded and documented in field notes using a standardized consent script. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, the measures taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and how their data would be used for academic research and publication purposes. Consent covered participation in interviews, audio recording, anonymized data analysis, and publication of de-identified findings.

The study involved non-interventional qualitative interviews with adult participants only and did not involve minors or legally vulnerable populations. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable institutional guidelines.

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