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Enhancing self-sufficiency in panchayats: A path forward

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Abstract

The concept of enhancing self-sufficiency in panchayats is pivotal for fostering sustainable local governance and development in rural India. This paper analyzes the multifaceted approach needed to empower Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) to ensure they can meet the needs of their communities effectively. It examines the challenges faced by panchayats, including limited financial resources, inadequate capacity-building initiatives, and insufficient access to technology and information. By emphasizing the role of decentralized governance, the study proposes a framework for strengthening the institutional capacity of panchayats through enhanced training programs, community participation, and better access to funds. Additionally, it explores case studies of successful self-sufficient panchayats, highlighting best practices that can be replicated across various regions. The analysis underscores the importance of collaborative efforts between government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities in achieving the goal of self-sufficiency. This paper outlines the challenges that panchayats in India encounter. Finally, this paper presents a path forward that advocates for policy reforms and strategic investments aimed at empowering panchayats to become resilient and self-reliant entities capable of driving local development. Self-sufficiency will empower Panchayats and ensure that they emerge with greater respect and trust.

Keywords: Panchayat, self-sufficient, institutions, economic, political, India

Introduction

Self-sufficiency is a crucial condition where a system can independently or collectively fulfil its essential needs, including food, clothing, and shelter. This concept requires a comprehensive approach, encompassing various dimensions of life such as social, economic, technological, cultural, institutional, political, and environmental balance. When applied to Panchayats, self-sufficiency should encompass not only the functions these institutions are designed to perform but also the outcomes they aim to achieve. It's important to recognise that self-sufficiency extends beyond seeing these units as isolated and non-dependent; instead, it emphasizes the necessity for our Panchayats to cultivate an environment that instils values of self-reliance among their citizens, fostering a community that can stand resilient and empowered.

To establish a truly autonomous and democratic community, it is essential for each Panchayat to achieve a state of self-sufficiency across multiple dimensions. In our governance and community development efforts, self-sufficiency for Panchayats means that neither the Panchayats nor the people rely on external authorities, such as Block or District Authorities, or even Zilla Parishad, for decision-making, implementation, resources, or essential functions. Self-sufficiency fosters community engagement in local governance by giving residents greater control over priorities and financial resources. This empowerment enables them to effectively manage the allocation of funds through grant-building committees. Numerous Panchayats worldwide are successfully creating and maintaining essential infrastructure at the local level without relying on State and Federal grants. Consequently, self-sufficiency within Panchayats has emerged as a transformative trend, promoting the efficient utilization of resources at the grassroots level. There is an increase in available funding, flexibility, and reduced uncertainty within the global strategy, allowing for better planning and prioritization of welfare programs and, crucially, for determining the direction of various welfare initiatives.

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Decentralization across various sectors is recognized as a fundamental right, empowering citizens who are willing to be self-sufficient, whether through the provision of free aid or minimal assistance. This approach emphasizes gathering donations and funding through non-governmental channels, such as grassroots investments, which provide an effective means of financing public goods and services. However, the concept of 'self-sufficiency in Panchayats' is not explicitly addressed in the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution. Panchayats are granted unique financial and administrative autonomy as enshrined in the Constitution. This includes provisions for free elections, reserved positions, continuity of performance without the conflict of double office-holding, and responsible governance overseen by state election commissions and vigilance bodies. Furthermore, they are entitled to loans equivalent to those taken by societies with limited liability, ensuring proper planning and transparent auditing practices within the framework of Panchayat Raj governance.

