



Gandhian Vision and Panchayati Raj: A Theoretical Examination of Gram Swaraj in India's Local Governance

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Abstract: Mahatma Gandhi envisioned Gram Swaraj as a system of self-governing village communities founded on participatory democracy, economic independence, and moral leadership, positioning the village as the cornerstone of India's civilizational identity. Following independence, this philosophical ideal found institutional expression through the constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), particularly after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992. Employing qualitative methodology grounded in normative political theory and secondary sources, the study reveals that while PRIs have significantly broadened political participation—particularly among women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes—they institutionalise decentralisation primarily in procedural terms. They fall considerably short of achieving the substantive autonomy, economic self-sufficiency, and moral self-governance that constitute the essence of Gandhian thought. The paper concludes that Gandhian rural reconstruction remains both a vital normative corrective to technocratic governance models and an unfinished transformative project in contemporary India.

Keywords: Gram Swaraj; Panchayati Raj; Gandhian philosophy; rural reconstruction; decentralisation; local governance; 73rd Constitutional Amendment

Introduction

Background

Throughout Indian civilisation, villages have constituted the fundamental social, economic, and political units. Rural society continues to shape democratic participation, social justice movements, and developmental trajectories in contemporary India. According to the 2011 Census, India has approximately 6.5 lakh villages, housing over 65% of the country's population, underscoring the continued significance of rural governance. Mahatma Gandhi articulated this reality most powerfully, conceptualising rural India as the locus of political sovereignty and moral regeneration (Gandhi, 1909/1938). In Hind Swaraj, he rejected centralised industrial modernity, envisioning instead Gram Swaraj—self-reliant, ethically grounded village republics capable of managing their own affairs (Gandhi, 1941). His conception of decentralisation transcended administrative arrangements, representing a civilisational alternative rooted in swadeshi, trusteeship, participatory democracy, and social harmony.

Post-independence constitutional developments sought to institutionalise elements of this decentralised vision. Article 40 of the Constitution directed the State to organise village panchayats as units of self-government. However, meaningful constitutional status arrived only through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, which inserted Part IX and recognised Panchayati Raj Institutions as the third tier of governance (Government of India, 1992). This landmark reform mandated regular elections, reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women, established State Finance Commissions, and empowered Gram Sabhas (Mathew, 2000; Singhvi, 1986). Today, India has over 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats with more than 3.1 million elected representatives, making it the largest experiment in grassroots democracy globally (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2023). Unlike conventional evaluations focusing on performance metrics or participation rates, this study repositions Gram Swaraj as a normative framework for assessing the limitations of constitutional decentralisation.



Research Problem

A fundamental disjunction exists between Gandhian moral-economic decentralisation and the administrative decentralisation practised through Panchayati Raj. Gandhi's Gram Swaraj encompassed political autonomy, economic self-reliance, ethical leadership, and the elimination of caste hierarchies (Gandhi, 1909/1938), emphasising moral transformation as the foundation of self-rule. Conversely, contemporary PRIs operate within state-controlled fiscal and bureaucratic frameworks, possessing limited autonomy over taxation, planning, and personnel management (Government of India, 1992).

Research indicates that many Panchayats function primarily as implementing agencies for centrally sponsored schemes rather than as genuine self-governance institutions (Mathew, 2000). Studies of Gram Sabha functioning in Tamil Nadu reveal that while participatory mechanisms exist, substantive autonomy and deliberative decision-making remain constrained (Ranjithkumar, 2014; 2020). The core problem thus lies in determining whether Panchayati Raj represents authentic decentralisation in the Gandhian sense or merely a procedural, scheme-driven model disconnected from Gram Swaraj's normative ideals.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does the constitutional framework of Panchayati Raj translate Gandhian Gram Swaraj ideals into practice?
2. Does Panchayati Raj represent substantive decentralisation or merely procedural devolution within a centralised state structure?

Objectives

- Theoretically analyse Gandhian rural reconstruction and Gram Swaraj (Gandhi, 1909/1938; 1941)
- Examine the constitutional design and functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (Government of India, 1992)
- Assess convergence and divergence between Gandhian decentralisation and contemporary local governance practices

Methodology

This study adopts a doctrinal and theoretical research methodology, employing qualitative analysis of primary sources including Gandhi's Hind Swaraj and Constructive Programme (Gandhi, 1909/1938; 1941), constitutional provisions on decentralisation (Government of India, 1992), and official committee reports (Singhvi, 1986). Secondary sources encompass scholarly literature on democratic decentralisation and Panchayati Raj (Mathew, 2000; Baviskar & Mathew, 2009). The approach remains analytical, comparative, and conceptually focused, grounded in normative political theory.

Scope and Limitations

This study is confined to theoretical assessment of Gram Swaraj and Panchayati Raj Institutions, excluding primary fieldwork or quantitative analysis of scheme implementation. References to empirical findings from Tamil Nadu studies (Ranjithkumar, 2014; 2022) serve illustrative purposes, with emphasis remaining on governance philosophy and institutional design. Consequently, conclusions are normative rather than statistically generalisable.

