
UNIT 5 COMMITTEES CONSTITUTED BY GOVERNMENT OF INDIA: INITIATIVES TAKEN BY THE STATE GOVERNMENT

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

When it comes to local governance in Indian context, the period before the emergence of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, that is, the period from late 1940s to 1980s is of utmost importance. In fact, the period from 1947 to 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1993) had witnessed a wide range of development and change in local governance. For perspective, the term ‘Panchayat’ had not been explicitly mentioned by the makers of our Indian Constitution, however, in 1992 the Parliament made the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) as an integral part of the Constitution.

The current Unit will make an attempt to trace the evolution of PRI in the post-Independent (1947-1992) phase by answering the following questions: (i) What were the various Committees that gradually shaped PRI as the third-tier governance body? and (ii) What was the role of the Government appointed Committees in institutionalising PRIs? To have an understanding about local governance context and its relevance today, you need to study the various Committees appointed by the Government of India and the initiatives taken by the respective state governments until 1980s, as after the implementation of 73rd CAA, the modus operandi of state governments has been similar.

5.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the vital role of Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report in institutionalizing Panchayati Raj;
- Describe the contributions made by Ashok Mehta Committee in streamlining the functions of Panchayati Raj; and
- Spell out the initiatives taken by the respective State Governments (select state governments) in line with the Government appointed Committees.

5.3 THE CONTEXT

The period 1951-58 witnessed the implementation of the first Five Year Plan. Significantly, the year 1952 can be called as a crucial year for the evolution of Community Development Programme (CDP) and National Extension Service (NES). The Government of India acknowledged the role of rural communities and villages as basic units of development process. To develop these basic units, that is, the villages, various projects were implemented by the concerned departments/agencies/ministries vis-à-vis food, health, and education. The launch of CDP and NES can be undoubtedly considered as vital factors for the growth of rural development and especially for the progress of Panchayati Raj. For perspective, the CDP focused on the establishment of Community Development Blocks (CDB). Indeed, the institutional focus of CDP was not the villages but the newly established CDB. With a Block Development Officer (BDO) heading the Block, the CDB served as an administrative entity between the district and the village. In fact, BDO had a team of Extension Officers (also known as experts) who were allotted various departments, such as, agriculture, cottage industries, healthcare, education etc. For the implementation of development projects, CDB received funds from both Central and State governments. Similarly, NES was also established, however, it was equipped with few financial and human resources. While CDP focused on short term development targets, NES focused on long term plans and strategies.

The intended outcome of CDP was to enable a self-reliant rural populace with enterprising spirit and indeed both CDP and NES did create a rural ecosystem for itself. However, CDP and NES were understaffed and underfinanced and could not realise the intended outcome (Dayal, 1966). To evaluate the development impact made by CDP and NES, the Government of India appointed a committee in 1957. The Committee was headed by Balwantrai Mehta to evaluate and propose appropriate recommendations. In 1958, the Committee came up with certain recommendations which will be discussed in the ensuing Section.

5.4 BALWANTRAI MEHTA COMMITTEE, 1957

The recommendations of Balwantrai Mehta came to be known as the Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report (BMCR). For the first time in the post-Independence phase, the Committee spoke the need for democratic decentralisation and its relevance for rural reconstruction. The Committee emphasised the need for statutory support to people's representations as: "Public participation in community works should be organised through statutory representative bodies" (Ministry of Panchayati Raj). In fact, the Committee asserted that without an agency at the village level to assume leadership and responsibility for community development programmes, real rural construction could not be realised. The recommendations of BMCR have been mentioned below:

- i) To establish a 3 tiered/layered Panchayati Raj system vis-à-vis Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Zila Parishad at the district level. And the role of BDO is to act on behalf of village panchayat. All the three tiers/layers should be linked together. The role of Gram Panchayat would be to execute public services and routine administrative tasks. The role of Panchayat Samiti would be to plan and execute all development schemes, and the role of Zila Parishad would be to supervise and coordinate the Panchayat Samitis.
- ii) Genuine transfer of power and responsibility should be enabled to the functionaries so as to achieve the development targets.
- iii) Besides transfer of adequate resources to the panchayat bodies, all development and welfare schemes should be implemented through these bodies.
- vi) The Committee envisaged that adequate people's participation in community welfare projects should be channelized wherein vulnerable sections including women would get adequate space to involve.
- v) Above all, the Committee recommended for co-opting two women members in development works related to women and children. Unlike male members who were to be elected, the Committee emphasized the relevance of women members to be co-opted. And one member each representing the Scheduled Caste/Schedule Tribe community.

