



Empowering Marginalized Communities Through Grassroots Democracy: Pathways To Inclusive Rural Development In India

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Abstract: The Indian social structure as a wide example of plural identities which includes both the majorities and minorities communities and other weaker sections and so on which exposes their vital role to success the definition of real democracy. The Grassroots democracy has emerged as a vital instrument for promoting social justice and inclusive development in India's rural landscape. Since the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992, India's Panchayati Raj system has provided institutional frameworks for participatory governance and empowerment of marginalized communities, Dalits, Adivasis, women, and minorities. Yet, the persistence of structural inequalities, caste hierarchies, and economic disparities limits the transformative potential of decentralization. This study examines how grassroots democratic institutions function as vehicles for empowerment, equity, and accountability in rural India. By integrating theoretical perspectives on participatory democracy with empirical data from the Ministry of Rural Development, NITI Aayog, and field studies across states such as Kerala, Rajasthan, and West Bengal, the paper evaluates the extent to which decentralized governance has advanced inclusive rural development. The findings suggest that while participatory institutions have deepened democratic engagement, substantive empowerment remains uneven across social groups, calling for stronger institutional reforms and inclusive policy design.

Keywords: Grassroots democracy, Panchayati Raj, marginalized communities, rural development, decentralization, social inclusion, empowerment

1. Introduction

India's rural development trajectory has been deeply intertwined with the evolution of grassroots democracy. Nearly 65% of India's population continues to live in rural areas (Census of India, 2011), where local governance plays a central role in shaping access to resources, representation, and welfare delivery. The philosophy of *Gram Swaraj*, articulated by Mahatma Gandhi, envisioned self-governing villages as the cornerstone of India's democracy, where participation, equality, and moral autonomy would guide governance (Gandhi, 1946). This vision gained constitutional recognition through the 73rd Amendment Act (1992), which institutionalized a three-tier Panchayati Raj system across India.

Grassroots democracy thus represents both a political reform and a developmental strategy, a mechanism for democratizing power and ensuring equitable participation in local decision making. Over three decades of Panchayati Raj governance have witnessed the creation of over 250,000 Gram Panchayats and 2.5 million elected representatives, with one-third reserved for women and proportional seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2023). However, as Bhattacharya (2021) and Jha (2019) observe, decentralization has not automatically translated into social transformation. While local bodies provide opportunities for representation, caste-based hierarchies, gender norms, and economic inequalities often persist within Panchayat structures. For marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslim minorities, the challenge lies not merely in formal inclusion but in achieving substantive empowerment, the ability to influence local governance, access resources, and hold institutions accountable. This paper, therefore, examines how grassroots democratic mechanisms empower marginalized groups and promote inclusive rural development in India. It critically analyses policy frameworks, participatory practices, and socio-political barriers that shape democratic outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Decentralization and Participatory Governance in India

Decentralization as a development paradigm emerged strongly in India in the 1990s, aligning with global shifts toward participatory governance (World Bank, 2000). The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act marked a milestone by transferring administrative, fiscal, and political responsibilities to elected local bodies. Scholars such as Mathew (1994) and Manor (2010) argue that this reform redefined India's democratic landscape by legitimizing local self-governance and citizen participation. Empirical studies demonstrate that effective decentralization enhances accountability and service delivery (Crook & Manor, 1998; Jha, 2019). In states such as Kerala and Karnataka, participatory budgeting and local planning exercises under the *People's Plan Campaign* have yielded significant improvements in human development indicators (Isaac & Franke, 2002). Yet, in many northern states, Panchayats remain dependent on higher administrative tiers for funds and technical expertise (NITI Aayog, 2021). Chattopadhyay and Duflo's (2004) seminal study *Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India*, provided groundbreaking evidence that women's political representation in Panchayats leads to distinct policy priorities, particularly in health and infrastructure. Similarly, Corbridge et al. (2005), in *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*, argue that grassroots governance is shaped by everyday negotiations of power between citizens and bureaucratic actors. Jayal (2006), in *Engendering Local Democracy: The Impact of Quotas for Women in India's Panchayats*, notes that quotas have expanded participation but not necessarily autonomy for women leaders. For Dalits and Adivasis, political inclusion remains constrained by structural hierarchies and elite capture (Still, 2017; Xaxa, 2019). The Sachar Committee Report (2006) highlighted the persistent underrepresentation of Muslims in local institutions and their limited access to public resources. More recently, PRIA's (2023) *Citizen Engagement and Panchayati Raj: A Status Report* and NITI Aayog's (2021) *State of Decentralization in India* have underscored the uneven implementation of participatory processes across states. Collectively, this literature emphasizes that decentralization alone does not guarantee inclusion. It must be accompanied by active citizenship, institutional accountability, and socio-economic empowerment (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1999).

