

Community to Constitution Based Local Governance in India

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Abstract:

'India lives in villages' signifies how important rural areas are to India's economy and society. India still has about 65% of its people living in villages, which makes the role of local government very important (World Bank, 2020). The present paper analyzes the evolution of local government in India from the Vedic period to the 21st century. Vedic institutions such as the Sabha, Samiti, Ganapada, and Gramani represent India's early democratic developments, while the Sabha and Samiti began to evolve into the Panchayat in the post-Vedic era. During the Middle Ages, the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire set up village panchayats and community councils to give people more control over their own lives, but they were still controlled from one central authority. The Cholas also had Ur, Sabha, and Nagaram assemblies that administered village matters and local government. During British rule, the Permanent Settlement (1793) weakened traditional Panchayats, but Lord Ripon's Resolution (1882) and the Government of India Act (1935) laid the foundation for modern local bodies. After independence, recommendations of various committees and reforms paved the way for decentralization & democratization and finally the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992- 93 gave constitutional recognition to gram panchayats and urban local bodies, making India the largest local self-governance democratic system in the world. Between 1993–2025, Digital India, Panchayat e-Governance Plan, Gram panchayat Development Plan (GPDP), Smart City Mission, Local Governance of SDGs, have given a new direction to the efficiency and transparency of local self-governance.

Keywords: Local self-governance, decentralization, democratization, constitutional amendments.

Introduction:

The term "local government" consists of two words, 'local' and 'government'. The word "Local" refers to a specific area or locality, a town, city, or village and the people living within it. It focuses on the needs, problems, and interests of that particular region. Thus, "local" means something that belongs to or concerns a limited geographical area rather than the whole nation and the second word "Government" means a system of authority through which the affairs of a community or state are managed. It may involve elected representatives who make decisions, enforce laws, and provide services.

At the global level, The Westphalian System, which emerged from the Treaties of Osnabruck and Munster in 1648, has been a defining force in the field of international relations and state sovereignty. The fundamental principles of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention introduced by the Westphalian system laid the foundation for a new political order, significantly altering the dynamics of

state interaction. This treaty emphasized the autonomy of individual states. The principles of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention created a new framework for the international system, granting states the exclusive right to manage their domestic affairs without foreign interference. These principles formed the bedrock of the Westphalian system, which laid the foundation for the nation-state system that persists to this day (Kehinde et al., 2023). After the Napoleonic Wars, the Congress of Vienna (1815) set up the "Concert of Europe," a way for European countries to keep the peace and safety of each other. In France and Spain, the old kingdoms were brought back. In Germany and Italy, new confederations were made. This is seen as one of the first examples of global government in Europe. During Adolf Hitler's reign in Germany (1933-1945) the democratic system had collapsed and a totalitarian government was established in place. Hitler and the Nazi Party were in charge of everything, including the schools, the media, and the propaganda machine. The Gestapo and other secret police were used to carry out harsh policies, such as discriminating against black people and punishing Jews (NCERT, 2023). The "Golden Age" of multilateralism (1945–1990) was a period when international institutions such as the UN, IMF, World Bank, and GATT strengthened cooperation among countries, leading to high economic expansion rates, rapid growth in industrial output, near-full employment, and improved standards of living (Pantazelos et al., 2025).

The evolution of local self-governance in India reflects the country's journey from traditional community-based institutions to modern, technology-driven governance systems. This paper traces how self-governance practices rooted in ancient village assemblies transformed through colonial municipal structures and post-independence reforms into the constitutionally recognized panchayati raj and urban local bodies. It also highlights the shift towards smart and digital governance in the 21st century, emphasizing decentralization, transparency, and citizen participation.

Objective of the study:

To examine the evolution of local governance in India from community-based institutions to constitutionally recognized local self-government systems.

Traditional Roots of Local Self-Governance

In India, the concept of local self-government is very traditional and has deep roots in our political and socio-cultural system. Before modern states were made, Indian villages were able to take care of themselves. Through community participation, people in each village took care of their own business and solved issues as a group. Traditionally, local governance can be divided into two periods: the ancient period and the medieval period.

A. Evolution in Ancient Period

Vedic Period: Panchayat comes from the word Panch. The term Panchasvanusthitah refers to the presence of village associations or rural communities. The system of local governance in India has existed since ancient times. The Panchayat system of local government is mentioned a lot in works like the Rigveda, Manusmriti, Dharmashastra, Upanishads, Jataka stories, and others (Roy, 2024).

