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Panchayati Raj Institutions and Rural Development in Bihar: A study of gap between formal decentralisation and substantive local governance

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Research Article

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Abstract

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) constitute the institutional foundation of democratic decentralisation in rural India. Following the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, local self-government institutions were accorded constitutional status to facilitate participatory governance and strengthen rural development processes. In Bihar, where a substantial proportion of the population resides in rural areas and continues to face developmental constraints, PRIs have emerged as significant mechanisms for implementing development programmes and expanding political participation. This study examines the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Bihar with specific reference to decentralised governance, poverty alleviation, social inclusion, infrastructure development, education, health, and environmental sustainability. Using a qualitative research design based on secondary data, the study analyses government reports, constitutional provisions, policy documents, and scholarly literature. The findings indicate that PRIs have enhanced grassroots participation and facilitated the implementation of developmental programmes. Reservation policies have also broadened the representation of women and historically disadvantaged social groups within local governance structures. However, the effectiveness of these institutions continues to be constrained by limited financial autonomy, inadequate administrative capacity, bureaucratic dependence, weak participatory mechanisms, and persistent socio-cultural inequalities. The study argues that the developmental role of Panchayati Raj Institutions can be strengthened through greater devolution of powers, enhanced institutional capacity, effective fiscal decentralisation, and strengthened mechanisms of accountability and citizen participation.

Introduction

Theoretical Background and Context of the Study

Decentralisation constitutes an important dimension of democratic governance and rural development in contemporary India. The central premise underlying decentralisation is that institutions located closer to citizens possess a greater understanding of local conditions and are consequently better positioned to identify community needs, facilitate public participation, and implement development interventions that reflect local priorities. Through the transfer of decision-making responsibilities to locally elected institutions, decentralisation is expected to enhance administrative responsiveness, improve accountability, and strengthen the effectiveness of public service delivery. However, decentralisation extends beyond the mere relocation of administrative functions from higher to lower levels of government. Its success depends upon the extent to which political authority, financial resources, and administrative responsibilities are genuinely devolved to local institutions. In this regard, the outcomes of decentralisation are conditioned by local political structures, accountability mechanisms, and the unequal distribution of social and economic power[1]. Consequently, the creation of local governance institutions alone does not guarantee democratic participation or developmental effectiveness; the broader institutional and social environment within which these institutions operate remains equally important.

Within the Indian context, democratic decentralisation acquired constitutional status through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, which introduced Part IX of the Constitution and established a formal framework for rural local self-government. The Amendment envisaged a three-tier Panchayati Raj structure comprising institutions at the village, intermediate, and district levels. It further provided for regular elections, reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and reservation for women to ensure broader political inclusion. The Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution identified twenty-nine functional areas that could be entrusted to Panchayats, including agriculture, rural housing, drinking water, roads, education, health, poverty alleviation, and social welfare. The constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj Institutions thus marked a significant shift from a predominantly centralised system of rural administration towards a model of participatory and decentralised governance.

Nevertheless, the literature on decentralisation suggests that constitutional provisions and institutional structures represent only the foundational stage of effective local self-government. The functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions is shaped not only by legal mandates but also by the social and political conditions within which they operate. Local governance outcomes are significantly influenced by factors such as social hierarchy, economic status, patterns of political participation, and community-level power relations. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of Bihar, where rural society is characterised by complex interactions among caste, class, gender, and local political networks[2]. As a result, the effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions cannot be adequately assessed solely through an examination of their formal organisational structure; it must also be understood in relation to the broader social relations that influence local governance and decision-making processes.

The importance of Panchayati Raj Institutions is especially pronounced in Bihar, where rural development continues to be closely associated with persistent challenges of poverty, unemployment, migration, inadequate infrastructure, social inequality, and uneven access to public services. In such a context, Panchayats serve as crucial institutional mechanisms for translating government policies and development programmes into locally relevant initiatives. They provide opportunities for citizens to participate directly in decisions concerning community development, infrastructure creation, welfare programmes, and the allocation of public resources. However, the existence of local institutions does not necessarily imply that communities exercise meaningful control over development decisions. A distinction must therefore be drawn between formal decentralisation, which refers to the establishment of institutional structures, and substantive decentralisation, which reflects the actual capacity of local governments to exercise authority and influence development outcomes.

