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DUTIES AND ROLE OF GRAM PANCHAYATS FOR EDUCATION IN PUNJAB: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN VILLAGES OF DISTRICT SAS NAGAR

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Abstract

Gram Panchayats are the bulwark of India's social and economic development, active and integral stakeholders in ensuring equitable and quality education, as outlined in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992. In this context, the effectiveness, awareness, and decision-making capacity of Panchayats become crucial for strengthening the village-level educational ecosystem. This paper examines the nature and extent of Panchayat engagement in education in the village, including school education, adult education, youth involvement, and the promotion of indigenous education in District Sahibzada Ajit Singh (SAS) Nagar, Punjab, India. Conducted as part of a research project under MGNCRE (2024), the study encompasses 41 villages across all three blocks of the district: Majri, Kharar, and Derabassi, with the goal of identifying existing gaps between policy mandates and on-the-ground implementation.

Keywords: Local Authority, Village, Panchayat, Education, Punjab, Right to Education

Introduction

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 granted constitutional status to Gram Panchayats (Local Authority of the Village) and held them accountable for the village-level education system. Along with this Act, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, for Children between the age group of 6-14 years also defines the duties of local self-government, i.e., Gram Panchayats. Hence, the Gram Panchayats must be active, well-informed, and capable of making decisions for the development of the education system at the

grassroots level. After understanding the constitutional term “Village Panchayat”, it is necessary to know the ‘engagement of gram panchayat’. A Gram Panchayat is a part of the village/community. Thus, it is essential to understand community engagement. What is the meaning of community? Community is a group of people united by at least one, and perhaps more than one, common characteristic, including geography, ethnicity, shared interests, values, experience, or traditions (Brenner B, Manice, 2011). The engagement of community (villagers), also termed citizen or public engagement or participation, is ‘an umbrella term that encompasses numerous methods for bringing people together to address issues of public importance’ (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). Other definitions highlight the deliberate, strategic nature of community engagement, since its objective is to ensure that people outside of government are involved in and can influence decision-making on policies and services, and that it is therefore closely related to notions of empowerment (Holmes, 2015; Morgan-Trimmer, 2013). Madzivhandila, S. Thanyani, and Caswell, Maloka (2014) have argued that community participation remained essential to the success of planning for service delivery despite its complicated structures, obstacles, and difficult managerial challenges.

Initially, it was believed that transferring school administration to Panchayat bodies would provide immediate supervision and authority over schools, thereby enhancing educational quality. However, many research studies have shown that panchayat engagement with the subject ‘education’ is very low. The reasons are many, including a lack of supervision, a lack of interest, and, above all, a lack of awareness (Krishnamacharylu, 1993). Recognizing the importance of Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) members in managing educational institutions, many scholars have investigated various aspects of community involvement in school education. Prasad and Gautam (2013) found that Panchayati Raj Institutions are the primary source of development for primary education through their Shiksha Committees, Shiksha Mitras, and various other committees. Biswal (2006) found that Panchayat

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involvement in schools to provide infrastructure, such as access to drinking water, increased the percentage of students attending school. In another study, Kumar, V. & Mohalik, R. (2017) examined the role of PRI members in providing infrastructure facilities, teaching-learning material, and monitoring the school's functioning. The study revealed that none of the PRI members were involved in developing boundary walls, classrooms, kitchens for the mid-day meal and bench desk; 19.23% of the PRI members (Ward members, Sarpanch, Pramukhya and Zila Parishad adhyaksha) were involved in purchasing infrastructure for the school, developing separate toilet for boys and girls, hand pumps for drinking water; and all the PRI members were involved in preparation, distribution and monitoring the quality of mid-day meal. The study made recommendations for PRI members' orientation on their roles and responsibilities to improve their involvement in the school's functioning. Therefore, the PRIs should develop systems to manage schools within their jurisdictions and involve local communities in their functioning to ensure the quality of elementary education. Similarly, another study by Shah K, J., & Jhala, N., 2021, in Gujarat, stated the role of the Sarpanch in providing infrastructure facilities, teaching-learning material, and monitoring the functioning of the school system. The researcher used a descriptive research design for the study. The Sarpanch can play an important role in implementing government education interventions across all villages through the panchayat institutions. The Government of Gujarat has launched several initiatives to improve education, especially for marginalized and minority groups. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalay (KGBV) Yojana, Vidya Laxmi Bond, Distribution of Cost-free Text Books, Gunotsav Programme, and Assistance for Infrastructure are the key education initiatives in the state of Gujarat. Failure or negligence in this role may negatively impact the overall rural development landscape and the primary and secondary education systems. In another study, Rajni (2021) elucidated the role of gram panchayats in fostering community participation and in implementing State policies