Self-sufficiency in panchayats embodies equity in its purest form, as it ensures that individuals have access to income, resources, skills, and knowledge necessary to engage, contribute, and enjoy the benefits of modern society. It is reasonable to assert that self-sufficiency serves as the foundation of participatory democracy, rooted in the idea that local communities are best equipped to develop policies and programs that significantly impact their daily lives. Moreover, it is a prerequisite for effective local self-governance, particularly at the third level of Panchayati Raj, which is constitutionally assigned the task of planning and implementing initiatives. Therefore, it is essential that local bodies not only achieve self-reliance but also possess the economic resources required to fulfil their planning and implementation responsibilities effectively. The tension between the traditional roles of civil society—like social mobilization and service delivery—and the state functions of panchayats, particularly regarding discretionary funds, reveals the critical need for self-sufficiency within civil society institutions. Many past panchayats, which were funded centrally but lacked clear paths to self-sustainability, have unfortunately fallen into disrepair and inactivity. Achieving self-sufficiency is crucial for transforming conflicts of interest into unified intentions, a principle well-recognized in cooperative fields. It's evident that the focus on self-sufficiency deserves greater emphasis than is sometimes acknowledged. This aim is encapsulated in three key outcomes: the development of skills and goods tailored to local market needs, the enhancement of governance, and the empowerment of political processes at the community level to improve local governance. The synergy of these three positive social and economic outcomes—mutually reinforcing each other—positions self-sufficiency initiatives as innovative strategies that hold significant potential for testing and implementation.

Leveraging Technology for Self-Sufficiency

To bolster the fiscal capacities of panchayats across the nation and diminish their financial dependence, a comprehensive and inclusive strategy is imperative. The core principle guiding this initiative should focus on enhancing the administrative and financial autonomy of local governments, supported by essential technological and managerial resources. The vision of a self-sufficient panchayat is rooted in restoring the rightful authority of

elected local bodies to govern and administer, as enshrined in the Indian Constitution. This restoration is crucial for establishing a pathway to revenue-raising capabilities that empower these institutions to reduce reliance on higher levels of government, thereby fostering holistic growth in both rural and urban areas of India.

Technological innovations, particularly through the development of a digital platform utilizing data and information technology, can serve as both a regulatory and equalizing force. This approach can effectively curb the escalating ratio of Non-Plan to Expenditure while simultaneously enhancing public-private investments across various sectors, acting as a self-sustaining mechanism for local resource generation. Moreover, it will facilitate good governance by promoting informed and participative decision-making at the grassroots level. Such applications should focus on capacity building, enabling panchayats to elevate their revenue streams and strategically improve their financial resources. Leveraging space technology, digitizing land records, and developing applications for land use and town planning will not only fortify the panchayat system but also streamline services while enhancing the capability to generate independent funds.

Community Participation and Empowerment

To effectively enhance community engagement within the Panchayat, the Chief should prioritize active involvement from community members at every stage of project development—preparation, planning, implementation, and monitoring. Hosting an event with local stakeholders serves as an excellent opportunity to gather valuable ideas and insights, making community input a vital part of the project's framework. This fosters a deeper understanding of local dynamics and aligns the project with the community's needs and priorities. By incorporating feedback from these gatherings, we can tailor the project to ensure it truly resonates with the Panchayat. But for genuine participation, we must empower the community. This can be achieved through the Ten-Community Self-Sufficient Model (CSR), which emphasizes four critical pillars: Economic Development, Social Development, Environmental Sustainability, and Cultural Heritage. Exploring the community landscape will reveal the potential of CSR initiatives. Together, we can create impactful, community-driven projects that bring lasting benefits to the Panchayat.

Community participation is a process that engages and mobilizes individuals and organizations in a collective effort to enhance the overall living standards of communities and society at large. Achieving full participation allows institutions to provide effective governance and operate optimally. When civil society is actively involved, councils and their partners gain a better understanding of the goals and preferences of the public, thereby fostering a closer relationship between local communities and their councils. Sustainable community development should bring about meaningful changes in societal behaviour and conditions, cultivate happy, peaceful, and prosperous communities, generate wealth, promote cultural identity and autonomy, and ensure harmony with nature.