The institutional framework of Panchayati Raj in Bihar was further strengthened through the Bihar Panchayat Raj Act, 2006, which serves as the principal legislative basis for rural local governance in the state. Bihar follows a three-tier system consisting of the Gram Panchayat at the village level, the Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and the Zila Parishad at the district level[3]. The Gram Sabha occupies a particularly important position within this framework as an institutional platform for direct citizen participation and local accountability. A notable feature of Bihar's Panchayati Raj system is the provision of fifty per cent reservation for women in elected local bodies. This policy has considerably expanded

women's participation in local governance and has emerged as one of the most significant experiments in political inclusion at the grassroots level.

The relationship between women's political representation and democratic governance has attracted considerable scholarly attention. The gender composition of elected institutions can influence development priorities and patterns of public expenditure. Women representatives often assign greater importance to issues directly affecting women's everyday lives and community welfare. The findings indicate that political representation may affect substantive developmental outcomes rather than merely altering the demographic composition of governing bodies. Similarly, it shows that prolonged exposure to women political leaders can contribute to changing social attitudes towards women's leadership and can influence the aspirations of younger generations. Such findings highlight the transformative potential of political reservation in challenging traditional gender norms and expanding opportunities for women's social and political participation.

The presence of women and other marginalised groups within elected institutions does not automatically ensure their effective participation in decision-making processes. Patriarchal social norms, limited access to administrative knowledge, inadequate political experience, and dependence on influential family or community actors may constrain the autonomy of elected representatives. This concern is particularly relevant in Bihar, where local political processes are shaped by the intersection of caste, class, and gender relations. Consequently, the effectiveness of reservation policies must be evaluated not only through the number of elected women representatives but also through their actual involvement in planning, budgeting, policy implementation, and the monitoring of developmental activities.

A further dimension of the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in implementing rural development programmes in Bihar showcase that Panchayats have increasingly become central actors in programmes relating to employment generation, poverty reduction, and rural infrastructure development. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), now, VB-G RAM G represents a significant example, as Panchayats are entrusted with responsibilities relating to the identification, planning, implementation, and monitoring of development works. The decentralised implementation under MGNREGA created opportunities for enhanced participation and improved access to public resources[4]. However, the extent to which local communities' benefit from such programmes remains influenced by prevailing social and political relationships. This observation underscores the broader argument that decentralised development initiatives operate within existing structures of power and authority and cannot be analysed independently of these local realities.

The effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions is also closely linked to the quality of local development planning. Democratic decentralisation requires local governments to identify community priorities and translate them into coherent and actionable development strategies. In this context, in the examination of Gram Panchayat Development Plans in Bihar, the development planning often assumes a procedural character when Panchayats lack adequate technical expertise, reliable information systems, trained

personnel, and effective mechanisms for public participation. It therefore highlights the importance of institutional capacity in ensuring that decentralisation contributes meaningfully to local development outcomes[5].

Taken together, the theoretical and empirical literature suggests that the effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions depends not merely upon constitutional recognition or institutional existence, but also upon the extent of devolution, administrative capacity, financial autonomy, social inclusion, and meaningful citizen participation. The experience of Bihar provides an important context for examining these issues because it combines significant institutional innovations, particularly in relation to women's representation, with persistent developmental and governance challenges.

The present study is situated within this broader debate and seeks to assess the extent to which Panchayati Raj Institutions have contributed to rural development and grassroots governance in Bihar, while identifying the institutional factors that facilitate or constrain their effectiveness.

