

Assessing the Impact of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment on Panchayati Raj: A Two Decade Retrospective

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Abstract

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 marked a significant milestone in India's journey toward decentralized governance by strengthening Panchayats—local self-governing bodies—across village, intermediate, and district levels. This paper critically evaluates the Amendment's impact on Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) over the past two decades, analysing its achievements, challenges, and areas needing reform. By examining government reports, academic studies, and case examples, the study investigates how the Amendment has reshaped local governance, particularly in financial devolution, political empowerment, and social inclusion for marginalized groups, including women and Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes. It also assesses the role of Panchayats in executing central and state-level schemes, navigating political dynamics, and ensuring accountability in governance. Additionally, the paper highlights persistent issues such as inadequate infrastructure, political interference, and resource limitations, which hinder the full potential of the reform.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, Decentralization, 73rd Constitutional Amendment

1. Introduction

Context and Background

The Panchayati Raj system represents an institutional framework for rural governance in India, rooted in the ancient tradition of village assemblies, known as Sabha's. The modern iteration of Panchayati Raj began post-independence, with early decentralization efforts initiated under the Community Development Program in 1952. However, a robust framework for grassroots governance only materialized with the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992. Before this reform, Panchayats operated without substantial constitutional support, financial independence, or effective authority to govern locally.

2. Historical Context of Panchayati Raj in India

Pre-73rd Amendment System

Prior to the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Panchayats were largely advisory entities with minimal powers and functions. While some states had introduced legislation to establish local governance structures, these bodies lacked sufficient financial autonomy, legal authority, and political legitimacy. Decision-making processes were heavily centralized, and Panchayats were frequently overshadowed by state governments.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992)

The passage of the 73rd Amendment in December 1992, which came into effect in April 1993, marked a paradigm shift in India's governance framework. This amendment granted constitutional recognition to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), fundamentally altering rural governance through political decentralization and the empowerment of elected local bodies. Key provisions of the amendment included:

- Mandatory implementation of a three-tier Panchayati Raj system (Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, Zilla Parishad) across all states.
- Reservation of one-third of seats in Panchayat elections for women.
- Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).
- Establishment of State Election Commissions to oversee local elections.
- Devolution of powers and responsibilities to Panchayats for local planning, implementation of development programs, and management of local resources.

The 73rd Amendment: Key Transformations

The 73rd Amendment redefined the Panchayati Raj system by:

- Granting constitutional status to Panchayats, ensuring their continuity and recognition.
- Establishing a uniform governance framework, delineating clear roles for Panchayats at village, block, and district levels.
- Promoting inclusivity by reserving seats for women, SCs, and STs in Panchayats.
- Mandating regular elections every five years to ensure democratic representation.

Article 243H enables Panchayats to mobilize resources through taxes, grants, and other mechanisms. The Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution assigns 29 specific functions to Panchayats, spanning critical domains such as agriculture, drinking water, education, healthcare, and social welfare. To fulfill these responsibilities, Panchayats require consistent and adequate funding. While the amendment was enforced in 1993, states were given a deadline to comply, and by the late 1990s, most had implemented the three-tier structure. As of 2020, all 29 states and union territories in India have adopted the provisions of the amendment, albeit with varying levels of success.

A significant achievement of the amendment was the introduction of regular elections to ensure that Panchayats remained representative of the populace. Furthermore, the mandatory reservation of one-third of seats for women provided them with a platform for participation in local governance. Provisions for reserving seats for SCs and STs also ensured greater inclusivity, fostering equitable representation at the grassroots level.

Post-independence, India revisited the concept of local governance, notably through the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee in 1957, which proposed a three-tier Panchayati Raj structure. Despite these recommendations, constitutional backing for PRIs came only with the 73rd Amendment, formally institutionalizing Panchayats and significantly advancing grassroots democracy. The Indian Constitution has always emphasized the importance of local governance, but the 73rd Amendment provided the legal framework for Panchayats to assume their intended role in the democratic setup. Article 243G obliges state legislatures to empower Panchayats with the necessary authority to plan and execute social and economic development activities.

