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## Panchayat Raj Institutions in India – An Overview

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### Abstract

The Panchayati Raj is a political system that is prevalent throughout South Asia, particularly in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. It is a form of local self-governance. In the history of the Indian subcontinent, this kind of community administration is the one with the longest continuous use. The Panchayat Raj is an institution that dates back to the beginning of Indian civilization. It had been around since the ancient ages, and it exercised effective authority over the village community's civil and judicial affairs throughout that time. Numerous ancient texts, such as the Rigveda, the Manusamhita, the Dharmashastras, the Upanishads, the Jatakas, and others, make extensive references to the panchayat form of administration, which is used in local governance. Changes in the political structure of India's rural communities brought about shifts in the connection between typically higher middle Dalit and caste groups. These shifts had an effect on the political structure. For the very first time in the annals of Indian social history, there is a discernible rise in the level of political mobilisation among dalits. In addition, their upward social mobility can be attributed to a growing understanding of the rights and benefits they are entitled to. The ratification of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act led to the decentralisation of power and decision making at a lower level, which is another significant result of the legislation's adoption. The most significant aspect of this is that reservation was extended to the lower castes in order to democratise and secularise the operation of the panchayats and to make certain that they do not continue to be under the influence of influential rural elites in the countryside.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, self-governance, rural communities, political mobilization, and dalits.

## Introduction

The Panchayati Raj is a political system that is prevalent throughout South Asia, particularly in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. It is a form of local self-governance. In the history of the Indian subcontinent, this kind of community administration is the one with the longest continuous use. It was Mahatma Gandhi who popularised the phrase "Gram Swaraj," which translates to "Power to the People." This phrase encapsulates the spirit of genuine democracy. <sup>1</sup> The process of increasing the capacity of such a huge number of Panchayats is a mammoth undertaking. Even after 22 years of enactment of the 73rd Constitutional (Amendment) Act and also after having three rounds of Panchayat elections in many States in India, the empowerment of Panchayats has not taken place as envisioned in the 73rd Constitution (Amendment) Act in 1992, according to the assessment of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. This is the conclusion that was reached after analysing the situation. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, which was passed in 1992, granted the Panchayats constitutional status as institutions of local self-government. In addition, the Panchayats were given the responsibility of designing and executing programmes for economic growth and social justice<sup>1</sup>.

In the years that followed India's independence, the idea of Panchayati Raj appeared, for a while, to have vanished completely into the haze of India's storied past. In the latter part of the twentieth century, on the other hand, the idea has once more made its way back onto the political agenda for a variety of reasons, including ideological, strategic, and practical considerations. This chapter's goals are to provide an explanation as to why the panchayat should once again have taken relevance, provide some historical examples of the panchayat in operation, and provide a brief history of the concept's roots<sup>2</sup>.

## Statement of the problem

Since India's independence, women and, in particular, dalits have had very little representation in the country's political institutions. In the past two decades, there has been a greater push toward strengthening what is known as "dalit women's participation" in political institutions, which has ultimately led to greater levels of empowerment for these individuals. Affirmative action is now widely recognised as a valid approach to achieving political empowerment. Leadership is required not just to rule, but also to effect change in the manner in which government is carried out. In India, it is unfortunate that efforts to promote women's involvement and affirmative action have not advanced beyond the level of local governments.

On the other hand, the presence of dalit women members in PRIs has sparked a significant amount of discussion on the roles that dalit women should play within these organisations. Researchers' attention has been

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<sup>1</sup> Jaganath Pathy (1980). 'Panchayati Raj and Decentralization of Political Power', Social Scientist, Vol. 8, No. 9, April, p.36

<sup>2</sup> Khalid Mirza (2007). 'Community Development and Democratic Decentralization: A Scheme of Participative Governance' in Sundar Ram (ed.) Panchayati Raj and Empowering People, New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, P. 284.

piqued as a result of conflicting tales regarding the history of dalit women members' engagement, some of which were triumphant while others were tragic.