2.2 Empowerment and Social Inclusion

Empowerment is multidimensional, spanning political, economic, and social domains. Narayan (2002) defines empowerment as expanding people's freedom to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions. In the Indian rural context, grassroots democracy operationalizes empowerment through representation, participation, and control over local resources. While political reservations for women and marginalized castes have significantly increased descriptive representation (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004), the quality of participation varies across regions, influenced by literacy, social capital, and local elite dominance (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006). Tokenistic participation, where marginalized representatives serve as figureheads, remains a major challenge (Jayal, 2006).

2.3 Marginalized Communities and the Democratic Deficit

Caste and class hierarchies often reproduce inequalities within decentralized structures (Corbridge et al., 2005). The Panchayati Raj framework has facilitated Dalit representation, but studies show continued exclusion from key committees, discrimination in Gram Sabha meetings, and limited access to developmental schemes (PRIA, 2023). For Adivasis, whose governance is protected under the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), participation remains constrained by administrative neglect and land alienation (Reddy et al., 2018). Similarly, Muslim minorities face underrepresentation in local governance due to demographic dispersal and absence of targeted political provisions (Sachar Committee Report, 2006; Alam, 2020).

2.4 Rural Development and Local Governance

Inclusive rural development requires not only economic growth but also social justice and participatory decision-making (Chambers, 2012). The Ministry of Rural Development (2023) notes that decentralized planning through Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDs) has improved local resource allocation. Yet, NITI Aayog (2021) highlights uneven performance across states, where elite capture and weak accountability undermine outcomes. Despite these variations, grassroots democracy remains a dynamic but contested space, where empowerment, governance, and inclusion intersect in complex ways.

Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite rich scholarship, gaps persist. First, most studies examine either administrative efficiency or identity-based inclusion, with limited integration between institutional design and social justice theory. Second, the intersectionality of marginalization, where caste, gender, and religion converge, remains under-theorized in rural governance studies. Finally, while numerous works examine Dalit and women's participation, Muslim minorities' political engagement in Panchayats remains underexplored beyond the Sachar Committee Report (2006). This paper addresses these gaps by combining empirical evidence with theoretical synthesis to explore how India's grassroots democracy can advance empowerment and inclusive rural development.

3. Theoretical and Constitutional Framework

3.1 Theoretical Perspectives: Participatory and Empowerment Frameworks

Grassroots democracy in India can be understood through participatory democratic theory (Pateman, 1970; Fung & Wright, 2003). This perspective holds that participation fosters civic competence, equality, and collective responsibility. In India, it intersects with Amartya Sen's (1999) *capability approach*, which links empowerment to the expansion of freedoms and opportunities. Kabeer (1999) conceptualizes empowerment as a process by which those denied the ability to make strategic choices acquire such ability. Within the Panchayati Raj context, empowerment occurs when marginalized citizens influence decisions over local infrastructure, health, education, and livelihoods, transforming passive subjects into active citizens.

3.2 Constitutional Provisions: The 73rd Amendment and Beyond

The 73rd Amendment (1992) institutionalized a three-tier Panchayati Raj system; Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zila Parishad. Articles 243A–243O define the structure, powers, and finances of Panchayats, while the Eleventh Schedule lists 29 subjects devolved to them. Critically, Articles 243D and 243T mandate reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women in Panchayat positions, embedding affirmative action in local governance (Mathew, 1994; Jayal, 2006). The Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), further empowers tribal Gram Sabhas to govern land, water, and forests, linking democracy to ecological justice. Yet, Rao and Singh (2020), in *Fiscal Decentralization in India: Challenges and Prospects*, note that inadequate fiscal devolution and bureaucratic dominance constrain these ideals. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2023) reports that only 60% of states have devolved all 29 functional domains.

