

Local Self-Government in India

We know there is a government in India at the Center and State levels. But there is another important system for local governance. The foundation of the present local self-government in India was laid by the Panchayati Raj System (1992).

But the history of Panchayati Raj starts from the self-sufficient and self-governing village communities. In the time of the Rig-Veda (1700 BC), evidence suggests that self-governing village bodies called 'sabhas' existed. With the passage of time, these bodies became panchayats (council of five persons).

Panchayats were functional institutions of grassroots governance in almost every village. They endured the rise and fall of empires in the past, to the current highly structured system.

What is Local self-government?

Local self-government implies the transference of the power to rule to the lowest rungs of the political order. It is a form of democratic decentralization where the participation of even the grass root level of the society is ensured in the process of administration.

History of local administration

The village panchayat, as a system of administration, began in the British days, as their offer to satisfy the demands for local autonomy. They opened up the governance of the lowest levels to the citizens. The GoI act, 1935 also authorizes the provinces to enact legislations.

How did the concept of local self-government evolve in India?

Even though such minor forms of local governance was evident in India, the framers of the constitutions, unsatisfied with the existing provisions, included **Article 40** among the Directive Principles, whereby:

“The state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.”

Later, the conceptualisation of the system of local self-government in India took place through the formation and effort of four important committees from the year 1957 to 1986. It will be helpful if we take a look at the committee and the important recommendations put forward by them.

1. Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957)

Originally appointed by the Government of India to examine the working of two of its earlier programs, the committee submitted its report in November 1957, in which the term '**democratic decentralization**' first appears.

The important recommendations are:

- Establishment of a three-tier Panchayati Raj system – gram panchayat at village level (direct election), panchayat Samiti at the block level and Zila Parishad at the district level (indirect election).
- District Collector to be the chairman of Zila Parishad.
- Transfer of resources and power to these bodies to be ensured.

The existent National Development Council accepted the recommendations. However, it did not insist on a single, definite pattern to be followed in the establishment of these institutions. Rather, it allowed the states to devise their own patterns, while the broad fundamentals were to be the same throughout the country.

Rajasthan (1959) adopted the system first, followed by Andhra Pradesh in the same year. Some states even went ahead to create four-tier systems and **Nyaya panchayats**, which served as judicial **bodies**.

2. Ashok Mehta Committee (1977-1978)

The committee was constituted by the Janata government of the time to study Panchayati Raj institutions. Out of a total of 132 recommendations made by it, the most important ones are:

- Three-tier system to be replaced by a two-tier system.
- Political parties should participate at all levels in the elections.
- Compulsory powers of taxation to be given to these institutions.
- Zila Parishad to be made responsible for planning at the state level.
- A minister for Panchayati Raj to be appointed by the state council of ministers.
- **Constitutional recognition to be given to Panchayati Raj institutions.**

Unfortunately, the Janata government collapsed before action could be taken on these recommendations.

3. G V K Rao Committee (1985)

Appointed by the Planning Commission, the committee concluded that the developmental procedures were gradually being taken away from the local self-government institutions, resulting in a system comparable to '**grass without roots**'.

- Zila Parishad to be given prime importance and all developmental programs at that level to be handed to it.
- Post of DDC (District Development Commissioner) to be created acting as the chief executive officer of the Zila Parishad.
- Regular elections to be held

4. L M Singhvi Committee (1986)

Constituted by the Rajiv Gandhi government on 'Revitalisation of Panchayati Raj institutions for Democracy and Development', its important recommendations are:

- Constitutional recognition for PRI institutions.
- Nyaya Panchayats to be established for clusters of villages

Though the 64th Constitutional Amendment bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha in 1989 itself, Rajya Sabha opposed it. It was only during the Narasimha Rao government's term that the idea finally became a reality in the form of the **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment acts, 1992**.

