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EMPOWERING THE FORGOTTEN TIER: REIMAGINING PANCHAYATI RAJ FOR 21st- CENTURY GOVERNANCE

AUTHORED BY - JEGANNATH C¹

ABSTRACT

This paper examines why India's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are experiencing structural distress despite the constitutional promise of democratic decentralisation under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. The author explains that the crisis is multi-dimensional, rooted in incomplete administrative devolution, shrinking fiscal autonomy due to a tilt toward tied grants, political centralisation that weakens timely, independent local elections, and technological architectures (Direct Benefit Transfer / Jandhan Aadhaar Mobile) that often bypass Gram Sabhas, diluting participatory decision-making. Methodologically, the study undertakes a qualitative, document-based analysis of constitutional provisions, finance commission trends, official reports, and comparative state experiences to map how design choices translate (or fail to translate) constitutional status into operational power. Substantively, the author highlights a growing urban policy bias that diverts reform energy and resources toward cities, leaving rural local bodies under-capacitated. A comparative lens contrasts Kerala's deeper devolution and people's planning with uneven outcomes in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan to illustrate the central claim that institutional design and enforcement, not merely electoral turnover, drive PRI performance. The author suggests a renewal strategy anchored in enforceable state-level devolution compacts across all 29 subjects, a higher share of untied, formula-based grants, professionalised staffing and continuous capacity building, and "participatory tech" that embeds Gram Sabha consent and social audit into digital systems. Ultimately, this paper argues that revitalising PRIs requires reconnecting constitutional mandates with day-to-day authority over plans, people, and purse. so that local governments recover their role as the living engine of grassroots democracy and inclusive rural development.

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Keywords: Decentralisation, Devolution. Development, Gram Sabha, Panchayati Raj.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Panchayati Raj system in India stands as one of the most transformative milestones in the journey of Indian democracy. Enshrined in the *73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992*, it marked the constitutional recognition of *local self-governance* as the third tier of government. The amendment inserted *Part IX (Articles 243 to 243O)* into the Constitution and added the *Eleventh Schedule*, listing 29 subjects intended for devolution to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This landmark reform sought to actualise Mahatma Gandhi's vision of *Gram Swaraj*, self-rule at the village level, by ensuring **decentralisation, participation, inclusion, and accountability** in governance. It provided constitutional status to the Panchayats, mandated regular elections, reservation for women and marginalised groups, establishment of State Finance Commissions, and a three-tier structure at the village, block, and district levels.²

Over three decades later, however, the spirit of this decentralisation appears to be under strain. The momentum towards deepening grassroots democracy has stalled³. Panchayats are increasingly reduced to mere *implementation agencies* of centrally sponsored schemes rather than autonomous decision-making bodies. Despite the constitutional mandate, most States have not devolved the full range of functions, funds, and functionaries envisioned in the Eleventh Schedule. *The Ministry of Panchayati Raj's 2022 Report* notes that fewer than 20% of States have transferred all 29 subjects to PRIs, reflecting the reluctance of States to share administrative authority.⁴ The fiscal dimension of decentralisation, too, reveals alarming dependence. According to the *15th Finance Commission (2021–26)*, while the total volume of transfers to local bodies has increased, the proportion of *untied grants*, essential for local autonomy, has declined from 85% under the 13th Finance Commission to about 60%.⁵ This

² The Constitution of India, 73rd Amendment Act, 1992, inserting Part IX (Articles 243–243O) and Eleventh Schedule.

³ Suvojit Chattopadhyay, “The Panchayati raj movement is in distress”, *The Hindu*, February 17, 2025, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-panchayati-raj-movement-is-in-distress/article69227007.ece> (last visited on October 17, 2025)

⁴ Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, “Report on Devolution to Panchayati Raj Institutions”, 2022, available at <https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s316026d60ff9b54410b3435b403afd226/uploads/2025/02/202502141128959181.pdf> (last visited on October 18, 2025)

⁵ Fifteenth Finance Commission Report, Government of India, 2021–26, Volume I, p. 147 available at [chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnibpcjpcglcfindmkaj/https://fincomindia.nic.in/asset/doc/commission-reports/XVFC%20VOL%20I%20Main%20Report.pdf](https://fincomindia.nic.in/asset/doc/commission-reports/XVFC%20VOL%20I%20Main%20Report.pdf), (last visited on October 18, 2025)

growing fiscal centralisation, coupled with reduced administrative devolution, has undermined the Panchayats' capacity for local planning and governance. Furthermore, the restructuring of welfare delivery through digital platforms like the *Jan Dhan–Aadhaar–Mobile (JAM)* trinity has bypassed PRIs in identifying beneficiaries or addressing grievances, further eroding their relevance in rural governance.

