



## Self-Government and human welfare in rural India: The role of local governance in development

Dr. Jayaprakash R

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Government First Grade College, Hosadurga, Chitradurga, Karnataka, India

### Abstract

The nationwide adoption of decentralization and people's participation in governance served as major milestone in the democratic process to make local self-government an essential part of India's body politics. The constitutional amendments known as the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act of 1992, however, were a transformative moment adding a new dimension to democratic decentralisation. This article explores local governance in India and its consequent role in deepening the political participation, promotion of inter-group social inclusion and conditionality of democratic accountability. It further critically examines the inherent problems — structural, political and fiscal — that limit its efficiency. Based on secondary literature and comparative analysis of the experiences at the two state levels, especially differences between Kerala and Uttar Pradesh, I argue that local governance in India is beyond merely administrative dispensation; it is woven into a developmental architecture whose democratic content holds implications for human welfare. Strong local government institutions are critical for deepening democracy and enhancing participatory governance, but they can play a possible role provided specific deeply entrenched impediments are overcome that are not simply structural but essentially political.

**Keywords:** Panchayati raj, local governance, democratic decentralization, grassroots democracy, social inclusion, india, kerala, uttar pradesh, participatory development

### Introduction

Veil of the superstructure the visible superstructure of India's political system is made up by the representative democracy, which have their moorings in state and national level institutions. But the content and endurance of democracy are also contingent on citizens themselves substantively participating from below in governance. For such a large, diverse and socially-complex country as this one, centralist models of rule are always going to be sub-optimal. They frequently overlook localized demands, perpetuate gaps in accountability and exclude communities from the levers of decision-making. As a result, decentralization has been primarily viewed not only as an administrative policy but also as the semantics of democracy—a route to make the state more responsive, accountable and approachable to its people.

The PRIs, which are conceived as instruments of a decentralized, government closest to the ordinary people in rural India and an interface between the state and its citizens, seek to eliminate these forests wider over. They aim to make power more accountable and people's participation in decisions that affect their daily lives a reality. The statutory embedding of the PRIs through the Seventy-third Amendment Act (1992), is one of the several important stages in Indian history for democratizing the state from its grassroots level. This article argues that local governance is an important pillar in the process of democratic consolidation and human development in India. It examines how self-governance is intimately entwined with the realization of democratic ideals in rural life, by tracing its institutional history, the configuration of democratic inputs and social-political effect, as well as ongoing challenges.

**The local government in India:** Aspirations and reality.

**The Evolution of Local Governance in India:** From Traditional Roots to Constitutional Mandate

The spirit of local self-government in India is not modern, it has a rich historical tradition. Informal village councils, by whatever name known in different regions, have overseen local affairs and ensured that disputes were settled and social peace preserved since long before the nation-state came to pass. Although these traditional institutions often mirrored and strengthened prevailing social hierarchies, they were founded on a concept of communal governance.

But this is not how the organic bodies were systematically subordinate in the colonial period. Local government institutions were reorganised largely as 'instruments of the state', instruments created to raise revenue and exercise administrative authority rather than enhance democratic participation. They were rendered very dependent, and worked without much democratic freedom in favour of the colonial government.

The post-independence phase of the country brought back on the scene the idea that democratic decentralisation was not only a matter of philosophical obligation but also a course betides for development. The Constitution's directive principles of state policy (Article 40) specifically enjoin the state to take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function. This vision got some organic expression in the landmark Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report (1957) which was formulated around key concepts like "democratic decentralization" and "people's participation". It recommended a three-tier system—Gram Panchayat (village), Panchayat Samiti (block) and Zila Parishad (district)—as the main vehicle of local planning and development.

The plan seemed promising, but over the following decades, implementation was patchy. PRIs in many instances remained simply in name, characterised by protracted supersessions, fractional and irregular elections and near zero financial devolution along with no functional

autonomy. They were still subject to the vagaries of state governments and often got outflanked by line departments of the state administration. This was a time that highlighted the disconnect between lip service and genuine empowerment.

