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# Role of Gram Sabha in Panchayati Raj

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**ABSTRACT:** The Gram Sabha is the fulcrum of the Panchayati Raj and village development. People use the forum of the Gram Sabha to discuss local governance and development, and make need- based plans for the village.

The Panchayat implements development programs under the overarching mandate, supervision and monitoring of the Gram Sabha. All decisions of the Panchayat are taken through the Gram Sabha and no decision is official and valid without the consent of the Gram Sabha.

**KEYWORDS-**gram sabha, panchayati raj, development, government

## I. INTRODUCTION

What is Gram Sabha

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- The term Gram Sabha is defined in the Constitution of India under Article 243(b).
- Gram Sabha is the primary body of the Panchayati Raj system and by far the largest.
- It is a permanent body.
- Gram Sabha is the Sabha of the electorate. All other institutions of the Panchayati Raj like the Gram Panchayat, Block Panchayat and Zilla Parishad are constituted by elected representatives.
- The decisions taken by the Gram Sabha cannot be annulled by any other body. The power to annul a decision of the Gram Sabha rests with the Gram Sabha only.[1,2,3]

Who are the members of Gram Sabha

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- Persons, those who are above 18 years of age and
- living in the village and
- whose names are included in the electoral rolls for the Panchayat at the village level.

Scheduled meetings of the Gram Sabha

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- According to the State Panchayat Raj Acts, the Gram Sabha must meet at least two to four times in a year.
- For people's convenience, in most of the States, four national-international days have been identified as reference dates for these meetings. They are
  - Republic Day (26<sup>th</sup> January)
  - Labour day (1<sup>st</sup> May)
  - Independence Day (15<sup>th</sup> August)
  - Gandhi Jayanti (2<sup>nd</sup> October)
- Gram Panchayats are however free to convene Gram Sabha on other dates according to their convenience.

Venue, Time and Place of Gram Sabha

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- Gram Sabha should be conducted within the purview of GP at a place convenient for all the members to sit.
- In case of multiple villages under a GP, Gram Sabha may be conducted on rotation basis in all the villages' one after the other.
- Gram Sabha can be conducted anytime during day time i.e., after sunrise and before sunset.



## Who Organises Gram Sabha

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- The Panchayat Secretary after obtaining approval of the Sarpanch should organize the Gram Sabha.
- Gram Panchayat Sarpanch has to convene a Gram Sabha meeting when either 10% members of Gram Sabha or 50 persons of Gram Sabha (whichever is more) submits their requisition for holding a Gram Sabha. However, those members have to inform the purpose for the meeting.
- A written request for the meeting must be handed over to the Sarpanch during office hours 5 days before the date of meeting.
- If the Sarpanch fails to hold the meeting on the requested date, the members who requested the meeting can themselves organize the gram Sabha meeting.[4,5,6]

## II. DISCUSSION

Panchayati raj (council of five officials) is the system of local self-government of villages in rural India<sup>[1]</sup> as opposed to urban and suburban municipalities.

It consists of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) through which the self-government of villages is realized.<sup>[2]</sup> 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."<sup>[2]</sup>

Part IX of the Indian Constitution is the section of the Constitution relating to the Panchayats.<sup>[3][4]</sup> It stipulates that in states or Union Territories with more than two million inhabitants there are three levels of PRIs:

- the gram panchayats at village level
- the panchayat samiti (block samiti, mandal parishad) at block level, and
- the district council (district panchayat) at district level.<sup>[2]</sup>

In states or Union Territories with less than two million inhabitants there are only two levels of PRIs. The Gram Sabha consists of all registered voters living in the area of a Gram Panchayat and is the organization through which village inhabitants participate directly in local government. Elections for the members of the Panchayats at all levels take place every five years. The Panchayats must include members of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the same proportion as in the general population. One third of all seats and chairperson posts must be reserved for women, in some states half of all seats and chairperson posts.<sup>[2]</sup>

Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated Panchayati at Nagaur on October 2, 1959. The day was selected on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's birthday. Gandhi wanted Gram Swaraj through Panchayati Raj.<sup>[5][6]</sup> The system was modified in 1992 with the 73rd constitutional amendment.<sup>[7][8][9]</sup>

In India, the Panchayati Raj now functions as a system of governance in which gram panchayats are the basic units of local administration. Currently, the Panchayati Raj system exists in all states except Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram, and in all Union Territories except Delhi.