3.3 Gandhian Decentralism and Modern Democratic Practice

Mahatma Gandhi's *Gram Swaraj* envisioned village republics governed through moral autonomy and collective decision-making (Gandhi, 1946). Modern Panchayati Raj institutions embody this ethos, though within bureaucratic systems. Baviskar and Mathew (2009) describe India's decentralization as a "hybrid moral-administrative model," balancing Gandhian ethics with modern governance.

3.4 Critical Gaps in the Framework

Despite progressive constitutional design, devolution remains partial. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Finance Commissions note that Panchayats manage less than 20% of total rural expenditure (Finance Commission of India, 2020). Overlapping hierarchies and weak fiscal autonomy undermine the transformative potential of local governance (NITI Aayog, 2021).

4. Analytical Sections on Key Themes

4.1 Empowerment through Decentralized Governance

Empowerment through decentralized governance in India lies at the heart of the Panchayati Raj system's transformative potential. The Gram Sabha, conceived as the nucleus of participatory democracy, represents an arena where citizens collectively deliberate on local development priorities and hold their representatives accountable (Mathew, 1994). In theory, it embodies the Habermasian ideal of deliberative discourse, where every voice is heard. In practice, however, the quality and depth of participation remain uneven. Empirical data from NITI Aayog (2021) reveal significant variation across states. In Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra, Gram Sabha attendance regularly exceeds 60%, facilitated by civic education and decentralized planning traditions. Conversely, in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh, participation often remains below 25%, largely due to bureaucratic capture, social hierarchies, and lack of awareness. The People's Plan Campaign in Kerala stands as a benchmark of participatory planning, where citizens directly engage in identifying and budgeting for local needs (Isaac & Franke, 2002). PRIA's (2023) nationwide assessment of citizen engagement underscores that awareness of Panchayat functions are still limited among marginalized citizens. Women, Dalits, and Adivasis often participate symbolically rather than substantively. Fiscal and administrative dependence on higher tiers further restricts local autonomy, turning Panchayats into implementers of centrally designed schemes rather than autonomous planning units (Rao & Singh, 2020). True empowerment in decentralized governance thus demands more than procedural participation requires what Kabeer (1999) calls *transformative agency*, where citizens can exercise control over the decisions that affect their lives. The Panchayat system has achieved notable progress in political inclusion, but its transformative capacity remains contingent on fiscal autonomy, civic education, and the dismantling of entrenched hierarchies.

4.2 Gender and Political Inclusion

India's gender reservation policy, guaranteeing at least one-third representation for women in Panchayats (increased to 50% in several states), constitutes one of the world's most ambitious experiments in political empowerment. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) demonstrated empirically that women-headed Panchayats prioritize welfare issues, such as drinking water, sanitation, and education, reflecting gendered perspectives in policymaking. Further, Beaman et al. (2009), in *Powerful Women: Does Exposure Reduce Bias?* analyse that exposure to female leaders significantly reduces gender bias and reshapes social aspirations, particularly in rural areas. Similarly, Kumar (2019) notes that women leaders are increasingly influencing budget priorities, though they continue to face institutional barriers. Yet, the picture is complex. Jayal (2006) and Rai (2011) caution that representation does not automatically equate to empowerment. Proxy politics, where husbands or male relatives informally control elected women representatives, remains prevalent, particularly in patriarchal rural contexts. Structural factors such as low literacy, restricted mobility, and dual domestic burdens constrain effective participation. Despite these challenges, examples from Kerala's *Kudumbashree* movement illustrate how economic empowerment through self-help groups can reinforce political participation (John, 2011). Women's federations have enhanced collective bargaining power, while digital platforms like *Mahila Gram Sabhas* in states like Maharashtra have increased transparency and collaboration. These cases affirm that gendered empowerment in grassroots democracy requires institutional support, economic independence, and continuous capacity-building.