Literature Review

Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006). *Decentralization and Local Governance in Developing Countries: A Comparative Perspective* argue that decentralisation can improve public service delivery when local institutions possess adequate resources and accountability mechanisms. However, they also note that local governance outcomes are shaped by existing socio-economic hierarchies and political structures. Their comparative work on decentralisation remains important for understanding why formally similar local-government arrangements can generate different developmental outcomes.

Besley, Pande, and Rao (2007) *Political economy of Panchayats in South India* emphasise that the effectiveness of local institutions depends on the interaction between political incentives, community participation, and institutional capacity. Their analysis highlights that decentralisation should be assessed not merely in terms of constitutional provisions but also in relation to actual authority and resource control.

Roy et al. (2017) *Gram Panchayats Development Plans in Bihar a Situational Analysis.* examined the status of Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs) in Bihar and identified several institutional and operational constraints affecting local-level planning. Their situational analysis of Panchayati Raj Institutions highlighted a gap between the formal framework of decentralised planning and its actual practice at the Gram Panchayat level. The study observed that although Gram Panchayats were required to prepare development plans, the planning process often lacked integration across sectors and departments. Development planning was frequently programme-driven rather than based on comprehensive assessments of local needs and priorities. The authors found that Panchayats prepared multiple plans under different schemes without a coherent framework for convergence, which limited the effectiveness of local development planning. He further reported deficiencies in institutional capacity, including inadequate technical knowledge, insufficient training of elected representatives and Panchayat functionaries, and limited access to planning-related information. The study noted that many

stakeholders involved in the planning process lacked familiarity with GPDP guidelines and planning procedures, thereby affecting the quality of local development plans.

Fischer, H. (2019). *Reshaping the public domain: Decentralization, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), and trajectories of local democracy in rural India*. examined the relationship between decentralisation and MGNREGA through case studies including Bihar. The study found that the devolution of resources increased access to state resources and participation in development planning, but that the intensity and equity of local influence depended substantially upon existing political relationships. This finding is important for Bihar because it suggests that development programmes do not operate independently of local political structures. A Panchayat may formally possess responsibility for implementation while the actual distribution of influence may depend upon relationships among elected representatives, bureaucrats, local elites and citizens.

Government of India, Ministry of Rural Development. (2024) [6] . The reports on the implementation of MGNREGA highlight the programme's importance as a mechanism for rural employment generation and community asset creation in Bihar. Documentation published by the Ministry of Rural Development demonstrates the extensive scale of programme implementation in the state and identifies considerable expenditure on agriculture and allied activities. The available evidence underscores the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in the execution of employment-oriented development interventions and in promoting sustainable rural resource development.

Verma, I. R. (2022) [7] . *Participation for rural development: A study of Panchayati Raj with special reference to Bihar* notes that bureaucratic influence and limited local autonomy continue to affect participatory governance in the state. The argument is that although Panchayati Raj has created institutional opportunities for rural participation, the actual participation of elected representatives can remain constrained by bureaucratic structures and limited institutional autonomy. The study therefore raises an important distinction between participation in local institutions and effective participation in decision-making. This distinction is central to assessing whether Panchayati Raj has genuinely decentralised power in Bihar.

Research Gap

The existing literature provides valuable evidence concerning specific dimensions of Panchayati Raj—women's representation, decentralisation, participation and local planning. However, there remains scope for an integrated analysis focusing specifically on how these dimensions collectively influence rural development in Bihar. Much of the literature either examines a particular programme, a particular social group or a particular aspect of local governance. The principal research problem examined in this study concerns the gap between the institutional empowerment of Panchayati Raj Institutions and the extent of their actual autonomy in local governance and development. Although Bihar has established an extensive framework of democratic decentralisation and has emerged as a notable example of enhanced women's political representation in local government, the effectiveness of Panchayats in

exercising substantive authority remains a matter of concern. Questions persist regarding their ability to independently identify local development priorities, prepare and implement development plans, mobilise financial and institutional resources, manage public programmes, and participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. The study therefore seeks to examine the extent to which the formal provisions of decentralised governance have translated into effective local self-government and developmental autonomy in practical form.