समानो मन्त्रः समितिः समानी समानं मनः सह चित्तमेषाम् ।

समानं मन्त्रमभि मन्त्रये वः समानेन वो हविषा जुहोमि.. (३)

(May your thoughts be alike, may your assembly be one, and may your minds and thoughts be united). This verse reflects the spirit of governance and collective decision-making in Vedic society. It calls for unity, harmony, and working together towards a common purpose, which is crucial for organisation and national solidarity. In the Rigvedic period, decision-making was not solely the responsibility of the king, but discussions were also held through assemblies and committees (Rigveda, Mandala 10, Sukta 191, Mantra 3).

सभा च मा समितिश्चावतां प्रजापतेर्दुहितरी संविदाने ।

येना संगच्छा उप मा स शिक्षाच्चारु वदानि पितरः संगतेषु.. (१)

(Sabha and Samiti provide justice, order, and security to society. May knowledge, cooperation, unity, and positive thoughts prevail in collective meetings so that the wisdom of elders guides society in the right direction). The above verse depicts the administrative system of the Vedic period. In Vedic society, the Sabha and Samiti were the principal institutions of governance. In the Atharvaveda they are called "daughters of Prajapati"; both are ready to protect the society. This evidence clearly shows that even in the Vedic period, democracy was based on collective action and deliberation. (Atharvaveda, Mandala 7, Sukta 13, Mantra 1)

द्वयोस्त्रयाणां पञ्चानां मध्ये गुल्ममधिष्ठितम् ।

तथा ग्रामशतानां च कुर्याद राष्ट्रस्य सङ्ग्रहम् ॥ ॥११४॥

ग्रामस्याधिपति कुर्याद दशग्रामपति तथा ।

विंशतीशं शतेशं च सहस्रपतिमेव च ॥ ॥११५॥

This verse from the Manu smriti illustrates the administrative structure of ancient governance. It states that for better governance in a state, villages should be divided into smaller units. An administrative group should be formed between two, three, or five villages to easily resolve village-related problems. A larger administrative group should be formed for a hundred or a thousand villages. This was an important part of the local government system in ancient India, significantly helping to maintain order and administer villages. (Manusmriti 7.114,115)

There are a lot of mentions of village groups or councils in the Manu smriti and the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata. The Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata is the first place that the word "Panchayat" is used. Kautilya's Artha shastra also includes information about village councils. The Ganapada, which was perhaps a kind of confederation of village republics, is mentioned in Valmiki's Ramayana. There have been self-governing village communities with farming economies in India for a long time. The Rigveda talks about this. In the Vedic period, governance involved public participation through the Sabha and Samiti; the Samiti functioned as a large public assembly, while the Sabha served as a smaller council of village elders. The village was recognised as an administrative unit by Gramani (Chandaka, 2021).

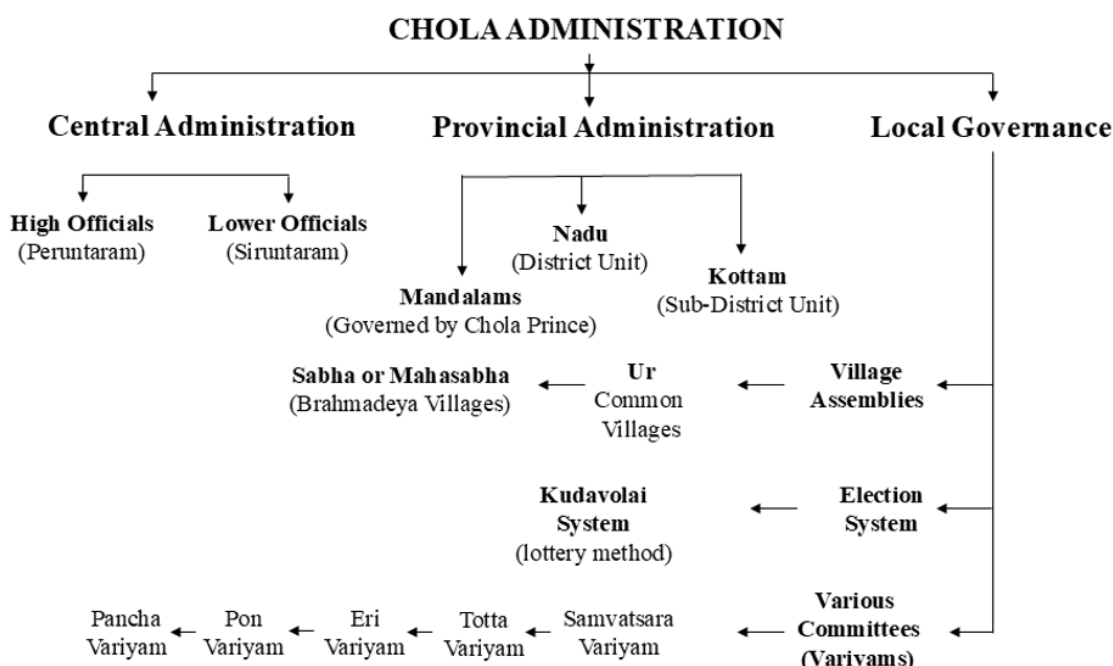
Post Vedic Periods:

