

## CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF VILLAGE DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

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**Abstract:** *In the post-1992 scenario, decentralized governance has opened up opportunities for the empowerment of women, weaker sections of society, and the poor, as well as for the implementation of participatory models for rural development. In addition, the new Panchayat Raj System has brought forth the ideas of local development planning, participatory development, and governance and development that are centred on the people. Empowering Panchayat functionaries, representatives, and concerned officials of rural development departments has been a primary focus of the decentralized governance system. Through the process of modernizing its political and administrative institutions, the Indian polity has been working toward the establishment of democratic goals. The democratic decentralization and involvement of people in the decision-making process was recognized by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1993, which provided for three-tiered panchayats both in rural and urban areas. This act was passed in recognition of the democratic decentralization and involvement of people in the decision-making process. The 11th Schedule included a provision that gave the panchayats in rural areas the authority to perform certain functions. This paper focuses on the shifting landscape of village democracy in India and presents its findings.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Indian polity has been working toward the establishment of democratic goals through the modernization of its political and administrative institutions as we approach the 21st century. Participatory development that prioritizes social justice and equity has become the primary focus of development planning as a result of shifts in dominant paradigms regarding development. It advocated for administrative decentralization, the participation of the populace in decision-making processes, and the prioritization of the requirements of the local community. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992 included a provision that provided for the empowerment of local bodies as a means of ensuring local self-governance. As a result, the units of the Local Self-Government were granted statutory status, and the state governments were given the mandatory provisions for establishing panchayats at all three levels of government. Importantly, the local bodies have become the units of the government to have a share in decision making and active participation in the development process for the socio-economic development of the region. This is a significant change. Even so, the provision of local bodies, particularly Panchayats, can be tracked down in historical texts, monuments, and excavation sites. Panchayats were particularly important in this regard. However, the credit for the strengthening of Panchayats in the modern period goes

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to Bruisers, and this is despite the fact that the role that Panchayats played in development during the ancient period was deemed to be praiseworthy. Panchayats were unable to function effectively because they lacked the financial and functional autonomy necessary to do so, and the non-statutory status of Panchayats meant that state governments were not required to exercise any mandatory powers in order to establish units of local self-government. The process of functional and financial devolution to the local bodies was initiated by the State Governments with the enactment of the State Conformity Amendment Act in 1994. This act was the catalyst for this process.

The meaning and significance of state and local fiscal relations in the context of the 73rd Amendment Acts have been given a new lease on life. Inadequate financial resources have been a major obstacle in the way local bodies in India have been able to perform their jobs efficiently. The mechanism of state finance commissions is being utilized to assist in the reorganization of their financial standing. The financial resources that are currently available to panchayats on all levels are woefully inadequate to meet their requirements. Because of this, the job of serving on a state finance commission has become significantly more challenging and difficult. Despite the fact that local bodies have been given control over both their functions and their finances, there is a mismatch between the two. Even though funds have been transferred to local bodies by Union Finance Commissions and State Finance Commissions, these bodies are still facing a fiscal deficit, and there are significant difficulties in sustaining and maintaining core services as well as fulfilling the committed liabilities by the Panchayats. As a result, there is an immediate need to evaluate the financial potential of panchayats and suggest policy measures for increasing the amount of resources they have at their disposal. The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, which was passed in 1992, established the groundwork for the emergence of strong female leadership from the ground up, which has the potential to ascend the ranks to positions of power at both the state and the national levels. The 74th Constitution Amendment Act, 1992, which provided a constitutional status for local governments in the country and was considered a revolutionary and radical piece of legislation, provided reservation of one-third of the strength of the council to women and also extended the same principle of reservation to women in other categories, such as SCs and STs, in addition to the General category. This legislation also provided reservation of one-third of the strength of the council to women. In addition, it provided reservation of one-third of the strength of the council to women

## **DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE**

The term “decentralization” has emerged as a popular one in recent years. The term “decentralization” has been given a lot of different meanings over the years (Davis, et.al., 1994). The term refers to shifts that take place within established political structures. This eliminates three of the six potential explanations that could have been given. The first category of transformation that won’t be considered is what’s known as “decentralization by default.” This occurs when government institutions become so ineffective that they fail almost entirely to make the influence of central authorities penetrate down to lower level arenas, and as

