



E-ISSN: 2664-603X
P-ISSN: 2664-6021
IJPSG 2025; 7(4): 121-124
www.journalofpoliticalscience.com
Received: 16-01-2025
Accepted: 19-02-2025

Siba Prasad Sahoo
Department of Political
Science and Public
Administration, Sambalpur
University, Jyoti Vihar, Burla
Sambalpur, Odisha, India

Significance of Panchayati raj institutions in agrarian governance: A study of Odisha

Siba Prasad Sahoo

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2025.v7.i4b.491>

Abstract

PRIs have a very significant role to play in agrarian governance, especially in a rural and agriculture dependent state like Odisha. Through this study, the role that PRIs play in formulating the agricultural policies, implementation mechanisms and grassroots decision making processes is examined. Despite wide ranging constitutional mandates of the 73rd Amendment Act, the PRIs continue to be mere implementing bodies rather than autonomous decision makers, which are subjected to bureaucratic control, political interference and lack of structural efficiency. This paper uses secondary data analysis to explicate the challenges of agrarian governance, of price instability, infrastructural deficit, and mismatches of supply and demand. This analyzes the potential and limitations of PRIs in the rural development in the light of schemes like, KALIA, PM-KISAN, and the Underground Piped Irrigation Project in Bargarh. In the study, the need for crop diversification, improved storage facilities, and market linkages is also brought out to reduce Odisha's dependence on other states. Thus, in the end, it is proved that in Odisha agriculture growth would be sustainable along this way, with PRIs acting as the key facilitator between policy maker and the farmer; helping the effective implementation of policy and the socio economic resilience.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), agrarian governance, agricultural policies, price instability, crop diversification, food security, decentralization, rural development

Introduction

India is among the top most populated countries in the world. To manage the vast population smoothly, the need for efficient governance is crucial in every field. Either in the field of education, health or agriculture, effective governance is much needed. The agrarian governance specifically has much more potential to shape the socio-economic as well as the political landscapes of the country, because no one can live without food. Food is one of the basic necessities of human life. That's why for centuries everyone tries to achieve the food security. In India, the variety of soil helps to seed different types of crops and pulses. But the facilities and encouragements given by governments are not favorable to every crop. Unequal importance creates barriers for the production of a particular crop. Due to that the supply of a certain crops goes down and gradually the demand falls. But there is a catch, the most essential vegetables like-Tomatoes, onions and potatoes create a reverse effect. When the supply of these products falls then due to a large demand, the price instability situation arises.

As we know the Panchayatiraj Institutions (PRIs) plays a dominant role in functioning of the rural developmental measures in grassroots level, they also have crucial powers to determine the political aspects of the agrarian rural economy. Mahatma Gandhi clearly stated that Development of villages is the true development of India. His concept of Gram Swaraj gave emphasis upon the self-reliance capabilities of villages. The focal points of all developmental activities in the state are the individual in particular and society in general. By focusing more upon grass root level i.e. Rural we can address the problems more efficiently and effectively. But the invisible division between rural and urban creates various issues to a larger extent.

"There are two schools of thought current in the world. One wants to divide the world into cities and the other into villages. The village civilization and the city civilization are totally different things. One depends on machinery and industrialization, and the other on handicrafts" (Gandhi, 1962, p.35) [5].

Corresponding Author:
Siba Prasad Sahoo
Department of Political
Science and Public
Administration Sambalpur
University, Jyoti Vihar, Burla
Sambalpur, Odisha, India

Over the recent days there has been a major shift from the Agriculture and Industry to Tourism and Urban life which influences the overall economy of the nation. It is for that reason it generates a cause effect circumstance. The 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 has ensured that the wide grass root governance of India be enchanted by the abstraction of knitted Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to the most essential part of Government administration which has the ability to illuminate governance in rural and agricultural domains as proportionate, participatory and illuminating. However, if we view the area of agrarian governance, we clearly see that the purpose of such an amendment has not yet been accomplished. That's why the shift happening. Robust implementation and sustained efforts should be done to empower Panchayats are crucial for realizing its potential to make a proper systematic governance.

