



Challenges of the Panchayati Raj System in India: Persistent Hurdles to Grassroots Democracy

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Abstract

India's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) embody the constitutional commitment to decentralized governance, tracing roots from ancient village councils to the 73rd Amendment's three-tier framework. This article delineates the system's historical evolution through seminal committees—Balwant Rai Mehta (1957), Ashok Mehta (1977), and GVK Rao (1985)—while invoking Mahatma Gandhi's vision of "gram swaraj" for self-reliant village republics. It elucidates the imperative for power devolution, grassroots empowerment via gram sabhas, and direct democracy. Yet, entrenched challenges like the "mukhiya pati" syndrome, caste conflicts, fiscal dependency, state overreach, and bureaucratic red tape impede progress. The analysis further explores the perils of neglect: eroded self-rule, marginalized exclusion, flawed policymaking, and absent bottom-up planning. Balancing Gandhi's idealism with B.R. Ambedkar's caution on caste-ridden villages, it highlights safeguards like reservations and initiatives such as e-Gram Swaraj. Ground-level policy formulation emerges as vital for authentic swaraj. **Keywords:** Panchayati Raj, devolution of power, gram swaraj, caste dynamics, bureaucratic hurdles, fiscal federalism, 73rd Amendment.

Historical Development of Panchayati Raj in India

The Panchayati Raj system, India's bedrock of rural self-governance, predates modern nationhood, embedded in ancient texts like the Rig Veda's sabha/samiti references and Kautilya's Arthashastra, which detailed village assemblies (grama) handling justice, taxation, and irrigation. Medieval periods saw kulavapu in South India and khap panchayats in the north resolving disputes informally.

Colonial interruption came via the Cornwallis Code (1793), centralizing power, but Lord Ripon's Resolution of 1882 revived local boards, labeling them the "Magna Carta of local government." Post-independence, the Community Development Programme (1952) faltered due to top-down flaws, prompting the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957).

Chaired by Balwant Rai Mehta, this panel recommended a democratic three-tier structure: gram panchayat (village), panchayat samiti (block), and zila parishad (district), with gram sabha as the voter base. It emphasized resource integration for development, non-involvement of MLAs/MPs in PRI presidencies, and separate PRI elections. Rajasthan pioneered implementation in Nagaur (1959), followed by Andhra Pradesh and others by 1962.

The Ashok Mehta Committee (1977), amid post-Emergency reforms, diagnosed PRI decline from political interference and fund shortages. It proposed a two-tier model (zila parishad and mandal panchayat), mandatory political parties in elections, zila parishad as the planning unit with judicial tribunals, and revenue-sharing via nyaya panchayats. Though not fully adopted, it influenced state experiments.

The GVK Rao Committee (1985) advocated zila parishad-centric planning, regular PRI elections every five years, and state finance commissions for fiscal devolution. Its call for executive grants and functionaries under PRI control addressed cadre reluctance.

These culminated in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992), inserting Part IX (Articles 243-243O), mandating three-tier PRIs (except small states), 33% reservations for women/SCs/STs (up to 50% in many states), gram sabha mandates, district planning committees, and state election commissions/finance commissions every five years. The Eleventh Schedule lists 29 devolvable subjects, from minor forest produce to social welfare. PESA (1996) extended autonomy to scheduled areas. By 2026, over 3.1 million elected PRI representatives (45% women) underscore scale, yet functionality lags. Panchayati raj institutions faced several obstacles but they have not rightly placed, henceforth what is needed is proper implementation and timely execution. The bias against the grassroots democracy was inherent in the early plan makers. They were apprehensive of delegating powers to them.

Gandhi's Enduring Support for Panchayati Raj



Mahatma Gandhi viewed Panchayati Raj as democracy's "soul," stating in *Hind Swaraj* (1909): "Independence must begin at the bottom... The unit of swaraj is the village." He envisioned "oceanic circles" of self-governing villages, independent in food, cloth, and defense, promoting non-violence and trusteeship.

Gandhi's constructive programme (1920s-40s) operationalized this via All India Village Industries Association, emphasizing khadi, sanitation, and education through panchayats. He critiqued centralized Congress ministries post-1937 for neglecting villages, urging: "Real swaraj will come... not by the acquisition of authority by a microscopic minority, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused."

His philosophy countered urban bias, advocating moral regeneration through self-rule. Gandhi ji was optimistic he felt that through moral persuasion caste wars would be settled and the development models could be implemented from the grassroot level. Though Ambedkar ji was apprehensive, his fear was not unfounded, he had faced one of the worst levels of discrimination, he knew how village society worked. We have tried to maintain balance by providing reservation to marginalized sections, which could not if entirely then partially fulfill the desire of Ambedkar ji. Perception of Gandhi ji was not if trickle down, which proposes the benefits of economic growth flowing from top to bottom over time, he was of the opinion that the river of development should start from bottom and flow to top, as the most needy are at the bottom of the pyramid.

Why Panchayati Raj Was Imperative

Devolution of Power

Post-1947 centralization via Five-Year Plans overlooked India's 6.5 lakh villages' heterogeneity. Devolution via Eleventh Schedule subjects ensures context-specific interventions, e.g., Tamil Nadu's panchayats managing water user associations effectively.