## History

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Panchayati raj has its origins in India since Vedic period (1700 BCE). Since Vedic times, the village (gram) in the country is considered as the basic unit for regional self-administration.<sup>[10]</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayati Raj as the foundation of India's political system, as a decentralized form of government in which each village would be responsible for its own affairs.<sup>[11][12]</sup> The term for such a vision was Gram Swaraj ("village self-governance"). Instead, India developed a highly centralized form of government.<sup>[13]</sup> However, this has been moderated by the delegation of several administrative functions to the local level, empowering elected gram panchayats. There are significant differences between the traditional Panchayati Raj system, that was envisioned by Gandhi, and the system formalized in India in 1992.<sup>[8]</sup>





Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated Panchayati at Nagaur on October 2, 1959. The day was selected on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's birthday. Gandhi wanted Gram Swaraj through Panchayati Raj.<sup>[5]</sup> Rajasthan was the first state to implement it. Nehru inaugurated Panchayat Raj in Andhra Pradesh on October 11, 1959 on the occasion of Dussehra. The system was gradually established all over India.<sup>[6]</sup> The system was modified in 1992 with the 73rd constitutional amendment.<sup>[8][9]</sup>

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, headed by the Member of Parliament Balwantrai Mehta, was a committee appointed by the Government of India in January 1957 to examine the work of the Community Development Programme (1952) and the National Extension Service (1953), to suggest measures to improve their work. The committee's recommendation was implemented by NDC in January 1958, and this set the stage for the launching of Panchayati Raj Institutions throughout the country. The committee recommended the establishment of the scheme of 'democratic decentralization', which finally came to be known as Panchayati Raj. This led to the establishment of a three-tier Panchayati Raj system: Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Zila Parishad at the district level.<sup>[7,8,9]</sup>

On 24 April 1993, the Constitutional (73rd amendment) Act of 1992 came into force in India to provide constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj institutions. This amendment was extended to Panchayats in the tribal areas of eight states, namely: Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Rajasthan beginning on 24 December 1996. This amendment contains provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibilities to the panchayats, both for the preparation of economic development plans and social justice, as well as for implementation in relation to 29 subjects listed in the eleventh schedule of the constitution, and the ability to levy and collect appropriate taxes, duties, tolls and fees.<sup>[14]</sup> The Act aims to provide a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj for all states having a population of over two million, to hold Panchayat elections regularly every five years, to provide seats reserved for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women, to appoint a State Finance Commission to make recommendations regarding the financial powers of the Panchayats, and to constitute a District Planning Committee.<sup>[15]</sup>

#### 4 - tier panchayat system

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The 4-tier panchayat system [bn] was inaugurated in West Bengal on Mahatma Gandhi's birthday (2nd October) in the year 1964 by the passage of the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act in 1963. It consisted of

1. gram panchayats composed of representatives directly elected by villagers for a term of 4 years
2. locality panchayats composed of elected sarpanchs & representatives elected directly by the villagers for a term of 4 years,
3. locality councils composed of the block development officer of that community development block, all heads of the locality panchayats under jurisdiction of that block, persons representing the locality panchayats elected by the members of each locality panchayat falling under that block, the local Lok Sabha MP who doesn't hold any ministerial portfolio, local MLA who doesn't hold any ministerial portfolio, a Rajya Sabha MP who is domiciled in that block & doesn't hold any ministerial portfolio, an MLC who is domiciled in that block & doesn't hold any ministerial portfolio, 2 female members nominated by the state government, 2 members representing the SC, ST & OBC population nominated by the state government and 2 social workers experienced in rural development elected by the aforementioned members for a term of 4 years
4. District councils composed of the sub-divisional officers in charge of the sub-divisions of that district, a district panchayat officer appointed by the state government, a civil servant nominated by the state government, chairpersons of all locality councils under that district, 2 members elected by the sarpanchs of each sub-division of that district, a local municipality chairman or mayor nominated by the state government, chairperson of the district school board, 2 female members nominated by the state government and MLAs & MPs (both representing the district & domiciled in that district) who don't hold any ministerial portfolio for a term of 4 years.<sup>[10,11,12]</sup>

#### 3 - tier panchayat system

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The 3 tier panchayat system was inaugurated in June 1973 by the West Bengal Panchayat Act passed that year. It consists of

1. gram panchayats



2. panchayat samitis &
3. district councils

#### Gram panchayat sabha

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The Sarpanch (president) is its elected head. The members of the gram panchayat are elected directly by the voting-age village population for a period of five years.<sup>[16]</sup> The Gram Panchayat President, also known as Sarpanch often presides over the Sabha meetings.