According to Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (2023), the rate of Odisha's workforce involved in agriculture and allied sectors was as high as 48.1%. The implication of this is the importance of agricultural governance to stability of economic, especially in the rural areas. The governance over Odisha's agrarian circumstances is closely linked to the governance over rural issues that pertain to price instability as well as to the state's overall cultivation. However, considering its huge agricultural potential, Odisha faces problems of systemic aspect such as weak market linkages, inadequacy in infrastructure and fragmented supply chains all of which emanate from rural governance deficits. The main problem is the absence of clear, robust and transparent market mechanisms in rural areas. The exploitation of farmers also significantly depends on the involvement of intermediaries who purchase their produce in cheaper rates and sell it at exorbitant prices with price volatility being unpredictable. Imbalances in the structure of rural governance cannot provide for fair pricing through mechanisms like implementation of Minimum Support Price (MSP) or through access to regulated markets. They step in the way of farmers to the market shocks and the seasonal price crashes. The lack of adequate rural storage facilities is another major challenge in recent days. Not only do these increase post-harvest losses, but farmers have no access to larger markets with which to compete. Price instability for perishable goods makes farmers to sell at distress prices owing to the lack of cold storage facilities.

By focusing PRIs, agriculture has always been a top priority in the manifestos of political parties of Odisha in general elections 2014, 2019, and 2024. It has been spoken of promises to begin the introduction of innovative schemes and policies that would consolidate agrarian governance and maintain sustainable growth. But there are persistent problems that question the gap between endorsing such commitments and their fulfilling. Remaining dependent on other states for staples like potatoes, onions, tomatoes and other vegetation presents a key challenge as vegetables are not available in sufficient quantity. Such reliance has further intensified supply demand imbalances, resulting into frequent market break downs as well as price crises.

PRIs as Decision making body

From a viewpoint of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as decision makers, it is paradoxical that respondents at rural level do not hold much of an authority in relation to rural issues. PRIs are not ethnic autonomous institutions which

imply the capacity to formulate local concerns, rather they tend to function merely as instruments of executing government directives and implement the assigned projects without proactive local or regional considerations. Though it has helped some rural development, this system prevents the playing of a substantial role of PRIs in decision making, especially in areas of agriculture that are crucial for rural economies. In order to have some effective governance in rural area, there should be substantial power in the hand of PRIs particularly in the agriculture sector. Agriculture being the driving factor behind rural livelihoods; therefore it should be left to the stakeholders to make decisions based on local realities and emerging challenges. All the same, this must be affiliated to a structured oversight mechanism by higher authorities who are not initially intended to control but to ensure transparency and accountability in the whole process. The bureaucratic structures should not micromanage PRIs but handle them as independent entities capable of making informed decisions. Up to now, grassroots agricultural planning is one of the main functions of PRIs, but in reality, this has been reduced merely to a formal process. Zilla Parishads that should be highly engaged in the making of rural agrarian policies, tend to subject themselves to becoming rubber stamps of bureaucrats made plans. The action of Panchayati Raj largely consists of bureaucratic control over elected Panchayati Raj representatives that does not fit into a proper space for meaningful deliberation or local participation. Additionally, District Magistrates (DMs) and more bureaucrats have great power to overturn local planning decisions, further reducing the power of PRIs. Political interference of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), Members of Parliament (MPs) also undermine PRI autonomy and make such institutions vulnerable to external influences rather than being representative of rural interests. Structural reforms are needed to make PRIs as real decision makers in the field of agriculture. Let these reforms allow the local bodies to make independent decisions and let them be subject to the necessary checks and balances for making these decisions transparent. Therefore, to ensure that agricultural policies take cognizance of ground realities, agricultural policies will increase farmer participation and speak for them in the decision making process. To have a true grassroots governance model there has to be a shift from top down approach to bottom up approach whereby, PRIs are not mere passive implementers but active architects of rural agrarian development.

PRIs as Implimenting body

Inefficiencies in the implementation of the agrarian policies that directly benefit the farmer are scarce, not because of deficient formulating or effectiveness in these policies, but largely because of poor implementation. At the grassroots level, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are mostly perceived as administrative bodies only and very little resources are invested to build their capacities. As a result of this oversight suboptimal policy execution has taken place, resulting in policies being implemented inferiorly than intended. For effective policy implementation the institutions must be efficient, that the mechanisms of execution are in sync with the socio political and economic contexts of operation. Without this, even well designed policies will fail. Agrarian governance helps in handling the agricultural production and trade as well as market

conditions. Different agrarian policies have been rolled out in Odisha to resolve long standing issues in the sector. The long standing agrarian issues have been attempted to be addressed through state level initiatives like Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation (Kalia Yojana), Bhoomihina Agriculturist Loan and Resources Augmentation Model (Balaram) Yojana, Mukhyamantri Krushi Udyog Yojana (MKUY) and the central level schemes like Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM Kisan), Pradhan Mantri Kisan Maan Dhani Yojana (PM KMY) and Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY). However, despite these attempts, many of the earlier policies have failed; the continuous need for newer policies to tackle the same unresolved problems is evident.

