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The significance of the administrative structure of local self-government in democracy: An analysis of India's local self-government

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Abstract:

The biggest democratic system has always been entitled to India in all Democratic nations. India has a vital position due to its deep diversity, decentralization of power from top to bottom i.e., Union, State and local level administrative system, a responsible government, and enhancement of participation of Indian citizens in the administrative system from the grassroots levels to the union level. The most significant of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments have strengthened local self-government in Indian democratic administration and structure. From Gandhian philosophy to contemporary times the various intellectuals enhanced the diverse perspectives on the Local Self-Government and also has been projected its salient in numerous ways. The present research explains its historical evolution and comparative analyses and structural analyses of Local Self-Government at States with reference to different levels. Lastly, it also explains how the Local Self Government is pivotal for the federal structure of the Indian administrative system and how it plays a pivotal concept in the administrative structure of Indian democratic administration. The present research is qualitative as well as quantitative, and the collection of information is based on secondary data.

Keywords: Democracy, Local Self-Government, Administrative structure, federal structure, Panchayati Raj.

Introduction: Democracy is a form of government that has been adopted by the majority of countries in the world. Thus, the question that comes into our cognitive sphere is how democracy is most acceptable in the majority of countries in the world. However, most intellectuals accepted the answer as limited government, people's participation in decision-making, the rights and liberty of citizens, representativeness, and responsibility, and the division of administrative power in various institutions such as the Judiciary, Parliament, and Executives (Larry Diamond, 1999). Besides these, the function of the administrative

government is also classified at the union, state, and local levels. Local self-government has the function of nurturing the democratic values of people in civil society and enhancing the people's participation in government functions at the grassroots level (Sarin et al., 2013). Local self-government and administration reflect government at the village, intermediate, and district levels. This local government works closest to the common people, helping to develop close relations between the local government and the local community in villages and districts (Dutta & Fischer, 2021). Along with that, it is also beneficial in ensuring the participation of mass people in the democratic process, which ensures local self-governance and strengthens grass-roots level democracy and administration in the form of decentralization. The existence of local self-government in India could be traced back to ancient and British times. In British time, particularly the Viceroy of India, Lord Rippon (1882), who is also known as the father of local self-government in India (Mahajan & Sharma, 2019). In India, the various states have adopted various structures and forms of local self-government; broadly, the local self-government is classified as rural and urban, and further, these institutional bodies are classified into various sub-institutional bodies with different names. Thus, broadly, the local government system categories are three-tier system, four-tier system, and two-tier system. The present research explained the local self-government in India and further elaborated its importance in the federal structure of Indian democracy.

Local Self-Government's Development: Local governance in India encompasses both rural and urban regions (Sarma & Chakravarty, 2018). In rural areas, it is administered through panchayats, while in urban areas, the governance structure includes municipal corporations, municipal councils, and Nagar panchayats. The term "panchayat" has its roots in "panchasvanusthitah," signifying the traditional five-member Grama Sanghas or rural communities in Indian culture. This age-old institution has historically held authority over local civil and judicial matters within the community. The references to "Pancha" and "panchavanustitah" in Mahabharata's Shanti-Parva are closely connected to the concept of Panchayat (Singh, 1996). Kautilya, in 400 BC, detailed village councils in his 'Arthashastra', where the village government was overseen by the Adyaksha headman, responsible for collecting state dues and monitoring criminals. There are hints of the 'Ganapada' (village federation) in Valmiki's Ramayana, suggesting a federation of village republics (Ghosh & Pramanik, 1999). During the Vedic era (200 BC), self-government was the primary governance unit, featuring assemblies known as 'Sabha' and 'Samiti.' A Samiti was a Vedic Folk Assembly with the authority to elect a monarch in certain cases, while the Sabha handled judicial responsibilities (Singh, 1996). Over time, village bodies evolved into panchayats, responsible for overseeing village affairs and maintaining law and order. Additionally, caste panchayats existed, and in the south, village assemblies often had an executive body composed of representatives from various castes (Mathew, 1995). During the Mauryan era, the village served as the primary governance unit, but regular councils had not yet been established. However, in the Gupta era, village councils appeared to become

regular entities, known as Panchamandalas in central India and Gramajanapadas in Bihar (Altekar, 2002).

