

Functioning Of the Panchayati Raj System in Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

This article examines the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh within the broader context of democratic decentralisation in India. Rather than treating decentralisation as an abstract constitutional ideal, the study approaches it as a lived administrative and political process operating at the district level. Drawing on secondary data from constitutional provisions, state legislation, government reports, and peer-reviewed scholarship, the paper analyses institutional design, political representation, functional performance, and fiscal practices of PRIs in Kangra. The analysis suggests that while Panchayats in the district have achieved a degree of institutional stability and inclusiveness, particularly through reservations and electoral participation, their capacity for autonomous local governance remains constrained by fiscal dependence, uneven administrative support, and bureaucratic mediation. The paper contributes to district-specific empirical literature on Panchayati Raj by highlighting how scale and institutional density shape governance outcomes.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, decentralisation, local governance, Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh

1. Introduction

Democracy has very much been a necessary part of India's way of living. From ancient times itself, we find its grains deep-rooted within our conscience. In the midst of the autocratic rulers, we find examples of republics such as Vajji and Kosala during the Mahajanpad era and similar such examples during the Gupta and post-Gupta eras as well. What also needs to be considered is that it is not as if these democratic institutions existed only at the topmost level alone, but we find their penetration deep towards the lowest levels as well. During the Vedic age, we find references to participatory institutions such as 'sabha' and 'samiti', which discussed administrative, judicial and societal matters, and the Rajan (ruler) also had to take their recommendations into consideration while deciding things (Basham, 2004, pp. 109-111). Similarly, during the Mauryan period we find references to village officials like 'Gramika'; Kautilya, in his Arthashastra, also talks about village assemblies, which were collectively responsible for revenue, judicial and law enforcement responsibilities (Kautilya, 1992, pp. 240-242). Similar village systems were found during the Gupta and post-Gupta period as well, which handled societal and judicial matters at the lowest levels. A very popular case in point is that of the Chola ruler Parantaka I's 'Uttaramerur' inscription, which extensively talks about the composition, election procedures, and functions of the village assemblies (sabha/ur) and its committees (variyaams) (Sastri, 1975, pp. 486-520). The trend

continued further during the mediaeval times as well, which is very telling considering the fact that although Muslim dynasties ruled the greater part of India during these times and introduced different innovations at the central level, the village administration remained quite similar to ancient practices, although understandably with certain modifications according to changed circumstances. During the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal period, panchayats served more judicial and social roles (Habib, 1999, pp. 67-69). During the British rule, the functioning of panchayats got deeply affected because of the presence of a centralised bureaucracy and judicial formalism (Metcalf, 2012, pp. 93-95). However, certain efforts were made to revive them with Lord Ripon's resolution (1882), the Royal Commission on Decentralisation (1907) and the Government of India Act, 1935. They tried to provide some reforms to strengthen local self-government in villages, but the overall functioning of the panchayats remained weak. The structure of the present-day system of Panchayati Raj owes much to the developments post India's independence. Mahatma Gandhi, one of the most important personalities related to India's freedom struggle, was an ardent supporter of Gram Swaraj, a system of self-reliant village republics and decentralised democracy. Panchayats had a very dominant role to play in his scheme of things, so naturally after independence, his ideas formed the basis on which the Panchayati Raj structure was drawn, and Article 40 of the Indian Constitution directly reflects it (Austin, 1999, pp. 51-52). After independence, the Nehruvian government sought to implement it in practice, for which the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) was constituted. It recommended a three-tier Panchayati Raj system, consisting of Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Panchayat. Further developments came with the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee, which suggested the creation of a two-tier system and involvement of political parties at the local level. The G.K.V. Rao committee (1985) emphasised developing as institutions of development administration, and the L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986) recommended constitutional status for panchayats with regular elections to be held for choosing the representatives. Constitutional status was guaranteed by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, which added part IX to the Constitution and articles from 243 to 243O, introducing a three-tier structure of panchayats, regular elections after every five years, reservations for SCs, STs and women (minimum 33%) and a State Finance Commission and State Election Commission as overseeing bodies (Maheshwari, 2021, pp. 210-235). It is after it that Panchayats truly became institutions of self-government and not merely advisory bodies. In the present times, Panchayats play an increasing role in rural development, social justice, and welfare schemes (Beteille, 2006, pp. 172-174).

