

## Interrogating the role of Panchayats in Rural Development in North East India

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### **Abstract**

Rural development initiatives have emerged from a national development strategy adopted by country at different phases of its development. Rural development programmes are therefore conceived and implemented as part of a national development strategy. The present strategy of rural development mainly focuses on poverty alleviation, better livelihood opportunities, provision of basic amenities and infrastructure facilities through various programmes of wage and self-employment. Most of the programmes have a more diverse agenda, such as the empowerment of the poor, especially women and other vulnerable groups, community development, the protection of the environment and natural resources and enhancement of the capabilities of the poor through greater access to education, health and credit. All the programmes launched by the government are meant for the welfare and empowerment of poor and vulnerable residing in the rural areas. The panchayats, i.e., the government at the grass root level, play a vital role in the implementation of the various programmes. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment passed in 1992 has provides, inter alia, the devolution of development functions with authority and resources from the state to these bodies, thereby created a space and opportunity for decentralized participatory local development effort with in-built pressures for accountability. These institutions now have control of all rural development programmes. It is in this backdrop, this paper seeks to study and interrogate the role of panchayats in the rural development in north east India with special reference to state of Sikkim. The paper concludes that panchayats play an important role in the implementation of the programme but more devolution of functions and resources is required to make the institutions more effective and powerful for the successful implementation of programmes.

***Key words: Panchayats, Devolution, Rural Development, Sikkim, India***

## **Introduction**

Rural development initiatives have emerged from a national development strategy adopted by country at different phases of its development. Rural development is the prioritised objective of development planning in India. Ever since the independence of the country, rural developments have been accorded high priority in our plans for economic development and social justice. The development of rural areas is very important because about 70 per cent of the total population lives in rural areas and most of them are found poverty ridden and economically backward. The government has been giving special thrust for elimination of rural poverty as well as for upliftment of economic condition of people in rural areas. Rural development programmes are therefore conceived and implemented as part of a national development strategy. The present strategy of rural development mainly focuses on poverty alleviation, better livelihood opportunities, provision of basic amenities and infrastructure facilities through various programmes of wage and self-employment. Most of the programmes have a more diverse agenda, such as the empowerment of the poor, especially women and other vulnerable groups, community development, the protection of the environment and natural resources and enhancement of the capabilities of the poor through greater access to education, health and credit. All the programmes launched by the government are meant for the welfare and empowerment of poor and vulnerable residing in the rural areas. The panchayats, i.e., the government at the grass root level, play a vital role in the implementation of the various programmes. The Seventy-Third Constitution Amendment Act passed in 1992 has provides, inter alia, the devolution of development functions with authority and resources from the state to these bodies, thereby created a space and opportunity for decentralised participatory local development effort with in-built pressures for accountability. These institutions now have control of all rural development programmes.

The rural development has been one of the constant goals of the Five Year Plans of the Government of India. Every plan document right from the First Five Year Plan has spelt out the philosophy, the programme content and the financial allocations for the different schemes. Rural development programme aim at the improvement of the living standards of the rural poor by providing them opportunities for the fullest utilisation of their potential through active participation in the process of goal-oriented change (Prasad and Lalneihzovi, 2003). The implementation of these programmes requires the establishment of institutions which are not

