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Panchayati Raj Institutions and the emergence of grassroots leadership in Prakasam District of Andhra Pradesh – A historical study

T Srikanth[1], G Somasekhara[2]
[1] Research Scholar, Department of History & Archeology, Acharya Nagaruna University, Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India
[2] Professor, Department of History & Archeology, Ongole, Campus, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarajuna Nagar, Guntur, Andhar Pradesh, India
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Abstract
In India, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are the most established and pervasive type of democratic decentralization. The article explores how the Panchayati Raj system in Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh developed historically and how it made provision for a new generation of rural leaders. The paper starts with the Madras Presidency's colonial local-board procedures and continues through the Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957), the Andhra Pradesh three-tier structure (1959), the Mandal system (1986), and the changes brought about by the Andhra Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act (1994) and the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992). Founded in 1970 and named for the independence warrior Tanguturi Prakasam Pantulu, Prakasam's political culture was influenced by a strong nationalist and reformist heritage. The paper contends that PRIs gradually broadened the social base of rural leadership, shifting it away from dominant landholding and caste groups and toward women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Backward Classes, though this shift has been uneven and frequently hampered by social hierarchies and proxy practices. The study is based on a reading of government papers, statutes, district gazetteers, and secondary literature, and it will be complemented with field evidence from the district.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions, grassroots leadership, Prakasam District, Andhra Pradesh, local self-government, 73rd Constitutional Amendment, social change

Introduction

For centuries, the village has served as the fundamental unit of India's political and social life. Ancient and medieval sources refer to village assemblies that were responsible for managing local affairs, resolving disputes, and collecting dues. Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj placed the self-governing village at the center of his vision for an independent India. However, when the Indian Constitution was framed in 1950, village panchayats were included only under the Directive Principles of State Policy through Article 40, rather than being established as an enforceable constitutional institution. It was only after the Community Development Programme failed to ensure meaningful popular participation that the state began to seriously consider establishing elected local self-governing bodies.

In Andhra Pradesh, the Panchayati Raj system was introduced shortly after the submission of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee's report, making the state one of the earliest in India to adopt the three-tier system of local self-government. Since its introduction, these institutions have undergone repeated transformations as a result of legislative changes, shifts in the political landscape, and constitutional reforms. Each phase of this evolution has influenced the eligibility of individuals to contest elections, the prospects of different groups for electoral success, and the extent to which various sections of rural society have been able to express their views and participate in village affairs.

Prakasam District provides a valuable case for historical investigation. The district is predominantly agrarian and drought-prone, comprising both a coastal belt and an interior dryland region. It is characterized by a diverse caste structure and has a long history of participation in the freedom movement, along with agrarian struggles and social reform initiatives. Against this background, the central objective of this paper is to examine the role of Panchayati Raj institutions in facilitating the emergence of new grassroots leadership in the district. It also seeks to investigate the extent to which this emerging leadership represented a genuine process of social awakening and political empowerment, rather than merely perpetuating the traditional patterns of social and political dominance.

Objectives and Methodology

The Objectives of the study are:

1. To trace the historical evolution of local self-government in the Madras Presidency and Andhra region up to the formation of Prakasam District.
2. To examine the stages of development of the Panchayati Raj system in Andhra Pradesh and their effect on Prakasam District.
3. To analyse the changing social composition of rural leadership in the district.
4. To assess the role of constitutional reservation in bringing women and marginalised communities into leadership.
5. To identify the main constraints on effective grassroots leadership.

The present study adopts the historical method of research, integrating both descriptive and analytical approaches to examine the evolution of Panchayati Raj institutions and the emergence of grassroots leadership. The primary sources of information include committee reports, legislative

enactments, government orders, census data, district gazetteers, and records of panchayat and zilla parishad institutions. Secondary sources comprise books, journal articles, and previous studies dealing with the development of Panchayati Raj in India and Andhra Pradesh. In addition, wherever available, interviews with former and serving panchayat representatives are used to supplement the documentary evidence and offer additional perspectives on the historical development of rural leadership.

Review of Literature

The existing literature on Panchayati Raj in India can be broadly classified into four major categories. The first category comprises official committee reports, particularly those of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957), the Ashok Mehta Committee (1978)[1, 2], and the G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985)[3], which played a significant role in shaping the institutional structure of Panchayati Raj and influencing debates concerning the powers and responsibilities of local self-government bodies. The second category examines Panchayati Raj from constitutional and administrative perspectives, focusing on the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the devolution of functions, financial resources, and administrative personnel. The third category, represented by the works of political scientists and sociologists, investigates the social foundations of local leadership and explores the relationship between caste, landownership, and political power within village society. The fourth category concentrates on social inclusion and political representation, particularly examining the impact of reservation policies on the participation and representation of women and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe members in Panchayati Raj institutions.

