



Research Article

## Panchayat System of Ancient India

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### Abstract

The Panchayat system in India is one of the oldest forms of self-government in the country. The word 'Panchayat' means a group of five wise or elderly people who solve the social and administrative problems of the rural areas. In ancient India, the village was the mainstay of administration, and the village community was almost self-sufficient. In ancient India, the Gram Sabha and Panchayat conducted local justice, revenue collection and developmental work. This system existed in the Middle Ages as well, although it increased somewhat under the influence of central rule. The evolution of the Panchayat system in India is an important chapter in the history of rural governance in India. Since ancient times, villages have been the centre of social and administrative life in India. At that time, the administrative system that was developed with representatives of the local people to govern the village was known as the Panchayat system. Over time, the structure, powers and functioning of this system have changed. During the British rule, the autonomy of the Panchayat system was greatly reduced. However, in 1882, Lord Ripon took the initiative to encourage local self-government, which laid the foundation of the modern Panchayat system. After independence, the Directive Principles of State Governance (Article 40) of the Indian Constitution mentioned the formation of Gram Panchayats. Later, in 1957, as per the recommendations of the Balwant Roy Mehta Committee, a three-tier Panchayat system - Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad - was introduced. Finally, in 1992, through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, the Panchayat system gained constitutional status and came into effect in 1993. This amendment ensured the establishment of Gram Sabhas, regular elections, a conservation policy, and financial power. As a result, the Panchayat system emerged as one of the main foundations for establishing democracy at the grassroots level.

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## INTRODUCTION

India is considered, as we rightly call it, a village country. India is a country where more than seventy per cent of the population lives in villages. The importance of rural self-government is undoubtedly huge. The rural self-government system is now known as panchayatiraj. It can be said clearly that the government has been born in the whole country with the intention of improving and enhancing the social and economic development of the rural masses.

In independent India, we have seen the existence of the panchayatiraj system in the rural local self-government system, but it is not a new concept. If we analyse the history well, then we can find the true identity of Panchayatiraj in the past or ancient India. At first, we have to know the meaning of the term panchayat. It originated from the word 'Pancha', which means 'five'. It can be said more clearly that the five members of the rural council were considered as a panchayat. Although its number of members was limited to 'Pancha' or five at the beginning, but gradually the number disappeared and the number has been expanded. It has been said beforehand that the organisation was created spontaneously for the social and economic needs, and in due course of time, evolved into a great change. It is probably the most exuberant of any political organisation in the world.

### Ancient history of the evolution of the Panchayat system in India:

The panchayat system that we see in independent India is not the idea of today; it got its shape many years ago. We know that in ancient times, the rural system was in existence in society. To facilitate the discussion, we can discuss the origin of the panchayat system by sharing it in a few categories as given below:

- Panchayat system of ancient India.
- Panchayat system of India in the medieval period.
- Panchayat system during British rule.

### Panchayat System of Ancient India

We got the idea of the local government in ancient India from the famous books, the Upanishad, and the famous books of the past. Various scholars, such as Manu, Kautilya and Sukracharya, have written valuable manuscripts from which we got the idea of Panchayats, and there are also some important historical books, historical ruins, and foreign tourists' descriptions. From that book and account, we can learn about the local government's idea, the history, structure and activities of the local government. The idea of local government is not new to the people of India; the system has been used in some places in different parts of India since its inception. We look at the effective forms of various types of local organisations in the Vedic period. Mainly, for the purpose of perpetuating and upholding a self-reliant village regime and that system was developed for administrative convenience. According to Professor M.V. Venkatarangian, "These ancient institutions, compared to the self-governing institutions that existed in the British period and even in some respects compared to the

institutions now obtaining in India, were more widespread, more real and more successful".

In the absence of a good communication system in the far distant ancient past, these institutions performed sporadically, but they were self-contained. They had more elaborate powers. State control or intervention was minimal. Through the participation of the people of the whole village, the rural organisations worked. In spite of the existence of the caste system, the mass or community was very strong and true. The public felt then and realised that they had some duties and obligations towards society. Institutions were either managed privately or managed by the trust system. Among them were schools, ponds, charitable treatments, temples and hospices, respectively. In one word, the dependence on the government was very low. Old institutions were always guided by their own initiative. At the end of British rule, local arrangements of rural justice were able to survive in some way or form. According to many, the real question was how people used to enjoy their rights and opportunities in the circumstances under which the communication system was completely underdeveloped and in extreme situations. In essence, they were sceptical about the existence of the local regime of the past.

