E-Panchayat as a tool for empowering Panchayati Raj:
An exploratory study of Pattan block of Baramulla District

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Abstract

Objectives: The concept of e-Panchayat holds great promise for rural masses across the country as it aims to transform Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) into symbols of modernity, transparency, and efficiency. The study was designed to examine the role of e-Panchayat as a tool to facilitate the functioning of Panchayati Raj (PR) system.
Methods/Statistical analysis: Both primary and secondary sources of data were used for the purpose of the study. Quantitative as well as qualitative methods of data collection were used to provide a holistic view of the issues under study. While survey method was used and an Interview Schedule designed for the purpose of data collection, few in-depth interviews with representatives of state and block level officials and journalists were conducted to obtain detailed insights into the topic. A Pilot study was undertaken in one of the Halqa Panchayats to pre-test the Interview Schedule. Appropriate statistical techniques were used for data analysis and drawing inferences.
Findings: The findings revealed that PRFs were not aware of the facility as e-Panchayat enabling agents like computers and the internet were not available at the Panchayat Ghars. Besides, PRFs and villagers were not computer literate as such even a simple computer application would be difficult for them to handle. In this context trained human resource or support staff in the form of Village Level Worker (VLW) or Gram Rozgar Sevak (GRS) or any other could facilitate them in their respective works. The data connectivity needs to be extended to Panchayat Ghars and trained staff be provided at the Halqa Panchayat level. The absence of other infrastructural facilities needs to be addressed at the earliest for effective implementation of e-Panchayat.
Application/Improvements: In view of mobile penetration, accessibility of mobile phones and internet usage in the study area, e-Panchayat holds great promise in the study area. It can serve as an empowering tool for masses at grass root level provided timely and specific measures are adopted. e-Panchayat can go a long way in strengthening participatory democracy at the grass root level.
Keywords: e-Panchayat, empowerment, PRFs, Baramulla, infrastructure, internet facility

1. Introduction

With the introduction of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992, a new era of democratic decentralization ushered across the country. It was a landmark Act that enabled decentralized and participative governance through Panchayats in the rural areas and shifted its focus from mere executioners of development projects to policy makers on various issues of local importance [1].

To make Panchayats self-sufficient for governing themselves it was imperative to equip and make them technology-friendly. With the advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), it has been taken as a tool for dissemination of information. To improve local self-governance, the Government of India in 2006 formulated National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) [2] for automation of various tasks and a significant attention was provided towards strengthening of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) [3].

The NeGP aims at improving delivery of government services to citizens and businesses with the vision to: "*Make all government services accessible to the common man in his locality, through common service delivery outlets and ensure efficiency, transparency and reliability of such services at affordable costs to realize the basic needs of the common man.*"

Under NeGP, e-panchayat were proposed to provide a whole range of Information Technology (IT) related services that included decentralized database and planning, budgeting and accounting, implementation and monitoring of central and state sector schemes and citizen-centric services. The Plan sought to create right governance and institutional mechanisms, set up the core infrastructure and policies and to implement a number of

Mission Mode Projects (MMP) at the center and state level to create a citizen-centric and business-centric environment for governance in the country (NeGP). The Plan also identified Panchayats as one of the MMP, since Panchayats provide a large number of basic services for millions of citizens living in India's rural centers [4].

The Seventh Round Table Conference of State Ministers of Panchayati Raj organized by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj at Jaipur in December 2004 recommended taking e-Governance in Panchayati Raj Institutions (e-PRI) as mission mode through National Informatics Centre (NIC) and other solution providers. The MMP has been designated to overcome the challenges being faced in the village such as delay in providing services to the citizens (licenses and certificates), lack of reliable communication infrastructure and lack of monitoring mechanism for implementing schemes at the Halqa Panchayat level.

The e-Panchayat aims to automate the functioning of all the Panchayats across the country. For instance, the use of technology in conveying a Gram Sabha meeting at the Halqa Panchayat level can be an effective way to ensure the success of such meetings. The usual method of conveying a Gram Sabha meeting over the years has been an announcement over the public address system from a marketplace, temple or mosque or informing about the same through an advertisement in local newspapers or employing a mobile vehicle for publicity on this matter or pasting of posters on public buildings. The alternative method of communicating can be networking through the use of mobile phones. The Gram Sabha members can be communicated about a meeting through Short Messaging Service (SMS). Thus, mobile communication can play a crucial role in connecting people to administration and maintaining accountability and transparency.

e-Panchayat is expected to promote accountability into the working of the PRIs and Panchayati Raj Functionaries (PRFs) to strengthen the overall functioning of the PR system. The e-Panchayat holds great promise for the rural masses as it aims to transform PRIs into symbols of modernity, transparency, and efficiency apart from addressing their various other issues. It will revolutionize the entire PR system by including mass information and Communications and Technology or ICT usage that will raise the efficiency of the functioning of the PR system [5].

