

## The third tier

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Political legitimacy arising from active participation of people in grassroots governance is regarded as a litmus test for democracy. On April 24, 1993, India took a decisive step in meeting that objective. The Panchayati Raj Act conferred constitutional status on Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Though there were long debates on local-level democracy in the Constituent Assembly, in its first 42 years, the republic's Constitution reposed trust in the two-tier form of government — PRIs found a mention only in Directive Principles of State Policy. The Panchayati Raj Act not only institutionalised PRIs as the mandatory third tier of governance, it transformed the dynamics of rural development by giving a say to a large section of the people — significantly, women — in the administration of their localities. Yet, the churn precipitated by the Act has largely remained unexpressed in national-level politics. There are very few channels that connect the grassroots leader to the politics at higher levels.

Nowhere is this more true than in the representation of women. Women constitute more than 45 per cent of the nearly three million panchayat and gram sabha representatives in the country. In contrast, women's representation in the current Lok Sabha is barely 11 per cent. It's easy to dismiss the women in panchayats as proxies for their male relatives. However, as social scientists have argued, the fact that women come forward to contest elections, attend panchayat meetings and sit with men of different castes and age groups is itself a step towards empowerment. PRIs free women from the compulsion of tailoring politics to male-dictated agendas.

At the same time, the democratic potential of the PRIs remains limited. Most states have merely completed the formality of devolving powers. They have not followed this up with effective devolution, especially with respect to funds. Ideally, the PRIs should be formulating their own plans and executing them. But they remain dependent on Central and state government funds. At many places, PRIs have become adjuncts to Central and state-level administrative agencies. As the country celebrates 25 years of the Panchayat Raj Act, it should also debate why the churn at the grassroots has not found expression nationally.

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