

## Evolution and Development of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Jammu and Kashmir: A Study of Pre and Post Abrogation of Article 370

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**Abstract:** The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) constitute the foundation of grassroots democracy in India and represent a vital instrument of decentralization, participatory development, and local self-governance. Jammu and Kashmir has historically experienced a distinctive evolution of Panchayati Raj due to its special constitutional status under Article 370 and the region's unique political context shaped by conflict, instability, and contested governance structures. This research paper critically examines the historical evolution of Panchayati Raj institutions in Jammu and Kashmir from the pre-independence era to the post-2019 period, with special emphasis on the institutional restructuring after the abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35A in August 2019. The paper adopts a qualitative historical-institutional approach supported by secondary sources such as legislative documents, official reports, and election statistics. The study argues that although Jammu and Kashmir possessed Panchayat institutions since the Dogra period (1935), these institutions largely remained under bureaucratic control and failed to evolve into autonomous democratic structures. While the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act of 1989 provided the legal framework for a three-tier system, the institutionalization of higher tiers remained absent until the post-abrogation reforms, particularly the establishment of Block Development Councils (2019) and District Development Councils (2020). However, despite these structural advancements, the democratic legitimacy and effectiveness of PRIs remain contested due to political boycotts, administrative dominance, and weak fiscal decentralization. The paper concludes that post-2019 reforms have expanded formal democratic decentralization but substantial gaps remain in ensuring meaningful devolution of functions, funds, and functionaries.

**Keywords:** Panchayati Raj Institutions, Article 370, Jammu and Kashmir, Decentralization, Democratic Governance, Grassroots Democracy, Rural governance

### 1. Introduction

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) represent one of the most significant historical and cultural legacies of India's democratic architecture enabling citizen participation in governance at the grassroots level. The evolution of PRIs in India reflects the broader transformation of the state from colonial centralization toward democratic decentralization, culminating in the constitutional recognition of Panchayats through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 (Pal, 2020). While majority of Indian states and Union territories aligned their Panchayati systems with this constitutional framework, erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir (Union Territory since 2019) remained outside its direct applicability due to the special constitutional status provided under Article 370 in Indian Constitution (Constitution of India, 2018). This exception created an alternative institutional trajectory for PRIs in J&K, wherein decentralization was shaped not only by developmental priorities and institutional developments but also by the region's political conflict and security-centric

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governance framework. Historically, J&K presents a complex case of decentralization. Despite having statutory Panchayat laws dating back to 1935, the actual empowerment of PRIs remained weak, inconsistent, and largely dependent on political stability (Chowdhary, 2012). Unlike other Indian states where Panchayat elections and decentralization reforms became mandatory after 1992, J&K witnessed long gaps between Panchayat elections, limited devolution of authority, and frequent administrative interventions. Consequently, PRIs remained underdeveloped as democratic institutions despite their long historical presence.

The abrogation of Article 370 and the reorganization of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories (UT of J&K and UT of Ladakh) in August 2019 created a new governance context. This development provided an opportunity for the Union government to introduce reforms aimed at establishing a complete three-tier Panchayati Raj system. The post-2019 period thus marks a significant institutional shift, particularly by conducting elections of Block Development Councils (BDCs) in 2019 and District Development Councils (DDCs) in 2020 for the first time in history of J&K. However, these reforms also emerged in an environment of extraordinary political restrictions and legitimacy crisis, raising questions regarding the democratic quality and sustainability of the decentralization process. This paper attempts to critically analyze the evolution of PRIs in J&K, focusing on institutional developments in the pre-abrogation and post-abrogation phases, and assessing the extent to which Panchayati Raj reforms have contributed to grassroots democracy and rural governance.