In Scheduled Areas, *the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996* was enacted to empower tribal Gram Sabhas to manage natural resources and local development. Yet, multiple government reviews and NITI Aayog assessments indicate weak implementation of PESA in most tribal states. Bureaucratic control, lack of awareness, and conflict with state laws have diluted the autonomy envisaged under the Act.

The distress of the Panchayati Raj system must thus be understood as systemic, arising from administrative inertia, fiscal dependency, and political centralisation. The accelerating trends of urbanisation, digital governance, and direct benefit transfers have further marginalised rural institutions. What was envisioned as the foundation of grassroots democracy is now at risk of becoming a mere appendage of higher bureaucracies. Against this backdrop, this study critically examines the evolving condition of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India. It seeks to identify the structural causes of their decline, assess the impact of contemporary policy and technological shifts, and propose a renewed vision to *revive local self-governance* in alignment with constitutional ideals and democratic values.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The concept of local self-governance in India has evolved through several committees and policy recommendations preceding constitutional recognition. The *Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957)* first proposed a three-tier structure of democratic decentralisation — village, block, and district, emphasising popular participation in planning and development. Later, the *Ashok Mehta Committee (1978)* strengthened this idea by advocating constitutional status for Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and highlighting the need for adequate financial and administrative powers.⁶

⁶ Dr Mamta Pathania, “Indian Polity and Governance – Panchayati Raj, Public Policy, Rights Issues etc.”, *Indian Institute of Public Administration* 2022 available at chrome extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.iipa.org.in/upload/IPG_panchayati%20raj.pdf (last visited on October 22, 2025)

Following these recommendations, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, institutionalised the Panchayati Raj system, creating a constitutional framework for local governance. Scholars such as George Mathew and M.A. Oommen have underlined that this amendment was not merely an administrative reform but a democratic deepening of India's political system.⁷ However, several studies and official reports reveal that the spirit of decentralisation envisaged by the Constitution has not been fully realised. The *Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2007)* and subsequent *Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) Reports* have repeatedly noted that most states have failed to devolve adequate funds, functions, and functionaries.

Empirical studies also highlight regional variations: states like Kerala and Karnataka have demonstrated relative success through people's planning initiatives, while many northern states remain constrained by political centralisation and bureaucratic control.⁸ Recent analyses, including the *Fifteenth Finance Commission Report (2021–26)*, observe that fiscal dependence and tied grants undermine local autonomy. Moreover, literature seldom addresses how **technological centralisation, direct benefit transfers, and urban policy shifts** have further marginalised PRIs.

Thus, the existing scholarship reveals a substantial research gap, limited inquiry into how emerging socio-economic and digital transitions are altering the constitutional spirit of local self-governance. This study aims to fill that gap by critically examining the structural and technological dimensions of distress in India's Panchayati Raj system.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To comprehensively understand the evolving challenges confronting the Panchayati Raj system in India, it is essential to establish clear and focused research objectives. These objectives provide a structured framework for the study, guiding the analysis of administrative, fiscal, political, and technological dimensions that have shaped the present condition of local self-governance. They also help in formulating evidence-based recommendations aimed at

⁷ George Mathew, *Status of Panchayati Raj in the States of India*, Concept Publishing, New Delhi, 2000.

⁸ Second Administrative Reforms Commission, *Local Governance: An Inspiring Journey into the Future*, Government of India, 2007, available at <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.darpg.gov.in/sites/default/files/decision6.pdf> (last visited on October 22, 2025)

revitalising Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in alignment with constitutional ideals of decentralisation, participation, and accountability.

1. To analyse the causes and dimensions of distress in the Panchayati Raj system:

The author seeks to identify and critically assess the multifaceted reasons behind the weakening of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) across India. The objective is to explore how structural, administrative, fiscal, and political factors—such as lack of devolution, bureaucratic dominance, and excessive centralisation—have contributed to the present crisis of local self-governance.