only democratic but also close to the masses. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are such organisations which are not only close to masses but also have adequate representation of women and marginalised sections at village, block and district level (MahiPal, 2004). And it is generally accepted that the programmes of rural development will become realistic and meaningful only if people's representatives are actively involved in the local level planning, design, formulation and implementation of these schemes and in selection of beneficiaries in the anti-poverty and employment programmes (GoI, 1985). The World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development held in 1979 under the auspices of the FAO has recommended a programme of action which includes decentralisation of institutions and process of government decision-making and delegation to institutions of local government increasing responsibility for decision-making in rural development activities, in particular the planning, formulation and implementation of development activities and programmes relating of their regions and areas. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) in its report said, "Development cannot progress without responsibility and power. Community Development can be real only when the community understands its problems; realizes its responsibilities, exercises the necessary powers through its chosen representatives and maintains a constant and intelligent vigilance on local administration. It was with this objective that the team/committee recommended an early establishment of statutory elective local bodies and devolution to them of the necessary resources, power and authority (GoI, 1957). The committee thus shows PR system as a means of involving people and their representatives in development programmes of the government. The Asok Mehta Committee appointed in 1977 to study the working of Panchayati Raj System also viewed that the Panchayati Raj System was not only meant for decentralisation of power and people's participation, but it was also for supporting rural development and strengthening the planning process at the micro level (GoI, 1978). The Singhvi Committee (1986) which was set up to prepare the concept paper on Panchayati Raj also wanted Panchayati Raj Institutions to be closely involved in planning and implementation of rural development programmes at lower level (GoI, 1986). It becomes clear from the above recommendation of different committees that the success of any programmes depends on effective steps for the decentralisation of planning and development administration on the one hand and involvement and participation of the people in the formulation and implementation process through elected grassroot level institution. The decentralisation and democratisation are thus the compulsion of rural development. There is no

alternative to raising the awareness of the rural poor and activating and involving representative institutions from below (Village Panchayats, Panchayat Samities, Zilla Parishads) in the planning and implementation of rural development programmes in an integrated manner for optimal use of resources and for closer monitoring (GoI, 1985). It is in this backdrop, this paper seeks to study and interrogate the role of panchayats in the rural development in north east India with special reference to state of Sikkim. The paper concludes that panchayats play an important role in the implementation of the programme but more devolution of functions and resources is required to make the institutions more effective and powerful for the successful implementation of the programmes.

### **Constitutionalising Panchayats**

With the passage of 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act (1992), the people's participation in the process of planning, decision-making, implementation and delivery system in rural India has been recognised. The panchayati raj bodies have been accorded the constitutional status and its involvement in the implementation of rural development schemes has been made compulsory. Article 243G of the Constitution - introduced by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act - deals with the question of powers, authority and responsibilities of Panchayat. Article says that "subjects to the provisions of this constitution, the legislature of a state may, by law, endow the Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government and such law may contain provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon Panchayats at the appropriate level, subject to such conditions as may be specified therein, with respect to:

- (a) the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice and
- (b) the implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to the matter listed in the Eleventh Schedule".

The Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution which relates to Panchayats contains 29 subjects like agriculture, minor irrigation, land reforms, education, health, rural housing, poverty alleviation and rural development programmes maintenance of community assets, and so on (see Box 1).

<b>Box 1: Classification of items under Eleventh Schedule (Article 243G)</b>
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**Core functions**

- Drinking water
- Roads, culverts, bridges, ferries, waterways, and other means of communication
- Rural electrification, including distribution of electricity
- Health and sanitation, including hospitals, primary health centers, and dispensaries
- Maintenance of community assets

**Welfare functions**

- Rural housing
- Non-conventional energy sources
- Poverty alleviation program
- Education, including primary and secondary schools
- Technical training and vocational education
- Adult and informal education
- Libraries
- Cultural activities
- Family welfare
- Woman and child development
- Social welfare, including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded
- Welfare of the weaker sections, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes
- Public distribution system

**Agriculture and allied functions**

- Agriculture, including agricultural extension
- Land improvement, implementation of land reforms, land consolidation, and soil conservation
- Minor irrigation, water management, and watershed development
- Animal husbandry, dairying, and poultry
- Fisheries
- Social forestry and farm forestry
- Minor forest produce
- Fuel and fodder
- Markets and fairs

**Industries**

- Small-scale industries, including food processing industries
- Khadi, village, and cottage industries.