Keeping in view the recent government efforts and the emphasis being placed on e-Panchayats, it was felt worthwhile to ascertain the status of e-Panchayat in one of the blocks in Baramulla district of Kashmir valley and examine how it can be used as a tool for empowerment of PRFs and in turn the local people.

2. Objectives

In this regard, a study was designed with the broad objective to examine the role of e-Panchayat as a tool to facilitate the functioning of Panchayati Raj (PR) system. The specific objectives of the study were to:
- explore the awareness of Panchayati Raj Functionaries (PRFs) about e-Panchayat;
- identify various e-Panchayat related facilities available at the Halqa Panchayat level;
- assess the learning skills and capacity building of PRFs with respect to e-Panchayat; and
- Identify the key challenges in the implementation of e-Panchayats.

3. Review of Literature

Several studies have been carried out to find out the need for creating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure and capacity within the Panchayati Raj system and the need for e-panchayat to achieve a set of objectives for the overall benefit of citizens and the government.

Panchayats should be provided with adequate technological resources in order to be able to play a meaningful role in the course of development. They were envisioned to provide opportunities to the rural masses for participation in the governing process from taking decisions to preparation, implementation, and supervision of various development programs. But due to lack of transparency, the functioning of Gram Sabhas have come under much flak.

The need for creating ICT infrastructure and capacity within the Panchayat administration followed by training of local citizens in the use of the ICT infrastructure and then integration of the ICT facility with the need and requirement of the end users has been stressed as the ICT has a capability to publicize any information to millions of people in minimal cost, time and efforts. ICT enables the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to proliferate their participation in governance and decision-making process by establishing communication between government and the citizens. This would in a way help to maintain transparency and accountability in the overall system of the governance.

Information Technology has a vital role to play in all transactions that government undertakes as it helps it to cut red tapes, avoid corruption and reach out to the citizens. Such initiatives would help citizens learn about various policies and processes and help to maintain all daily transactions that take place at the Halqa Panchayat and help to reduce the labor of paperwork [6].

The need for e-panchayat included empowering citizens of every Panchayat with bottom up and top down information and content and putting every Panchayat on the global digital map and facilitating their growth [7]. e-panchayat provides an opportunity to local masses to establish a link with the government and other stakeholders thus, providing a platform to empower masses at the grass root level.

In developing countries like India, where literacy level is low and most of the people live below poverty line, it is difficult for the government to provide its services to such citizens via the internet. A plethora of obstacles including social, environmental, economical and technical factors existed in the implementation of e-Governance in the country. Other factors like lack of infrastructure and trained human resources, digital divide and privacy and security related to user's personal information were the other challenges for its proper implementation at the grass root level [8]. It is, however, argued that telecommunications are one of the prime movers of modern economies and information flow, accessing, sharing and utilization help boost local economies and better decision-making and effective planning. The use of internet not only delivers the services faster but also brings more transparency between the government and the citizens. The computer and internet penetration in India is 2.7 percent and 4.9 percent, respectively and are among the lowest in the world. Tele-density in rural areas is around 14 percent.

Gujarat recognized as one of the most e-prepared states in the country, occupies the highest teledensity and has the longest Optical Fiber Cable (OFC) network (over 65,000 km). Evolution of e-gram was a prestigious project of Gujarat, which was not just a stand-alone software application but reflected an attempt towards holistic integration of ICT applications within the Panchayat system [9].

The adoption of e-governance gave a fillip to IT development in Andhra Pradesh as was evident by the introduction of an e-gram project in providing various types of services at the doorsteps of its citizens. The potential for increasing welfare in rural areas could be substantially enhanced if there were a greater telephone and internet access in these areas [10].

The mission of e-Panchayat is to empower individuals in the most rural of rural communities to not only get better access to citizen services but also to improve the quality of information collected at the grass root level. The e-Panchayat system is the Government of India's planned system to connect all 250,000 Panchayats serving 600,000 villages and over 1.15 billion people through the fiberoptic broadband internet to improve service delivery and government responsiveness and transparency [11].

Above studies examined various issues related to the importance of e-Panchayat and the challenges related to its proper and effective implementation but did not focus on e-Panchayat as a tool for empowering Panchayats. The study aimed to fill the gap and analyzed its role as a tool for empowering PRFs and identifying the key challenges in its implementation at the grass root level.

4.   Research design

To meet the objectives, a research study was designed to generate data on the topic using both primary as well as secondary sources of data.

4.1. Methodology

The research methodology used both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection to provide a holistic view of the issues under study. The survey method was used and an Interview Schedule was designed for the purpose of data collection. Both closed-ended, as well as open-ended questions, were included in the Interview Schedule. A few in-depth interviews with representatives of state and block level officials and journalists were conducted to obtain detailed insights into the subject.

