NEXT IAS

DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE: STRENGTHENING PANCHAYATS FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

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Context

- Panchayats in India remain underutilized due to financial constraints, fragmented efforts, and limited institutional capacity.
  - Strengthening panchayats is essential for achieving holistic and inclusive development across India's diverse rural landscape.

About the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India

Historical Evolution:

- **Ancient Period:** The concept of local self-governance in India dates back to ancient times, with **Village Councils (Panchayats)** playing a crucial role in **local administration and dispute resolution.** These councils were **informal** and operated based on **local customs and traditions.**

- **British Era:** During the early British period, the traditional Panchayat system was **weakened** due to the **introduction of centralized revenue collection systems.**
  - Reforms in the later British period, such as **Lord Ripon's Resolution (1882)** and the **Royal Commission on Decentralization (1907-09),** sought **to revive local self-governance.**

- **Post-Independence Era:** The **Constitution of India** emphasized the importance of village Panchayats as units of self-governance.
  - The **Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957)** recommended the establishment of a **three-tier Panchayati Raj system**, which was implemented in **Rajasthan in 1959.**
  - Subsequent committees, such as the **Ashok Mehta Committee (1978), further refined the structure** and **functions of PRIs.**

- **Constitutional Recognition (1992):** The **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act** granted constitutional status to PRIs, making them a mandatory feature of governance in rural India.
  - It came into effect on **April 24, 1993,** thus April 24th is celebrated as the **National Panchayati Raj Day** every year.
  - It introduced a **Three Tier System:**
    - **Gram Panchayat (Village Level):** The lowest tier, responsible for addressing local issues such as sanitation, water supply, and rural housing.
    - **Panchayat Samiti (Block Level):** The intermediate tier, coordinating development programs across multiple villages.
    - **Zila Parishad (District Level):** The apex tier, overseeing and integrating development activities at the district level.
  - It **mandated reservations for women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs),** and the appointment of a **State Finance Commission** to recommend the financial powers of Panchayats.

Key Features of the Modern Panchayati Raj System

- **Decentralized Governance:** PRIs enable decision-making at the grassroots level, ensuring that local needs and priorities are addressed effectively.

- **Participatory Democracy:** The system promotes citizen participation through Gram Sabhas (village assemblies), where residents can voice their concerns and influence decisions.

- **Inclusive Representation:** Reservations for women, SCs, and STs ensure that marginalized groups have a voice in governance.
  - Nearly 14 lakh women representatives have been elected to PRIs, showcasing the success of reservation policies.

- **Integration with Development Goals:** PRIs play a critical role in implementing government schemes and achieving SDGs at the local level.

Role of Panchayats in Grassroots Governance

- **Localizing Development:** Panchayats are uniquely positioned to tailor strategies to the specific socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental needs of villages.
  - Unlike top-down models, a panchayat-led approach ensures that development initiatives are contextually relevant and community-driven.
- **Implementing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** The recently launched **Panchayat Advancement Index (PAI)** ranks over 216,000 panchayats on their progress in areas such as poverty alleviation, health, water sufficiency, infrastructure, and governance.
  - It underscores the critical role of panchayats in achieving India's sustainable development agenda.

Challenges Facing Panchayats in India

- **Inadequate Financing:** Most panchayats rely heavily on funds from higher tiers of government, with limited avenues for generating their own revenue.
  - A study by the **Reserve Bank of India (RBI)** revealed that in 2022-23, the average revenue per panchayat was 21.23 lakh, with only 1.1% coming from local taxes and fees.
- **Technological and Digital Literacy Gaps:** Limited technological infrastructure and low digital literacy hinder effective monitoring, evaluation, and reporting of progress.
  - Without digital tools, real-time tracking of SDG progress remains a challenge.
- **Fragmentation in Rural Governance:** Multiple government departments operate in villages without proper coordination, leading to duplication of work and inefficient use of resources.
  - The lack of convergence between different schemes and departments makes holistic development difficult to achieve.

Strengthening Panchayats for Development

- **Enhancing Institutional Capacity:** Targeted training programs to equip panchayat officials with technical and managerial skills.
  - Promoting digital inclusion to streamline administrative processes and improve governance.
- **Enhancing Financial Autonomy:** PRIs should be empowered to generate revenue through property taxes, market fees, and local businesses.
  - Timely devolution of funds from higher tiers of government is essential.
- **Fostering Community Participation:** Encouraging citizen involvement in decision-making processes to ensure local needs are addressed.
  - Strengthening transparency mechanisms for better accountability.
- **Better Coordination Between Departments:** Establishing integrated development plans that align efforts across multiple sectors.
  - Strengthening accountability measures to prevent resource wastage.

Key Initiatives and Efforts Strengthening Panchayats in India

- **Infrastructure Development:**
  - **Funds For Gram Panchayat Bhawans:** To ensure dedicated office premises for panchayats with populations exceeding 3,000.
  - **Digital Infrastructure:** To streamline governance.
- **Financial Empowerment:**
  - **Own Source Revenue Training:** Specialized modules have been introduced to help panchayats generate revenue through local taxes and fees.

- ◆ **Samarth Portal:** It facilitates revenue generation and fund management for panchayats, promoting financial independence.
- **Technological Integration:**
  - ◆ **eGramSwaraj:** A digital governance initiative **available in 22 languages,** enabling transparent fund management and real-time monitoring.
  - ◆ **SVAMITVA Scheme:** Drone surveys have been conducted in 3.17 lakh villages, issuing over 2.19 crore property cards to empower rural property owners.
- **Capacity Building:**
  - ◆ **Training for Women Representatives and Development of Panchayat Leaders:** Specialized modules have been developed to strengthen the political voice of women in panchayats.
- **Environmental and Social Initiatives:**
  - ◆ **Localized Climate Data:** Over 2.5 lakh panchayats now receive weather forecasting data to support climate-resilient planning.
  - ◆ **Community Engagement Campaigns** like 'Healthy Panchayat' and 'Siti Bajo aur School Aao' to address health and education challenges.

Conclusion

- Strong panchayats are the cornerstone of grassroots governance and sustainable development in India.
- Addressing challenges such as inadequate financing, technological gaps, and fragmented efforts is crucial to unlocking their full potential.
- By enhancing institutional capacity, improving financial autonomy, and fostering community participation, panchayats can drive inclusive and holistic development, ensuring that no village is left behind.

Source: BS

Mains Practice Question
[Q] What strategies can be implemented to strengthen panchayati raj institutions in India and ensure their pivotal role in driving sustainable development at the grassroots level?

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