

### The Role of Local Self Government in India

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with a general perspective of the local self-government by making an enquiry into its implication and implementations after the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in India. At the beginning, it deals with the historical background of the local self-government in India from pre Independence to the colonial period. Further, it explores the progress of local bodies after independence with functions of local governments, sources of income of local bodies, Centre and States' control over local bodies, values and limitations of local governments and concluding remarks. The overall progress of the Indian villages depends upon the upliftment of rural masses, socially, economically and politically. Effective people's participation in the democratic processes provides voices to the otherwise voiceless rural masses who toil under extreme conditions of poverty, illiteracy and inequality. The present model of Panchayats was created keeping in mind the Gandhian ideology of Gram Swaraj and self-sufficiency of villages. Gandhi said: "The village problem has to be solved by the villagers alone." Gandhi's idea of people's participation in development of rural areas is still applicable to Indian villages. However, despite the constitutional status granted to Panchayats as a body responsible for local self-governance in India, the overall progress of villages and implementation of a large number of development schemes is not at par with the desired outcome. The increasing gap between Panchayats and the results that they were created to ensure has to be reduced and people's active involvement can go a long way in achieving the same. Through the present paper, the authors have traversed through the road towards ensuring effective people's participation amidst the system of local self-governance in India. A descriptive method has been adopted for the purpose of analysing the evolution of people's participation and identifying the present developments in that direction.

[Mandolkar, A.K. **The Role of Local Self Government in India.** *The International Journal of Interpretation, Observation and Analysis*, 2025; Volume 3, Issue 1:35-39 (July-September). ISSN 2349-0713, Peer-reviewed (online/offline), Refereed, Indexed and International Journal (Since 2013), Global Impact Factor: 5.776

**Keywords:** Governments, implementations, constitutional amendments, independence

#### Introduction:

In every state it has been necessary to carry a process of territorial subdivision through various stages. Operating from a single Centre, the central government has found it difficult to tackle the myriad problems of a wide territory. Thus conceived, the regional governments in a federation are also central governments. These are clearly distinguishable from the network of local authorities, which can be found in every state operating with limited powers in narrow localities. In India, the local government units are of two types, Rural and Urban. Previously, the rural units consisted of the union boards (or village panchayats in some states), the local boards and the district boards at village, sub-division and district levels. In recent years, a new system of local bodies generally known as "Panchayat Raj" has been set up at village, block and district levels. The major urban units

in India are the municipal corporations, the municipalities and the cantonment boards. The cantonment boards are partly elected and are to be found only in military stations. Besides, there are notified area and town are committees for small towns. Local institutions have every deep roots in Indian soil. History tells us that every Indian village in older times had a village panchayat, which used to function as an autonomous body. The panchayats were largely free from state interference. They were mainly concerned with administrative and judicial work. Their working was so efficient that every village community was a sort of small republic. Sir Charles Metcalf goes to the extent of saying, " They (Village Communities) seems to last where nothing else lasts.

The central tenet that runs across the Constitution of India is democracy. Democracy is essentially a tool in the hands of the country's

masses to liberate themselves from despotism and inequality as reflected in Gandhi's words, "freeing a man from political and social enslavement and from economic exploitation" is democracy. In harmony with such a notion, is also the opening sentence of the Preamble of our Constitution "We, the people... adopt, enact and give to ourselves this Constitution" which signifies that the power is ultimately vested in the hands of the people. Ideally, the expression „people“ should constitute all the people living in this country, including those residing in the remotest corners. Democracy would be truly inclusive when these people acquire a sense of self-governance through community participation. Through universal adult suffrage, people do participate in the democratic processes but the outcomes of it might not be at par with their expectations. Here it is necessary to empower them in such a manner so that they can be in control of their immediate needs and social, political and economic aspirations. Therefore, for a democracy to become meaningful, strengthening the grassroots institutions is of outmost importance. Local self-government institutions are bodies constituted at the grassroots level for the better administration of local affairs. These institutions comprise representatives directly elected by the local people at regular intervals of time. The objective of these institutions is to meet with the local needs, relieve the centre and the state governments of administrative burden, secure an effective development administration, promote political consciousness among the rural masses, decentralise power and authority and make participatory democracy a success. Importance of local governance in a democratic set up can hardly be underestimated. In developing countries such as India, local self-government institutions provide impetus to democratic principles and at the same time act as a means to provide the much-needed participation of the masses in the socioeconomic transformation of the nation. Given the unjust circumstances and gross inequality that the villagers in India live with, the need for adequate measures designed to voice their grievances and to ensure their participation cannot be denied. The State being the supreme authority entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding the interests of its citizens must discharge its solemn responsibility "to promote the welfare of the people by

securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life. The State shall, in particular, strive to minimise the inequalities in income, and endeavour to eliminate inequalities in status, facilities and opportunities, not only amongst individuals but also amongst groups of people residing in different areas or engaged in different vocations.