On the contrary, we cannot deny historical books, remnants or memorabilia, and preserved accounts and consequences of the valuable manuscripts written by some of the famous writers and famous historical manuscripts of the past, Manu, Kautilya and Sukracharya. Clear evidence indicates that in the past, there was a well-organised local self-government in India. Past Vedas and historical texts clearly indicate that the people of India were in a rural community in the past, where all the residents were assembled in the village meeting and conducted all the administrative functions.

In the discussion from the Mahabharata, the head of the village is mentioned. In the Mahabharata, the head of the village was called Grameeqa or village husband. The Kautilya ordinance has been fully acknowledged by the gram panchayat of ancient India.

The evidence is found in the famous historian Dr Ramesh Ch. Majumder. According to Dr Majumder, although Rajan (king) was the lord of the village, he did not rule without the consent of the people. All the activities of indigenous and tribal communities were performed in the popular rural meeting. This was known as samity. Both Rajan (king) and the people were present in that meeting or association (samity). Again, it is also known that there was another village organisation, which was known as the assembly. Some of whom have been identified as the council of elders. Some others thought that it was a village assembly or a gathering place that was the centre of social gatherings. The assembly, associations, or the council of elders decide matters related to general requirements and the administration of justice. It may be mentioned that Dr Majumder's village assembly or council of elders has existed in the Maurya and Gupta era in rural India. In fact, from the fourth century onwards, the rural council started working in Bihar, Rajasthan in central India, from the Maurya era to Karnataka.

Local self-government was present in the Maurya era of ancient India. During Chandragupta, every village was completely independent in all matters. Each village had its own assembly or association (samity). Every family representative, village elder and other experienced people gathered there. Elder people played a key role in the respective village. Who was known as Gramik of the village? Though he was mainly an assistant, his appointment was dependent on the choice of the village. During the time of the Pratihara, the head of the village was usually called as Gramapati. He conducted the whole village with the help of the village council formed by the village elders. There were various committees in the village council. Those who cared for different things in the village, such as ordinary work, the pond and graffiti, etc. The villages were considered the lowest level or unit of administration during the Chalukya regime. Gram Sabha and gram panchayat were the best or major ones. The book written by Shukracharya 'Nitisar' (science of polity) is known in the past about the rural governance system. Nehru mentioned the book 'Nitisar' written by Shukracharya in his 'Discovery of India'. It has been said that the rural organisations enjoyed huge power in both the administrative and judicial systems. It should be noted that during that time, there was a committee system in the panchayat. All those committees were elected, and women were also involved in them. Only due to bad behaviour would any member be removed. There is evidence of the existence of powerful local government during the rule of the 'Chola' in South India. It was the work of the panchayat to manage justice and development. During the roles of 'Chola' and 'Vijayanagara' kings, the local government greatly influenced civic life. At this time, the village was financially and administratively independent. Rural administration was administered by a village council comprising elected representatives. During the Chola rule, the main functions of the village council were: 1. Land control, 2. Agricultural land survey, 3. Revenue collection, 4. Education system management, 5. Resolve rural disputes

Western authors praised these local institutions. Lord Metcalf referred to rural institutions as 'Little Republics.' It may be mentioned here that those rural organisations were able to maintain or end their efforts till the end of Mughal rule. Elphinstone's report in this regard is notable (1819). The report says that "In whatever point of view we examine the native government in the Deccan, the first and most important feature is the division into villages and townships. These communities contain in miniature all the materials of state within themselves and are almost sufficient to protect their members, if all other governments are withdrawn". A clear picture is available from the Elphinstone report about the village panchayat. According to the report by means of the panchayat, they were enabled to affect a tolerable dispensation of justice among themselves.

## CONCLUSION

The long journey from the ancient self-governing village communities to the incorporation of modern constitutional structures has transformed the Panchayat system into a

powerful democratic decentralisation institution. Overall, it can be said that the Panchayat system is not just an administrative structure, but a pillar of local democracy. By ensuring the active participation of the local people, it has strengthened the democratic foundation of India and will play an important role as the main driving force of rural development in the future.

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