The present article therefore brings these dimensions together and conceptualises rural development as a multidimensional process in specific reference to Bihar. The study also distinguishes between institutional presence and institutional effectiveness, which is crucial for assessing the actual developmental contribution of PRIs.

Research Objectives

1. 1. To evaluate the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in fostering social inclusion, political participation, and the substantive empowerment of women in local governance.
2. 2. To assess the contribution of Panchayati Raj Institutions to rural infrastructure development and the delivery of services related to poverty alleviation, education, and public health.
3. 3. To identify the institutional, administrative, financial, and socio-political constraints that affect the effective functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions.
4. 4. To propose policy measures and institutional strategies for strengthening decentralised governance and enhancing the effectiveness of rural local self-government in Bihar.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research design based exclusively on secondary sources of data. Rather than generating primary empirical evidence through field surveys or interviews, the study relies on the systematic examination and synthesis of existing scholarly literature, government reports, policy documents, and official statistical records. The research design is intended to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in rural development and grassroots governance in Bihar. Through a critical review of available literature and official documentation, the study evaluates the achievements, challenges, and developmental contributions of Panchayati Raj Institutions within the broader framework of democratic decentralisation.

The study is based on secondary data collected from a variety of authoritative academic and institutional sources. These include constitutional provisions and legislative documents relating to the Panchayati Raj system, publications and legislative records of the Government of Bihar, reports and statistical publications issued by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, and reports of the Ministry of Rural Development. In addition, the study draws upon peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books on decentralisation and local governance, research reports relating to Gram Panchayat Development Plans, and existing scholarly studies examining women's political participation and rural governance in Bihar. Particular attention has also been given to recent official statistical resources, including the Basic

Statistics of Panchayati Raj Institutions 2025, which provides updated information on the organisational and institutional status of Panchayats across the country.

The collected material was analysed through a thematic approach in order to identify major patterns, issues, and trends relating to the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Bihar. The analysis was organised around six broad thematic dimensions: decentralisation and democratic participation; poverty alleviation and rural employment; social justice and inclusion; infrastructure development and the provision of basic services; education and public health; and environmental sustainability. This thematic framework enabled a systematic assessment of the developmental role of Panchayati Raj Institutions while also facilitating an examination of the institutional challenges and opportunities associated with decentralised governance in the state.

Findings and Result

a. Decentralisation and Local Governance

The institutionalisation of Panchayati Raj has strengthened local participation in governance processes. The three-tier structure provides formal mechanisms through which rural citizens can engage with elected representatives and participate in developmental planning. Gram Panchayats, in particular, function as the primary interface between citizens and the state.

The statistics relating to Panchayat Development Plans (PDPs) provide particularly strong evidence of local planning activity in Bihar. The number of Panchayats preparing development plans increased from **7,566 in 2019–20** to **8,053 in 2024–25**.

More importantly, during the People's Plan Campaign (PPC) for 2024–25, all 8,053 Gram Panchayats in Bihar uploaded their Panchayat Development Plans, giving Bihar a reported 100 percent upload rate.

The detailed status of approved plans is presented in Table 1. In 2024–25, Bihar had 38 District Panchayats, of which 38 had approved plans; among 534 Intermediate Panchayats, 532 had approved plans; and among 8,054 Village Panchayats, 8,053 had approved plans.

Table 1
Panchayat Development Planning in Bihar, 2024–25 *[Insert* Table 1 *about here]*

Level	Total Panchayats	Plans approved	Approval rate
District Panchayat	38	38	100.00%
Intermediate Panchayat	534	532	99.63%
Village Panchayat	8,054	8,053	99.99%

Source: MoPR (2026), data as on 31st March 2025. (*Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, Basic Statistics of Panchayati Raj Institutions 2025. New Delhi, India: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2026)*