a result, people at the grassroots level become extremely cynical about the government. When this takes place in different nations, non-governmental organizations (also known as NGOs) take part in development projects and share resources with the government. The second thing that will not be included is privatisation, which refers to the transfer of duties formerly carried out by government agencies to private companies (World Bank, 1995). When something is privatised, the power and resources it once belonged to a large, centralised authority structure are often transferred to a different authority structure. One more form of decentralization, namely the delegation of some responsibilities for development programmes or projects to parastatal agencies, is not included in our discussion of decentralization at this time. The following are the three most important definitions: (i) decentralization or administrative decentralization; (ii) fiscal decentralization; (iii) devolution or democratic decentralization. The term “decentralization” refers to the process by which agents from higher levels of government are dispersed into arenas at lower levels (Rondinelli, 1981, and Parker, 1995). Decentralization of administrative functions is one way to think about it. Second, the term “decentralization” can sometimes refer to “downward fiscal transfers,” which is the process by which higher levels in a system code influence lower levels’ control over budgets and financial decisions. This authority may be delegated to decentralized bureaucrats who are only accountable to superiors at higher levels, or it may be delegated to unelected appointees selected from higher level positions. Devolution is the transfer of resources and power (and often tasks) to lower level authorities that are largely or wholly independent of higher levels of government, and which are democratic in some way and to some degree. Finally, there is devolution. Devolution is the transfer of resources and power (and often tasks) to lower level authorities. It is common knowledge that the decentralization of resources and responsibilities without accompanying (democratizing) political reforms would have been insufficient and most likely not conducive to the effective results desired by society (World Bank, 1995).

There are many different ways that democratic decentralisation can be implemented. It is abundantly clear that this encompasses situations in which those in positions of authority within institutions operating at intermediate and/or local levels are chosen via ballots cast in private. There is also the option of holding indirect elections. The individuals who are elected can serve as members of a council, the executive head of an authority, or both of these roles simultaneously. The “first-past-the-post” voting system is the standard, but elections may also employ proportional representation or other voting systems on occasion. It is possible for decentralization to involve the distribution of power among the various levels of political systems. It is possible to confer this honour on one or more of the intermediate levels. It is possible for something to be considered federalism if it results in the establishment of fully functional governments at the regional level. However, in experiments that stop short of a complete reorganisation of the federal government, more restricted powers might be delegated to intermediate levels.

There is a great deal of variety in the factors that contribute to decentralisation from one region to another. The variety of hypotheses and the range of practical applications

lend credence to the possibility of the following assertions having some degree of truth to them (Huntington, 1992):

- Decentralization in each country is the result of a combination of causes.
- There is no one factor that can adequately explain the decision to decentralize in any country or in a single country.
- There is no single factor that is required to make decisions or decentralize in any country.

The specific constellation of factors that interact to produce decentralization varies from nation to nation. There was a contribution from the deterioration of patronage systems as well as the parties in power in less developed countries. The ability of the regimes to respond to the growing demands from organized interests was hampered by a combination of factors, including sluggish economic growth and increasing corruption by political activities at all levels. The oil crises that occurred in the middle and later part of the 1970s made that problem worse and caused others. Many national leaders over-centralized power in the interest of personal rule, which undermined the autonomy, resources, effectiveness, and responsiveness of ruling parties and formal institutions. The goal of many national leaders was to establish personal rule. By the 1970s, it was becoming more possible for smaller businesses in a variety of industries to compete with larger companies, including state-owned businesses. This trend continued throughout the 1980s. This was caused in part by advances in technological capabilities. Because of this, all types of decision makers were forced to move toward greater decentralization. During the 1980s, the political development/modernization school and the dependency theory, which were the two paradigms that had long dominated political analyses of less developed countries, became less convincing. Both of these paradigms had long dominated political analyses of less developed countries. In their place, new methods of analysis rose to prominence, which helped to lay the foundation for investigations into decentralization (Manor, 1997). In the 1980s, some donor organizations began to shift their emphasis away from large-scale development programmers and toward more modest, micro-level projects in the hope of making development more sustainable. These projects could draw participants from grass-roots communities. Because of this, the path to decentralization was made easier. The dismantling of the Soviet system and the conclusion of the cold war both played a part in this development. It ultimately results in the globalization and reorganization of society, the economy, and the political system. The impact of Gandhian ideas in India has always ensured a somewhat wider constituency for decentralization than in most other countries. This is in contrast to the situation in most other countries. The lack of support for such ideas within Nehru's inner circle and among the people who drafted India's constitution, on the other hand, ensured that the elected councils that were established during the 1950s at both the local and intermediate levels had only very restricted levels of authority. After that, decentralization was largely thwarted due to national leaders' preoccupations with large-scale development projects and state level politicians' aversion to sharing power with elected members of lower level councils. Small