Elected standing committees operate in the panchayat, focusing on specific areas like finance, development, education, health, and welfare. Each committee, headed by a chairperson, comprises three to five members, ensuring representation and expertise in their respective domains.

#### Block level panchayat or Panchayat Samiti

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Just as the tehsil goes by other names in various parts of India, notably mandal and taluka, there are a number of variations in nomenclature for the block panchayat. For example, it is known as Mandal Praja Parishad in Andhra Pradesh, Taluka Panchayat in Gujarat and Karnataka, and Panchayat Samiti in Maharashtra. In general, the block panchayat has the same form as the gram panchayat but at a higher level.

#### Composition

Membership in the block panchayat is mostly ex-official; it is composed of: all of the Sarpanchas (gram panchayat chairmen) in the Panchayat Samiti area, the MPs and MLAs of the area, the Sub-District Officer (SDO) of the sub-division, co-opt members (representatives of the SCs, STs and women), associate members (a farmer from the area, a representative of the cooperative societies and one from marketing services), and some elected members. However, in Kerala, block panchayat members are directly elected, just like gram panchayat and district panchayat members.

The Panchayat Samiti is elected for a term of five years and is headed by a chairman and a deputy chairman.<sup>[18]</sup>

#### System in practice

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The Panchayats, throughout the years, have relied on federal and state grants to sustain themselves economically. The absence of mandatory elections for the Panchayat council and infrequent meetings of the Sarpanch have decreased the spread of information to villagers, leading to more state regulation.<sup>[19]</sup> Many Panchayats have been successful in achieving their goals, through cooperation between different bodies and the political mobilization of previously underrepresented groups in India. There is an obstacle of literacy that many Panchayats face for engagement of villagers, with most development schemes being on paper. However, homes linked to the Panchayati Raj System have seen an increase in participation for local matters.<sup>[20]</sup> The reservation policy for women on the Panchayat councils have also led to a substantial increase in female participation and have shaped the focus of development to include more domestic household issues.<sup>[21]</sup>

In 1992, the 73rd amendment was passed, transforming the role of women in Panchayati raj.<sup>[22]</sup> The 73rd amendment established reservation of one-third of seats for women in basic village councils. This reservation had led to a significant increase in women's participation in local governance. Women are now serving as elected representatives in various positions, including as Sarpanch (village head) and Panchayat members.<sup>[13,14,15]</sup> Women also demonstrated their positive and enlightened thinking in the panchayat to respond to the government's expectations of women. The supportive actions from their families are encouraging women to attend every PRI (Panchayati Raj in India) meeting. Even though the bureaucracy was all male dominated, Gandhi hoped that Panchayati raj could be the framework for a free Indian political order. As a promoter of liberalism, he proposed gram swaraj, or self-contained and autonomous villages, to give women the most rights.<sup>[23]</sup> The 73rd amendment was also resisted because reservation of seats meant that high caste people had to accept marginal caste women into the political empowerment system. Indirectly, this leads to corruption when the government devotes funds to the grassroots panchayat where resources and funds are exploited by bureaucratic channels.<sup>[24]</sup>



### III. RESULTS

Rural development is one of the main objectives of Panchayati Raj and this has been established in all states of India except Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram, in all Union Territories except Delhi. and certain other areas. These areas include:

- a. The scheduled areas and the tribal areas in the states
- b. The hill area of Manipur for which a district council exists and
- c. Darjeeling district of West Bengal for which Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council exists

#### Evolution of Panchayati Raj

The Panchayati system in India is not purely a post-independence phenomenon. In fact, the dominant political institution in rural India has been the village panchayat for centuries. In ancient India, panchayats were usually elected councils with executive and judicial powers. Foreign domination, especially Mughal and British, and the natural and forced socio-economic changes had undermined the importance of the village panchayats. In the pre-independence period, however, the panchayats were instruments for the dominance of the upper castes over the rest of the village, [16,17,18] which furthered the divide based on either the socio-economic status or the caste hierarchy.

The evolution of the Panchayati Raj System, however, got a fillip after the attainment of independence after the drafting of the Constitution. The Constitution of India in Article 40 enjoined: "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".