During the later Vedic period, the Sabha became a small group, like the king's privy council. As time based, village institutions changed into Panchayats, which took care of village business. They possessed the authority to uphold law and order. There were also caste panchayats. This pattern was common in the Indo-Gangetic plains. In the South, village Panchayats usually had a village assembly, and the executive body was made up of people from different groups and castes. The village was the main administrative unit during the Mauryan period. Villagers set up public works and fun activities, mediated arguments, and

looked after the property of minors. But they still hadn't set up regular councils. During the Gupta dynasty, it looks like village councils became regular groups. In Bihar, they were called Gramajanapadas, while in central India, they were called Panchamandals.

B. Evolution of Medieval Period

Chola Administration (9th-13th Century): Between the 9th and 13th centuries CE, the Chola Empire was the strongest South Indian state. The Chola state was known as Chola Mandalam. It was made up of the Chera, Pandya, and Chola kingdoms (Vanitha et al., 2024). It was known for having one of the most innovative and unique democratic governmental systems in the world. It was the first dynasty in South Asia to attempt to bring all regions of the subcontinent under a single authority (Sharma, 2022)



Source: Prepared by the researcher based on Nadaf (2017), Sharma (2022), and Vanitha et al. (2024).

Delhi Sultanate Period (13th-16th Century) The Delhi Sultanate had a system of government where the Sultan was in charge and was helped by numerous departments and ministers. The Wazir, who was in charge of the tax and money offices, was the most important person in charge of running the government. The Diwan-i-Arz department was responsible for recruiting and training troops, disbursing salaries, branding horses, and maintaining soldiers' records. The Diwan-i-Insha was in charge of public correspondence and administrative communications, while the Diwan-i-Risalat was in charge of religious issues, grants, and court cases. In the court system, Sharia-based justice was handled by Qazis, and Barids, or intelligence agents, were hired to improve control over the government. Villages, parganas, and shiqs were used to organise local government. The Muqaddam (village headman), Khut (landowner), and Patwari (village accountant) were in charge of each town. These people were in charge of collecting taxes, keeping records, and keeping the peace in the area.

Mughal Period (16th-18th Century): After conquering Gujarat, Akbar rebuilt the land revenue system, as Sher Shah Suri's structure had become disorganised. Initially, Qanungos were designated for annual settlements; but, due to complications, Karoris were subsequently appointed. In 1580 CE, the Dahsala

system was instituted, whereby one-third of the average yield from the preceding decade was established as the state's part, to be remitted in cash. This method was founded on the Zabti system, which encompassed land measurement and offered assistance in the event of crop failure. In addition, other systems such as Batai and Nasq/Kankut continued to be utilised. The reforms, referred to as Raja Todar Mal's settlement, established the foundation of the Mughal land revenue system (Chandra, 2007, p- 248-251).

Local Self-Governance during British Rule (18th-1947)

Decline of Traditional Local Government (18th Century): When the British ruled over India in the 18th century, the villages' ancient system of self-government declined. In the past, villages were self-sufficient and conducted their own business. The British created a centralized system to replace local government. The emphasis failed on getting people involved, but on collecting revenues and having things in control.

Decline of Village Autonomy (1793): A big change arrived when Lord Cornwallis introduced the Permanent Settlement of 1793. This system was created to make collecting taxes simpler, so instead of assisting villages manage land and revenue at the local level, the British handed this job to zamindars, who were usually wealthy outsiders who took taxes from farmers and kept some for themselves. This took away villagers' traditional role in making decisions about land management and revenue (Yadav, 2025).