A Pilot study was undertaken to pre-test the Interview Schedule. A Halqa Panchayat (Palhallan 'C') was randomly selected in Pattan block for the purpose in which the schedule was administered to four respondents. Based on the feedback received, the Interview Schedule was modified and finalized. Appropriate statistical techniques were used for data analysis and drawing inferences.

4.2. Study area

Ten Halqa Panchayats in Pattan block in north Kashmir's Baramulla district were selected for the study. Pattan block is spread over a huge area and comprises of 36 Halqa Panchayats. According to Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989 'Halqa' means the area comprising a village or such contiguous number of villages as may be determined by the government from time to time. It further says 'Halqa' shall be determined in such a manner that the population of any Halqa does not exceed 3,000 in hilly areas and 4,500 in plain areas. The Halqa Panchayat comprises of 7-11 panchs including the Sarpanch.

4.3. Sample selection

A multi-stage sampling was done in which at the first level, 10 Halqa Panchayats in Pattan block were randomly selected. Then 50 percent of the total PRFs were selected from each Halqa Panchayat as shown in Table 1a.

Table 1a. Number of PRFs surveyed in 10 Halqa Panchayats in Pattan block

Halqa Panchayat	Total PRFs	PRFs surveyed
Mamoosa 'B'	09	05
Palhallan 'A'	07	03
Palhallan 'B'	07	04
Palhallan 'D'	07	04
Palhallan 'E'	07	03
Palhallan 'F'	09	05
Sherpora 'A'	07	03
Sherpora 'B'	07	04
Zangam 'A'	08	04
Zangam 'B'	08	04
Total	**76**	**39**

5. Findings

The findings have been presented in sub-sections on Field Survey and In-depth Interviews.

5.1 Field survey
Section-A: Socio-demographic profile
Age group of respondents

Mostly middle-aged people had participated in 2011 Panchayati Raj (PR) elections held in Jammu and Kashmir after several decades. Around 26 percent of the respondents were in the age group 54-63 years followed by 23 percent of respondents in the age group 34-43 years further followed by 18 percent of respondents each in the age group 44-53 years and 64-73 years, respectively. Less percentage of respondents (15 percent) was found in the younger age-group of 24-33 years as shown in Table 1b.

Table 1b. Age Group of respondents

Age Group	N	%
54-63 years	10	25.64
34-43 years	09	23.08
44-53 years	07	17.95
64-73 years	07	17.95
24-33 years	06	15.38
Total	**39**	**100**

Marital status of respondents

The majority of the respondents (92 percent) in the study area were married followed by 05 percent unmarried. Remaining 03 percent of the respondents were widows as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Marital Status of respondents

Marital Status	n	%
Married	36	92.31
Unmarried	02	05.13
Widow	01	02.56
Total	**39**	**100**

Educational qualifications of respondents

The majority of the respondents (39.90) were illiterate followed by 23.08 percent of respondents who had studied up to Middle level and 17.95 percent up to Primary level. 10.26 percent of the respondents had studied up to High School whereas 02.56 percent each had studied up to Higher Secondary and Post Graduate level. 07.69 percent of the respondents were literate as shown in Table 3.

Table 3.Educational Profile of respondents

Educational Profile	n	%
Illiterate	14	35.90
Middle	09	23.08
Primary	07	17.95
High School	04	10.26
Literate	03	07.69
Higher Secondary	01	02.56
Post Graduates	01	02.56
Total	**39**	**100**

Social category of respondents

Social category of respondents was studied under two categories of religion and caste and all the respondents in the study area were Muslims. The majority of the respondents (97.44 percent) belonged to General category whereas 02.56 percent respondents belonged to Scheduled Caste category as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Caste of respondents

Caste	n	%
General	38	97.44
Scheduled Caste	01	02.56
Total	**39**	**100**

Occupation of respondents

Apart from discharging their duties as Panchayati Raj Functionaries (PRFs), most of the respondents (56.41percent) were self-employed and worked in agriculture and allied sector, orchards, dairy farming, handicraft sector, tailoring and as shopkeepers. 17.95 percent of respondents, each, worked as homemakers and were engaged with Panchayat related work only. Less percentage of respondents (02.56 percent), each, worked in the government sector (Retired) and were engaged in private service (teacher) and as the daily wager (laborer), respectively as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Occupation of respondents

Occupation	N	%
Self employed	22	56.41
Home makers	07	17.95
Panchayat related work only	07	17.95
Government Service (Retired)	01	02.56
Private Service	01	02.56
Daily wager	01	02.56
Total	**39**	**100**