To truly assess the self-sufficiency of Panchayats, it is essential to look beyond just basic expenditure and revenue figures. We must develop more comprehensive and quantifiable metrics that leverage the existing data sets. Evaluating the overall financial self-sufficiency or fiscal

autonomy of Panchayats requires considering not only the revenues linked to development activities but also accounting for operational expenses and staff costs—particularly those related to elected representatives—by excluding grant components. Every state has established data banks and financial systems, making it feasible to utilize these resources to accurately estimate the fiscal gap across all Panchayat bodies for meaningful comparisons. Additionally, conducting a longitudinal study of various Panchayats within a district or state can provide valuable insights into their financial dynamics and growth over time. It is crucial to establish an evaluation mechanism that assesses Panchayats based on various scoring systems. A comprehensive study encompassing all 28 states in the country is essential for future research in this area. Such evaluations would benefit both deserving Panchayats and those who may be misusing funds. Additionally, it would enable the Government of India to hold state governments accountable if the overall status of self-sufficiency is lacking. Inter-annual evaluations could also be conducted to determine which sectors are adequately funding their planning and developmental activities and which are not. This information could guide states in reallocating untied funds from both state and central sources, referencing the guidelines or national laws, as illustrated by the example from the UK in Chapter 5 regarding fiscal devolution. Therefore, the key to assessing self-sufficiency lies not merely in expenditure caps but ineffective measurement. A uniform scoring or ranking system should be developed to evaluate all Panchayats, taking into account factors such as per capita expenditure, the role of Panchayats in local spending, SA reports, and downward accountability, while also considering the recommendations of the Finance Commission (FFC) and the present maximum of the District Yearly Report (DYR).

The analysis can effectively leverage the previously mentioned database. When announced well in advance, this scheme proves invaluable as it enhances capacity building. Both PESA and PRIA have established Panchayat assessment systems that can be standardized into a common indicator or report card for Panchayats, given their similar frameworks. Furthermore, we have urban area indicators that can be equally applied to TPs. Schedule M emphasizes that states should assess and empower sub-states wherever possible. Implementing periodic assessments every five years can align with the national mean plan and enhance TSP utilization of PESA. CoSHAA and MIRT outline the necessary thresholds for achieving self-sufficiency or a robust fiscal framework for a Panchayat or any sub-state within the country.

Sustainable Financing Mechanisms

To achieve effective local governance, it is crucial to ensure financial resources are available for sustainable development initiatives. A fundamental question arises: "What mechanisms can we implement to empower panchayats to attain self-sufficiency?" Before diving into this critical inquiry, it's essential to reflect on some guiding principles of financial management. These principles encourage a proactive approach rather than a reactive mindset when strategizing for self-sufficiency. "When the value of services provided is perceived as fair, sustainability becomes attainable." "Users who receive goods or services must contribute to their costs." "The processes of

decentralization and the delegation of resources must align with economic viability." Therefore, by establishing effective rural water supply systems at the local level, panchayats can inherently enhance their self-sustaining capabilities, leading to long-term growth and resilience. Panchayats have the potential to explore their own sources of funding. Some councils already generate revenue through taxes or user charges. Many panchayat bodies are involved in constructing irrigation channels, reclaiming waterlogged areas, and implementing afforestation programs. However, only a few have effectively developed irrigation systems or forests to maximize outputs, from which the local community pays for water usage and forestry products. This highlights the question of affordability. Panchayats could finance irrigation schemes and foster industries that utilize forestry products, with the profitability of these industries reflected in increased benefit levies on agricultural production. Additionally, like irrigation and forestry, panchayats could secure funding for housing projects that also enhance health and education benefits through levy appeals. Engaging in projects that offer environmental co-benefits or reduce pollution in local waterways, such as through afforestation, could provide a financial incentive to support panchayat investments. This approach could form an area-specific and sector-focused financing policy linked to regeneration initiatives in housing and health.