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at all levels of school education, both inside and outside the classroom. An exploratory study was conducted in four villages of Hoshiarpur district, Punjab, India, to determine discrepancies between State priorities for primary education (in the context of the duties of gram panchayats) as stated in significant policies and programmes and the actual situation, particularly in rural schools. The study found that the lack of community participation at all levels of school education, both inside and outside of the classroom, greatly contributes to the ineffective implementation of State policy. The objectives of the study were to examine the panchayat members' perceptions of how primary schools run by the State function in rural Punjab, to identify the gaps between State priorities in primary education as specified in the Punjab Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 and the ground reality, particularly in rural schools, and based on the above analysis and policy recommendations were made. The study found that community leaders failed to organize a campaign in their villages to raise awareness of the Right to Education Act and the provision of free education in public schools. The study's policy recommendation was that, to influence people's social priorities, the State needs to participate immediately and actively in the sensitization process.

This paper enlightened how Gram Panchayats (Local Authority) contribute to education in their respective villages. A research study (a research project under MGNCRE) was conducted in 41 villages of one of the northern states of India, i.e., Punjab (which shares the International Border), to identify the gaps between State priorities (in the context of duties of gram Panchayat) in education as specified in major policies and programmes, and the ground reality. This study explores Gram Panchayat engagement at all levels of education and was conducted in the district of Sahibzada Ajit Singh (SAS) Nagar, Punjab.

Objectives of The Study

- ▶ To examine the perceptions of panchayat members about their engagement in the education of their villages.
- ▶ To assess the engagement of Gram panchayats for education with ground realities.
- ▶ To suggest policy recommendations

Research Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design within the framework of quantitative research methods. The primary data for the present study were collected through a structured and interview schedule. The secondary data were collected from journals, previous studies, and government officials (where applicable).