Monthly income of respondents

More than half of the respondents (58.97 percent) earned less than Rs. 2000 per month. This included the monthly honorarium provided to them by the state government. 20.51 percent of respondents earned Rs 2001-4000 per month whereas 10.26 percent earned Rs. 4001-6000 and an equal percent of respondents (10.26 percent) earned Rs. 8001 & above. Their income too included the monthly honorarium provided to them by the state government. Sarpanchs were provided Rs 2000 per month whereas Panchs were provided Rs. 1000 per month as monthly honourarium. All the respondents shared that they did not get their monthly honorarium on the regular basis as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Monthly Income of respondents

Monthly Income	N	%
Less than Rs. 2000	23	58.97
Rs. 2001-4000	08	20.51
Rs. 4001-6000	04	10.26
Rs. 8001 & above	04	10.26
Total	**39**	**100**

Section-B
e-Panchayat

In this section variables related to the availability of computers and the Internet at the Panchayat Ghars, an ability to use computers and managing the facility, awareness about e-Panchayat and similar other issues were explored.

Availability of computers at Panchayat Ghar

Almost 90 percent of the respondents said that computers were not available at their respective Panchayat Ghars. Just 10 percent of the respondents had computers. Many Halqa Panchayats in the study area lacked Panchayat Ghar and they operated in a rented accommodation (2-3 rooms). Even the newly constructed Panchayat Ghars lacked basic facilities like proper matting and furniture (though few chairs were found in some Panchayat Ghars). All the 04 PRFs who said that they had the computer at their Panchayat Ghar belonged to Halqa Panchayat Palhallan 'B'. One of the respondents said that though the computer was available at their Halqa Panchayat but she had never seen it as it lied with Sarpanch, who had provided space for the Panchayat Ghar on rented basis. Almost every respondent expressed the need to have a computer in the Panchayat Ghar for the overall benefit of their area as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Availability of Computers at Panchayat Ghar

Availability of Computers at Panchayat Ghar	N	%
No	35	89.74
Yes	04	10.26
Total	**39**	**100**

Ability to use computers

The majority of the respondents (97.44 percent) in the study area did not know how to use computers given the educational qualifications and socio-economic background of most of them. Besides, there was the lack of computer-literacy among the respondents. Only one respondent, who was a teacher in private school and had done one-year diploma in computers knew how to use computers. He too was unaware of the concept of e-Panchayat citing that it was a relatively new concept and he had no information about it. As shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Ability to use Computers

Ability to use Computers	n	%
No	38	97.44
Yes	01	02.56
Total	**39**	**100**

Internet facility at Panchayat Ghars

The majority of the respondents (87.18 percent) agreed that if internet facility was available at the Panchayat Ghars it would be useful as the village youth will avail benefits and it would ease their (PRFs) work, apart from helping them in awareness generation and connecting them to the outside world. One of the respondents in the study area observed that it would help them to have easy access to data like expenditure on works etc. 07.69 percent of the respondents did not find internet facility useful whereas 05.13 percent of the respondents did not hold any opinion as shown in Table 9. One of the respondents termed computer/internet facility useless (*bekaar)* and stressed that solar lights should be provided to them instead of computers/internet facility.

Table 9. Internet facility at Panchayat Ghars

Internet facility at Panchayat Ghars	N	%
Yes	34	87.18
No	03	07.69
Can't say	02	05.13
Total	**39**	**100**

Managing the facility

The respondents were asked who would manage the computer and internet facility if made available at the Panchayat Ghars. Most of the respondents (43.59 percent) said that the facilities would be managed by Chowkidar (local employee) followed by Sarpanch (33.33 percent) further followed by 10.26 percent by Village Level Worker (VLW). 05.13 percent of respondents said that the facility would be managed by Panch, 02.56 percent by a local teacher and 05.13 percent of respondents could not put forth any opinion as shown in Table 10. The respondents largely opined that government should employee Chowkidar, preferably a local person to manage the facility at the Panchayat Ghar.

Table 10. Managing the facility

Managing the facility	n	%
Chowkidar (local employee)	17	43.59
Sarpanch	13	33.33
VLW	04	10.26
Panch	02	05.13
Local teacher	01	02.56
Can't say	02	05.13
Total	**39**	**100**

Information about various PR related schemes

It needs to be mentioned that none of the respondents were aware of the concept of e-panchayat thus negating the very concept of e-Panchayat. There are many reasons responsible for the same. Firstly, the computers and internet facility was not available at the Panchayat Ghars, secondly given the socio-economic and educational background of the respondents and lack of computer-literacy among the respondents, they were not familiar with the concept. Thirdly, lack of awareness about the concept of e-Panchayat on part of government as it has not taken any serious steps towards implementation of e-Panchayat at the grass root level. The PR system is still in infancy in Jammu and Kashmir as the last PR elections were held in the state in 2011 after almost three decades.