### **Importance of the Study**

The numerous meanings of Indian society have led to variations and differential participation in the local administration. These variations and differences are based on age, gender, caste, class, patriarchy, and sexual orientation. It is also important to observe the ways in which these elements influence the engagement of various social groups in the processes of decision making. It is also rather interesting to observe how socially and politically marginalised communities react to shifting circumstances and embrace the difficulties presented to them in order to discover their new identities. In the course of determining 'images' independently of caste, gender, and patriarchy, holocausts have been generated, which have led to tensions and disputes. An important line of inquiry centres on the potential for traditionalist, conservative, and liberal ideals to come into conflict with one another's respective objectives.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The following is a list of the goals that this study aims to accomplish:

1. To investigate the differences in socioeconomic status and political participation between dalit and non-dalit women living in Telangana.
2. To conduct an analysis of the challenges that the respondents had to encounter as a result of their vulnerability.
3. To investigate and engage in social, political, and economic empowerment, as well as to ensure equal access to decision-making processes.
4. To find the evidence of how the empowerment of dalit women influences significant development outcomes such as political and social behaviour, educational levels, income levels, and so on.

### **Review of Literature**

"Empowering People: Issues and Solutions" is a collection of papers edited by G.Palanithurai. Pradhan, an NGO, has contextually analysed the link between NGOs and Panchayats in 'NGO and Grassroots Democracy' It has proposed methods for enhancing the link between Panchayats and NGOs. N.D. Mani and P. Arumugam have elucidated the necessity of geographic information systems for planning at the local level. A Rajeswari examines the function of Panchayat institutions in empowering women in her article titled "Panchayati Raj Institution and Women." In their essay titled "Participatory Planning in the New Panchayati Raj System," N. Narayanasamy and R. Ramesh demonstrate the potential for participatory planning at the local level and outline the procedures to be taken for this endeavour. In his paper titled "Gram Sabha in the New

Panchayati Raj System in India: Major Issues," S. Narayanasamy explains the Gram Sabha's potential to build participatory governance at the village level. In another paper titled 'Challenges of New Panchayati Raj System,' he analyses in depth the major issues that are occurring during the construction of institutions at the local level for governance.

The article 'The Genre of Women Leaders in Local Bodies: Experience from Tamil Nadu' by G. Palanithurai describes the recruitment process for women leaders in local bodies and how they handle power in their institutions. It examines the issue that women leaders have while carrying out their tasks and obligations. These posts have been filled by a variety of leaders with a variety of backgrounds and goals. This work investigates how difficult it is for organisms to carry out their functions in the given environment. It suggests that the imperative for women leaders has been to execute their roles effectively. This piece also analyses how women leaders perceive their space and shape their public lives at the conclusion of their five-year terms.

Women Leadership and Women Empowerment by G. Palanithurai emphasises the need for leadership training prior to Panchayat Raj training. Given the context in which rural Indian women leaders operate, it is necessary to alter their mentality. It necessitates an in-depth comprehension of the conditions of women in Indian society and the expected roles of women leaders. Specific programmes must be designed, modules must be produced, and thus, their leadership quality must be enhanced. Women's empowerment is only achievable if grassroots institutions are staffed with the appropriate type of female leaders.

### **The Historical Background of Panchayat Raj Institutions in India**

The origin of the word panchayat can be traced back to the phrase "Pancha panchasvanusthitah," which makes reference to the existence of Grama Sanghas, also known as rural communities. The Panchayat Raj is an institution that dates back to the beginning of Indian civilization. It had been around since the ancient ages, and it exercised effective authority over the village community's civil and judicial affairs throughout that time. Numerous ancient texts, such as the Rigveda, the Manusamhita, the Dharmashastras, the Upanishads, the Jatakas, and others, make extensive references to the panchayat form of administration, which is used in local governance. There are quite a few references to the presence of Grama Sanghas, also known as village councils, in the sections of the Mahabharata known as Manusmriti and Shantiparva.

