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Q3

To what extent, in your opinion, as the decentralisation of power in India changed the governance landscape at the grassroots?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · GS II · 10 marks · Governance and Policy

Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.

Core demand of the question

- Examine to what extent decentralisation of power has changed grassroots governance in India
- Cover the 73rd and 74th Amendments, the Eleventh and Twelfth Schedules, and remaining limits including [State Finance Commissions](#)

Revision summary

The 73rd and 74th Amendments constitutionalised panchayats and municipalities, with SECs and fixed tenure.

The Eleventh and Twelfth Schedules list functions but [Articles 243G and 243W](#) leave devolution to the State.

[State Finance Commissions](#) exist in the text and are often late or only partly implemented.

Political presence of women and SC/ST persons at the local level is the clearest change.

Fiscal and administrative autonomy remains limited, so the extent of change in daily governance is partial.

Introduction

The Constitution (Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendment) Acts, 1992, made panchayats and municipalities a constitutional third tier and listed functions in the Eleventh and Twelfth Schedules. Grassroots governance has changed in elections, reservations, and the gram sabha's legal existence; it has changed much less in money, staff, and exclusive control of those listed functions.

Body

What has changed

- Part IX and Part IXA ended the old pattern in which local bodies could be superseded at will without a constitutional duty to hold elections; [Article 243E and 243U](#) fix duration, and [State Election Commissions](#) under [Articles 243K and 243ZA](#) run local polls.
- Reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women in seats and chairperson offices have altered who sits in the gram panchayat and the municipal ward, which is a real change in political presence at the grassroots.
- The gram sabha in [Article 243A](#), and ward committees in large cities, created a legal forum below the elected council, even where meetings are irregular.

- Centrally sponsored schemes now often route work through panchayats (for example MGNREGA's gram sabha role), so the third tier is visible in delivery even when the scheme is Union-designed.

Functions: Eleventh and Twelfth Schedules

- The **Eleventh Schedule** lists 29 panchayat subjects and the **Twelfth Schedule** lists 18 municipal subjects; **Articles 243G and 243W** leave it to the State legislature to endow those bodies with powers.
- **Devolution is therefore discretionary:** many States notify overlapping schemes, keep parallel directorates, and leave the panchayat as an implementing agency rather than a government of the subject.
- **District Planning Committees** under **Article 243ZD** were meant to consolidate rural and urban plans; they are unevenly active, so grassroots planning is still often a departmental annual plan.

Funds, functionaries, and the State Finance Commission

- **Article 243I and 243Y** require a **State Finance Commission** every five years to recommend distribution of taxes and grants to panchayats and municipalities.
- Delayed constitution, delayed reports, and partial acceptance of awards mean local bodies still live on tied scheme money and a thin property-tax or assigned-tax base.
- Staff remain largely State cadres on deputation; the secretary of the gram panchayat answers upward more than to the sarpanch.
- The **Fifteenth Finance Commission's** local grants improved predictability of Union money, but they do not replace a State's refusal to share own tax.

Extent: a measured answer

- Decentralisation has changed the electoral and representative face of grassroots governance more than it has changed fiscal federalism inside the State.
- Where PESA, 1996, and active gram sabhas meet a willing State, natural-resource and minor-forest decisions are more local; where parastatals run water and planning, the 74th Amendment is a form without a function.
- **The extent is therefore partial:** constitutional local government exists; autonomous local government is still the exception.

Flow diagram

73rd and 74th Amendments -> SEC elections reservations
 73rd and 74th Amendments -> 11th and 12th Schedules
 11th and 12th Schedules -> State legislature devolution
 State legislature devolution -> SFC funds and staff
 SFC funds and staff -> Grassroots change

Conclusion

The 73rd and 74th Amendments changed who is elected and how often, and they named functions in the Eleventh and Twelfth Schedules. Grassroots governance will have changed in substance only when **State Finance Commission** awards, staff, and exclusive functions follow those lists, which in most States they still do not.

Facts & figures

Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992

Inserted Part IX and the **Eleventh Schedule** of 29 panchayat subjects.

Constitution (74th Amendment) Act, 1992

Inserted Part IXA and the **Twelfth Schedule** of 18 municipal functions.

Articles 243I and 243Y

Require a **State Finance Commission** to review local finances and recommend devolution.

PESA Act, 1996

Extends panchayat provisions to scheduled areas with stronger gram sabha powers over resources, subject to State law.

Article 243ZD

District Planning Committee to consolidate panchayat and municipal plans.

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