During the Mughal era, villages were administered by their respective panchayats, a practice that gained prominence during Sher Shah's reign. Each panchayat was comprised of village elders tasked with ensuring the well-being of the community, administering justice, and imposing penalties on those who violated regulations. The village headman, acting as a semi-official representative, played a crucial role in bridging the gap between the panchayat and the higher levels of the administrative hierarchy. Akbar adopted and integrated this system into the civil government, whereby every community had its own self-sustaining panchayat responsible for local revenue, administrative oversight, judicial matters, and punishments (Ghosh & Pramanik, 1999). The Mughals instituted a comprehensive administrative system featuring a structured hierarchy of officials, particularly within the revenue department, a system that endured for centuries. Subsequently, the British assumed authority in India following the fall of the Mughal stronghold.

Before India's independence, the British introduced local-self-government as a representational institution, initially forming local organizations with nominated members around commerce centers. In 1687, the first municipal corporation was established in Madras, given the authority to levy taxes for constructing guild halls and schools (Mathew, 1995). Lord Mayo, during his tenure as Viceroy (1869-1872), introduced elected representatives in urban areas to decentralize authority for improved administrative efficiency (Mathew, 1995). The Bengal Chowkidar Act of 1870 allowed district magistrates to establish panchayats of nominated members in each village (Mathew, 1995). Lord Ripon's resolution in 1882 divided local boards into smaller units, increasing efficiency, and implementing an election mechanism. The government's decision in May 1882 marked a significant milestone, providing a substantial majority of elected non-official members on the local board, headed by a non-official chairman, often regarded as the Magna Carta of Indian municipal democracy (Mathew, 1995). Lord Ripon also introduced the concept of urban self-government and municipalities. The Montagu-Chelmsford Reform in 1919 transferred local authority to provinces, with eight provinces enacting local panchayat legislation by 1925, albeit with limited responsibilities (Stephen & Rajasekaran, 2001). The Government of India Act of 1935 marked progress in democratizing local self-government organizations (Government of India Act 1935, 1935).

India's local self-government was strengthened when the constitution was adopted on January 26, 1950. However, in the beginning, the Indian Constitution did not give constitutional provisions or status for local self-government. However, the various committees and their recommendations from time to time have exposed the significance of local self-government. Those numbers of committees were as follows: the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee in 1957, the Ashok Mehta Committee in 1977, the G.V.K. Rao Committee in 1986, the LM Sanghvi Committee in 1986, the Thungon Committee in 1988, and the Gadgil Committee in 1988. However, the recommendations and suggestions of all

these committees on local self-government reached constitutional status when the P.V. Narasimha Rao Government passed the Panchayati Raj institutional bill passed as 73rd constitutional amendment Act 1992, which came into force on April 24, 1993, and the Municipalities Bill, or 'Urban Local Government bill, passed as 74th constitutional amendment Act 1992, which came into force June 1, 1993. This constitutional amendment added a new chapter to the Indian constitution and made India a more federal and democratic nation. Hence, India's local governance has a rich historical evolution, from ancient village councils to modern panchayats and urban local bodies, with significant reforms and constitutional amendments shaping its current structure and functions (Basu et al., 2015).

Local Self-Government: The Constitution of India conferred constitutional status upon local self-government by incorporating two fresh sections into the constitution: Part IX and Part IX-A. This part of the constitution was added by the 73rd and 74th constitution amendments in 1992, along with the details of various constitutional provisions about local self-government for rural areas as 'Panchayati Raj institutions and for urban areas as 'Municipalities.' Moreover, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 added a new schedule: the 11th consisted of 29 functional items for panchayats and the 12th consisted of 18 functional items for municipalities in the constitution of India. The constitutional Articles 243 to 243-O deal with the provision of panchayats, and Articles 243-P to 243-ZG deal with the provision of municipalities (Basu et al., 2015).

Organizational Structure of the Local Self-Government System: In India, the local self-government system exhibits a clearly delineated organizational framework in both rural and urban regions.

(A) Rural Local Government: In rural regions, the local self-government system consists of three main governing bodies. At the top is the Zila Parishad or district council, which is responsible for overseeing multiple areas. Below the Zila Parishad are Panchayat Samitis or block councils, which constitute the Zila Parishad. Further down the hierarchy are Gram Panchayats or village councils. Each village in India has a Gram Sabha, comprising individuals above 18 years of age, who have the authority to directly elect Panchayat members. This structure, known as the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), is consistent across India, with tribal and reserved regions being exceptions. A Gram Panchayat must have a minimum population of 500 people, and its members are elected directly by the people for a five-year term. Zila Parishad serves as the apex body in rural local governance, with ex-officio and co-opted members. The ZP has a duration of three to five years and elects a chairman who supervises its executive office and reports to the Divisional Commissioner. The ZP operates through a network of standing committees (Jain & Polman, 2003; Narayana, 2005; Pal, 2002).