2. To examine the status of administrative, fiscal, and political devolution to PRIs:

This paper aims to evaluate the extent to which States have implemented the constitutional mandate of devolving the three Fs — *Functions, Funds, and Functionaries*. It will assess variations across States, the role of State Finance Commissions, and the balance between autonomy and accountability in Panchayati Raj governance.

3. To study the impact of technological and policy shifts on local governance:

With the growing emphasis on digital governance and direct benefit transfers, the author intends to analyse how emerging technologies and welfare delivery mechanisms have affected the role, relevance, and functioning of Panchayats. This includes assessing whether technology has empowered local institutions or bypassed them in decision-making processes.

4. To propose measures for revitalising the Panchayati Raj system in India:

This paper ultimately aims to recommend practical, constitutional, and policy-level interventions to strengthen grassroots democracy. It seeks to suggest strategies for deepening decentralisation, ensuring fiscal autonomy, enhancing capacity building, and reimagining the Panchayati Raj system as a dynamic instrument of participatory governance in the 21st century.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to understand the underlying causes of the present crisis in India's Panchayati Raj system and to identify pathways for its revival, the following research questions have been formulated. These questions aim to guide the inquiry into the structural, fiscal, and political dimensions of decentralisation and their implications for grassroots democracy.

1. Why has the momentum of the Panchayati Raj movement declined in recent decades?

2. *How have centralisation and welfare delivery models affected PRIs?*
3. *What are the systemic and structural barriers to effective decentralisation?*
4. *What strategies can restore Panchayati Raj's autonomy and effectiveness?*

V. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION AND CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The roots of local self-governance in India trace back to the ancient village assemblies, which functioned as community-based institutions responsible for justice, resource management, and dispute resolution. However, the formal framework of Panchayati Raj in modern India began to evolve after independence, when the government recognised the need to democratize governance and promote people's participation at the grassroots level. The *Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957)* was the first to systematically recommend a three-tier structure: Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Zilla Parishad at the district level — to strengthen democratic decentralisation and ensure that development programs were locally administered.⁹

Subsequent committees, notably the *Ashok Mehta Committee (1978)*, emphasised the necessity of providing constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to ensure their stability, regular elections, and autonomy.¹⁰ These recommendations gradually shaped the national consensus that decentralisation must be constitutionally protected rather than politically discretionary.

This culminated in the *73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992*, which inserted *Part IX (Articles 243–243O)* and the *Eleventh Schedule* into the Constitution, formally recognising PRIs as the third tier of governance. The Amendment mandated a uniform three-tier structure, regular elections every five years, reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women, and the creation of State Election Commissions and State Finance Commissions. It also listed 29 subjects for devolution to local bodies, promoting functional autonomy and

⁹ Report of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee on Democratic Decentralisation, Government of India, 1957. *IGNOU People's University* available at [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/101776/1/Unit-5.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com](https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/101776/1/Unit-5.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com) pg. no 55 (last visited on October 22, 2025)

¹⁰ Report of the Ashok Mehta Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions, Government of India, 1978. Available at https://indianculture.gov.in/reports-proceedings/report-committee-panchayati-raj-institutions?utm_source=chatgpt.com (last visited on October 24, 2025)

participatory democracy.¹¹ The 73rd Amendment thus transformed Panchayati Raj from an administrative experiment into a constitutional reality, embedding it within India's federal framework as the foundation of grassroots democracy and inclusive development.

VI. CURRENT STATUS AND DIMENSIONS OF DISTRESS IN THE PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM

To understand the contemporary challenges facing India's grassroots democracy, it is crucial to assess the current condition of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) within the constitutional and policy framework. Although the 73rd Constitutional Amendment sought to empower local self-governance through administrative, fiscal, and political devolution, the ground reality reveals persistent disparities between constitutional intent and institutional practice. The following analysis examines the key dimensions of distress—administrative, fiscal, political, technological, and structural—that collectively explain the weakening of PRIs. Each of these dimensions reflects how systemic inertia, centralised policy approaches, and uneven development priorities have constrained the effective functioning of Panchayats as genuine units of local self-government.

