



A Critical Study Of People's Participation In Local Self-Government With Gandhian Solutions

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the evolution of local self-government and people's participation in the decision-making processes throughout the ages, also aiming to apply Gandhian philosophy to resolve challenges persisting in achieving true participation of people.

KEYWORDS: Local Self-Government, Gandhian Philosophy, People's Participation, Decentralization, Swaraj, Panchayati Raj.

INTRODUCTION

Local self-government has always been an integral part of India's democratic ethos, with its roots tracing back to ancient times. From the early *Gana Rajya* and *Mahajanapadas*, where collective decision-making and people's councils shaped governance, to the present-day Panchayati Raj institutions, the idea of empowering people at the grassroots has endured. However, despite constitutional provisions and reforms, genuine public participation in decision-making faces many obstacles today. Excessive interference by political interests and rigid bureaucratic systems often dilute the spirit of self-rule and hinder community involvement.

This paper critically explores the historical evolution of local governance and people's participation across different eras, highlighting how these practices have transformed yet struggled under modern complexities. By revisiting Gandhian philosophy, which emphasizes self-reliance, decentralization, and moral leadership, this paper seeks to propose solutions to overcome these persistent challenges and to revive the true spirit of participatory governance for a more inclusive and empowered society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach using historical analysis, case studies, and content review of policy documents. It critically examines people's participation in local self-government across different periods and applies Gandhian principles as a normative framework to propose decentralized, ethical, and participatory governance models for contemporary challenges.

OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESIS

The primary objective of this study is to examine how India's local self-government institutions have evolved over centuries yet continue to struggle for true autonomy, especially in financial matters. It aims to analyze how excessive political interference and bureaucratic control have eroded their independent identity, making genuine people's participation difficult. This paper also seeks to identify practical ways to re-establish autonomous, financially empowered local bodies by applying Gandhian principles of decentralization, self-sufficiency, and moral leadership.

The central hypothesis is that despite constitutional safeguards, local self-governments in India lack real financial autonomy and face constant political and bureaucratic intrusion, which undermines participatory democracy. By integrating Gandhian philosophy into local governance models—focusing on community ownership, ethical leadership, and economic independence—these institutions can regain their original spirit of self-rule. This can ensure that local bodies function as truly autonomous units of governance, capable of addressing grassroots needs effectively and democratically.

DECENTRALIZATION THROUGH THE AGES: EVOLUTION AND CHALLENGES OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN INDIA

The *Rigveda's* verse “Samani va akutiḥ samana hridayani vah...” embodies India's ancient spirit of unity, collective aims, and shared governance. From the Vedic *Sabha* and *Samiti* to the republican *Gana-Rajya* and the democratic village councils of the Cholas, India's history reveals deeply rooted traditions of participatory self-governance. Ancient texts, epics, and treatises like the *Arthashastra* show that decisions were made through councils, assemblies, and local bodies, ensuring community involvement. This collective ethos laid a strong foundation for India's democratic principles, proving that local self-governance and people-centric administration are not modern imports but age-old Indian values.

The transition from ancient to medieval India saw vibrant local self-governance through village panchayats, *sabhas*, guilds, and community-led projects. Local bodies resolved disputes, managed resources, and upheld justice based on local customs. However, with the rise of centralized powers like the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire, this autonomy faced challenges. Strong central authority, elite-dominated councils, and feudal intermediaries limited true local representation. Despite the survival of panchayats and guilds, ordinary people struggled for direct say in governance. The main problem was balancing local needs with imperial control—heavy taxation, political interference, and lack of financial independence weakened village autonomy.

Even today, the legacy of this struggle is visible: local self-government bodies often lack real power, depend heavily on state support, and face bureaucratic control. The challenge remains to revive genuine grassroots democracy by empowering local institutions financially and administratively, ensuring they truly reflect people's voices and local aspirations.

