
THE EVOLUTION OF LOCAL SELF GOVERNMENT IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian government is divided into two parts. These are the central government and state government. However, there is also another level of government that exists in our country. It is called the local self-government. This system of government was founded in 1992 by the Panchayati Raj System¹. However, you will find the mention of self-governing village bodies called 'sabhas' in the Rig Veda. Over time these village bodies or the 'sabhas' became the panchayats. The word 'panchayat' refers to a council of five persons. The concept of selfgoverning bodies was also recognised during British rule in India. So let's look at the evolution and advantages of local self-government in more detail.

To understand the evolution of these local self-governments in India, one should go back as far as pre-independent India and the constitutional developments which gave it the form and structure as we see it today.

LOCAL SELF-GOVERNANCE DURING BRITISH RULE

The concept of local self-governance was not new to India. Evidence for the functioning of local bodies at village levels has been found in various ancient texts and scriptures. Financial transactions and local disputes were administered and settled by such bodies. During the Mughal period too there is evidence of such local governments carrying out justice and administering revenue collection at the rural levels.

With the entry of the British into the administrative system of India, they converted these informal structures into representative institutions, and they were generally set up in or around trading centres, catering to their interests. Thus, in 1687, a corporation consisting of Indians and British was constituted in Madras, however, it did not last. In the year 1870, under Lord

¹ Singh Raj, Panchayat Raj Manual : A Socio-Historical Cum Legal Perspective, Anmol Publications, New Delhi, 1996.

Mayo, the system of electing people's representatives to urban municipalities was brought about. Collection of taxes from people was carried out through Chowkidars, who were recognised through the Bengal Chowkidar Act, of 1870.

Lord Ripon is known as the father of urban local governance, because he envisaged such a system for the first time, though it did not get implemented wholly. By the Montague Chelmsford Reforms passed in 1919, local self-government became a topic under the provinces. This gave more autonomy to the ruling power rather than the villages to govern themselves.

LOCAL SELF-GOVERNANCE IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

The task of strengthening panchayati raj system fell on the Indian government formed after independence. It was clear that India a country of villages had to strengthen village panchayats to strengthen democracy.

Article 40 of the Directive Principles of the State Policy states that 'the states shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them function as units of self-governments'.² The most important aspect to strengthen grass root democracy was neglected by the Constitution makers as Directive Principle of State Policy is not legally binding on the governments.

From 1957 through 1986, four significant committees were formed and worked on to conceptualise India's local self-government system. Therefore, it will be beneficial to have an overview of the four committees and their major recommendations mentioned below.

VARIOUS COMMITTEES RESPONSIBLE FOR DEVELOPEMNT OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

BALWANT MEHTA COMMITTEE (1957)

The Indian government originally created the committee to look into the workings of two of the country's previous projects. It published its report in November 1957, where the phrase 'democratic decentralisation' initially appeared.³ Rajasthan was the first state to adopt the

² Mathew George, Panchayati Raj in India, an Overview. Status of Panchayati Raj in India, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2000.

³ Singh, Mahendra Pal, (2013) V.N. Shukla's Constitution of India, (Eastern Book Company).

recommendations of this committee in 1959. The important recommendations of this committee were:

- Formation of a Panchayati Raj system with a three-tier governance model. The model shall comprise Gram panchayats in villages, Panchayat Samitis in blocks, and Zila Parishad in districts
- The chairperson of the Zila Parishad will be the District Collector
- It is necessary to ensure the transfer of resources and power to these bodies.

ASHOK MEHTA COMMITTEE (1977-1978)

The then-Janata government formed the committee to examine Panchayat institutions. But unfortunately, the Janata administration fell apart before these suggestions could be implemented.

The following are the most important of the 132 recommendations given by it:

- A two-tier structure will replace the three-tier structure
- Political organisations should take part in elections at all administration levels
- These institutions will be given mandatory taxing powers
- At the state level, the Zila Parishad will be administering the planning
- The state council of ministers will designate a minister for local self-government.

