



## Panchayati Raj System in India: It's Status and Prospects

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**Abstract :** *India has adopted a de-centralized strategy in its local governance system with a more active and area-based approach to rural development through the 73rd constitutional amendment in 1992. It holds very important place in 11th schedule of the constitution. Panchayati Raj institutions in rural areas signify India's experiment with direct democracy at the grass root level. The British administration implemented centralized control over governance, relegating the role of Panchayats. The introduction of land revenue systems, such as the Permanent Settlement of 1793, altered the power dynamics in rural areas and undermined the autonomy of local bodies. In 1882, the Royal Commission on Decentralization recommended the establishment of local boards to manage affairs at the district and municipal levels, although these boards had limited power and were largely controlled by the British colonial government. The 73rd Amendment has been instrumental in promoting inclusive governance. While some states have embraced the Panchayati Raj system enthusiastically, others have struggled with its effective implementation. States like Kerala, West Bengal, and Rajasthan have made substantial strides in strengthening Panchayats and ensuring that they play an active role in local governance. The inclusion of women in Panchayats through reservation has led to a notable increase in female participation in governance. One of the most promising aspects of the future of Panchayati Raj lies in its ability to foster greater democratic participation. With the constitutional recognition of Panchayats as institutions of self-government, there is a growing opportunity to involve local communities in decision-making processes. The significant opportunity for the future of Panchayati Raj lies in strengthening the capacity of elected representatives.*

**Key Words:** *Panchayati, Local Bodies, Rural, India, Governance, Government.*

### **Introduction**

Panchayati Raj is the bulwark of India's social and economic development in 21st Century. Panchayati Raj was introduced to give a fillip to the development of programmes launched in rural areas. It was the hope of the promoters of Panchayati Raj, that if the representatives of the local people were associated with developmental administration, there would be better people's participation in the implementation of the programmes. They

have, therefore, assigned a significant role to the non-officials in Panchayati Raj and all-important decisions in these bodies are taken by them now. Among the non-Officials, the political executives, i.e., refers to elected executives such as the Chairman of the Jilla Parishad, the President if the Panchayat Samithi and the Sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat, play a dominant role. As leaders of the Panchayati Raj administration, they are largely responsible for setting its pace. Such leader would be popular and their



legitimacy would be widely accepted only if they are drawn from a cross-section of the rural society. Theoretically, therefore the Panchayati Raj institutions being democratic bodies should provide opportunities to perform its tasks towards the need of the local people.

India has adopted a de-centralized strategy in its local governance system with a more active and area-based approach to rural development through the 73rd constitutional amendment in 1992. It holds very important place in 11th schedule of the constitution. Panchayati Raj institutions in rural areas signify India's experiment with direct democracy at the grass root level. The present three-tier system was the brain child of Balawant Rai Mehta Committee, 1957. The ideal construction of the Indian Constitution postulates an aspirational level both for the institutions and functionaries of the Panchayati Raj, provides a measuring rod for evaluating their performance and also contributes to improving the tone of their working, by constantly reemphasizing how far removed from the ideal they still are.

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### ***Historical Background of Panchayati Raj System in India***

The Panchayati Raj system in India has its roots in ancient Indian history, where village communities were traditionally self-governed through a system of local assemblies known as "Panchayats." These institutions played a crucial role in managing the affairs of rural communities, resolving disputes, and ensuring the welfare of their members. The system was based on the principles of democracy, cooperation, and collective decision-making. However, over time, the nature and functioning of Panchayats changed, especially during the colonial period, when local self-governance structures were altered or weakened under British rule.

Historically, the Panchayati system in India was a manifestation of decentralized governance. In ancient times, villages functioned as autonomous units, where decisions regarding local matters, including water distribution, agriculture, social norms, and public welfare, were made collectively by the elders of the community, often with the assistance of a council of five members, known as a "Panchayat." These councils enjoyed significant authority and were integral to the functioning of village life. The system remained prevalent during the early stages of medieval India as well,



although its influence began to wane with the establishment of centralized Mughal rule.