Gender Inclusivity in Self-Sufficiency Efforts

The pursuit of self-sufficiency in governance at lower levels of the federal system, such as Panchayati Raj institutions, is gaining momentum. While there is an invigorating discussion surrounding the inherent value of local governments having sufficient funding and functional autonomy, it is crucial to highlight and clarify several key elements that are often overlooked in this broader discourse. In India, lower-tier government entities remain predominantly male-dominated. Acknowledging the importance of women's participation in local democracy, Indian states have mandated since 1993 that no less than one-third of all seats in Panchayats and urban local bodies be reserved for women. Critics have consistently underscored the need for gender inclusivity in the movement toward self-sufficiency in the governance of these lower-order institutions. However, the argument for gender inclusion has often been regarded in a primarily descriptive or lexicographic manner. To establish a truly effective gender-sensitive approach to achieving self-sufficiency in Panchayat governance, we must confront this challenge head-on. It is critical to elevate female participation beyond mere statistics; it should represent a fundamental shift in our understanding of governance. The distinction between gender inclusion and true inclusivity in governance captures the essential leap needed to move past tokenism—marked by seat reservations and rotation—into genuine representation. While increasing female involvement in elected bodies was initially viewed as a catalyst for gender-sensitive governance, the reality has proven these expectations largely unfulfilled. For gender inclusivity to genuinely support the pursuit of self-sufficiency in governance, our policies must embrace a holistic, transformative vision of participation. This vision must also extend its benefits to the third gender and adopt gender-sensitive strategies in governance.

Challenges to Self-Sufficiency in Panchayats

To enhance self-sufficiency in panchayat governance, it is essential to integrate resource accessibility—both material and human—into its operations. The current discussion outlines various strategic actions aimed at promoting this self-sufficiency within panchayats. Factors such as the size of the panchayat, its social diversity, and geographical context significantly influence the degree and manner in which self-reliance can be established. Historically, the functions devolved to panchayats have been relatively minor and did not attract substantial resources from the state. Nonetheless, these functions provide a framework for future initiatives that emerge from the community's identified needs, illustrating practical self-reliance in action. Collectively, these elements pose considerable challenges to fostering sustainability. Ultimately, policies aimed at building institutional resilience and a robust local economy via diversified livelihoods may inadvertently undermine community self-reliance. This dynamic is further complicated when considering the insights of economist Elinor Ostrom, who advocated for community resilience as a crucial factor in managing shared resources. Financial and economic challenges abound, particularly due to economies of scale. Empirical data suggest that larger panchayats tend to be less reliant on external financial support. However, this increases the complexity of implementation, as there may be significant disparities in economic status and development among community members. In contrast, local development communities (LDCs) may face more considerable difficulties in securing necessary resources, thus exacerbating the challenges in ensuring that local interests are adequately represented and supported.

Economic Challenges

The Panchayat system has been caught in a web of three overlapping constituencies from its inception. Official legal frameworks grant Panchayats a formal, albeit limited, existence. Additionally, they operate within a political constituency that provides them with necessary legitimacy among citizens. However, a crucial aspect often overlooked is the economic constituency that connects Panchayats to the broader economic landscape. The original vision of empowering local self-government is significantly hindered by various constraints and obstacles, which reduce Panchayats to mere representatives of "higher" governments. This diminishes their ability to address local economic needs and effectively manage administrative functions. It's imperative to recognise and empower Panchayats beyond these limitations to fulfil their potential as true agents of local governance. The administrative concept of local self-government, known as Panchayat, was intended to promote economic autonomy. However, due to inherent conceptual weaknesses and a complex structure, Panchayats often function as mere 'citizen-state arenas'—representative bodies despite their economic ties to the state. The approach to evaluating Panchayats through fiscal, administrative, and economic lenses becomes evident whenever financial transfers are made. Economic challenges play a significant role in discussions and analyses surrounding these bodies. The issues that hinder Panchayats from achieving self-determination, stability, assurance, and independence include limited resource availability, persistent and escalating fiscal demands, difficulties in obtaining and ensuring timely flow of resources, significant

socio-cultural diversity, and the lack of industrial and employment ecosystems, among others.

