



Structural Awareness of Panchayat Raj Institutions in Jammu and Kashmir: A Study of Budgam District

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Abstract: Panchayats are a grass-root level government as they provide early resolution of people's grievances. People's participation in this institution is vital as it makes these institutions vibrant, accountable, and transparent. In the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir, the panchayats are in a nascent phase as they have remained underdeveloped over a period of time due to political instability and violence in the erstwhile state. However, in the last decade, two Panchayat elections were conducted by the government in which people participated. This led to the institutionalisation of Panchayat institutions in the erstwhile state. In this respect, a study has been conducted in the district Budgam in Jammu and Kashmir to know people's structural awareness of Panchayat institutions, relationships between officials and non-officials, and the dominance in the Panchayat institutions. The study is based on primary data and was analysed through percentage method as well as graphical representation of the responses of the respondents are shown in the below charts. The results show that no significant variations were found between groups; however educated group had little bit more awareness as compared to other groups.

Keywords: Panchayat, Awareness, Dominance, Education, Relationship.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Panchayat Raj institutions have a long history in the Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. From ancient times to the present era, the erstwhile state had the existence of Panchayat institutions despite facing ups and downs in its long period of existence. The Panchayat, as a democratic institution, had not lost its roots of glory between eras; history shows that these institutions were performing vibrantly at times.¹ In the Dogra rule, when the state emerged as a single political identity; the re-emergence of Panchayat was also witnessed. Despite having only judicial powers, Panchayat institutions were performing well in the rural areas, and in the same period, a freedom movement had taken shape under the leadership of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. The downtrodden people of the state raised their voice against autocratic, feudal, and dynastic governments (freedom movement for responsible government). Earlier, the freedom movement was largely religious-centric or community-based as it was headed by the Muslim Conference, but the party was renamed as the National Conference, which gave the movement a secular shape and involved all the people from the different regions of the state.² During the same period, the NC issued the blueprint of the movement or party, where a separate chapter was dedicated to local self-government. It is from here that Panchayat institutions receive complete attention on the part of governing parties. After independence, the governments of Jammu and Kashmir passed village Panchayat acts in 1951 and 1958. These acts gave a boost to the democratic institutions at the grass-root level; the state had launched a national development programme and a community development programme in the state. However, elections to the Panchayat institutions were not conducted till 1969 due to political instability in the erstwhile state.³ The first Panchayat elections in the state were conducted in 1969, when a largely population participated. Again, the state government couldn't conduct elections after this despite passing the historic Panchayat legislation Act in 1989 and notifying Panchayat rules in 1996. It was again because of the volatile situation, militancy, and conflict that had affected this institution. In 2001, the state government conducted Panchayat elections, but these elections were again boycotted by the people of the valley. The 2011 elections were peaceful, and they are regarded as the valley's first "real elections" by various stakeholders. These elections provided opportunities for both the state and the federal government to bridge the trust gap between the government and the people.⁴ However, both governments failed to capitalise on these opportunities, further lagging the former state behind in development. The Panchayat was dissolved in 2016 but elections



were not conducted as the erstwhile state was facing violent protest from the people as the state was engulfed by violence due to the death of Burhan Wani. Under the governors' rule, the elections were conducted in October 2018, but these elections were again boycotted by major regional parties of the erstwhile state, citing security and article 370 as reasons for non-participation of the people. The Jammu and Kashmir region, on the other hand, saw a high turnout with 60% of voters casting ballots. It was only in the Kashmir region that there was a total boycott of the Panchayat elections. After the revocation of article 370, the state administration conducted bi-polls for the vacant seats in October 2020. In this election, there was a large voter turnout in the vacant, with 70% of electorates' voting⁵. After the institutions of Panchayat had been institutionalised and revitalised again in the Union Territory, there is a strong political will from the central government to empower the Panchayat Raj institutions in the Union Territory. In the study, an attempt was made to study the perception and structural awareness of the people in the Badgam district.