During the British Raj, the idea of local self-government emerged but failed to flourish due to excessive colonial control. The Regulating Act of 1773 centralized power under the Governor-General, limiting local autonomy. Traditional village panchayats continued but lost true authority. Later, the Charter Act of 1853

opened civil services to Indians but did not strengthen local bodies. Lord Ripon's 1882 Resolution laid the groundwork for municipal institutions, yet real power stayed with the British. Despite the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935, which expanded Indian roles, local self-government remained underfunded, weak, and overshadowed by colonial bureaucracy.

Post-independence, India's state-led development model (1947–1980s) focused on centralized planning inspired by Nehruvian socialism. Programs like the Community Development Programme (1952) and Panchayati Raj system (1959) were initial steps toward local participation but remained top-down in practice. A major shift came with the 73rd Amendment (1992), which institutionalized grassroots democracy through a three-tier Panchayati Raj system, direct elections, and reservations for marginalized sections—realizing Gandhi's vision of self-sufficient villages.

In the Modi era, participatory governance deepened through digital platforms (*MyGov*), direct public connect (*Mann Ki Baat*), and people-driven schemes like *Swachh Bharat*, *Jan Dhan Yojana*, and *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, boosting family, youth, and women's participation. Gandhi's concept of *Swaraj* and *Sarvodaya*—self-rule and welfare of all—remains the guiding light for true decentralization. While the Planning Commission's top-down approach limited local voices, the NITI Aayog's bottom-up method opens new doors for community empowerment. By embracing Gandhian ideals, India can realize the goal of participatory, autonomous local self-government, where villages truly become the soul of the nation.

GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY ON LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

Mahatma Gandhi drew the concept of *Sarvodaya* from John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*; however, he also believed that the concept had existed in Indian society since ancient times. *Sarvodaya*, which literally means "welfare of all," emphasizes the upliftment of all segments of society, especially the small and marginalized. Moreover, Gandhi believed that *Sarvodaya* not only included *Antyodaya* (welfare of the last person) but also encompassed spiritual and moral development.

The village, in Gandhi's view, was the smallest unit of the Indian social structure. He believed that India as a whole could be developed only if all its villages were developed. For this, Gandhi emphasized *Swaraj*, or self-rule, in which administrative and financial autonomy for villages were essential to their empowerment and self-sufficiency.

Gandhi envisioned a deontological philosophy, which focuses on righteous means rather than solely on outcomes. He was critical of over-bureaucratization in local governance, as it often fails to address the actual needs of the people.

In Gandhi's view, *Sarvodaya* rejected the socialist belief in the positive role of state-led nationalization. Instead of nationalization, Gandhi advocated for *villagisation*—a model centered around local economies and decentralized governance. Furthermore, while socialism often involved violent revolution to achieve an egalitarian society, Gandhi's *Sarvodaya* relied on non-violence, persuasion, and a change of heart.

Thus, Gandhi's idea of *Sarvodaya* stood in contrast to the international concept of socialism, which he saw as a new form of capitalism—one dominated by party leaders, bureaucracies, and centralized state machinery.

CONCLUSION

According to Gandhi, "True civilization is not one which makes us animal but makes us better human." Guided by this vision, Gandhi proposed his *oceanic circle model*, where power radiates outward from self-reliant villages rather than flowing down from a central authority. He opposed political party dominance and the pitfalls of parliamentary democracy that, in his view, often serve the profit of political leaders rather than the welfare of villagers. Through his idea of *trusteeship*, Gandhi rejected the Marxist notion of class struggle, believing instead that "violence is a wrong means" and true progress lies in harmony between classes.

To realize his dream of *Swaraj*, we must strengthen *panchayats* with financial autonomy, freedom from political interference, empowerment of local people, greater public awareness, and local tax authority. Gandhi's *oceanic circle* and *trusteeship* principles remind us that power should belong to the people at the grassroots, not distant elites. At the same time, as he wrote in *Hind Swaraj*, we cannot ignore modern industry or societal needs but must shape them with ethical, humane values. By applying these Gandhian ideals, India's villages can become the real centres of democracy, ensuring development with dignity, self-reliance, and true human civilization.

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