Structure

The paper proceeds through ten sections. Following this introduction, Section II reviews literature on Gandhian thought and decentralisation. Section III develops the conceptual framework of Gram Swaraj and rural



reconstruction. Section IV traces Panchayati Raj's historical evolution and constitutional framework. Section V provides theoretical comparison between Gram Swaraj and PRIs. Section VI discusses structural and conceptual challenges. Section VII explores contemporary relevance and synthesis pathways. The paper concludes with policy implications and reflections on Gandhian decentralisation's enduring normative relevance.

Literature Review

Gandhian Interpretations of Gram Swaraj

Gram Swaraj occupies a central position in Gandhian political philosophy. Gandhi conceptualised Swaraj not merely as political independence but as moral self-rule, rooted in individual discipline, community self-sufficiency, and participatory decision-making (Gandhi, 1909/1938). In Hind Swaraj, he offered a fundamental critique of modern, centralised civilisation, proposing village republics as foundational polity units—capable of self-governance through consensus, ethical leadership, and locally rooted economies (Gandhi, 1941). Early interpreters emphasised Gram Swaraj as an integrated vision combining political freedom with social reform, including untouchability eradication and village industry promotion.

Contemporary scholarship revisits Gandhian ideas to examine their relevance within modern democratic systems. Pantham (1983) and Parel (2006) interpret Gram Swaraj as a normative critique of the modern nation-state, highlighting Gandhi's scepticism toward representative democracy, bureaucratic authority, and industrial capitalism. These scholars argue that Gandhi's preference for decentralised, participatory, non-hierarchical governance challenges dominant state-centric democracy models. Guha (2018) situates Gandhian thought within broader debates on ethical politics, sustainability, and civic responsibility, suggesting Gram Swaraj continues offering critical insights into contemporary governance dilemmas. Together, these interpretations establish Gram Swaraj as both philosophical ideal and critical evaluative framework for analysing local governance.

Theories of Decentralisation and Local Governance

Decentralisation theory provides important analytical foundations for understanding local governance institutions. Democratic decentralisation theory conceptualises authority transfer to local governments as a means to deepen democracy, enhance accountability, and improve responsiveness to local needs (Rondinelli, 1981). From this perspective, decentralisation should bring governance closer to citizens and strengthen participatory decision-making.

Participatory democracy theorists further emphasise citizen engagement's intrinsic value. Participation is viewed not merely as an administrative efficiency tool but as a mechanism for political empowerment and civic learning (Pateman, 1970). In the Indian context, the Gram Sabha is frequently interpreted as participatory democracy's institutional embodiment, closely aligned with Gandhian collective deliberation ideals. Deliberative democracy theory extends this framework by stressing reasoned dialogue, marginalised voice inclusion, and consensus-oriented discussion legitimacy (Habermas, 1996).

However, critical scholarship cautions that decentralisation does not automatically translate into empowerment. Without genuine authority, resources, and decision-making power devolution, decentralisation may remain procedural rather than substantive. This theoretical caution proves particularly relevant in developing democracies, where decentralised institutions often operate within highly centralised fiscal and administrative structures. These debates provide a crucial lens for evaluating Panchayati Raj Institutions against Gandhian normative standards.

Panchayati Raj Institutions Scholarship

A substantial literature examines Panchayati Raj evolution, structure, and functioning. Committee-based reforms, beginning with the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) and followed by the Ashok Mehta



Committee (1978), conceptualised Panchayati Raj as democratic decentralisation intended to promote local development planning participation. The L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986) marked a significant normative shift by advocating Panchayat constitutional status, arguing local self-government was essential for participatory democracy.

Following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992), scholarly attention focused on assessing PRI performance and impact. Studies by Mathew (2000) and Baviskar and Mathew (2009) highlight political representation expansion, particularly through reservations for women and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Simultaneously, these studies underscore persistent challenges related to fiscal dependence, bureaucratic dominance, and uneven power devolution.

Palanithurai G. has made seminal contributions to Panchayati Raj scholarship. His extensive work analyses PRIs as political institutions embedded within state-led development frameworks. Palanithurai (2000; 2004; 2014) argues that despite constitutional recognition, Panchayats often remain administratively subordinate and fiscally constrained, limiting their self-governance potential. He emphasises the gap between constitutional intent and operational reality, particularly regarding Gram Sabha functioning, local autonomy, and accountability.

Empirical Studies on Participation and Social Justice

A growing empirical literature examines Panchayati Raj from participation, social justice, and inclusion perspectives. People's participation studies demonstrate that Panchayats can function as important grassroots democracy sites when community engagement is meaningfully institutionalised (Ranjithkumar, 2014; 2015). Research focusing on rural development programmes highlights PRI roles in implementing schemes such as MGNREGA, while also drawing attention to caste-based exclusions and structural inequalities limiting equitable outcomes (Ranjithkumar, 2017; 2018; 2020).

Several studies specifically examine Gram Sabha roles in promoting social justice. These works suggest that while Gram Sabhas have potential to function as deliberation and accountability spaces, participation often remains uneven and dominated by local elites (Ranjithkumar, 2020). Research on women's political representation and Dalit leadership further indicates that constitutional reservations have enhanced numerical representation but have not always translated into substantive empowerment due to patriarchal norms, proxy representation, and bureaucratic control (Ranjithkumar, 2022).