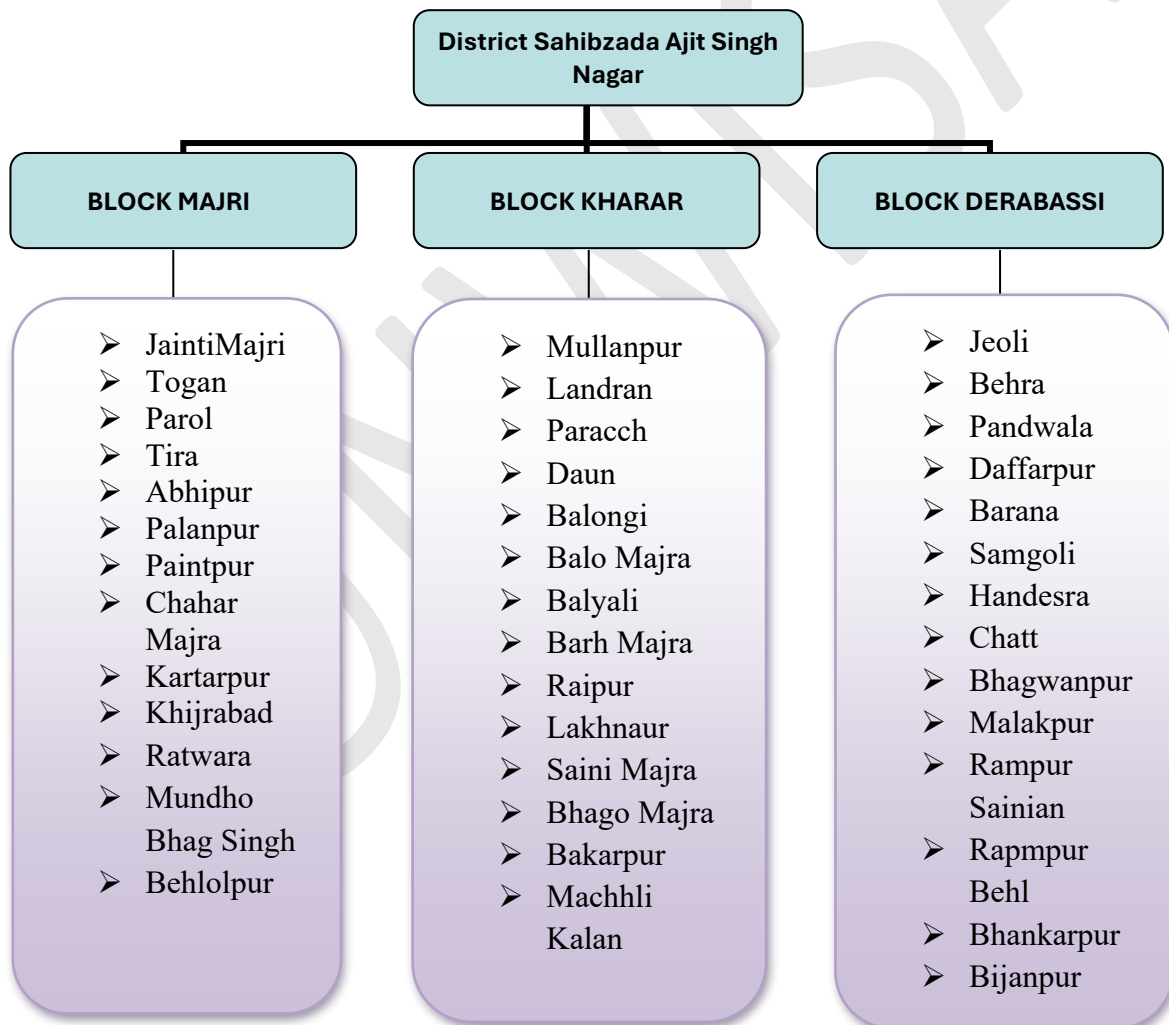
As per the Department of Rural Development and Panchayats records, the number of gram Panchayats in the S.A.S. Nagar district is 360, and the number of gram Panchayat members in the S.A.S. Nagar district is 3240. Referring to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) Table, the required sample size would be 343 gram panchayat members. As District SAS Nagar has three blocks, 115 Panchayat members were selected from each block to ensure equal representation for all blocks.

Profile of the Area of Study

Out of 41 sampled villages, 68.29% (28) were located in the Kandi area. Not all the villages were in the Bet area, the border area, or the backward area. Sixteen villages, i.e., 39.02%, were located within the Kharar assembly constituency. In contrast, only 24.39% of the villages (10) were located in S.A.S Nagar, and 34.14% (14) were in the Derabassi assembly constituency. Additionally, 65.85% of the villages (27) were located in the Anandpur Sahib parliamentary constituency, and 34.14% (14) were located in the Patiala parliamentary constituency. The distance of villages from the district headquarters varies from block to block. To begin with, Block Majri, the most distant village from the district headquarters, was Abhipur, located

33 km away, and the nearest villages were Togan and Behlolpur, at 8 km. In addition to Block Kharar, the remotest village was Parachh and nearby was Landran, i.e., 19 km and 4 km, respectively, from the district headquarters. Furthermore, in Block Derabassi, the Handresa is farthest from the district headquarters, i.e., 39 KM. Moreover, the closest village was Bijanpur, located 17 km away.