There were a number of committees appointed by the Government of India to study the implementation of self-government at the rural level and also recommend steps in achieving this goal.

The committees appointed are as follows:

- Balwant Rai Mehta Committee
- Ashok Mehta Committee
- G V K Rao Committee
- L M Singhvi Committee

#### Balwant Rai Mehta Committee & Panchayati Raj

The committee was appointed in 1957, 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. [19,20,21]

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.
- It also requested for provisioning resources so as to help them discharge their duties and responsibilities.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee further revitalised the development of panchayats in the country, the report recommended that the Panchayati Raj institutions can play a substantial role in community development programmes



throughout the country. The objective of the Panchayats thus was the democratic decentralisation through the effective participation of locals with the help of well-planned programmes. Even the then Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, defended the panchayat system by saying, “. . . authority and power must be given to the people in the villages . . . . Let us give power to the panchayats.”[15,16]

#### Ashok Mehta Committee & Panchayati Raj

The committee was appointed in 1977 to suggest measures to revive and strengthen the declining Panchayati Raj system in India.

The key recommendations are:

- 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.

#### G V K Rao Committee & Panchayati Raj

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’. Hence, it made some key recommendations which are as follows:

- Zila Parishad to be the most important body in the scheme of democratic decentralisation. Zila Parishad to be the principal body to manage the developmental programmes at the district level.
- The district and the lower levels of the Panchayati Raj system to be assigned with specific planning, implementation and monitoring of the rural developmental programmes.
- Post of District Development Commissioner to be created. He will be the chief executive officer of the Zila Parishad.
- Elections to the levels of Panchayati Raj systems should be held regularly.[16,17]

#### L M Singhvi Committee & Panchayati Raj

The committee was 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. The following recommendations were made by the committee:

- The committee recommended that the Panchayati Raj systems should be constitutionally recognised. It also recommended constitutional provisions to recognise free and fair elections for the Panchayati Raj systems.
- The committee recommended reorganisation of villages to make the gram panchayat more viable.
- It recommended that village panchayats should have more finances for their activities.
- Judicial tribunals to be set up in each state to adjudicate matters relating to the elections to the Panchayati Raj institutions and other matters relating to their functioning.

All these things further the argument that panchayats can be very effective in identifying and solving local problems, involve the people in the villages in the developmental activities, improve the communication between different levels at which politics operates, develop leadership skills and in short help the basic development in the states without making too many structural changes. 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. Due to the sustained effort of the civil society organisations, intellectuals and progressive political leaders, the Parliament passed two amendments to the Constitution – the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment for rural local bodies (panchayats) and the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitution Amendment for urban local bodies (municipalities) making them ‘institutions of self-government’. Within a year all the states passed their own acts in conformity to the amended constitutional provisions.[17,18]

Also read: Caste system and Panchayati Raj

73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992

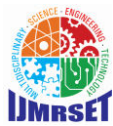
Significance of the Act

- The Act added Part IX to the Constitution, “The Panchayats” and also added the Eleventh Schedule which consists of the 29 functional items of the panchayats.
- Part IX of the Constitution contains Article 243 to Article 243 O.
- The Amendment Act provides shape to Article 40 of the Constitution, (directive principles of state policy), which directs the state to organise the village panchayats and provide them powers and authority so that they can function as self-government.
- With the Act, Panchayati Raj systems come under the purview of the justiciable part of the Constitution and mandates states to adopt the system. Further, the election process in the Panchayati Raj institutions will be held independent of the state government’s will.
- The Act has two parts: compulsory and voluntary. Compulsory provisions must be added to state laws, which includes the creation of the new Panchayati Raj systems. Voluntary provisions, on the other hand, is the discretion of the state government.
- The Act is a very significant step in creating democratic institutions at the grassroots level in the country. The Act has transformed the representative democracy into participatory democracy.[19,20]

Salient Features of the Act

1. 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. Candidates can refer to the functions of gram panchayat and gram panchayat work, on the government official website – <https://grammanchitra.gov.in/>.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. The Chairperson of a Panchayat and other members of a Panchayat, whether or not elected directly from territorial constituencies in the Panchayat area, have the right to vote in Panchayat meetings.
5. 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.