Additional studies extend local governance analysis to issues such as women's health and social welfare, highlighting Panchayats' expanding functional scope while also revealing capacity and autonomy limitations (Ranjithkumar, 2022). Collectively, these empirical works underscore both the democratic potential and structural constraints of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Research Gap

Despite extensive scholarship on Gandhian philosophy, decentralisation theory, and Panchayati Raj Institutions, a significant gap remains in theoretical integration. Gandhian studies tend to treat Gram Swaraj primarily as a moral or civilisational ideal, often detached from contemporary constitutional arrangements. Conversely, much Panchayati Raj literature—including influential empirical and institutional analyses—focuses on performance, participation, or policy outcomes, with limited engagement with Gandhian normative theory.

Consequently, Gram Swaraj is frequently invoked symbolically rather than employed as a rigorous evaluative framework for assessing decentralised governance. The tension between Gandhian moral decentralisation and constitutionally mediated administrative decentralisation has not been systematically theorised. This study addresses this gap by offering a normative-theoretical assessment of Panchayati Raj Institutions through the lens of Gandhian rural reconstruction, thereby contributing to debates on inclusive, participatory, and ethically grounded local governance in contemporary India.



Conceptual Framework: Gandhian Rural Reconstruction and Gram Swaraj

Swaraj Philosophy and Decentralisation

Swaraj occupies a foundational position in Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy. For Gandhi, Swaraj did not merely signify political independence from colonial rule; rather, it denoted ethical self-governance, where individuals and communities govern themselves through discipline, ethical responsibility, and collective conscience (Gandhi, 1909/1938). Swaraj, in this sense, was inseparable from self-restraint, duty, and moral agency cultivation. Gandhi argued that without ethical self-governance, political freedom would remain hollow and could easily reproduce new forms of domination.

Decentralisation, therefore, was not an administrative technique but a moral and social necessity. Gandhi rejected highly centralised state power, viewing it as alienating and coercive. Instead, he advocated a bottom-up governance structure in which power emanated from self-governing communities rather than being delegated downward by the state (Pantham, 1983). Swaraj thus implied decentralisation rooted in autonomy, responsibility, and participatory decision-making, laying the philosophical groundwork for Gram Swaraj as a governance model distinct from modern bureaucratic centralism.

Core Principles of Gram Swaraj

Gram Swaraj represents the practical manifestation of Gandhi's Swaraj philosophy at the village level. At its core lies the idea of village republics, where each village functions as a self-sufficient and self-governing unit capable of managing its political, economic, and social affairs (Gandhi, 1941). These village republics were not isolated entities but interconnected communities cooperating voluntarily with one another.

Economic self-reliance constituted another central pillar of Gram Swaraj. Gandhi emphasised locally rooted production systems, small-scale industries, and sustainable livelihoods as safeguards against exploitation and dependency. Such an economic order was intended to ensure labour dignity and equitable distribution rather than accumulation and profit maximisation. Participatory democracy formed the political backbone of Gram Swaraj. Decision-making was to be conducted through direct villager participation, ideally by consensus rather than competitive electoral politics. This participatory ethic was closely linked to ethical leadership, where authority derived from moral credibility, service, and trust rather than coercive power or party affiliation. Together, these principles framed Gram Swaraj as a holistic governance model integrating political autonomy, economic justice, and moral responsibility.

Rural Reconstruction in Gandhian Thought

Gandhian rural reconstruction extended beyond governance structures to encompass comprehensive social and economic transformation. Central to this vision was Sarvodaya, the welfare of all, with special emphasis on Antyodaya, the upliftment of the last and most marginalised person (Gandhi, 1941). Development, in Gandhian thought, was meaningful only if it addressed the poorest and most oppressed sections of society. The trusteeship principle further articulated Gandhi's approach to economic justice. It proposed that wealth and resources should be held in trust for society, thereby morally obligating the privileged to use them for collective welfare rather than personal accumulation. Gandhi also strongly advocated village industries, such as khadi and handicrafts, as instruments of employment generation, self-reliance, and resistance to exploitative industrial capitalism.

Equally important was Gandhi's emphasis on social harmony and caste oppression eradication. He viewed untouchability and caste discrimination as moral evils incompatible with Swaraj. Rural reconstruction, therefore, necessitated social reform, communal harmony, and inclusive village community creation based on equality and mutual respect. In this sense, Gram Swaraj was inseparable from the struggle for social justice.



The "Oceanic Circles" Concept

One of Gandhi's most distinctive contributions to political thought is the "oceanic circles" metaphor, which captures his vision of non-hierarchical decentralisation. Unlike pyramidal governance structures characterised by power concentration at the top, Gandhi imagined society as a series of expanding circles, where each unit retains autonomy while remaining interconnected with larger wholes (Gandhi, 1941). In this model, the village serves as the governance nucleus, exercising primary authority over local affairs. Higher governance levels—such as districts, provinces, and the nation—exist to support, coordinate, and facilitate, rather than dominate or override village autonomy. Power thus flows outward rather than downward, preserving grassroots self-rule.