## 2. Literature Review

The evolution of PRIs in Jammu and Kashmir has been widely examined through historical and institutional perspectives. Punjabi (1990) provides one of the earliest systematic accounts of Panchayat development in the region, tracing its origins to the Dogra-era Village Regulation of 1935. He argues that Panchayats under the princely regime were primarily instruments of administrative surveillance rather than genuine democratic institutions. The restrictive electoral qualifications, elitist composition, and judicial focus of the 1935 Act demonstrate that the Panchayat system was designed to serve state control rather than popular empowerment. This argument is supported by later scholars who contend that pre-independence Panchayats in Jammu and Kashmir functioned within a feudal social order, limiting their developmental and participatory potential (Chowdhary, 2012). Bhat (2002) examines local self-government in the region and argues that despite legislative reforms such as the Village Panchayat Act of 1951 and the Act of 1958, Panchayats remained institutionally fragile due to political interference and bureaucratic dominance. According to Bhat, the nomination provisions and supersession powers granted to the state authorities prevented Panchayats from functioning as autonomous institutions of self-governance. This argument is reinforced by Chowdhary (2012), who observes that the dismissal of Sheikh Abdullah in 1953 and the subsequent erosion of democratic processes weakened decentralization efforts. Kumar (2014) regards the 1989 Act as a landmark in the decentralization trajectory of the region because it formally established a three-tier Panchayati Raj system comprising Halqa Panchayats, Block Development Councils, and District Planning and Development Boards. Most of the studies remain focused on Panchayat elections and decentralization before 2019 whereas the post-abrogation phase represents a fundamentally altered governance structure that demands renewed academic investigation. The present study attempts to fill this research gap by providing a systematic analysis of PRI evolution in pre- and post-abrogation phases, using election data and institutional reforms as the basis of critical evaluation.

## 3. Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the historical evolution of Panchayati Raj institutions in J&K from the pre-independence era to the post-2019 period.
- To examine the legislative and institutional developments under the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989.

- To evaluate the impact of the abrogation of Article 370 on grassroots decentralization and democratic governance in J&K.
- To assess electoral participation and institutional functioning through Halqa Panchayat, Block Development Council and District Development Council election trends.
- To examine the key challenges affecting PRIs in J&K.

#### 4. Research Questions

The paper addresses the following research questions:

- How did Panchayati Raj institutions evolve in Jammu and Kashmir historically under different political regimes?
- To what extent did the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act of 1989 succeed in institutionalizing democratic decentralization?
- What structural changes were introduced after the abrogation of Article 370, and how do these reforms affect grassroots democracy?
- What do election data indicate regarding participation, representation, and institutional continuity of PRIs in Jammu and Kashmir?
- What challenges constrain PRIs from becoming genuine institutions of self-governance in the J&K?

#### 5. Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Democratic Decentralization, supported by institutional and governance perspectives. Democratic decentralization is understood as the transfer of political, administrative, and fiscal powers from higher levels of government to local bodies, enabling participatory governance, accountability, and inclusive development (Rondinelli, 1981). In the Indian context, PRIs are conceptualized not merely as administrative units but as democratic institutions designed to deepen democracy by involving citizens directly in decision-making processes at the village and district levels. Theoretically, decentralization can be interpreted through the lens of institutionalism, which emphasizes how political institutions evolve through historical processes and shape governance outcomes (North, 1990). In Jammu and Kashmir, PRI evolution reflects a historically contingent pattern where institutions were shaped by monarchy, post-1947 political instability, insurgency, and later by the constitutional transition after 2019. This institutional trajectory demonstrates that decentralization is not only a legal reform but also a political process dependent on legitimacy, stability, and power relations. The paper also employs a critical governance approach, emphasizing that decentralization reforms may sometimes serve symbolic purposes rather than genuine empowerment. In conflict zones such as Jammu and Kashmir, decentralization may become an instrument of state-building and legitimacy construction, rather than an outcome of local democratic demand. This aligns with the argument that decentralization in contested regions often becomes a top-down governance strategy to manage political alienation and strengthen administrative penetration (Crook & Manor, 1998). Thus, the theoretical framework highlights that Panchayati Raj in Jammu and Kashmir must be studied not simply as a development institution but as a political institution embedded within contested sovereignty, security-driven governance, and shifting constitutional arrangements.

#### 6. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, employing a historical-institutional and descriptive-analytical approach. The paper is primarily based on secondary data sources, including legislative documents, government notifications, official election reports, committee reports, and published academic literature. The qualitative design is appropriate because the research aims to understand institutional evolution, policy shifts, and political transformations over time. The research relies on document analysis as the main tool of data collection. This includes examination of the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati laws (1935, 1951, 1958, 1989),

official records related to Halqa Panchayat elections (2001, 2011, 2018), BDC elections (2019), and DDC elections (2020). Election-related statistical data is used to interpret trends in participation, vacancies, gender representation, and institutional continuity. The study integrates these data with interpretive analysis to assess the broader governance implications. The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and absence of primary fieldwork. However, the use of official election data and legislative documentation ensures reliability and provides a strong empirical basis for analysis.