The majority of the respondents (95 percent) said that they got information about PR related schemes through 'word of mouth' by Sarpanch, Village Level Workers (VLWs) and other concerned Panchayat officers followed by very few respondents (02.56 percent) who got it through published material. An equal number of respondents (02.56 percent) did not get information from any quarter as shown in Table 11.

Table 11. Information about various PR related schemes

Information about PR schemes	N	%
Word of Mouth	37	94.87
Published material	01	02.56
None	01	02.56
Total	**39**	**100**

When the respondents were asked if they would like to get PR information through online mode of communication (the internet or telephonically), the majority of them (84.62 percent) agreed to cite that it would ease their work as they would not be dependent on VLWs or others for information and it would keep them updated. Some observed that getting PR information through online mode of communication would help them in maintaining transparency and accountability. The respondents were familiar with the word 'internet' as they have seen the younger generation around using it and some of them even said that the younger generation would facilitate them in using the facility.

A section of the respondents (12.82 percent) did not like to get information related to PR through online mode whereas 02.56 percent of respondents did not hold any opinion on this perspective.

Usage of Mobile phones

The majority of the respondents (79.49 percent) in the study area used the mobile phone themselves whereas 20.51 percent did not use it themselves as shown in Table 12. They either received a call on their husband's or son's number or their family members attended the calls on their behalf.

Table 12. Usage of Mobile phones

Usage of Mobile phones	n	%
Yes	31	79.49
No	08	20.51
Total	**39**	**100**

Though 59 percent of respondents did not get information related to PR through mobile phones, but a significant percent of respondents (41 percent) got such information through mobile phones and in the 'voice' mode is shown in Table 13. Either VLW or Sarpanch informed them (telephonically) about a meeting or a training program.

Table 13. Getting information related to PR via mobile phones

Getting PR information via mobile phones	n	%
Yes	16	41.03
No	23	58.97
Total	**39**	**100**

Around 49 percent of respondents felt that if they start getting information related to PR through mobile phones it might be useful for them as it would save their time and energy and would facilitate their work. Some respondents observed that the same would keep them informed and updated and help them to maintain transparency is shown in Table 14 & 15.

Table 14. Usefulness of getting PR information on mobile phones

Usefulness of getting PR information on mobile phones	n	%
Yes	19	48.72
No	17	43.59
Can't say	03	07.69
Total	**39**	**100**

Table 15. Reasons for usefulness of getting PR information on mobile phones

Reasons for usefulness of getting PR information on mobile phones	n	%
Will save our time & energy	07	36.84
Facilitate our work	06	31.58
Keep us informed & updated	04	21.05
Any other	02	10.53
Total	**19**	**100**

Almost an equal number of respondents (43.59 percent) felt that it might not be useful as they were not comfortable with mobile phones and it incurred the cost. One of the respondents said that he cannot dial the number as such getting information related to PR through mobile phones cannot be of any use for him. 07.69 percent of respondents did not hold any opinion.

In continuation with getting PR related information via mobile phones, a question was asked about Toll Free Helpline if it would facilitate PRFs in their work. Majority of the respondents (82.05 percent) agreed that Toll free helpline would help them to generate awareness about PR system as it was free of cost. 07.69 percent respondents thought that the Helpline would not serve any purpose whereas 10.26 percent of respondents did not hold any opinion as shown in Table 16.

Table 16. Toll free helpline

Toll free helpline	N	%
Yes	32	82.05
No	03	07.69
Can't say	04	10.26
Total	**39**	**100**

Bank accounts

All the respondents in the study area had their own bank accounts, but majority of them (77 percent) got funds related to PR directly transferred to their respective bank accounts whereas 23 percent of the respondents did not get PR funds transferred to their accounts as shown in Table 17. One of the respondents said that getting PR funds directly transferred into their respective bank accounts would give them more freedom to spend the amount as per the priority of the works in the ward. Some respondents emphasized that the PR related funds should not be transferred in the joint account of VLW and Sarpanch as they were not able to keep track of the funds spend. They stressed that the funds should go in the respective accounts of ward members. Some of the respondents said that they do not know how the PR funds are utilized as such the funds should be transferred into the respective account of PRFs so that they are able to maintain a check on the utilization of funds.

Table 17. Transfer of PR funds into bank accounts

PR funds transferred to bank accounts	N	%
Yes	30	76.92
No	09	23.08
Total	**39**	**100**

Expressing satisfaction, one of the respondents said that the direct transfer of PR funds into their bank account eased many of their problems and they do not need to approach the concerned offices, time and again, as compared to the earlier process that was hectic and cumbersome. The respondent added that direct transfer of funds into their bank accounts would also help in curbing corruption. Citing an example, he alleged that prior to direct transfer of funds into their bank accounts, he had to bribe the officials to get the funds released.