2. Objectives of the study

1. To study the structural awareness among the people about the Panchayat Raj institutions,
2. To study the dominance of the Panchayat institution Raj in the district of Badgam.

3. Research Methodology :

The study was conducted in the purposively selected Badgam district of Jammu and Kashmir as the district is not affected by militancy too much and it was also feasible for the researcher to study things properly. The sample was randomly selected by the researcher by picking up 3 Panchayats from each block: Badgam, Narbal, and Soibugh. The data was collected through an interview schedule and through participatory observation of the researcher. Following data collection, the researcher inserted the data into an excel sheet and scored the data, to give a graphical representation of the things in perspective.

4. Discussion and Analysis :

Awareness deals with the perception and knowledge of a person about any particular object, idea, concept or work etc. It decides his working performance in any institution which leads to his better performance also. The level of awareness of general population is referred as the degree to which these people were familiar with the knowledge about the different subject matter and content of Panchayati raj system of the country. It determines the perception and knowledge of people about the of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) about the system and also affects their working pattern and outcome of Panchayat bodies. Therefore, it was found important and taken for the present study and operationalized as to investigate the conceptual knowledge of respondents about Panchayat raj in terms of structural awareness, relations between political person and functionaries, dominance in the Panchayat Raj institution.

The below table 1 presents that number of sample taken for the study, it includes all general population viz educated, uneducated, half-educated etc. Education was taken as independent variable and the dependent variables include awareness, harmonious relationship, bureaucracy and dominance in the Panchayat.

4.1 Education level of Respondents

S.NO	Education level	Sample
1	Illiterates	68
2	Upto 12 th class	81
3	More than 12 th class	88
TOTAL		237

Field survey: April 2022

In the beginning of the study, researcher aims to bring out the basic information from the respondents which includes all types of the population viz women, man, youth, employed and unemployed etc. The researcher aims to study the people's structural awareness of the grass-root Institutions. The other objectives of this part are to find out dominance in the Panchayat institutions and the relations between representatives and officials from the perspective of the local people. In this respect, respondents were asked, Point out the number of functionaries in your gram Panchayat. The researcher intends to know about the awareness of the people regarding their functionaries and to find out whether Panchayat Ghars or buildings are established in their villages from the opinion of the people.

A majority of respondents frequently asserted orally that VLW (Village level worker or Panchayat Secretary) is the only functionary in our Panchayat. Out of the sample of 237, 150 asserted that one functionary is in our halqa Panchayat. Also, a number of respondents said that "No" functionaries are in our halqa Panchayat. A number of



people asserted that two of the functionaries were from our villages. To find out, whether there was a variation between groups, the researcher felt that these villagers were confused with regard to the functionaries in their Panchayat. Between groups, it was felt by the researcher the semi-educated and educated had more information viz-a-viz functionaries in their villages. The researcher saw in a number of villages that there were no Panchayat ghars available. People have to go to the block for the redressal of their grievances.

According to their claims, the government of Jammu and Kashmir advertised a recruitment (02 Of 2020-Dated 06-07-2020) drive in the union territory's rural development department and Panchayat institutions in order to empower grass-root institutions and build institutional capacity in Panchayat institutions. The government recruited 1,889 via Jammu and Kashmir Service Selection Board (Recruitment Board) Panchayat account assistants in the union territory to fill vacancies in the department. These recruited individuals have received appointment orders and have been assigned to Panchayat Halqas or blocks in all union territory districts. In this respect, the researcher framed questions to find out whether people are aware of the creation and recruitment in the Panchayat. The purpose of this inquiry is to find awareness in the people. The researcher asked whether there was a new post created by government for the purpose of empowering Panchayat institutions. To this, a majority of respondents asserted that no post had been created or new functionaries were being sent to our panchayats. However, a number of respondents asserted that some posts are being advertised through local recruitment bodies. But the 2/3rd population seem to be unaware of these posts. But majority seem to be unaware about these posts. Similar findings were observed by Khare (2001), Rajneesh (2002) and Tyagi and Sinha (2003).

