Strengthening India's Panchayati Raj

What is the issue?

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- Panchayati Raj institutions in its present form and structure have now completed 25 years of existence (73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992).
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- But a lot remains to be done in order to further decentralisation and strengthen democracy at the grassroots.
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What is the 73rd Constitutional Amendment?

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- The 73rd constitutional amendment, passed in 1992 mandated the creation of a 3 tier panchayat structure in rural India.
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- Even political parties that vehemently opposed the 73rd Amendment 25 years ago are presently celebrating the current occasion.
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- This indicates a univocal consensus towards the local-self governance as per the provisions that were ingrained in the constitution.
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- Notably, there were panchayats before too, but it functioned largely at the State government's discretion and elections weren't held for them regularly.
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- The 73rd Amendment specificed provisions for devolution through the 11th schedule and provided for financial self sustainability for panchayats.
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What are the significant milestones achieved?

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- All states have ensured the full and diligent implementation of the mandatory provisions provided in the 73rd amendment.
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- Moreover, states have also provided statutory safeguards for many devolution provisions, which have considerably empowered local governments.
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- Successive (central) Finance Commissions have, so substantially, increased fund allocations for local bodies and grants have also been increased.
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- Currently, 15th Finance Commission is considering to further increase allocations for local governments to match international standards.
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- There are about 2.5 lakh panchayats in India, which are represented by about 32 lakh people.
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- This is greater than the sum total of elected representatives from all other countries.
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- Uniquely, SC/ST representation in elected bodies is another big push towards their empowerment. There are about 1 lakh SC/ST sarpanches.
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- Also, about 14 lakh women elected representatives and heads have now got political representation as the constitution has mandated 33% reservation for them.
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- More significantly, some states have enhanced women representation to about 50%, thereby furthering their voices.
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What are some actions that can be done?

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- Progress across states has been highly uneven with some states like Kerala and Karnataka leapfrogging, while others like UP crawling.
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- District planning should increasingly be made bottom-up, based on grassroots inputs received from gram sabhas.
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- Like in Karnataka, all states should create a separate bureaucratic cadre for Panchayats that will work in a subordinate capacity to the elected

authorities.
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- This is because, it has been observed that officials who work on deputation to Panchayats often lord over the elected representatives.
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- Activity maps need to be incorporated in all centrally sponsored schemes for poverty alleviation in order to directly transfer funds to the local governments.
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- The centre also needs to financially incentivise states to encourage effective devolution to the panchayats in functions, finances, and functionaries.
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Source: Indian Express

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