

From Subjects to Citizens? Examining Governance Trajectories in Postcolonial India with MPLADS

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Abstract: *The paper examines how the Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS) in India demonstrates the incomplete transformation from subjects to citizens in postcolonial India. It argues that while democratic structures were adopted after independence, feudal social relations persisted, creating a distinctive state-citizen relationship where citizens are treated more as subjects. The paper traces the historical roots of this "subject-citizen" dynamic to colonial administration practices and their interaction with pre-colonial institutions. It then analyzes MPLADS implementation, focusing on changing guidelines, spending patterns, and evaluations over the years. Key issues highlighted include unspent funds, misalignment with local needs, and reinforcement of patron-client relationships. The analysis reveals that MPLADS, while intended for local development, often reinforces existing power structures rather than empowering citizens or strengthening local self-governance. Spending patterns, particularly the focus on visible infrastructure like roads, reflect a top-down approach to development that treats people as passive recipients rather than active participants. The paper concludes that MPLADS serves as a microcosm of larger challenges in India's journey from a colonial subject-based system to participatory democracy. It calls for fundamental reforms in how development schemes are conceived, implemented and evaluated to achieve meaningful citizen empowerment and democratic governance.*

Keywords: MPLADS, Governance, Subject, Citizen, Development.

INTRODUCTION

The transformation from 'subject' to 'citizen' marks the progression from subjugation to liberty, status to equality, and authoritarianism to democracy within liberal democracies. A subject owes allegiance to a ruler within feudalism's hierarchical patron-client relationship. A citizen, however, is an equal member of a political community, entailing rational autonomy and participatory political allegiance. Subjects and citizens are thus binary opposites.

In postcolonial India while the structures of state were modelled on the lines of western democracies the society remained essentially feudal. The structures of a liberal democratic state were adapted to the prevalent cultural ethos, thereby creating distinctive state-citizen relationships. This paper examines how infrastructural development under MPLADS demonstrates that India's journey from subject to citizen was precluded.

I

The process of tracing the lineage of subject citizens takes us to the interactions between the colonial state and pre-colonial institutions, and the subsequent shaping of institutions of democracy in a post-colonial setup. The footprints of subject citizens can be traced to colonial administration—its processes of law-making and adjudication.

British colonizers encountered difficulties in controlling unfamiliar territories due to the differing origins of law between Britain and India. English jurisprudence was characterized by two opposing views: law as a sovereign imposition versus law as a product of societal development. In contrast, pre-British India had multiple legal sources, including dharma, vyavahara, guhyasutra, and rajasasana, with later sources superseding earlier ones. Locally, caste laws held more significance than royal decrees. Bernard Cohn (2004) identifies this dichotomy and notes the struggle of British officers with native quasi-feudal rights that resisted Western interpretation.

Colonial interactions with natives balanced institutional innovation and preservation based on economic needs and social unfamiliarity. The British court system under Hastings and Punjab customs codification exemplify this phenomenon. Hastings' courts used Pandits and Ulemas to interpret native laws, working within existing structures. The Crown rule entailed consolidation of ties with princes and land magnates. It was believed that 'ordinary Indians do not understand impersonal government...they crave government by a person for loyal homage' (Chatterjee, 1993, 16). Hence, British colonialism operated through local intermediaries, which in turn influenced the evolution of institutions.

The nationalist reaction to colonialism oscillated between Gandhi's communitarian ideals- centered on pristine village and Nehruvian modernism based on rational citizenship. Although Nehruvian principles prevailed in the

Constitution, social structures remained resistant to change. Consequently, liberal democracy was imposed on traditional feudal systems, leaving the transformation of subjects into modern citizens incomplete.

In addition to the colonial legacy, another plausible reason for the underdeveloped state of citizenship in post-colonial India could be the severe poverty and civil unrest that the nation faced at the dawn of its independence. The democratically elected post-colonial government was essentially perceived as “mai-baap,” or a benefactor (Bardhan, 1984). The state was primarily seen as a provider of patronage. Rajni Kothari (1970) identifies feudal patronage at the core of a modern democratic government. I extend the patron-client relationship argument as identified by Kothari and Bardhan, as a lens to analyse the MPLAD scheme.