G.V.K RAO COMMITTEE (1985)

This committee was set up by the Planning Commission. It recommended the post of a District Development Commissioner. It said that all necessary resources be provided for these bodies in order to carry out their functions. The committee once again emphasised the importance of block-level governance.⁴

L.M. SINGHVI COMMITTEE (1986)

⁴ Ghosh Buddhadeb, Mohanty Bidyut, (2011)Local Governance Search for New Path, Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.

A committee led by Laxmi Mall Singhvi was constituted in the 1980s to recommend ways to revitalize local self-governance. According to this report, the Gram Sabha was considered the basic unit of governance. It recommended the constitutional recognition of local governments and political parties need not be involved in elections to Panchayats.

SARKARIA COMMISSION

Constitutional status for PRIs was opposed by the Sarkaria Commission. But the idea gained momentum in the late 1980s especially because of the endorsement by the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi who introduced the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill in 1989. Rajiv Gandhi's commitment to the PRI route to rural development seems to have emerged through a series of workshops he had as Prime Minister with District Collectors, where he got a sense of the insensitivity of District Administration and of wastage of funds for rural development. The 64th Amendment Bill caused much anxiety among opposition parties because they perceived it to support the partisan agenda of Rajiv Gandhi and it was defeated in the Rajya Sabha.

73rd AND 74th CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT ACTS (1992)

Due to the ineffectiveness of various commissions set up in the past decades, it was decided that local self-governance can be vitalised only by giving it constitutional status. Though Rajiv Gandhi had introduced the 64th Amendment Bill on local self-governments, while he was Prime Minister, it did not get passed. After another failed attempt to pass such a Bill in 1990, it was through the 73rd Amendment Act that the structure of local self-government in India came to existence as we see it today.⁵ This was passed during the term of the Narasimha Rao government. It came into force on April 24, 1993. The main features of the Act were:

- The establishment of Gram Sabha in each village was to be the foundation of the Panchayati Raj System.
- Three-tier structure of panchayats that are, Gram Panchayat, Block Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat.

⁵ Basu, Durga Das, (2011) Constitutional Law of India, LwwisNexis Butterworths wawdhwa Nagpur.

- Elections to be conducted to all seats of the panchayat at all levels. Of these, not less than 1/3rd to be reserved for women, and reservation for SC/ST members to be decided according to population.
- A State Finance Commission is to be established in each State, and every five years it determines the allotment of adequate financial resources for panchayats.
- To promote bottom-up-planning, the District Planning Committee (DPC) in every district has been accorded constitutional status.⁶

The 74th Amendment Act set out the guidelines for the establishment of urban self-government in towns and cities. It established Municipal Corporations, Councils and Nagar Panchayats, which would have representatives that are elected regularly and have a decisive role in planning and efficient implementation of services in these bodies. The institutional changes prescribed by this Act include the setting up of Ward Committees, District Planning Committees and Metropolitan Planning Committees to coordinate planning across jurisdictions, as well as the setting up of State Election Commissions and State Financial Commissions.⁷

Thus, it was through these Amendments that local self-governance in India achieved a definite structure which was uniform in nature and had efficient mechanisms to implement developmental projects at all levels. It gave impetus to local bodies to promote social and economic development and improvement in the living conditions of people all over India.

CONCLUSION

In such a diverse country like India, it is important that government schemes aimed at the development of people reach all levels. This is what makes local self-governing institutions an essential part of our administration. It is also the grassroots point of Indian democracy, by which people decide who their representatives ought to be at all levels.

The local self-government system is considered one of the major governance processes India has seen. It is a functional institution that governs most of the villages in India at the grass-root level. A few major committees played a vital role in the evolution of local self-government in our country. It functions locally, which is not feasible for the state-level government. However,

⁶ Altekar A.S., *State and Government in Ancient India*, Motilal Banarasi Das Publications, New Delhi, 1997 ⁷ Bakshi, P.M, (2015) *The Constitution of India*, Universal Law Publishing

this system is also imperfect like most other systems worldwide. Local self-government often faces the issues of corruption, lack of funds, and maladministration. To address such problems, the government has introduced many schemes to uplift rural areas in the country.