The watershed moment was ushered when the Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act came along in 1992. This changed the local government picture by giving PRIs a new status of importance in the constitution and making them compulsory for all states. The reforms and their most important provisions were meant to breathe some energy into the system, and stem its exclusivity:

**Ordinary Elections:** Compulsory elections every 5 years; there is also a special provision for reconstitution within 6 months of dissolution.

**Reservations:** Third of all seats and chairpersons reserved for women, other than reservation for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) in proportion to population.

**Institutional arrangement:** Constitution of SFCs (by government order) for recommending devolution of funds and creation of SECs to conduct elections.

Gram Sabha was considered the basic unit of direct democracy.

This constitutionalization firmly embedded grassroots institutions in the structure of Indian democracy, opening up previously unheard-of channels for political voice and participation, especially those representatives of historically oppressed groups.

**Panchayati Raj Institutions:** Salient Features of its Architecture, Functions and Democratic credentials.

**This system of Panchayati Raj is three tiers:** Gram Panchayat, at the village level; Panchayat Samiti, at the block level; and Zila Parishad at the district level. Their role, etched in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution, includes 29 subjects including agriculture, land improvement and water management to education, health and sanitation poverty alleviation and social welfare.

In the PRI platform, the Gram Sabha – or village council – is central. Gram Sabha is a purest form of the direct democracy and envisaged as supreme body which give consent to plans, supervise implementation and overseeing activities performed by elected Gram Panchayat. It is a principal platform for participatory planning, the primary space in which development priorities are intended to be discerned through collective Discussion.

The revolutionary reservation-policy has been the centrepiece of the PRI structure. By ensuring representation of women, SCs and STs in elected office, the amendment has effectively effected the conscious transformation of local power relations. The downside of this has been far more than merely symbolism: in opening the door for previously marginalized groups to enter formal decision-making arenas, traditional domination by a small elite has been confronted and a more representative democracy nurtured. The citizens are physically closer to the system of governance, which on paper increases transparency and accountability so that citizens are able to "see" and have a say in what is happening.

## Literature Review: Theoretical Foundations and Evidence Evaluation

The normative case for democratic decentralization is strong, based on subsidiarity, participation, accountability and empowerment. It is in perfect sync with Gandhian philosophy, which envisioned "village republics" (Gram Swaraj) as the ethical and structural base of a genuine democratic India based on self-reliant communities running their own show.

The academic literature on decentralization in India provides some nuance. Mathew (2000) [7] called the 73rd Amendment a "silent revolution" for enlarging space of democratic participation on dramatic scale. More specifically, scholars such as Behar and Kumar (2002) [1] have studied how women and other marginalized groups are increasingly represented in PRIs, resulting in changing local power structures although unevenly. The empirical evidence, such as Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) [2], demonstrated the early evidence that women pradhans (council heads) were likely to spend more on public goods followed closely with what women actually wanted indicating that descriptive representation can make a difference in practice.

The Kerala case is widely researched as an example of a successful decentralized system. The People's Plan Campaign of 1996, which delegated a significant degree of planning powers and resources to local institutions – the decentralised planning machinery in Kerala as well as Panchayat bodies – illustrated that when local institutions have real authority, can be rooted in political will, and are nurtured by vigorous civic mobilisation they can act as agents of active citizenship as well social development (Heller, 2001) [5].

But an equally large literature points to ongoing pathologies. Manor (1999) [6] and others have raised the spectre of "elite capture," where established majority groups appropriate and pervert new agencies to perpetuate dominance. Apart from classic bureaucratic resistance, state-level politicians and officials have also been unwilling to let real power slip through their fingers: This has led to inadequate fiscal devolution and the continued exclusion of PRIs. This has frequently resulted in the "emptying out" of decentralisation, where PRIs are assigned powers but not provided with the correlative resources, or that are sometimes referred to as decentralisation of powerlessness.

## Research Questions and Objectives

This study is informed by the following related research questions:

How is the local level of government contributing towards strengthening democracy and wellbeing of people in rural India?

In what way Panchayati Raj Institutions have led to mass political participation?

What social inclusion and democratic accountability benefits derive from PRIs?

What are the key structural, political and financial hindrances to good local government?