In the Panchayats, officials perform administrative tasks and are subject to rules and regulations. They work to guarantee that laws are followed and that the government's regulations are followed. Political representatives, on the other hand, are focused on people. They always think about their own interests and strive to get more people to vote for them. Political leaders, on the other hand, are people-focused. They make an effort to appease people in order to keep and grow their voter base. They even attempt to breach the law to appease people. Here, bureaucrats and political leaders will debate on moral ideals. The following graph displays respondents' perceptions of cordial interactions between political leaders and officials who are dispatched by authorities alongside elected representatives.

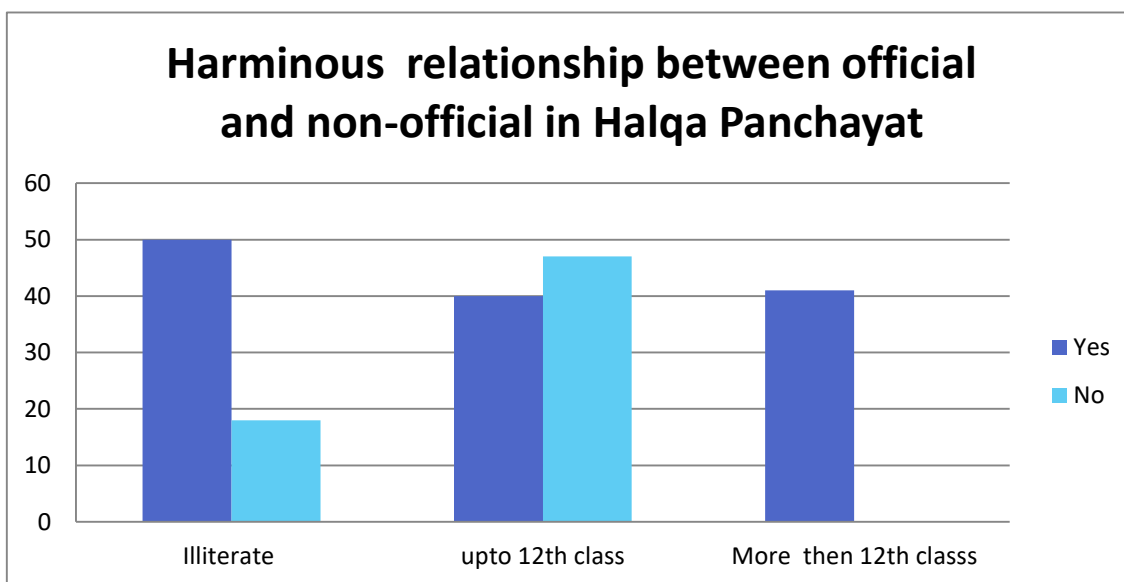


Figure 1.1 – Cumulative frequencies of the Respondents

The chart shows that a majority of respondents accept that there is a harmonious relationship between official and non-official working in the Panchayat. The majority responded positively, saying "Yes" there is a good relationship between people working in panchayats and the people in their area. In between groups, 73% percent illiterates, 49.38% semi-educated, 46.59% educated have asserted 'Yes' that there is a harmonious relation between groups. However, 26.47 illiterates, 50.61% semi-educated, 53.40% educated said 'No' that there does not exist harmonious relations between officials and non-officials in their halqa Panchayat. Within groups, it was found that major difference exists particularly in the uneducated group as majority had asserted there is positive relation between officials and non-officials.