Figure 1
Area of Study



Findings

Gram Panchayats: Responsibilities, Duties, and Ground Realities

- 1. Grant from Higher Institutions for Education:** The fieldwork had found that the maximum respondents, i.e., 82.89 per cent, from all three blocks of the district, namely Majri, Kharar, and Derabassi, stated that they received the grant from the government only for the construction of the Mid-Day Meal shed/kitchen on the school premises. They did not receive any specific education grant. They also stated that the grant they received from the higher authority was for the development works to be carried out in the village, such as the construction/repair of streets, dharamshalas, cremation grounds, water supply, street lights, and sewerage connections. The government grants were utilised by the Panchayat members on development work in the villages, which included streets and drains, pipeline, cremation ground, etc. Whereas only three villages, Lakhnaur, Landran, and Bakarpur, had utilised the grant for schools (furniture).
- 2. Adult Education Centre:** There was no adult education centre in any of the 41 sampled villages, and the Panchayats were not undertaking any work to promote or establish adult education in the villages. They neither initiated any development work for school education nor for adult education and vocational education. According to the 2011 census, the absolute number of illiterate adults in India is 25.76 crores. The Government of India aims to cover all aspects of Adult education and align it with the National Education Policy 2020. For this, the Government of India approved a new scheme, “New India Literacy Programme” for the Financial Year 2022-2027. According to a study the Saakshar Bharat Mission aims at 80% adult literacy and is to be implemented by gram Panchayats. However, local bodies are already heavily burdened with a multitude of roles and responsibilities, and presume that their members are adult literates” (Arya, T. S., (2010)

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Panchayat participation in Adult Literacy Programmes, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40736687.pdf>).

3. ***Engagement of Youth for Village Education:*** A very small percentage, i.e., 7.82%, of Panchayat members from Kharar and Majri blocks disclosed that youth/volunteers regularly engage in the education system by visiting schools and communicating with children about various subject choices, nearby educational institutions, and career options.
4. ***Meeting of Panchayat Members with School Authority and Parents:*** It was found that 84.34 per cent of Panchayat members from all three blocks always had meetings with school authorities and parents at least once a month or whenever required. Panchayat members also confirmed that they discuss students' progress, development work carried out in the school, and issues faced by the school authorities.
5. ***Promotion of Rural Artisan and Vocational Training:*** It was disclosed by 77.10 per cent of Gram Panchayat members that whenever the government initiates skill/vocational training programmes, especially for girls, they run courses such as sewing, beauty parlour, and embroidery in the village. Space for running these centres was provided by the Gram Panchayat, and the necessary support is provided to children/youth and faculty members. The Panchayat members also revealed that no such centres are run for boys in the village. None of the Panchayat members in the sampled villages had promoted any rural artisan, indigenous knowledge, or vocational training programs for youth from their own resources.
6. ***Promotion of education for Scheduled Castes, Backward Classes, and other weaker sections:*** 62.31 per cent of Panchayat members always, and 24.34 per cent sometimes, promote the education of Scheduled Castes, Backward Classes, and other weaker sections through enrolment drives and financial assistance from Panchayat funds. Sarpanches and panches of the

selected villages disclosed that they inform parents from the Scheduled Castes, Backward Classes, and other weaker sections about scholarships, collaborate with school authorities, and provide all possible assistance in availing these scholarships. According to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, Section 9 (c), Local Authority shall ensure that the child belonging to the weaker section and the child belonging to the disadvantaged group are not discriminated against and prevented from pursuing and completing elementary education on any grounds;

7. ***Ensure admission of children of migrant families:*** The results of fieldwork revealed that only 13.62 percent of Gram Panchayat members always ensure that the names of all children in the migratory population, including the locally mobile population, are enrolled in schools under their jurisdiction, and 74.78 percent sometimes do so. The rest of the respondents stated that it was not their duty to check the enrolment of all children in the village school, and that they had never ensured such enrolment in their village. According to Section 9(k) of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, the Local Authority shall ensure the admission of children of migrant families.
8. ***Monitoring and Supervision of the Education System by Gram Panchayats:*** 84.34 per cent of Panchayat members reported participating in School Management Committees, monitoring the distribution of funds in schools, and discussing the progress of school children. 68.98 per cent of Panchayat members disclosed that from time to time, they check the quality of mid-day meals cooked and served to children in schools. 44.05 per cent of Panchayat members revealed that they do surprise visits to schools to check the functioning of schools. Under Section 9 (l) of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, the Local Authority shall monitor the functioning of schools within its jurisdiction.