### **7. Panchayati Raj in J&K: Pre-Independence Period**

The origins of local governance institutions in Jammu and Kashmir can be traced back to ancient times, where villages functioned as the basic administrative units governed by councils such as Pancakula, a five-member body that resembled the traditional Panchayat system. Historical references indicate that these councils performed administrative and judicial functions and were composed of respected members of society known as Mahattaras, often elected by the residents (Drabu, 1986). Such structures reflect the indigenous tradition of participatory governance, though not institutionalized in the modern democratic sense. The formal statutory recognition of Panchayats emerged under the Dogra monarchy with the promulgation of the Jammu and Kashmir Village Regulation No. 1 of 1935 (Punjabi, 1990, Shabnam, 2017). This law marked the first modern attempt to institutionalize Panchayats in the state. However, the Panchayats under this act were elitist and restrictive, as electoral qualifications such as property ownership, income criteria, and educational qualifications limited participation to privileged classes like Jagirdars and Lambardars. The Act was thus criticized as an administrative tool designed to maintain surveillance over rural society rather than promoting democratic representation. The law also focused heavily on judicial functions, with 47 out of 58 provisions dealing with dispute resolution, reflecting the monarchy's emphasis on using Panchayats as subordinate legal mechanisms rather than as developmental institutions (Punjabi, 1990, Sohail, 2020, Wani, 2014).

The 1935 Act was amended in 1941, expanding Panchayat responsibilities to include sanitation, education, infrastructure, and taxation powers. While these reforms theoretically expanded the functional scope of Panchayats, their effectiveness remained constrained by feudal social structures and bureaucratic supervision. Nevertheless, some progress was recorded, such as increased dispute resolution cases and limited developmental activities like adult education drives and rural surveys. Yet, Panchayats remained politically weak institutions incapable of transforming rural governance in the absence of democratic political structures (Chowdhary, 2012, Punjabi, 1990).

### **8. Post-1947 Developments and Panchayati Raj in J&K**

After 1947, Jammu and Kashmir entered a new phase of political restructuring under the leadership of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah and the National Conference government. The socio-economic conditions at the time were characterized by poverty, inequality, and landlord domination. The introduction of the Big Landed Estate Abolition Act, 1950 represented a landmark reform that transferred land from large landlords to peasants. This reform created conditions for strengthening local democratic governance, as rural society underwent a major transformation. However, political instability and the dismissal of Sheikh Abdullah in 1953 disrupted the democratic decentralization process (Kumar, 2014). The Jammu and Kashmir Village Panchayat Act 1951 represented the first post-independence attempt to establish Panchayats on democratic lines. The most significant feature of this act was the introduction of universal adult franchise, though nomination provisions still existed, limiting full democratic character. The act introduced Halqa Panchayats covering multiple villages and Panchayat Boards at Tehsil levels. However, Tehsil Panchayat Boards remained largely non-functional (Khan, 2007, Kumar, 2014). The act provided Panchayats with administrative, developmental, civic, and judicial functions and outlined revenue sources such as fees, taxes, government contributions, and sanitation.

Despite these provisions, political instability and bureaucratic control undermined Panchayat autonomy at ground level (Chowdhary, 2012, Punjabi, 1990).

The Village Panchayat Act of 1958, which replaced the 1951 law, maintained a two-tier structure and introduced Panchayat Adalats. However, it also reinforced government control through nomination provisions and supersession powers. Furthermore, there was no mandatory provision for regular elections, resulting in institutional discontinuity. Scholars argue that despite statutory existence, Panchayats functioned largely as agencies of government rather than autonomous bodies of self-governance (Balkoo, 2020). A major administrative reform occurred in 1976 with the introduction of Single Line Administration under Sheikh Abdullah. This reorganized district governance by strengthening the role of the District Development Commissioner and integrating all departments under district-level administrative control. While it improved coordination, it further centralized development administration rather than empowering Panchayats as independent democratic institutions (Kumar, 2014, Waza, 2018).

