

The Evolution of Local Governance in India



kolkata, West bengal Jul 18, 2023 ([IssueWire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - There is evidence that rural self-governing organizations known as 'sabha' existed during the time of the Rigveda (1700 BC). Over time, these organizations evolved into Panchayats, which were councils consisting of five members. Panchayats played a crucial role in grassroots governance within villages. Elected Gram Panchayats had both executive and judicial powers, including land distribution and tax collection on behalf of the village. They were supervised by a larger panchayat or parishad, which intervened when necessary.

During the Middle Ages, Muslim rulers introduced a more centralized system of governance. Feudal chiefs and land tax collectors, known as zamindars, emerged as intermediaries between the rulers and the people. As long as the zamindars paid regular rents, the rulers typically did not interfere with their lands. Consequently, the zamindars took on the responsibility of maintaining law and order in the villages, reducing the authority and power of the Panchayat.

The British colonial administration did not prioritize local administration initially, entrusting it to local rulers. However, after facing significant financial pressure following the 1857 coup, the colonial administration decentralized administrative control to local governments for managing roads and public works.

After suffering a defeat in the Battle of Buxar in 1765, the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam granted the East India Company the Diwani powers of Bengal. In response, the company implemented two important measures. Firstly, they abolished the village land record office and established the position of "Patwari" to be responsible for keeping official records of specific villages. Secondly, they established the office of magistrate and did away with the village police. The policing duties were carried out by civil servants known as Darogas, who answered to Faujdars. The primary goal of these actions was to ensure proper collection of land revenue. Over time, these Patwaris and Darogas became figures of folklore. However, this decision ultimately resulted in the worst famine Bengal had ever experienced, which persisted until the late 18th century. Essentially, these measures greatly disempowered rural communities and nearly destroyed the panchayat system. In an attempt to rectify this situation after the 1857 uprising, the British attempted to empower panchayats to address minor offenses and resolve village disputes. However, these actions were insufficient in fully restoring the lost power of rural communities. The 1870 resolution by Viceroy Lord Mayo, aimed at improving administrative efficiency and meeting the needs of the people, marked a significant milestone in the development of local institutions and decentralization of power. Lord Ripon also played a role in altering the government's approach to decentralization, contributing to this shift in policy.

Another significant development unfolded when Lord Ripon recognized the twofold nature of local government in his renowned Resolution on Local Self-Government on May 18, 1882. This entailed the importance of both administrative proficiency and political education. Subsequently, the Montague-Chelmsford Amendment in 1919 transferred the responsibility of local self-government to Indian provincial ministers. However, due to organizational and financial challenges, the reform fell short of creating truly democratic and vibrant Panchayats. Nonetheless, this period witnessed the establishment of Gram Panchayats in several provinces, with Panchayat legislation being passed in eight provinces by 1925. Additionally, six native states also enacted panchayat legislation within the year 1926. Under the Government of India Act 1935, Panchayats played a crucial role in the evolution of provincial administrative divisions. In the provinces, their governing bodies were tasked with promoting the democratization of local self-governing institutions. However, the system of responsible governance at the grassroots level often lacked accountability. These shortcomings led D.P. Mishra, the then Local Government Minister of Madhya Pradesh, to express concern about the "terrible pattern" emerging in local bodies across the province and possibly the country, where "inefficiency" and "local agency" had become synonymous.

The Royal Commission on Decentralization (1907), along with Montague and Chelmsford's Report Relating to Constitutional Change (1919) and the Government of India Resolution (1919), proposed an administrative structure that emphasized hierarchical supervision and control. Under this system, administrators became the central figures in rural administration. The British colonial rulers were primarily focused on maintaining their control and were not concerned with promoting decentralized democracy.

From the 1920s to 1947, the Indian National Congress, led by Mahatma Gandhi, spearheaded the movement for India's independence, with the goal of achieving complete self-rule, known as Sarva Bharati Swaraj. However, during this period, there was a neglect of formulating comprehensive plans for the local level. The party's top leaders did not have a unanimous consensus on the role and contribution of rural local self-government institutions. Instead, there were differing guidelines and perspectives on this matter.

The Panchayati Raj arrangement is essential to India's democratic governance structure. It has played an important role in promoting gender equality along with inclusive and sustainable development, empowerment of citizens in rural areas and social justice. Although the system has faced several challenges, including scarcity of resources along with political interference, it remains an essential institution for rural India. As India continues to grow and develop, Panchayati Raj arrangements will continue to play a significant role in shaping its future.

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