The question that arises is: Why policies getting fail repeatedly. Who is at fault for their shortcomings? Whom to blame the stakeholders, PRIs, over coordinating policymakers or under coordinating implementers? Socio economic factors are consistently used in policy assessment; political dimensions of policy implementation at grassroots level are often neglected. The functioning of agrarian governance activities may be impeded by political dynamics within the PRIs and local governance arrangements. In the implementation process, there are bureaucratic inefficiencies including red tape that may slow things down and make the policies so too procedural and not outcome oriented. This has led to the development of a system centric, rigid approach which may lead to missing the real objectives of agriculture policies and thus defeat the objectives which were formulated to benefit the farmers. Because the framework of agrarian governance is so influenced by these structural and political barriers, it is important to address them in order to the make the agrarian governance more efficacious and contribute to the attainment of sustainable agricultural development.

PRIs as Facilitator

The Effective governance of agrarian system requires coordination between the various sections of the system and a policy decision, which can meet the needs of the farmers: Nevertheless, policies tend to be difficult to prepare and enforce in rural areas as a result of a lack of awareness, resistance to changes, and false beliefs of new government initiatives. With regards to such schemes and policies, PRIs become important intermediaries between the rural population and the government, for the purpose of executing various such schemes and policies, which aim towards agrarian development. PRIs are not as simple as they appear to serve as facilitators. All policies are subject to objection and obstacles; people are not all equally support or pleased with the implementation of a policy. Fear, misinformation or skepticism in regard of government initiatives most often forms the basis for opposition. It is natural for some people to oppose or question the impact of a policy since its every policy has positive and negative aspect. In this case, PRIs become involved in educating beneficiaries and helping rural communities to understand the benefits in the long term that these policies will have on them.

An example of such project is Underground Piped Irrigation Project in Bargarh district. Water provided by the Bargarh Main Canal is being drawn in through an 18 km long underground network and supplied to outlets at every four hectares of land. The Bargarh sub division of the district obtains its irrigation from the Bargarh Canal, which starts

from the Hirakud Reservoir but the Padampur sub division (including Bijepur and Sohela) was under drought stress severely. The primary objective of the project is to feed the irrigation to the Padampur (region), which will help farmers through the water scarcity and increase productivity of the agriculture. Despite this, implementing this project was not an easy task. At first, many farmers were against this idea because of misconceptions and fears. In traditional irrigation systems (Canal) land may be acquired or affected for construction of canals resulting in loss of cultivable land. The underground piped system was thought by many rural residents, however, to also bring about similar consequences. It was their unwillingness to accept the project as they thought they would lose land ownership or were not sure if they would get any benefits from the project. If beneficiaries do not perceive the good that will come of a policy or scheme for them, they would outright reject it. The Panchayati Raj Institutions played a very vital role in this. PRIs take an active part of local farmers, organize the awareness programs and tell pros and cons of Underground Piped Irrigation Project to eliminate myths and clear doubts. They also informed the rural population of how this new irrigation system would advance water distribution without usurping a great deal of land as was the case in the traditional canal system. By doing so, they pointed to how this new irrigation system would help increase agricultural production, turn the waste of water into productivity, and be an effective means for the drought prone areas. Eventually, the farmers started to see the advantages of such a project.

Any policy cannot be achieved only with good design but also with good communication to the people it is to serve. As an instrument of grassroots governance, PRIs are pivotal in making sure government schemes are delivered effectively to the targeted segments. Many well intentioned policies could fall short without the intervention of their people because they were unaware or were misinformed about the policy. It is to do with not only the policy, but the policy will succeed only if the rural people have awareness and acceptance. In the scenario of the Underground Piped Irrigation Project in Bargarh district, PRIs played a very significant role facilitating implementation of the project. PRIs educate, eager and address the concerns of local farmers, so that the government schemes accomplish what they were targeted to promote agricultural growth.