II

Guidelines

The Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS) is a centrally sponsored scheme launched in 1993. This scheme was designed to enable each Member of Parliament (MP) to ‘recommend works of developmental nature for creation of durable community assets and for provision of basic facilities including community infrastructure, based on locally felt needs’ (MPLAD Guidelines, 2023). Besides the creation of infrastructural assets, funds can be utilised for a range of welfare activities for the benefit of differently abled; purchasing computers for educational institutions; creating mobile libraries and purchasing vehicles etc. According to the scheme guidelines, *Lok Sabha* members can recommend work within their constituencies. In constituencies spread over multiple districts, an MP is free to choose any district as a nodal district for scheme implementation. Elected members of *Rajya Sabha* (Upper House of Parliament) can recommend work anywhere in their state of election. The nominated members of parliament can recommend works anywhere (MPLADS Guidelines, 2023).

The guidelines for this central scheme have undergone periodic changes, reflecting administrative priorities and approaches to local area development. The revisions were simultaneously reflective of the experiences gained from implementation and evaluations by governmental and third-party agencies. The guidelines were revised in December 1994; February 1997; September 1999; April 2002; November 2005; August 2012; May 2014; June 2016; and April 2023. The scheme remained suspended during Covid, from April 2020 to November 2021 to make funds available for COVID relief (Press note, MoSPI, April 6, 2020). MPs from the opposition party saw the suspension of the scheme and the withdrawal of funds as disabling. This according to the opposition parties reduced their prospects of microlevel COVID relief (Govardhan, 2020).

Periodic changes showed a systematic enhancement in the entitlement amount of each MP. The amount to be sanctioned and spent gradually increased from Rupees 5 lakhs (half million) per annum in 1993-94 to Rupees 5 crore (50 million) per annum in 2011. The entitlement amount has stagnated ever since, with no enhancement over the last decade.

The 2005 guidelines proved to be a landmark as they introduced earmarking of 15 and 7.5 percent of MPLADS entitlements for spending on areas inhabited by

Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) respectively (MPLADS Guidelines, 2005). This particular provision was made mandatory in 2016 but reversed into an advisory clause by the 2023 guidelines. The reversal was subsequently withdrawn under political pressure, and the mandatory allocation for SC-STs resumed (Nair, 2023; Wire, 2023).

The latest guidelines have brought about several groundbreaking changes, including accrued provisions for interest. While earlier guidelines allowed for investment of the interest amount in the project, guidelines issued in 2023 mandated remitting accrued interest to the Consolidated Fund. The fund-flow process was also sought to be made transparent by enabling real-time monitoring through a web portal. The entitlement of 5crores would be released in two instalments of Rs 2.5 crores each directly to the District Authority of the Nodal District of the concerned MP. Works had to be sanctioned within seventy-five days of the date of receipt of the recommendation. Rejections, if any, should be communicated within forty-five days. This brought provisions for restricting a successor MP from altering the recommended work. For the first time, a penal clause was introduced for material breach in the MPLADS Guidelines (MPLADS Guidelines, 2023).

Controversies

The MPLAD scheme has remained controversial since its inception. The major contentions can be grouped into three broad categories, each giving flesh to subject-citizen theorisation. The first relates to certain perceptions regarding the introduction of the scheme, the second group of contestations pertains to the legality of the scheme, and the third concerns the issues of implementation.

At the level of perception, the introduction of this scheme was seen as a strategic move by a minority government to buy the loyalty of the members of the Parliament. This perception gained ground because of the way MPLADs originated and the swiftness of their implementation. The scheme was proposed by a Joint Parliamentary committee to suggest facilities and remuneration for the MPs. The recommendation of a development fund at the disposal of MP's was clearly beyond the scope of the terms of reference for such a committee. The scheme was inaugurated within hours of presentation of the report (Sezhyan 2005). The government was seen as buying loyalty of Members of Parliament who, in turn, would buy the allegiance of their constituents. The era of unstable coalitions at the centre saw the scheme running without provisions for internal audits. It was seen as a scheme designed to distribute large and extended patronage. This perception compromises the foundation of democratic citizenship—that is, an enlightened, autonomous actor as a citizen.