### **9. Jammu and Kashmir Panchayat Act, 1989: A Landmark Legislation of Decentralization**

The most significant legislative milestone in the history of Panchayati Raj in Jammu and Kashmir was the enactment of the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989 by government of erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir State. This act aimed to establish a three-tier system comprising Halqa Panchayats, Block Development Councils, and District Planning and Development Boards. The act introduced direct elections for Sarpanchs, established Halqa Majlis (Gram Sabha equivalent), reduced voting age to 18, and mandated elections every five years (J&K Panchayati Raj Act, 1989). It also provided for Panchayat Adalats for dispute settlement. In theory, the 1989 Act represented a progressive decentralization framework comparable to national reforms. However, its implementation was severely constrained by the outbreak of insurgency and political unrest in the early 1990s. The region entered a prolonged phase of conflict, during which normal democratic processes remained suspended. Consequently, Panchayati institutions remained virtually non-functional, and the envisioned three-tier structure could not be institutionalized (Balkoo, 2021, Mathew, 2002). This demonstrates that decentralization reforms require not only legal frameworks but also political stability and administrative commitment to become operational. Despite its progressive intent, the 1989 Act also had structural limitations. It allowed nomination provisions at various levels and lacked strong institutional safeguards like State Finance Commission and State Election Commission mechanisms, which later became mandatory under the 73rd Amendment in the rest of India. Therefore, even though the act symbolized a formal commitment to grassroots democracy, it remained incomplete both in practice and in institutional depth (Kumar, 2014).

### **10. Panchayat Elections and Grassroot Politics in Post-2000 Period**

#### **10.1 Panchayat Elections 2001**

The first major attempt to revive grassroots democracy after decades of conflict was the Panchayat elections held in January 2001. These elections were conducted after nearly two decades, as the last elections had taken place in 1978. However, the elections occurred amidst boycott calls from separatist groups and insurgent organizations, which discouraged participation especially in Kashmir valley. Consequently, while Jammu and Ladakh regions witnessed enthusiastic turnout exceeding 70%, the Kashmir region recorded widespread vacancies due to lack of candidates (Chowdhary, 2001, Waza and Wani 2018).

**Table 1: Details of Panchayat Elections, 2001**

| S. No. | Items                   | Kashmir Division | Jammu Division | Total |
|--------|-------------------------|------------------|----------------|-------|
| 1      | No. of Halqa Panchayats | 1470             | 1230           | 2700  |

| S. No. | Items                                           | Kashmir Division | Jammu Division | Total |
|--------|-------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------------|-------|
| 2      | No. of Sarpanch Constituencies                  | 1470             | 1230           | 2700  |
| 3      | No. of Panch Constituencies                     | 10468            | 10090          | 20558 |
| 4      | No. of Sarpanchs Elected                        | 1034             | 1198           | 2232  |
| 5      | No. of Panchs Elected                           | 5127             | 9728           | 14855 |
| 6      | No. of Women Sarpanchs Elected                  | 02               | 07             | 09    |
| 7      | No. of Women Panchs Elected                     | 71               | 166            | 237   |
| 8      | No. of Vacancies of Sarpanchs                   | 596              | 237            | 833   |
| 9      | No. of Vacancies of Panchs                      | 5987             | 590            | 6577  |
| 10     | No. of Panchayats Notified                      | 518              | 657            | 1175  |
| 11     | No. of Panchayats Not Notified (Want of Quorum) | 568              | 25             | 593   |
| 12     | Panchayats where No Nomination Received         | 384              | 32             | 416   |
| 13     | Total                                           | 1470             | 1230           | 2700  |

**Source:** Chief Electoral Officer, J&K (2001).

The analysis of the above data clearly demonstrates that the 2001 elections suffered from serious representational gaps. The Kashmir division recorded 596 vacant Sarpanch seats and 5,987 vacant Panch seats, indicating severe political disengagement. The low participation suggests that Panchayat elections were perceived as weak instruments of governance, lacking legitimacy in the conflict context. Additionally, women representation was extremely low, with only 9 women Sarpanchs and 237 women Panchs across the entire state. The elections therefore failed to establish strong institutional foundations for decentralized governance in Jammu and Kashmir.

## 10.2 Panchayat Elections 2011 and Grassroot Democracy

The Panchayat elections of 2011 represented a major turning point. Conducted in 16 phases from April to June 2011, the elections witnessed an unprecedented turnout of around 78%, reflecting renewed public engagement. The elections resulted in 4,081 Sarpanchs and 28,248 Panchs, including 28 women Sarpanchs and 9,224 women Panchs. These elections were widely regarded as the first meaningful Panchayat elections after decades, particularly since the 2001 elections were considered a “paper exercise” due to widespread vacancies (Wani 2014).

