



Autonomy at the Panchayat Level

This editorial is based on [“There is hardly any autonomy at the panchayat level”](#) which was published in The Hindu on 21/01/2023. It talks about the issues at the Panchayat Level in India.

For Prelims: Local Governments, 73rd Constitutional Amendment, 74th Amendment Act (1992), Panchayati Raj Institutions, Local Self Governance, Government Policies & Interventions

For Mains: Steps to improve the functioning of Panchayats in India, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Local Self Governance, Government Policies & Interventions

More than three decades after the [73rd and 74th Amendment Acts](#), which gave constitutional status to local governments, **State governments, through the local bureaucracy, continue to exercise considerable discretionary authority** and influence over panchayats.

In India, the **powers of local elected officials remain seriously restricted by State governments and local bureaucrats in multiple ways**, thereby diluting the spirit of the constitutional amendments seeking to empower local bodies.

Which are the Issues with the Functioning of the Panchayat?

- **Lack of Financial Autonomy:**
 - **Gram panchayats remain fiscally dependent on grants (both discretionary and non-discretionary grants)** from the State and the Centre for everyday activities.
 - Broadly, **Panchayats have three main sources of Funds:**
 - **Own sources of revenue:** It constitutes a tiny proportion of overall panchayat funds. **For Example:** Local taxes, revenue from common property resources, etc.
 - **Grants in aid from the Centre and State governments:** Access to discretionary grants for panchayats **remains contingent on political and bureaucratic connections.**
 - **Discretionary or Scheme-Based Funds:**
 - One major issue with these funds in India is **that they are often subject to mismanagement and corruption.** This can occur when government officials misuse these funds for personal gain or when the funds are not used for the intended purpose.
 - Even when **higher levels of government allocate funds to local governments**, sarpanchs need help accessing them. The **slow transfer of approved funds to panchayat accounts stalls local development.**
- **Time Consuming Process of Seeking Approvals:**
 - Governments also bind local governments through **local bureaucracies.**
 - **Approval for public works projects often requires technical approval** (from the engineering department) and administrative approval from local officials of the rural

development department, such as the block development officer.

- Sarpanches **spend a substantial amount of time visiting government offices** and meeting local bureaucrats, and waiting to be seen or heard.
- The ability of sarpanchs to **exercise administrative control over local employees is also limited.**
 - In many States, the recruitment of local functionaries reporting to the panchayat, such as village watchmen or sweepers, is conducted at the district or block level.

▪ **Political Interference:**

- Unlike elected officials at other levels, **sarpanchs can be dismissed while in office.**
- Gram Panchayat Acts in many States have **empowered district-level bureaucrats, mostly district Collectors, to act against sarpanchs** for official misconduct.
 - For instance, **the Telangana Gram Panchayat Act allows District Collectors to suspend and dismiss incumbent sarpanchs.**
- Across the country, there are regular instances of bureaucrats deciding to dismiss sarpanchs from office which is not merely a legal provision.
 - In Telangana, more than **100 sarpanchs have been dismissed from office in recent years.**

▪ **Lack of Trained Personnel:**

- Lack of trained personnel is a **significant issue facing panchayats in India.**
- Many panchayat members lack the necessary training and skills to effectively govern their communities.
- This can **lead to poor decision-making, lack of accountability, and inefficiency** in the functioning of panchayats.
- **Some reasons for this lack of training include:**
 - Limited access to training opportunities for panchayat members, particularly in rural and remote areas.
 - Insufficient budget allocation for training and capacity building of panchayat members.
 - Limited awareness among panchayat members about the importance of training and capacity building for effective governance.

▪ **Inadequate Participation:**

- There is often low participation from citizens in panchayat meetings and decision-making processes.
- Some possible reasons include **lack of awareness about the meetings, lack of trust in the government or local leaders,** lack of time or resources for citizens to attend, or lack of interest in the issues being discussed.
- Additionally, **some citizens may not feel that their voices will be heard** or that their concerns will be addressed, which can discourage participation.