Almost all the respondents who got funds related to various PR works directly transferred in their bank accounts found it helpful (97 percent) as they opined that the same would a long way in curbing corruption and making better utilization of funds, apart from being a hassle-free process is shown in Table 18 & 19.

Table 18. Reasons behind usefulness of online/mobile based trainings

Reasons behind usefulness of online/mobile based trainings	n	%
Training at own convenience	24	85.71
Better trainers	03	10.71
Easy to understand	01	03.57
Total	**28**	**100**

Table 19. Usefulness of Trainings

Usefulness of training	n	%
Yes	34	87.18
No	04	10.26
Can't say	01	02.56
Total	**39**	**100**

Online banking

Despite the fact that the respondents in the study area were not computer-literate but given the easy accessibility and hassle free approach, most of the respondents (48.72) found online banking helpful whereas 15.38 percent did not found it helpful and a significant percentage of respondents (36 percent) had no opinion as shown in Table 20. One of the respondent said that online banking would save their time and their children or other family

member can help them in operating it. Other respondent observed that since only literates can operate it so it was of no use for them.

Table 20. Online banking

Online banking	n	%
Yes	19	48.72
No	06	15.38
Can't Say	14	35.90
Total	**39**	**100**

Literacy essential requirement

Majority of the respondents (85 percent) agreed with the question on literacy of PRFs as an essential requirement for proper functioning of PR system citing that literates could understand things better and could go through documents before signing them. One of the respondents remarked that since PRFs were representatives of their respective village, they should be able to put forth their viewpoint and education played a significant role in it. Around 13 percent of the respondents did not consider literacy as an essential requirement for PR functioning mostly because they observed that it was the influence of the PRFs and their activeness that mattered and not the qualification. 03 percent of the respondents did not hold any opinion as shown in Table 21.

Table 21. Literacy essential requirement

Literacy essential requirement	n	%
Yes	33	84.62
No	05	12.82
Can't say	01	02.56
Total	**39**	**100**

Online/Mobile based Training programmes

To find out the scope for online/mobile based training programmes, a question was asked and majority of the respondents (71.79 percent) said that such trainings would be useful as they would get better training as per their convenience. One of the respondents said that they could attend online training programmes on holidays and extreme weather conditions.

28.21 percent of the respondents did not found such traning programmes useful as shown in Table 22. They opined that detailed discussion and interaction was not possible in online mode of communication. Other respondent observed that since using internet facility was not possible for illiterates so attending such training programmes too was impossible for them.

Table 22. Online/mobile training programmes

Online/mobile training programmes	N	%
Yes	28	71.79
No	11	28.21
Total	**39**	**100**

Though all the respondents attended PR training programmes offered to them by the government from time to time, majority of them (87.18 percent) found the training programmes useful whereas 10.26 percent did not consider these programmes useful due to their daily routine been disturbed and lack of concentration due to noise in the training hall. Some respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the trainer and the training as whatever was taught to them was not implemented in letter and spirit. Some respondents observed that the number of training programmes offered to them were less. A small section of respondents (02.56 percent) did not hold any opinion is shown in Tables 23, 24 & 25.

Table 23. Reasons behind usefulness of online/mobile based trainings

Reasons behind usefulness of online/mobile based trainings	n	%
Training at own convenience	24	85.71
Better trainers	03	10.71
Easy to understand	01	03.57
Total	**28**	**100**

Table 24. Usefulness of Trainings

Usefulness of training	n	%
Yes	34	87.18
No	04	10.26
Can't say	01	02.56
Total	**39**	**100**

Table 25. Drawbacks about trainings

Drawbacks about trainings	n	%
Less number of trainings	04	11.76
Noise in training hall	03	08.82
Not satisfied with Trainer	03	08.82
Daily routine gets disturbed	02	05.88
Any other	02	05.88
None	20	58.82
Total	**34**	**100**

The respondents also expressed their dismay that no training programme was offered to them over the last two years and demanded the same to be continued.

5.2. Findings: In-depth interviews

Indepth interviews were conducted with Sarpanchs, officials at the Block and District level, senior trainer and media professional to obtain their views on e-Panchayat and identified the key challenges in implementation of e-Panchayats spread over the month of May, 2016 as detailed in Table 26.