Studies on Panchayati Raj in Andhra Pradesh generally highlight the state's early adoption of the system, the influence of dominant landholding castes on local politics, the political experiments undertaken during the 1980s and 1990s, and the subsequent integration of local self-government institutions with welfare and development programmes. However, historical research conducted at the district level remains relatively limited, particularly in the case of districts formed after 1956. The present paper seeks to address this research gap by examining the historical development of Panchayati Raj institutions and the emergence of grassroots leadership in Prakasam District, situating district-level developments within the broader historical and political context of Andhra Pradesh and India.

Historical Background of Local Self – Government before 1959

1. The Colonial Inheritance

Local self-government in the Telugu-speaking districts developed during the period of British colonial rule under the Madras Presidency. The Madras Village Panchayats Act of 1920 and the Madras Local Boards Act of 1920 established elected local institutions to administer village and local affairs. Subsequently, the Government of India Act of 1935 and the introduction of provincial autonomy enhanced the political significance of local government institutions. However, their functioning remained constrained by property-based electoral qualifications, official control, and inadequate financial resources, which restricted meaningful participation largely to a small elite comprising landowners and educated sections of society.

2. Nationalism and Political Awakening

The region that subsequently became Prakasam District played a significant role in India's national movement. Major political campaigns, including the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Chirala–Perala agitation against municipal taxation, and the Civil Disobedience Movement, mobilised thousands of rural people and brought them into public and political life. Tanguturi Prakasam Pantulu, popularly known as Andhra Kesari, emerged as one of the prominent symbols of this nationalist tradition and later became the first Chief Minister of Andhra State in 1953. The national movement contributed to the expansion of political awareness among rural communities, fostered a cadre of local organisers, and established a tradition of public service. These developments subsequently influenced rural political participation and helped shape the emergence of leadership within Panchayati Raj institutions.

3. Post - Independence Foundations

Following India's independence in 1947, the Madras Government and, subsequently, the Andhra Government made efforts to revitalise village panchayats. However, these institutions continued to function with limited powers and inadequate financial resources. The introduction of the Community Development Programme in 1952 and the National Extension Service in 1953 aimed to promote rural development through people's participation. In practice, however, these programmes remained largely administration-driven, with government officials playing the dominant role in planning and implementation. The limited success of this approach in securing meaningful public participation pointed to the necessity of a more democratic and decentralised system of rural administration. Consequently, the Government of India appointed the Balwantrai Mehta Committee in 1957 [1] to examine the functioning of community development programmes and recommend measures to strengthen democratic decentralisation.

Panchayati Raj in Andhra Pradesh and Prakasam District

1. The Three – Tier System of 1959

The Balwantrai Mehta Committee recommended the establishment of a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj, comprising the village-level Gram Panchayat, the block-level Panchayat Samiti, and the district-level Zilla Parishad. The committee emphasised democratic elections and the devolution of genuine powers and responsibilities to these institutions for implementing rural development programmes. Andhra Pradesh was among the first states in India to implement this system. In 1959, legislation was enacted to establish Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samithis, and Zilla Parishads, and the Panchayati Raj system was inaugurated in the state during the same year. Subsequently, further legislative measures were introduced to consolidate and modify the institutional framework, including the Andhra Pradesh Gram Panchayats Act of 1964 [5], which contributed to the continued development of rural local self-government in the state.

During this period, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were closely associated with the implementation of community development programmes, agricultural initiatives, rural public works, and primary education. At the village level, leadership generally emerged from families possessing land,

educational qualifications, and connections with the dominant political parties. Sarpanches and Panchayat Samithi presidents played an important role as intermediaries between village communities and the government, facilitating the implementation of development programmes and the delivery of administrative services. Through these responsibilities, they strengthened their local influence, expanded their political networks, and gradually established themselves as influential political leaders.

2. Formation of Prakasam District (1970)

Prakasam District was formed on 2 February 1970 by integrating territories drawn from the neighbouring districts of Guntur, Nellore, and Kurnool, with Ongole designated as its headquarters. The decision to name the newly formed district after Tanguturi Prakasam Pantulu symbolically connected its administrative identity with the region's nationalist heritage. Following its formation, the district developed its own institutional framework of Panchayati Raj, comprising the Zilla Parishad, Panchayat Samithis, and Gram Panchayats. These institutions functioned across a geographically diverse region extending from the coastal delta to the drought-prone inland areas, each presenting distinct socio-economic and developmental challenges. In April 2022, the Government of Andhra Pradesh reorganised the state's districts, resulting in changes to the boundaries of Prakasam District. Accordingly, the present historical analysis primarily examines the district as it existed during the period under study, taking into account its earlier geographical and administrative boundaries.

