The Panchayat Raj Movement

Why in the news?

In recent times, the Panchayati Raj system is declining relevance and effectiveness, caused by reduced public participation, overdependence on central schemes, fiscal constraints, and the impact of rapid urbanization and technological changes.

What is the Historical Perspective on Panchayati Raj?

- **Ancient India** – Village autonomy was a hallmark of governance in Vedic times and during the Mauryan and Gupta periods.
- Ancient texts mention Sabhas, Samitis, and Gram Sanghas, which were self-governing village institutions responsible for dispute resolution, resource management, and administration.
- **Medieval India** – Under the **Delhi Sultanate and Mughal rule**, local self-governance declined as the administration became more centralized.
- However, village panchayats **continued informally** in many regions.
- **British Era** – the British introduced **centralized administration,** weakening traditional local governance structures.
- **Ripon's Resolution (1882)** is considered the **first step towards modern local self-government**, emphasizing **local representation**.
- The **Government of India Act, 1919 & 1935** introduced elected local bodies but with limited powers.
- **Post-Independence Developments** – Gandhian Vision of Gram Swaraj by Mahatma Gandhi emphasized self-sufficient village republics as the foundation of democracy.
- Community Development Program (1952) and Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) recommended a three-tier system of local governance, leading to the first structured Panchati Raj System (1959) in Rajasthan.
- Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) further emphasized constitutional status for Panchayati Raj, leading to the 73rd Amendment in 1992.

What are the challenges faced by the Panchayat Raj System?

- **Administrative Decentralization Issues** – Governments are reluctant to delegate power to panchayats.
- **Financial Constraints** – The share of direct transfers to panchayats has decreased.
- **Erosion of Local Autonomy** – Central and state governments are taking control over schemes and funds.
- **Urbanization Impact** – As more people move to cities, the role of panchayats in rural governance diminishes.
- **Electoral Politics & Panchayats** – The **panchayat elections** are more contested, and **women's** participation has increased.

- However, political interference and centralized control over funds are weakening local governance.

What are the Possible Solutions?

- Strengthening direct funding to panchayats.
- Using technology for better local governance.
- Reforming the electoral system to give panchayats more autonomy.
- Expanding panchayat roles in migration support, risk management and infrastructure development.

What are the Current Challenges Facing Panchayati Raj?

- **Administrative Constraints** – Lack of **functional devolution of power** to panchayats.
- State governments are reluctant to delegate staff and key responsibilities to local bodies.
- Excessive control by **bureaucracy** and **centralization of decision-making** has weakened local autonomy.
- **Financial Issues** – Reduction in direct fund transfers to panchayats.
- **Grants from the 15th Finance Commission** were cut from 85% to 60%.
- States are increasingly controlling **welfare schemes** through central agencies, bypassing panchayats.
- Panchayats have not been granted enough financial independence, making them dependent on **state and central funds**.
- **Erosion of Political Autonomy**
- **Politicization of panchayats –** Party-sponsored elections and interference from political elites reduce local autonomy.
- **Power dynamics** – Local elections often become a **battle for control** rather than focusing on grassroots development.
- **11th Schedule** – Lack of enforcement of the Eleventh Schedule (which lists subjects under Panchayati Raj) by states.
- **Impact of Urbanization**
- **Declining rural population** – In 1990, **three-fourths** of Indians lived in villages; today, urbanization has reduced this to **two-thirds**, leading to a shrinking role for panchayats.
- Migration for jobs has weakened the connection between rural governance and people's needs.

What is the Way Forward?

- **Administrative Reforms –** Proper implementation of the Eleventh Schedule by ensuring functional devolution of powers.
- Decentralization of key governance functions to **increase local participation**.
- **Financial Strengthening** – Ensure direct fiscal transfers to panchayats, reducing state government control.
- Strengthen revenue generation at the local level through property tax, user fees, and

local resources.
- Implement transparent auditing mechanisms to avoid fund misuse.
- **Political and Electoral Reforms** – Reduce political interference by limiting centralized control over local elections.
- Promote independent grassroots leadership rather than party-sponsored candidates.
- **Using Technology for Good Governance** – Expand e-governance and digital monitoring systems to improve panchayat efficiency.
- Promote citizen engagement platforms to ensure accountability.
- **Expanding the Role of Panchayats** – Involve them in migration support, rural risk management, climate resilience, and employment generation.
- Strengthen panchayats as **decision-making bodies** in disaster management, social welfare, and economic development.

References

1. The Hindu - The Panchayat Raj Movement

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