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Q4(b)

What do you understand by decentralisation of power? What is its role in strengthening the roots of democracy in India? Elaborate

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 2 · 20 marks · Politics and Society

Politics and Society: Nation, democracy and citizenship; Political parties, pressure groups, social and political elite; Regionalism and decentralization of politics; Secularization.

Core demand of the question

- Define decentralisation of power as transfer of authority, funds and functions below the Union and states
- Explain Panchayati Raj and municipalities after the 73rd and 74th Amendments
- **Show how this can deepen democracy:** participation, local goods, women and SC/ST seats
- **Show limits:** parallel bodies, funds, elite capture, and the inspector raj of schemes

Revision summary

Decentralisation transfers authority, funds and functions to local governments.

The 73rd and 74th Amendments are India's main constitutional design for that transfer.

Reservations and local elections can broaden who holds power.

PESA links decentralisation to tribal consent in Schedule Five areas.

Parallel missions, weak finance and proxy rule limit democratic deepening.

Introduction

Decentralisation of power means shifting **decision, money and administration** from distant capitals toward local governments that citizens can see. In India the constitutional form is **Panchayati Raj** and urban local bodies after the **73rd and 74th Amendments (1992)**. The sociological claim is that democracy grows roots when the village and the ward can tax, plan and punish, not only when they vote in a Lok Sabha election.

Body

What decentralisation is

Political decentralisation creates elected councils. Administrative decentralisation posts functionaries downward. Fiscal decentralisation assigns revenues and grants. India attempted all three, unevenly. The Eleventh and Twelfth Schedules list functions. **State Finance Commissions** and the **Union Finance Commission** (from the **Eleventh Commission** onward) were meant to fund them. **PESA** extends Gram Sabha powers in **Fifth Schedule** areas. This is more than 'participation theatre' if the Gram Sabha can refuse a mining lease or a fake beneficiary list.

M. N. Srinivas's dominant caste and **Béteille**'s local power warn that the village is not a republic of equals. Decentralisation without land reform can strengthen the already strong.

That is not an argument against local government. It is an argument for **who sits in it**.

Strengthening democratic roots

Regular local elections create a second and third tier of politicians. Reservation for women, SCs, STs and often OBCs brings new personnel into the state, which is a change in the social composition of power, not only in procedure. MNREGA social audits, local planning, drinking water and sanitation schemes need a panchayat to be more than a contractor's desk. Urban ward committees, however weak, are the only everyday face of the city for slum citizens.

- **Decentralisation also trains opposition and accountability:** a sarpanch can be unseated locally. That is **democratic deepening** in the sense of more arenas of contest, closer to livelihood. **Rajni Kothari's** worry about a distant Congress system meets a partial reply here: multiple centres.

Limits that keep roots shallow

States still control inspectors, engineers and many funds. Parallel bodies-mission societies, smart-city special purpose vehicles, nominated boards-**recentralise**. Elite capture and proxy women sarpanchs are documented. Caste panchayats and khaps can rival statutory panchayats on marriage. Municipalities lack staff and depend on octroi-replacement grants. Without control over land use and police, local democracy is a grievance window.

Fiscal design decides whether the root is a tap or a poster. When the Union and state run MNREGA, housing and sanitation as missions with parallel staff, the panchayat becomes a last-mile contractor. When a Gram Sabha can publish a list and refuse a fake job card, decentralisation is a democratic check. Urban local bodies face a sharper version: city growth (census towns, peri-urban NCR) often sits outside municipal limits, so the people who need local democracy are still in a village panchayat or a census village with urban work.

So the role in strengthening democracy is **real and conditional**. It works where elections are held, seats are not purely proxies, and functions-funds-functionaries actually move. It fails where decentralisation is a slogan over a scheme-driven collectorate.

Flow diagram

73rd and 74th Amendments -> Panchayats and municipalities
 Panchayats and municipalities -> Wider participation
 Panchayats and municipalities -> Women SC ST seats
 Elite capture parallel bodies -> Shallow roots
 Panchayats and municipalities -> Deeper local democracy
 Shallow roots -> Deeper local democracy

Conclusion

Decentralisation is the constitutional shift of power to panchayats and municipalities. It strengthens democratic roots by multiplying elected offices, reserving seats for excluded groups, and locating some goods in the Gram Sabha. Capture, parallel bodies and starved finances limit that role. The roots grow only where the local body is a government, not a helpdesk.

Facts & figures

73rd Amendment 1992

Constitutional status for panchayats, five-year elections, reservations, **Eleventh Schedule** functions.

74th Amendment 1992

Municipalities as a constitutional urban tier with a **Twelfth Schedule**.

PESA 1996

Gram Sabha powers in scheduled areas, including consultation on land and minor forest produce.

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