



## The Rural Local Government in India: Structure, Functioning and Citizen Empowerment

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DOI- 10.5281/zenodo.14059330

### Introduction:

India is called as the Mother of democracy and the institution of Rural local government is as old as civilization. It can be traced to Rigvedic Assemblies like Sabha- Samiti, Village Republics like Lichhavi.

After Independence, Recommendations of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) were accepted by The National Development Council in 1958 and left it to the states to evolve their own patterns. Rajasthan was the first state to establish Panchayat Raj system. Later Number committees were formed to strengthen the Rural Local Government system in India.

1. Ashok Mehta committee (1977)
2. G V K Rao committee (1985)
3. L M Singhvi Committee ( 1986)
4. Thungon Committee (1988)
5. Gadgil Committee (1988)

Finally recommendations of Gadgil Committee became the basis for drafting an amendment bill aimed at conferring the Constitutional status and protection to the panchayat raj system. 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment 1992 has given the practical shape to A40 of the constitution which States that state should take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them necessary powers to enable them to function as units of self government.

### Objectives:

1. To Explain the structure of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs).
2. To examine the functioning of Rural local Government.
3. To analyze the Impact of Democratic Decentralization on Social- Economic – political development in India.
4. To understand the challenges faced by Rural Local governments.

### Structure of Local Self Government:

73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act 1992, Based on the recommendations of Gadgil Committee (1988) Report Conferred Constitutional status and and protection to the Panchayat Raj Institutions in India. This act added a new Part-IX to the constitution of India, entitled as “The Panchayats” and consists of provisions from Articles 243 to 243 O. In addition, It also added a new Eleventh Schedule to the Constitution. This schedule contains 29 functional items of the panchayats.

It provided for Compulsory provisions that have to be included in the state laws creating a new

Panchayat Raj System and Voluntary Provisions may be included at the discretion of the state.

### •Village level

The Act provides for Three tier system of Panchayat Raj in every state- Village, intermediate and district level. Although State having a population not exceeding 20 lakh may not have the panchayat at intermediate level. All the members of the Panchayat at village, Intermediate and district level are Elected by directly by the people. Further, the chairperson of panchayats at the intermdiaand district level elected indirectly – by and from amongst the elected members thereof. Article 243 D provides for Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and scheduled Tribes in every Panchayat in proportion of their population to the total population in the panchayat area. It also includes Reservation of offices of Chairperson to SCs and STs. It makes provision for reservation of not less than one third of total number of seats for women in panchayats . Article 243 E mentions five year term of office to Panchayat at every level. Article 243 A provides for Gram sabha as the foundation pf the PRI. It is a village assembly consisting of all the registered voters in the area of Panchayat.

### •Block level

All the Panchayats in the block are represented in the Block Panchayat( BP/ PS) . A PS, typically consists of (i) directly elected members from the territorial constituencies, (ii) all members of the Legislative Assembly of the State representing constituencies which comprise wholly or partly the BP area, and (iii) chairpersons of all the Panchayats falling within the PS. The president of BP has yhe responsibility for its effective functioning.

**•District level**

Zilla Parishad (ZP) or District Panchayat (DP) normally consists of –

(i) directly elected members from as many territorial constituencies, (ii) all members of the Lok Sabha and of the State Legislative Assembly representing constituencies which comprise wholly or partly the Zilla Parishad area, (iii) all members of the Rajya Sabha registered as electors within the Zilla Parishad area, and (iv) chairpersons of all the PSs falling within the Zilla Parishad area.

**Functions of Rural Local Self Government Bodies:**

1. Gram Panchayat
  - a. Delivery of critical public services including water supply, sanitation, road, education, nutrition, drainage etc.
  - b. Economic development of village and poverty reduction, increase local productivity, increase employment and employability.
  - c. Improve wellbeing of vulnerable and marginalised section – SCs, STs, OBCs, Persons with disabilities, bonded labourers, victims of trafficking etc.
  - d. Plan towards conservation of biological diversity.
  - e. Maintenance of community assets.
2. Block panchayats- Block Development Officer and the officers of various line departments at the block level provide necessary support to the panchayat samiti in all matters relating to planning, execution and administration of development work.
3. Zilla Parishad- It prepares District Panchayat Development Plan. It coordinates the activities of Panchayats, oversees implementation of five year plan.