The oceanic circles idea provides a powerful conceptual framework for evaluating contemporary decentralised governance. It challenges hierarchical state-centric models and offers a normative benchmark against which Panchayati Raj Institutions can be assessed. By foregrounding autonomy, cooperation, and moral authority, Gandhi's decentralisation vision continues to offer critical insights for debates on inclusive and participatory local governance in India.

Evolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India

Pre-Colonial and Colonial Village Governance

Village-level institutions possess a long historical presence in India. In the pre-colonial period, villages functioned as relatively autonomous units with assemblies managing local administration, dispute resolution, and resource allocation. These traditional village councils, though shaped by social hierarchies such as caste and patriarchy, exercised considerable everyday governance control and reflected a form of decentralised community life (Beteille, 1980). This historical experience informed later nationalist thinking, particularly the Gandhian imagination of village republics as the Indian polity foundation.

During the colonial period, however, village autonomy was significantly eroded. British administrative reforms prioritised revenue extraction and centralised control, weakening indigenous self-governing institutions. Although limited efforts were made to revive local bodies—most notably through Lord Ripon's Resolution on Local Self-Government (1882)—these initiatives remained largely administrative and fiscal in nature rather than genuinely democratic (Tinker, 1954). Colonial village governance thus functioned primarily as an imperial state extension, a legacy continuing to influence post-independence approaches to decentralisation.

Constituent Assembly Debates and Article 40

Village governance's role emerged as a contested issue during Constituent Assembly debates. While Mahatma Gandhi and his followers strongly advocated village-centric self-rule based on Gram Swaraj, other leaders—particularly Jawaharlal Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar—expressed concerns about village-level oppression, caste domination, and parochialism. Ambedkar famously warned that villages could be "a sink of localism" and a site of entrenched social injustice, arguing that strong constitutional safeguards were necessary to protect individual rights. As a compromise, Panchayati Raj was not included as a justiciable right but placed under the Directive Principles of State Policy. Article 40 of the Constitution directed the State to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers as may be necessary to function as self-government units (Constitution of India, 1950). While this provision acknowledged decentralisation's importance, it lacked enforceability, resulting in uneven and delayed implementation across states in the early independence decades.

Post-Independence Committees

Panchayati Raj's institutional development in India was significantly shaped by a series of post-independence committees examining decentralisation and local governance.

Table 1: Key Committees in Panchayati Raj Evolution

Year	Committee	Key Recommendations	Impact
1957	Balwant Rai Mehta Committee	Three-tier system (Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, Zila Parishad); democratic decentralisation; people's participation in development	Led to establishment of PRIs in several states; foundation of modern Panchayati Raj
1978	Ashok Mehta Committee	Two-tier structure with district as key unit; stronger financial powers; political accountability; mandatory elections	Limited implementation due to political instability; influenced later reforms
1986	L.M. Singhvi Committee	Constitutional status for Panchayats; regular elections; judicial protection; Gram Sabha empowerment	Provided intellectual foundation for 73rd Amendment

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) marked the first systematic attempt to conceptualise Panchayati Raj as democratic decentralisation. It recommended a three-tier structure—Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zila Parishad—and emphasised people's participation in rural development programmes. The committee's recommendations led to Panchayati Raj's formal launch in several states, though implementation varied widely. The Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) undertook a critical Panchayati Raj reassessment and highlighted its declining vitality. It recommended a two-tier structure with the district as the key decentralisation unit, greater political accountability, and stronger financial powers for local bodies. However, many recommendations were not fully implemented due to political instability and consensus lack.

The L.M. Singhvi Committee provided a decisive push toward Panchayati Raj constitutional recognition. It argued that local self-government was essential for participatory democracy and recommended Panchayat constitutional status, regular elections, and judicial protection. These recommendations laid the intellectual and institutional foundation for subsequent constitutional reforms (Singhvi, 1986).

Panchayati Raj Constitutionalisation

The most significant Panchayati Raj evolution milestone was the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act enactment, which came into force in 1993. This amendment inserted Part IX into the Constitution and accorded Panchayati Raj Institutions uniform constitutional status across states. It aimed to transform Panchayats from discretionary administrative bodies into local self-government institutions. The amendment mandated a three-tier structure consisting of Gram Panchayat at village level, Panchayat Samiti at intermediate level, and Zila Parishad at district level. It provided for regular elections, fixed tenures, and reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women, thereby significantly expanding grassroots political inclusion (Government of India, 1992). The Gram Sabha was recognised as the Panchayati Raj system foundation, envisioned as a direct democracy and citizen participation forum.

The Constitution's Eleventh Schedule listed 29 subjects that could be devolved to Panchayats, covering areas such as agriculture, health, education, and rural development. Additionally, the amendment required states to constitute State Finance Commissions to strengthen fiscal decentralisation. Despite these provisions, several

scholars argue that actual functions, finances, and functionaries devolution remains uneven and incomplete, limiting local self-governance realisation (Mathew, 2000; Baviskar & Mathew, 2009).