Lord Ripon's Resolution (1882): At 1687, a corporation was founded at Madras (present-day Chennai), including both Indians and Britishers, however it was ultimately unsuccessful. In 1870, Lord Mayo instituted the election of members to municipalities, signifying the beginning of popular involvement in local governance. In 1870, the Bengal Chowkidar Act was enacted, giving the responsibility of revenue collection to village watchmen. Lord Ripon, acknowledged as the "Father of Local Self-Government in India," initiated the most pivotal advancement towards local self-governance. In 1882, he proposed a resolution advocating for local self-government, which promoted the formation of entities such as municipalities and district boards widely considered the "Magna Carta" of local self-government in India (Rao, 2025).

Government of India Act (1919): The Government of India Act of 1919 was a landmark in the development of British colonial policy in India. Also known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, it came into effect in 1921. The aim of this Act was to gradually introduce responsible government in India and increase Indian participation in governance. Its main features included the introduction of dyarchy in the provinces; the division of subjects into reserved and transferred categories, a bicameral legislature at the center, comprising the Council of State and the Central Legislative Assembly, the expansion of communal electorates, granting women the right to vote, and including Indians in executive roles. Although this Act did not fully satisfy the aspirations of Indians for complete self-governance, the 1919 Act represents a transitional phase in India's journey from colonial rule to independence. (JAYANNA, 2025).

Government of India Act (1935): The Government of India Act of 1935 abolished dyarchy in the provinces and granted them autonomy, leading to the formation of provincial governments and a division of powers that allowed them to manage their own affairs. It also established a federal system of government and a Federal Court. Despite these advancements, true independence remained elusive. The British colonial administration still retained the final say on crucial policy decisions and could veto any decision made by the local and provincial administrations.

A Step Towards Freedom-The Formation of Modern Local Governance (1940-1947)

In India, the basis for modern local self-government had been made by the 1940s. The process of having these institutions in place during the British era laid the foundations for democratic committees, which would later be used as the base for membership in municipalities, district boards, and provincial councils. The British did not actually give up power, but their changes, especially those started by Lord Ripon in 1882 and made official by the Government of India Act in 1935, set the rules for how local governments should work. India became independent in 1947 and expanded on these concepts.

Post-Independence Reforms (1947-1991): Despite India's independence in 1947, its duty of strengthening the Panchayati Raj system was assigned to the newly established Government of India. Since India is mostly a rural nation, strengthening local panchayats was crucial for strengthening grassroots democracy. Mahatma Gandhi, a staunch advocate of Gramme Swaraj, highlighted the necessity of decentralizing authority to rural communities. He envisioned autonomous communities administered by elected panchayats. Nonetheless, the preliminary version of the Indian Constitution (1948) omitted provisions for Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Gandhi strongly opposed this exclusion and demanded swift action.

Major Milestones in the Evolution of Panchayati Raj System in India

Year	Reforms/Committee	Key Aspects on Local Self- Governance
1947	India Independence	It marked the beginning of democratic rule in India and laid the foundation for people's participation
1950	Constitution of India	Article 40 of the Directive Principles of State Policy established the constitutional base for local self-government, so instituting the Panchayati Raj system.
1952	Community Development Programme	Launched by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1952, it was India's first program to promote democratic decentralization and local participation
1953	National Extension Service	It extended the Community Development Programme to include all villages and encouraged participation by the public in local planning.
1957	Balwant Mehta Committee	The three-tier Panchayati Raj system-Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zila Parishad is advocated for democratic decentralisation.
1959	Starting of Panchayati Raj	It symbolized the beginning of democratic decentralization. Panchayati Raj was first time established on October 2 in Bahadri village of Nagaur district in Rajasthan, followed by Andhra Pradesh on October 11.
1977-1978	Ashok Mehta Committee	Worked for a two-tier system (Zila Parishad and Mandal Panchayat), direct elections, and constitutional status for the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).
1983	Sarkaria Commission	They examined center-state relations, suggested cooperative federalism, and recommended an inter-state council for improving decentralisation.

1985	G.V.K. Rao Committee	Development activities must be conducted under the control of the Panchayati Raj institutions, with the District Council functioning as the primary authority for planning and development.
1986	L.M. Singhvi Committee	It is essential to give constitutional status for PRIs and establish the Gramme Sabha as the basis of local governance.
1988	V.N. Gadgil Committee	Improve Panchayati Raj institutions by promoting proper decentralisation.
1989	P.K. Thungon Committee	It is essential to give constitutional status for local governments to improve decentralisation, finally approved thru the 73 rd and 74 th Amendments in 1992.