**PRIs and Citizen Empowerment:**

Panchayats were at the Centre of Gandhian Idea of Gram Swaraj. Gandhi Maintained “Whenever I see the State, It reminds me my weakness”. He believed that The Individual development is possible through Village Republic and Democratic Decentralisation. In a Representing Democracy of India, Gram Panchayats Introduced The direct Democracy through Gram Sabhas. Gram sabha is a participatory place to discuss and intervene in key decisions within ambit of gram panchayat. PRIs have been facilitating civic participation, mass education and a responsible citizenry. It has increased transparency and accountability in Village governance. Through reservation provision they have given a voice to voiceless and a power to powerless sections of society. For example, Gram Sabha of the Niyamgiri hills played a central role in the Niyamgiri movement, which successfully prevented a mining

project from being implemented in the area. It ensured that the rights of the Dongaria Kondh tribals were not violated.

They are allotted the 29 subjects for devolution like Agriculture, minor irrigation, small scale industry, Education and so on. With optimum utilization of resources PRIs have contributed to Poverty reduction and More progress to achieve SDGs. Elapully Gram panchayat in Kerala once faced farmer suicides issue due to water scarcity. Yet with Collaborative water conservation and management it successfully overcame the water issues and Win National Water Award.

The PRIs have played significant role in Women empowerment. The women representatives have gained awareness about their rights, capabilities, Government schemes and motivated other women also. It has positive psychological impact amongst them. World Bank Policy Research Paper sighted increase in Female Labour Force participation Rate, increased bargaining power of women in inter and intra home matters as well. It has brought progressive attitudinal change towards Women. For example families are more interested in Educating their daughters. SC, ST women are also being enabled to think and act freely without hesitation. For example, Nouroti Devi, a Dalit illiterate woman elected as the Sarpanch of the Harmada Village (Rajsthan). She later complete her education, Used power of ICT in Governance, led the RTI campaign and campaign against Alcohol Mafias. Another recent shining example being Honorable President Murmuji. She started her career as councillor of Rai rangpur Nagar Panchayat. Thus Rural Local Government has perceptibly empowered the citizens in India.

**Challenges:**

PRIs are criticized as they have remained “A grass without roots”.

1. 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment provides only skeleton and left infusion of flesh and blood on will and capabilities of states.
2. Lack 3F- Fund, function, functionaries, Corruption.
3. Mani Shankar Aiyer Committee (2012) reported that they are unable to acquire the status and dignity of being viable and responsive people’s body because
  - a. Irregular elections of panchayats
  - b. Power is hijacked by Collector – BDO axis
  - c. Segregated sittings of Gram Sabha on caste, gender lines.
4. Sudha Pai gave the concept of ‘Panchayat pati’- Proxy representation of elected women representatives by male family members.

**Way Ahead:**

1. Activity mapping and devolution of power based on subsidiary principle (2<sup>nd</sup> Administrative Reforms Committee).

2. National commission for Panchayat Raj Institutions ( Aiyer committee).
3. Reorient the outlook of lower bureaucracy.
4. Adoption of Kerla Model by each state- Bigbang devolution, Panchayat ombudsman.
5. Representation to PRIs in legislative Council.( Punchhi commission)
6. Election commission of India to have powers to issue directions to state Election Commission.

**Conclusion:**

As said by James Bryce, The school of democracy and the best guarantee for its success is practice of local self government. 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment is a milestone towards democratic Decentralisation. The elaborate structure and functions designed for Rural local government in India provide promising future. Although they remain half baked cake. They need to be further empowered by implementing the recommendations of Aiyer committee, 2<sup>nd</sup> ARC, Punchhi committee.

They are pillars of Indian Democracy in whose strength lies the prosperity of New India. Let us pledge to further empower them for Self Reliant India.

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