9. Observations in villages during fieldwork found that gram panchayats did not regulate animal slaughter. The village of Jeoli, in block Derabassi, was suffering from a severe fly infestation and a foul smell due to a slaughterhouse at the periphery of the village. Schoolchildren were also disturbed and helpless about it. It was mentioned under *Chapter III, Functions, Powers and Duties of Gram Panchayats (35. Power of Gram Panchayat to make general order. A Gram Panchayat may, by general order to be published in the manner prescribed) that Gram Panchayats (n) regulate the slaughter of animals.*

10.No promotion of indigenous knowledge/rural artisans/vocational

training: The Panchayat members do not promote indigenous knowledge among children and youth in the villages, such as rural artisans, animal husbandry, and weaving. They are busy with village development and give little attention to promoting indigenous knowledge/rural artisans/vocational training. Indigenous knowledge/rural artisans/vocational training are necessary to equip village youth who are migrating abroad due to unemployment. “Punjab’s youth want to move abroad due to limited opportunities at home” (Hindustan Times, October 18, 2022 <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/chandigarh-news/punjabs-youth-want-to-move-abroad-due-to-limited-opportunities-at-home-101666042283706.html>), “4.7 lakh people from Punjab went abroad for jobs” (The Times of India, March 26, 2021 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/since-2016-4-71-people-from-punjab-went-abroad-for-jobs/articleshow/81698819.cms>). The national youth policy 2021, mentioned that district officers can leverage the local authority such as gram Panchayat to improve implementation of skill training programme at grass root level (<https://nyks.nic.in/resources/Circulars/DraftNationalYouthPolic.pdf>).

Discussion

Panchayats' involvement in village education can be analyzed through sociological perspectives. From the structural-functional perspective of Talcott Parsons (1951) and Robert Merton (1968), Panchayats can be understood as stabilizing institutions that integrate educational initiatives—such as school construction, literacy drives, and other educational functions—into the social system, thereby reinforcing cohesion and preparing children for future social roles. Whereas Merton also talks about dysfunction- a disruption in the necessary social equilibrium. According to the research project's data, the dysfunction was illiteracy and low literacy among panchayat members. The data from 343 Gram Panchayat members revealed that 21.44 percent were illiterate; 28.40 percent were qualified up to 8th class; 33.04 percent were qualified up to 10th class; 14.49 percent were qualified up to 12th class; and only 2.60 percent were graduates. Illiteracy and low literacy rates were the primary reasons for Panchayat members' lack of awareness of their powers, functions, and duties within the village-level education system. They were even unable to coordinate with the panchayat secretary, as they depended on others to draft an application requesting development work in their village. Thus, such incompetent leaders (members of the panchayat) act as a negative force, disrupting social stability.

In contrast, Karl Marx's conflict theory (1848/1976) and later insights by C. Wright Mills (1956) help explain how Panchayats may become contested arenas in which local elites dominate. This also supports the finding that the *gram Sabha* was *inactive*, with only high-caste individuals and influential persons participating in its meetings. Also, the elite (upper caste) elect illiterate sarpanch and members of the panchayat to legitimize their authority.

Similarly, findings showed that panchayat members also expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of support from the villagers. Panchayat members

asserted that, at the request of the school authorities, they sought funds for the upgradation of the village school but did not receive support from the villagers, who were unwilling to spend their money on the development of the village's education system. On this ground, critical theory explains how incompetent leadership leads to poor communication.

Through George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism (1934) and Herbert Blumer's (1969) emphasis on meaning-making, Panchayat meetings and Gram Sabhas are seen as spaces where villagers negotiate the significance of "education," shaping collective attitudes toward literacy and girls' schooling. Symbolic interactionism is useful for understanding findings that revealed that the Panchayat members themselves were unaware of the duties and responsibilities of the Gram Panchayat for education under the Punjab Panchayati Act, 1994, and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009.

Robert Putnam's (1993) social capital theory further underscores how Panchayats build networks of trust and cooperation, mobilizing parents, teachers, village youth, and the community to support school infrastructure and monitor quality. Additionally, Robert Chambers' participatory development approach (1997) emphasizes Panchayats' role in enabling villagers to articulate educational needs, design locally relevant programs, and ensure accountability. However, data from villages shows that panchayats expressed no interest in organising and promoting Youth Clubs. Youth clubs are necessary for providing political education, giving the village's youth firsthand experience in organising educational and sports programmes, developing leadership qualities, etc. According to the Punjab Panchayati Raj Act, 1994, in Chapter III (Section XIV, b), the organisation of a youth club falls under the functions, powers, and duties of gram Panchayats.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal Panchayats not merely as administrative bodies but as dynamic institutions that mediate power, foster inclusion, and

cultivate collective responsibility for education as a cornerstone of village development.