In consequence of various committees as described in table 1.1, efforts at the parliament level were made to give constitutional status to local governance, including panchayats and municipalities.

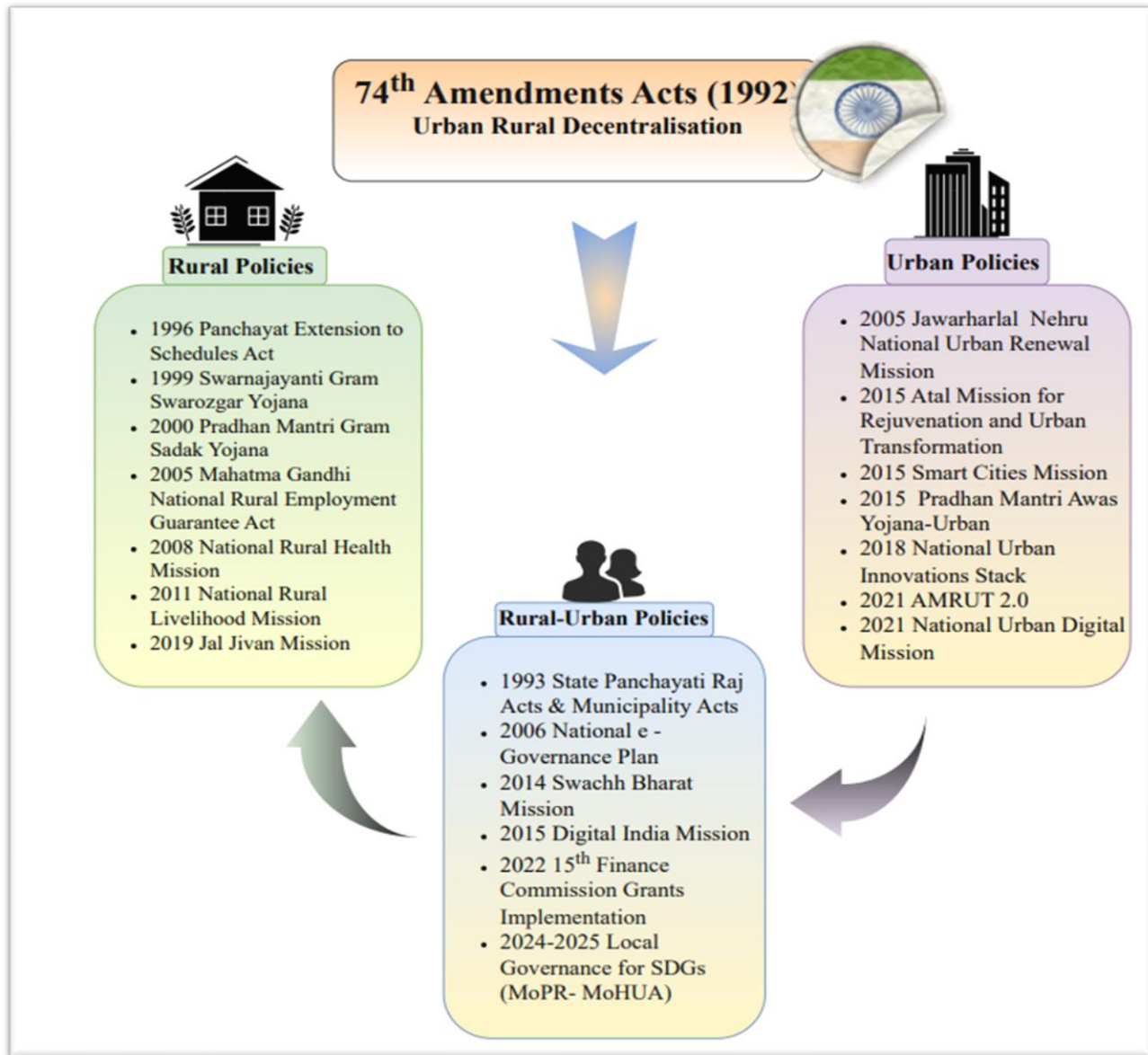
Constitutional Status: 73rd and 74th Amendments (1992)

The amendment process for strengthening Panchayati Raj institutions began with the 64th (Gram panchayat) and 65th (Nagar panchayat) Amendment Bill in 1989. however, it did not succeed in the Rajya Sabha. The 74th Amendment Bill, including Panchayati Raj and municipalities, was introduced in 1990 but remained inactive. A more comprehensive amendment followed in September 1991 as the 72nd Constitutional Amendment Bill. In December 1992, Parliament passed the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, establishing Panchayats for rural areas and Municipalities for urban areas (Babu, 2023). The 73rd Constitutional Amendment came into force on 24 April 1993, it known National Panchayati Raj Day. It contains 9 Parts, 11th Schedules, 29 subjects, and Articles 243 to 243 O. The 74th Constitutional Amendment came into force on 1 June 1993, It contains 9A Parts, 12th Schedules, 18 subjects, and Articles 243 P to 243 ZG.