4.3 Dalits and the Quest for Social Justice

For Dalits, historically subjected to caste exclusion and untouchability, grassroots democracy represents both a constitutional right and a moral reassertion of dignity. Political reservations under the 73rd Amendment have expanded Dalit representation, yet *substantive equality* remains elusive. Still (2017) documents persistent caste-based discrimination, including instances where Dalit sarpanches are denied access to official seating or prevented from hoisting the national flag in villages. Similarly, Kumar and Prasad (2020), in *Caste, Democracy, and Development: Analyzing Panchayati Raj and Dalit Empowerment*, argue that political empowerment cannot be divorced from socio-economic emancipation. Dalit empowerment thrives where movements and collective mobilization challenge caste dominance, such as in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, but remains fragile in northern states where social coercion persists. A PRIA (2023) study reveals that 42% of Dalit representatives experience interference from upper-caste elites in executing development schemes. Symbolic representation without authority often perpetuates dependency rather than empowerment. Yet, the growth of Dalit organizations and local NGOs has fostered new political consciousness. As Jha (2019) notes, training initiatives that enhance administrative literacy and legal awareness among Dalit Panchayat members significantly improve their capacity to negotiate bureaucratic systems. Thus, the Dalit struggle for empowerment within Panchayati Raj institutions is both political and epistemic, a reconfiguration of power and recognition. True inclusion requires dismantling caste hierarchies that shape social relations at the village level.

4.4 Adivasis and Participatory Self-Governance

Adivasi empowerment under PESA (1996) and the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution represents an effort to harmonize traditional governance with modern democratic institutions. Adivasis, comprising 8.6% of India's population (Census, 2011), enjoy legal recognition of their Gram Sabhas as sovereign decision-making bodies in Scheduled Areas. However, as Sharma and Saxena (2016) demonstrated in a research paper, *Tribal Self-Governance and the Indian State: Evaluating PESA's Impact*, implementation has been uneven and often diluted by state governments. Reddy et al. (2018) and Xaxa (2019) similarly argue that bureaucratic control, corporate mining interests, and weak institutional support undermine Adivasi autonomy. In contrast, community-led initiatives such as Mendha Lekha in Maharashtra exemplify the transformative potential of Adivasi self-rule. The village, through collective forest rights and Gram Sabha governance, has successfully linked environmental stewardship with participatory democracy

4.5 Minorities and Political Representation

Although, the Muslim population sharing the approximately 14.2% (Census, 2011), which more than other minorities of population as Christian Sikh Jain Buddhist remain one of the most underrepresented groups in public institutions and governance. Unlike Dalits or Adivasis, Muslims lack constitutionally mandated political reservations.

The *Sachar Committee Report* (2006) and Alam (2020) document the structural disadvantages faced by Muslims in accessing local governance positions. Socio-economic deprivation, communal polarization, and lack of targeted political outreach contribute to their marginalization. However, in states such as West Bengal and Kerala, where Muslim populations are more concentrated, participatory institutions show better inclusion outcomes, suggesting that demographic strength and institutional support together shape political presence.

Muslim women also face constraints such as gendered exclusion. Yet, NGOs such as SEWA Bharat and PRADAN have demonstrated that collective self-help groups can foster leadership skills, enabling women to participate actively in local governance (NITI Aayog, 2021). Bridging this representational gap requires targeted institutional innovations, leadership fellowships, and community advisory councils embedded within Panchayats.

4.6 Local Governance and Democratic Deepening

The overall quality of grassroots democracy depends on the degree to which participatory institutions foster transparency, accountability, and civic engagement. Mechanisms like *Social Audits* under MGNREGA and *Right to Information (RTI)* initiatives have empowered citizens to question local authorities (Banerjee et al., 2019). Kerala remains a benchmark of deep democratic practice, where participatory budgeting and decentralized planning have improved social indicators (Isaac & Franke, 2002). Conversely, states with weak devolution frameworks exhibit higher elite capture and corruption. The *Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP)* process, though conceptually sound, suffers from low compliance, PRIA (2023) found that only 58% of Panchayats conduct inclusive consultations. To deepen democracy, Panchayats must transcend their administrative functions and evolve into arenas of deliberative citizenship. Institutionalizing participatory planning, regular Gram Sabha audits, and transparent digital portals for budget disclosures are vital steps toward this goal.