Conclusion

From what has been said above, it can be deduced that the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in agrarian governance, especially Odisha, is very necessary. But to come up to speed will require them to have greater autonomy and enhanced powers. PRIs have the potential to enhance PRIs in providing responses to rural agricultural challenges in a localized and efficient ways. The major problem in Odisha's agriculture sector is that there is lack of proper infrastructure, especially storage facility. Farmers cannot store their produce in many blocks in the state because there is little or no storage system in place, hence they sell the produce at lower prices before it perishes. The lack of infrastructure caused the prices to be unstable, seasonal unavailability of vegetables, and the dependence on other states for certain essential produce. This dependency thus makes neighboring states take advantage of it as they raise their prices as per Odisha's demand. Year round, there is high demand for staples such potatoes,

onions and tomatoes, but the supply often fails to meet the need. This prompts the very important question: Why does the government focus on the production of rice and not on other essential crops? Maybe there is an answer in the policies on food security. Below Poverty Line families are given rice as ration every month by the government to ensure food security to the poor. Thus, rice production is tremendously supported by Minimum Support Price (MSP), subsidies or incentives of various kinds. Rice production could drop which means that the state might not be in a position to continue its food security programs without relying on imports and if the importations were reduced the state might have broader economic impact. Nevertheless, the focus on rice should not come at the expense of the other produce in agriculture. Self-reliance in agriculture is much needed. The government and the PRIs should all work in conjunction with PRIs to encourage cultivation of not only rice but also other crops for food security. The Millet Mission programs have demonstrated that there are certain programs which ensure the production and marketing of millet, a super food which is gaining global attraction. The government has been working with PRIs to persuade farmers to grow millet, with support and necessary resources have been provided by the government. The same approach should be adopted to ensure the production of other crops that can find favor in Odisha's varying soil type. The soil type is varied in Odisha, which largely suggests that crop can be grown in diffuse variety. This advantage can be utilized so much that the state becomes less dependent in the outside for vital food items. Koraput is a great example, where tribal farmers are introducing strawberry cultivation. Farmers in other districts in the region have been inspired to grow strawberries which were traditionally a foreign fruit. In similar vein, the cultivation of dragon fruit in Odisha went on successfully, and it is a sign that farmers can increase their agricultural portfolio with helpful guidance and assistance. These success stories point out that if provided the right resources, knowledge and encouragement, farmers can grow high value crops that had previously been considered as unsuitable for this area. Thus the government, with PRIs, needs to be able to provide subsidies, training, and market access to farmers that are willing to diversify their cultivation. This would ensure increased farmers' income as well as a push towards strengthening the agricultural economy of Odisha. The law of Comparative Advantage as propounded by the economist David Ricardo can be extended to interstate agricultural trade. The principle involved here is that *states should produce those crops at which they are most efficient and import other crops that are produced more efficiently elsewhere*. Adopting this approach, Odisha will be able to specialize in the crops it is best suited to planting under its climate and soil conditions and get into fair trade with other the states to get a stable supply of vegetables and other essential commodities. Such a solution would resolve these problems of price volatility and supply demand misbalance. Nevertheless, none of these measures can succeed without the PRIs and farmers. At the grassroots level, the PRIs have a key role in the implementation of agricultural policies. This will strengthen their capacity and give them more decision making powers that will enable them in providing support to farmers effectively. It is also important for PRIs to enable farmers to have access to technology, credit and assured storage facilities, so as to prevent them from having to suffer any unnecessary losses.

The challenge of agricultural governance in Odisha is of evolving with the changing life styles and economic climate.

There is no way that traditional crop such as rice can trust for long term sustainability. What is needed is diversified, good infrastructure, and access to the market, for which the government, PRIs and farmers have to work together to create an atmosphere that promotes agriculture so that, in turn, there will be food security as well as a steady economic activity in the country. Though PRIs have played an important role in shaping the design of agrarian governance in Odisha, they have much room for improvement. To strengthen their role, to improve infrastructure, promote crop diversity and to promote trade principles like Comparative Advantage, Odisha can become more self-sufficient. Any policy or reform of the agricultural sector must be done with keeping farmers in mind, as they are the backbone. To expand, it will be necessary to adjust to the changing face of the agricultural sector. Thus, continuous reforms and pro-active governance are considered necessary to achieve a sustainable and prosperous agricultural future in Odisha.

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