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Q4(b)

Discuss the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in transforming traditional power hierarchy in rural India

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Anthropology GS 2 · 15 marks · Indian Village

5.1 Indian Village-Significance of village study in India; Indian village as a social system; Traditional and changing patterns of settlement and inter-caste relations; Agrarian relations in Indian villages; Impact of globalization on Indian villages.

Core demand of the question

- How have Panchayati Raj Institutions transformed the traditional rural power hierarchy?
- Keep the answer to a 15-mark length of about 200 words

Revision summary

Traditional rural power was dominant-caste land and elder panchayat.

The **73rd Amendment** created statutory seats and reservations.

New office-holders include women and SC/ST sarpanches.

Proxy rule and factions recapture many chairs.

Land control still underwrites hierarchy beneath the statute.

Introduction

Panchayati Raj Institutions are the constitutional local bodies after the **73rd Amendment**. They have opened rural office to new categories, and they have also been captured by the old hierarchy in new clothes.

Body

Traditional hierarchy

- The old village order sat on dominant-caste land, jajmani, and an informal panchayat of elders.
- Women, Dalits, and land-poor clients spoke through patrons, not as office-holders.

What PRIs changed

- Statutory gram sabha, reserved seats for SC, ST, and women, and a three-tier fund flow created new chairs.
- A Dalit or woman sarpanch is a structural fact that the old caste panchayat did not allow.
- **PESA** in Scheduled Areas can, on paper, restore gram sabha consent over land and intoxicants, a direct hit at outsider contractors.

Limits of transformation

- **Proxy rule**: husbands and caste elders sit behind reserved chairs, a pattern village studies keep reporting.

- Factions, as **Dube** and **Bailey** described, contest the new prizes. Hierarchy moves into the scheme list.
- Fiscal dependence on higher grants keeps the sarpanch a broker, not an autonomous government.
- Where dominant castes still own land, PRI office is an add-on, not a replacement of agrarian power.

Flow diagram

Old caste panchayat -> 73rd PRI
73rd PRI -> Reserved chairs
73rd PRI -> Proxy faction capture
PESA -> Gram sabha consent

Conclusion

PRIs legally flattened the rural office hierarchy and put new bodies in the chair. Agrarian caste power and proxy politics mean the transformation is real, incomplete, and reversible.

Facts & figures

73rd Amendment

Constitutionalised panchayats with reservations and a three-tier structure.

Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA)

Extends panchayats to Scheduled Areas with stronger gram sabha powers on paper.

Reserved sarpanch

Seat set aside for women or SC/ST; often the test of whether hierarchy actually moved.

Proxy rule

Informal control of a reserved chair by a husband or caste elder.

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