

Expansion of Village Republics Gram Sabhas and Governance in India

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The paper highlights rural village structure in expanding different welfare activities of different governments and governance.

1. Introduction

Indian States and territories frequently use different Local titles for the same level of subdivision (e.g. Mandalas in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana correspond to Tehsils of Uttarpradesh and other Hindi speaking states but to Talukas of Gujarat, Goa, Karnataka Kerala, Maharashtra and Tamilnadu. The smaller subdivisions (Village & and Blocks) exist only in rural areas. In Urban areas, urban local bodies exist instead of these rural divisions. It gradually transformed into a system where control over power and resources has steadily moved away from citizens. During the Indian freedom struggle, democracy was not viewed merely as a process of transferring power. Sustained fiscal commitment has driven rural transformation, with rural development Budget allocations rising over 211 per cent from ₹87,765 crore in 2016-17 to ₹2.73 crore (2026-27). Women led collectives anchor last mile delivery, mobilizing ₹10.05 crore women across ₹90.09 lakh SHGs support by ₹9 lakh community cadres. Rural connectivity is near universal, with budgetary allocation for Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana increasing from ₹12,581 crore in 2016-17 to ₹19000 crore in 2026-27 an increasing of 51%. Housing led security has expanded at scale, with ₹3.70 crore rural homes built over 11 years, budgetary allocations for PMAY-G (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Grameen) increasing from ₹15,000 crore in 2016-17 to ₹54,916.70 crore in 2026-27 an approximately to increasing over the 266.1%.

Rather, it was imagined as a comprehensive reorganisation of society, one where citizens did not exist solely as the governed but also as participants in the process of governance¹. In today's time, the Indian Constitution and constitutional system are regarded as exemplary models of democracy across the world. Yet, it is necessary to make them more effective and just. The most pragmatic and ethical path forward would be to abolish, as soon as possible, the remnants of colonial laws and structures that stand in contradiction to the spirit and potential of Panchayati Raj. The Southern Zonal Council to comprising Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Pondicherry, Tamilnadu and Telangana.

2. Decentralised Governance:

The sixth schedule of the constitution of India allows for the formation of autonomies administrative divisions which have been given autonomy within their respective states. Currently, Super district administrative divisions exist 18 of the 28 states and 3 of the 8 Union Territories. States and Territories of which there are 775 (as of 2022). Each District is headed by an IAS officer called District Magistrate. At present, Andhra Pradesh had 28 Districts Tamilnadu has 38 districts, Karnataka 31 districts, Kerala 14 Districts, Telangana 33 districts Puducherry 4 districts. Each Gram Panchayat

covers a large village of a cluster of small villages with a Combined population exceeding 500 Gram Sabha. Clusters of villages are also sometimes called Hobli or Patti. Certain Government functions and activities including clean water availability, rural development and education are tracked at a sub-village level. These hamlets are termed habitations. In some states most villages have single habitations. India is composed of 1, 71, 56 habitations. In some states most villages have a single habitation; in others (Kerala and Tripura) there is a high ratio of habitations to villages.

3. Gandhi's Gram Swaraj: Democracy, justice, and sustainability

Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj placed villages at the moral centre of Indian democracy. He envisaged villages as 'little republics' self-reliant, participatory communities where decisions emerged from the Gram Sabha. Gram Swaraj was also deeply ecological. Gandhi argued for local control over land, water, forests, and livelihoods, warning that extractive development would intensify inequality and environmental degradation. In today's context of climate change, groundwater depletion, and fragile rural livelihoods, Sustainable development cannot be delivered through centralised blueprints alone; it requires empowered local institutions capable of managing commons, resolving conflicts, and balancing equity with ecological limits².

4. Deliberative Democracy in Action: Strengthening India's Grassroots Republic

On January 26, 2025, India will enter its 76th year as a democratic republic, a milestone that invites reflection on its journey toward becoming one of the world's most vibrant democracies. Rural India, with around 0.25 million local governments and approximately 3.1 million elected representatives, is at the forefront of this democratic experiment, poised to take democratic values and practices to the next level. A silent yet powerful movement is emerging to strengthen democratic spaces through deliberation, consensus-building, and participatory decision-making, enabling local communities to shape their futures in alignment with their aspirations and dreams³.

