

## Decentralisation in India

We know that federal governments have two or more tiers of governments. The two-tiers of government in our country. But a vast country like India cannot be run only through these two-tiers. States in India are as large as independent countries of Europe. In terms of population, Uttar Pradesh is bigger than Russia, Maharashtra is about as big as Germany. Many of these States are internally very diverse. There is thus a need for power sharing within these States. Federal power sharing in India needs another tier of government, below that of the State governments. This is the rationale for decentralisation of power. Thus, resulted a third-tier of government, called local government. When power is taken away from Central and State governments and given to local government, it is called decentralisation. The basic idea behind decentralisation is that there are a large number of problems and issues which are best settled at the local level. People have better knowledge of problems in their localities. They also have better ideas on where to spend money and how to manage things more efficiently. Besides, at the local level it is possible for the people to directly participate in decision making. This helps to inculcate a habit of democratic participation. Local government is the best way to realise one important principle of democracy, namely local self-government. The need for decentralisation was recognised in our Constitution. Since then, there have been several attempts to decentralise power to the level of villages and towns. Panchayats in so, we are like a three-tier coach in a train! I always prefer the lower berth! Villages and municipalities in urban areas were set up in all the States. But these were directly under the control of state governments. Elections to these local governments were not held regularly. Local governments did not have any powers or resources of their own. Thus, there was very little decentralisation in effective terms. A major step towards decentralisation was taken in 1992. The Constitution was amended to make the third-tier of democracy more powerful and effective.

- Now it is constitutionally mandatory to hold regular elections to local government bodies.
- Seats are reserved in the elected bodies and the executive heads of these institutions for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes.
- At least one-third of all positions are reserved for women.
- An independent institution called the State Election Commission has been created in each State to conduct panchayat and municipal elections.
- The State governments are required to share some powers and revenue with local government bodies. The nature of sharing varies from State to State.

Rural local government is popularly known by the name panchayati raj. Each village, or a group of villages in some States, has a gram panchayat. This is a council consisting of several ward members, often called panch, and a president or sarpanch. They are directly elected by all the adult population living in that ward or village. It is the decision-making body for the entire village. The panchayat works under the overall supervision of the gram

sabha. All the voters in the village are its members. It has to meet at least twice or thrice in a year to approve the annual budget of the gram panchayat and to review the performance of the gram panchayat. The local government structure goes right up to the district level. A few gram panchayats are grouped together to form what is usually called a panchayat samiti or block or mandal. The members of this representative body are elected by all the panchayat members in that area. All the panchayat samitis or mandals in a district together constitute the zilla (district) parishad. Most members of the zilla parishad are elected. Members of the Lok Sabha and MLAs of that district and some other officials of other district level bodies are also its members. Zilla parishad chairperson is the political head of the zilla parishad. Similarly, local government bodies exist for urban areas as well. Municipalities are set up in towns. Big cities are constituted into municipal corporations. Both municipalities and municipal corporations are controlled by elected bodies consisting of people's representatives. Municipal chairperson is the political head of the municipality. In a municipal corporation such an officer is called the mayor.

This new system of local government is the largest experiment in democracy conducted anywhere in the world. There are now about 36 lakh elected representatives in the panchayats and municipalities etc., all over the country. This number is bigger than the population of many countries in the world. Constitutional status for local government has helped to deepen democracy in our country. It has also increased women's representation and voice in our democracy. At the same time, there are many difficulties. While elections are held regularly and enthusiastically, gram sabhas are not held regularly. Most state governments have not transferred significant powers to the local governments. Nor have they given adequate resources. We are thus still a long way from realising the ideal of self-government.

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