

How to Cite:

Saikia, A. A. (2021). Role of village-level workers in the process of political decentralisation. *Linguistics and Culture Review*, 5(S3), 1757-1763.
<https://doi.org/10.21744/lingcure.v5nS3.2001>

Role of Village-Level Workers in the Process of Political Decentralization

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Abstract--India, the second-largest democratic country in the world with about 1.21 billion people, among which all most half of the total population lives in the villages, and to the welfare of our nation, it is essential to improve the conditions of the villages. Therefore, rural development has become the first and foremost necessity for our country to develop. In India for all-round development of the rural areas the village level worker is responsible. They are recruited by a district-level selection committee chaired by the district collector. Usually, there are ten village-level workers in a development block. They must have passed the matriculation examination and the age limit is 24. They must belong to a rural area. From planning to implementing various policies for the rural people, from making aware the rural poor to ensuring their participation in them are the primary duties of the village level workers.

Keywords--block, decentralisation, rural development, village level workers, village.

Introduction

The soul of India lives in its villages- Mahatma Gandhi

The rural development is intended to bring the administration closer to the people for the realisation of objectives like increasing people's awareness and participation, proper implementation of its programs and reducing the gap between villagers and government mechanisms. In realising the above goals, the village-level workers (VLWs) play a pivotal role.

The VLWs are at the tail end of the administrative machinery. The VLWs are multi-purpose workers to provide services as a common agent of development-oriented departments, as extent agents of agriculture and allied sectors, a channel of communication between block, villages and Sevak or servant of the people and government (Kastenholz et al., 2012; Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012).

The title VLW, emphasizes his role as an employee in government with the particular responsibility of representing the block to the villagers. On the other hand, Gram Sevak, translated village servant, emphasizes his role as a helper to the villagers and his responsibility to speak for them to the block.

To provide the villagers with all information and assistance through one function at the village level, the Community Development Programme had introduced the post of VLW, making one multi-purpose functionary responsible at the grass-root level. The VLWs are like first aid services to the villagers, who act as a link between the block and villagers (Seabright, 1996; Sumah et al., 2016; Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013). They are responsible for improving the condition of rural people. The village level functionaries are closely linked with the rural people who are poor, illiterate, unemployed and living in an unsanitary conditions. They are also not in a position to approach the higher officials to solve their problems. They constitute the higher officials to solve their problems and they can not be isolated from the total framework of the development (Loi, 2021). However, the VLWs are easily available to the local people who know the local conditions and problems. Therefore the importance of VLWs in rural development cannot be ignored. Without it, the rural development machinery and grass-root levels development would be incomplete (Shortall, 2008; Jafry & O'Neill, 2000; Pandey et al., 2021).

Literature review

Bahel (1954), discusses the functions and responsibilities of VLWs. The author has explained the necessities of training for these workers. The article gave an idea of essential qualities to be earned by the VLWs before programming their duties and responsibilities.

Majumdar & Sing (1997), give a comprehensive and critical study of historical evaluation of the PRIs in India from ancient times to the present day. The author highlights the various phases of theoretical development and practical implementation of the system of Panchayati Raj in Indian society. The Panchayat is the pivot of rural administration and the actual center of socio-economic and cultural life around the entire structure of the local government revolves with the facility and ease.

Paul (1978), highlighted the duties and responsibilities of the VLWs. Along with their extension services, the author explained that the VLWs are responsible for the multi-purpose functions at the village level.

Dey (1955), opined that the VLWs are the key functionaries of community development projects who perform the functions as a first-aid man in all fields of rural development. The author has elaborately discussed the training, area of VLWs and administrative structure of the block.

Deogaonkar (1980), explained the need for training of the VLWs and suggested certain preconditions for the training imported to them. The book also elaborately analyses the recruitment policy of VLWs in India and abroad.

[Dube \(1958\)](#), highlighted the emerging role of VLWs in Indian village life. The author examined and analysed the role of VLWs in the Indian context and expressed that the VLWs are expected to function in the villages not as minor government officials but as friends, well-wishers and leaders of the village people. The book also analyses the problems of VLWs while performing their entrusted duties.

[Maheswary \(1985\)](#), observes that the VLWs stand at the tail end of the community development hierarchy. Originally a VLW covered five villages; later on, his jurisdiction was extended. To him, the VLWs are multi-purpose workers required to attend all aspects of development. He meets the villagers to persuade them to adopt new methods and practices in the areas they live in. The VLWs indeed work for all the extension personnel but under the administrative control of BDO.

Objectives of the study

- To examine the historical background of the democratic decentralisation process in India.
- To study the relationship between the VLWs and the villagers.
- To identify the problems faced by the VLWs while carrying out their responsibilities.

Research questions

- What are the phases that had come across by the democratic decentralisation process in India?
- What kind of relationship exists between the VLWs and the villagers?
- What are the problems by the VLWs in operating their duties?

Methodology

The research tool is employed in the study are primary and secondary. The primary data will include constitutional provisions, statutory provisions of India. For the secondary sources, the study includes books, journals, articles, newspapers, etc.

Historical background

In 1952 the Government of India attempted to develop rural areas by introducing the Community Development Programme in the country, and twelve VLWs were provided in each block. A year later, in 1953, the National Extension Service was designated to integrate the efforts of all developmental departments at the village level to provide quick help and service to the rural people ([Rusli et al., 2021](#)).