Policy Recommendations

The study's major findings have highlighted several issues faced by Gram Panchayats in providing education in villages. To deal with these problems and to bring further improvement in the field of education at the village level, the following policy recommendations are proposed: 1) Grant for Education: Grants are necessary for taking timely action for the growth in the field of education. Hence, the foremost priority is to release the education grant to gram Panchayats regularly so they can take the necessary actions to improve the education system at the village level. In the absence of grants/finances education system at the village level could not flourish. 2) Orientation of Panchayat Members: It is important to orient every newly elected Panchayat member about their role, power, and functions in the field of education. The majority of Panchayat members were unaware that they were responsible for promoting education in their villages. It is also necessary to provide orientation in the local language to better understand the Panchayat members' roles, powers, and functions in education. 3) Literacy programme specially for Panchayat Members: The Panchayat members were illiterate, and those who were literate had an education qualification till grade 8th only. It is imperative that Panchayat members be at least literate to understand their roles and functions in the education field. An educated member would be better equipped to provide solutions and take initiatives to improve the education system at the village level. Special literacy programmes should be run to eradicate illiteracy among Panchayat members. 4) Regular Gram Sabha Meeting: The researchers found that meetings of Gram Sabha in 41 sampled villages hardly take place, and in villages where they are held, people do not participate enthusiastically. An active Gram Sabha can make Panchayats accountable and pressurize them for work in the field of education. 5) Initiatives for Vocational Training: The Panchayat members

are required to take initiatives by themselves for promoting vocational training for the youth of the village. They only support government-initiated vocational training for girls. Gram Panchayats must organise vocational training centres with the support of the village community, offering courses in carpentry, furniture-making, modern agricultural techniques, information technology, and other relevant skills to generate employment opportunities for youth. 6) Organisation of Youth Club: Youth clubs are the educational point for the youth where they imbibe leadership qualities, learn to organise various events, learn to cooperate/coordinate, etc., which is necessary for the overall development of the children and youth. Moreover, the youth club organises cultural and sports programmes in the villages that inculcate a spirit of competition among children and youth. Cultural and sports activities help in the physical and psychological development of children and youth. 7) Regular Inspection and Monitoring: Gram Panchayats must inspect and monitor the working of early childhood care centres/anganwadis, educational institutions, and vocational training centres under their jurisdiction from time to time to check the working and provide required help and guidance. Last of all, 8) Organisation of various Activities: Community leaders, affluent people of the village, philanthropists, educated children of higher classes of the village and parents of school children/higher education institution of the village should organise some educational/vocational/sports motivated activities/competitions and workshops on a regular basis for all the children and youth of the village. Activities, such as competitions in sports, art, farming, knowledge, indigenous knowledge, and vocational training, can be organised in a game-style format to instill a competitive spirit among the village's children and youth.

Conclusion

The construction and maintenance of infrastructure are not the only tasks gram panchayats must undertake. According to a significant judgement by the Punjab and Haryana High Court (The Tribune, 13 April 2023), the panchayat is responsible

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for ensuring the education of village children. The village, according to Durkheim, is a collective representation and a form of mechanical solidarity that can easily solve collective issues. This paper highlighted the contribution of Panchayats to education. The research project concludes with inferential statistics that show that Gram Panchayats' engagement in education was higher in block Majri, followed by Kharar, and that Panchayat members in Derabassi have the least engagement in the village-level education system. Village panchayats work better if there is social inclusion. Panchayats should be the voice of women, marginalized sections, and low-income people. The study has highlighted issues such as illiteracy, lack of knowledge, grants, and enthusiasm among panchayat members. The study also endorsed that the panchayats had little contribution to the villages' schools and education programmes. Therefore, Panchayats must have educated persons with proper training, along with sensitivity, to implement government programmes and coordinate with higher authorities. The proposed recommendations must be implemented with priority to develop the education system at the village level. It is well said that children are the future and youth are the backbone of the nation; hence, it becomes essential that they should be provided with quality education and guidance respectively. Therefore, the role of Gram Panchayats becomes significant in this field, and they should be made accountable for the same.

Undertaking

This paper has not been published wholly or partly in any other journal, and it has not been submitted to any other journal for consideration or publication.

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