The history of Panchayati Raj of Himachal Pradesh in modern times dates to the pre-independence era. The first such system was established in 1954, post the Himachal Pradesh Panchayat Act, 1952. The act aimed at providing an institutional basis to local self-governance in rural areas. Thus, Himachal took a pioneer role in championing the cause of local self-government (Government of Himachal Pradesh, Panchayati Raj Department, 2025). Post 1 November 1966, after hilly areas of Punjab were merged into Himachal Pradesh and in line with the Balwant Rai Mehta recommendations (1957), the number of Gram Panchayats present increased significantly in number to 1695. While the Punjab hill regions followed a three-tier system, the rest of Himachal had a two-tier system (Government of Himachal Pradesh, Panchayati Raj Department, 2025). To do away with this parallel system, the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act of 1968 was brought, which introduced a uniform two-tier Panchayati Raj structure (Government of Himachal Pradesh, Panchayati Raj Department, 2025). Next, substantial change into the legislative framework came after the Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. In order to

match with the changed architecture, Himachal Pradesh repealed the 1968 Act and introduced the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994. It aligned the states' PRI system with constitutional requirements, establishing a three-tier Panchayati Raj structure, with clearly defined powers for Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads (The Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994). Post-1994, the PRI structure of the state has continued to evolve according to changing needs, such as the creation and reorganisation of new Gram Panchayats. Another significant reform which introduced widespread change in the working of Panchayats was that of the Himachal Pradesh Panchayat Raj [Amendment Act], 2008, which introduced 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj bodies, significantly exceeding the one-third level mandated by the 73rd Amendment, which has been a great boon for women's empowerment in the state (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2008, p. 61).

The Panchayati Raj system represents the constitutional foundation of grassroots democracy in rural India. Conceived as a mechanism to deepen democratic participation and improve administrative responsiveness, decentralisation seeks to relocate decision-making closer to citizens. The Seventy Third Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 marked a decisive moment by granting constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and mandating regular elections, reservations, and financial oversight mechanisms (Government of India, 1992, pp. 9–14). However, the mere existence of constitutional provisions does not automatically ensure effective decentralisation. The actual functioning of PRIs depends on how these provisions are translated into administrative practice at the local level.

Himachal Pradesh is often cited in decentralisation literature as a relatively successful case due to early legislative adoption and comparatively high social indicators. Within the state, Kangra district occupies a distinctive position. As the most populous district with the highest number of Gram Panchayats, Kangra provides a useful lens for examining how Panchayati Raj functions under conditions of institutional scale and administrative complexity. This paper analyses the functioning of PRIs in Kangra district with particular attention to representation, development planning, service delivery, and fiscal capacity.

2. Constitutional and Legislative Framework

The constitutional framework for Panchayati Raj is provided under Part IX of the Constitution of India, introduced through the Seventy-Third Amendment. The amendment envisages a three-tier structure of rural local government, periodic elections, and reservations for women and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In compliance with these provisions, Himachal Pradesh enacted the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994. The Act defines the powers, responsibilities, and jurisdiction of Panchayats at different levels and establishes mechanisms for administrative supervision and financial transfers. The Act prescribes a three-level division of the Panchayati system in Kangra, namely, Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads. Furthermore, the act also provides that Gram Panchayats of the region also have the power to hear minor civil and criminal cases (Singh, 2015, pp. 305-312).

Scholars have noted that while the Act offers a relatively detailed legal framework, the effectiveness of devolution depends less on statutory intent and more on administrative and political practice (Mathew, 1994, pp. 56–58). The difference is sharper in Kangra, where the Panchayats function in a dense institutional setting with multiple line departments and development agencies.

3. Kangra District: Administrative and Panchayati Profile

Kangra is the largest district of Himachal Pradesh in terms of population and number of Gram Panchayats. The district comprises several development blocks, each administered through a Panchayat Samiti, with the Zila Parishad, Kangra, functioning as the apex tier. A total of 814 gram panchayats are present in the district, and average literacy, according to census data of 2011, is 85.67% (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 2026). The large number of Panchayats enhances opportunities for political participation but also introduces challenges of coordination, monitoring, and capacity building (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 2019, pp. 112–115). High literacy rates and social and economic diversity across the district further shape the functioning of local institutions. The changing and dynamic expectations of a large youth population make the population more responsive towards government communication in comparison to other hilly regions of the state. The topography of the district is also not completely uniform, with hills towards major eastern parts of the district but the presence of substantial comparatively plainer areas towards the areas closer to Punjab. This variance brings about its own set of unique challenges and problems, specific to panchayats. Paucity of enough funds further complicates the problem.