Dynasties tumble down, revolution succeeds revolution. Hindu, Pathan, Mogul, Maratha, Sikh and English all are masters in turn but the village communities remain the same. The village communities, by their unwillingness to change have been in the past preserves of Indian culture and Indian way of life. Above all the Local self-governing institutions as a rule are more efficient and economic. The councilors or corporators knew well that any waste of money means loss and disadvantage to the taxpayers. They as such work more judiciously and sincerely. The distribution of power between the Centre, the State and Local bodies is not based on any rigid principles. It is difficult to define their respective scopes. Gilchrist similarly observes: "It can be described but not defined, for a definition requires limits and local government and central government cannot always be clearly demarcated. As a rule, the Centre administers subjects that concern the whole country, viz defence, external affairs, currency, inter-state commerce and customs, subjects like primary education, sanitation, drainage, street light and registration of births and deaths are handled by the local bodies.

#### **The Local Self - Government in India**

The successful working of a democracy demands association of people at the various levels of administration. The role of local self-government in the state administration is of considerable importance. In ancient India, village panchayats are basic units of local government. Self-governing village communities in an agrarian background existed in India from the times of the Rig-Veda (1200 B.C). These village bodies, in course of time, took the form of "panchayats". They were an assembly of 'five' persons which looked after the affairs of the village. They enjoyed police and judicial powers. The modern panchayat raj systems are different from the age-old panchayats. Panchayat raj is a multi -functional,

multi-purpose organizational system. It is an outcome of democratic decentralization. It is also development oriented. With the objective of facilitating the participation of the people in the developmental activities of the village. It is possible to trace the origin of local government institutions far back in Indian history. There is also evidence to show that these institutions came into existence during the Mauryan period, which is known for its extensive network of administration as well as innovations in administrative organization. In the early years of the British rule in India, there was centralization of authority. In 1830, Sir Charles Metcalfe described village panchayat as little republics. In 1864, Lord Lawrence in a resolution admitted the capability of the people of India in administering their own local affairs. Lord Mayo in 1870 in a resolution adopted decentralization with respect to sanitation and public works. The most important step came in 1882 when Lord Rippon issued his famous resolution of local self-government which formed the basis of local self-government till 1947. Hence, he is regarded as the "Father of local self-government". In India, the Act of 1935 was a big step in the process of democratizing local bodies.

#### **Progress of local bodies in Post Independent India**

With the advent of Independence, real opportunity arose for the introduction of democratic decentralization. Mahatma Gandhi emphasized on the need to establish local selfgoverning institutions. The constitution of free India contains specific provisions for the progress of local bodies, The state government went ahead with panchayat raj acts, The panchayats were formed in every village, with adequate powers to deal with local affairs. Most of the district boards have been dissolved and their functions have now been entrusted to Zilla parishads or panchayats. One of the Directive Principles of State Policy (Art. 40) of the constitution of India states that States can take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to work as units of self-government [4] . The panchayats send representatives to the block samities. The block samities have a chief executive officer as their development officer. All other panchayats have tehsildar as their executive chief. The panchayat

samities are fully empowered to make budget and formulate schemes for village development. They are assured of getting all sort of technical or administrative help from the state. The new constitution which came into being from 26th January 1950 gave constitutional importance to local self-government institutions. In addition, Article 40 of Directive Principle of State Policy enjoins upon state to take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable to function as units of local government. With the passing of the Constitution Amendment Act, 1992 popularly known as the Nagarapalika Act- A uniform three tier system of government has been introduced at the local level. The Nagar Panchayat is to be constituted for a transitional area that is an area which is transitioning from a rural area to an urban area, the municipal council for a smaller urban area and the municipal corporation for a larger urban area. The end of the first plan period revealed that not much success had been achieved in getting the participation of the people in the development process. Therefore, the government appointed the Balwant Roy Mehta committee in 1957 to examine the reorganization of district administration by providing for the association of popular organizations at the village and state level. The Committee recommended a scheme of "democratic decentralization". With the three tier structure of the local bodies namely the directly elected Panchayat Samiti at the block level and Zilla Parishad at the district level. The government accepted the recommendations made by the Balwant Roy Mehta Committee and a three-tier system of Panchayat Raj had evolved in the country. Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh were the first States to adopt the panchayat form of rural local self-government in 1959. They were joined by other states also in due course. Still, variations existed between states with regard to the composition, tenure, functions, decisions making, resource allocation, implementation and devolution of power at different levels of these bodies. Thus, there did not exist a uniform pattern of panchayat raj institutions.