BMCR gave a generic blue print for democratic decentralisation and encouraged the state governments to chalk out appropriate working structures in their respective states. In 1958, the National Development Council (NDC) endorsed the value of democratic decentralisation as envisaged by BMCR. During the first decade of Independence, the term 'Panchayati Raj' gained a prominent status of governance. On October 2nd, 1959, the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated the 3 tier Panchayati Raj in Nagaur, Rajasthan. Indeed, BMCR set the tone for pushing democratic decentralisation into the national agenda.

With impetus brewing around Panchayati Raj Institutions post BMCR, the Government of India elevated the status of Department of Community Development to a Ministry.

5.5 ASHOK MEHTA COMMITTEE

In 1977, the Government of India constituted the Ashok Mehta Committee to study the causes for poor performance of Panchayati Raj system. Unlike BMCR, the Committee recommended for a two-tier Panchayati Raj vis-à-vis Zila Parishad and Mandal Panchayat and asserted the need to have compulsory taxation powers to mobilise their own financial resources. It also asserted the need to protect Panchayati Raj and decentralisation of powers. For perspective, the Committee stated: “the establishment of democratic bodies below the State level is an imperative from the political and socio-developmental perspectives. Democratic institutions with periodic elections at all levels will provide a forum for the assertion of their strength in large number by the weaker sections” (Ashok Mehta Committee Report). Indeed, it was one of the major Government appointed committees to talk about social justice perspective at the local level. For instance, it focused on inclusion and representation of weaker sections of the society into the local politics.

To sustain the momentum of rural development, technical expertise should be made available at all levels below the state. In fact, the Committee considered district as the first point of decentralisation which would come under popular supervision. It proposed that the decentralised structure needs to be big enough to cater to the technical, administrative, and financial requirements but also small enough to ensure accountability to the grieved citizens. To materialise this arrangement without any practical difficulties the Committee recommended for grouping of villages. These group of villages were referred as Mandal Panchayats with a population of 15,000 to 20,000. In fact, the recommendation regarding grouping of villages corresponded with the already enacted legislations of Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1972, and West Bengal Panchayati Raj Act, 1973.

Coming to the block level (Panchayat Samitis) agencies, the Committee suggested them to function as transitional units until the Committee’s recommendations get implemented at a full swing. In fact, major change in their recommendation was in the abolishment of Panchayat Samitis. One of the reasons for recommending the abolishment of Panchayat Samitis was the growing disconnection between development programmes and panchayats between 1964-1977 (Mitra, 2015).

At the village level, people would be involved in Mandal Panchayats through Village Committees. The Committee left it to the discretion of the states to make structural arrangements of Panchayati Raj, nevertheless, they emphasised on ‘directly elected element’ to prevail over any administrative agencies. In terms of elections, the Committee had recommended for inclusiveness wherein Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) would get adequate representation based on their population. It also suggested that the Chairman of Zila Parishad would be indirectly elected.

Similarly, the President of the Mandal Panchayat would be either directly or indirectly elected, as decided by their respective states. When it comes to elections, the Committee had recommended that once in four years elections should be conducted and it should be simultaneously held.

- **Composition of Zila Parishad**

With regard to the composition, the Committee had recommended for six types of members vis-à-vis elected members from electoral divisions, Presidents of the Panchayat Samitis as an ex-officio member, nominated members of large municipalities, nominees of district level co-operative federation, two women who secured the highest percent of votes in the Zila Parishad elections. In case of no women contenders, the Zila Parishad can co-opt for two women. Two other co-opted members vis-à-vis one University/College teacher and another member with special interest in rural development.

- **Composition of Mandal Panchayat**

The Mandal Panchayat would comprise of vis-à-vis 15 members directly elected on village-cum-population basis, representatives of Farmers' Service Societies, and two women who secured highest proportion of votes in the Mandal Panchayat elections. In case of no women contenders, the Mandal Panchayat can co-opt for two women. Reservation would also be made available for SCs/STs. The President of Mandal Panchayat would be elected by the directly elected members or the post may be directly elected by the state. Besides, there would be a committee led by all women members in the Mandal Panchayat to ensure that all decisions connected to development programmes of women and children were made by women themselves.