Panchayati Raj System under 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment acts, 1992

The acts of 1992 added two new parts IX and IX-A to the constitution. It also added two new schedules – 11 and 12 which contains the lists of functional items of **Panchayats and Municipalities**. It provides for a three-tier system of **Panchayati Raj** in every state – at the village, intermediate and district levels.

What are Panchayats and Municipalities?

- Panchayat and Municipality are the generic terms for the governing body at the local level. Both exist as three tier systems – at the lower, intermediate and upper levels.
- The 73rd Constitutional Amendment act provides for a **Gram Sabha** as the foundation of the Panchayati Raj system. It is essentially a village assembly consisting of all the registered voters in the area of the panchayat. The state has the power to determine what kind of powers it can exercise, and what functions it has to perform at the village level.

- The 74th Constitutional Amendment act provides for three types of Municipalities:
 1. **Nagar Panchayat** for a transitional area between a rural and urban area.
 2. **Municipal Council** for a small urban area.
 3. **Municipal Corporation** for a large urban area.
- Municipalities represent **urban local self-government**.
- Most of the provisions of the two acts are parallel, differing only in the fact that they are being applied to either a Panchayat or a Municipality respectively.
- Each Gram sabha is the meeting of a particular constituency called *ward*.
- Each ward has a representative chosen from among the people themselves by *direct election*.
- The chairperson of the Panchayat or Municipality at the intermediate and district level are elected from among these representatives at the immediately lower level by *indirect election*.

Types of Urban Local Government

There are eight types of urban local governments currently existing in India:

1. Municipal Corporations.
2. Municipality.
3. Notified area committee.
4. Town area committee.
5. Cantonment board.
6. Township.
7. Port trust.
8. Special purpose agency.

How are the elections held in the local government bodies?

- All seats of representatives of local bodies are filled by people chosen through *direct elections*.

- The conduct of elections is vested in the hands of the State election commission.
- The chairpersons at the intermediate and district levels shall be elected *indirectly from among the elected representatives at the immediately lower level.*
- At the lowest level, the chairperson shall be elected in a mode defined by the state legislature.
- Seats are reserved for SC and ST proportional to their population.
- Out of these reserved seats, not less than one-third shall be further reserved for women.
- There should be a blanket reservation of one-third seats for women in all the constituencies taken together too (which can include the already reserved seats for SC and ST).
- The acts bar the interference of courts in any issue relating to the election to local bodies.

What are the Qualifications needed to be a member of the Panchayat or Municipality?

Any person who is qualified to be a member of the state legislature is eligible to be a member of the Panchayat or Municipality.

“But he shall not be disqualified on the ground that he is less than 25 years of age if he has attained the age of 21 years”

This means that unlike the state legislature, a person needs to attain only 21 years of age to be a member of panchayat/municipality.

What is the duration of the Local Government bodies?

- The local governing bodies are elected for a term of five years.
- Fresh elections should be conducted before the expiry of the five-year term.
- If the panchayat/municipality is dissolved before the expiry of its term, elections shall be conducted within six months and the new panchayat/municipality will hold office for the remainder of the term if the term has more than six months duration.
- And for another five years if the remaining term is less than six months.

What are the Powers invested on these Local Government bodies?

The powers of local bodies are not exclusively defined. They can be tailor-fitted by the state governments according to the environment of the states. In general, the State governments can assign powers to Panchayats and Municipalities that may enable them to prepare plans for economic development and social justice. They may also be authorized to levy, collect, or appropriate taxes.

Conclusion

To conclude, local self-government is one of the most innovative governance change processes our country has gone through. The noble idea of taking the government of a country into the hands of the grass root level is indeed praiseworthy.

However, like any system in the world, this system is also imperfect. Problems of maladministration and misappropriation of funds are recurring. But this shall not stand in the way of efficient governance; and if these ill practices are rooted out, there would be no comparisons around the world to our system of local self-government.

Compiled by
Dr. P.S Prasad
HoD, Political Science
RTU