5. Discussion: Theoretical Synthesis

The findings from the preceding sections underscore that grassroots democracy in India is simultaneously a project of governance and emancipation. Theoretically, this paper situates India's decentralization within three overlapping frameworks: participatory democracy, empowerment theory, and deliberative democracy. From a *Senian* perspective, empowerment must expand individuals' *capabilities*, not merely their formal rights, to act as agents of change. Panchayati Raj institutions, when inclusive, expand freedoms through access to education, representation, and resource control. However, when participation is constrained by social hierarchies, the capability set of marginalized groups remains limited. Participatory democracy, as articulated by Pateman (1970), posits that active involvement in decision-making enhances both competence and equality. In India, Gram Sabhas embodies this ideal, but they also reflect social inequalities that inhibit equal deliberation. Habermas's notion of the "ideal speech situation" (1996) rarely materializes in contexts dominated by caste or patriarchal hierarchies. The Gram Sabha thus becomes a contested site, an arena where equality is aspirational rather than inherent. Empowerment theory (Kabeer, 1999; Narayan, 2002) complements this by emphasizing transformation of power relations. Grassroots democracy transforms political spaces into sites of negotiation where marginalized communities assert agency. For Dalits, this may mean challenging caste-based exclusion; for women, confronting gender bias; for Adivasis, reclaiming control over land and resources; and for Muslims, resisting invisibilities within local politics. Ultimately, these frameworks converge on one principle: **empowerment without devolution is symbolic**. Sustainable empowerment requires the redistribution of political power, fiscal autonomy, and socio-cultural recognition. Panchayati Raj institutions must thus evolve from administrative intermediaries into engines of democratic citizenship.

6. Policy Implications

6.1 Deepening Devolution

True decentralization demands fiscal and functional autonomy. The Fifteenth Finance Commission (2020) recommends increased untied grants to Panchayats, enabling innovation in local governance. States must devolve the remaining subjects under the Eleventh Schedule and allow Gram Panchayats discretion over resource allocation.

6.2 Capacity Building and Civic Literacy

Empowerment depends on knowledge. Programs under the *Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA)* should prioritize digital literacy, participatory planning, and rights-based awareness for marginalized representatives (MoPR, 2023). Civil society partnerships can sustain long-term leadership development among women, Dalits, and minorities.

6.3 Inclusive Representation

Political inclusion should extend beyond constitutional quotas. Minority inclusion charters and legal protection mechanisms for Dalit and Adivasi representatives can safeguard participation. States may establish *Minority Advisory Councils* within Panchayats to address community-specific concerns.

6.4 Strengthening Gram Sabhas

Regular meetings, quorum enforcement, and open budget disclosure must be institutionalized. Kerala's model of *Ward Sabhas* demonstrates that smaller deliberative units can enhance participation and accountability (Isaac & Franke, 2002).

6.5 Linking Economic and Political Empowerment

Economic empowerment initiatives like the *National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)* should be integrated with Panchayat planning processes to ensure synergy between livelihood promotion and local governance (Chambers, 2012).

7. Conclusion

Grassroots democracy in India embodies the promise of participatory transformation, bridging the gap between state and citizen at grassroot levels. The Panchayati Raj system has achieved remarkable progress in expanding representation for marginalized groups, yet the path to *substantive empowerment* remains fraught with structural and institutional constraints. This study reaffirms that decentralization is not a panacea but a political process requiring sustained commitment to inclusion, transparency, and accountability. Empowerment must extend beyond procedural participation to encompass social justice and capability enhancement. For Dalits and Adivasis, it means access to dignity and self-determination; for women, equality in public life; and for Muslims, recognition within the democratic mosaic of rural India. As India approaches the next phase of rural transformation, driven by digital governance, climate resilience, and demographic shifts, strengthening grassroots democracy becomes imperative. Only when local institutions genuinely redistribute power, recognize intersectional identities, and sustain deliberative participation can India's democracy fulfill its emancipatory potential, uniting governance with justice and representation with dignity.

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