What effect do intra-state differences have on the quality and results of local democracy?

## The Study Aims

The historical and constitutional voyage of local government in India.

To assess what role PRIs, play in promoting local democracy, political participation and social inclusion.

To assess what structural and political barriers are hampering their ability.

To compare performances of Indian States.

To recommend to the support for democratic decentralization.

### **Local Government and the Promotion of Democratic Development and Good Governance: A Strategy for Human Welfare**

Well-functioning local governance is also a great rein to deepen democracy and improve welfare. The first being that it opens up the political space beyond a one-off national election. Local government elections held regularly and in which they compete on extremely local issues politicise the population, promote political consciousness among people, create a cohort of committed grassroots leaders. In its optimum form, the Gram Sabha is a school of democracy, instructing citizens on how to deliberate and negotiate effectively with authority, or assert themselves as democratic claimants.

Secondly, the inclusionary mandate of reservations has worked to bring in a radical democratizing force. More than direct administration, it is the presence of over 1.4 million women elected representatives that has slowly started to change societal attitudes about gender and policy priorities, despite innumerable challenges. Likewise, SC/ST representatives find themselves in a position to express the concerns of their community as opposed to long-standing exclusion and claim a right to govern. This has led to a more diverse and representative public sphere.

Third, local governance may also contribute to developmental effectiveness and welfare impacts. Simple proximity makes for a better recognition of local needs and priorities, which entail more relevant and tailored actions. Adaptive participatory planning approaches can be directed at optimising resource allocation, minimising corruption and maximising ownership of development among citizens, hence increasing sustainability.

### **Persistent Challenges to Grassroots Democracy**

Although the Constitution prescribed it, and despite significant achievements, grass-roots democracy is facing several formidable hurdles that are holding back its transformational potential.

**Half-step Devolution:** The greatest wall perhaps is the disparity between the transferred responsibility and devolved authority. Most states have shown reluctance to fully devolve the 3 Fs (function, functionaries and funds) to PRIs. They still rely heavily on discretionary grants from state governments rather than having strong, own-source revenues. This economic dependence limits their freedom and room for manoeuvre.

**Bureaucratic Inertia and Political Resistance:** State bureaucrats often see PRIs as competitors, not coworkers, and do everything they can to block the transfer of authority over departmental personnel and resources. Likewise, empowered local bodies may be seen as threats by state legislators and political parties to their own powers of influence and patronage which may result in the interference in-and curtailment of- PRI authority by politicians.

**Social Barriers and Elite Capture:** Inter-generational social hierarchies continue to exist along lines of caste, class and gender and do not disappear with the introduction of electoral reservations. "Proxy rule" or "back seat driving", where powerful figures ensure the reserved-seat representatives towed their line, are not rare. Control can also enable dominant groups to appropriate PRI resources and decision-making, marginalizing the concerns of the poor and powerless.

**Capacity Gaps:** A number of the elected representatives, especially those who were newly entering politics in their first term and had come from weaker sections lacked the administrative and technical expertise to deal with complex planning, budgeting and project implementation. If they are not continuously supported to build their capacity, they may develop dependence on bureaucratic staff that does not enable them to have agency.

**Lacking Gram Sabhas:** Many times, Sethias hold Gram Sabha meetings which are attended by a few people and are not democratic. Ignorance, social pressure, and apathy render this linchpin of direct rule out for the count.

Asymmetric Practice across States Patterns of functioning of the PRIs are not homogenous but in fact varies widely from state to state, which reflects varying degrees of political willingness and historical contexts as well as strength of civil society.

### **A Tale of Two States: Kerala and Uttar Pradesh**

A comparison between Kerala and Uttar Pradesh reveals how state-centric factors play a crucial role in the functioning of local governance.

Kerala is a demonstration of empowered devolution. And a strong political consensus across the political spectrum and clear citizen-led mobilisation on the ground, resulted in the state launching its People's Plan Campaign, decentralising as much as 40% of its plan budget to local bodies. It created large capacities, facilitated participatory resource mapping and planning through Gram Sabhas, building partnerships between elected representatives, civil society organizations and technical experts. The results have translated into improvements in local infrastructure, social services and a sense of citizen agency at the grass-roots level so that decentralization has directly been linked to human development achievements.