The oldest reference to panchayat is found in the Shanti-Parva of Mahabaratha. This reference is derived from the word Pancha, which refers to an institution of the five (Pancha panchasvanusthitah). Both Pancha and panchavanustitah are semantically close to the panchayat. Another source that provides a description of these village councils is Arthashastra, which was written by Kautilya around 400 B.C. Arthashastra provides a detailed description of the method of village governance that was common throughout his historical period. 5 During this time period, the Adyaksha, also known as the headman, was in charge of overseeing and controlling all aspects of village governance. Other authorities were the accountant, known as

the Samkhyaka, the veterinarian, known as the Anikitsaka, the village couriers, known as the Chikitsaka, and the jamgh karmika (physitian).

The village headman was accountable for guaranteeing the collection of state dues as well as maintaining order among the criminals. There are references to the Ganapada in Valmiki's Ramayana. Ganapada literally translates to "village federation," and it's possible that Ganapada was a federation of village republics<sup>3</sup>.

Over the course of time, the governing bodies of villages evolved into Panchayats, which were responsible for overseeing village business. They were vested with the authority necessary to maintain law and order. They were exalted to the holy position of authority by the practises of their customs and religion. In addition to this, there were other Panchayats that were organised according to caste. In the Indo-Gangetic plains, this was the typical pattern. In general, the village panchayats that were located in the southern region of India were organised around the concept of a village assembly, the executive body of which was made up of representatives from a variety of different groups and castes. These village bodies had been the pivot of administration, the core of social activity, and most importantly, a focus of social solidarity in India's north as well as its south. This was true for both regions. During the time of the Mauryans, the village served as the fundamental administrative unit. Villagers were responsible for mediating conflicts, organising works of public utility and leisure, and serving as trustees for the property of minors in the past. But at that time, they did not yet have established councils. During the Gupta dynasty, the village council seemed to have gradually transformed into more regular formations.

In the central part of India, they were known as Panchamandalas, while in the state of Bihar, they were called Gramajanapadas. These organisations negotiated with the government in order to obtain concessions and to settle conflicts. The Chola dynasty left an inscription that describes the construction of the village assembly as well as its activities and the governing committees that it had. The elected delegates that comprised the village council were the ones in charge of administrative tasks for the community.

In 1909, the 24th Congress Session that was held in Lahore passed a resolution that urged the government to take easy steps "to make all local bodies from village panchayats upwards elected with elected non-official chairman"<sup>16</sup> and to support them with adequate financial aid. The resolution urged the government to take these steps "to make all local bodies from village panchayats upwards elected with elected non-official chairman"<sup>16</sup>. The Montague-Chelmsford Reforms Act was enacted into law in the year 1919. As a result of this Reform, the responsibility for governing at the local level was given to the provinces. The Reform also proposed that there should, to the greatest extent feasible, be a total popular control in local bodies and that they should have the widest possible independence possible from influence from the outside. <sup>17</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Joshi, R.P and Narwani, G.S (2002). Panchayati Raj in India, Emerging Trends across the States, New Delhi: Rawat Publications, pp.21-24

However, this Reform was not successful in achieving many of its goals, particularly those regarding the democratisation of the Panchayat. The British government in India approved a landmark act known as the Government of India Act, 1935 in the year 1935. This act delegated a distinct authority to the several provincial governments. The popularly elected provincial administration in the provinces was granted provincial autonomy, and they were duty-bound to implement legislation for further democratisation of the local Self-Government institution, which included the village Panchayat. Therefore, the spirit of democratic decentralisation at the village level was already present throughout the Ancient period. This was the case straight from the beginning. In spite of the fact that the British government had no interest in the autonomy of the villages, they were compelled to acknowledge their need to do so in order to maintain their reign over India and fulfil the financial requirements. On the other hand, by the time India achieved its independence on August 15, 1947, the rural local self-government in India had become significantly more organised and had taken on the appropriate form.