There were concerns about the constitutionality of the MPLAD scheme—specifically regarding jurisdictional overreach by the legislature and violation of the federal arrangement. However, the constitutional question was settled in favour of the scheme. A constitution bench of the Supreme Court observed that ‘the Indian Constitution does not recognise a strict separation of powers. The constitutional principle of separation of power will only be violated if an essential function of one branch is taken over by another branch leading to removal of checks and balances’ (Sivaramakrishnan, 2010).

In recent years, there has been a change in the

nature of parliamentary government, whereby a coalition with a single dominant party and a heavily centralised executive makes ordinary MPs practically irrelevant. In light of these developments, the scheme seems to be undergoing changes, with several restrictions imposed on spending. Provisions for pooling of funds with other schemes have been introduced (MPLAD Guidelines 2023, 24-25).

The implementation of the scheme has been particularly contentious since its introduction. There have been several evaluations undertaken over the last 30 years, raising questions on the nature of the scheme itself beyond the usual complaint of pilferage of funds. These evaluations include audit reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) conducted in 1998, 2001, 2010. CAG audit reports have pointed out numerous lacunae in the implementation of this scheme. The issue of unspent and misspent is the most prominent. The Planning Commission also evaluated MPLADS in 2002 and raised implementation issues.

The reports of parliamentary committees, such as the Public Accounts Committee on MPLADS and the consultative papers of the National Commission for Review of the Working of Constitution, furthered evaluation exercises.

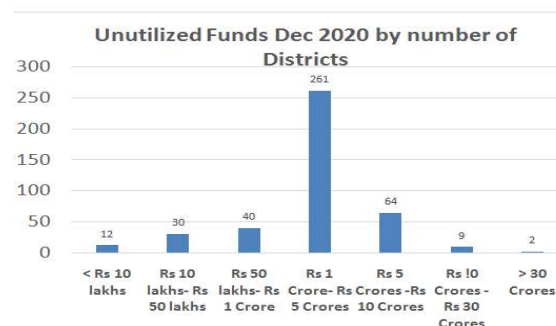
The latest evaluation was a third-party evaluation by Deloitte, commissioned by the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation in 2021. The Request for Proposal enlists the objective of the third-party evaluation of works, 'inter alia...from the point of view of equitable access of the general public utilization, proper and efficient utilization, timely completion of works, maintenance of assets created, and checking for due adherence to MPLADS guidelines'. Identifying implementation gaps, better monitoring, and improving outputs are also being considered. Outcomes were to be evaluated in the light of convergence of the MPLADS with other schemes like Swach Bharat Abhiyan, MNREGA Khelo India, Atal Jyoti Yojana etc. Studies undertaken between April 2014 and March 2019 in 216 districts were under the scanner with special emphasis on areas such as left-wing extremism affected areas, aspirational districts, and island areas (RFP, 2020).

The problem of unspent and misspent amounts along with the accretion of spending in the election year is a primary concern raised by most evaluations. Despite the tightening of norms, the problem of unspent amounts remains a concern. The latest guideline revisions made provisions for real-time monitoring, yet the unspent balance with district authorities from the 17th Lok Sabha, in May 2023, was to the tune of Rs. 1.9 thousand crores (Kancharla, 27 June 2023). The share of unspent funds doubled during the 17th Lok Sabha as compared to the 16th Lok Sabha (Business Standard, April 25, 2025).

This problem has persisted since the introduction of this scheme. In response to a question raised in the Parliament, it was reported that in December 2020 over Rs.1750 crores of allocated funds remained unspent (Kancharla, 22 March 2021). The graph below shows the unused MPLADS funds with district authorities for Lok Sabha in December 2020. A total of 261 districts had unspent amounts between Rs. 1-5 crores marking a palpable trend in MPLADs spending.