These figures suggest a very high degree of formal compliance with decentralised planning processes. Nevertheless, it is important not to equate the existence or uploading of a Panchayat Development Plan automatically with effective participatory planning. The statistics establish that plans were prepared, uploaded and, in most cases, approved; they do not by themselves establish the extent to which Gram Sabha deliberations influenced priorities, whether local preferences were incorporated, or how effectively planned projects were subsequently implemented. This distinction is important for assessing the difference between formal decentralisation and substantive local autonomy. Local governments continue to depend substantially on higher administrative authorities for technical support, project approval, and financial resources. Consequently, decentralisation in Bihar remains partial rather than fully autonomous.

b. Poverty Alleviation and Employment Generation

Panchayati Raj Institutions play a central role in the implementation of poverty alleviation programmes. Through various schemes, they facilitate beneficiary identification, project selection, employment generation, and local asset creation. The participation of Panchayats has improved access to welfare programmes and contributed to livelihood security.

However, programme implementation continues to vary across localities because of differences in administrative capacity and levels of community participation[4].

c. Social Inclusion and Political Representation

One of the most important contributions of Panchayati Raj Institutions has been the inclusion of historically marginalised groups in local governance. Reservation policies have increased the representation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and women. Bihar's provision of 50 per cent reservation for women has significantly altered the composition of local political institutions. The increased presence of women in elected positions has expanded opportunities for political participation and leadership development. The increased representation of women has influenced governance priorities at the local level. Women representatives have often emphasised issues related to education, sanitation, health, drinking water, and social welfare.

One of the most significant indicators of political inclusion is the participation of women in elected Panchayati Raj institutions. The MoPR report records 247,658 elected representatives in Bihar, of whom 110,964 were women, representing 44.81 percent of all elected representatives. These figures are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Elected Representatives in Bihar PRIs *[Insert* Table 2 *about here]*

Indicator	Number
Total elected representatives	247,658
Women elected representatives	110,964
Women as percentage of representatives	44.81%
Male/other representatives	136,694

Source: MoPR (2026)[8], data as on 31st March 2025. (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, Basic Statistics of Panchayati Raj Institutions 2025. New Delhi, India: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2026.)

The figure of 44.81 percent is particularly important in evaluating the consequences of Bihar's policy of enhanced women's reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions. Although women's representation is below 50 percent in the aggregate figure reported by Ministry of Panchayati Raj, women constitute a very substantial proportion of elected representatives. This provides evidence of the transformation of the local political arena and creates opportunities for greater descriptive representation of women in rural governance.

However, representation has not always translated into effective decision-making authority. Patriarchal social norms, limited administrative training, and dependence on family members continue to influence women's political participation[9] .

d. Infrastructure Development

Panchayati Raj Institutions contribute substantially to the planning and implementation of infrastructure projects. Their involvement encompasses roads, sanitation facilities, drinking water systems, drainage networks, and community infrastructure.

Local participation allows infrastructure priorities to reflect community requirements more effectively. Nevertheless, the implementation of development projects remains constrained by funding limitations and technical deficiencies.

The availability of basic institutional infrastructure remains an important constraint on the effective functioning of Gram Panchayats. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj report shows that Bihar had **8,053 Gram Panchayats**, but only **1,548 had Gram Panchayat Bhawans** as of 31 March 2025.

This means that approximately **19.22 percent** of Bihar's Gram Panchayats had a Panchayat Bhawan according to the reported data.

The digital infrastructure situation was somewhat better but still incomplete. Of the 8,053 Gram Panchayats, 2,000 had computers, equivalent to approximately 24.84 percent. The key physical and

digital infrastructure indicators are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Basic Infrastructure of Gram Panchayats in Bihar *[Insert* Table 3 *about here]*

Indicator	Number	Percentage
Total Gram Panchayats	8,053	100%
Gram Panchayats with Panchayat Bhawan	1,548	19.22%
Gram Panchayats with computers	2,000	24.84%

Source: Percentages calculated from MoPR reported figures (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, Basic Statistics of Panchayati Raj Institutions 2025. New Delhi, India: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2026.)