Strengthening Grassroots Democracy

PRIs transform representative democracy into participatory, with gram sabhas approving plans under MGNREGA, reducing elite capture seen in 1960s samitis. Instead of top down model we strive for a bottom to top approach, which would be the real essence of democracy. The real democracy is the direct democracy, which is practised in countries such as Switzerland. That model, which enables direct participation of citizens in public affairs, is not

possible in India as it is a vast country, but we can implement that model at the grassroot level.

Empowering Common Masses through Gram Sabha

Gram sabha is a body of every eligible adult who has the right to vote in that area, what else could be more democratic, gram sabha has been empowered by law to act as the main deciding body. Article 243A mandates gram sabhas for social audits, e.g., Rajasthan's Jan Sunwai exposed corruption. They empower dalits/adivasis via muster verification.

Concept of Self-Rule and Direct Democracy

Gandhi's gram swaraj embodies autonomy in 18 MGNREGA-style entitlements. Direct democracy via quarterly sabhas fosters accountability, unlike parliamentary remoteness.

Challenges Facing Panchayati Raj Institutions

PRIs grapple with socio-economic and structural impediments.

The Mukhiya Pati Phenomenon

In Bihar/Jharkhand, women's 50% reservation is subverted by "mukhiya pati" (husband proxies), with husbands signing cheques despite sarpanch wives. A 2019 study found 40% cases in UP/Bihar; legal proxies persist via PoA. The historical hesitation of woman to come out in the limelight and take charge has held back the proper implementation of panchayati Raj institutions reservation scheme benefits. Even though women are elected they are rarely present to solve the issue or hear the grievances, in one instance the actual mukhiya was residing in foreign country she was acting through her proxy, which was her father.

Caste Wars and Hesitation to Seek Support

Elections spark violence, e.g., 2021 Bihar polls saw 50+ clashes. Upper castes shun dalit mukhiyas, preferring informal leaders, perpetuating "sarpanch" (proxy) rule.

Budget Constraints and Inability to Self-Finance

PRIs generate <1% revenue; 15th Finance Commission (2021-26) allocates ₹4.36 lakh crore tied grants. Property tax evasion and weak markets hinder Article 243H powers.

Zero Autonomy from State Governments

States withhold 40-60% functions; e.g., Maharashtra devolves only 10/29 subjects. Supersession norms violate Article 243K.

Lack of Expertise



Illiterate pradhans (30% cases) botch tenders; RGSA trains 10 lakh annually, but capacity gaps persist. Bureaucratic Hurdles in PRI-Led Development Bureaucracy undermines PRIs. Panchayati raj is led by a village person who may not be much educated, and it could be difficult for them to understand the typicality of works involved in panchayats

Red Tapism

A Kerala road project needs 25 NOCs; delays inflate MGNREGA costs 20-30%.
Bureaucratic Superiority Complex
IAS officers resist PRI oversight, e.g., BDOs ignore zila parishad summons.
Absence of Expert Support
Engineers report to blocks, not PRIs; only 20% states second staff.
Failure to Act as Enabler
Bureaucrats prioritize CSS over PRI plans, e.g., PMAY funds diverted.
Consequences of Not Strengthening Local Bodies.
Red tapism is the worst outcome of bureaucracy, the well intended bureaucracy is plagued by the red tapism which causes unnecessary delay by sticking to rigid customs hierarchy, often this leads to growing cost of projects and cancellation often. Many development projects gets diluted because of delay or become irrelevant over time. India definitely needs to adopt new moder form of bureaucracy which puts emphasis on work execution and quick approval. The file system is not going accelerate the wheels of development .

No Real Self-Rule

Villages depend on districts, negating swaraj; e.g., 70% panchayats lack plans.
Absence of Marginalized Sections in Leadership
Proxies sideline 50% women/SC/ST seats, entrenching patriarchy/casteism.
Improper Policy Formulation
Top-down schemes like NRLM ignore dialects/crops, causing 30% leakages.
Lack of Bottom-to-Top Approach
No feedback leads to failures like Swachh Bharat's uneven toilets.
Panchayats entirely depend upon the state for various kinds of approval and funding, they act as subordinate to state machinery, which itself is a failure of the intended result. Failure of panchayats to self finance their works have led to inefficient execution of programs and welfare measures. There was mention of a self-financing module of panchayati Raj institutions, in one of the economic surveys, but

the later plan failed to take off. One of the reasons as stated by heads of panchayati Raj institutions is that they hesitate to tax their own people ,unlike the taxing body which taxes citizens who do not live among them that's why they don't hesitate. Taxes such as property tax , market tax ,fair tax and other levies could be imposed for self financing and made mandatory by the law, so no hesitation would be there

Conclusion:

Reconciling Gandhi and Ambedkar, Path Forward
Gandhi's vision: self-reliant panchayats as "republics" for sarvodaya. Ambedkar countered: villages breed "untouchability," favoring constitutionalism.
Government responses: 50% women quota (15 states), OBC hikes, PESA/Gram Sabha digitalization via e-Gram Swaraj (2 crore users), SVAMITVA drones for property cards, and 16th FC push for untied funds. These protect marginalized via audits/reservations.
Yet, ground-level policy—participatory GPDP—remains essential for swaraj, demanding fiscal autonomy and anti-proxy laws. We can not ignore the essentiality of panchayati Raj institutions, we need to just do a proper implementation of rules and procedures established, though we can allow custom tailoring of panchayati Raj institutions to better suit each , instead of developing and imposition of one size fits all model which could hamper it's implementation. The freedom to adopt and the methods or ways in which to adopt should not be conservative, we should have a liberal approach towards it.

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