farmers and other groups with an even lower potential for collective action can benefit from decentralization because it helps them overcome their low collective action potential. It has real potential to foster, over time, a more equitable balance of power between local communications and higher levels of government, as well as between more prosperous and less prosperous groups operating within local arenas. This is a goal that has real promise (Manor, 1997). Civil society can be strengthened through decentralization. The pre-existing, unofficial arrangements and processes at the local level for managing resources and local affairs are brought into the official political process as a result of this integration. This has the potential to improve the long-term viability of development programmes and policies. Residents of rural areas become more knowledgeable about government policies and better able to distinguish between those that are advantageous and those that are not as a direct result of decentralization (Crook and Manor, 1994). Now, decentralization is helping regular people develop their analytical capabilities and teaching them how to put those capabilities to use. It is easier for people working at lower levels of government to communicate with those working higher up in the system when decentralization is practiced. As a result, it makes it possible for the government to become more responsive. It greatly expands the number of individuals operating at lower levels in political systems who are aware of the amount of public money that is available for development. This contributes to a more stable political environment. Decentralization has the potential to make politics more stable and more responsive to people at lower levels. Additionally, it has the potential to reduce popular cynicism about politics and to increase the legitimacy of the political system. Second, because it generates a large number of elected posts in authorities at lower levels, it opens the door for political participation at those levels by individuals who aspire to play a part in government. This helps them to feel less frustrated, which reduces the risk to their stability. Thirdly, it helps opposition parties feel less powerless by expanding the number of contests in which there are political prizes up for grabs. This makes it more likely that one of them will emerge victorious. Following the implementation of decentralisation, elections are held not just for the presidency or the legislature at the national level, but also for authorities at the regional and local levels. This helps to persuade opposition parties and interests, whose candidates lose elections for one of those bodies, to remain engaged with the democratic process, since there is a chance that they will win in another arena when the next opportunity presents itself (Jenkins, 1997).

Decentralized planning has been repeatedly emphasized in our country's Five Year Plans. Despite frequent policy changes, progress in this direction has been slow and sluggish. The Indian economy has reached a stage of development where the survival of democratic politicisation necessitates immediate decentralized planning. The structural, technological, institutional, and organizational impediments to development can only be effectively addressed when the planning process is approached and viewed locally.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 empowered local bodies to ensure local self-governance. Thus, local self-government units became statutory, and state governments were required to establish three tiers of local governments in both rural and

urban areas. Importantly, local governments now include local bodies in decision-making and development processes for the region's social and economic development. The 74th Amendment Act of 1992 ushered in a historic reform to decentralize power at the grass roots level in urban areas. This act gave municipalities a constitutional structure and mandate, allowing them to function as a democratic institution of local self-government. One of its main goals is to increase public participation in civic planning, provision, and delivery. It introduced a new structure, additional devolution of functions, planning responsibilities, new fiscal transfer system, and empowerment of women and the weaker sections of society (Agrawal, 2005). Post-decentralization, the institutional structure for financing and managing basic services has changed significantly.

The global trend towards decentralization has prompted policymakers to debate its benefits and costs. Most countries have decentralization or strengthening local governments on their development policy agenda. However, sub national governments' share of expenditures has remained stable for two decades. Perhaps the economic climate hasn't favoured widespread decentralization. However, policymakers have recognized decentralization as a panacea for many social ills, development model flaws, and social problems. It is seen as a way to improve public goods and services, people's active participation in development, governance, and resource mobilisation. Decentralization is likely to improve efficiency, growth, and reduce corruption. Decentralization is divided into three types: de-concentration, delegation, and devolution. The higher level of government makes the decisions, and the lower level simply implements the higher level's policies and programmes. Delegation occurs when a higher level government delegated decision-making power to a lower level. True decentralization occurs only when decision-making power is shared between higher and lower levels of government. Administrative decentralization is required to implement political decisions, while fiscal decentralization is required to improve public service delivery efficiency and accountability.

Before independence, rural and urban governments were decentralized. However, the first draught of the Constitution made no mention of Panchayats. The provisions were limited to non-justiciable parts of the Constitution when made. The Balwantroy Mehta Committee recommended in 1957 that Panchayati Raj Institutions be established and given the necessary resources, powers, and authority. The K. Santhanam Committee was set up in 1963 to look into the finances of Panchayats. To help PRIs manage their finances, the Committee recommended creating a Panchayati Raj Finance Corporation that would provide loans and financial assistance to grassroots governments. The Ashok Mehta Committee recommended including Panchayats in the Constitution in 1978. The Panchayat as a development organisation became a political institution. The L.M. Singhvi Committee recommended in 1986 that political parties be excluded from Panchayat elections. The Congress government introduced the 72nd (Panchayats) and 73rd (Nagar Palika) Constitutional Amendment Bills in September 1991, and on April 24, 1993, the amendment became law after being ratified by more than half of the state assemblies. The bills became the 73rd and 74th Amendments when both houses of Parliament approved them. In addition to giving PRI constitutional status, the 73rd

Amendment empowers socially and economically disadvantaged groups like SC, ST, women and guarantees free, fair and regular elections; identifies a list of subjects to be dealt with by PRIs; and establishes a uniform three-tier PRI structure with village, block, and district levels. A reservation for Scheduled Tribes was made in the Constitutional Amendment. The Bhuria Committee extended the provisions to Scheduled Areas in 1994, and the Provisions for Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) came into effect in 1996.

