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Q6(c)

Do you think that despite having significant limitations the Panchayati Raj Institutions have strengthened the process of democratic decentralization? Give your views

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Indian Nationalism

Indian Nationalism: Political Strategies of India's Freedom Struggle; Perspectives on Indian National Movement; Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Ambedkar, and the socialists.

Core demand of the question

- Do you think that despite having significant limitations the Panchayati Raj Institutions have strengthened the process of democratic decentralisation? Give your views. (15 marks)

Revision summary

The 73rd Amendment gave panchayats constitutional elections, reservations, and a gram sabha.

That has strengthened democratic decentralisation as a process and a right to local office.

Limitations are incomplete devolution, parallel schemes, and elite or caste capture.

Pateman and Habermas supply the participation and public-sphere tests that practice only partly meets.

- **The view is a qualified yes:** stronger than before 1992, not yet a village republic.

Introduction

The **73rd Constitutional Amendment** made panchayats a third tier. Limitations of funds, functionaries, and elite capture are real. Democratic decentralisation has still been strengthened because local office, reservations, and the gram sabha now exist as constitutional facts, not as a scheme that a state can quietly forget.

Body

What strengthened

- Constitutional status, five-year elections, and **State Election Commissions** created a repeating local democratic calendar.
- Reservations for SCs, STs, and women opened offices that **Pateman** would call a participation gain, even when sarpanch-pati distorts it.
- The **Eleventh Schedule** and gram sabha (**Article 243A**) give a map of functions and a local public, which **Habermas** would recognise as a (weak) public sphere.
- **Rajni Kothari's worry about a distant Centre meets a partial reply: some allocation of values now happens in the village, in Easton's sense.**

Significant limitations

- Devolution of funds, functions, and functionaries remains a state-legislature choice. Parallel bodies and MLAs often bypass the panchayat.
- The **Rudolphs** noted command politics and demand politics; local bosses can turn PRIs into a new patronage machine.
- Audit, staffing, and district planning committees are uneven. Urban-rural and state-wise gaps are large.
- **Jaffrelot's** caste politics travels downward: Mandal-era mobilisation can capture the sabha as well as the Vidhan Sabha.

View

- Yes, they have strengthened democratic decentralisation, if the test is rights to contest, to sit, and to meet, plus a legal list of local subjects.
- No, they have not completed Gram Swaraj or **Ambedkar's** social democracy, if the test is autonomous planning power and equal voice of landless and women in fact.
- **The honest view is a qualified yes:** the process is stronger than the pre-1992 nominated or sleeping panchayat, and still far from a local republic.

Flow diagram

73rd Amendment -> Panchayati Raj

Panchayati Raj -> Strength: elections reservations sabha

Panchayati Raj -> Limits: funds capture bypass

Strength: elections reservations sabha -> Democratic decentralisation

Limits: funds capture bypass -> Democratic decentralisation

Conclusion

Despite limits of money, staff, and capture, PRIs after the 73rd Amendment have strengthened democratic decentralisation by constitutionalising local elections, reservations, and the gram sabha. The remaining task is real devolution, not another paper tier.

Facts & figures

73rd Amendment, 1992

Inserted Part IX; panchayats as constitutional local government.

Eleventh Schedule

Twenty-nine subjects that states may devolve, including agriculture and poverty alleviation.

Article 243A

Gram sabha; powers left to state law, hence uneven.

State Election Commission

Constitutional authority for local-body elections, a check on postponement.

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