3. Overall Impact of the 73rd Amendment on Panchayati Raj Institutions

The 73rd Amendment significantly bolstered the local governance structure by granting constitutional status to Panchayats across all levels. This recognition has enhanced their legitimacy and accountability,

making them integral to governance at the grassroots. Empowered Panchayats have driven progress in areas like local economic growth, resource management, and public service delivery. With the establishment of over 2.6 lakh Gram Panchayats (village-level), 6,000 Panchayat Samitis (block-level), and 600 Zilla Parishads (district-level), local governance has undergone a remarkable transformation. States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu have demonstrated success in utilizing Panchayats for infrastructure improvements, such as constructing roads, enhancing sanitation, and conserving water resources. Kerala's innovative village adoption programs exemplify the potential of Panchayats in spearheading development initiatives. Additionally, these institutions have played a vital role in delivering essential services in education, healthcare, and welfare.

The one-third reservation for women in Panchayat elections introduced by the 73rd Amendment has profoundly reshaped gender representation in local governance. By 2020, nearly 14 million women had secured positions in Panchayats, leading to a substantial rise in their participation. States such as West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar have recorded women's representation exceeding 40%. Women leaders have demonstrated a heightened focus on issues like sanitation, healthcare, and child education. Studies reveal that women-led Panchayats are more inclined to implement policies targeting women's welfare compared to their male counterparts. Despite these advancements, barriers to assuming leadership roles, such as Sarpanch positions, persist. In many instances, male relatives influence decision-making, undermining the independence of elected women leaders.

The amendment also mandated the devolution of financial powers to Panchayats, enabling them to manage funds and prioritize development initiatives. Between 2015 and 2020, the 14th Finance Commission allocated over INR 2.87 lakh crore to Panchayats, significantly aiding rural infrastructure development and community projects. However, issues such as delayed fund transfers, inadequate financial systems, and weak accountability mechanisms have hindered effective utilization. The CAG reported in 2019 that some states utilized only 60% of the allocated funds. Panchayats have been instrumental in advancing rural development by implementing programs targeting poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, and skill enhancement. Panchayats are central to the execution of MGNREGA, a program that guarantees 100 days of employment to rural households. By 2020, more than 50 million households benefited from this scheme under the supervision of Panchayats. Active Panchayats have been associated with improved poverty alleviation outcomes.

According to a study by the National Institute of Rural Development, regions with well-functioning Panchayats recorded a 7% reduction in rural poverty through effective implementation of MGNREGA and skill development programs. Despite the constitutional support granted to Panchayats, they continue to face substantial political interference that undermines their independence. In states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal, Panchayats remain under significant control from state governments, where political elites often exert influence over local decisions. According to a report by the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), in these regions, local decision-making is frequently overridden by political forces, diminishing the power of Panchayats. Additionally, local governments often bypass Panchayats in executing centrally funded schemes, further weakening their role in local development. Bureaucratic resistance to decentralization also presents a challenge in several states. Another key issue is the lack of capacity and expertise within Panchayats. Many Panchayats, especially in remote regions, struggle to manage funds, plan, and implement projects effectively.

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) reported that only 20% of Panchayat members received adequate training in governance and financial management in the early years following the Amendment. This gap

in training often leads to inefficient policy implementation and governance. Furthermore, the World Bank (2020) reports that 50% of Panchayats still lack essential administrative infrastructure, such as computers and internet access, which are critical for efficient e-governance and financial management. Although the Amendment mandates women's reservations, gender inequality continues to be a major hurdle in Panchayati Raj implementation. Women elected to Panchayats often face challenges in assuming leadership positions due to entrenched patriarchal structures and societal norms in rural areas.