**Table 2: District-wise Panchayat Election Statistics, 2011**

| S. No. | District | Total Panchayats | Sarpanchs Elected | Sarpanch Vacancies | Panch Constituencies | Panchs Elected | Panch Vacancies |
|--------|----------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|----------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 1      | Kupwara  | 356              | 355               | 1                  | 2716                 | 2694           | 22              |
| 2      | Band     | 114              | 114               | 0                  | 869                  | 865            | 4               |

| S. No.       | District   | Total Panchayats | Sarpanchs Elected | Sarpanch Vacancies | Panch Constituencies | Panchs Elected | Panch Vacancies |
|--------------|------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|----------------------|----------------|-----------------|
|              | ipora      |                  |                   |                    |                      |                |                 |
| 3            | Bara mulla | 365              | 350               | 15                 | 2906                 | 2352           | 554             |
| 4            | Srinagar   | 10               | 10                | 0                  | 79                   | 78             | 1               |
| 5            | Budgam     | 283              | 282               | 1                  | 2155                 | 2108           | 47              |
| 6            | Ganderbal  | 103              | 103               | 0                  | 744                  | 719            | 25              |
| 7            | Anantnag   | 297              | 296               | 1                  | 2054                 | 2037           | 17              |
| 8            | Kulgam     | 159              | 158               | 1                  | 1060                 | 1040           | 20              |
| 9            | Pulwama    | 186              | 166               | 20                 | 1350                 | 841            | 509             |
| 10           | Shopian    | 103              | 103               | 0                  | 763                  | 620            | 143             |
| 11           | Leh        | 93               | 93                | 0                  | 604                  | 588            | 16              |
| 12           | Kargil     | 95               | 95                | 0                  | 659                  | 656            | 3               |
| 13           | Jammu      | 296              | 295               | 1                  | 2160                 | 2153           | 7               |
| 14           | Kathua     | 244              | 244               | 0                  | 1644                 | 1642           | 2               |
| 15           | Udhampur   | 204              | 204               | 0                  | 1544                 | 1543           | 1               |
| 16           | Doda       | 231              | 231               | 0                  | 1424                 | 1420           | 3               |
| 17           | Kishtwar   | 134              | 134               | 0                  | 838                  | 836            | 2               |
| 18           | Poonch     | 189              | 189               | 0                  | 1540                 | 1537           | 3               |
| 19           | Ramban     | 124              | 124               | 0                  | 832                  | 831            | 1               |
| 20           | Reasi      | 147              | 146               | 1                  | 1014                 | 992            | 22              |
| 21           | Rajouri    | 295              | 289               | 6                  | 2026                 | 1972           | 54              |
| 22           | Samba      | 100              | 100               | 0                  | 726                  | 724            | 2               |
| <b>Total</b> |            | <b>4128</b>      | <b>4081</b>       | <b>47</b>          | <b>29,707</b>        | <b>28,248</b>  | <b>1458</b>     |

**Source:** Chief Electoral Officer, Jammu and Kashmir (2011).

The analysis of election data collected from official website of Chief electoral Officer of Jammu and Kashmir indicates that while the elections were successful overall, some Kashmir districts such as Pulwama and Baramulla still witnessed significant vacancies. This highlights that despite improved participation, conflict-related political conditions continued to shape electoral engagement particularly in Kashmir Division. Moreover, although the government delegated powers of 14 departments to Panchayats through cabinet decisions in 2011, only the first tier (Halqa Panchayat) was effectively operational, while higher tiers remained absent, limiting decentralization in Jammu and Kashmir.

### **11. Panchayat Election 2018 and Grassroot Democracy**

The Panchayat elections held in November–December 2018 occurred under Governor’s Rule and were boycotted by major regional parties like the National Conference and PDP. While the overall turnout was 74%, the Kashmir region recorded only around 41%, reflecting political alienation. A significant number of Halqas witnessed uncontested seats and vacancies. Shopian district saw no elections at all, and districts like Pulwama, Budgam, and Kulgam witnessed high vacancy levels. These elections therefore represented an institutional continuity in formal terms but reflected declining democratic legitimacy in the Kashmir valley (Begum and Mehwish, 2019). The 2018 elections must be understood as occurring in a politically fragmented environment where democratic participation was shaped by the absence of mainstream political actors. The boycott weakened the representative character of Panchayats, and the institutional structure continued to remain incomplete due to absence of Block and District tiers.