1. Administrative Decline

Despite the constitutional mandate under Part IX of the Constitution, the *devolution of powers and responsibilities* to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) remains largely incomplete. According to the *Ministry of Panchayati Raj's Devolution Index (2024)*, only a few States have devolved all 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule, while most continue to operate under administrative and bureaucratic control.¹² Lack of staff, overlapping departmental jurisdictions, and limited functional autonomy have constrained the effectiveness of local governments.

2. Fiscal Dependence

The fiscal position of PRIs reflects growing dependency on higher tiers of government. The *Fifteenth Finance Commission (2021–26)* increased total allocations to rural local bodies but significantly reduced the proportion of *untied grants* from 85% (13th FC) to 60%.¹³ This shift toward tied grants has curtailed flexibility in local planning and prioritisation, forcing Panchayats to act primarily as implementing agencies for centrally sponsored schemes rather than self-governing units.

¹¹Supra note 2 at 2.

¹²Supra note 4 at 2.

¹³Supra note 5 at 2.

3. Political Centralisation

Many States have exhibited delays in conducting Panchayat elections and interference with the functioning of State Election Commissions (SECs). Judicial interventions, such as High Court directions mandating timely local body elections, underscore persistent challenges to local democratic autonomy.¹⁴ Political capture and the absence of a genuine participatory framework have further eroded the grassroots democratic spirit envisaged by the Constitution.

4. Technological and Structural Challenges

The emergence of *Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)* systems and the *Jan-Dhan–Aadhaar–Mobile (JAM)* platform has centralised welfare delivery mechanisms, often bypassing PRIs in beneficiary identification and grievance redress.¹⁵ Although digital governance promotes transparency, it inadvertently diminishes the role of Gram Sabhas in participatory planning. Moreover, India’s growing urbanisation has shifted policy attention toward urban reforms, marginalising rural local institutions.¹⁶

5. Urban Bias and Policy Neglect

In recent years, a distinct urban bias has emerged in India’s development policy, leading to the marginalisation of rural local bodies. Government initiatives, fiscal transfers, and institutional reforms have increasingly focused on urban governance and infrastructure, such as the *Smart Cities Mission*, *AMRUT*, and municipal accounting reforms. While these programs have strengthened urban local bodies, they have simultaneously diverted administrative attention and financial resources away from the Panchayati Raj system.¹⁷

India’s rapid pace of urbanisation, with the urban population projected to exceed 40% by the mid-2030s, has further shifted the policy gaze toward cities and metropolitan regions. As a result, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) often remain under-funded and under-capacitated, lacking adequate staff, technical expertise, and untied financial resources necessary for autonomous governance. This imbalance has deepened the *structural neglect* of rural self-

¹⁴ High Court of Rajasthan, Order on Conduct of Delayed Panchayat Elections, 18 Aug 2025; also see *The Indian Express*, “Delay in Local Body Polls and SEC Autonomy,” 21 Aug 2025 available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/state-election-commissions-delays-urban-local-government-polls-report-sec-10184172/> (last visited on October 18, 2025)

¹⁵ Department of Agriculture & Farmers’ Welfare, Government of India, PM-KISAN Operational Guidelines, 2023; *Press Information Bureau*, “DBT Performance through JAM Platform,” 2024, available at <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressNoteDetails.aspx?NoteId=153249&ModuleId=3> (last visited on October 22, 2025)

¹⁶ NITI Aayog, *Urbanisation and Local Governance in India*, 2023; World Bank, *India’s Urban Development Report*, 2024.

¹⁷ NITI Aayog, *Urbanization and Local Governance in India: Policy Perspectives and Challenges*, Discussion Paper, Government of India, 2023.

governance, contrary to the constitutional vision of balanced decentralisation under Part IX of the Constitution.

Unless policy reforms consciously *re-prioritise rural governance*, this dualism between urban efficiency and rural deprivation will persist, undermining the foundational ideal of *Gram Swaraj*. A more equitable fiscal and developmental approach is essential to restore the vitality of PRIs and sustain inclusive local democracy.

VII. CASE STUDIES / EXAMPLES

To illustrate the practical implications of decentralisation and to understand the contrasting realities of Panchayati Raj implementation across India, it is essential to examine specific state experiences. Case studies provide valuable insights into how variations in political will, fiscal policy, administrative structure, and citizen participation shape the functioning of local governance. The following examples—spanning Kerala’s model of deep devolution, the uneven implementation in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan, and the evolving digital governance initiatives under the e-Panchayat program—highlight the diversity of outcomes and underline how institutional design determines the success or stagnation of the Panchayati Raj system.