3. Stagnation, Suspension and Political Control (1960s - 1980s)

During the 1960s and 1970s, Panchayati Raj institutions in Andhra Pradesh, as in many other parts of India, faced several challenges, including irregular elections, financial dependence on the state government, and substantial political and bureaucratic control. Elections were periodically postponed, and elected local bodies were sometimes superseded, weakening their democratic functioning and institutional autonomy. In response to the shortcomings of the existing system, the Ashok Mehta Committee was appointed in 1977 and submitted its report in 1978 [2], recommending a two-tier structure of local self-government based on the district and the mandal, along with a clearer definition of political responsibilities. During this period, political leaders increasingly regarded local self-government institutions as platforms for advancing their political careers and entering state-level legislative politics. This development strengthened the connections between local and state politics but also intensified factional rivalries and encouraged the growth of patron–client networks within rural political structures.

4. The Mandal System (1986)

In 1986, the Government of Andhra Pradesh replaced the Panchayat Samithis with Mandal Praja Parishads as part of its efforts to reorganise the system of rural local self-government. The introduction of smaller administrative units brought governance structures closer to rural communities and improved the accessibility of government offices to village residents. This reform increased the number of local administrative and political positions, thereby creating additional opportunities for rural leadership, particularly among social groups that had previously enjoyed limited access to higher positions of authority. At the same time, the reorganisation strengthened the influence of political parties in rural electoral contests. In Prakasam District, the introduction of the mandal system significantly reshaped the local political power structure and established an additional tier of leadership between the village-level Gram Panchayats and the district-level Zilla Parishad.

The 73 rd Constitutional Amendment and a New Social Base

The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992 [4], which came into effect in 1993, granted constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions in India and strengthened the framework of democratic decentralisation. It provided for regular elections to panchayats at five-year intervals, the establishment of State Election Commissions to conduct and supervise local body elections, and the constitution of State Finance Commissions to review the financial position of panchayats. It also prescribed a three-tier system of local self-government in states with larger populations. Significantly, the amendment introduced provisions to promote social justice and inclusive political representation by reserving seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population in the respective areas. Furthermore, it mandated that not less than one-third of the total seats in panchayats be reserved for women and provided for the reservation of not less than one-third of the offices of chairpersons for women. These constitutional provisions marked an important milestone in expanding political participation and creating opportunities for historically marginalised sections of rural society.

In accordance with the provisions of the Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992 [4], the Government of Andhra Pradesh enacted the Andhra Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act, 1994 [6], to strengthen and regulate the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions in the state. In the subsequent years, elections to Gram Panchayats, Mandal Parishads, and Zilla Parishads enabled large numbers of women and members of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Backward Classes to enter formal political institutions, thereby creating opportunities for groups that had previously been underrepresented in positions of political authority. State-level initiatives introduced during the late 1990s, particularly the Janmabhoomi program, along with the expansion of women's self-help groups, contributed to the development of social networks, leadership skills, and political confidence among rural women. These groups provided many women with an organizational foundation through which they could enter local politics and participate in village-level decision-making. Subsequently, state government decisions to increase women's reservation in local self-government institutions beyond the constitutional minimum further strengthened women's political representation and widened opportunities for their participation in rural governance.

In Prakasam District, developments in political representation broadly reflected the trends observed across Andhra Pradesh. The implementation of reservation policies led to a noticeable increase in the representation of women as sarpanches and ward members, as well as in the participation of women and members of Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes in Mandal Parishads and Zilla

Parishads. These changes expanded opportunities for historically underrepresented sections of rural society to enter formal political institutions and participate in local governance. However, the extent to which this increased representation translated into effective leadership, independent decision-making, and genuine political empowerment varied considerably across different parts of the district.

Analysis: Emergence of Grassroots Leadership

1. Broadening of the Social Base

The historical evidence indicates that the social composition of rural leadership in Prakasam District evolved through three broad phases. During the first phase, beginning in 1959, leadership within Panchayati Raj Institutions remained largely concentrated among landowning families and dominant caste groups that already possessed considerable social status, economic resources, and local influence. The second phase, which emerged following the introduction of mandal-level reforms in the 1980s, witnessed the creation of new political opportunities. The growing competition among political parties facilitated the emergence of leaders from intermediate caste groups and backwards classes, enabling them to gain greater access to positions of local authority. The third phase began after the implementation of the constitutional provisions introduced by the Seventy-Third Amendment in 1993, when reservation policies established a legal basis for the political representation of women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes. This development reduced their dependence on the discretionary support of established political elites for access to elected positions. Overall, this historical progression demonstrates a gradual expansion of the social base of rural leadership, although elements of the earlier patterns of dominance and inequality continued to influence the functioning of local political institutions.