Table 26. Details of the Indepth Interviews Conducted

Name	Designation	Date	Location	Duration
Ghulam Qadir Mir	Sarpanch, Halqa Panchayat Palhallan 'F'	May 01, 2016	Palhallan 'F' in Pattan	60 minutes
Raja Begum	Sarpanch Halqa Panchayat Palhallan 'D'	May 02, 2016	Yadeepora in Palhallan 'D' in Pattan	60 minutes
Hakim Tanveer	District Panchayat Officer (DPO), Baramulla	May 31, 2016	DPO office in Baramulla	45 minutes
Nasir Ahmad Lone	Block Development Officer Pattan	May 23, 2016	Block office Pattan	45 minutes
Dr. S. N. Alam	Senior faculty, Institute of Management, Public Administration and Rural Development (IMPA) Srinagar	May 10, 2016	IMPA office, M A Road, Srinagar	60 minutes
Athar Parvaiz	Independent journalist	May 22, 2016	Lal Chowk, Srinagar	45 minutes

The following key areas related to e-Panchayat emerged from the indepth interviews:
a) Basic Educational Eligibility Criteria
b) Need for training programmes
c) Infrastructural facility for e-Panchayat
d) Awareness generation

a) Basic educational eligibility criteria

All the interviewees emphasized the need and importance of education for the PRFs. Ghulam Qadir Mir observed that illiterate PRFs often face many difficulties in dealing with their day-to-day activities therefore some basic educational eligibility criteria may be prescribed especially for Sarpanchs who should be at least matriculate. Raja Begum was also of the view that educated persons are better equipped to function as PRFs and should come forward for contesting elections. However, illiterate persons also have equal rights and should be encouraged to come forward and voice their concerns.

The BDO said that although formal education and college/university degree is not essential for contesting the PR election but the PRFs are entrusted with financial powers and need to discharge various functions such as signing of Date of Birth (DOB) certificates, managing development and social welfare schemes. They also have to be aware

about issues related to health, schooling, safe drinking water, toilets, anganwadi centres, beneficiaries-oriented schemes etc. Therefore, it is desirable that some basic educational criteria, at least 10th standard for Sarpanch is prescribed for contesting the PR elections. Expressing similar views, the DPO argued that literate PRFs have the advantage to understand issues easily. Hence, matriculation and 8th standard may be prescribed for those contesting as Sarpanch and Panch respectively.

Senior journalist Parvaiz, currently associated with Inter Press Service (IPS) Agency, Reuters and Associated Press observed that though education is must but the education system in the state at various levels is not satisfactory. Politicians need to have a strong base in social sciences to make a mark and generate interest among common masses towards politics. Besides, knowledge about computers among the PRFs is dismal.

In a contrary view, Dr. S. N. Alam, senior faculty at Institute of Management, Public Administration and Rural Development (IMPA) Srinagar observed that prescribing certain educational eligibility criteria for PRFs is against the fundamental right which will deny the right to contest elections to almost 30 to 35 percent of the population. Over a period of time, the next generation of PRFs in the state would emerge as more efficient. It would learn from the successes and failures of the first generation that have come for the first time in Jammu and Kashmir in 2011, after three decades.

b) Need for training programmes

All the interviewees observed that the training programmes organized by the government for PRFs time and again were useful for them and should be continued. They also supported training programmes to be offered to PRFs via online mode of communication as well by making them interactive and localized.

Mir observed that four-day-long training programme was organized at the block level once a year whereas Begum said that such training programmes were organized thrice a year. Both Mir and Begum said that such programmes were useful but no training programme was organized for them over the last two years and demanded such programmes to be continued. The training programmes helped Begum to grow, "I am not the same person that I was before contesting the PR election. Training programmes sharpened my skills and exposed me to the outside world."

Both Sarpanchs were in support of providing online training programmes to the PRFs. Mir emphasized that such trainings should be made interactive and conducted in local language to make them effective and useful. Begum stressed that such training programmes would be more useful for PRFs as they would be trained at their convenience without spending a penny from their pockets and without going to the block or any other office. Trained support staff could facilitate PRFs in their work and everything would be available at the click of a button.

The DPO said that after establishing PR system in the state, training programmes were provided to PRFs at Halqa, block and district level apart from awareness camps held at the district level. Since PRFs were unaware about powers and functioning of PR system, training programmes bridged this gap. Two training programmes were carried out at a block level in a year and two meetings in a month were held at the Halqa Panchayat level. The training programmes were carried out in the local language (Kashmiri) and the trainers (including Block Development Officers, Village Level Workers and others) were first trained at Institute of Management and Public Administration (IMPA) in Srinagar then at the block level.

Expressing almost similar views, the BDO added that the computer training provided to the PRFs was useful only for literate PRFs as they got an opportunity to learn. Both DPO and BDO observed that online training programmes could be useful for PRFs as the training programmes would be offered to them at their doorsteps. The BDO said that training programmes offered to PRFs via online mode of communication would ease the burden of block office and help PRFs whereas DPO observed that VLWs or other employee at the Halqa Panchayat level could facilitate PRFs in online mode of communication.

Dr. Alam said that strong administration, technical and political support is required to implement e-panchayat in reality. Every year, the Institute trained 34,000 PRFs in the state. Online training programme requires the capacity building of the elected representatives and others facilitating them in their work and government officials. Content for online training ought to be localized. A Panchayat body does not necessarily need to operate things itself; they could be facilitated by the support staff in their PR related work.