Panchayat Samiti is the intermediate layer, with members including ex-officio, associate, and co-opted members. The Pramukh, elected by the Samiti, holds authority over the Block

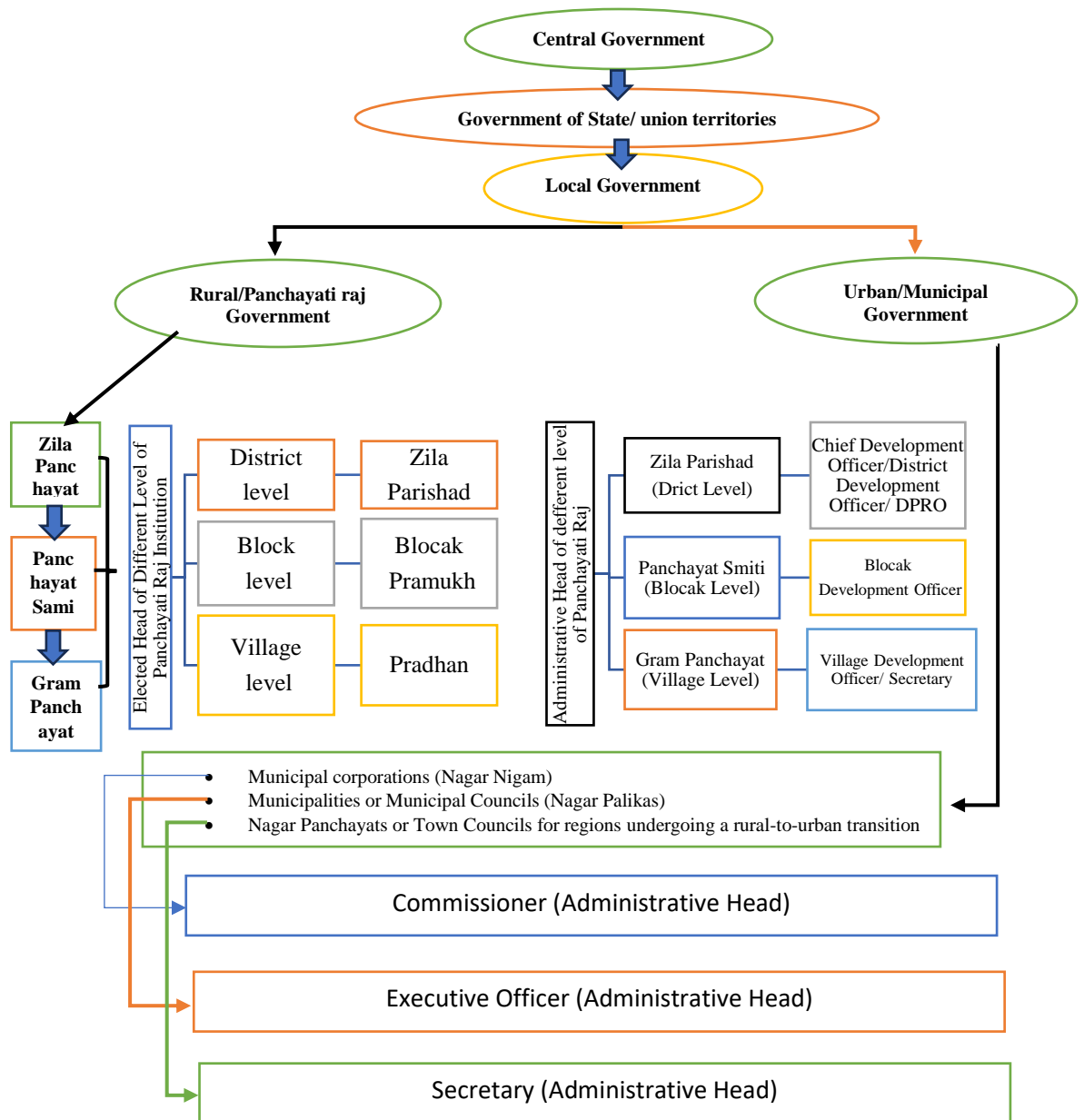
Development Officer and has access to all Samiti records. The Block Development Officer manages development programs and is assisted by subject specialists. Gram Panchayat functions as the basic administrative body at the village level elected democratically. There is minimal permanent staff at this level, and most services are under the control of the Zila Parishad or Panchayat Samiti. A Gram Sevak (Secretary/Village level worker) is typically the only permanent staff member. The Village Level Worker (VLW) serves as a crucial link between Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti.