Social Challenges

Long-term theocracies in history often raise questions about their effectiveness in improving the socio-economic status of all societal groups. Historically, the marginalized voices were silenced in governance, leaving them without any support during their struggles. As British rule took hold, proportionate representation began to replace theocracies, driven by increasing social inequalities. Despite this shift, the socio-political landscape saw minimal improvement, and the socio-economic situation continued to decline. Helen Keller poignantly stated, "Nothing is valuable when they blame us for actions we haven't done and leave us for the battles, but everything is remarkable when they achieve the possible." Unfortunately, many state governments neglect to conduct timely local body elections, undermining grassroots democracy and obscuring the very purpose of devolving administrative and economic rights to the populace. This lack of collaboration for local self-sufficiency fosters a belief among citizens that they are entitled to free services, viewing local bodies merely as a liability. Such an attitude risks stalling the advancement of democracy at the grassroots level, especially in areas like Pad-handles. The proportion procedure has begun to diminish in significance within the realms of training and other sectors. Considering our country's priorities, urban and municipal corporations have now assumed responsibility for organizing elections, a development I do not consider advantageous. In the long term, local communities fail to foster complete self-reliance. The subsequent step involves the Union, encompassing both central and state governments, in efforts to establish urban areas that promote financial independence. However, once the grants from the Union and State governments are depleted, towns resort to adjusting taxes and fees to cover deficits, leading to the re-imposition of such financial obligations. Consequently, achieving social sustainability remains an elusive goal in every nation-state.

Environmental Challenges

The critical link between local environmental quality and the self-sufficiency of Panchayats is undeniable. Ensuring reliable access to ecological goods and services (EGS) must be at the forefront of every sustainable initiative. Currently, 40% of Panchayats exhibit some level of dependence on forest-based resources, with over half heavily relying on wood energy for cooking. Furthermore, four-fifths of these communities continue to cultivate wasteland, marginal tracts, and other government or common lands for their livelihoods. While only 9% of rural households are migrant families, the impacts on those remaining are significant—they will invariably continue to exploit local environmental resources. Factors such as population pressure, economic interdependencies, shifts toward non-agricultural income sources, and comparatively unrestricted access to EGS contribute to local environmental degradation. To promote successful ecological practices, we must recognize the environment as the community's most valuable asset. It is imperative to foster technical skills in environmental management, enhance natural resource management education, and implement training programs that yield tangible environmental benefits. In identifying local pressure dimensions, priorities should be informed by

community governance structures at the village, Taluk, and Zilla Panchayat levels, alongside a clearly defined legal mandate. The lack of robust statutory support has contributed to the widespread adoption of alternative development initiatives sponsored by the forest department, such as the establishment of farm nurseries and the distribution of trees and energy-efficient assets, rather than fostering a comprehensive commitment to supporting alternative livelihoods. Considering the diverse contexts in which decentralised development can evolve from ecological and economic perspectives, a shift towards the state government's ideology must serve as the foundation for any public decision-making process. Additionally, priorities outlined in the guidelines must undergo thorough cross-ecology analyses to establish a mandate that can facilitate the creation of an effective blueprint.

Policy Recommendations and Interventions

To advance the discourse on building self-sufficient panchayats, we must embrace key policy recommendations and interventions. First and foremost, it is essential to uphold the statutory measures that grant these local bodies their autonomy. Enhancing panchayat capabilities and capacities is critical, as this will forge a distinct path for development—tailored solutions to local challenges driven by the community's own wisdom. It is imperative that local governance institutions secure at least 10% of public outlays to foster self-sustainability. Furthermore, we have identified that several governance principles can effectively underpin the creation of self-reliant schools as extensions of local government. Voluntary organizations, serving as a crucial third tier of governance, play a vital role by implementing development initiatives within panchayats. They facilitate freedom of speech and possess the ability to hold local governance accountable to the very stakeholders they serve. Due to changes in principles and procedures, panchayats now possess the constitutional authority to uphold the rights and dignity of every village within the state, serving as the rightful holders of these rights, along with the powers of trusteeship. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, has developed an Analysis of Legislation and Governance Policy aimed at fostering self-sufficient panchayats. This report seeks to promote a foundational policy framework, principles of decentralization, and strategic interventions for the effective governance of self-sufficient panchayats. The approach outlined aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the governance policies and strategies devised by the Government of India to achieve the goals of self-sufficient panchayats. Additionally, the report presents insights into concepts and best practices from South Asian countries, along with legal and statutory requirements, innovative laws, and exemplary practices.

