

Panchayat Raj

Meaning.

The **Panchayat** is a political system in India also known as a *local self-government* system established to strengthen democracy at grass root level. Panchayats ensures that the local administrative affairs of rural areas are resolved by local government units hence making local administration efficient and responsive. It also Facilitates people's participation at grassroots level making Democracy more functional. They are tasked with "economic development, strengthening social justice and implementation of Central and State Government Schemes including those 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule.

It was Mahatma Gandhi who advocated Panchayati Raj in his words (Gram Swaraj) as the foundation of India's political system in which each village would be responsible for its own affairs. Thus, recognizing the importance of local self-government our Constitution makers included a provision for Panchayats under **Art. 40** which stated "The state shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government", in part IV of our constitution that is the Directive principles of state policy but its organization and structural part was missing.

Balwant Rai Committee

Its formal organization and structure were recommended by Balwant Rai committee in 1957, which was appointed to examine and suggest measures for better working of the Community Development Programme and the National Extension Service. The committee suggested the establishment of a democratic decentralised local government which came to be known as the Panchayati Raj.

Recommendations by the Committee:

- Three-tier Panchayati Raj system: Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad.
- Directly elected representatives to constitute the gram panchayat and indirectly elected representatives to constitute the Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad.

- Planning and development are the primary objectives of the Panchayati Raj system.
- Panchayat Samiti should be the executive body and Zila Parishad will act as the advisory and supervisory body.
- District Collector to be made the chairman of the Zila Parishad.

Ashok Mehta Committee

The second very important committee, Ashok Mehta Committee appointed in 1977 to suggest measures to revive and strengthen the declining Panchayati Raj system in India recommended that the three-tier system should be replaced with a two-tier system: Zila Parishad (district level) and the Mandal Panchayat (a group of villages). District level as the first level of supervision after the state level. Zila Parishad should be the executive body and responsible for planning at the district level. The institutions (Zila Parishad and the Mandal Panchayat) to have compulsory taxation powers to mobilise their own financial resources.

There were other committees like G V K Rao Committee the committee was appointed by the planning commission in 1985. It recognised that development was not seen at the grassroot level due to bureaucratisation resulting in Panchayat Raj institutions being addressed as ‘grass without roots’.

L M Singhvi Committee appointed by the Government of India in 1986 with the main objective to recommend steps to revitalise the Panchayati Raj systems for democracy and development. Thought states like Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh were the first to adopt Panchayati raj in 1959, other states followed them later. Though there are variations among states, there are some features that are common. In most of the states, for example, a three-tier structure including panchayats at the village level, panchayat samitis at the block level and the zila parishads at the district level-has been institutionalized.

73rd Constitutional Amendment

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution enacted in 1992 added a new part-IX to the Constitution. It also added a new XI schedule containing list of 29 functional items for Panchayats and made statutory provisions for the establishment, empowerment and functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions. Some provisions of this amendment are binding on the States, while others have been left to be decided by respective State Legislatures at their discretion.

The salient features of this amendment are as follows:

- **Gram Sabha:** Gram Sabha is the primary body of the Panchayati Raj system. It is a village assembly consisting of all the registered voters within the area of the panchayat. It will exercise powers and perform such functions as determined by the state legislature.
- **Three-tier system:** The Act provides for the establishment of the three-tier system of Panchayati Raj in the states (village, intermediate and district level). States with a population of less than 20 lakhs may not constitute the intermediate level.
- **Election of members and chairperson:** The members to all the levels of the Panchayati Raj are elected directly and the chairpersons to the intermediate and the district level are elected indirectly from the elected members and at the village level the Chairperson is elected as determined by the state government.
- **Reservation of seats:**
 - For SC and ST: Reservation to be provided at all the three tiers in accordance with their population percentage.
 - For women: Not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be reserved for women, further not less than one-third of the total number of offices for chairperson at all levels of the panchayat to be reserved for women.
 - The state legislatures are also given the provision to decide on the reservation of seats in any level of panchayat or office of chairperson in favour of backward classes.
- **Duration of Panchayat:** The Act provides for a five-year term of office to all the levels of the panchayat. However, the panchayat can be dissolved before the completion of its term. But fresh elections to constitute the new panchayat shall be completed –
 - before the expiry of its five-year duration.
 - in case of dissolution, before the expiry of a period of six months from the date of its dissolution.
- **Disqualification:** A person shall be disqualified for being chosen as or for being a member of panchayat if he is so disqualified –
 - Under any law for the time being in force for the purpose of elections to the legislature of the state concerned.

- Under any law made by the state legislature. However, no person shall be disqualified on the ground that he is less than 25 years of age if he has attained the age of 21 years.
 - Further, all questions relating to disqualification shall be referred to an authority determined by the state legislatures.
- State election commission:
- The commission is responsible for superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of electoral rolls and conducting elections for the panchayat.
 - The state legislature may make provisions with respect to all matters relating to elections to the panchayats.
8. Powers and Functions: The state legislature may endow the Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government. Such a scheme may contain provisions related to Gram Panchayat work with respect to:
- a. the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice.
 - b. the implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them, including those in relation to the 29 matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule.

Important Functions of Panchayats

- Implementation of schemes for the development of agriculture and infrastructure
- Establishment of primary health centres and primary schools
- Supply of clean drinking water, drainage and construction/repair of roads
- Development of a cottage and small-scale industries, and the opening of cooperative societies
- Establishment of youth organisations in India
- To facilitate this, states are supposed to devolve functions to Panchayats (29 subjects as mandated) and also make funds available for doing these.

- In order to address these issues and strengthen the local self-governments in India, the central government brought about the 73rd Amendment Act in 1992. The act was passed in both houses and entered into force from 24th April 1993.