These statistics reveal an important contradiction in the decentralisation process. Bihar demonstrates very high levels of formal planning and reporting, but the physical and digital infrastructure required to support effective local administration remains comparatively limited. Thus, institutional compliance does not necessarily imply adequate institutional capacity.

e. Education and Health

In Bihar, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) play a role in addressing local educational and public health needs, particularly through the Gram Panchayat and its coordination with frontline government functionaries. In the education sector, Panchayats can contribute to monitoring school infrastructure, encouraging enrolment and attendance, and mobilising communities around children's education. In health and sanitation, their responsibilities include supporting village-level awareness activities and coordinating with frontline workers on immunisation, maternal and child health, nutrition, and sanitation programmes. However, the extent of their involvement varies across Panchayats, depending on local administrative capacity, the availability of resources, and coordination with departmental officials. In practice, many essential services continue to be delivered through the relevant line departments and their field-level functionaries. Consequently, the role of PRIs in Bihar is not limited to implementing local development activities; they also act as an institutional link between rural communities and government programmes. The effectiveness of this role depends on the degree of functional devolution, administrative support, and community participation at the village level[7] .

f. Environmental Sustainability

Environmental challenges such as flooding, water scarcity, and land degradation continue to affect rural Bihar. Panchayati Raj Institutions participate in environmental management initiatives, including watershed development, afforestation, sanitation programmes, and natural resource conservation. Their involvement has become increasingly significant as sustainable development objectives gain prominence within rural development policy.

MGNREGA's emphasis on natural-resource management provides an institutional opportunity to integrate employment generation with environmental objectives. Official programme documentation indicates significant expenditure on agriculture and allied activities and natural-resource-related works in Bihar[6].

Discussion

The findings indicate that Panchayati Raj Institutions have expanded democratic participation and strengthened the institutional foundations of local governance in Bihar. Political decentralisation has progressed considerably through regular elections and reservation policies. However, administrative and fiscal decentralisation remain comparatively weak. Bihar experience demonstrates that the effectiveness of decentralisation depends upon the simultaneous transfer of functions, funds, and functionaries. Political representation alone is insufficient to ensure developmental effectiveness. Local governments require adequate financial resources, administrative support, and technical capability to translate community priorities into tangible developmental outcomes. The findings further suggest that women's representation has improved political inclusion, but substantive empowerment remains contingent upon broader institutional and socio-cultural transformations. Similar challenges emerge in relation to participatory planning, accountability, and local autonomy.

Some major **Challenges** include:

Capacity Deficit

The effective functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions depends significantly on the administrative, technical, and managerial capabilities of elected representatives. Many Panchayat functionaries continue to face challenges in areas such as budgeting, development planning, implementation of government schemes, financial administration, digital governance, and social auditing. These responsibilities have become increasingly complex with the expansion of decentralised governance and the growing emphasis on transparency and accountability. Consequently, capacity-building initiatives should not be confined to orientation programmes conducted immediately after elections. Instead, continuous training, periodic skill enhancement, and institutional support mechanisms are necessary to enable representatives to perform their responsibilities effectively and respond to evolving governance requirements.

Financial Dependence

Fiscal autonomy constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for meaningful decentralised governance. Although Panchayats are entrusted with a range of developmental responsibilities, their capacity to fulfil these functions often remains constrained by limited financial resources. A substantial reliance on tied grants and transfers from higher levels of government restricts local discretion in determining development priorities and addressing community-specific needs. As a result, Panchayats may be unable to respond effectively to local demands or undertake initiatives that fall outside predetermined

funding frameworks. Strengthening local revenue generation and enhancing financial autonomy are therefore essential for improving the effectiveness and responsiveness of grassroots governance.

Bureaucratic Dominance

The bureaucracy performs a vital role in providing technical expertise, administrative support, and assistance in programme implementation. However, an excessive concentration of decision-making authority within administrative structures may limit the autonomy of democratically elected Panchayat institutions. Such imbalances can weaken the principles of decentralisation by reducing local participation in governance processes and development planning. The objective of decentralised governance should not be framed as a contest between bureaucratic authority and Panchayat leadership. Rather, effective local governance requires a collaborative framework in which administrative systems support and facilitate the priorities determined through democratic decision-making at the Panchayat level.