4. Electoral Process and Representation

Panchayat elections in Kangra are conducted regularly under the supervision of the State Election Commission. Before the beginning of elections, District Election Officers (Panchayats) divide the Gram Sabha areas and higher tiers into single-member territorial constituencies under rules 5-12 of the HP Panchayati Raj (Election) Rules, 1994, as per directions of the State Election Commission. Draft rolls are published with a 10-day window for public claims and objections before their finalisation (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 1994, pp. 3-6). Election of different office bearers are held on a non-party basis, with symbols allotted to the candidates by returning officers close to the conduction of elections (Sharma, 2019, p. 19). However, indirect support to candidates by different political parties is also a common phenomenon. Voting is conducted by secret ballot paper, while executive leaders (chairpersons and vice-chairpersons) of Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads are subsequently chosen via indirect voting among elected members (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 1994, pp. 52, 76). Reservations to women, SCs and STs are provided in these elections on a rotational basis (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 1994, pp. 76–77). Voter turnout in these elections is generally higher than in state assembly elections, suggesting high local engagement. Reservation provisions have changed the social composition of local leadership. Women now hold almost half the seats in the Panchayat, which is generally perceived as a major democratic gain (Jayal, 2006, p. 19). However, empirical studies suggest that while descriptive representation has increased, the substantive levels of participation across Panchayats are context- and institution-dependent (NIRDPR, 2018, pp. 34–36).

5. Functional Performance of Panchayati Raj Institutions

5.1 Development Planning

Gram Panchayats in Kangra play a formal role in preparing Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDs). These plans are intended to reflect local priorities while aligning with state and centrally sponsored schemes. In practice, however, Panchayats often remain dependent on technical inputs from line

departments, which limits autonomous decision-making. As Manor (1999, p. 47) observes, decentralisation frequently involves shared authority rather than complete transfer of power.

5.2 Service Delivery

The Kangra Panchayats have been involved in the delivery of basic services such as drinking water, sanitation, rural connectivity and welfare schemes. However, outcomes have varied considerably across the district. Where the leadership of Panchayats is proactive and coordination with the administration is effective, the results in service delivery are much better to see. District-level reports indicate improvements in sanitation and housing coverage. Kangra has been at the forefront in achieving Open Defecation Free (ODF) status. Though it is also to be noted that progress still remains uneven (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 2019, pp. 142–146). It is also to be noted that in recent times, the focus has shifted towards achieving ‘ODF Plus’ status, focusing more on construction of Material Collection Facilities (MCFs) for solid waste management and elimination of plastic litter in public spaces (Swachh Bharat Mission, 2024, p. 4).

5.3 Financial Management

Fiscal autonomy constitutes one of the most persistent constraints on Panchayat functioning in Kangra. Local bodies depend heavily on intergovernmental transfers, while their own-source revenue generation remains limited. Common property resources (CPRs) and local markets that could be means of generating their own sources of revenue are not so developed in the case of panchayats of the region. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006, pp. 23–25) argue that such dependence weakens local accountability, a pattern that is also evident in Kangra, where Panchayats have limited discretion over expenditure priorities. Most of the developmental works that these panchayats are expected to perform are sanctioned in follow-up of recommendations of successive finance commissions, but the main problem is that these funds come tied with central or state government schemes, which leaves little room for innovation or for addressing local problems (Accountability Initiative, pp. 4-6). Furthermore, the problem of deep corruption, irregularities and misappropriation of funds further complicates the situation. There is also a problem of many unspent funds which have remained unutilised. Some of the main reasons behind it are:

(i) The system of double authorisation which requires both the Sarpanch and the Panchayat Secretary to co-sign any cheque, which many a time goes on to stall many projects (CPR, 2024, p.14).

(ii) Lack of technical staff leads to delays in reporting of utilization certificates to the concerned authorities, without which further funds could not be released (MoPR, 2025, p. 89)

(iii) Service delivery in mountainous areas is very tedious and comes with its own problems in terms of high costs of construction and maintenance of the assets; moreover, these resources are subject to frequent depreciation and losses subject to climate disasters such as landslides, flooding, etcetera, because of which panchayats are forced to divert their meagre funds towards repairs instead of planned development (UNDP, 2025, pp. 18-22).

(iv) Any attempt on the part of the panchayats to raise their own source of revenue by imposing new local taxes faces resistance from local leaders as they fear losing political support (Digital Sansad, 2025, p. 124).