This amendment act defined Panchayati Raj as a three-tiered structure, comprising Gram Panchayats at the village level, Panchayat Samitis at the block level, and Zila Parishads at the district level (Singh and Singh, 2022). It also granted constitutional status to urban local governments, establishing bodies such as Nagar Panchayats, Municipal Councils, and Municipal Corporations, which manage local administration and development initiatives in urban areas.

After the 74th amendment, administrations of states have worked to give power to local councils through the devolution of functions, powers, and financial resources. The Central Finance Commission has periodically issued guidelines for this purpose. The 15th Finance Commission (2021–26) proposed grants totaling ₹4,36,361 crore to enhance the financial autonomy of local bodies, allocating approximately ₹2,36,805 crore for rural local bodies and ₹1,21,055 crore for urban local bodies (Government of India, 2021). Furthermore, the Commission reinforced financial accountability by linking the distribution of local body grants to the establishment of State Finance Commissions (SFCs) and the implementation of their recommendations. The 16th Finance Commission (2026-2031) has proposed grants amounting to approximately ₹7,91,493 crore to bolster the financial autonomy of local self-government institutions, allocating ₹4,35,236 crore for rural local bodies and ₹3,56,257 crore for urban local bodies (Government of India, 2026). The 16th Finance Commission has prioritized digital governance, online accounting, property tax reforms, performance-based incentives, and the efficacy of State Finance Commissions. Thus, while the 15th Finance Commission established a financial framework for local governance, the 16th

Finance Commission has made significant strides in enhancing their capacity, accountability, transparency, and self-sufficiency.



This diagram shows how India's 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) strengthened local governance. It displays a number of rural, urban, and rural-urban development initiatives. In 2022-2023, rural programs like MGNREGA (VB-G RAM G) generated almost 289 crore person-days of employment, and under the Jal Jeevan Mission, the percentage of rural households with tap water facilities increased from 17% in 2019 to over 79% in 2024 (Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2024). By 2024, 7,352 projects under the Smart Cities Mission had been finished (MoHUA, 2024).

Much of India's development agenda is mirrored in the Sustainable Development Goals. Our national plans are ambitious and purposeful; sustainable development of one-sixth of humanity will be of great consequence to the world and our beautiful planet (NITI Aayog, 2022).

Bringing government to the local level through decentralisation is a key part of reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This makes it possible to come up with and carry out plans. India has a long

history of decentralisation. For example, the Chola Empire had a complex system of local self-governance where institutions like the Sabha, Ur, and Nagaram ran village government. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which gave constitutional status to Panchayati Raj institutions and Urban Local Bodies, made decentralisation even stronger in modern India. At the local level, Gram Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies are very important for putting the SDGs into action because they provide important services like clean water, sanitation, healthcare, education, housing, jobs, and protecting the environment. SDG 11 focuses on making towns and communities safe, welcoming, strong, and long-lasting. This goal can only be reached if local government institutions are involved, responsible, and good at managing resources. From the local self-governance systems of the Chola era to the present-day Panchayati Raj system, decentralization has been a crucial part of India's journey towards sustainable and inclusive development and the achievement of the SDGs.

Conclusion:

Local self-governance is seen as the "living soul" of Indian democracy, embodying democratic values in practice. It represents a long and evolving journey from traditional community institutions to constitutionally empowered democratic bodies. The Sabhas and Samitis of ancient India, and the Gram Sabhas of the Chola period, established a strong tradition of governance based on people's participation. This tradition continued, albeit in a limited form, during the medieval period. During the British period, local bodies were created, but were not granted significant powers. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, therefore, granted constitutional recognition to local bodies. These amendments gave practical shape to democracy at grassroot level and consequently democratic decentralization in India. The governance system was moved from centralization to "Power to the People." These amendments proved to be important pillars of autonomous governance, accountability, and good local self-governance in India.

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