BLOGS

Local Self-Government in India: An In-Depth Overview

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Introduction

Local self-government in India serves as the bedrock of governance, addressing the unique needs and challenges of specific local areas within the broader framework of the nation. Its functions include:

- Maintaining law and order.
- Enhancing healthcare standards.

- Ensuring the development of essential infrastructure like feeder roads and drainage systems.

The **73rd** and **74th** constitutional amendments have been instrumental in recognizing the significance of local self-governments and delegating their powers and responsibilities.

Three Levels of Government in India

India's governance structure operates across three tiers, reflecting its federal character.

1. Union Government

The Union government is the highest level of government, encompassing the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. It is governed by the Constitution of India.

2. State Government

Each state in India has its own government, led by a Chief Minister. State governments handle matters specific to their regions, ensuring localized governance.

3. Local Government

Local government serves as the lowest tier, concentrating on the resolution of regional issues within a more significant state or national framework. Empowered by the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, local governments are essential to promoting grassroots development.

Local Government Levels: Urban and Rural

Local government entities in India are broadly categorized into urban and rural bodies, each serving its respective domain.

Urban Local Governance Bodies

Three democratically elected urban local governance bodies play a crucial role in urban development:

1. Nagar Nigam (Municipal Corporation)

This is the highest urban local governance body responsible for governing large cities and metropolitan areas.

2. Nagar Palika (Municipal Council)

Municipal councils cater to smaller urban areas and towns, addressing their unique needs.

3. Nagar Panchayat (Municipal Committee)

Municipal committees are responsible for governing smaller municipalities and townships.

Rural Local Governance Bodies

Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) form the backbone of rural local governance, consisting of three hierarchical tiers:

1. Gram Panchayat

At the grassroots level, Gram Panchayats focus on village-level governance and development.

2. Zila Parishad

Operating at the district level, Zila Parishads oversee the planning and resource allocation for PRIs, ensuring integrated development efforts.

3. Panchayat Samiti

At the community block level, Panchayat Samiti facilitates governance and development initiatives, acting as intermediaries between Gram Panchayats and Zila Parishads.

73rd Constitutional Amendment: Empowering Rural Local Bodies

Panchayats in India

Directive Principles of State Policy

Article 40 of the Constitution, enshrining a Directive Principle of State Policy, stipulates that the state should take measures to organize village panchayats and empower them with the necessary powers and authority to function as units of self-government.

Constitutional Inclusion

In response to **Article 40, a new Part IX** was introduced in the Constitution, which focuses on panchayats. Some key features of the **73rd constitutional amendment**, enacted in 1992 during the tenure of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao include:-

1. Panchayats at Various Levels

The constitution of Panchayats at village and other levels

2. Gram Panchayat

The establishment of Gram Panchayat in villages or groups of villages.

3. Direct Elections

Direct elections for all seats in panchayats at the village and intermediate levels, if applicable, and for the offices of chairpersons at these levels.

4. Reservation

Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population for Panchayat membership and Chairpersons' positions at each level. Additionally, not less than one-third of the seats are reserved for women.

5. Tenure and Elections

Fixing a five-year tenure for panchayats and requiring elections within six months in the event of any panchayat's super session.

This constitutional framework underscores the importance of local self-governance in rural areas, emphasizing democracy and empowerment at the grassroots level.

6. Devolution of Powers

Article 243-G of the Indian Constitution made it mandatory for state governments to devolve powers, responsibilities, and authority to the Panchayats, ensuring greater local autonomy.

74th Constitutional Amendment: Strengthening Urban Local Bodies

Municipal bodies have a significant historical presence in India. The first municipal corporation was established in the former Presidency Town of Madras in 1688. This pioneering effort was followed by the establishment of similar corporations in Bombay and Calcutta in 1726.

In 1993, the 74th Constitutional Amendment followed suit to empower urban local bodies and ensure the decentralization of union and state powers. It introduced several significant provisions addressing municipal issues:

- Part IXA in the Constitution

The Constitution (Seventy Fourth Amendment) Act, 1992, introduced Part IXA, specifically addresses municipal issues and the devolution of powers to urban local bodies.

- Role of Zila Parishad

At the district level, Zila Parishad was entrusted with the vital role of planning and allocating resources for Panchayati Raj institutions, ensuring coordinated development efforts.

Conclusion

India operates as a federal republic with a three-tiered government structure comprising the union, state, and local levels. The Union government functions at the highest echelon, dealing with national affairs, while state governments manage regional matters.

Local government, empowered by the Constitution (74th Amendment) Act, 1992, serves as the foundation for addressing specific local area concerns and promoting decentralized governance. It plays a crucial role in ensuring that governance is responsive to the unique needs of local communities, thereby contributing to the nation’s overall development.