### **Article 40 of the Indian Constitution**

The State is required to take the steps necessary to create Village Panchayats and provide them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to allow them to function as units of Self-Government, according to the provisions of Article 40 of the Constitution of India. In addition, Article 246 of the Constitution grants the state legislatures the authority to pass any law they see fit affecting any facet of local self-government. In point of fact, it is now compulsory for the State Governments to ensure that the Rural Local Bodies are operating in the appropriate manner in order to fulfil their responsibilities. As a direct consequence of this, panchayats were established in a significant number of states in accordance with the legislation of those states. They envisioned that the most important functions of Panchayats are mostly related to economic and civic activity.

### **Balwant- Rai Mehta Committee**

According to the findings of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, the CDPs, once they reached the Gram Panchayat level, were deemed to be programmes of the government rather than programmes of the people living in the villages. Without the engaged participation of the people living in the village, it would not have been possible to achieve self-sufficiency for the hamlet. Therefore, the Mehta Committee advised that the villagers should be given the power to decide about their own perceived requirements and that the programmes should be implemented according to those needs. <sup>26</sup> It was suggested in 1959 by the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee that an agency should be established at the level of the village. This agency would not only represent the interests of the community of the village, but it would also take on the development programmes that the government was implementing at its level. Because of this, the Gram Panchayat, which was going to be the governing body of this organisation, was seen as a government agency that carried out its directives in a particular domain, specifically the realm of development.

## **Ashoka Mehta Committee, 1977**

An economist named Ashoka Mehta led a team that was tasked with making recommendations for altering the structure of the Panchayat Raj that had been suggested by the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee. A committee on the institutions of the Panchayat Raj was established by the Janata Government in December of 1977, and Ashoka Mehta was nominated to chair the committee.

The report was turned in by the committee in August of 1978, and it included 132 suggestions for how the country's deteriorating Panchayat Raj system may be revitalised and improved. As a direct consequence of this research, the governments of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and West Bengal in India all decided to enact brand new laws. Nevertheless, the institutions were unable to create their own political dynamics since the flow of politics at the state level did not permit it<sup>4</sup>.

## **Different Committees on Panchayat Raj in India**

In 1985, not long after Rajiv Gandhi took office as Prime Minister, two committees were established, and this mixed and largely unsatisfactory state of affairs began to alter rapidly. These committees were responsible for: The first one, which was founded under the leadership of G.V.K. Rao, was designed to examine the plans for rural development and the reduction of poverty. It suggested reviving Zilla Parishads by installing a District Development Commissioner in the position of Chief Executive of each Zilla Parishad. This was one of the recommendations. The second committee, which H.M. Singhvi presided over, made recommendations about the reorganisation of Panchayati raj institutions and the establishment of efficient village level committees.

Following the publication of this study, the Sarkaria Commission on Centre-State relations and a Parliamentary Consultative Committee both advised that the institutions of Panchayati raj be significantly strengthened<sup>5</sup>.

## **G.V. K. Rao Committee, 1985**

The Planning Commission selected G.V.K. Rao to serve as chairman of the Committee on Administrative Arrangement for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation Programs in 1985. This committee was appointed by the Planning Commission. The Committee arrived at the conclusion that the procedure for development had become more bureaucratic over time and had become disconnected from the Panchayat Raj. The phenomenon of bureaucratization, which leads to what is correctly dubbed "grass without roots," is the cause of this problem. As a result, the Committee came up with some suggestions for improving and reinvigorating the Panchayat Raj system. Within the framework of democratic decentralisation, the Zilla Parishad, which is the body that operates at the district level, need to have a position of central importance. It claimed that "the District is the correct unit for planning and development and the Zilla Parishad should

<sup>4</sup> Shriram Maheshwari (1979). 'New Perspectives on Rural Local Government in India: The Asoka Mehta Committee Report', Asian Survey, Vol. 19, No. 11 (Nov), p.1115.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

become the major body for management of all development Programs which may be handled at the level." In other words, the district is the appropriate unit for planning and development.