Table 2: Panchayati Raj Institutions - Key Statistics (2023)

Indicator	Number
Total Gram Panchayats	2,50,000+
Total Elected Representatives	31.2 lakh
Women Representatives	14.5 lakh (46%)
SC Representatives	5.6 lakh (18%)
ST Representatives	2.8 lakh (9%)
Gram Sabhas Annually	5+ million meetings
Funds Devolved (2022-23)	₹2.2 lakh crore

Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Annual Report 2022-23

According to Ministry of Panchayati Raj reports, India has over 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats, with more than 3.1 million elected representatives, of whom nearly 46% are women, making PRIs the largest grassroots democracy experiment globally. Despite this numerical inclusion, studies consistently show limited fiscal autonomy and bureaucratic dominance at village level, constraining Gram Swaraj realisation (Mathew, 2000; Baviskar & Mathew, 2009). Thus, while the 73rd Constitutional Amendment institutionalised decentralisation, it did so within a state-centric constitutional framework, leaving unresolved the Gandhian demand for village sovereignty and moral self-governance.

Theoretical Assessment: Gram Swaraj and Panchayati Raj Institutions

This section undertakes a normative-theoretical comparison between Gandhian Gram Swaraj and contemporary Panchayati Raj Institutions across four interrelated dimensions: structural design, functional logic, economic philosophy, and social justice orientation. The comparison highlights the conceptual disjunction between Gandhian moral decentralisation and constitutionally mediated administrative decentralisation in India.

Table 3: Conceptual Comparison - Gram Swaraj versus Panchayati Raj Institutions

Dimension	Gram Swaraj (Gandhian Ideal)	Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)
Source of Authority	Ethical self-governance; community consent	Constitutional and statutory authority
Nature of Power	Village sovereignty	State-mediated devolution
Form of Democracy	Direct and deliberative	Representative
Economic Model	Self-sufficient village economy	Scheme-driven; grant dependent
Leadership Type	Ethical; service-oriented	Electoral; party-based



State Role	Minimal; facilitative	Dominant; supervisory
Social Justice Approach	Antyodaya (last person first)	Reservation-based inclusion
Accountability	Moral and social	Administrative and electoral

Source: Compiled from Gandhian writings and PRI literature (Gandhi, 1941; Mathew, 2000; Baviskar & Mathew, 2009)

Structural Comparison: Village Autonomy versus State Control

At the structural level, the most fundamental distinction between Gram Swaraj and Panchayati Raj Institutions lies in the nature of authority and autonomy. In the Gandhian vision, the village was conceived as a sovereign republic, exercising primary authority over its political, economic, and social affairs. Governance in this model was grounded in moral legitimacy, collective consent, and voluntary cooperation rather than coercive power (Gandhi, 1941). Villages were not subordinate administrative units but autonomous communities interconnected through non-hierarchical relationships. In contrast, Panchayati Raj Institutions derive their authority from the Constitution and state legislation. Although PRIs enjoy constitutional recognition, they remain structurally subordinate to state governments, which retain decisive control over legislation, finance, and administration (Government of India, 1992). This arrangement results in state-mediated devolution rather than genuine self-rule. Authority within PRIs is primarily statutory, rooted in legal mandates and bureaucratic oversight, rather than moral authority emerging from community autonomy. Scholars have consistently argued that such structural dependency constrains Panchayat capacity to function as true self-government institutions (Mathew, 2000).

Functional Comparison: Direct Democracy versus Representative Governance

Functionally, Gram Swaraj is anchored in direct democracy, where villagers collectively deliberate and decide on matters affecting their lives. Gandhi envisaged decision-making through consensus-based village assemblies, emphasising dialogue, participation, and shared responsibility (Gandhi, 1909/1938). Governance, in this sense, was embedded in everyday social life, minimising the separation between governors and the governed. By contrast, contemporary PRIs primarily operate through representative democracy, with elected members exercising decision-making authority on behalf of villagers. Although the Gram Sabha is constitutionally recognised as a direct participation forum, its role in practice is often advisory rather than decisional. Empirical studies indicate that Gram Sabhas frequently experience low attendance, procedural formalism, and limited influence over development priorities (Ranjithkumar, 2014; 2020). Consequently, Panchayats tend to function less as community self-governance spaces and more as administrative units responsible for implementing centrally and state-sponsored schemes. This functional shift—from deliberation to execution—marks a significant departure from the Gandhian ideal of participatory self-rule.

Economic Philosophy: Self-Reliance versus Grant-Dependent Development

The divergence between Gram Swaraj and Panchayati Raj Institutions is particularly pronounced in their underlying economic philosophies. Gandhi advocated a self-sufficient village economy grounded in local production, small-scale industries, labour dignity, and need-based consumption. Economic life under Gram Swaraj was guided by the trusteeship principle, which rejected accumulation and profit maximisation in favour of moral responsibility and social welfare (Gandhi, 1941). Contemporary PRIs, however, operate within a development paradigm characterised by grant-dependent growth. Panchayats rely heavily on financial transfers from state and central governments, with limited authority to mobilise local resources or levy taxes. Development priorities are frequently shaped by externally designed schemes rather than locally determined

economic initiatives. Critics argue that this scheme-driven model reinforces dependency, weakens local innovation, and undermines the self-reliance principle (Baviskar & Mathew, 2009). Furthermore, increasing rural economy integration into market-oriented development stands in sharp contrast to Gandhi's ethical critique of industrial capitalism, raising questions about Gram Swaraj compatibility with prevailing economic policies.