4. Rural India's Progress through Panchayati Raj Institutions in last two decades: A Chronicle of Governance, Infrastructure, and Welfare

1. Rural Development and Infrastructure

Since its inception, the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) has constructed over 650,000 kilometres of rural roads, connecting more than 180,000 habitations with all-weather roads by 2023. Under the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), over 60 million toilets were constructed, and more than 700,000 villages were declared Open Defecation Free (ODF) by 2023. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been pivotal in employing over 50 million households annually, generating rural infrastructure like roads and irrigation systems. Additionally, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)-Gramin has sanctioned more than 12 million rural houses, aiming for "Housing for All" by 2024. Despite these efforts, audits show that nearly 25% of rural infrastructure projects under MGNREGA and PMGSY face delays or remain incomplete.

2. Education and Health

Since the launch of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2001, over 1.2 million schools have been established in rural India, and literacy rates have increased from 58.5% in 2001 to 75% by 2021. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) now feeds approximately 120 million children across 1.2 million schools. The National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) has led to the creation of 200,000 health facilities and an increase of 200,000 healthcare professionals. The Ayushman Bharat scheme has enrolled over 50 million rural households, offering health insurance up to INR 5 lakh. Despite these advancements, challenges persist, such as high teacher absenteeism (25-35%) and shortages of essential drugs and personnel in rural health centers.

3. Governance, Transparency, and Accountability

As of 2023, more than 1.1 million elected Panchayat representatives, with 33% women, are involved in governance, with over 300,000 Panchayats connected to the e-Gram Swaraj platform for better transparency and monitoring. The 15th Finance Commission allocated INR 8,263 crore for local governance improvements. However, audits have shown irregularities in fund allocation in 20% of Panchayat projects, and nearly 25% of Panchayats in politically sensitive areas remain influenced by local political elites, undermining autonomous decision-making.

4. Financial Devolution and Fiscal Management

The 15th Finance Commission allocated INR 2.64 lakh crore to Panchayats for the period 2020-2025, representing a 22% increase from the previous allocation. Despite this, only 10% of Panchayats have the power to generate and manage their own finances, with the remaining relying heavily on central and state funding. Additionally, 35% of Panchayats experience delays of over six months in receiving funds from state governments.

5. Social Welfare and Empowerment of Marginalized Communities

Over 12 million SC/ST families have benefited from welfare schemes like PMAY and educational schola-

ships. Special funds of INR 1,500 crore were allocated for SC/ST Panchayats in 2023. However, a 2021 National Census revealed a 20% gap in access to welfare programs for SC/ST populations compared to the general population, with many marginalized groups unaware of their entitlements

6.Environmental Protection and Sustainability

Over 300,000 Panchayats have adopted water conservation practices, and 100,000 rainwater harvesting structures have been built. While over 80,000 Panchayats have implemented waste segregation and composting, only 10% of Panchayats have adequate resources to execute large-scale environmental programs. Additionally, over 50% of rural Panchayats are located in disaster-prone areas but lack sufficient disaster-resilient infrastructure.

7.Youth and Skill Development

Over 4 million rural youth have been trained under the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), with 85% completion rates. Despite this, 35% of Panchayats have dedicated skill centers, limiting the reach of training programs. Rural youth face an unemployment rate of 18%, primarily due to limited local job opportunities

8.Disaster Management and Preparedness

Panchayats have established 100,000 disaster management committees, with 50,000 villages in flood-prone regions equipped with early warning systems. Over 15 million people have benefitted from Panchayat-led disaster relief operations. However, 70% of Panchayats lack basic infrastructure for disaster management, such as shelters and rescue equipment.

9. Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods

Since its introduction in 2018, the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan) program has provided financial assistance to over 120 million farmers. By 2023, more than INR 75,000 crore had been directly transferred to farmers' bank accounts to supplement their income. The National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) has successfully organized 7.8 million rural women into 630,000 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) by 2023, giving them access to financial services and livelihood opportunities. Additionally, over 2 million hectares of agricultural land have been equipped with micro-irrigation systems, while more than 1.5 million hectares have shifted to organic farming in the last decade. Despite these advancements, only 10% of rural farmers have access to modern farming tools and machinery, and just about 20% have access to organized markets, creating challenges in pricing and payment delays.