The British colonial era had a significant impact on the traditional Panchayati system. The British administration implemented centralized control over governance, relegating the role of Panchayats. The introduction of land revenue systems, such as the Permanent Settlement of 1793, altered the power dynamics in rural areas and undermined the autonomy of local bodies. British policies favoured landlords and zamindars over traditional local leaders, which weakened the Panchayats and marginalized their role in local governance. The British also introduced a system of administrative officers and bureaucratic control that further reduced the power of village institutions.

However, the idea of local self-government was not entirely abandoned during the colonial period. In 1882, the Royal Commission on Decentralization recommended the establishment of local boards to manage affairs at the district and municipal levels, although these boards had limited power and were largely controlled by the British colonial government. Despite the lack of significant power, these boards laid the foundation for the future development of local governance structures in India. The vision of empowering rural India through a more robust and democratic system of governance gained prominence in the post-independence era. After India gained independence in 1947, the leaders of the newly formed Republic of India sought to build a system that would ensure grassroots participation in governance and development. The idea of revitalizing the Panchayati system was seen as a way to foster inclusive democracy, promote

social justice, and improve rural governance.

The significant turning point came with the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950. Although the Constitution initially did not provide a detailed framework for Panchayati Raj, it recognized the importance of local self-government and decentralized decision-making. Over the years, various leaders and policymakers emphasized the need for empowering local communities, particularly in rural areas, to manage their affairs and participate in national development. In 1957, the first major attempt to strengthen Panchayati Raj was made through the establishment of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee, which recommended the establishment of a three-tier Panchayati Raj system, consisting of village, intermediate, and district levels. This recommendation laid the foundation for the future institutionalization of local governance in India.

Despite these efforts, it was only in 1992 that the Panchayati Raj system was constitutionally strengthened and institutionalized through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. This amendment was a landmark development in the history of Panchayati Raj in India, as it mandated the creation of Panchayats at the village, intermediate, and district levels, and established a uniform framework for their functioning across the country. It also introduced the provision for direct elections at all levels of Panchayats, reserving one-third of the seats for women, and ensuring representation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Moreover, the amendment called for the devolution of powers and responsibilities to local bodies, making them more autonomous in



managing their affairs and promoting local development.

The 73rd Amendment gave a constitutional mandate for the Panchayati Raj system, but its actual implementation varied across different states. Some states embraced the system more effectively, while others struggled with challenges related to funding, capacity building, and ensuring the autonomy of Panchayats. In some regions, political interference, corruption, and a lack of adequate devolution of powers from the state government have hindered the successful functioning of Panchayats. Despite these challenges, the Panchayati Raj system has played an essential role in strengthening democracy at the grassroots level, promoting participatory governance, and addressing local development needs.

### ***73rd Constitutional Amendment Act***

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, enacted in 1992, marked a pivotal moment in the history of local self-governance in India. This amendment aimed to empower rural communities by strengthening the Panchayati Raj system, which had been an important feature of India's governance structure since ancient times. The amendment was a significant step toward decentralizing power and fostering greater political participation at the grassroots level, especially in rural areas where governance had traditionally been distant from the people. It was a response to the growing recognition that true democracy could not thrive without effective local governance and the active involvement of citizens in decision-making.

Before the 73rd Amendment, the Panchayati Raj system existed in a somewhat fragmented form across India. The recommendations of various committees, such as the Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) and the Ashok Mehta

Committee (1978), had laid the groundwork for decentralization, but it was only in 1992 that a formal and comprehensive constitutional framework was provided. The amendment mandated the establishment of Panchayats at three levels: the village, intermediate, and district levels, forming a three-tier system of local governance. The aim was to ensure that decision-making power was vested in local bodies, allowing them to address issues that directly impacted their communities, such as education, healthcare, infrastructure, and poverty alleviation.