### **12. Post-370 Abrogation Era: Reforms in Panchayati Raj System in J&K**

The abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35A in August 2019 fundamentally altered the constitutional and political context of Jammu and Kashmir. The region’s transformation into a Union Territory enabled the central government to directly influence governance reforms, including Panchayati Raj restructuring. This period witnessed the establishment of the second tier in 2019 (Block Development Council) and third tier in 2020 (District Development Council) of Panchayati Raj for the first time in the history of Jammu and Kashmir (Begum and Mehwish, 2019). Though Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act 1989 envisaged for the three tiers Panchayati Raj System, but only first tier (Halqa Panchayat) was operational in pre-370 abrogation period.

#### **12.1. Block Development Council Elections 2019 and Grassroot Politics**

The Block Development Council elections held in October 2019 were historically significant because they represented the first attempt to operationalize the intermediate tier in Jammu and Kashmir. Elections were held for 310 blocks with a turnout exceeding 98%. However, the elections were boycotted by major political parties, raising concerns about legitimacy. Additionally, the elections occurred during a period of severe restrictions, communication shutdown, and detention of political leaders after the abrogation decision (Waza 2019). Therefore, while the elections institutionalized decentralization formally, their democratic quality remained contested.

**Table 3: Results of Block Development Council Elections 2019 (Party-wise)**

| District  | Total Blocks | Blocks Notified | BJP | INC | JKNPP | BSP | Independent | Total |
|-----------|--------------|-----------------|-----|-----|-------|-----|-------------|-------|
| Kupwara   | 24           | 24              | 0   | 0   | 0     | 0   | 24          | 24    |
| Baramulla | 26           | 26              | 1   | 0   | 0     | 0   | 25          | 26    |

| District     | Total Blocks | Blocks Notified | BJP       | INC      | JKNPP    | BSP      | Independent | Total      |
|--------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|------------|
| Bandipora    | 12           | 12              | 0         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 12          | 12         |
| Ganderbal    | 7            | 7               | 0         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 7           | 7          |
| Srinagar     | 4            | 3               | 0         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 3           | 3          |
| Budgam       | 17           | 16              | 2         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 14          | 16         |
| Pulwama      | 11           | 9               | 4         | 1        | 0        | 0        | 4           | 9          |
| Shopian      | 9            | 8               | 8         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0           | 8          |
| Kulgam       | 11           | 7               | 0         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 7           | 7          |
| Anantnag     | 16           | 16              | 3         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 13          | 16         |
| Kishtwar     | 13           | 13              | 7         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 6           | 13         |
| Doda         | 17           | 17              | 5         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 12          | 17         |
| Ramban       | 11           | 11              | 2         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 9           | 11         |
| Reasi        | 12           | 12              | 4         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 8           | 12         |
| Udhampur     | 17           | 17              | 4         | 0        | 8        | 0        | 5           | 17         |
| Kathua       | 19           | 19              | 9         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 10          | 19         |
| Samba        | 9            | 9               | 4         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 5           | 9          |
| Jammu        | 20           | 20              | 9         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 11          | 20         |
| Rajouri      | 19           | 19              | 8         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 11          | 19         |
| Poonch       | 11           | 11              | 0         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 11          | 11         |
| Leh          | 16           | 16              | 7         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 9           | 16         |
| Kargil       | 15           | 15              | 4         | 0        | 0        | 0        | 11          | 15         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>316</b>   | <b>307</b>      | <b>81</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>8</b> | <b>0</b> | <b>217</b>  | <b>307</b> |

**Source:** Chief Electoral Officer, Jammu and Kashmir (2019).

The table demonstrates that Independent candidates dominated the election outcomes, winning 217 blocks, which indicates that party-based political competition remained absent due to boycott. This raises a serious question: whether these institutions represented grassroots democratic empowerment or whether they became administratively facilitated structures to showcase democratic normalcy.

## 12.2 District Development Council Elections 2020 and Grassroot Politics

The most significant post-abrogation reform was the replacement of District Planning and Development Boards with District Development Councils (DDCs) through amendments introduced in October 2020. Elections were

held in November–December 2020 for 280 seats, with voter turnout around 52%. The results reflected competitive politics, with the People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD) winning around 109 seats and BJP winning 74 seats. This marked the first time that district-level grassroots representatives were directly elected, establishing a complete three-tier Panchayati system (SEC J&K, 2020). However, the DDC system has also been criticized because each district has a fixed number of 14 seats regardless of population size, raising issues of proportional representation. Moreover, many observers argued that DDCs were introduced as alternative democratic structures to replace statehood politics and create a new power configuration under Union Territory administration (Barthwal, 2020).

