DECENTRALIZED ADMINISTRATION-VILLAGE SECRETARIAT SYSTEM IN ANDHRA PRADESH: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The Village Secretariat System in Andhra Pradesh also known as Andhra Pradesh Grama Sachivalayam, was initiated on October 2, 2019 as part of the government's promise to decentralize administration and improve service delivery at the grassroots level. The government claims to enhance transparency, efficiency, and accountability in service delivery. The present study makes an attempt to study the efficiency of the village Secretariat system in realizing the objectives of decentralized administration, identifies the loopholes and makes recommendations for its effective functioning.

Key Words: Decentralized Administration, Good Governance, Village Secretariat System, Service delivery at door steps

Introduction

The Village & Ward secretariat system, also known as Andhra Pradesh Grama Sachivalayam, was introduced by the Jagan Mohan Reddy's Government in Andhra Pradesh on October 2nd 2019. The new system is modeled on the lines of Gandhiji's Grama Swarajya and Grama Surajya which aims to decentralize administration and provide services at the door steps of the citizens. A total of 11,158 village secretariats and 3,786 ward secretariats have been established across the state. The State Government claims to provide 500 services at the doorsteps of people in all villages across the state through Village Secretariats which would act as a bridge between the government and the people.

Decentralized administration delivers efficient, effective, transparent, accountable and corruption-free services to the people of the state. In decentralized administration, decision-making authority and responsibilities are distributed across various levels of government, offers several benefits. These advantages contribute to more effective governance, improved service delivery, and increased responsiveness to local needs. Decentralization empowers local communities by involving them in decision-making processes. It allows for a more direct and active role in shaping policies and programs that affect their daily lives. Decentralized administration enables quicker and more tailored responses to local challenges and demands and are attuned to the specific needs and priorities of their communities. Decentralization can reduce bureaucratic red tape and promotes greater accountability as local officials are more directly accountable to their constituents. This accountability fosters a sense of responsibility and encourages better governance practices. Policies and programs can be implemented more rapidly at the local level. Local administrators often have a better understanding of local dynamics, enabling them to implement initiatives more effectively and can contribute to more equitable distribution of resources.

The Andhra Pradesh Government claims to realize the above benefits of decentralized administration through the introduction of Village Secretariat System. Local resources are best spent for balanced regional growth and the government is brought near to the people which in turn fosters improved communication between the government and the citizens. Local authorities can better communicate policies, gather feedback, and address concerns at the community level.

Administrative Structure & Functioning of Village Secretariat System:

The system involves the establishment of Village Secretariats at the village level, each catering to the administrative needs of the village Panchayath. These secretariats function as multi-functional service delivery points. Village Secretariats are responsible for delivering a range of government services directly to the citizens. This includes services related to revenue, Panchayat Raj, rural development, agriculture, education, health, and various welfare programs especially Navarathnalu, the nine welfare schemes of Jagan Government,

1. YSR Raythu Bharosa

2. Arogya Sri

3. Pensions

4. Housing

5. Fees Reimbursement

6. Alcohol free Andhra Pradesh

7. Jala Yagnam

8. Amma Vadi

9. YSR Aasara-Cheyutha

The services provided by Village Secretariats cover a wide spectrum, including issuing certificates (income certificate, residence certificate, caste certificate), facilitating social welfare schemes, handling land-related matters, and more.

Staffing:

Each Village Secretariat is staffed with a Village Secretary, who is responsible for coordinating and overseeing the delivery of services. The staff includes other functionaries specializing in different service areas such as

1. Welfare Officer

2. Digital Assistant

3. Village Revenue Officer,

4. Women Police

5. Village Surveyor

6. Veterinary Officer

7. Fisheries Assistant

8. Agriculture Assistant

9. ANM,

10. Horticulture Assistant.

The system aligns with the principles of decentralized governance, with a focus on devolving powers and responsibilities to the local level. It aims to promote Grama Swarajya, reflecting Gandhian ideals of self-governance at the village level.

The objectives behind the introduction of Village Secretariat System are:

Decentralization of Governance:

Facilitate decentralization by bringing government services closer to the grassroots level, allowing for more effective and responsive administration.

Improved Service Delivery:

Enhance the delivery of public services to rural areas by creating a local administrative structure that can address the specific needs and concerns of the community.

Efficiency and Transparency:

Increase the efficiency and transparency of government processes by streamlining administrative procedures and making information more accessible to the public.

Local Economic Development:

Support local economic development initiatives by promoting and implementing schemes that address the economic needs of the village community.

Empowerment of Local Communities:

Empower local communities by involving them in decision-making processes and encouraging active participation in local governance.

Poverty Alleviation:

Implement programs and initiatives aimed at reducing poverty and improving the standard of living in rural areas.