Social Justice Dimension: Antyodaya versus Procedural Inclusion

From a social justice perspective, both Gram Swaraj and Panchayati Raj Institutions articulate commitments to inclusion, but they differ significantly in approach and depth. Gandhi's Antyodaya notion—the last person's upliftment—placed moral responsibility and ethical transformation at governance's centre. He argued that true Swaraj was unattainable without caste oppression, untouchability, and social exclusion eradication, emphasising social reform alongside political decentralisation (Gandhi, 1941). The Panchayati Raj constitutional framework addresses social justice primarily through reservation policies for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women. These provisions have substantially expanded political representation and marginalised group visibility at the local level (Mathew, 2000). Empirical studies, particularly from Tamil Nadu, indicate increased women and Dalit participation in Panchayat leadership, contributing to political empowerment processes (Ranjithkumar, 2020; 2022).

Table 4: Social Inclusion Outcomes in Panchayati Raj

Category	Constitutional Provision	Observed Outcomes	Challenges
Women	33% reservation (increased to 50% in several states)	46% representation nationally; increased policy attention to health, nutrition, child welfare	Proxy representation; patriarchal norms; limited decision-making autonomy
Scheduled Castes	Proportional reservation based on population	18% representation; enhanced visibility; greater access to development funds	Elite capture within communities; social boycotts; bureaucratic resistance
Scheduled Tribes	Proportional reservation	9% representation; recognition of traditional governance systems	Limited forest rights devolution; displacement concerns

Gram Sabha	Mandatory participation forum	5+ million meetings annually; platform for social audit	Low attendance (avg. 15-20%); elite dominance; limited decisional power
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Source: Compiled from Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2023), Ranjithkumar (2014; 2020; 2022), Mathew (2000)

However, critical scholarship highlights persistent elite capture, proxy representation, and entrenched social hierarchies within Panchayats, which often dilute reservation transformative potential (Crook & Manor, 1998). While PRIs have achieved procedural inclusion, the deeper Gandhian vision of moral equality, social harmony, and substantive empowerment remains only partially realised. This tension between constitutional empowerment and lived social realities underscores institutional mechanism limitations in achieving comprehensive social justice. Overall, the comparison reveals that while Panchayati Raj Institutions have institutionalised decentralisation within a constitutional framework, they fall short of embodying Gram Swaraj's normative aspirations. The contrast between moral autonomy and statutory authority, direct participation and representative governance, self-reliant economies and grant-dependent development, and ethical transformation versus procedural inclusion highlights Gandhian thought's enduring relevance as a critical framework for evaluating local governance in India.

Challenges and Contradictions in Achieving Gram Swaraj

Political Challenges

One of the foremost challenges in realising Gram Swaraj within the Panchayati Raj framework arises from increasing party politics penetration into local governance. Gandhi had envisaged village governance as a largely non-partisan space, guided by consensus, moral authority, and service-oriented leadership. In contrast, contemporary Panchayati Raj elections are deeply embedded in party competition, factionalism, and electoral mobilisation, often mirroring state and national politics' adversarial nature (Mathew, 2000). This politicisation tends to prioritise electoral calculations over community welfare and weakens the deliberative ethos central to Gram Swaraj. Closely linked to this is the problem of centralised decision-making. Despite the constitutional mandate for decentralisation, major policy priorities and development agendas continue to be formulated at state and central levels. Panchayats are frequently tasked with implementing pre-designed schemes rather than exercising autonomous decision-making power. This top-down approach limits local initiative and undermines the self-rule spirit, reducing Panchayats to subordinate units within a hierarchical governance structure rather than autonomous political authority centres (Baviskar & Mathew, 2009).

Administrative Challenges

Administrative constraints constitute another major obstacle to effective Panchayati Raj Institution functioning. Bureaucratic dominance remains pervasive, with line departments and district-level officials exercising substantial control over planning, implementation, and monitoring of development programmes. Elected Panchayat representatives often lack authority over administrative personnel, resulting in a mismatch between political accountability and administrative power (Crook & Manor, 1998). The problem is further compounded by weak three Fs devolution—Funds, Functions, and Functionaries. Although the 73rd Constitutional Amendment envisaged substantive devolution, actual responsibility and resource transfer varies significantly across states. In many cases, Panchayats are assigned functions without adequate financial resources or trained personnel to carry them out effectively. This partial and uneven devolution restricts institutional capacity and reinforces dependency on higher government tiers (Mathew, 2000).

Table 5: Status of 3Fs Devolution in Panchayati Raj

Dimension	Constitutional Provision	Observed Reality	States with High Devolution	States with Low Devolution
Functions	Eleventh Schedule (29 subjects)	Partial and selective transfer; avg. 15-18 subjects transferred nationally	Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra	Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand
Funds	State Finance Commission; own revenue powers	High grant dependency; own revenue <5% of total PRI funds nationally	Kerala, Tamil Nadu	Most North Indian states
Functionaries	Administrative control over staff	Bureaucracy retains authority; limited personnel devolution	Kerala, West Bengal	Majority of states

Source: Reserve Bank of India (2022); Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2023)

Economic Challenges

From an economic perspective, Panchayati Raj Institutions face persistent fiscal dependency on state and central governments. Gandhi's Gram Swaraj model was grounded in economic self-reliance and locally generated resources, whereas contemporary Panchayats rely heavily on grants, shared taxes, and centrally sponsored schemes for their functioning (Government of India, 1992). This dependency constrains local autonomy and limits Panchayat ability to prioritise context-specific development needs.