One of the most significant features of the 73rd Amendment was the provision for direct elections to Panchayats at all levels. This was seen as a vital step in promoting democratic participation, as it ensured that local representatives were chosen by the people and were accountable to them. Furthermore, the amendment reserved one-third of the seats in Panchayats for women, a move that aimed to enhance gender equality and empower women to participate in governance. In addition, it provided for reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, ensuring that marginalized communities had a voice in local decision-making processes.

The amendment also addressed the issue of financial autonomy for Panchayats. It called for the devolution of powers and responsibilities from the state governments to local bodies, giving them greater authority in managing local resources and implementing development schemes. The Panchayats were entrusted with tasks related to economic planning, infrastructure development, and social welfare, including programs related to education, healthcare, sanitation, and poverty alleviation. The constitutional recognition of Panchayats as institutions



of self-government was meant to make them more effective in responding to the needs of rural communities.

However, while the 73rd Amendment laid the foundation for a robust Panchayati Raj system, its implementation has faced several challenges. One of the major issues has been the lack of adequate devolution of powers and funds from state governments to Panchayats. While the amendment provided for the transfer of authority to local bodies, many state governments have been reluctant to fully implement these provisions, thereby limiting the effectiveness of Panchayats in fulfilling their responsibilities. In some cases, Panchayats continue to be dependent on state governments for funds and decision-making, which undermines their autonomy.

Another challenge has been the lack of capacity among Panchayat representatives, particularly at the village level. Many elected members, especially in rural areas, lack the education, training, and experience necessary to handle complex governance tasks. This has led to inefficiency in planning and implementation of local development programs. In addition, political interference at the local level, often by influential political leaders or powerful local elites, has sometimes hindered the effective functioning of Panchayats. Corruption and mismanagement of resources have also been significant issues, preventing the equitable distribution of funds and services to marginalized communities.

Despite these challenges, the 73rd Amendment has made notable contributions to local governance in India. It has increased political participation, particularly among women and marginalized communities, and has led to

the creation of more responsive and accountable local bodies. The reservation for women has resulted in the election of a significant number of women to Panchayats, leading to greater attention to issues such as women's health, education, and social security. The amendment has also played a crucial role in promoting decentralization and enabling local communities to take charge of their development.

The 73rd Amendment has been instrumental in promoting inclusive governance, but its success has largely depended on the commitment of state governments to fully implement its provisions. The devolution of powers, financial resources, and administrative control to Panchayats is essential for their success. Additionally, capacity-building programs for Panchayat representatives and officials, along with stronger accountability mechanisms, are crucial to overcoming the challenges of inefficiency and corruption. For the Panchayati Raj system to function effectively, it is necessary for all stakeholders, including the central government, state governments, and civil society, to collaborate and work towards empowering local self-governments.

### **State control over Panchayati Raj Institutions**

The creation of Panchayati Raj institutions was intended to promote local self-governance by devolving powers and responsibilities to elected local bodies. The 73rd Amendment recognized Panchayats as institutions of self-government and mandated the devolution of various powers to them. These powers were expected to include responsibility for local administration, planning, development, and resource management. The aim was to ensure that Panchayats could operate independently and effectively address the



needs of their communities, with local representatives making decisions based on the specific context of their villages, blocks, and districts. However, despite this recognition, the autonomy of Panchayats has often been compromised by the state's continued control over key aspects of their functioning.

One of the primary ways in which state control manifests is through the financial dependence of Panchayats on state governments. The 73rd Amendment grants Panchayats certain responsibilities, but the allocation of funds for their operations often remains under the control of the state. In many instances, state governments control the disbursement of funds for development schemes and projects, which limits the autonomy of Panchayats in terms of financial management. While the amendment calls for the devolution of financial resources, the allocation process remains centralized, and Panchayats often face delays or inconsistencies in receiving the funds necessary to implement local development programs. This financial dependency reduces the ability of Panchayats to make independent decisions about local priorities and hampers their ability to initiate and execute projects effectively.