Elite Capture

The effectiveness of decentralised governance can be undermined when local power structures disproportionately influence decision-making processes and resource allocation. Factors such as caste hierarchy, economic status, social privilege, and political networks may affect access to Panchayat institutions and the distribution of development benefits. In such contexts, decentralisation may inadvertently reproduce existing social and economic inequalities rather than promote inclusive governance. Ensuring transparency, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and encouraging broad-based citizen participation are therefore essential for preventing elite domination and enhancing the equitable functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Gendered Constraints

Despite significant progress in enhancing women's representation within Panchayati Raj Institutions, the achievement of descriptive representation does not automatically translate into substantive political empowerment. Deeply embedded patriarchal norms and gender-based power relations may continue to constrain women's participation in decision-making processes and limit their autonomy in exercising elected authority. Research on local governance in Bihar indicates that women's political experiences are often shaped by the intersection of gender with other social identities, including caste, class, education, and economic status. Consequently, the advancement of women's political empowerment requires not only institutional representation but also measures aimed at addressing the broader structural and socio-cultural barriers that restrict meaningful participation.

Weak Gram Sabha Participation

The Gram Sabha represents a central institution of participatory democracy within the Panchayati Raj system and serves as an important mechanism through which citizens can influence local governance and development priorities. Active participation in Gram Sabha meetings facilitates transparency, accountability, and community involvement in decision-making processes. However, levels of

participation often remain limited, reducing the effectiveness of these forums as instruments of democratic engagement. Low attendance, inadequate awareness, and limited citizen involvement can weaken the participatory foundations of decentralisation. Strengthening public awareness, improving civic engagement, and creating more inclusive participatory processes are therefore necessary to ensure that Gram Sabhas function as effective platforms for collective decision-making and local accountability.

Therefore, the developmental impact of Panchayati Raj Institutions should be understood not merely in terms of institutional presence but in terms of their capacity to exercise meaningful authority within the governance process.

Limitations

Since the article relies primarily on secondary sources, it does not independently measure the causal impact of PRIs on specific developmental indicators. The findings should therefore be interpreted as an analytical assessment rather than as the result of a primary econometric or field-based investigation.

A future study could strengthen the analysis through district-level comparative research involving household surveys, interviews with elected representatives, Gram Sabha observation and Panchayat-level development indicators.

Conclusion

Panchayati Raj Institutions have emerged as important instruments of democratic decentralisation and rural development in Bihar. Their contribution extends beyond programme implementation to include citizen participation, political inclusion, local planning, and community mobilisation. Through institutionalised representation, Panchayats have expanded opportunities for women and marginalised groups to participate in governance processes.

Despite these achievements, significant challenges continue to limit the effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Financial dependence, administrative weaknesses, inadequate capacity, bureaucratic dominance, and social inequalities constrain their developmental role. Addressing these challenges requires deeper decentralisation, strengthened institutional capacity, enhanced fiscal autonomy, and more effective participatory mechanisms.

Policy Recommendations and Way Forward

Drawing upon the preceding analysis, several policy measures may be considered to strengthen the effectiveness, inclusiveness, and democratic functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Bihar.

Strengthening the Three Fs

The effectiveness of decentralised governance depends upon the substantive transfer of the three foundational components of local self-government: functions, funds, and functionaries. The devolution

process should ensure that these elements are transferred in an integrated manner rather than in isolation. Assigning responsibilities without corresponding financial resources or adequate administrative personnel can limit the operational capacity of Panchayats and undermine the objectives of decentralisation. Consequently, a balanced and coordinated approach to devolution is essential for enhancing local autonomy and institutional effectiveness.