The Committee suggested that the following functions to be decentralised: agriculture and allied sectors, health, education, communications, rural industries, marketing, welfare of backward classes, family welfare, etc. However, the Committee recommended that certain functions mentioned above can be retained by the respective state governments depending on its significance. The Committee was quite sure that those items that transcends district boundaries/jurisdictions need not be transferred to Zila Parishads, rather, retained by the states.

The Committee asserted that: "the Zilla Parishad will handle all the decentralised State programmes and plan for them at the district. The Mandal Panchayat will handle the implementation work" (Ashok Mehta Committee).

- **Minister for Panchayati Raj**

Owing to the increase in complexity of development works, the Committee recommended for a periodic study of state-level departments that caters to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). To ensure efficiency to the development works undertaken, the Committee recommended for a Minister for Panchayati Raj whose task would be to ensure:

- i) enactment of Panchayati Raj legislation;

- ii) conduct of elections to PRIs;
- iii) training of elected representatives and administrative officials;
- iv) administration of all training centres that caters to the training needs of PRIs;
- v) promotion of audit of Panchayati Raj accounts;
- vi) review of Panchayati Raj activities and present a report to the respective state legislatures; and
- vii) promotion of camp training of panchayat elected members.

5.6 G.V.K. RAO COMMITTEE

A Committee was appointed under the Chairmanship of G.V.K. Rao to examine the issues related to rural development. The title of the Committee was 'Administrative Arrangements for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation Programmes' and it submitted the report in 1985. Though the focus of the Committee was to reform the existing development and poverty alleviation programmes, it did recommend concerning Panchayati Raj. The Committee's concern for decentralisation and people's involvement can be implicitly traced through the following statement: "local initiative must be encouraged and the detailed strategy worked out by local people" (G.V.K. Rao Committee Report). Concurrently, the Committee recommended to activate PRIs across the country and provide them adequate support to evolve as effective organisations. In the long run, the Committee believed that PRIs would be able to handle people's grievances. Further, the Committee suggested to hold regular elections to PRIs.

Reiterating on this, the Committee suggested to consider districts as the basic unit for policy planning and programme implementation. Further, the Committee proposed that Zila Parishad can evolve as the principal body of managing all development programmes (socio-economic). The Committee went one step ahead in advocating empowerment of PRIs to plan, implement, and monitor development programmes.

- **Zila Parishad**

The Committee suggested that the President can be elected directly for a term co-terminus or for one year each based on Mayoral pattern. It can work based on the number of sub-committees that were elected on the basis of proportional representation. In a way, the Committee intended to promote participatory democracy.

- **District Development Commissioner**

The Committee recommended for a post of District Development Commissioner (DDC) to supervise and coordinate all the development related activities of the district. In fact, DDC was suggested to be made as the Chief Executive of the Zila Parishad in states where PRIs carry out the responsibility of planning and implementing development programmes. Indeed, the Committee suggested that the post of DDC should be of higher

status than the District Collector.

By doing so, the G.V.K. Rao Committee re-affirmed the recommendations made by the Ashok Mehta Committee Report in making 'district as the entry point of decentralisation'. The G.V.K. Rao Committee Report did not make an immediate impact on state legislation, however, it impacted the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90) (Mitra, 2015). For perspective, the Plan acknowledged that grassroots participation through Village Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Zila Parishads would foster local-specific development solutions as it would integrate poverty alleviation programmes with area development (Mitra, 2015).

As the Plan explicitly referred to poverty alleviation, there was a shift of focus from agricultural and industrial development to social development (Mitra, 2015). In line with the Ashok Mehta Committee, there was stronger inclusion of representation of women, SCs, and STs.