Another significant aspect of state control over Panchayats is the lack of true devolution of powers. Although the 73rd Amendment mandates that Panchayats should be entrusted with certain responsibilities, in practice, the devolution process has been incomplete in many states. In some cases, state governments have been reluctant to transfer adequate powers or have retained control over critical areas such as education, healthcare, and public infrastructure. Panchayats are often tasked with the implementation of central and state

schemes, but they do not have the authority to create their own policies or make decisions outside the framework imposed by higher levels of government. This leaves them with limited discretion in addressing local issues and reduces their effectiveness as true institutions of self-governance.

Political interference is another important factor contributing to state control over Panchayats. In many regions, Panchayats are influenced or controlled by political elites, including powerful local politicians and influential figures in the state government. These political actors often undermine the autonomy of Panchayats by exerting pressure on elected representatives to act in alignment with state-level political interests rather than the needs of the community. In some cases, the interference can lead to corruption, misallocation of resources, or the prioritization of politically motivated projects over those that are genuinely beneficial to the local population. The lack of a strong, independent mechanism for oversight and accountability further exacerbates this issue, making Panchayats vulnerable to manipulation by political forces.

The role of state government officials and bureaucrats also contributes to the state's control over Panchayats. While Panchayats are supposed to function independently, the presence of state-appointed officials in decision-making processes often curtails their ability to make autonomous decisions. These officials sometimes exercise control over the implementation of programs, thereby reducing the Panchayats' role in managing local affairs. In some cases, the bureaucratic structure continues to dominate, leaving Panchayats as mere implementers of decisions made by higher authorities rather than as independent



bodies with the power to shape their own agendas.

The existence of parallel administrative structures at the state level also undermines the autonomy of Panchayats. While Panchayats are meant to be the primary units of governance in rural areas, state governments often maintain their own bureaucratic apparatus at the district and block levels. These parallel systems can create confusion and result in inefficiencies, as the responsibilities of state officials overlap with those of local bodies. The presence of multiple layers of administration can lead to conflicts, delays in decision-making, and a lack of clarity regarding the division of responsibilities, further reinforcing the control of the state over local governance.

Despite these challenges, there have been efforts to strengthen the autonomy of Panchayats and reduce state control. Some states have enacted legislation that provides greater powers and financial autonomy to Panchayats. Capacity-building programs have also been introduced to help elected representatives better understand their roles and responsibilities. However, these efforts have not been universally implemented, and the extent of devolution varies significantly from state to state. In many cases, Panchayats remain financially and administratively dependent on state governments, and their autonomy continues to be compromised by the persistence of state control.

### ***Present Status***

The status of Panchayati Raj in India reflects both the promise and challenges of decentralized governance. Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) are an essential part of India's democratic framework, intended to empower local

communities, particularly in rural areas, by ensuring that people have a say in the governance of their own affairs. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 laid the legal foundation for a three-tier system of Panchayats at the village, intermediate, and district levels. Despite the constitutional backing, the status of Panchayati Raj remains complex, with varying degrees of success and obstacles across the country.

At the core, the objective of Panchayati Raj is to decentralize power and decision-making, shifting it from central and state governments to local communities. This is a critical aspect of ensuring inclusive governance, addressing local needs, and improving public service delivery. Panchayats are expected to handle a wide range of responsibilities, from local administration and development planning to managing resources like water and land. The system also aims to enhance social justice, offering marginalized groups, particularly women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs), an active role in governance.

The constitutional framework established through the 73rd Amendment has created a standardized structure for Panchayats across the country. The amendment mandates the creation of Panchayats at the village, intermediate, and district levels and sets up a system of direct elections to these bodies. One-third of the seats in Panchayats are reserved for women, and similar reservations exist for SCs and STs to ensure political participation from all sections of society. Despite this, the status of Panchayati Raj is not uniform, as the implementation of these provisions differs across states.