6. 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.
7. 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.[20,21]
8. 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:
  - the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice.
  - 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.
9. Finances: The state legislature may –
  - Authorize a panchayat to levy, collect and appropriate taxes, duties, tolls and fees.
  - Assign to a panchayat taxes, duties, tolls and fees levied and collected by the state government.
  - Provide for making grants-in-aid to the panchayats from the consolidated fund of the state.
  - Provide for the constitution of funds for crediting all money of the panchayats.
10. Finance Commission: The state finance commission reviews the financial position of the panchayats and provides recommendations for the necessary steps to be taken to supplement resources to the panchayat.
11. Audit of Accounts: State legislature may make provisions for the maintenance and audit of panchayat accounts.
12. Application to Union Territories: The President may direct the provisions of the Act to be applied on any union territory subject to exceptions and modifications he specifies.
13. Exempted states and areas: The Act does not apply to the states of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram and certain other areas. These areas include,
  - The scheduled areas and the tribal areas in the states
  - The hill area of Manipur for which a district council exists
  - Darjeeling district of West Bengal for which Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council exists. However, Parliament can extend this part to these areas subject to the exception and modification it specifies. Thus, the PESA Act was enacted.
14. Continuance of existing law: All the state laws relating to panchayats shall continue to be in force until the expiry of one year from the commencement of this Act. In other words, the states have to adopt the new Panchayati raj system based on this Act within the maximum period of one year from 24 April 1993, which



was the date of the commencement of this Act. However, all the Panchayats existing immediately before the commencement of the Act shall continue till the expiry of their term, unless dissolved by the state legislature sooner.

15. Bar to interference by courts: The Act bars the courts from interfering in the electoral matters of panchayats. It declares that the validity of any law relating to the delimitation of constituencies or the allotment of seats to such constituencies cannot be questioned in any court. It further lays down that no election to any panchayat is to be questioned except by an election petition presented to such authority and in such manner as provided by the state legislature.[21]

#### PESA Act of 1996

The provisions of Part IX are not applicable to the Fifth Schedule areas. The Parliament can extend this Part to such areas with modifications and exceptions as it may specify. Under these provisions, Parliament enacted Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, popularly known as PESA Act or the extension act.

#### Objectives of the PESA Act:

1. To extend the provisions of Part IX to the scheduled areas.
2. To provide self-rule for the tribal population.
3. To have village governance with participatory democracy.
4. To evolve participatory governance consistent with the traditional practices.
5. To preserve and safeguard traditions and customs of tribal population.
6. To empower panchayats with powers conducive to tribal requirements.
7. To prevent panchayats at a higher level from assuming powers and authority of panchayats at a lower level.

As a result of these constitutional steps taken by the union and state governments, India has moved towards what has been described as 'multi-level federalism', and more significantly, it has widened the democratic base of the Indian polity. Before the amendments, the Indian democratic structure through elected representatives was restricted to the two houses of Parliament, state assemblies and certain union territories. The system has brought governance and issue redressal to the grassroot levels in the country but there are other issues too. These issues, if addressed, will go a long way in creating an environment where some of the basic human rights are respected.

After the new generation of panchayats had started functioning, several issues have come to the fore, which have a bearing on human rights. The important factor which has contributed to the human rights situation vis-a-vis the panchayat system is the nature of Indian society, which of course determines the nature of the state. Indian society is known for its inequality, social hierarchy and the rich and poor divide. The social hierarchy is the result of the caste system, which is unique to India. Therefore, caste and class are the two factors, which deserve attention in this context.

Thus, the local governance system has challenged the age old practices of hierarchy in the rural areas of the country particularly those related to caste, religion and discrimination against women.[23]

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Panchayati Raj is the oldest system of local government in the Indian subcontinent. Panchayati Raj Institutions as units of local government have been in existence in India for a long time, in different permutations and combinations. However, it was only in 1992 that it was officially established by the Indian Constitution as the third level of India's federal democracy through the 73rd Amendment Act.

The Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) consists of three levels:

- Gram Panchayat at the village level
- Block Panchayat or Panchayat Samiti at the intermediate level
- Zilla Panchayat at the district level



The word “Panchayat” means assembly (ayat) of five (panch) and raj means “rule”. Traditionally Panchayats consisted of elderly and wise people chosen by the local community, who used to settle disputes between individuals and villages. The leader of the panchayat used to be called as Mukhya or Sarpanch. Generally the elder-most or most senior person would be elected to this position. The Panchayati Raj system is also recognised as a form of direct democracy (i.e they exercise all powers of a government at a village level), as opposed to the popular notion that it is a type of representative democracy. As per January 2019, there are 630 Zilla Panchayats; 6614 Block Panchayats and 253163 Gram Panchayats in India. There are currently more than 3 million elected representatives (of which more than 1 million are women) for panchayats at all levels.