While unspent amounts remained a concern, another issue that gained significant traction was the tendency

Figure I

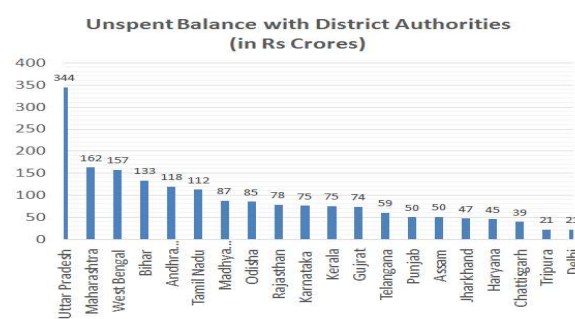


Source: MPLADS Portal

to spend accumulated funds in the election year. Fund utilisation under a scheme linked to political business cycles has been noted in several studies (Pal, 2002). The CAG's MPLAD Performance Report-2010 notes 'year-wise expenditure incurred during 2004-09 showed that, to some extent, the expenditure under the scheme had a propensity to increase in years closer to elections, while during the intermediary period, funds tended to accumulate' (Audit Report, 2010, 35). The Public Accounts Committee of Parliament led by Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi investigated the spendings between 2004-09 and raised the issue of non-spending in the first three years of the Lok Sabha term (55th PAC Report, 2011-12).

The suspension of MPLADS during COVID until November 2021 was seen as an opportunity to clear spending backlogs, as no new funds were allocated, and district authorities had to spend the remaining funds on already sanctioned projects. Interestingly, spending data from May 2023, that is, just a year before the end of the 17th Lok Sabha, shows over Rs. 1.9 thousand crores of unspent balance with the District Authorities. The table below presents the state-wise unspent amounts as of May 2023.

Figure II



The provision for utilisation of accrued interest in scheme projects exacerbated tendencies towards poll-time spending. The 2023 guidelines attempt to check this tendency by making interests unavailable for spending, as it is mandatorily remitted to the Consolidated Fund of India (OM, Finance Ministry, 27 Sept 2022).

Poll-dole has become the structural base of Indian democracy. It nurtures the patron-client relationship between the leaders and the electorate. Hence, a scheme such as MPLADS with provision for nonlapsable funds seems to be tailor-made for breeding these tendencies.

The second pertinent point raised by all evaluative reports is the disjunction between 'felt needs of community'

and the spending pattern. The scheme has no guidelines for assessing the needs of the local community for whom durable assets have to be created. MPs have been given discretionary powers to decide on and recommend work. The elected leader, while recommending works, puts on the cloak of a benevolent ruler distributing largesse to his/her subjects, irrespective of their needs. It is pertinent to note that evaluative reports by both the Planning Commission and CAG pointed to this issue. The CAG report of 2010 notes that – ‘there was no record to indicate that local requirements were considered systematically with relative importance being explored and weighed properly. The process of selection of works lacked transparency and objectivity to that extent (Audit Report, 2010, 9).

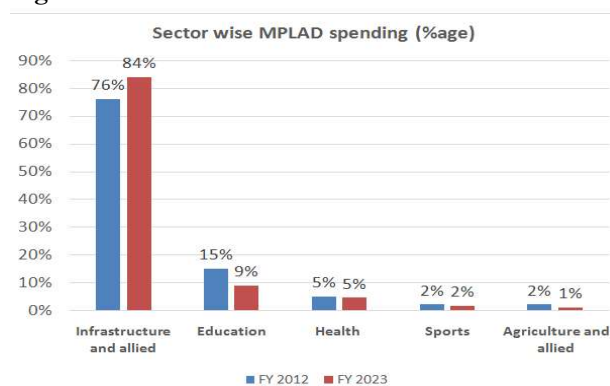
The Programme Evaluation Organization’s 2001 report examines local community needs for fund allocation. It notes that needs vary across socio-economic groups, and small groups with MP access may influence work recommendations that don’t address wider population needs. In Karnataka districts, despite widespread water shortages evidenced by people using pushcarts for water collection, MPLADS funds were spent on community halls, many of which became storage spaces for contractors. These halls were not considered a ‘felt need’ given the water scarcity. The report recommends involving panchayats and urban local bodies in needs assessment rather than relying solely on MPs’ discretion (PEO, 2001).