State and union territory Panchayat Acts were amended. The amended acts standardized the three tiers of local government: Zilla Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Gram Panchayats. Almost every state has transferred some or all 29 subjects to panchayats. For Panchayats to perform these functions, nominal subject transfer is insufficient. The Constitutional Amendment established State Finance Commissions to examine and recommend Panchayat finances. Most states have SFCs with similar terms of reference. The SFCs must recommend state financial assistance and tax, toll, and fee allocations to local governments. Local bodies' resource requirements were determined differently by each state's SFC. In the absence of clear expenditure assignments, all SFCs had issues assessing. They also had data issues. Devolution of plan funds to local governments was thus devised by each SFC. That depends on population, area and development level.

In India, democratic decentralization is not a goal. It is a process of harnessing, channeling, and realizing the people's energies in order to bring about social transformation and ensure that everyone has their rightful place in the country's social, economic, and political life. PRIs will have many functions. They are vehicles for political and leadership education. They must be responsive to community needs, promote equality and liberty, and be transparent, accountable, and efficient (Kanshi, K., 2005). The country has 7-8 years of experience with PRIs as it prepares to formulate its tenth five-year plan. Many states held repeat elections. We felt it was time to review the country's progress towards democratic decentralisation and suggest measures to deepen this process in the tenth five-year plan so that PRIs could play their designated role in the country's socio-economic development.

A democratic system requires political participation. To what extent does the system allow for equal, effective, and actual participation by all citizens? Women make up roughly half of the population, so they deserve equal treatment in the system and in the process. Citizens' active participation in political affairs is critical to a democracy's legitimacy and strengthens the democratic fabric (Palmer, 1976). Democracies fail if women citizens are denied equal opportunity to participate in governmental decision-making. Political democracy necessitates public participation in decision-making. Citizens' participation in political affairs is vital because it increases the potential for democracy (Lipset, 1973). According to Norman D. Palmer, political participation is the involvement of citizens in political activities that directly or indirectly influence decision-makers (Palmer, 1976). Volunteerism is defined as "any successful or unsuccessful voluntary action that is intended to influence public policy, administration of public affairs or the choices of political leaders at any level of government, local or national" (Weiner, 1976).

The new Panchayati Raj System has changed the nature and character of village democracy. Reservation for women and other weaker sections, such as Scheduled Castes and Tribes, has ensured that all classes are represented in decentralized rural governance and decision making. Precisely trained politicians actively participate in the implementation of rural development schemes. They also assist in social mobilization, beneficiary identification, and programme oversight. The establishment of Panchayati Raj Institutions committees and sub-committees has increased opportunities for equal participation of all sections of society. The government's 1992 New Panchayati Raj System paved the way for decentralised rural governance. Reservation for SC/ST/OBC/Women ensured equal opportunity in decision making in grassroots political institutions and implementation of rural development programmes. So a new discipline called political sociology was born, and studies were conducted in rural India.

Decentralized governance and New Panchayati Raj gave rural people new political power. Making village panchayat committees and sub committees mandatory, allowing reservation in elected positions, and involving Panchayati Raj Institutions in rural development programmes changed the social and political power structure. The public respected and acknowledged the elected officials. They took part in development plans. The public paid close attention to them because they were the link between the public and government officials, as well as the gatekeepers for government-sponsored development programmes. Elected officials also implement, monitor, and supervise government programmes and schemes. The determinants of voting behaviour have shifted significantly. Electoral issues related to development became important due to the adult franchise, secular values, and modernization of traditional institutions. Election malpractices and corruption have drastically decreased, and people are freely voting in the national interest. Due to the constitution and legal provisions protecting vulnerable groups, violence, crime and exploitation of vulnerable groups by peasantry or landowners have decreased. The government's positive discrimination in education and employment has increased participation of weaker sections and others in rural development programmes. Changes in value systems, modernization, globalization, and economic liberalization have gradually shifted attitudes towards social, economic, and political issues.

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