10. Transport and Connectivity

The Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) has expanded rural connectivity by 40% since its launch, connecting over 180,000 habitations with all-weather roads by 2023. The Bharat Net initiative has connected more than 600,000 Panchayats to the internet, while over 50,000 rural buses and vans serve remote villages, enhancing mobility. Despite these efforts, 30% of rural roads remain poorly maintained, and 40% of Panchayats still lack adequate transportation infrastructure, especially in isolated regions.

11. Urbanization and Rural-Urban Linkages

The "Smart Village" initiative has transformed 500 villages by 2023, providing them with urban-like amenities such as Wi-Fi, modern sanitation, and integrated public services. While migration from rural to urban areas remains high, with 20 million rural residents migrating annually, government schemes such as MGNREGA and Skill India aim to reduce migration by providing rural employment opportunities. As of 2023, more than 400,000 rural startups have been promoted under the Start-Up India initiative. Despite these efforts, rural areas continue to struggle with inadequate infrastructure and face rising migration at a rate of about 3% annually.

12. Water Resources and Irrigation

The National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) has helped restore over 1,000 rural water bodies since 2014, ensuring better access to clean drinking water. By 2023, over 80 million rural households had received potable water connections under the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), with the goal of achieving 100% coverage by 2024. Additionally, the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY) has extended irrigation coverage to 2.5 million hectares of agricultural land. However, over 50% of rural India still suffers from water scarcity, and groundwater levels are depleting due to unsustainable farming practices.

13. Energy and Renewable Resources

By 2023, India had installed 2.5 GW of solar capacity in rural areas, with more than 100,000 households benefiting from solar-powered electricity through the Deendayal Upadhyaya Grameen Jyoti Yojana (DDUGJY). The Saubhagya scheme electrified over 28 million rural households by 2022. The Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) has also facilitated the installation of over 200,000 biogas plants. Despite progress, 10% of rural households, particularly in remote tribal areas, still face unreliable electricity access, and the high upfront costs of renewable energy systems limit affordability for the rural

14. Digital Literacy and Technology Adoption

By 2023, the Digital Literacy Mission Scheme (NDLM) trained over 60 million rural individuals in digital literacy, improving access to government services and e-commerce platforms. More than 100,000 Panchayats were equipped with Common Service Centers (CSCs), allowing citizens to access e-governance, financial services, and digital education. However, a significant digital divide remains, with only 25% of rural households having internet access and over 60% of rural residents still facing challenges with digital platform usage.

15. Disaster Resilience and Climate Change Adaptation

The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) has trained over 250,000 Panchayat officials in disaster response and preparedness by 2023, and established 100,000 disaster management committees. Over 50,000 Panchayats have been involved in building climate-resilient infrastructure, including flood-resistant roads and cyclone shelters. Despite these efforts, 70% of Panchayats lack dedicated funding for climate resilience, and rural areas continue to face high vulnerability to climate impacts, including droughts, floods, and cyclones.

Major States Performance of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) Over the Last Two Decades

1. Kerala: Decentralized Planning and People's Participation

Kerala's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are often regarded as a model for decentralized governance in India. The People's Plan Campaign, initiated in the late 1990s, was a pivotal step in fostering participatory planning by involving local bodies and citizens in decision-making processes. Over the last two decades, Kerala's PRIs have made significant strides in local governance by prioritizing community engagement, particularly through Gram Sabhas, to identify key development needs. This participatory approach has led to efficient fund allocation and successful project execution, especially in sectors like healthcare, education, and infrastructure. The state's public health system, largely shaped by local healthcare initiatives, has been exemplary, addressing issues like communicable disease control and maternal health. Moreover, Kerala has improved literacy and ensured universal primary education. However, challenges such as bureaucratic delays, political interference, and insufficient technical expertise at the grassroots level can impede the execution of more complex projects. Despite these hurdles, Kerala's model of participatory democracy remains an example for other states.