While some states have embraced the Panchayati Raj system enthusiastically, others have struggled



with its effective implementation. States like Kerala, West Bengal, and Rajasthan have made substantial strides in strengthening Panchayats and ensuring that they play an active role in local governance. These states have seen improved outcomes in terms of resource allocation, rural development programs, and community participation in decision-making processes. For instance, Kerala's model of decentralized planning has been widely praised for its success in involving local communities in the formulation and execution of development plans.

However, many other states have faced difficulties in empowering Panchayats as institutions of self-governance. One of the most significant challenges has been the reluctance of state governments to fully devolve powers and resources to Panchayats. In several states, Panchayats continue to function in a subordinate role, with state governments exercising considerable control over decision-making and resource allocation. While the 73rd Amendment mandates the devolution of powers, the actual transfer of authority is often incomplete or slow. In some cases, the financial resources required for Panchayats to carry out their duties are either inadequate or delayed, hindering their ability to effectively address local issues.

Another major issue affecting the status of Panchayati Raj is political interference. In many regions, Panchayats are heavily influenced by local political elites or party politics, which can undermine their effectiveness. Panchayat representatives, particularly at the village level, are sometimes subject to pressure from state-level politicians or influential local figures, resulting in compromised decision-making. This political interference often detracts from the Panchayats' role as independent and

empowered local bodies, and instead, they become tools for furthering political interests.

Furthermore, the lack of adequate capacity among elected representatives is another challenge. Many Panchayat members, especially in rural areas, lack the education, training, and technical expertise needed to manage local governance and development effectively. This limits their ability to address complex issues such as infrastructure development, healthcare, education, and poverty alleviation. Capacity-building programs are being implemented in some states, but the need for continuous education and training for Panchayat representatives remains a significant gap.

The status of Panchayati Raj has seen important improvements in recent years. The inclusion of women in Panchayats through reservation has led to a notable increase in female participation in governance. Many women representatives have successfully taken on leadership roles, focusing on issues like women's empowerment, health, sanitation, and education. The empowerment of women at the grassroots level has contributed to a shift in the priorities of Panchayats, with a greater emphasis on social justice and welfare. Moreover, Panchayats have been instrumental in the implementation of various rural development programs, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). These programs aim to provide employment, reduce poverty, and improve infrastructure in rural areas, and Panchayats play a critical role in ensuring their success by managing funds and monitoring implementation.





### ***Future prospects of Panchayati Raj System***

The future prospects of Panchayati Raj in India hold immense potential, given the growing emphasis on decentralization, empowerment of local communities, and the promotion of participatory governance. As India continues its journey towards becoming a more inclusive and democratic nation, the role of Panchayats in rural governance is increasingly crucial. The future of Panchayati Raj largely depends on the successful implementation of existing reforms, the reduction of systemic challenges, and the enhancement of the capacity of local institutions to handle the complexities of governance at the grassroots level.

One of the most promising aspects of the future of Panchayati Raj lies in its ability to foster greater democratic participation. With the constitutional recognition of Panchayats as institutions of self-government, there is a growing opportunity to involve local communities in decision-making processes. In the future, more effective devolution of powers from the state and central governments to Panchayats can empower local communities to directly influence the policies and projects that affect their lives. This increased involvement will not only ensure that local needs are prioritized but also promote accountability and transparency at the grassroots level.

Another significant opportunity for the future of Panchayati Raj lies in strengthening the capacity of elected representatives. While many Panchayat members lack formal education or technical training, there is a growing recognition of the need for skill development and capacity building. In the coming years, the expansion of training programs for Panchayat members,

covering areas such as governance, budgeting, resource management, and social welfare, can significantly improve their ability to carry out their responsibilities effectively. With better-trained representatives, Panchayats will be better equipped to handle local governance issues, including infrastructure development, healthcare, education, and rural welfare.