Moreover, Panchayats possess limited revenue-raising powers. Their authority to levy taxes, fees, or user charges is often narrow and poorly enforced, resulting in weak own-source revenues. The absence of a robust local fiscal base not only undermines financial sustainability but also weakens accountability, as Panchayats remain more answerable to higher government levels than to local citizens. Scholars argue that without meaningful fiscal decentralisation, political decentralisation remains largely symbolic (Baviskar & Mathew, 2009).

Table 6: Fiscal Dependency of Panchayati Raj Institutions

Revenue Source	Percentage of Total PRI Revenue	Trend
Central Finance Commission Grants	45-50%	Increasing
State Finance Commission Grants	30-35%	Stable
Centrally Sponsored Schemes	10-15%	Increasing

Own Tax Revenue	3-5%	Declining
Own Non-Tax Revenue	2-3%	Stable

Source: Reserve Bank of India, State Finances Reports (2020-2023)*

Social Challenges

Social structures continue to pose significant challenges to Gram Swaraj realisation. Deeply entrenched caste and gender hierarchies shape participation and power relations within village governance. Although constitutional reservations have enhanced Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women's numerical representation in Panchayats, substantive empowerment is often constrained by social norms, proxy representation, and informal power structures (Ranjithkumar, 2022).

Additionally, participation deficits in Gram Sabhas limit direct democracy potential. Studies indicate that attendance is often low, deliberation limited, and decisions frequently dominated by local elites (Ranjithkumar, 2014; 2020). These patterns undermine the Gram Sabha's role as participatory governance cornerstone and weaken its capacity to function as a collective decision-making and social accountability space.

Table 7: Gram Sabha Participation Patterns - Select Studies

State	Average Attendance (%)	Women Participation (%)	SC/ST Participation (%)	Key Issues Raised
Tamil Nadu	18-25%	30-40% of attendees	25-35% of attendees	Drinking water; roads; MGNREGA wages
Kerala	35-45%	45-50% of attendees	20-25% of attendees	Welfare schemes; infrastructure
Karnataka	15-20%	25-30% of attendees	30-35% of attendees	Housing; ration cards
Uttar Pradesh	10-15%	15-20% of attendees	40-45% of attendees	MGNREGA; caste-based issues
Maharashtra	20-25%	35-40% of attendees	20-25% of attendees	Water; agriculture

Source: Ranjithkumar (2014; 2020); Institute of Social Sciences (2019)

Conceptual Contradictions

Beyond practical challenges, there exists a deeper conceptual contradiction between the Gandhian ideal of Gram Swaraj and the Indian state's constitutional architecture. Gram Swaraj presupposes a high degree of village autonomy and economic self-reliance, whereas India's fiscal and administrative systems remain highly centralised. Major revenue sources are controlled by Union and state governments, limiting scope for genuine local self-governance. This raises critical questions about Gram Swaraj compatibility with a centralised fiscal constitution. While the 73rd Amendment provides a decentralisation framework, it operates within broader constitutional constraints that prioritise national planning, uniformity, and centralised redistribution. As a result,



Gram Swaraj functions more as a normative ideal than an operational reality. The challenge, therefore, lies in reconciling Gandhi's ethical and decentralised vision with a modern constitutional state's structural imperatives. These challenges are not merely administrative failures but reflect a deeper incompatibility between a moral vision of decentralised self-rule and a constitutionally centralised developmental state.

Contemporary Relevance and Pathways for Synthesis

Reinterpreting Gandhian Thought for the 21st Century

In the contemporary context of globalisation, digital governance, and market-oriented development, Gandhian thought requires reinterpretation rather than replication. Mahatma Gandhi did not offer a rigid institutional blueprint; instead, he proposed a normative framework centred on ethical self-rule, decentralisation, and human dignity (Gandhi, 1909/1938; 1941). Reinterpreting Gram Swaraj for the twenty-first century involves translating its core values—self-reliance, participation, moral leadership, and social justice—into forms compatible with constitutional democracy and contemporary socio-economic realities. Rather than rejecting modern institutions, a Gandhian approach encourages reorienting them toward people-centred governance, sustainability, and ethical accountability. In this sense, Gram Swaraj remains relevant as a critical lens for evaluating technocratic and centralised development models that often marginalise local voices.

Strengthening the Gram Sabha

The Gram Sabha holds a pivotal position in bridging Gandhian ideals and constitutional local governance. As a direct participation institution, it resonates strongly with the Gandhian emphasis on deliberation, consensus, and collective responsibility. Strengthening the Gram Sabha as a deliberative democracy space requires moving beyond ritualistic meetings toward meaningful discussion, inclusive participation, and decision-making authority (Habermas, 1996). This involves ensuring adequate information flow, regular meetings, and facilitative leadership that encourages marginalised voices.