1. Kerala: Model of Deep Devolution and People’s Planning

Kerala is often hailed as the benchmark of decentralisation in India. Following the People’s Plan Campaign (1996), nearly 35–40% of the State’s development budget was devolved to local bodies. Panchayats were empowered to prepare local development plans, supported by technical committees and participatory Gram Sabhas. The State implemented the constitutional mandate of the 73rd Amendment comprehensively, devolving all 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule. Regular capacity-building programs and fiscal autonomy have made Kerala’s Panchayati Raj system one of the most successful examples of *bottom-up planning and inclusive governance in the country*.

2. Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan: Uneven Implementation

In contrast, states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan demonstrate *uneven and limited devolution* of power. While elections are held regularly, Panchayats often function as extensions of the State bureaucracy. The absence of sufficient staff, restricted financial discretion, and dependence on centrally sponsored schemes have

weakened institutional autonomy. Bihar's Panchayats have achieved notable success in women's political participation, but still face fiscal dependency. Rajasthan's *early adoption of Panchayati Raj (1959)* has not translated into sustained empowerment due to political interference and irregular fund flows.

3. Digital Governance (e-Panchayat): Promise and Constraints

The Government of India's *e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project* aims to digitalise governance at the village level by introducing online service delivery, accounting, and grievance platforms. While it enhances transparency and data-driven decision-making, its benefits remain unevenly distributed due to infrastructural gaps and limited digital literacy in rural areas. Thus, technology has aided administrative efficiency but has not yet ensured participatory empowerment of PRIs.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND WAYS TO REVIVE THE SYSTEM

Panchayati Raj remains indispensable to India's democratic architecture and inclusive development. The author concludes that the present distress is not episodic but structural, arising from intertwined deficits of authority, capacity, and autonomy. First, the study found a persistent *administrative shortfall*: many States have not operationalised the full devolution of functions, functionaries, and decision space envisioned under the Eleventh Schedule. Panchayats often work through fragmented line departments, suffer staffing gaps, and face overlapping jurisdictions that dilute local initiative. Second, a *fiscal dependence trap* has formed. While aggregate transfers have increased, the composition has shifted toward tied grants, narrowing discretion for locally determined priorities and reinforcing a project-implementation mindset over genuine self-governance. Third, the research noted *political centralisation* and uneven respect for institutional safeguards—such as timely elections and the independence of State Election Commissions, which curtail the democratic vitality of the third tier. *Technological change* adds a fourth layer. Digital public infrastructure and direct benefit transfers have improved efficiency and transparency, yet they frequently bypass Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayats in beneficiary identification and grievance redress, eroding participatory deliberation. The promise of e-Panchayat is real, better accounting, public disclosure, and service delivery—but its benefits remain uneven due to connectivity, capacity, and literacy gaps. A fifth finding is the *structural tilt toward urban policy*, with reforms, investments, and programmatic attention flowing more readily to cities, leaving rural local bodies relatively under-capacitated and under-resourced.

Comparative evidence in this paper underscores that design choices matter. Kerala's deeper devolution, people's planning, and systematic capacity building demonstrate that constitutional vision can translate into day-to-day autonomy and outcomes. By contrast, states with intermittent devolution, weak staffing, and fiscal fragmentation struggle to convert electoral legitimacy into developmental authority. The Scheduled Areas highlight a further concern: the normative empowerment promised under PESA often stalls in practice when administrative rules, sectoral laws, or extractive incentives overshadow Gram Sabha primacy.

Against this backdrop, the author concludes that revitalising Panchayati Raj requires reconnecting constitutional status with operational power. Devolution must be made real in offices, budgets, and staff postings; fiscal flows must protect a robust share of untied funds; elections must be timely and insulated from executive delay; and technology must be designed to enhance, not replace, deliberative self-government. Equally, inclusion must move from numerical representation to substantive voice and capability, especially for women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and migrant-affected communities. Planning processes should be re-centred in the Gram Sabha, with transparent social audit, open data, and accessible grievance systems that bring citizens back into the heart of rural governance.