Social Awakening and Political Learning

Participation in elections, village meetings, and local committees provided many first-generation rural leaders with valuable opportunities to acquire practical experience in public administration, negotiate with government officials, and manage funds allocated for development activities. For members of historically marginalised communities, occupying elected positions had both symbolic and practical significance, as it challenged established social hierarchies and influenced the manner in which they were perceived and treated within village society. The nationalist and reformist traditions of the Prakasam region, combined with the expansion of educational opportunities and the growing implementation of welfare programmes, created a favourable environment for the development of political awareness and leadership skills among rural communities. However, although these factors appear to have contributed to the emergence of new grassroots leadership, their precise relationship with local political transformation requires further district-level historical evidence for a more definitive assessment.

2. Women Leadership

Reservation policies created significant opportunities for women to enter local political leadership in a social environment where public authority had traditionally been dominated by men. Many women elected to Panchayati Raj Institutions have demonstrated effective leadership by prioritising essential community needs, including drinking water, sanitation, education, healthcare, and the implementation of welfare programmes. However, studies conducted across India have also documented the practice of male relatives exercising actual decision-making authority on behalf of elected women representatives, a phenomenon commonly described as proxy leadership or sarpanch-pati leadership. Prakasam District has also faced this broader challenge, raising important questions about the extent to which women representatives exercise independent political authority. Consequently, the gap between women's formal representation in elected positions and their actual participation in decision-making remains a central issue in evaluating the effectiveness of women's political empowerment through Panchayati Raj institutions.

Limitations

Several factors have constrained the transformative potential of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in rural society. These include their continued dependence on state governments for financial resources and administrative functions, the growing influence of party politics, the dominance of bureaucratic authorities over elected representatives, and the persistence of caste- and class-based hierarchies. In addition, limited literacy and awareness among some first-time representatives can restrict their ability to perform administrative responsibilities and exercise their powers effectively. The challenges are further intensified in regions such as Prakasam District, where recurrent droughts and agrarian distress place considerable pressure on local economies and rural livelihoods. In constituencies reserved for historically marginalized communities, elected representatives may also encounter pressure, resistance, or non-cooperation from socially and economically powerful groups, thereby limiting their independence and capacity to implement development initiatives.

Findings

1. The development of Panchayati Raj in Prakasam District was rooted in the long-standing tradition of local self-government under the Madras Presidency and the strong nationalist legacy of the Andhra region, both of which played an important role in shaping the evolution of rural political institutions.
2. Major legislative and institutional reforms, including the introduction of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system in 1959, the mandal-level reorganisation in 1986, and the constitutional and state-level reforms implemented during 1993–1994, significantly reshaped the structure of local governance and transformed the patterns of rural leadership.
3. The social composition of rural leadership has gradually broadened, extending beyond traditionally dominant landowning groups to include members of backward classes, women, scheduled castes, and Scheduled Tribes, thereby promoting greater social diversity and inclusiveness in local governance.
4. Constitutional reservations have been the single most significant factor in enabling marginalised communities to enter elected positions in Panchayati Raj Institutions. However, formal representation has not always translated into effective decision-making power or genuine authority in local governance.

5. Financial dependency, political interference, entrenched social hierarchies, and the practice of proxy leadership continue to constrain the autonomy of grassroots institutions, limiting their ability to function independently and make decisions that reflect the needs and interests of local communities.

Conclusion

The historical evolution of Panchayati Raj in Prakasam District demonstrates that democratic decentralisation is a gradual process shaped by institutional changes, social inequalities, and political contestations. Over the past six decades, Panchayati Raj institutions have transformed from government-directed agencies for rural development into constitutionally recognised institutions of local self-government, bringing significant changes in the nature and composition of rural leadership. This transformation has created opportunities for a new generation of leaders, particularly women and members of historically marginalised communities, to participate in local governance and occupy leadership positions that were previously inaccessible to them. However, the realisation of the broader objectives of democratic decentralisation and social empowerment remains constrained by the limited devolution of financial resources, administrative responsibilities, and personnel, as well as inadequate capacity-building opportunities for elected representatives and the persistence of proxy leadership. Addressing these challenges is essential to strengthening grassroots democracy and ensuring the effective functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions. Further field-based studies at the mandal and village levels would provide a deeper understanding of these developments, assess the extent of social and political transformation, and contribute to a more comprehensive historical account of Panchayati Raj and rural leadership in Prakasam District.

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