**Panchayats in Sikkim**

Sikkim enacted new panchayati raj legislation, the Sikkim Panchayat Act, 1993 in conformity with the provision of the Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992. The Sikkim

Panchayat Act 1993 has incorporated all the mandatory provisions of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act and envisages to achieve the grass root democratic polity by making PRIs an instrument of local government. Provision of Gram Sabha, five years terms, reservation for SCs and STs, one-third reservation for women, the constitution of State Election Commission and State Finance Commission and other related mandatory provisions find place in the Sikkim Panchayat Act, 1993. The legislation, however, does not make any changes in the existing two-tier panchayati raj structure and provide the same with Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat at village and district levels respectively. There are at present 176 Gram Panchayats and 4 Zilla Panchayats.

### **Gram Sabha**

The conformity Act of 1993 has made the Gram Sabha a statutory unit in the system of PRIs. Under this Act, the provision has been made to constitute Gram Sabha at each village comprising of all the adult voters. The Gram Sabha meets two times in a year. The meeting of Gram Sabha is presided over by the President (Sabhapati) and in his absence by the Vice-President (Up-Sahbapati) of the Gram Panchayat. The quorum for a meeting of Gram Sabha shall be one-fifth of the total members of Gram Sabha. The identification of beneficiaries for implementation of development schemes pertaining to the village is the important function of Gram Sabha. Apart from this, the Gram Sabha in Sikkim considers some of the matter pertaining to the annual statement of accounts of the Gram Panchayat, its report on administration and development programmes of the village, among others.

### **Gram Panchayat**

Gram Panchayat is the executive body of Gram Sabha. For the constitution of a Gram Panchayat, a Gram is divided into a number of wards ranging from 5 to 7. The voters of each ward elect from among themselves their ward members. The term of Gram Panchayat including all the members are five years, commencing from the date of the first meeting of the Gram Panchayat. The members of Gram Panchayat elect from among themselves, a President (Sabhapati), vice-President (Up-sabhapati) and Secretary (Sachiva). Gram Panchayat meets twice in every month at the office of Gram Panchayat. Under the new Panchayat Act, provision has been made for the reservation of seats in the Gram Panchayat for persons belonging to scheduled caste, scheduled tribes and women. As regard to functions, the section 34 and 35 of the Act has provided a long list of obligatory and discretionary functions to be performed by the Gram Panchayat.

## **Zilla Panchayat**

The Act also provided for the Zilla Panchayat at each district. A Zilla panchayat consists of (a) members elected directly by the voters for territorial constituencies; (b) member of Legislative Assembly of the State representing a constituency which form a part or a whole of the district concerned; (c) member of the House of the People representing a constituency which form a part or whole of the district concerned; (d) member of the Council of States who is registered voter in the district and (e) all the Presidents of Gram Panchayat in the district. The Adhakshaya and Up-Adhakshaya of the Zilla Panchayat shall be elected by and from amongst its elected member. Adhakshaya, in his absence, Up-Adhakshaya shall convene, preside and conduct meetings of the Zilla Panchayat. Zilla Panchayat meets four times in a year. Reservation of seats in favour of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes in proportion to their population and one-third in favour of women does exist.

### **Box 2: Panchayati Raj in Sikkim**

- Sikkim has only two-tier panchayati raj system viz., Gram Panchayat at village level and Zilla Panchayat at district level. There is no intermediate tier.
- Powers and responsibilities of the two-tier panchayats have been clearly demarcated through Activity Mapping.
- Local level employees in respect of programmes transferred to PRIs are placed under the control of panchayats.
- Gram Panchayats are empowered to sanction development works up to 5 lakh and Zilla Panchayat up to 10 lakh.
- Organic link and coordination among two-tier of panchayats have been maintained by making all President (sabhapati) of Gram Panchayats the member of Zilla Panchayat.