Institutionalising Continuous Capacity Building

Given the expanding responsibilities of Panchayati Raj Institutions, capacity-building initiatives should be institutionalised as an ongoing process rather than being limited to post-election orientation programmes. Training and professional development programmes should focus on key areas such as Panchayat budgeting, implementation of government schemes, social auditing, digital governance, Gram Panchayat Development Plans, public procurement procedures, financial management, gender-responsive governance, and environmental planning. Continuous learning opportunities can strengthen the administrative competence and decision-making capacity of elected representatives, thereby improving the overall quality of local governance.

Strengthening Gram Sabha Participation

The Gram Sabha constitutes the primary institutional mechanism through which citizens participate directly in local governance. Its effectiveness can be enhanced through measures that encourage broader and more meaningful public engagement. Such measures include timely public notification of meetings, convenient and accessible meeting schedules, regular social audits, public disclosure of financial expenditures, and proactive inclusion of women and marginalised social groups in deliberative processes. The digital dissemination of Panchayat plans and development information can further improve transparency and facilitate wider community participation in local decision-making.

Enhancing Women's Substantive Empowerment

While Bihar's policy of fifty per cent reservation for women has significantly increased descriptive representation within Panchayati Raj Institutions, additional measures are necessary to promote substantive empowerment. Efforts should focus on strengthening women's leadership capabilities through specialised training, improving legal and administrative literacy, expanding mentoring and peer-support networks, and enhancing digital literacy. Institutional safeguards should also be developed to address gender-based interference and constraints on decision-making. Furthermore, women representatives should be provided with direct and meaningful opportunities to participate in planning, budgeting, and developmental decision-making processes to ensure that political representation translates into effective governance participation.

Improving Panchayat-Level Planning

Local development planning should move beyond procedural compliance and become firmly grounded in evidence-based assessments of local socioeconomic, demographic, and environmental conditions. Gram Panchayat Development Plans should incorporate community needs, resource availability, and

local development priorities while remaining aligned with broader state development programmes and the Sustainable Development Goals. Such an approach can enhance the relevance, responsiveness, and sustainability of local development interventions.

Strengthening Transparency and Social Accountability

Transparency and accountability are essential for ensuring public trust in local governance institutions. Information relating to Panchayat expenditures, beneficiary selection, developmental works, procurement processes, tendering activities, and project implementation should be made publicly accessible through both digital platforms and Gram Sabha forums. Strengthening disclosure mechanisms can enable citizens to monitor governance processes more effectively and contribute to greater accountability in the utilisation of public resources.

Improving Coordination between Panchayats and Bureaucracy

Effective decentralised governance requires constructive collaboration between elected representatives and administrative officials. While bureaucratic institutions provide essential technical expertise and implementation support, they should function in a manner that complements rather than displaces democratic decision-making at the local level. Establishing a clear division of responsibilities between political and administrative actors can reduce institutional conflicts, improve coordination, and ensure that developmental initiatives reflect locally determined priorities while benefiting from professional administrative support.

Thus, the future of rural development in Bihar depends substantially upon the ability of Panchayati Raj Institutions to function as genuine institutions of local self-government. Strengthening these institutions is therefore essential for ensuring inclusive, participatory, and sustainable rural development.

Declarations

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2.Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no competing financial or non-financial interests that could have influenced the research presented in this article.

3.Ethics Approval

Not applicable. This article is based on secondary data and publicly available documentary sources and does not involve human participants, animals, or the collection of personally identifiable information.

4.Consent to Participate

Not applicable.

5.Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

6.Availability of Data and Materials

The data and materials used in this study are derived from publicly available secondary sources, including government reports, official publications, policy documents, and previously published scholarly literature. The relevant sources have been appropriately cited in the manuscript.

7.Code Availability

Not applicable.

8.Author Contributions

Author Contribution

Anupriya Singh is the sole author of this manuscript and was responsible for all aspects of the research, including conceptualisation, development of the research framework, literature review, data collection from secondary sources, analysis and interpretation of findings, and preparation, writing, and revision of the manuscript. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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