2. Rajasthan: MGNREGA Implementation

Rajasthan's PRIs have played an essential role in the successful implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which guarantees 100 days of wage employment to rural households. Over the past two decades, PRIs in Rajasthan have facilitated the creation of durable rural infrastructure, such as water conservation structures, rural roads, and irrigation facilities. The scheme has empowered marginalized communities, especially women, by giving them job cards and encouraging participation in Gram Sabhas. Women's involvement in MGNREGA has contributed to higher household incomes and improved socio-economic indicators, such as literacy and nutrition. However, challenges like delayed payments, monitoring irregularities, and corruption have hampered the program's efficiency. Nonetheless, MGNREGA has strengthened the role of PRIs as agents of rural development and social change. More rigorous monitoring and capacity-building programs for Panchayat members could enhance the scheme's effectiveness.

3. Karnataka: Digitization and Transparency

Karnataka has emerged as a leader in integrating technology into Panchayati Raj governance. The state's Gram Panchayat Management System (GPMS) and e-Governance initiatives have streamlined operations and promoted transparency. These technological innovations have improved record-keeping, tax collection, and service delivery, leading to enhanced accountability. As a result, the management of public funds has been more efficient, and development projects have been executed more effectively. For instance, the digitization of property tax collection has increased Panchayat revenue. However, challenges like the digital divide and low levels of technical literacy among Panchayat members still persist. In response, Karnataka has initiated training programs to bridge these gaps, but further efforts are needed to ensure technology access is equitably distributed.

4. Bihar: Women's Leadership in PRIs

Bihar's landmark decision to reserve 50% of Panchayat seats for women in 2006 has significantly increased women's participation in local governance. Over the past two decades, this policy has empowered women, enabling them to bring a gendered perspective to decision-making. Women-led PRIs have spearheaded various campaigns, including sanitation initiatives, health programs, and education reforms, under schemes like the Swachh Bharat Mission. Additionally, women leaders have addressed social issues such as domestic violence and child marriage. However, societal resistance to women's leadership and limited capacity-building opportunities continue to pose challenges. Despite these barriers, Bihar's experience demonstrates the transformative impact of women's participation in grassroots governance. Continued support through training and mentorship programs will be crucial to sustain this progress.

5. Himachal Pradesh: Ecological Governance

Himachal Pradesh's PRIs have been pioneers in ecological governance, implementing watershed development, eco-tourism, and afforestation programs. These initiatives have helped preserve natural resources and provide alternative livelihoods for rural communities. Panchayats have mobilized local resources to construct rainwater harvesting systems, promoting water conservation in drought-prone areas. Eco-tourism projects managed by PRIs have also contributed to rural income generation while preserving the state's biodiversity. However, balancing developmental goals with environmental conservation remains a challenge. Ensuring equitable benefit-sharing among communities and addressing the effects of climate change will require more focused efforts.

6. Tamil Nadu: Inclusive Governance and Dairy Development

Tamil Nadu's PRIs have been instrumental in promoting inclusive governance and rural economic development, particularly in sectors like dairy development and sanitation. The state's initiatives, such as empowering women through self-help groups (SHGs) under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), have boosted rural incomes. PRIs have facilitated partnerships between SHGs and the dairy industry, allowing women to engage in milk production and marketing, thereby increasing household income. Additionally, Tamil Nadu's PRIs have played a key role in implementing sanitation programs under the Swachh Bharat Mission, achieving high sanitation coverage. However, issues like unequal resource distribution and the need for further capacity-building of Panchayat leaders persist.

7. Conclusion

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has had a transformative effect on Panchayati Raj in India, promoting decentralization and enhancing local governance. However, issues like political interference, lack of capacity, and gender inequality still hinder the full potential of PRIs. Over the last two decades, PRIs have made significant contributions to rural development through flagship schemes like MGNREGA, ecological conservation, and women's empowerment. While performance varies across states, decentralization, capacity-building, and participatory governance are crucial for the success of PRIs. Future efforts must focus on financial autonomy, robust monitoring mechanisms, and empowering marginalized communities to enable PRIs to become more effective in fostering sustainable rural development.

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