In modern India, Mahatma Gandhi was one of the leading advocates of Gram Swaraj i.e village self-governance where the village would be responsible for its own affairs. The Panchayati Raj system of governance can be found all over South Asia in countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, where it goes by the same name.[22]

Key Features of Panchayat Raj System:

- The Gram Sabha is a body consisting of all the people registered in the electoral rolls who belong to a village comprised within the area of the Panchayat at the village level. Gram Sabha is the smallest and the only permanent unit in the Panchayati Raj system. The powers and functions of Gram Sabha are fixed by state legislature according to the law on the subject.
- Seats are reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) and chairpersons of the Panchayats at all levels are reserved for SCs and STs in proportion to their population.
- One-third of the total number of seats are to be reserved for women. One-third of the seats reserved for SCs and STs, are also reserved for women. This policy extends to the office of the chairperson at all levels as well (Article 243D). The reserved seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in the Panchayat.
- There is a uniform policy with each term being five years. Fresh elections must be conducted before the expiry of the term. In the event of dissolution, elections compulsorily within six months (Article 243E).
- Panchayats have the responsibility to prepare plans for economic development and social justice with respect to the subjects as per the law put in place, which also extends to the various levels of Panchayat including the subjects as illustrated in the Eleventh Schedule (Article 243G).

Gram Panchayat

Gram Panchayat consists of a village or a group of villages divided into smaller units called “Wards”. Each ward selects or elects a representative who is known as the Panch or ward member. The members of the Gram Sabha elect the ward members through a direct election. The Sarpanch or the president of the Gram Panchayat is elected by the ward members as per the State Act. The Sarpanch and the Panch are elected for a period of five years. Gram Panchayat is governed by the elected body and administration. The secretary is normally in charge of the administrative duties of the Gram Panchayat.

Block Panchayat

Panchayat Samiti (also called Taluka Panchayats or Block Panchayats) is the intermediate level in Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Panchayat Samiti acts as the link between Gram Panchayat (Village) and District Panchayat (Zilla). These blocks do not hold elections for the Panchayat Samiti council seats. Rather, the block council consists of all of the Sarpanchas and the Upa Sarpanchas from each Gram Panchayat along with members of the legislative assembly (MLA), members of parliament (MPs), associate members (like a representative from a cooperative society) and members from the Zilla Parishad who are a part of the block. The Gram Panchayat members nominate their Sarpanch and Upa Sarpanch amongst their ranks, which extend



to the selection of the chairperson and vice-chairperson as well. The Executive Officer (EO) is the head of the administration section of the Panchayat Samiti.

District Panchayat

The District Panchayat also known as the District Council or Zilla Parishad is the third tier of the Panchayati Raj system. Like the Gram Panchayat, the District Panchayat is also an elected body. Chairpersons of Block Samitis also represent the District Panchayat. Like the Block Panchayat, the MP and MLA are also members of the district panchayat. The government appoints the Chief Executive Officer to carry out the administration of the district Panchayat along with the the Chief Accounts Officer, the Chief Planning Officer and one or more Deputy Secretaries who work directly under the Chief Executive Officer and assist him/her. The Zilla Parishad chairperson is the political head of the district panchayat.

The primary objective of establishing the third tier of the government is to increase democratic participation, better articulate local needs and priorities, and to ensure a more efficient use of local resources along with greater accountability and transparency. Accordingly, 29 functions have been proposed to be transferred to local governments in the rural area. These institutions have been playing an important role in several flagship programmes of the central and state governments, perhaps more role in implementation and monitoring.

PRIA's involvement with Panchayati Raj

PRIA has been involved with Panchayati Raj ever since the first Panchayati Raj elections took place in 1995/96. By focusing on Capacity Building, Knowledge Building and Policy advocacy, PRIA sought to engage and inform the voter into making the decision that works best for them, along with giving them information on the election process specifically and the voting process in general. To this end, PRIA organised many events and functions such as PEVAC (Pre-election Voters' Awareness Campaign), radio dramas, exposure visits, promotion of women and Dalit leadership etc. PRIAs expertise in working with Panchayats of all levels led to PRIA joining various government committees for the Panchayat such as the Expert Committee on Planning and Decentralisation and the Task Force on the Gram Sabha. [24]

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