4.1 Gram Panchayat Ramtila: A Unique Case Study

In the tribal block of Bijadnadi, Gram Panchayat Ramtila stands out for its distinctive democratic practices. The Panchayat is led by women, including the chairperson, while a tribal leader, Mr. Bharat, who serves as the chairman of 186 tribal leaders, resides in this Panchayat. "There is tremendous pressure as well as excitement when I prepare myself for the Gram Sabha," says Munki Bai Narreti the woman Sarpanch. Her statement reflects the complex dynamics of a Gram Sabha, a village assembly comprising all citizens above eighteen years of age and elected Panchayat representatives. As the Panchayat operates under the PESA (Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, the traditional leader chairs the Gram Sabha instead of the formal Panchayat chairperson. Active citizenship fuelled by Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), and youth networks is the backbone of this participatory governance⁴.

4.2 Democratizing Aspirations in Bhatadungariya

Gram Panchayat Bhatadungariya, situated in the same district. Predominantly tribal and surrounded by reserved forests, the Panchayat faces numerous challenges despite receiving routine grants from central and state Finance Commissions and funds through MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) known as Viksit Bharat – Guarantee for Rozgar and

Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) **VB-G RAM G Act, 2025**. This new framework aims to align with Viksit Bharat 2047, increasing guaranteed employment from 100 to 125 days per rural household. Community aspirations often exceed the available resources. Women dream of quality education and healthcare for their children, young girls aspire to pursue higher studies, and youth envision starting enterprises to avoid migration. Initially, most funds were allocated to essential infrastructure projects, leaving little for human development needs. However, transformative changes began when the Panchayat collaborated with women's collectives to tackle these challenges. Through coordinated planning and deliberation, they addressed unmet demands like constructing a boundary wall for the Anganwadi Centre. By leveraging resources from public programs and community contributions, they devised innovative solutions to local issues.

4.3 Local Governance: A Republic in Action

The rural India, where communities continuously reimagine, the republic envisioned in the Indian Constitution. The collective action, and mutual assistance, forming the social fabric necessary for democratic governance. Institutions such as local governments, women's collectives, and user associations play a critical role in mobilizing resources and addressing locality-specific needs sustainably. Over the last two decades, the growing presence of Panchayats, cooperatives, and other community-based organizations has enabled communities to assert greater control over decisions affecting their lives. This localized governance model has proven particularly effective during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating that one-size-fits-all solutions are inadequate. Communities need the freedom and capacity to develop context-specific solutions.

4.4 Challenges to Grassroots Democracy

Despite these successes, several challenges hinder the full realization of grassroots democracy. The devolution of power to Panchayats remains uneven, often constrained by political centralization. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment which enshrined Panchayats as institutions of self-governance—has not been fully implemented, with significant gaps in the transfer of functions, finances, and functionaries to local bodies. Additionally, inadequate civic education undermines citizens' understanding of the distinct roles of central, state, and local governments, limiting their ability to hold institutions accountable.

5. A Path Forward

The Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) has emerged as a critical tool for participatory planning over the past five years. Guidelines from the Ministry of Panchayati Raj emphasize the convergence of resources to set local development agendas and localize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Collaborative efforts between women's collectives and Panchayats have shown promising results, fostering social equality and enhancing the democratic functioning of local governments. Women have actively engaged with elected representatives, reinforcing their institutional capacity while ensuring accountability. To overcome persistent challenges, locality or neighbourhood compacts—inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's vision of self-governance offer a promising institutional framework. These locality compacts encourage collaboration between local governments, community-based organizations, and frontline workers, creating a development model tailored to local needs.

6. Republic Day 2026: Renewing the democratic compact

As India commemorates Republic Day in 2026, the case for strong local governance has never been more urgent. Rapid urbanisation, climate vulnerability, agrarian distress, and widening inequalities demand governance systems that are responsive, participatory, and trusted. This requires moving beyond token decentralisation towards genuine devolution of functions, finances, and functionaries. The most meaningful tribute to the Constitution on Republic Day is not ceremonial display, but the everyday practice of democracy where people live and work. Strengthening local governance is not merely an administrative reform; it is a constitutional imperative. Only by deepening democracy at the grassroots can India ensure that the Republic remains not just sovereign, but just, sustainable, and inclusive⁵.

