

Caste System and Panchayati Raj [UPSC Polity Notes]

Panchayati Raj is an important topic that covers many subjects under the UPSC syllabus. It comes under polity and governance, social issues, constitution and also under the social justice section of the [IAS exam](#). In this article, you can read all about the relation between the caste system in India and the Panchayati Raj institutions and how their functioning is affected by the caste factor.

Caste and Panchayat Raj

One of the major objectives of the [Panchayati Raj](#), as envisaged in the Constitution, is to use these institutions for meting out social justice, a goal which has particular relevance for women, and members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

- They are powerless and resourceless people and therefore, victims of oppression and exploitation.
- In Indian villages, people are still organised in a rigid hierarchical social order.
- The notion of hierarchy, which is inbuilt into the caste system, is based on the religious principle of purity and pollution.
- The age-old caste system is deeply rooted in the Indian Society and continues even now as one of the most blatant violations of the basic human right to equality.
- The treatment of certain classes of people especially in rural areas is unheard of anywhere else in the world.

It is evident that the upper castes who have been controlling the affairs of the village and the community, and the rural economy cannot tolerate the changes that are being brought about by the decentralised democratic institutions. Therefore, from the beginning of the implementation of the panchayat system, tensions, violence and killings have taken place in order to resist the transformation. The elections to the local government bodies have been the first and foremost point of attack by the casteist groups. From the very first election under the new system, the rights of the lower castes to participate in the democratic process and hold positions were questioned by the upper castes.

- This however also implies a change in the setup which is welcome because it is this change that will ultimately help in narrowing down these inequalities that are against basic human rights.
- One of the basic objectives of the decentralised system is to give opportunities to the marginalised groups and thus try and bring them on par with the people from the higher castes.
- It should be noted that empowering Dalits and marginalised groups through ensuring their participation in the decentralised mechanism was one of the stated objectives of the central act.

Ground Realities of Caste and Panchayats

However, the ground reality reflects some negative trends too. It was observed that high caste groups have resorted to various measures to dilute or sabotage the attempts to empower marginalised groups especially Dalits.

- There are instances where high caste groups challenge the reservation for scheduled caste/scheduled tribes in the court of law, and when this attempt fails they announce a boycott of elections.
- There are also numerous cases of violence against Dalits to prevent them from contesting elections or to influence them to favour other interest groups.

In India, no attempt can claim to be appropriate unless it is geared to meet the exploitative relations of semi-feudal agriculture, tenancy, landless labourers, famished peasantry and unemployment. Village panchayats can succeed in their objectives only when they can function within a relatively homogeneous social structure

in which there will be a minimum (ideally none at all) differentiation in regard to social relations. The nature of a society is reflected in the character of the state. Although the [Constitution](#) of India has the ideal of equality and social justice enshrined in it, the ground reality is altogether different.

The nature of the ruling party and the coalition also determine policies regarding decentralisation and transfer of power to the people at the village level.

- The experience shows that the constitutional mandate is not implemented in letter and spirit, especially regarding the panchayats and municipalities.
- The first instance is postponing panchayat elections on one pretext or the other.
- Several state governments have not taken the provision of the Constitution to hold elections on the expiry of the five-year term of the panchayats seriously.
- It may be stated here that there are no consistent and systematic attempts with a political will to combat casteism.
- The implementation of the legal provisions has been minimal and utterly insufficient and often the violators go unpunished.
- The members of the Indian Parliament belonging to the scheduled castes publicly acknowledged the government of India's unwillingness to enforce legal sanctions against casteism and the continued abuse of lower caste people.
- The fact remains that in spite of these issues, things to a large extent are moving in a more or less progressive direction.

Conclusion

The constitutional amendments regarding the panchayats along with the state legislations regarding the same have given rise to a system of governance and given grievance redressal a whole new dimension. The bringing to the fore of this local governance system has challenged the age-old practices of hierarchy in the rural areas of the country particularly those related to caste, religion and discrimination against women.