Legislative Frameworks

There is a strong consensus that effective local governance institutions and structures reliant on local resources can significantly enhance self-rule and self-sufficiency. However, field observations and existing legal frameworks reveal that local governance bodies, including Panchayati Raj Institutions, remain poorly integrated within the overarching physical and financial structures of state governments. Elevating the role of local government in development planning represents not merely a functional

shift, but a critical step towards realizing the constitutional mandate outlined in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution of India. This mandate embodies the deep-seated aspirations of the people for self-governance and autonomy, central to grassroots movements. For the principle of self-sufficiency in Panchayats to be genuinely realized, substantial intervention in the legislative framework is imperative.

The authority of self-governing bodies derives from statutory provisions. Consequently, any legislative interventions necessary must address not just financial and administrative issues, but also the empowerment of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Proposals for legislative frameworks or amendments aimed at fostering self-sufficiency within these institutions should include recommendations for consultations at various levels—district, state, central, and urban local bodies (for urban areas)—to facilitate the implementation of their provisions. It is essential to regard the people in villages as co-partners in development, making their input vital to the process. Additionally, to enhance devolution and active participation, discussions will also encompass the modalities for transferring funds at their request, independent of any involvement from the state execution agency, during these consultation meetings.

Capacity Building and Training Initiatives

Panchayats are now entrusted with a variety of essential governance functions across multiple sectors, which necessitates a significant enhancement of their capacities and capabilities to meet the demands of these new responsibilities. To effectively execute their roles, Panchayats must develop crucial skills in areas such as planning, resource allocation, budget preparation, program implementation, and collaboration with line department officials. They also need to master procurement processes, mobilize social capital to encourage community participation, and facilitate collective action that aligns with the local needs of the communities they serve. In this vital context, a comprehensive training approach for Panchayats is imperative. It should encompass capacity-building initiatives tailored for elected leaders, executive agency heads (chief executive officers), and pivotal personnel within the Panchayats. Such investment in training will empower these institutions to thrive and effectively respond to the aspirations of their communities.

Given the previously discussed enabling capabilities, one can explore the significant role that local-level training may play in transforming the governance structure to achieve self-sufficiency as a key objective. Training for Panchayats is facilitated by the State Institute of Rural Development, thereby emphasizing both function-specific and institution-based approaches aimed at reinforcing Panchayats as self-governing and effective entities. As noted in the previous section, this strategy must be situated within a broader framework of non-training interventions and support programs designed to empower Panchayats further. This is proposed as a more generalized strategy that is not strictly sector-based, with the training component being central to the overall institutional support strategy.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This paper investigates the promising potential for self-sufficiency within Panchayats operating within bureaucratic

systems, demonstrating that local governance can indeed achieve a noteworthy level of autonomy. The emergence of such self-sufficiency is contingent on three pivotal factors: (a) the distinct circumstances of each community, (b) the collective aspirations of its citizens, and (c) the ability of bureaucrats to deeply engage with and comprehend local contexts and desires. Our theoretical framework gained considerable validation through practical examples; however, instances where theory did not fully account for outcomes were also identified. These exceptions were explored through the lens of deliberative action, providing valuable insights beyond theoretical predictions. Additionally, we examined the implications of our findings regarding the flexibility and resilience embedded in local governance.

The core question of this essay centres on whether self-sufficiency can authentically arise within bureaucratic governmental structures. Our findings affirm that yes, such possibilities not only exist, but they actively come to fruition. Each example presents a degree of self-sufficiency worth noting. For instance, the World Bank's Jalswarajya Project stands out for its significant progress, while the Pamban Sanmarga Sangam showcases a unique form of spiritual self-sufficiency. We present compelling evidence supporting the concept of nested self-sufficiency, especially at the domain level. Importantly, none of our examples completely eliminated reliance on external resources, nor did they fully dissolve hierarchical dynamics between citizens and the varkaris. Nevertheless, a recurring theme throughout these experiences is the gradual withdrawal of the state from certain areas—often motivated by financial factors. In the case of Jalswarajya, the state maintains a notably reduced level of regulatory and moral oversight, illustrating a nuanced shift in governance dynamics.

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