6.1 Local governance, social justice, and development goals

Republic Day also demands renewed attention to the Constitution's promise of justice social, economic, and political. Local governance institutions are uniquely positioned to address entrenched inequalities of caste, gender, and class. Reservations in Panchayats and municipalities have transformed the social profile of political leadership, but representation has not always translated into substantive power. Progress on poverty reduction, health, education, gender equality, and environmental sustainability earlier framed as the Millennium Development Goals and now as the Sustainable Development Goals ultimately depends on local action. This is especially evident in tribal regions, where PESA-recognised Gram Sabhas are constitutionally mandated to manage forests, water bodies, minor minerals, and land in accordance with traditional and indigenous practices—offering India a powerful but underutilised model of democratic environmental governance. Climate resilience, water security, waste management, and sustainable livelihoods cannot be achieved without empowered Panchayats and municipalities that plan in local contexts and are accountable to their communities.

6.2 Empowered communities, empowered villages, and an empowered republic

When resources are largely controlled by the state, the decision-making capacity of the gram sabha and the role of local communities becomes limited. However, while it is possible to trace the trajectory of this weakening of community rights over the decades, there is also a parallel story of struggle and mobilisation to be found in the history of the Indian republic from what began in Aundh in 1938–39 to now. Time and time again, rural communities have raised their voices to demand that all laws related to water, forests, and land be amended or repealed in accordance with the core spirit of Panchayati Raj. In the republic of a developed India, recognising the gram sabha as the fundamental unit for governance of resources is essential to realising the true possibilities of local self-governance.

It is on this foundation that a developed India can successfully realise its democratic ideals and Gram Swaraj, and make the republic more vibrant as a confederation of autonomous, independent, and self-reliant villages.

6.3 Self-governance and Panchayati Raj: Past, present, and future

Several decades after the Indian Constitution came into force, a broader political consensus gradually emerged around the Panchayati Raj system. In 1992, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were granted constitutional status through the *73rd Amendment* to the Constitution. The amendment formally established a three-tier structure of rural self-governance at the village, block, and district levels to empower local communities; ensure grassroots democracy; mandate regular elections; and provide

reservation of seats for women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes. Part IX and the Eleventh Schedule were added to the Constitution, placing responsibility on the states to institute these ‘units of self-governance’. While these developments can be viewed as a culmination of the long history of experiments with republican governance in India, the gap between the Swaraj Constitution of 1939 and the constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj in 1992 cannot be explained merely in terms of the passage of time. In the intervening decades, numerous policy choices, ideological debates, and administrative frameworks shaped governance, development, and nation-building. Consequently, given the historical and political context, several practical questions emerged regarding the ideals and prospects of Panchayati Raj. While decentralisation of the republic has continued to be discussed at the level of emotional rhetoric and even policy, in actuality, control over village resources had already become heavily concentrated in the hands of the state in the initial decades after Independence. This structural contradiction prevented the efforts towards decentralisation from achieving their desired outcomes.

7. Community Development Programmes

Community Development in India was initiated by Govt.of India through Community Development programme (CDP) in 1952. The focus of CDP was on rural Communities. But professionally trained social workers concentrated their practice in urban areas. The United Nations defines Community development as a process where Community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problem. It is a broad concept, applied to the practices of civic leader’s activists, in involved citizens and professionals to improve various aspects of Communities, typically aiming to build stronger and more resilient local Communities CDP seeks to empower individuals and groups of people with their Communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest in Urban and rural settings. The Community Development Journal, published by oxford University press, since 1966 has aimed to be the major forum for research and dissemination of international Community development theory and practice⁶.

8. Village Earth:

The Consortium for Sustainable Village-based Development Village earth is a publicly supported by Non-Government organisation (NGO) based in Fort Collins, Colorado, US. The organisation works for the empowerment of rural and indigenous Communities around the world with active projects with the Oglala Lakota on the pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, The shipIbo-Konibo of the Amazon region of Peru, India, Cambodia and Guatemala, village earth is associated with the International Institute for sustainable Development at Colorado state University. A low cost rural development source initiated by Volunteers in Asia in 1975 but transferred to village earth in 1995.

8.1 Village Republics: Gram Sabha:

A gram sabha is an assembly of all eligible voters in a village and its formation similar to a legislative Assembly. A gram sabha approves all village plans, supervises their implementation and monitors the elected Panchayat, members: A gram sabha reviews 200 development schemes. As India celebrates its 30th Anniversary of 1992 Constitutional Amendment, that gave legal backing to the Panchuyat-Raj system by making India’s governance three tier – the union, state and local governments - one of the biggest Contributions of the amendment has been the formalising of the Gram – Sabha.