The senior journalist observed that PRFs should have regular training programmes as those would provide them a platform to give a voice to their issues and concerns. To make online training programmes effective they have to be localized and the training content to be used for online PR related activities ought to be translated in the local language.

c) Infrastructural facility for e-Panchayat

All the interviewees spoke about absence of basic infrastructural facilities at the Panchayat Ghar but at the same time emphasized the need for equipping Panchayat Ghars with requisite facilities so that implementation of e-Panchayat is made possible at the grass root level.

Mir observed that many Halqa Panchayats still lack a Panchayat Ghar and they operate in rented accommodation. The existing Panchayat Ghars lack basic facilities like proper mating and furniture. The recently constructed Panchayat Ghar in Begum's Halqa Panchayat is spacious but lacks basic facilities like proper mating and furniture. Both the Sarpanchs mentioned absence of computer and internet facility at their respective Panchayat Ghars. The DPO said that basic infrastructural requirement for e-panchayat like computers/internet would be looked into in due course of time. The BDO, Dr. Alam and the senior journalist stressed the need for availability of basic facilities such as 24x7 electricity and computers and internet facility in all the Panchayat Ghars across the state.

d) Awareness generation

All the interviewees emphasized the need for awareness generation regarding e-Panchayat. Mir observed that though media had a role in generating awareness among PRFs regarding their powers and functions but they did not contribute much in this regard. Media, especially Radio (Radio Kashmir Srinagar) and Television, could devote some programme or a part of it exclusively for PRFs, their issues and concerns and familiarizing people about the concept and future prospects of e-panchayat. Sharing almost similar views, Begum said that media would not only help in awareness generation, provide information but also act as 'agents of change'. People have lot of expectations from media to contribute in capacity building of PRFs.

Both BDO and DPO said that Television could be used to generate awareness about the concept and utilization of e-panchayat. The DPO added that Radio too has a role in awareness generation, but the print media has a limited role due to literacy factor. Terming the role of media as marginal and peripheral, Dr. Alam said that its role is restricted to preparing masses for participation in the PR election and in awareness generation about e-Panchayat. Parvaiz observed that though media definitely has a role towards generating awareness among the people regarding the concept and importance of e-Panchayat but the reportage in local media vis-à-vis issues related to PR was not satisfactory as it was mostly focused on politics.

6.   Conclusions

Though relatively a new concept, e-Panchayat has a great potential especially in the cyber-age as it aims to explore the use of ICT tools at the grassroot level for better governance, participation, development and empowerment. Keeping in view its role and importance, a study was conducted in 10 Halqa Panchayats in Pattan block of Baramulla district in Jammu and Kashmir to explore it as a tool for empowering PRFs and facilitating them in their work to make the system effective, transparent and accountable.

The findings revealed that PRFs were not aware about the facility as e-Panchayat enabling agents like computers and internet were not available at the Panchayat Ghars. Keeping in view the mobile penetration, accessibility of mobile phones and internet usage, e-Panchayat holds great promise in the study area, but due to various impediments it has not really taken off.

PRFs and villagers were not computer literate as such even a simple computer application would be difficult for them to handle. In this context trained human resource or support staff in the form of Village Level Worker (VLW) or Gram Rozgar Sevak (GRS) or any other could facilitate them in their respective works. Basic computer trainings could be imparted to them so that they are able to facilitate PRFs in their work.

The data connectivity needs to be extended to Panchayat Ghars and trained staff be provided at the Halqa Panchayat level to make proper and effective implementation of e-Panchayat. This would not only create baseline at the grass root level for creating awareness about e-panchayat but would go a long way in empowering PRFs. Stress was also laid on capacity building of PRFs by providing them regular training programmes and increasing interaction sessions with local populace, officials and others. Interested PRFs could be taken on exposure visits, in groups, to outside village and state so that they get broader understanding of the concept of e-Panchayat, its functioning and various perspectives related to it.

Interestingly, mobile penetration and accessibility of mobile phones was predominant in the study area and it was found that e-Panchayat system has to be made more user-friendly by incorporating mobile phone based opportunities like SMS, toll free helpline and apps with automated options, which would later lead to quick

adaptability among the users. The PRFs, in particular, were comfortable with Toll Free Helpline as a tool for awareness generation and facilitating them in their work due to its cost effectiveness.

Absence of other infrastructural facilities (proper mating and furniture in the Panchayat Ghars), absence of proper office set-up and non-availability of round-the-clock electricity were the other challenges that need to be addressed at the earliest for effective implementation of e-Panchayat.

e-Panchayat is a great concept that holds immense significance in the contemporary society. It can serve as an empowering tool for masses at ground zero provided specific and target-oriented measures are taken well in time and thoroughly implemented. e-Panchayat can go a long way in strengthening participatory democracy at the grass root level.

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