5.7 L.M. SINGHVI COMMITTEE

The L.M. Singhvi Committee published its report in 1986. The report discussed the matters connected to PRIs. The Committee examined the failed take-off of PRI and discussed a plethora of challenges, such as, inadequate resources, lack of political will to implement legislation, lack of national commitment to promote participatory democracy and alike. Based on examined issues, the Committee proposed to revive PRIs. It reaffirmed the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee and acknowledged the role of PRIs as political entities and not as mere administrative agencies of the respective state governments. By doing so, the L.M. Singhvi Committee advocated the bottom-up approach to development. In bottom-up approach, PRIs would have adequate funds, functions, and functionaries to plan, implement, and monitor development programmes. In fact, one of the drawbacks for failed take-off of PRIs in the post BMCR and Ashok Mehta Committee was the top-down model of development. Under the top-down model of development, the PRIs role was that of an administrative entity and scope for planning and monitoring was nil. It is in this context, the L.M. Singhvi Committee proposed for the introduction and strengthening of Gram Sabhas, corporate village assemblies as the basis for democratic self-government.

Indeed, the Committee advocated for introducing a constitutional provision for Panchayati Raj which can be inferred from the following statement: "PRIs should be constitutionally proclaimed as the third-tier of government" (Mitra, 2015). The idea of a constitutionally sanctified entity was a paradigm shift in the field of local government and paved way for understanding the significance of such an entity in empowering PRIs vis-à-vis political, economic, and social. When it comes to structural arrangement, the Committee proposed to integrate administrative, technical expertise, and cadres of special departments at district level with Zila Parishads. The Committee also recommended to provide constitutional provisions for training officials and volunteers at the panchayat level and envisaged to

evolve research institutes for providing training and evaluation of PRI functionaries.

- **Brief Overview**

The period between 1977-1992 witnessed a lot of committee reports and their recommendations brought forth the necessary impetus to the constitutional backing of PRIs and it was made acceptable and desirable by the successive governments. For instance, prior to the publication of Ashok Mehta Committee Report, the idea of a constitutional amendment bill was instituted. Further, the environmental factors, such as, having a solid government at the local level, political parties showing enthusiasm towards winning local body elections, need for women's reservation, SCs and STs reserved constituencies and above all the need to empower PRIs fostered the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Bill, 1992. This was enacted and came into effect in the year 1993.

In the ensuing Section, let us discuss the initiatives taken by select state governments.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) *Name at least three recommendations made by the Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report (BMCR).*

5.8 INITIATIVES TAKEN BY THE STATE GOVERNMENT

Let us study about initiatives taken by the state government.

- **Uttar Pradesh**

In line with the recommendations of the BMCR, Uttar Pradesh (UP) implemented the Kshettra Samitis and Zila Parishad Adhiniyam of 1961. Kshettra Samitis were equivalent to the Panchayat Samitis of BMCR. The 1961 Act directly took reference of BMCR as the reason for enactment in UP. Besides paving way for implementing the three-tier structure, the Act put forth the relevance of Kshettra Samiti (at the block level) and Zila Parishad (at the district level). BMCR indicated that state could implement the reforms based on their respective political-administrative context. For perspective, the Act of 1961 instead of conducting direct elections at the village panchayat, the village sabha directly elected the representatives from block level. The elected Pradhans were considered as the principal officers of the village sabha. The Act also insisted to co-opt women members where the female representations were less than five. Secondly, at the block level, the Act recommended for at least five women to discuss the matters related to women and children. Further, at least eight Scheduled Caste (SC) members were to

be co-opted.

In the three-tiered structure, for instance, Kshetra Samitis (block level) catered to the following services, such as, education including primary education, health and sanitation, vocational education, increase in agriculture production, minor irrigation, fisheries and poultry production, seed management, establishment of cooperative societies, development of small-scale and cottage industries. In addition, they were in-charge of constructing and maintaining roads, bridges, and other public buildings that come under their jurisdiction.

Unlike BMCR, Zila Parishads were given more responsibilities under Schedule II of the 1961 Act, say for example, it was given responsibility to provide training centres meant for promoting small scale industries, public works, public hospitals, emergency relief services, establishment and coordination of facilities meant for the poor and the orphaned. Its focus was more on planning and supervise the development plans at the block level.

Moreover, under Schedule III of the Act of 1961, those functions that were formerly executed by the state government and its agencies were devolved either to the block or to the district. In fact, this devolution of powers included creation of staff positions, administrative control of the panchayat secretaries with regard to disciplinary procedures, transfers, levying taxes, etc. For example, a number of administrative positions were created to implement the directions as given by Kshetra Samitis and the Zila Parishads. In financial context, both Samitis and Parishads were allowed to levy fees for using public property (roads, bridges) and license fees for businessmen and traders (Mitra, 2015).