In 1957 the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was appointed by the government of India to examine the working of the Community Development Programme and National Extension Service. This committee suggested Panchayati Raj system should be established in the village to implement the Community Development Programme ([Jacob, 2021](#)).

In 1978 the Ashok Mehta Committee was appointed to recommend a two-tier system Zila Parishad at the district level and below it, the Mandal Panchayat consisting of a group of villages covering a population of fifteen to twenty thousand.

In 1993 by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act provided the constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Accordingly, it was implemented by all states in 1994. The rural development programme is administrated through a Central Ministry of community development and co-operation commissions.

The VLWs commonly known as Gram Sevak and Gram Sevika is appointed to implement the rural development programmes at the village level. This functionary was first given in 1946 by Albert Mayo, the American expert ([Dubey, 1958](#)).

Relationship between VLWs and the villagers

As a Development Agent, the VLWs have to encourage the people to become a dominant partner in overall development activities that chiefly include development programmes, administration and management meant for the rural poor. The VLWs can also play an essential role in sustainable development. Since they can increase the degree of consciousness among the rural poor for limited use of resources of the rural areas by way of giving proper education to the villagers as to how to use the limited resources for sustainable development. The VLWs help people to develop their entrepreneurship skills through active participation. This is essential to promote a participatory approach for the success of the programme. VLWs are most important as they can make the peasant aware of appropriate technology in the field ([Astuti et al., 2020](#)).

Moreover, they provide direction to the farmers to use cost-effective technology, so that after the use of technology, the farmer would not face the problems like soil erosion, soil degradation, less production, etc. To provide better services and assistance to the rural poor, group effort is one of the ways to solve the rural problems. The VLWs encourage and promote the rural poor, specifically those who have a common purpose, to form small groups and to participate in the development process as a whole ([Suwija et al., 2019](#)).

Under the guidance of VLWs, the rural people can develop leadership qualities. The VLWs can encourage the rural poor to organise various constructive programme or their socio-political upliftment. VLWs also promotes various developmental programmes, especially for the rural youth, farmers, women, and other section of the society, which ultimately helps in community building. ([Dubey & Sutton, 1965](#)).

Being the communication channel between the government and villagers, the VLWs act as the administration's spoken person and convey the problems and issues of local people to the administration. The VLWs and the villagers can be considered as the two sides of the same coin because both are complementary to each other. The development of the rural people depends on the VLWs and the VLWs success depends on the development of the rural poor.

Problems faced by the VLWs

While operating their functions, the VLWs face various challenges. These challenges not only affect the VLWs but also hamper the entire rural development process. Some significant problems faced by them such as:

- Lack of technical knowledge is one of the significant reasons faced by the VLWs. Due to inadequate technical knowledge, they fail to cooperate and provide service to the rural people.
- VLWs are appointed to provide good service to the rural poor. But in a practical sense, VLWs have not been able to maintain a good relationship with the people and deliver their duties as dynamic agents of rural areas. The drawbacks have been traced to the bureaucratic attitude of the superior officers. The immediate superior officer of the VLWs is Block Development Officer (BDO) but in technical matters, they are indirectly supervised and controlled by the Extension Officers.
- Being multi-purpose workers, the VLWs have to perform no work, making it difficult to perform quality work. This workload is a major reason for their stress. These work burdens led to a lack of job satisfaction.
- The VLWs have to perform their duties in more than one village, which is another problem they face. They have to handle a large population with a large area of working jurisdiction.
- Due to the high illiteracy rate and ignorance, the rural poor hesitate to cooperate with the VLWs. It stands as one of the major challenges in front of them.
- All these problems are equally responsible for the backwardness of rural India and to reduce these challenges, some effective measures should be taken.

Suggestions

To reduce the hinderances of the VLWs various initiatives should be taken such as:

- A good training programme should be encouraged among the VLWs to make them technologically updated. It helps them to reduce the workload also.
- More literacy awareness programmes should be encouraged among the villagers to make them aware of various developmental policies.
- The higher authority of rural development should co-operate with the VLWs to achieve tremendous success in fulfilling the demands of the rural poor.
- The number of VLWs should be increased in a block.
- The minimum qualification of the VLWs should be increased from matriculation to graduation. It would help them to tackle various technical problems related to rural development.

If the government takes necessary action to eradicate the problem by implementing these suggestion then the real goal of rural development can easily be achievable.

Conclusion

To bring the rural development administration to the doorstep of the villagers, the VLWs are appointed as multi-purpose grass-root level workers (Chacko, 2001; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2004). They have been designed to work among the villagers not as government officials but as fellow members to win people's confidence and thereby tactfully discover facts about the community, find out the informal leaders and get people involved in various rural development programmes, identify the local problems and their priorities, seek agreement on solutions to problems and carry those problems which they cannot readily solve to the technical experts at the Block level. Thus, they act as linkmen between Blocks and villagers. The VLWs are indispensable to the attainment of the targets of rural development. The targets of rural development can not be attained without the VLWs. The success of rural development highly depends on the VLWs. The role of VLWs determines the actual meaning of political decentralisation in India.

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