### 13. Comparative Analysis of Pre and Post-370 Abrogation

A comparative analysis of PRI evolution in Jammu and Kashmir shows that the pre-abrogation period was marked by incomplete institutionalization, irregular elections, and weak autonomy. Although the 1989 Act provided a three-tier structure, only the Halqa Panchayat tier was occasionally functional. Block and district tiers remained largely absent, indicating that decentralization existed more as a legal claim than an operational governance reality. The post-370 abrogation period, on the other hand, represented a structural expansion of decentralization through BDC and DDC elections for the first time. For the first time, a three-tier Panchayati structure has been institutionalized in Jammu and Kashmir. Moreover, reservation provisions for women, SCs, and STs were strengthened. The creation of a State Election Commission also represents a significant institutional development.

However, despite structural improvements, post-abrogation decentralization reforms face serious legitimacy concerns. The elections were held under political restrictions and communication lockdown and major political parties boycotted the process. This undermines democratic inclusiveness and raises the possibility that decentralization reforms may be instrumentalized as administrative tools rather than genuine empowerment mechanisms. Furthermore, fiscal decentralization remains weak, as Panchayats continue to rely heavily on centrally sponsored schemes and administrative departments for implementation. Thus, while pre-abrogation PRIs were structurally incomplete, post-abrogation PRIs are institutionally expanded but politically contested. The success of decentralization depends not merely on institutional creation but on trust, political participation, and functional autonomy.

### 14. Challenges to Effective Functioning of PRIs in J&K

Several structural and political challenges continue to constrain PRIs in Jammu and Kashmir. First, the long history of conflict and instability has disrupted electoral continuity, creating institutional fragility. Second, bureaucratic dominance remains strong, limiting Panchayats' role in planning and implementation. Third, fiscal autonomy remains weak because Panchayats have limited independent revenue sources and depend on government allocations. Fourth, political alienation in Kashmir valley has reduced participation and representation, leading to vacancies and legitimacy deficits. Fifth, Panchayats often remain confined to implementing centrally sponsored schemes rather than functioning as autonomous governance bodies. The broader governance culture in Jammu and Kashmir has historically been shaped by centralized administration, which undermines the spirit of democratic decentralization. Therefore, unless reforms ensure meaningful transfer of powers, functions, and resources, PRIs may remain symbolic institutions rather than genuine self-governing units.

### 15. Conclusion

The evolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Jammu and Kashmir reflects a long but discontinuous history of decentralization. From ancient Panchayat-like councils to the statutory framework introduced in 1935, the region has possessed institutional forms of local governance for decades. However, these institutions largely remained weak due to restrictive political structures, elitist participation, and bureaucratic control. Post-1947

reforms, including Panchayat Acts of 1951 and 1958, failed to establish stable grassroots democracy due to political instability and central interference. The Panchayati Raj Act of 1989 represented the most progressive legislative framework, but its implementation remained incomplete due to insurgency and prolonged conflict. The post-2019 period marks a decisive shift, as the establishment of BDCs and DDCs finally operationalized the three-tier Panchayati Raj system. This institutional expansion has the potential to deepen democracy and strengthen development planning. However, political boycotts, legitimacy crises, and administrative dominance continue to challenge meaningful decentralization. The study concludes that while post-abrogation reforms have expanded the structural framework of Panchayati Raj, the transformation of PRIs into genuine institutions of self-governance requires greater fiscal empowerment, administrative autonomy, political inclusiveness, and sustained democratic stability. The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and absence of primary fieldwork such as interviews, surveys, and participant observation. While official election data and legislative documents provide empirical reliability, future studies incorporating field-based evidence can offer deeper insights into citizen perceptions and governance outcomes. Future research may explore comparative performance evaluation of PRIs across Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh, assess the impact of PRIs on service delivery outcomes, and examine citizen perceptions of legitimacy in the post-abrogation era. Empirical studies focusing on women leadership, elite capture, and fiscal decentralization outcomes will further strengthen understanding of grassroots democracy in Jammu and Kashmir.

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