6. Women's Participation and Leadership

As elsewhere in India, the expansion of women's participation through reservation has reshaped local political space in Kangra. Women representatives not only increasingly get elected to high offices but also become role models for girls and women of their community. They help in breaking the stereotypes relating to women's participation in politics and in relation to financial matters. Case studies from blocks such as Dharamshala suggest that women Pradhans have played an active role in welfare implementation and community mobilisation. A very telling case is that of one Smt. Mamta Devi, a panchayat Pradhan of the Dharmashala block, who by the dint of her actions was able to address many local issues in a successful manner, such as rampant alcoholism, poor sanitation and unemployment. She was able to gain the support of all the stakeholders, including MLAs, ministers, NGOs, etc., in her effort (NIRDPR, 2019, pp. 1-5). However, it is also important to mention that such cases have been very few. Mostly, social norms and informal power relations continue to restrict independent decision-making in certain contexts, resulting in instances of proxy leadership such as the concept of 'Prdhan Pati', the husband of woman Pradhan who take all decisions on their part and in the process rob them of their agency as office bearers (NIRDPR, 2018, pp. 41–44). Another common problem faced by women representatives has been lack of technical and financial know-how of doing things. Moreover, a male-dominated society around makes it even more difficult for women representatives to get their voices heard, taking into consideration how women at large face stigmatisation in traditional settings of villages. As Crook and Sverrisson (2001, p. 17) note, decentralisation reforms often reproduce existing power hierarchies rather than dismantle them, a tendency observable in parts of Kangra.

7. Way forward

Problems in functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Kangra can be resolved going forward if certain reformative steps are taken:

(i) Enhancing financial autonomy

Expecting world-class performance without giving greater access and share of the state's financial resources would be unjust on the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), especially so in geographically difficult regions such as Kangra. A good way to bring about this would be by encouraging them to utilise their own statutory taxation powers. State government can further incentivise the Panchayats who perform well on grounds of collection of local taxes (such as sanitation, water charges, etcetera) and proper utilisation. Similarly, increasing the extent of allocation of united grants under the aegis of the State Finance Commission and reducing reliance on scheme-bound funding would help panchayats in Kangra to address region-specific priorities (such as landslide mitigation, traditional water source (kuhl) rejuvenation, etcetera) in a much better way.

(ii) Overcoming geographical barriers using digital governance

The limitations of geographical isolation can be overcome up to a certain limit by expanding the net of digital infrastructure, such as the deployment of high-speed broadband connections under the BharatNet project, especially in hilly and remote regions of the district, and encouraging and rewarding those Panchayats which perform well. This would help in preventing leakages and improve efficiency in administration.

(iii) Administrative restructuring and Human resource augmentation

To streamline the working of the Panchayats and sync their working with the changing times, it is important that people be proficient in technical knowledge – such as cluster-level junior engineers and computer operators. This would help in lessening the burden on Block Development Officers (BDOs). Further, steps may be taken to coordinate interdepartmental functioning to further increase efficiency of panchayats.

(iv) Deepening Gender Inclusion

Strict protocols should be implemented, and regular monitoring should happen to dissuade non-elected family members from attending official Panchayat proceedings, signing official documents or representing elected officials in formal meetings. Further, training programmes in public administration, especially tailored to the needs of elected women representatives (such as financial literacy, legal rights, project management, etcetera), should be provided through specialised institutes like the Himachal Pradesh Institute of Public Administration (HIPA).

(v) Promoting participatory democracy and public engagement

Increasing public participation should be ensured by implementing steps such as greater insistence on conducting meetings of Ward Sabhas so that hyper-local problems may be discussed before presenting them in front of the Gram Sabhas. Similarly, periodic and compulsory community-led social audits for all major infrastructural and welfare projects, displaying budget allocations, expenditure details and project deadlines on major and prominent public notice boards, would help in increasing transparency and public trust in the working of Panchayats.

8. Discussion

The experience of Panchayati Raj in Kangra underscores a broader tension within decentralisation reforms. While institutional presence and electoral participation are necessary conditions for local democracy, they are not sufficient in themselves. Effective decentralisation requires meaningful fiscal and functional autonomy, along with administrative capacity at the local level. The Kangra case demonstrates that high institutional density can, at times, dilute effectiveness if not accompanied by adequate support mechanisms. This is quite visible in Kangra's performance in the Panchayat Advancement Index (PAI) as well, where its performance reflects mixed outcomes, with relatively strong institutional coverage but weaker indicators related to fiscal autonomy and transparency (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2022, pp. 58–60).

9. Conclusion

The functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Kangra district reflects both the achievements and limitations of decentralised governance in Himachal Pradesh. Constitutional provisions and state legislation have created stable local institutions and expanded political inclusion. However, persistent fiscal dependence, administrative constraints, and uneven devolution continue to limit the transformative potential of local self-government. Strengthening fiscal powers, investing in capacity-building, and reducing bureaucratic mediation are essential for enhancing Panchayat effectiveness in Kangra. The study highlights the value of district-level analyses in advancing empirical research on local governance in India.

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