

2. National Panchayati Raj Day – Polity

1. Context

1. The National Panchayati Raj Day (NPRD) is observed every year on 24 April to mark the establishment of the Panchayati Raj system in India.
2. The day commemorates the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 which came into effect in 1993 and gave constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).
3. These provisions are included in Part IX of the Indian Constitution strengthening grassroots democracy by empowering local bodies at village, block, and district levels.

2. Historical Background of Panchayati Raj System

Ancient Origins

1. The Panchayati Raj system has origins in ancient village assemblies like sabhas and samitis which handled local governance in traditional Indian society.
2. These institutions provided self-governance at village level before centralized state systems emerged.

Colonial Decline

1. It declined during British rule due to centralized administration that concentrated power at provincial and district levels.
2. British administrative system undermined traditional village governance structures.

Post-Independence Revival

1. After independence, decentralized governance was promoted as essential for democratic consolidation.
2. Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) recommended a three-tier Panchayati Raj system providing institutional framework.
3. First implemented in Rajasthan in 1959 as pioneering experiment in democratic decentralization.

Constitutional Backing

1. Constitutional backing came through the 73rd Amendment Act making PRIs mandatory across all states.
2. Embedding them in Part IX (Articles 243-243O) of the Constitution provided legal foundation.
3. Transformed Panchayats from state-level administrative convenience to constitutional requirement.

3. Structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions

Principle of Decentralization

1. The Panchayati Raj system is based on principle of decentralization where power is transferred from central and state governments to elected representatives at village level.
2. Embodies subsidiarity principle that governance should occur at lowest effective level.

Three-Tier Structure

Gram Panchayat (Village Level)

1. Handles basic local administration like water supply, sanitation, street lighting, and village infrastructure.
2. Closest to citizens providing immediate responsive governance.

Block Panchayat (Intermediate Level)

1. Coordinates development across villages ensuring proper implementation of government schemes.
2. Links village-level bodies with district administration.

District Panchayat (District Level)

1. Oversees and integrates development activities across blocks focusing on planning and resource allocation.
2. Provides strategic direction and coordinates large-scale development initiatives.

Gram Sabha – Foundation of Democracy

1. The Gram Sabha is the body of all registered voters in a village representing the most direct form of democracy at the grassroots level.
2. It is a permanent institution in the Panchayati Raj system but not part of the three-tier structure.
3. Its powers and functions are defined by state laws varying across states.
4. It approves development plans, monitors spending, ensures transparency, and allows villagers to raise issues and participate in decision-making.
5. Represents sovereign people exercising direct control over elected representatives.

4. Initiatives to Strengthen Panchayati Raj System

SVAMITVA Scheme

1. Launched on 24 April 2021 aiming to provide legal ownership rights to rural households.
2. Mapping inhabited village areas using drone and GIS technology ensuring accurate land records.
3. Issuing property cards enabling rural residents to use property as financial asset for loans.

SabhaSaar – AI-Powered Meeting Documentation

1. AI-based tool that automatically prepares minutes of Gram Sabha meetings reducing manual workload.
2. Strengthens monitoring by creating searchable digital records of proceedings.

eGramSwaraj – Digital Platform

1. User-friendly web portal that improves transparency in planning, progress reporting, financial management, and tracking of assets.
2. Linked with Public Financial Management System (PFMS) allowing online transfer of Central Finance Commission funds from States to PRIs.
3. Eliminates delays and intermediaries in fund transfers.

Gram Urja Swaraj

1. Under eGramSwaraj, this digital dashboard tracks renewable energy assets at Gram Panchayat level in real time.
2. Promotes clean energy adoption at grassroots monitoring solar panels, biogas plants, and other renewable installations.

Meri Panchayat App

1. Integrated m-Governance platform designed by National Informatics Centre (NIC).
2. Aims to empower rural communities by improving governance, accountability, and citizen participation in Panchayat affairs.

Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA)

1. Centrally sponsored scheme strengthening PRIs through capacity building, institutional development, and infrastructure support.
2. Provides training to elected representatives and officials.

Model Women-Friendly Gram Panchayat (MWFGP)

1. Institutional initiative strengthening women's leadership in local governance.
2. Focuses on building inclusive and gender-sensitive Panchayats ensuring women's participation, safety, rights, and empowerment.