Skill Development and Employment Generation:

Focus on skill development programs and initiatives that generate employment opportunities locally, contributing to economic growth.

Social Welfare and Inclusive Development:

Prioritize social welfare programs that address the needs of vulnerable and marginalized sections of the society, ensuring inclusive development.

Infrastructure Development:
Plan and execute infrastructure development projects that address basic needs such as roads, water supply, sanitation, and healthcare facilities in rural areas.
Effective Implementation of Government Schemes:

Ensure the effective implementation of various government schemes at the grassroots level, including agriculture, education, healthcare, and other sectors.

Digital Transformation:
Integrate digital technologies to improve administrative processes, data management, and communication for efficient service delivery.

Environmental Conservation:
Implement initiatives for sustainable and environmentally friendly practices, addressing local environmental concerns and promoting conservation.

Loopholes in the System:
➢ Financial Burden: Critics argued that setting up and maintaining the Village Secretariat System could impose a significant financial burden on the state government. The costs associated with infrastructure, salaries, and other administrative expenses were a concern.
➢ Some functionaries like Women Police, Surveyor etc have no work.
➢ Redundancy: Some critics questioned whether the creation of a new layer of administration at the village level might lead to redundancy, given that there were already existing local bodies like Panchayats. The duplication of roles and responsibilities could potentially lead to confusion and inefficiencies.
➢ Administrative Challenges: Implementing a new system requires effective training and coordination. There were concerns about the readiness and capacity of the administrative machinery to handle the transition smoothly. Administrative challenges could include issues related to staffing, training, and ensuring effective functioning of the Village Secretariats.
➢ Political Influence: There were apprehensions about the potential for political influence in the functioning of Village Secretariats. The system might be vulnerable to local political pressures, potentially compromising its effectiveness and impartiality.
➢ Inadequate Infrastructure: In some areas, the lack of adequate infrastructure could hinder the smooth functioning of the Village Secretariat System. This includes concerns about office space, technology, and other resources necessary for the efficient operation of the system.
➢ Limited Participation: Critics raised concerns about the level of community participation and engagement in the decision-making processes of the Village Secretariats. The success of the system relies on active involvement and collaboration with the local community.

➢ VRO, Surveyor do not have direct access to the land records for which they again have to approach Mandal Office.
➢ Corruption is creeping through Village Volunteers who are severely criticized for their political appointment.
➢ Village Secretariat functionaries are under severe political pressures in the identification of the beneficiaries.

Recommendations:
Comprehensive Training Programs:
Implement comprehensive training programs for Village Secretariat staff to ensure they are well-equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge. Include training on technology use, community engagement, conflict resolution, and other relevant areas.

Infrastructure Development:
Ensure that Village Secretariats have adequate physical infrastructure, including office space, equipment, and technology, to support their operations effectively.

Digital Integration:
Integrate digital technologies to streamline processes and improve the accessibility and efficiency of service delivery.

Implement user-friendly digital platforms for communication, record-keeping, and data management.

Community Awareness Programs:
Conduct awareness programs to educate the local community about the functions and services provided by Village Secretariats. Foster a sense of ownership and involvement among the community members.

Performance Monitoring and Evaluation:
Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the performance of Village Secretariats.Regularly review key performance indicators and take corrective actions as needed.

Strengthening Local Governance:
Ensure synergy between Village Secretariats and existing local governance structures such as Panchayats. Foster collaboration and coordination among different levels of local administration.

Transparent Decision-Making Processes:
Promote transparency in decision-making processes to build trust within the community.
Publish information about decisions, fund allocation, and project progress to keep the community informed.

Community Participation Forums:
Establish forums for regular community participation in decision-making processes.

Encourage the formation of local committees or councils to actively engage the community in identifying priorities and addressing issues.

Addressing Political Interference:
Develop safeguards to minimize political interference in the functioning of Village Secretariats. Establish mechanisms to ensure that decisions are based on merit and community needs rather than political considerations.

Capacity Building for Local Leaders:
Provide capacity-building programs for local leaders and elected representatives to enhance their understanding of the Village Secretariat System and their roles in supporting its objectives.

Training Programs:
Comprehensive training programs are conducted for the staff of Village Secretariats to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge. This includes training on technology use, administrative processes, and community engagement.

Feedback Mechanisms:
Establish feedback mechanisms to gather input from the community on the performance of Village Secretariats. Use feedback to make continuous improvements and address concerns in a timely manner.

Conclusion: The success of Decentralized administrative system depends on effective governance structures, capacity building at the local level, and mechanisms to ensure accountability and transparency. Regular assessment, adaptability, and a commitment to community engagement are crucial for the success of Village Secretariats. The recommendations should be tailored to the specific needs and challenges of each region. Corruption, duplication of work, political interference s etc have to be addressed for effective functioning of the Village Secretariats.

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