Is the disjuncture between felt needs of the community and spending pattern merely a pointer to bad representation and faulty implementation, or it indicates a deeper malaise of Indian democracy? This issue extends beyond imperfect representation and implementation. This must be understood in the context of supplanting modern institutions in a feudal society. Patterns of interaction between the elected representatives and the electorate remain feudal/traditional. Hence, there isn’t any weightage given to ascertaining the ‘needs’ while designing a scheme because it is presumed that the representatives and bureaucrats know the best. The ‘citizen’ is not seen as a participant in governance but remains essentially a subject with voting rights.

A persistent issue is the duplication of nodal districts, where multiple MPs select the same district for MPLADS spending. The 2010 CAG report highlighted this problem, noting that in Uttar Pradesh, ten MPs chose Moradabad district, while in Madhya Pradesh, six MPs selected Bhopal. Many chosen districts were not the least developed. The 17th Lok Sabha analysis revealed 80 districts with multiple MP selections: 63 districts had two MPs, 13 had three MPs, and some districts like Mumbai Suburban and Pune had five MPs each. For Rajya Sabha, Kolkata was chosen by 10 MPs, Bengaluru Urban by five, while Lucknow and South Delhi had four MPs each. Only 62% of India’s districts received MPLADS funds, with MPs favoring urban areas (Kancharla, 30 March 2021). This suggests fund allocation may not align with creating durable assets based on people’s needs.

Any analysis of sector-wise spending of MPLADS funds shows substantial expenditure on infrastructural development, with a focus on the construction of roads, bridges, and pathways. This study considers fund allocation and the nature of the developmental work undertaken in the 15th and 16th Lok Sabhas.

Figure III



Source: MPLADS Portal

The identification of what counts as an indicator of development has become more an exercise in human perception than the actual need. Durable assets created must be exhibitable hence road construction is prioritized every other developmental need. This brings out the patron-client and state-subject relationship to the fore. The PEO report underlined a tendency on the part of the MPs to allocate insufficient amounts in an ad hoc manner (PEO, 2001). This is indicative of a tendency to inaugurate more projects, regardless of their completion. No guidelines existed on asset maintenance responsibility. The idea is to give constituents an impression of development without giving much thought to the creation of developmental assets.

When MPLADS was under the Ministry of Rural Development, funds were diverted from other programs: Jawahar Rozgar Yojana saw a 21.55% reduction, employment assurance fell by 5%, agricultural marketing cooperatives decreased by 29.25%, and land reforms reduced by 25% (EPW editorial, April 24, 2004). State assistance plans faced cuts with scheme’s transfer to the MoSPI.

The new guidelines issued in 2023 attempts to provide solutions to the problems identified earlier. However, the implementation of MPLADS in light of the new guidelines awaits evaluation and assessment.

CONCLUSION

The conception and implementation of MPLADS reveals significant insights into state-citizen interactions and relationships in post-colonial India. The scheme’s design and implementation reflect the incomplete transformation from subjects to citizens in post-colonial India. MPLADS, while potentially useful, does little to empower citizens or strengthen local self-government institutions. Instead, it reinforces existing power structures and patron-client relationships. The scheme’s implementation has been marred by issues such as unspent funds, misalignment with local needs, and lack of transparency in project selection and execution. The trends show how the transformation of the subject as a citizen in the process of delivery of public goods is doubtful?

The spending patterns under MPLADS, with a heavy focus on visible infrastructure like roads, reflect a perception-driven approach to development rather than addressing the most pressing community needs. This approach further entrenches the subject-citizen dynamic, where development is something done to or for people, rather than with their active participation.

In conclusion, while MPLADS aimed to address

local developmental needs, its implementation has inadvertently reinforced existing power structures and governance patterns. The scheme serves as a microcosm of the larger challenges in India's journey from a colonial subject-based system to a truly participatory democracy. To achieve meaningful citizen empowerment and democratic governance, there is a need for fundamental reforms in how development schemes are conceived and implemented and evaluated.

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