To establish the three-tier Panchayati Raj system as recommended by BMCR, all states, except Kerala and West Bengal, had enacted their respective legislations by 1964. Although with variations, in majority of the states the structure and functions of the Panchayati Raj system (for example the three-tier system) came as a resultant effect of BMCR. For perspective, within five years of BMCR, states, such as, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Madhya Pradesh implemented the recommendations and in fact directly responded to the ideas proposed. During this period, the convergence of three-tier Panchayati Raj structure was evident across India and one cannot ignore till date the contributions made by BMCR in democratic decentralisation.

- **Madhya Pradesh**

In the aftermath of the Ashok Mehta Committee Report, Madhya Pradesh was one among the few states to enact legislation. It made an attempt to reflect few of the recommendations made by the Committee. Majorly, it focused on consolidating and amending the existing legislation – Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Adhiniyam, 1981. Some of the aspects that reflected Ashok Mehta Committee Report included: strengthening village by providing compulsory income sources, limiting the scope of functions of Gram Panchayats, social welfare with respect to women, SCs and STs.

One of the major changes the state government enacted legislation was the

term 'Gram Sabha' was not mentioned. Unlike the Ashok Mehta Committee that recommended for two-tier Panchayati Raj structure, Madhya Pradesh state legislation retained the three-tier system. However, the official designation of Village Committees was changed to Gram Samitis. Also, in the composition of the Zila Panchayat there was inclusion of the representatives of the Public Health, Agriculture, Veterinary, and Education. The Gram Panchayat was entrusted with 29 specific duties and prominent change found was the omission of agricultural and industrial duties. The state legislation defined certain functions in the areas of public health, such as, disease prevention and assistance in vaccination programmes, birth and death registration, social welfare including the prevention of discriminatory practices and family planning, public works like construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, supply of drinking water, provision for village street lights. In addition, the Gram Panchayats were expected to implement the projects and programmes as entrusted by the state government (Mitra, 2015).

- **Karnataka and West Bengal: Observations made by G.V.K. Rao Committee**

While studying the impact of Ashok Mehta Committee Report on state legislation, the G.V.K. Rao Committee made some observations on West Bengal and Karnataka. They are as follows:

- a) Both the states had made district as the first point of decentralization below the state which was in line with Ashok Mehta Committee's recommendation;
- b) It was found that Zila Parishads in both the states were based on direct elections;
- c) The Chairman of the Zila Parishads were only from the directly elected members;
- d) In Karnataka, to comply with Ashok Mehta Committee Report, the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) ceased to exist, rather, its functions were merged with the Zila Parishads. Further, district heads of line departments would come under the Zila Parishad. Above all, each Zila Parishad would be headed by a Chief Secretary.
- e) In West Bengal, the District Magistrate would simultaneously head the Zila Parishad as the Chief Executive Officer. The Chairman of the Zila Parishad would be the Chairman of District Planning Committee and DRDA.

In line with Ashok Mehta Committee, the state of Karnataka opted for one-tier below the district, that is, the Mandal Panchayat. On the other hand, West Bengal opted for two-tier, namely, Panchayat Samitis (block level) and Gram Panchayats (village).

Check your progress-2

- 1) *Spell out at least four recommendations made by the Ashok Mehta Committee with reference to Minister of Panchayati Raj?*

5.9 LET US SUM UP

Through this Unit, you were able to understand the various Committees appointed by the Government of India vis-à-vis Balwantrai Mehta Committee, Ashok Mehta Committee, G.V.K. Rao Committee, and L.M. Singhvi Committee. The period from late 1940s to 1980s is of utmost importance. In fact, the period from 1947 to 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1993) had witnessed a wide range of development and change in local governance. The contributions of the above-mentioned Committees played a pivotal role in institutionalising Panchayati Raj in India. As per the local ecological factors these Committees worked out on the practical aspects of Panchayati Raj and came up with appropriate recommendations. Above all, these Committees gave a strong constitutional backing to establish PRIs as grassroots entity in our country.

5.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Name at least three aspects brought forth by Uttar Pradeshin the aftermath of Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report (BMCR).
- 2) Write down at least three observations made by G.V.K. Rao Committee about West Bengal and Karnataka?

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