(B)Urban Local-Government: In urban areas, India has three types of local self-governing bodies:

- (i) **Municipal Corporations (Nagar Nigam):** Found in cities with a population of over a million, these corporations are headed by a Municipal Commissioner or Vice Chairman who is an IAS official appointed by the state government. The Mayor and Deputy Mayor, elected for one year by councilors, play political executive roles (Government of India, 2000; Mattewada Chandrakala, 2017).
- (ii) **Municipal Councils (Nagar Palika):** Smaller cities have Municipal Councils, consisting of elected, co-opted, and associate members. The chairman, chosen from the members, serves a five-year term and holds significant administrative authority. An Executive Officer, appointed by the state government, oversees general administrative tasks.
- (iii) **Nagar Panchayats:** These are transitional settlements from rural to urban areas (Bhagat, 2005). The chairman leads the Nagar Panchayat, while the Executive Officer is in charge of official responsibilities (Shaw, 2005). Ward members are elected through adult suffrage.

Significance of Local self-government in Indian politics: The structural framework of Local Self-government within the Indian democratic system has played a pivotal role in preserving the federal structure and interconnecting the administrative system from the grassroots level to the central level (Figure No-1). These local self-governing bodies offer avenues for citizens residing in smaller state administrative units, such as villages, towns, and districts, to stay informed about all policies and programs. People actively engage in the democratic system, both directly and indirectly, at this level. Local government primarily operates at the village and district levels, making it the government that is closest to the general populace (Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999). It is intricately involved in addressing the day-to-day lives and issues of ordinary citizens. Local governance places significant value on local knowledge and interests, recognizing them as crucial components of democratic decision-making and essential for efficient and citizen-friendly administration. Democracy centers around meaningful participation and accountability, both of which are ensured by robust and dynamic local governments (Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999).

Figure No-1: Interface of Central, State and Local Self-Government bodies and Demonstration of Administrative and political head at different Local Self-Government institutions.



Source: Created by Author.

In a democratic system, it is essential to entrust responsibilities that can be effectively managed at the local level to the local population and their elected representatives (Gamage, Volume-IX, Issue-VI November 2023 156

2006). Ordinary citizens possess a greater familiarity with their local government when compared to state or national levels, and they have a stronger vested interest in the actions or inactions of the local government, as these directly impact their daily lives. Therefore, reinforcing local government is tantamount to fortifying democratic processes.

The federal system stands as a cornerstone concept in democracy, further enriched by the Indian Constitution's delineation of roles and authorities between the Union and the states. Notably, Parts XI and XII of the Indian Constitution oversee the administrative, legislative, and financial functions of both the Union and the states. Additionally, the Seventh (7th) Schedule of the Indian Constitution addresses the division of power between the Union and the states through the Union list (First List), State list (Second List), and Concurrent List (Third List). Furthermore, the constitutional stature of local self-government has been enhanced by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992, which augment the federal character of democratic governance by decentralizing authority and administrative power to various levels of local bodies and institutions (Alok, 2023).

Conclusion: Thus, through decentralization and direct engagement of Indian residents in the political system through their precious votes and other civic rights, India's local self-government system has enhanced the democratic framework. The decentralization of the administrative structure under local self-government improves the accountability and democracy of the Indian political system. It digs into the concept of decentralization of power and its impact on the local administrative system by providing light on the historical evolution of local governance in India, its development, and the relevance it has. The Panchayat Raj Institution's rich historical foundation, its evolution from ancient to modern, and the constitutionalization of local self-government in 1992 by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have improved liberal and democratic values. The structural framework of local self-government in the Indian democratic system plays a vital role in preserving the federal structure and connecting the administrative system from the grassroots to the central level. Reinforcing local government, therefore, is not only an administrative necessity but also a way to fortify democratic processes. It empowers citizens, strengthens the federal structure, and ensures that governance is not a distant concept but a participatory and accountable practice that directly impacts the daily lives of the people. As we move forward, this synergy between local self-government and constitutional federalism will continue to be a cornerstone of India's vibrant democracy.

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