## **Devolution of 3Fs**

Following the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act (1992), the Sikkim Panchayat Act 1982 has been amended and new Act came into force in 1993. The new State Act considerably enhances the responsibilities of the panchayat institutions to areas mentioned in the Eleventh Schedule. The state Panchayat Act besides (devolving some responsibilities and) making provisions for constituting Gram Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat at village and district respectively, also made

provisions for forming Gram Sabha (Village Assembly) at the Gram Panchayat level. This institution is corner stone of the entire edifice of rural decentralisation as it gives opportunity to each and every adult eligible voter of the Gram Panchayat to participate in decision-making of decentralised governance, planning and development. The Gram Sabha is expected to meet and to make recommendation and suggestions on development programmes, identification of beneficiaries, etc. The function of the Gram Panchayat has been enhanced by adding the list of items included in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution. The measures to accelerate devolution of powers was started in 2003, when the State Government for the first time transfers a major function of eight line departments to the panchayats. The devolution index prepared by MoPR placed Sikkim at the top among north-eastern states with 60.22 per cent (see Table 1).

Table 1: Panchayat Devolution Index (DI)

States	D1	D2	D3	D4	Devolution Index
	Framework	Functions	Finances	Functionaries	
Sikkim	70.60	65.58	41.96	50.88	60.22
Tripura	60.90	42.50	32.77	33.00	45.60
Manipur	57.54	34.70	36.54	13.33	39.31
Assam	38.35	29.20	33.51	0.00	19.70
Arunachal Pradesh	12.81	11.97	17.56	3.33	19.70
National Average	51.32	50.55	37.67	34.67	42.38

*Source: MoPR-IIPA 2011*

These devolution measures undoubtedly increased the powers and responsibilities of the Gram Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat giving them a much greater role in the delivery of important social services such as primary school, public health, social security programmes like old age pension, and rural development/poverty alleviation programmes. Along with the functions, the state government has also transferred the functionaries of line departments under the control of panchayats. As per the devolution index, 50.88 per cent of functionaries from line department have already been transfer to panchayat bodies (Table 1). To implement the designated programme, the financial resources of the Panchayats were also augmented. In fact, financial resources transferred for programme implementation of the Rural Management and Development is still the largest source of funds for the panchayats. Thus since the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act and the Conformity Act of State, a change has been engineered in the democratic rules governing



Panchayats which now have greater powers and resources to design and implement rural development programmes. The Act also reduces the political and bureaucratic interference in rural development programmes.

### **Rural Development through Panchayats**

The Government of India has launched a various rural development programme that are mainly aim at increasing the level of income and the rate of employment of the rural people. Worth mentioning of these programmes are Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS), Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). In addition, there are several important flagship programmes, which aim at provisioning basic essential services across the country through the panchayats. The Union Government has also augments the yearly budget allocation for the proper and effective implementation of the programmes as well as to make the programmes more inclusive. Since 2004, the allocations to the programmes, entailing the involvement of the panchayats, have shown a substantial growth (Table 2).

Table 2: Allocation of each scheme that entails a role of panchayats (*Rs in Crore*)

S.No.	Scheme	2004-04	2008-09
1.	MGNREGS/SGRY	10000	16000
2.	NRHM	-	11974
3.	Mid Day Meal	1507	8000
4.	SSA	4754	13100
5.	PMGSY	2468	13100
7.	Accelerated Rural Water Supply	2900	7300
8.	ICDS	1934	5665
9.	IAY	2500	5400
10.	SGSY	1000	2150
11.	RGGVY	-	5055
12.	BRGF	-	4670

Source: IIPA 2009

Since all the programmes are meant for the welfare and empowerment of poor people at rural areas, its effective implementation also requires the local bodies at rural areas. And the most suited institution is the panchayati raj institutions. The system of greater involvement of

panchayats in rural development was institutionalised in 1989/90 with the launching of JRY where there was a substantial flow of funds to the village level. In addition, the village panchayats prepare an inventory of assets and give details of the projects taken up by them under JRY. The works to be taken up are decided in the meeting of the Gram Sabha and these are prioritised according to the felt needs of the local people. PRIs had been given powers to draw and disburse funds, to select schemes and beneficiaries in gram sabha meetings, and to oversee the implementation of these schemes.