Panchayats Raj institutions are the grass-root representative’s bodies. They represent will of their people at the local level. They are elected by the people directly through elections. They have more authority compared to the administration. These representatives occupy dominant positions in their villages as they feel superior over the some aspects of village level. They had connections with the local regional political parties as both had vested interests in each other. Sarpanch and panches from the perception of political parties are vital for the garb of power, they feel that these represent the voices of the people at the grass-root level, for their vote bank they maintain close relationship with them. On the other hand, representatives at the local level institutes also maintain connection in purpose to get works for the local villages. It is also found that by maintaining connections to the political parties, Sarpanch and panches feel powerful in the local activities. In this respect, a query had been framed by researcher to know the superiority feeling of the political person at the village level from the perception of the people. The responses are shown in the graphically form below;

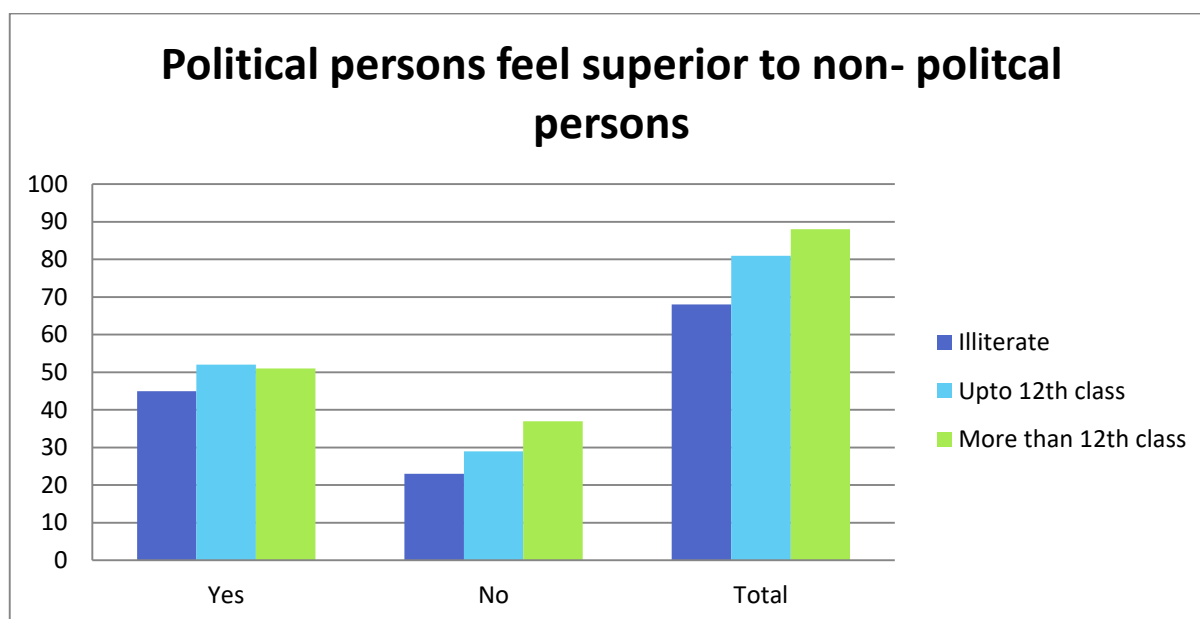


Figure 1.2 – Cumulative frequencies of the Respondents

Bureaucracy is the main organ of the government. Bureaucrats are recruited through rigid procedure. They have serious expertise in the administration and are trained thoroughly. Panchayat representatives had often to go for these officers in the district administration for their local problems. As numbers of functions are transferred to the Panchayat institutions which are related to different departments of district administration, Panchayat representative had the right to visit for the solution of their problems in the villages. The local state government from time to time had ordered to departments that Panchayat representatives should be taken along before carrying any developmental work in the Panchayat halqa. But the reality on the ground is different as many research results had shown that bureaucracy is not cooperating to the Panchayat bodies. This resulted that these institutions remain very defunct in their functioning. Bureaucracy and Panchayat representatives had to work hand in hand in order to bring empowerment of the grass-root people, bureaucracy had to play a vital role in the rural development. In this concern, respondents were asked whether their bureaucracy feels superior to political persons. The respondents had replied positively as shown in the below chart;