Uttar Pradesh, on the other hand, is a textbook example of limited devolution. "Though PRIs are structurally well defined, their autonomy is extremely circumscribed by strong political influence of the state government and local-level politicians. Financial decentralization is low and highly skewed while bureaucratic power is omnipresent. Social hierarchies are sharp and can in some cases prevent the feminist or dalit representatives from being effectively integrated, while they risk serious forms of social ostracism and violence. The Gram Sabha is often a powerless body. As a result, the potential of PRIS as drivers of democratic consolidation and equitable development has been widely underutilized, and their effects on welfare have been weakened.

This division highlights that the constitutional architecture is a sine qua non, but not enough. The nature of local democracy is, in the final instance, a function of political wills, bureaucratic ethos, chalupaan (civil society politics) and maushesta (social empowerment).

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Local Self Government, as an entity in the form of Panchayati Raj Institutions, is the base of democracy in India. There is no doubt that it has expanded the democratic space, institutionalised unprecedented social inclusion and had a positive impact on means of participatory development and accountability. The shift from village councils to constitutionally recognised organs of self-governance has indeed been a vital decentring of political space.

Nevertheless, local self-governance as an agent of human welfare and deep democracy has been realised only half way, till today. The transformative reach of a PRI remains consistently limited by political unwillingness, administrative inflexibility, fiscal parsimony and enduring social inequalities. Kerala's example versus Uttar Pradesh tells us that it's not so much the nomenclature but political and societal will that can make the system like a Panchayat Raj work or not.

#### A renewed commitment is necessary to realise the full promise of the 73rd Amendment

**Deepening Fiscal Devolution:** Adhere to the recommendations by State Finance Commission in letter and spirit enable a reduction from pernicious dependency AND to build an own-source revenue base of PRIs.

**Empower through the 3 Fs:** Deliver real devolution of Functions, Functionaries and Finances in the true spirit of federalism as enshrined in our Constitution with legally mandated levels of funding.

**Invest on Capacity Development:** Building strong and continuing systems of training the elected representatives as well as PRI functionaries in governance, finance, technology related domains.

**Strengthening the Gram Sabha:** Revive the Gram Sabha through technology, social mobilization and awareness campaigns as a dynamic space for debate and accountability.

**To fight Social Exclusion:** Empower the elected representatives of disadvantaged sections by giving them legal aid, social protection and an inclusive political culture will resist elite capture and proxy control.

**Promoting political consensus:** Develop cross partisan consensus at the state level on the centrality of local governance and make it immune to political contestation.

In sum, local self-governing units are not a tier of governance. Rather, it is the foundation on which a dynamic, inclusive and accountable Indian democracy will be built. It is not only a matter of improving service delivery, but raising citizenship – and that means nurturing Panchayati Raj Institutions as the “roots of democracy,” being built on which citizens with dignity and pride could be no fewer human beings or nationals than their wealthier neighbours.

### References

1. Behar A, Kumar Y. Decentralization in India: Challenges and Opportunities. New Delhi, Centre for Policy Research, 2002.

2. Chattopadhyay R, Duflo E. Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from an India Randomized Policy Experiment. *Econometrica*, 2004;72(5):1409–1443.
3. Government of India. The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act. New Delhi, Government of India, 1992.
4. Government of India. Report of the Team for the Study of Community Projects and National Extension Service (Balwant Rai Mehta Committee). New Delhi, Government of India, 1957.
5. Heller P. Moving the State: The Politics of Democratic Decentralization in Kerala, South Africa, and Porto Alegre. *Politics and Society*, 2001;29(1):131–163.
6. Manor J. The Economics and Politics of Democratic Decentralization. Washington DC, World Bank, 1999.
7. Mathew G. Local Governance: Perspective and Experience. In Mathew G, editor. Status of Panchayati Raj in the State of India. New Delhi, Institute of Social Science, 2000.
8. Shah G. Democracy, Decentralization and Development. New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1996.