



Mains Practice Question

Q. “Despite India’s commitment to rural decentralization, Panchayats could not live up to their potential.” Discuss. (250 Words)

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Approach

- Mention the constitutional provisions talking about India’s commitment for rural decentralisation
- Briefly talk how far India has been able to achieve these commitments
- Mention the challenges that hinder the decentralization process in the nation
- Conclude by suggesting a way forward

Introduction

India has a republican parliamentary democracy at the national level which is replicated at the level of states, which form the Union of India. The Constitution provided for decentralization in the form of a general directive to the State to establish Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) at the village level as the lowest rung of governance.

According to Article 40 of the Constitution, the State shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.”

Body

The introduction of Panchayati Raj signified the beginning of a new era of participatory development and laid the foundation of ‘democratic decentralization’ as it helped in:

- promoting people’s participation in rural development programmes;
- provided an institutional framework for popular administration;
- acted as a medium of social and political change;
- facilitated local mobilization; and
- prepared and assisted in the implementation of development plans.
- enabled the weaker social sections to voice their problems and encouraged the emergence of leadership among them.
- The panchayats were given the power and responsibility to plan and implement programmes to promote economic growth and social justice.

However, the promising start towards decentralization in most states has been out of sheen either under political pressure or due to changes in the growth strategies and policies of the government.

- The creation of panchayats was not followed up by the devolution of powers and resources to these bodies, stalling progress of the decentralization process in the country.
- Although the 73rd Amendment has visualized panchayats as institutions of self-government, these bodies have generally been viewed only as agents carrying out federal and state government programmes. Even for these, timely funds have not been made available to the panchayats.

- The planning process did not make much headway due to the lack of expertise and necessary information at the local level.
- Lack of involvement of rural poor in the development process, resulting in the marginalization of non-agricultural workers and landless labourers in economic development.
- Disregard of local resources, knowledge, skills and collective wisdom.
- A 'superior' attitude in government machinery at various levels and a 'passive' and 'servile' attitude among the rural poor.
- The imposition of development programmes without understanding local conditions; technology disseminators not tuned to local socio-economic and cultural realities.

Conclusion

The true potential of Article 40 lies not merely in its directive to set up village panchayats as part of a constitutionally formulated principle of state policy, but in the significant concomitant mandate that panchayats be endowed with "such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government". Thus the task would remain incomplete unless village panchayats begin to function as units of self-government as a part of a democratic polity

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