After the enactment of 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, the panchayats are now constitutionally mandated to draw up plans for development and antipoverty programmes have been brought under their purview. Since the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment envisages a shift of the planning and implementation of anti-poverty programmes from the bureaucracy to a local democratic institution, in which the local community, including the poor can have greater say. The involvement of panchayats makes it possible to take a holistic view of the development needs of the area. It is a good augury that the institutional mechanisms tend to provide centrality to the panchayats in their planning and implementation. This enables the village panchayat to meet the critical gaps in rural infrastructure and also to generate income via supplementary wage employment.

The Government of Sikkim has been implementing the various rural development programmes through different panchayats bodies like Gram Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat. Besides, there are number of programme introduced and supported by the state government. Land Bank Scheme, Chief Minister Self Employment Programme, CMRHS, to name a few, is some of the important schemes. Earlier these schemes along with various other developmental programmes were practically implemented by the line departments through bureaucratic channels. At present, the entire programme is implemented by the panchayats with their required decentralised structure and the local level bureaucracy. In Sikkim, PRIs with their localised structure, have kept themselves busy with rural development. Every year crores of rupees are being spent in the name of rural development activities (Table 3), the Panchayat have been getting a special scope to keep them alive. In fact so strong is the relation between panchayats and rural development in India including Sikkim state that it is being questioned now-a-days whether the panchayats will survive if the government withdraws the rural development schemes (Bhattacharya, 2002).

Table 3: Allocation of fund (*in crore*)

S.No.	Scheme	Zilla	Gram	Total	Percentage
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		Panchayat	Panchayat		contribution to total receipts
1.	MGNREGS	0	150.28	150.28	41
2.	SGRY	16.81	9.85	26.66	7
3.	BRGF	25.55	0	25.55	7
4.	TFC	4.60	8.40	13.00	3
5.	State Grants (Development Funds)	14.11	66.03	80.14	22
6.	Direction and Administration	10.14	4.71	14.85	4
7.	Fund transferred from other departments	23.04	36.72	59.76	16

Source: RMDD 2009

The Panchayati raj institution is therefore integral part of the rural development programme. Since panchayats are most localised institutions, it was envisaged that they could best tackle the issue of rural development (Shah, 1990). In Sikkim, panchayats play an important role in shaping the process of rural development. They have done remarkably well in respect of implementation of the centrally sponsored beneficiary-oriented and employment generating anti-poverty programmes. Their role has been increased after the introduction of 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the Constitution of India. Their primary task is to organise the developmental works, utilised allocate resources properly and co-ordinate programmes at local level to increase the well being of the rural masses. For the implementation of different programmes, they constituted a block level committee with the President (Sabhapati) as the chairman. Under the new legislation, the panchayats are expected to constitute the following committees to assist in the performance of their duties; the committee on agriculture; the committee on the education; the committee on welfare; the committee on development, etc. The preparation of list of beneficiaries and the identification of schemes are the two most important functions of Gram Panchayat. All the decisions in this regard are taken in the Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha therefore has to guide and advice the Gram Panchayat in regard to the schemes for economic development and social justice undertaken or proposed to be undertaken in its area and may (a) identify the schemes which are required to be taken up on priority basis for economic development of the village and (b) identify the beneficiaries of various poverty alleviation programme. Gram Sabha meetings are held to examine the progress of existing programmes, suggest new ones, choose

beneficiaries, and inspect account and budgets. The meeting and their recommendations had a legal status. In the context of infrastructure development, this would also mean that Gram Sabha have the power to undertake community contracting, both for construction of rural infrastructure projects and their maintenance (Raghunandan, 2007). The Gram Panchayat thus takes every decision according to the recommendation of the Gram Sabha. The present government established the precedence of the people's elected representatives over the bureaucracy in the hierarchy. The local level bureaucracy in the state is made to work under the supervision of the panchayats. Prior to 1990s, the rural development activities fell under the absolute charge of the bureaucracy in line with the tradition of India. India has been experimenting with rural development through the bureaucracy for over three decades and every programme has revealed a familiar pattern of bureaucratic neglect, defaults and distortions. The bureaucratic domination in administration of development programmes also alienates the people who become passive recipients (Dutta, 1998). The devolution revolution of power (to the PRIs) has changed the system from bureaucratic domination to panchayat domination in the implementation of anti-poverty programmes. The present-day panchayats, therefore, have a larger space and responsibility in the field of governance.