Technology also holds great promise for the future of Panchayati Raj. In recent years, technology has become a key enabler of good governance, and its integration into the functioning of Panchayats can be a game-changer. Digital platforms and e-governance tools can facilitate transparency in the allocation of resources, improve communication between Panchayats and citizens, and enable better monitoring of local development projects. Moreover, the use of technology can enhance the efficiency of administrative processes, reduce corruption, and ensure that the benefits of government schemes reach the intended beneficiaries. With the widespread use of smartphones and internet access, rural areas are increasingly connected, providing an opportunity to integrate digital tools into Panchayat governance.

Financial autonomy is another critical area for the future of Panchayati Raj. One of the long-standing issues has been the financial dependence of Panchayats on state governments, which limits their autonomy and effectiveness. To address this, future reforms should focus on ensuring that Panchayats have access to more resources, both from the state and central governments, as well as from local revenue generation. Strengthening the fiscal capacity of Panchayats will allow them to undertake development projects independently,



enhance local infrastructure, and improve the delivery of public services. The establishment of a more robust system of financial accountability and transparency will also play a crucial role in ensuring that funds are used efficiently and for the intended purposes.

Women's empowerment, which has gained significant momentum through the reservation of seats for women in Panchayats, will continue to be a key focus for the future of Panchayati Raj. As more women assume leadership roles in local governance, the inclusion of their perspectives will lead to the prioritization of issues that directly affect women and marginalized groups, such as healthcare, education, sanitation, and social justice. The future of Panchayati Raj will likely see further advancements in gender equality, as more women actively participate in decision-making processes and contribute to shaping policies that affect their communities. However, the future of Panchayati Raj is not without its challenges. Political interference remains one of the most significant hurdles in ensuring the autonomy of Panchayats. While the 73rd Amendment envisions Panchayats as independent institutions of self-governance, in many parts of India, local political dynamics continue to influence the functioning of these institutions. For Panchayati Raj to truly flourish, political parties and local elites must ensure that the decisions of Panchayats are based on the needs and aspirations of the community rather than political agendas.

Moreover, the challenge of addressing disparities between states in terms of the implementation of Panchayati Raj reforms will need to be addressed. While some states have made significant progress in strengthening Panchayats, others have lagged behind in

devolving power and resources. Future efforts should focus on ensuring that the principles of Panchayati Raj are uniformly applied across the country, with a focus on creating a level playing field for all regions, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Finally, the ongoing efforts to address issues such as corruption, lack of transparency, and administrative inefficiencies will be crucial in ensuring the long-term success of Panchayati Raj. A system of checks and balances, along with strong accountability mechanisms, must be established to ensure that Panchayats are able to perform their duties without undue influence or hindrances. The creation of local oversight committees, independent audits, and grievance redress mechanisms can help strengthen the governance structure at the Panchayat level and enhance public trust.

### **Conclusion**

Panchayati Raj in India reflects both progress and challenges. The legal and constitutional framework for Panchayati Raj has created a system designed to bring governance closer to the people, promoting decentralization, inclusivity, and local development. However, the extent to which this framework has been realized varies across states. Issues such as inadequate devolution of powers, political interference, financial constraints, and the lack of capacity among elected representatives have hindered the full realization of the Panchayati Raj system's potential. Nevertheless, the ongoing reforms and continued efforts to strengthen Panchayats at the grassroots level hold promise for improving local governance and ensuring that rural communities have a more active role in shaping their own development. The future of Panchayati Raj in India holds tremendous potential to



transform rural governance and empower local communities. With increased decentralization, capacity building, financial autonomy, and the use of technology, Panchayats can become more effective and autonomous institutions capable of addressing the diverse needs of rural India. However, challenges such as political interference, unequal implementation across states, and administrative inefficiencies must be tackled to realize the full potential of Panchayati Raj. By addressing these challenges, India can create a more inclusive, transparent, and accountable system of governance that benefits all citizens, particularly those in rural and underserved areas.

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