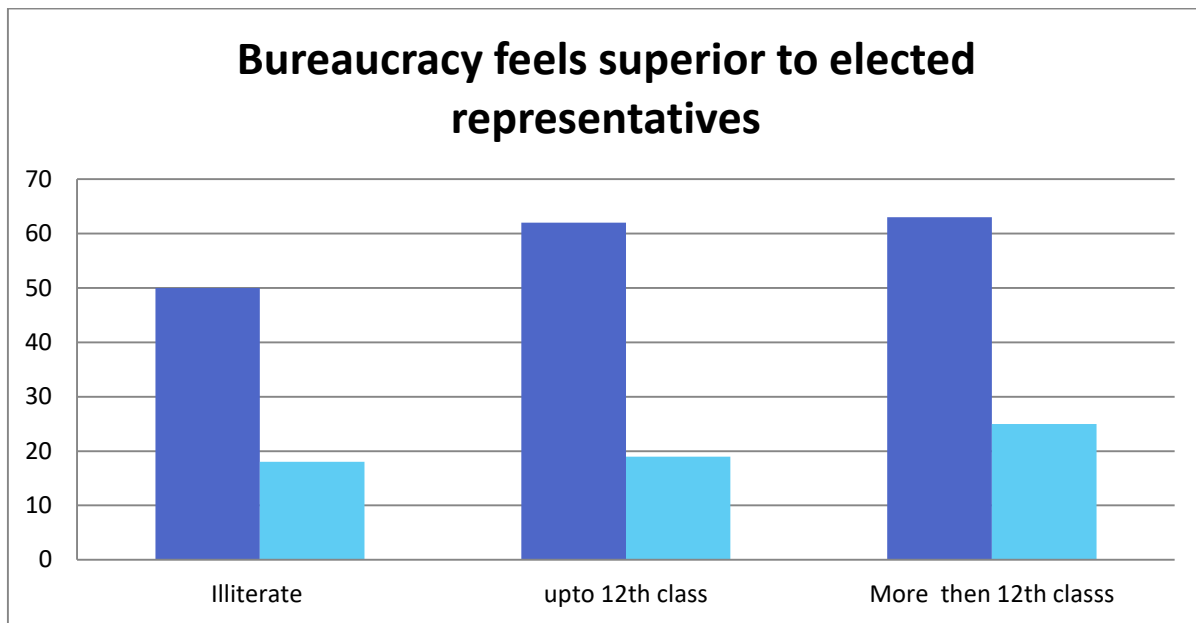


Figure 1.3 – Cumulative frequencies of the Respondents

Among the three groups, the majority of the respondents had frequently asserted 'Yes', which means that the majority of respondents felt that bureaucracy feels superior to political people. In between groups, 73.52% illiterates, 76.54% semi-educated, 71.59% educated asserted that bureaucracy had the superiority feeling over the Panchayat representatives. They asserted orally that majority of their representatives are uneducated, they mostly have unawareness about their functions and powers. A significant number of respondents also asserted that 'No' that bureaucracy is not feeling so. In between groups, 26.47% illiterates, 23.45% semi-educated and 28.40% educated asserted that bureaucracy is not feeling superior to these elected representatives. Within groups, it was also found that no significant variations exist in all the three groups. A majority of respondents in all the three groups had homogeneity in their perception vis-a-vis bureaucratic superiority over the elected representatives at the grass-root level.

The executive powers of the Halqa Panchayat are to be carried out by Sarpanch acting under the authority of the Gram Panchayat. He is the chief and president of each committee. In this connection, Respondents are asked who dominates in Gram Panchayat. Their response can be frequently observed from the following graph