#### **How far should the Centre or State control local bodies?**

The local bodies should get sufficient freedom in local matters, so that people are able to get

primary education in democracy. But this does not mean that the local bodies should be completely free from the control of provincial or central government. In our country, usually the central government has no relation with the local government and only the provincial (State) government have relation with the local bodies. However, in certain countries with unitary government, the central government maintains relation with the local government. Provincial or state government gives financial aid to local bodies and therefore it becomes its duty to see that this aid is not misused. To check this the state government appoints auditors and they audit the accounts of local bodies. Besides, the State government has to see that all local bodies adopt a uniform policy towards education, eradication of diseases, improvement of public health and other important subjects and there is administrative efficiency. The state government keeps commissioner or divisional commissioner. In case the management of local body is defective, or there is corruption, or if the public money is being misused by it, the state government can suspend that local body and take its administration into its own hands. For running the administration of that institution, the state government can appoint an administrator. The director of panchayats also has a great control over the panchayats. The director is a high government officer. Local institutions have been given powers to impose taxes to some extent not only in India but also in England, France, America and other countries. They can also take loans and grants from the state and central government. The state governments have the right to take administration of local bodies in their own hands if their administration proves to be defective. The state government can also take steps to prevent the misuse of funds and to relieve the local bodies of heavy debts. The state government can make rules and regulations for the administration of local bodies. Therefore, whenever it is desirable that the local bodies should be given autonomy in their own administration.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Many states have not taken effective step to devolve the three tier system of Panchayat Raj institutions to enable the discharge their constitutionally stipulated functions. Further, it is imperative that the Panchayat Raj Institutions have final resources and manpower to match the

responsibility entrusted to them. While State Finance commissions have submitted their recommendations, not many states have implemented these or taken steps to ensure Panchayat Raj Institutions fiscal viability. Parallel systems and organizations set up under various Central/State developmental programmes have further sapped the strength of the panchayats, reduced their legitimate functional space and even encroached upon their political space. In some states, the gram panchayats have been placed in a position of subordination: gram panchayat Sarpanches have to spend extraordinary amount of time visiting block offices for funds and/or technical approval. These interactions with the block staff/ office distort the role of Sarpanches as elected representatives. Activities permitted under the schemes are not always appropriate for all parts of the district. This results in unsuitable activities being promoted or an under-spend of the funds. An important power devolved to gram panchayats is the right to levy tax on property, business, markets, fairs and also for services provided, like street lighting or public toilets, etc. Very few panchayats use their fiscal power to levy and collect taxes. The argument of panchayat heads is that it is difficult to levy tax on your own constituency, especially when one lives in the community. However, when panchayats do not raise resources and instead receive funds from outside, people are less likely to request a social audit. The procedures of accounting adopted are very complex for the rural masses. This issue is further compounded by the lack of skills and knowledge of the panchayat members. Empowering the gram sabhas could have been a powerful weapon for transparency, accountability and for involvement of the marginalized sections. However, a number of the state acts have not spelt the powers of the gram sabhas nor have any procedures been laid down for the functioning of these bodies or penalties for the officials. Unfortunately, the present act has not clearly defined the role of political parties. To a large extent the success or failure of the Panchayati Raj system depends on the state government's good or bad intentions.

#### **THE EFFICACY OF THE 73RD AMENDMENT AND BEYOND**

The Constitutional 73rd Amendment Act 1992 has a chequered history. With the passage of

time, the Constitution, as it stood originally proved its incapacity to run on the basis of the structure assigned to it initially. The need for a much more inclusive form of governance grew stronger. With the aim of securing adequate community participation and involving people at the grassroots level, A Study Team of the Committee on Plan Projects (Balwantrai Mehta Committee) was appointed by the Government of India which served as the forerunner in the matter of establishing Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The Ashok Mehta Committee was appointed by the Janata Government in 1977 under Morarji Desai (which expressed strong interest in assigning a meaningful role to the Panchayati Raj) to examine the state of affairs pertaining to the PRIs. Realising the potential of the villages as gathered from the experiences of Maharashtra and Gujarat, the Committee through its report dissected the existing position with regard to PRI implementation highlighting the need for granting autonomy to the villages in terms of administration and finance.<sup>14</sup> The Report also focussed on the need for utilising human resources in the developmental processes, suggested a viable organisation of grassroots councils to mobilise the participation and active support of the people and also laid down a future course of action. Further, the Committee suggested structures with a development orientation at two levels-district Panchayats and Mandal Panchayats (covering 15,000 to 20,000 people) at the grassroots level. Its other recommendations were open participation of political parties in Panchayati Raj elections and constitutional protection to further extend decentralisation of power. The Committee recommended that these institutions participate in development activities in the areas of agriculture, forestry, cottage industries, welfare activities, and the like. With the expansion of anti-poverty programmes in the 1980s and the creation of district rural development agencies and other similar organisations at lower levels, it was necessary to integrate the local system with these programmes.

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