▪ **Corruption:**

- Corruption is a major issue in many panchayats, with funds and resources being misused or embezzled.
- Local government officials, such as **those in charge of land records and building permits, are often involved in corrupt practices,** such as accepting bribes in exchange for services.
- This can **lead to delays and increased costs for citizens, and can also contribute to the illegal acquisition of land** and other resources.
- Additionally, **corruption at the local level can impede economic development** and the delivery of essential services, such as healthcare and education.

▪ **Gender Bias:**

- **Women and marginalized groups are often under-represented in panchayats** and face discrimination in their participation and decision-making.
- One **major barrier to women's participation in panchayats is societal attitudes** that view women as inferior and less capable than men.
 - This can **lead to a lack of support for women who seek to become panchayat leaders** and can make it difficult for them to gain the necessary skills and experience.
- Another barrier is the **lack of reserved seats for women in the panchayat.**
 - Though India has introduced **reservations for women in the Panchayat Raj Institutions,** the reservation percentage varies from state to state and not all

states have implemented it.

What are the Related Initiatives?

- **SVAMITVA Scheme:**
 - [Survey of Villages and Mapping with Improved Technology in Village Areas \(SVAMITVA\)](#) scheme was launched on [National Panchayati Raj Day](#) 2020 to enable economic progress of Rural India by providing “Record of Rights” to every rural household owner.
- **e-Gram Swaraj e-Financial Management System:**
 - e-Gram Swaraj is a Simplified Work Based Accounting Application for [Panchayati Raj](#).
- **Geo-Tagging of Assets:**
 - The Ministry has developed “**mActionSoft**”, a mobile based solution to help in capturing photos with [Geo-Tags](#) (i.e., **GPS Coordinates**) for the works which have assets as an output.
- **Citizen Charter:**
 - In order to focus on the commitment of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) towards its Citizens in respects of Standard of Services, the Ministry has provided platform to upload Citizen Charter document with the slogan “Meri Panchayat Mera Adhikaar – Jan Sevaayein Hamaare Dwaar”.
- **Revamped Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (2022-23 to 2025-26):**
 - The focus of the scheme of [Revamped RGSA](#) is on re-imagining Panchayati Raj Institutions as vibrant centers of local self-governance with special focus on [Localization of Sustainable Development Goals \(LSDGs\)](#) at grassroot level adopting thematic approach through concerted and collaborative efforts of Central Ministries and State Line departments and other Stakeholders with ‘Whole of Government and Whole of Society’ approach.

What should be the way Forward?

- **Increasing Central and State Government Allocations to Panchayats:**
 - This can be done through the transfer of funds directly to the panchayats, rather than routing them through intermediaries.
- **Decentralizing Decision-Making:**
 - **Panchayats should be empowered to make decisions about the allocation** and use of funds, rather than having decisions made for them by higher levels of government.
- **Building Capacity of Panchayats:**
 - This can be done **through training and capacity building programs for panchayat members and staff**, to enable them to effectively manage financial resources and implement development projects.
- **Addressing Gender Biasness:**
 - Gender bias at the **panchayat level in India can be addressed by** providing training and resources for women seeking to become panchayat leaders, and addressing cultural attitudes that perpetuate gender inequality.
- **Increasing Transparency and Accountability:**
 - Transparency and Accountability issues can be **addressed by Conducting regular meetings, Publicising information, Implementing an e-governance system, Whistleblower protection and through social Audit.**

Drishti Mains Question

What steps can be taken to improve the functioning of Panchayats in India to ensure more effective and efficient delivery of services and greater participation of citizens in the decision-making process at the grassroots level?

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Q. In absence of a well-educated and organized local level government system, 'Panchayats' and 'Samitis' have remained mainly political institutions and not effective instruments of governance. Critically discuss. **(2015)**

Q. You are the Sarpanch of a Panchayat. There is a primary school run by the government in your area. Midday meals are provided to children attending the school. The headmaster has now appointed a new cook in the school to prepare the meals. However, when it is found that cook is from Dalit community, almost half of the children belonging to higher castes are not allowed to take meals by their parents. Consequently the attendance in the schools falls sharply. This could result in the possibility of discontinuation of midday meal scheme, thereafter of teaching staff and subsequent closing down the school.

(a) Discuss some feasible strategies to overcome the conflict and to create right ambience.

(b) What should be the responsibilities of different social segments and agencies to create positive social ambience for accepting such changes? **(2015)**

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