### **L.M. Singhvi Committee, 1986**

In 1986, the government of Rajiv Gandhi created a committee with the charge of "Revitalization of Panchayati Raj Institutions for Democracy and Development." L.M. Singhvi was chosen to serve as the committee's chairman. It suggested that the institution of Panchayat Raj ought to be acknowledged, safeguarded, and maintained by the constitution. To achieve this goal, the Constitution of India ought to be updated through the addition of a fresh chapter. Because of this, their identity and integrity will be properly and significantly protected from compromise. It also stressed the significance of the Gram Sabha and referred to it as the epitome of direct democracy. Additionally, it proposed constitutional provisions to ensure that elections to the Panchayat Raj are held on a regular basis, in a free and fair manner. More financial resources ought to be made available to the Village Panchayats. In order to settle disputes regarding the election of members to Panchayat Raj institutions, the dissolution of such institutions, and other issues pertaining to the proper operation of those bodies, judicial tribunals should be formed in each of the states<sup>6</sup>.

### **National Front Government and 73rd Constitutional Amendment Bill**

In 1986, the government of Rajiv Gandhi created a committee with the charge of "Revitalization of Panchayati Raj Institutions for Democracy and Development." L.M. Singhvi was chosen to serve as the committee's chairman. It suggested that the institution of Panchayat Raj ought to be acknowledged, safeguarded, and maintained by the constitution. To achieve this goal, the Constitution of India ought to be updated through the addition of a fresh chapter. Because of this, their identity and integrity will be properly and significantly protected from compromise. It also stressed the significance of the Gram Sabha and referred to it as the epitome of direct democracy. Additionally, it proposed constitutional provisions to ensure that elections to the Panchayat Raj are held on a regular basis, in a free and fair manner. More financial resources ought to be made available to the Village Panchayats. In order to settle disputes regarding the election of members to Panchayat Raj institutions, the dissolution of such institutions, and other issues pertaining to the proper operation of those bodies, judicial tribunals should be formed in each of the states.

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

As a result of these events, Rajiv Gandhi, who was the Prime Minister of India at the time, presented the 64th Amendment bill on local administration to the Parliament on May 15, 1989. However, the measure was unable to garner the necessary support from the elected officials. In September of 1990, there was a second attempt made to have the bill passed through the Parliament. The bill, on the other hand, was not even given a chance

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<sup>6</sup> Report of the Committee on Revitalization of Panchayati Raj Institutions for Democracy and Development, 1986.



to be considered. Under the leadership of P. V. Narasimha Rao, who served as Prime Minister at the time, the Congress government presented a new bill on the Panchayat Raj in the month of September 1991. With a few tweaks here and there, it became known as the 73rd Amendment Act 1992 and was signed into law in 1992. It didn't take effect until April 24, 1993<sup>7</sup>.

## Conclusion

The passage of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992 was a step toward providing a provision for the empowerment of groups known as Dalits that were previously excluded from society, culture, and politics. Changes in the political structure of India's rural communities brought about shifts in the connection between typically higher middle Dalit and caste groups. These shifts had an effect on the political structure. For the very first time in the annals of Indian social history, there is a discernible rise in the level of political mobilisation among dalits. In addition, their upward social mobility can be attributed to a growing understanding of the rights and benefits they are entitled to. The ratification of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act led to the decentralisation of power and decision making at a lower level, which is another significant result of the legislation's adoption. The most significant aspect of this is that reservation was extended to the lower castes in order to democratise and secularise the operation of the panchayats and to make certain that they do not continue to be under the influence of influential rural elites in the countryside. With the implementation of the reservation policy in PRIs, the meaning, character, and scope of weaker sections' involvement have been broadened. In terms of the administration of local affairs, the members of the panchayats were answerable to the communities in which they lived. The viewpoints held by the elected representatives of Dalits have undergone a significant shift both inside the panchayats and among the villagers as a whole. Before the PRIs were reorganised, something like this had never occurred in the past. It is quite challenging to wrap one's mind around the concept of Dalits participating in panchayats.

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<sup>7</sup> Sharma, Shakuntla (1997). Grass Root Politics and Panchayati Raj, New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publication, pp.44

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