



General Studies-2; Devolution of powers and finances up to local levels and challenges therein.

Role of Panchayats in Social and Economic Progress

Introduction

- The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIS) play a major role in the socio and economic development of people at the grassroots level.
- India has had a long tradition of panchayats in one form or another.
- In the olden days, the inhabitants of a village used to meet together under the leadership of village elders to discuss and resolve village problems. This system displayed the spirit of participatory democracy.
- Mahatma Gandhi advocated for 'Gram Swaraj' and argued for the handing over certain powers to the villagers.

Gram Panchayats

- The 73rd Constitutional Amendment passed by the Parliament in the year 1993 was a pioneering step in decentralising political power in India.
- The 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats in the country have been entrusted to provide basic services in the villages and plan for local economic development.
- Gram Sabha is a channel to include the less privileged section of society and ensure their participation in the village level governance.
- This bottom-up approach is meant to reflect felt need of various stakeholders.
- Visible signs of change can be seen in most of the villages in terms of village roads, water supply, sanitation, storm water drainage, and street-lighting.

Grants to the Local Bodies

- There is a general demand from several quarters to make PRIs financially stronger to meet their needs.
- The 15th Finance Commission has increased the grants for rural and urban bodies.
- In order to understand the effectiveness of the Fourteenth Finance Commission (FFC) grant to the GPs, the Institute of Economic Growth, had conducted a study of 120 GPs in 20 districts spread across 16 states in India.
 - The study found that about half of the GPs in the sample are headed by women.
 - In a remote village in Odisha, women members occupied three-fourth of elected positions and were relatively more active than their men counterparts in the same area.
 - In this village, it was heartening to note the absence of the 'Sarpanch Pati' culture that the Prime Minister had called to end.

Concerns / Challenges

- Attendance in Gram Sabha is not high in most of the GPs except on special occasions like Gandhi Jayanti when special drive for attendance is undertaken by the authorities.
- The local bodies face the problem of inadequate finance to carry out various activities assigned to them.
- Most of the GPs are found reluctant to raise own source of revenue (OSR).
- While convergence of various development programmes has been a priority for the government, it is mostly conspicuous by its absence in the programmes undertaken by the GPs.
- While roads in two different patches are being constructed utilising two different sources of funding (e.g. FFC and MPLAD), it is difficult to find one large activity with funding from multiple sources.
- Different guidelines by different departments are cited as a major constraint for lack of convergence of activities.
- Some GPs do not have their own building and they share space with schools, anganwadi centre and other places.
- Broadband connections are not functioning in many cases. For data entry purposes, panchayat official need to visit Block Development offices.

Way Forward

- Local level governance is still in the evolution process in India. We need to encourage the process to play a more effective role.
- The unwillingness by local bodies to collect potential tax revenue in most of the GPs needs a change in the mind set and some amount of persuasion.
- The local people must have a sense of belonging in the schemes. Involvement of GPs in a coordinating role in various projects of line departments would be a way forward for convergence.
- Solid waste management and waste disposal, as well as overall cleanliness, still need considerable improvements.
- Ministry of Panchayati Raj could design a system of comparative ranking of different GPs in a State as this could help in building a competitive ecosystem at the grassroot level.

Conclusion

- GPs are third tier in the democratic participation process by the citizens. The success of democracy at the top requires that it is built from the bottom.