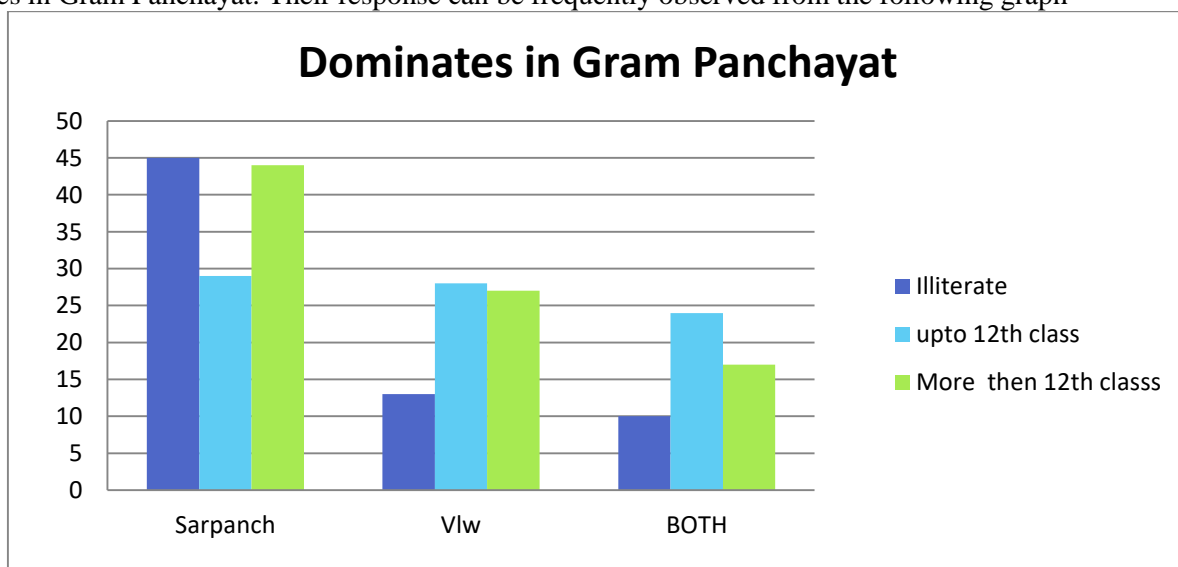


Figure 1.4 – Cumulative frequencies of the Respondents



The chart indicates that in all the groups, the majority responded that Sarpanch dominates in the halqa Panchayat, while the other majority asserted that it is village level worker (VLW) that dominates in the gram Panchayat. In the descriptive analysis, 66.17% illiterates, 35.08% semi-educated and 50% educated had asserted that it is Sarpanch who dominates in their Halqa Panchayat. A significant number of respondents in all the groups asserted that VLW dominates in their village as 19.11% illiterates, 34.56% semi-educated, 30.68% educated asserted that VLW plays a dominant role in the halqa panchayats. Also number of respondents in all the groups had different perception over the dominance in their Panchayat institutions as 14.7% illiterates, 27.27% semi-educated and 19.31% educated had pointed that both Sarpanch and VLW dominates in their halqa Panchayat. In all the three groups, we can assert that a significant variations between groups as for their responses are variedly distributed. Within groups, also significant variations exist as far their perception on the dominance in their panchayats.

5. CONCLUSION :

The present study indicates that no significant difference was found among groups consisting of educated, uneducated, and half-educated individuals. The people lacked structural awareness level not only about their functionaries but also the creation of new posts advertised by the government in the halqa panchayats. However, people believe that there is a harmonious relationship between political representatives and officials in their Panchayat. The other finding of the study is that political representatives had superiority feelings as far as working and functioning are concerned. The data suggests that a majority of people feel that Sarpanch and Panch have a feeling of superiority in the day-to-day affairs of their Panchayat. Bureaucracy is the vital organ of government. They are recruited through a rigid procedure. They are well trained and have serious expertise in the workings of administration. A question was posed to the sample population to determine whether the bureaucracy feels superior to Panchayats in their operation. The majority of respondents asserted positively that bureaucracy feels superior with regards to elected representatives. Most elected representatives are uneducated and lack knowledge of Panchayat raj institutions. These bureaucrats create administrative hurdles for these elected representatives. It was found out that Panchayats are mainly dominated by Sarpanch in the execution of their work and planning at the halqa Panchayat level. Among the three groups, it had been found that educated group had more awareness as compared to other two groups.

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