The demanding to governance system based on the existing village republics. Mahatma Gandhi fiercely advocated for such a body to drive the self-reliant villages. In 1992 amendment reduced the Panchayat-Raj system making it the World's, largest experiment in decentralised Governance. Kerala took up peoples campaigns to make decentralised planning for villages, with gram sahas at the core of the planning. As Panchayats are now the prime executors of rural development schemes, with budgets over Rs 1.5 lakh crores. Panchayats are still considered the most corrupt among the three tiers. The rise of Gram sabha reflects the need for further deepening of decentralised governance through direct involvement of the voters. If anything is to be celebrated in the Panchayat Raj, it is this evolution⁷.

9. Firka Development in Andhra Pradesh:

In Andhra Pradesh as Prakasam was interested in Panchayat-Raj and Self-Government for villages. Firka development should be organised on the following main centres Agriculture and village industries, sanitation and health, village education, village organisation, village culture, under agriculture there should be balanced cultivation, minor irrigation like tanks, wells etc. The conversation of the soil, vegetables and gardening, fruit tree planting, poultry farming, bee keeping, sheep rearing, fish culture, Sericulture, animal husbandry, village dairies amenities of cattle, common pasture land. Firka Development is one of the chief achievements of the Prakasam Ministry. Had it been continued after him, it would have change the complexion of villages and made them self-sufficient and prosperous, there would not have been migration of villages to cities⁸.

The village Panchayats should not be merely administrative Units. They should provide training facilities to the villagers in civic duties and responsibilities. Every villager should know his right and duties and true knowledge of citizenship. They should also take up the tasks of internal reforms like abolition of common vices like gambling, drinking, Superstitions, Untouchability and other evils. As long as prakasam was chief Minister, Panchayat system worked excellently, Even Gandhiji appreciated it. Galbraith, U.S. Ambassador to India calls "Democracy A Functioning Anarchy". The elections are the bedrock of one democracy and the following factors play their role like (1) Corruption (2) Criminalisation of politics (3) Caste factor. The common man is fed up with slat blatant corruption. There is no accountability to the people.

10. Denmark Rural Society:

Let us see the European countries and their achievements. It would suffice to say that various factors like land reforms, Cooperative movement, establishment of Folk High Schools mechanisation of farming, industrialisation, initiation of welfare measures and emphasis on women's education, gender equality, all within the fold of democracy were responsible for this stupendous achievement⁹.

11. Conclusion:

Historically and by evolution man is changing and many welfare measure were taken up in India and abroad. Nature is guiding man. Education has brought changes in Communities. Each ruler is doing same reforms and looking welfare in different aspect. In democracy, every ruler wants to rule longer period by bringing innovations and vote bank polities. West took many reforms and India is going in its own regional parties and national parties objectives looking towards west. However, Eastern Countries are lagging behind west. As India steps into its 76th year as a democratic republic, the promise of deliberative democracy shines brightest in its rural heartlands. Local governance, with its participatory

ethos and citizen-centred approach, serves as a nursery for nurturing democratic values. By empowering communities to actively shape their futures, Panchayats and associated institutions exemplify the republic's ideals of "*government by the people, for the people.*"

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Appendix – I

Certain Central Sector Programmes

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3. Rural reconstruction, 1979
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5. Dept., of Drinking water and Sanitation, 1999.
6. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural employment Guarantee scheme, 2005
7. National Rural Livelihoods Mission
8. Pradhana Mantri Awaas Yijane
9. Pradava Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana
10. National Social Assistance programme
11. Shyama Prasad Mukerjee Rurban Mission
12. Integrated Watershed Management Programme
13. Electronic Fund Management system
14. Aadhar seeding
15. Geo-Tagging
16. Social Audit system
17. Indira Gandhi old age pension scheme
18. Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme
19. Annapurna

20. Deen Dayal Upadhya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana
21. Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana
22. Integrated Rural Development programme
23. Antyodaya Diwas
24. Aajeevika Skills
25. Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojan Records
26. Digital India Land Reconds Modernisation Programme
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Source: India 22, p.49.