The decentralisation of the task to lower level politicians may improve delivery and reduce corruption; it can also do so at lower cost (Rastogi, 2007). Studies by many scholars show that local public works and poverty alleviation schemes worked well when there was devolution of funds to the panchayat. This led to a large reduction in costs and leakages. The elected body was able to exercise control over the local administration (Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002). Manor (1999), identifies a number of ways in which democratic decentralisation can promote rural development. Most important, he argues, is the impact it can have on local participation, government transparency and public accountability. Slightly less promising is the notion that decentralised and democratic arrangement can encourage more flexible government programmes and policies (in particular, one that move away from agricultural productivity), enhance government commitment to rural development and reduce economic disparities within regions (Manor, 1999). It was thus revealed from the research study that there are two distinct advantages in utilizing PRIs as a delivery mechanism for rural development which is also relevant in the context of Sikkim. First is the wide dissemination of knowledge about development schemes implemented by the panchayats in the field. The second is the absence of

large-scale complaints regarding misuse of public funds. Local people generally felt that PRIs are better suited for delivering development benefits than the bureaucracy, especially in view of the better accountability of the PRIs to the people as against the bureaucrats (Meenakshisundaram, 2005).

Panchayats, to a large extent, were successful in promoting social welfare, rural infrastructure, providing employment and improving overall conditions of the people of rural Sikkim. The implementations of rural development programmes through panchayats have produced desired results. At present majority of the rural development programmes are implemented by the PRIs. The employment generation programmes like SGSY, MGNREGS, etc. have benefited the rural people by creating some useful assets and tackling poverty. MGNREGS for example, alone generated 43.28 lakhs person days in 2009-10 and has provided employment to around 54,156 households. Under IAY scheme, total of 5572 new houses were constructed from 2002-03 to 2009-10. The timely releases of funds meant for designated programme by the government enable the Gram Panchayat to execute and utilize the funds properly and also in time.

### **Concluding Observations**

The panchayats throughout their evolution have been assigned different roles and responsibilities by policy-makers for the development of rural areas. The panchayat raj and subsequent policies of different government have envisaged a greater role of village level PRIs such as Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat in local development. They have an irreplaceable role to play in rural development. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment and consequent State Acts have provided various mechanisms to enable panchayats to perform this role more effectively. Being representative democratic bodies at local level, panchayats are better suited to oversee the local development process. Entrusting these bodies with the primary responsibility of development initiatives such as watershed development, drinking water distribution system and other similar projects help in achieving the goal of holistic and sustainable development of local areas.

There are more than 200 rural development programmes in India launched by the central government for the welfare and empowerment of rural poor. This apart, the governments at the state level also introduced various state-sponsored developmental programmes. All these programmes are implemented by the panchayats constituted uniformly in all the states in

pursuance with Central Act of 1992. The powers and responsibilities were transferred to the panchayats for the proper and effective implementation of the programmes. As far as state of Sikkim in concern, the government is implementing all the centrally-sponsored rural development programmes through panchayats. As in other part of the country, the government in Sikkim also launched various state-sponsored development programmes for the poverty reduction and making the state poverty-free by 2015. The functions, finances and functionaries have been devolve to the panchayats for the effective implementation of the programmes through the activity mapping. So far as devolution of 3Fs is concern, the state of Sikkim is far ahead than other states of north east. It has devolved almost all the powers mentioned in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution. This political will of the state government greatly help in the empowerment of local bodies and provide them a space in the decision making process for the implementation of the rural development programmes. Panchayat raj offers enormous possibilities of making local governance and the rural development process more need-based, participatory and productive. Some villages have benefitted and have achieved enormous success through the broadened role and powers given to village level panchayats. Panchayats is the main implementing agency of rural development programmes in Sikkim. More devolution of functionaries and finances, capacity and skill-building in critical management areas is requires for making the panchayts a real agency of development.

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