



DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

**PANCHAYATI RAJ MOVEMENT IS IN
DISTRESS**

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Context

- Recent discussions in Parliament on the **75th anniversary of the Indian Constitution** highlighted that the momentum towards deepening local governance has stalled.
 - Several factors are contributing to the distress of the Panchayati Raj movement, necessitating urgent reforms.

About the Panchayati Raj in India

- Historical Background:** The concept of Panchayati Raj has its roots in ancient India, where **village assemblies (Panchayats)** played a crucial role in local governance.
- Mahatma Gandhi** envisioned Panchayati Raj as the foundation of India's political system, advocating for **village self-governance (Gram Swaraj)**.
- The **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992** institutionalized this vision by creating a **three-tier system of local governance**:
 - Gram Panchayat at the village level;
 - Panchayat Samiti at the block level;
 - Zila Parishad at the district level;

Structure and Functioning of PRIs (As Per 73rd Amendment)

- The Panchayati Raj system operates through **regular elections, held every five years**, with reservations for women, SCs, and STs.
- It ensures inclusivity and representation of marginalized groups in local governance.
- The Gram Panchayat, as the basic unit of local administration, is responsible for implementing various development programs and schemes at the village level.

Key Committees Related To Panchayati Raj Institutions

- Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957):** This landmark committee recommended the three-tier Panchayati Raj system, with Gram Panchayats (village level), Panchayat Samitis (block level), and Zilla Parishads (district level).
- Ashok Mehta Committee (1977):** Focused on strengthening financial resources and functional autonomy of Panchayats.
- G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985):** Emphasized the need for regular elections and greater participation of women and marginalized communities.
- L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986):** Recommended measures to address financial constraints and improve administrative efficiency of Panchayats.
- P.K. Thungan Committee (1989):** Proposed electoral reforms and devolution of more power and functions to Panchayats.
- Natarajan Committee (1996):** Assessed the implementation of the 73rd Amendment and recommended further devolution of power and resources.
- Sachar Committee (2006):** Highlighted the need for greater representation and empowerment of women in Panchayats.
- M.V. Rajwade Committee (2017):** Reviewed the functioning of Gram Sabhas and recommended steps to enhance their participation and effectiveness.

Challenges Facing the Panchayati Raj System

- Administrative Decentralization Plateaued:** Effective local governance requires state governments to devolve staff and administrative control to local governments.

- ♦ However, less than **20% of states have fully devolved all 29 subjects** listed in the **Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution**. It hampers the functioning of panchayats.
- **Declining Fiscal Autonomy:** While the **73rd Amendment mandates financial devolution**, in practice, Panchayats still depend heavily on state and central grants.
 - ♦ While direct transfers to panchayats have increased from 1.45 lakh crore under the **Thirteenth Finance Commission (2010-15)** to 2.36 lakh crore under the **Fifteenth Finance Commission (2021-26)**, there has been a significant reduction in untied grants.
 - ♦ **Untied grants**, which allow local decision-making, have fallen from 85% to 60%, reducing the autonomy of local governments.
 - ♦ 14th and 15th Finance Commissions recommended increased grants to PRIs, but fund utilization **remains inefficient due to bureaucratic red tape**.
- **Gender and Social Inequality in Governance:** Although the **73rd Amendment provides for 33% reservation for women**, and many states have increased it to 50%, gender bias **still exists in Panchayat politics**.
 - ♦ The phenomenon of 'Sarpanch Pati' (where husbands or male relatives make decisions on behalf of elected women representatives) undermines the true empowerment of women in local governance.
 - ♦ Additionally, caste-based politics often prevents marginalized communities from actively participating in decision-making.
- **Poor Accountability and Transparency:** Social audits, which were introduced to improve transparency, are either not conducted regularly or manipulated.
 - ♦ **Misuse of funds** in welfare schemes like Mid-Day Meal Scheme, PMAY-G, and PDS (Public Distribution System) has raised concerns about corruption in local governance.
- **Shift in Welfare Distribution Mechanisms:** The central government's reliance on direct cash transfers, such as the **Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM) platform**, has bypassed gram panchayats in beneficiary selection and grievance redressal.
 - ♦ It has minimized the traditional roles of panchayats in welfare delivery.
- **Political Interference and Weak Autonomy:** Local governance is frequently overshadowed by state politics, where village representatives have little say in actual policy implementation.
 - ♦ State governments control funds, and many Panchayat leaders act as mere implementers of state schemes rather than decision-makers for local development.
- **Bureaucratic Hurdles and Capacity Deficit:** Many Panchayat functionaries lack proper training, leading to poor governance and inefficiency in implementing developmental schemes like MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) and PMAY-G (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Gramin).
- **Impact of Rapid Urbanization:** With rapid urbanization, the focus of policy has shifted towards cities and municipal reforms rather than rural governance.
 - ♦ In 1990, nearly 75% of India's population lived in rural areas, but this has now declined to around 60%. It has affected the relevance and functioning of panchayats.

Revitalizing the Panchayati Raj System

- **Strengthening Financial Autonomy:** 15th Finance Commission has recommended increased funding for Panchayats, but timely allocation and effective utilization must be ensured.
 - ♦ Panchayats should be given power to collect local taxes to reduce dependency on state and central grants.
- **Enhancing Administrative Capacity:** Proper training programs should be conducted for Panchayat representatives to improve governance.
 - ♦ Use of digital governance tools can improve efficiency in fund management and service delivery.
- **Reducing Political and Bureaucratic Interference:** State governments must ensure greater autonomy for Panchayats by reducing bureaucratic control.

- ♦ Panchayat elections should be conducted fairly without political influence.
- **Strengthening Social Audits and Accountability Mechanisms:** Regular social audits should be mandated to reduce corruption and improve transparency.
 - ♦ Gram Sabhas must be strengthened to allow active participation of villagers in governance.
- **Women Empowerment in Panchayats:** Strict laws should be enforced to prevent proxy representation in women-reserved seats.
 - ♦ Leadership training programs should be provided to women representatives.
- **Integration with Digital India and E-Governance:** The use of e-Panchayat initiatives can enhance transparency and efficiency in governance.
 - ♦ Digital literacy programs should be promoted in rural areas to improve citizen participation in governance.

Conclusion

- The Panchayati Raj system remains a powerful tool for decentralized governance, but it is currently in distress due to financial, administrative, and political challenges.
- Strengthening Panchayats with adequate financial autonomy, capacity building, and accountability mechanisms can revitalize the movement.
- Empowering local self-governance is not just a constitutional mandate but a necessity for ensuring holistic rural development in India.

Source: TH

Mains Practice Question

Given the current challenges facing the Panchayati Raj system in India, including administrative centralization, declining fiscal autonomy, and the shift in welfare distribution mechanisms, what reforms and strategies do you believe are necessary to revive and strengthen local governance at the grassroots level?