This paper suggests that a renewal strategy should weave together the following strands:

1. Redefining the Role of Panchayats in Governance

Over the past decade, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have been largely perceived as implementation agencies for centrally sponsored schemes rather than autonomous units of self-government. To revive the system, there is a need to redefine their role from passive executors to active decision-makers in local development. This requires restoring their constitutional mandate of planning, monitoring, and delivering services as envisioned under *Article 243G* of the Constitution. Panchayats must be allowed to design and implement projects based on local priorities rather than centrally imposed templates.

2. Strengthening Rural Representation and Participation

Electoral politics at the grassroots ensure that Panchayats retain political relevance, but substantive empowerment demands more than representation. Local governance must be revitalised through *participatory planning, social audits, and transparent budgeting* that include the voices of women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and marginalised communities. Gram Sabhas should be made vibrant forums for collective

decision-making. Considering that over 94 crore people still live in rural India, the revival of Panchayats is essential for inclusive governance and balanced national development.

3. Leveraging Technology for Inclusive Governance

Advancements in digital infrastructure present new opportunities for citizen engagement and accountability. Panchayats should adopt digital platforms for real-time monitoring of projects, online grievance redress, and data-driven planning. The creation of a networked Panchayati Raj system, integrating village, block, and district levels, can ensure faster coordination and transparency. Digital tools can also help bridge the rural–urban divide by supporting safe migration, improving service delivery for migrant families, and enhancing communication between communities and administrations.

4. Promoting Environmental Stewardship and Resource Management

Reviving Panchayati Raj also requires reimagining their role in *sustainable development*. Panchayats can serve as pivotal institutions in *water conservation, waste management, and renewable energy generation* at the village level. They are uniquely positioned to manage *common property resources* through a combination of traditional ecological knowledge and modern scientific practices. Local governance can thereby become an engine of environmental resilience, restoring degraded ecosystems, protecting local biodiversity, and ensuring water security.

5. Empowering Panchayats in Disaster and Climate Resilience

As climate risks and natural disasters increase, Panchayats must be strengthened to play a frontline role in *community-based disaster management*. Their responsibilities should include early warning dissemination, risk-mapping, disaster-resilient infrastructure development, and community training. Local preparedness, led by empowered Panchayats, can significantly reduce vulnerabilities and protect lives and livelihoods in rural India.

6. Strengthen Devolution

For Panchayati Raj to function as a genuine tier of government, devolution of powers, functions, and functionaries must be complete and uniform across all States. The constitutional intent of the Eleventh Schedule—to transfer 29 subjects to local bodies—remains only partially fulfilled in most regions. Strengthening devolution means ensuring that Panchayats are entrusted with clear administrative authority over local planning, implementation, and monitoring of development activities. States should

institutionalise *Devolution Index-based evaluations* and adopt model legislation ensuring that local governments have genuine decision-making powers, not merely consultative roles. Empowered Panchayats will foster accountability, local innovation, and context-sensitive solutions.

7. Fiscal Empowerment

Financial autonomy is the lifeline of self-governance. Panchayats cannot be effective if they depend entirely on tied grants from higher levels of government. Therefore, fiscal empowerment should focus on increasing untied grants, ensuring the timely release of State Finance Commission recommendations, and expanding the revenue base of local bodies. Mechanisms like formula-based transfers, local taxation powers, and digital accounting systems can strengthen financial discipline while preserving autonomy. Moreover, transparency in fund allocation and expenditure tracking can improve citizen trust and participation in local budgeting processes.

8. Adopting a New Vision for Panchayati Raj

Finally, India needs a *new vision of local governance*, one that combines constitutional empowerment, technological inclusion, and grassroots participation. Policymakers must engage directly with local communities, listen to their needs, and co-create governance frameworks that reflect rural realities. Reviving the Panchayati Raj movement is not merely an administrative reform; it is a democratic imperative that reaffirms the spirit of *Gram Swaraj* and strengthens the social fabric of the nation.

If these operational commitments match constitutional promises, Panchayati Raj can again become the living engine of India's grassroots democracy. The author concludes that without empowering local institutions, the aspiration of participatory governance will remain incomplete, and with it, the nation's broader goals of equity and inclusive development.