Sashakt Panchayat-Netri Abhiyan

1. Launched to enhance leadership, communication, and decision-making skills of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs).
2. Focus on practical and interactive learning for real governance situations.

Model Youth Gram Sabha (MYGS)

1. Initiative engaging young people in grassroots democracy.
2. Implemented with Department of School Education and Literacy and Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
3. Involves Class 9 and 10 students from Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas and Eklavya Model Residential Schools.

PESA Act, 1996

1. The Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 extends Panchayati Raj provisions to Scheduled Areas.
2. Strengthens Gram Sabha-led governance in tribal regions across 10 states covering over 77,000 villages.
3. Promotes decentralized, community-based decision-making in 45 full and 63 partial districts.
4. Applies to Fifth Schedule areas in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Telangana, and Himachal Pradesh.
5. Most states have notified PESA rules except Odisha.

5. Progress

Digital Transformation

1. PRIs are undergoing rapid digital transformation enhancing transparency, efficiency, and accountability at grassroots level.
2. Over 95% of villages now have 3G/4G connectivity improving last-mile service delivery considerably.

Common Service Centres

1. Operated by more than 6.5 lakh Village Level Entrepreneurs making digital services easily accessible in rural areas.
2. Provide government services, banking, education, and healthcare at village level.

Connectivity Achievement

1. Out of around 2.18 lakh Gram Panchayats, nearly 2.14 lakh are already connected and service-ready.
2. Reflects strong progress in digital inclusion at village level.

6. Challenges PRIs Facing

Fiscal Dependence

1. PRIs rely heavily on state and central transfers with minimal own-source revenue.
2. Limiting financial autonomy and planning flexibility as they cannot raise substantial local revenues.

Capacity Deficit

1. Shortage of trained personnel, planning expertise, and digital literacy weakens implementation quality.
2. Elected representatives often lack technical knowledge for complex development planning.

State-Level Resistance

1. Many state governments curtail PRI autonomy through bureaucratic control undermining constitutional intent of decentralization.
2. Parallel bureaucratic structures bypass elected Panchayat bodies.

Elite Capture

1. Caste hierarchies, gender bias, and local power structures distort representation despite constitutional reservations.
2. Proxy representation where women are nominal heads while male relatives exercise actual power.

Weak Accountability

1. Inadequate audit mechanisms and low social audit penetration allow leakages and reduce transparency.
2. Citizens often unaware of their rights to demand accountability.

7. Way Forward

Enhancing Fiscal Autonomy

1. Enable Panchayats to raise and manage local resources through property taxes and user charges.
2. Devolve more funds directly rather than through state intermediaries.

Strengthening Capacity

1. Continuous training programs for elected representatives and officials.
2. Digital literacy initiatives ensuring Panchayats can effectively use technology platforms.
3. Professional support through technical resource persons at block level.

Technology Integration

1. Greater use of technology to improve planning, monitoring, and service delivery.
2. Real-time dashboards tracking scheme implementation and fund utilization.

Inclusive Governance

1. Ensure meaningful participation of marginalized groups beyond reservation quotas.
2. Capacity building specifically for women, SC/ST representatives.
3. Combat proxy representation through awareness and monitoring.

Accountability Mechanisms

1. Independent audits examining financial and program implementation.
2. Social audits with community participation identifying leakages.
3. Citizen charters specifying service standards and grievance redressal.

Programme Convergence

1. Better convergence with national programmes like Swachh Bharat Mission and Jal Jeevan Mission.
2. Help Panchayats drive more effective and integrated rural development.
3. Aligning with vision of Viksit Bharat ensuring rural areas benefit from national development.

8. Conclusion

The Panchayati Raj system has significantly strengthened grassroots democracy in India by empowering local communities to manage their own development. National Panchayati Raj Day celebrates this constitutional achievement and renewed commitment to local self-governance. Challenges persist including financial dependence, limited capacity, state resistance, and weak accountability requiring sustained reforms. Digital transformation offers unprecedented opportunities for transparency and efficiency with over 95% village connectivity. Success requires balancing autonomy with accountability, capacity building with resource devolution, and technology with human-centered governance.

Source - <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2254972®=3&lang=2>