Equally important are social audit and accountability mechanisms, which align closely with Gandhi's insistence on moral transparency and public responsibility. Social audits of local development programmes, when conducted effectively, can empower citizens to scrutinise public expenditure, question authorities, and demand corrective action. Studies from Tamil Nadu demonstrate that where Gram Sabhas and social audits are taken seriously, they contribute to improved accountability and citizen engagement (Ranjithkumar, 2020). Strengthening these participatory institutions is thus central to reviving the Gram Swaraj spirit within the existing constitutional framework.

Panchayats and Inclusive Governance

One of the most significant Panchayati Raj system achievements has been the expansion of political participation among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women through constitutionally mandated reservations. This has altered local leadership's social composition and created new spaces for marginalised groups in governance (Mathew, 2000). Empirical studies indicate that women and Dalit representatives have increasingly engaged with health, education, and social welfare issues at village level (Ranjithkumar, 2022). However, a Gandhian perspective urges moving beyond welfare delivery toward deeper empowerment and self-governance forms. Inclusive governance, in this sense, involves not only representation but also capacity to shape development priorities, mobilise local resources, and challenge entrenched social hierarchies. Panchayats that function as collective problem-solving and social transformation forums come closer to Gandhi's vision than those limited to implementing externally designed schemes. Thus, inclusivity must be understood as substantive participation rather than procedural inclusion alone.

Toward a Gandhian-Constitutional Synthesis

The tension between Gram Swaraj and Panchayati Raj need not be viewed as irreconcilable. A Gandhian-constitutional synthesis is possible if constitutional decentralisation is infused with Gandhian ethical principles. Ethical governance, grounded in service, integrity, and accountability, can counteract electoral politics' instrumental and competitive tendencies. Training and capacity-building programmes for Panchayat representatives that incorporate Gandhian values can contribute to this ethical reorientation. At the same time, deepened decentralisation is essential for translating normative ideals into practice. This entails genuine decision-making powers, resources, and administrative control devolution to Panchayats, enabling them to function as self-government institutions rather than subordinate agencies. Such a synthesis does not abandon constitutional structures but seeks to humanise and democratise them through Gandhian philosophy. Such a synthesis would neither romanticise villages nor abandon constitutionalism, but reposition Panchayati Raj as an ethically grounded, citizen-centred governance institution.

Policy Implications

The theoretical assessment of Gram Swaraj and Panchayati Raj yields several important policy implications. First, there is a need for genuine fiscal decentralisation, including enhanced own-source revenue powers for Panchayats and more effective State Finance Commissions, to reduce dependency and strengthen local autonomy (Mathew, 2000).

Table 8: Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Gram Swaraj

Policy Area	Current Challenge	Recommended Measures	Expected Outcome
Fiscal Decentralisation	High grant dependency; limited own revenue	Enhance taxation powers; strengthen SFCs; untied funds	Greater financial autonomy; local priority-setting
Capacity Building	Limited technical and governance skills	Gandhian ethics training; financial management; participatory planning	Ethical leadership; improved governance
Bureaucratic Reform	Administrative dominance; unclear roles	Clear functionary devolution; elected representative authority	Enhanced accountability; reduced friction
Gram Sabha Strengthening	Low attendance; elite capture	Quorum requirements; social audit mandate; decision-making power	Genuine participatory democracy
Local Economic Development	Scheme-driven; external dependence	Village industry promotion; local procurement; MGNREGA convergence	Economic self-reliance; sustainable livelihoods

Second, capacity-building initiatives for elected representatives and officials should be rooted not only in technical skills but also in Gandhian ethics of service, inclusivity, and moral responsibility. Third, bureaucratic overreach must be reduced by clearly delineating administrative roles and strengthening political accountability at local level. Finally, promoting village-based livelihoods and local economies, consistent with Gandhian emphasis on self-reliance and labour dignity, can enhance both economic sustainability and democratic participation. Together, these policy measures can move Panchayati Raj closer to Gram Swaraj ideals.



Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that while Panchayati Raj Institutions have provided a durable constitutional framework for decentralisation and significantly expanded political participation at the grassroots, they have largely institutionalised decentralisation in a procedural sense. The deeper Gandhian vision of Gram Swaraj—grounded in village autonomy, economic self-reliance, ethical leadership, and moral self-governance—remains only partially realised within the existing local governance structure. Contemporary PRIs continue to operate under conditions of fiscal dependence, bureaucratic oversight, and scheme-driven development, which constrain their capacity to function as genuine self-rule institutions.

Rather than viewing Gram Swaraj as an obsolete or utopian ideal, this paper argues that it should be understood as an unfinished normative project that exposes the limitations of constitutional decentralisation in India. Gandhian rural reconstruction does not offer a rigid institutional blueprint; instead, it provides a critical ethical and philosophical framework for evaluating and reimagining local governance. Re-engaging with this framework allows for a deeper interrogation of how decentralisation can move beyond representation and service delivery toward substantive autonomy, social justice, and participatory democracy. In this sense, Gram Swaraj remains a vital intellectual resource for strengthening inclusive, democratic, and ethically grounded local governance in contemporary India.

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