



E-ISSN: 2664-603X  
P-ISSN: 2664-6021  
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.92  
IJPSG 2025; 7(8): 170-174  
[www.journalofpoliticalscience.com](http://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com)  
Received: 16-05-2025  
Accepted: 17-06-2025

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## Democratic decentralization and political empowerment of the rural people: Role of Panchayati Raj Institution in Assam

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2025.v7.i8b.634>

### Abstract

Democratic decentralization refers to the devolution of the power of the government democratically means to the people at the grass root level. To establish democracy in its true spirit decentralization of power is necessary. India, being a democratic country is trying to implement the democratic decentralization through the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi always favoured for a decentralized India. Following the ideology of Mahatma Gandhi the Panchayati Raj System was constituted to decentralize the power to the grass root level. However, a uniform constitutional structure of the Panchayati Raj Institutions was provided in the constitution of India through the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitution amendment in the year 1992. Assam is one of the pioneering states to introduce Panchayati Raj Institutions. Today, the Panchayati raj institutions are constituted democratically in the state. It is playing important role in implementing various developmental schemes in the rural areas of Assam. But the Panchayati Raj Institutions in Assam are also facing many challenges like influence of party politics, lack of adequate power, lack of efficiency of the elected representatives etc. Despite the Panchayati Raj Institutions must be empowered to perform as a real grass root government to establish social justice in the rural areas of the state. In this paper an analysis has been made about the role of the Panchayati Raj Institutions for the political empowerment the rural peoples of Assam.

**Keywords:** Democracy, decentralization, Panchayati Raj Institution, empowerment, rural, grass root, government etc.

### Introduction

Democratic Decentralization is the process of devolution of functions and resources of the state from the centre to the grass root levels so as to facilitate greater direct participation of citizens in governance. It implies that government functions are formally assigned by law to local body, backed by adequate transfer of financial power and given staff necessary to carry out their responsibilities. It makes democracy strong. It also gives power to the people. It is effective because development starts from Bottom to Top instead of Top to Bottom. The Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) is the mechanism of democratic decentralization in India. The PRI's are the Government at the Village Level giving Political, Administrative and Financial Power. It is noteworthy that in India the process of democratic decentralization is based on Gandhiji's philosophy of Gram Swaraj. "Gram Swaraj" means village self-rule which was the dream of Gandhiji. According to Gandhiji, India lives in villages. The fundamental concept of Gram Swaraj is that every village should be seen as a self-sufficient republic, depending on the neighbors only if necessary. For Gandhiji, true independence for India meant a comprehensive transformation of Indian society and polity on the line of Gram Swaraj. Gandhiji preached that the State in India would never be pyramidal where the villages at the bottom sustain the apex. There should be a true bottom-up approach.

After independence, the Article 40 of the constitution of India stated that "The state shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government." Thus, the constitution gives responsibility of PRI in India to the states. Accordingly, the States have constituted PRI's in their own discretions. Thus, the PRI in India is lacking uniformity. In 1957 the Government of India appointed a committee under the chairmanship of M.P.

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Balwantrai Mehta, known as the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee to examine the work of the Community Development Programme (1952) and the National Extension Service (1953), to suggest measures to improve their work. The committee recommended the establishment of the scheme of 'democratic decentralization'. The recommendations of the committee regarding democratic decentralization are:

- a) It recommended for administrative decentralization for effective implementation of development programme.
- b) The decentralized administrative system should be under the control of the elected bodies.
- c) Regarding the administrative structure, the committee recommended for a three tier structure- the village panchayat, the block panchayat samiti and Zila parishad
- d) There should be genuine transfer of power and responsibility to the panchayats
- e) Adequate resource should be transferred to these bodies to discharge their responsibility.

The Government of India accepted the recommendations of the committee and directed the states to enact legislations by the states to set up the PRI of its own according to the local needs and conditions of the state. The recommendation of the committee was first implemented by the Rajasthan in 1959. Finally in 1992, the Government of India gives constitutional status to the PRI system through the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitution amendment Act. In this paper we will try to highlight the role of PRI in political empowerment of the rural people in Assam.

### Review of literature

The study about the process of democratic decentralization and the Panchayati Raj Institutions is a very popular subject among the academicians not only in India but throughout the world. It is an important subject of research among the researchers of the country. Many books, research papers have been published on this subject. In this study some of such published works are reviewed to gain background knowledge on the topic of this paper.

In the edited volume "Democratic Decentralization in India: Experiences Issues and Challenges" by E. Venkatesu (Ed.), 2016 discussed about various issues on decentralization arise in the states of India since the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution. B. P. Syam Roy in his chapter on 'Democratic Decentralization in West Bengal- A Devolution Perspective' mentioned that in almost all the states of India there is no true devolution of functional responsibilities even after the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitution amendment. Writer Javed Alam Khan also mentioned about limited autonomy of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the states of India. However, Avaneesh Maurya in his chapter mentioned about the positive impact of the reservation system in the Panchayati Raj Institutions through the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendment. He stated that the Dalit society in Uttar Pradesh is divided into various sub castes and there is inequality of power among them. But the reservations have united them into one group and have benefited the Dalit society as a whole. In some chapters of the book have discussed about the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act of 1996 in different contexts ranging from Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and North Eastern States of India. In these chapters it is stated that the PESA Act has a marginal impact on the tribal peoples of the concerned areas.

Aditya Bohra and Rachit Sharma (2015) in their research paper on "Panchayati Raj System in India: A Way Ahead" stated that since most of the people in India are living in the rural areas therefore it is necessary to extend democracy and good governance into the grass root level. They have argued that the PRI is the best way of democratic governance in rural India. But the PRI's in India are facing multi-faceted issues which affected the objectives of its constitution. They have pointed out that despite constitutional provisions the PRI's are not empowered to generate revenue for its functioning. As a result in most of the states in India the PRI's are remain dependent on the state governments. They are seems like an extended body of the state government but not as an autonomous governing institution even after having constitutional status. Moreover, many states in India are not transferring the administrative authority to the PRI's on all the 29 subjects as mentioned in the constitution. The authors have raised one important issue that in many cases, in functioning of the PRI's the local influential persons played important role over the elected representatives. The party politics have affected the PRI's in India.

National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR) published a case study in the title "A Case Study on Women Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) at the Gram Panchayat Level" where it presented the accomplishments of a young woman of the marginalized Schedule Caste (SC) community who was serving as the President of her Panchayat namely Soukni-da-Kot Panchayat, Dharamshala block of Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh. This study presented an example of success of a women leader in the PRI in her role despite the highly patriarchal and traditional social system prevalent in the region. The report highlighted the challenges faced by the leaders in the Panchayat. The report mentioned the challenges into different categories i.e. infrastructure challenges like poor road connectivity in the hill areas where many of them were dimly lit after dark making it unsafe to use, problem of access to clean water etc. The political challenges are like poor attendance by the villagers in the Gram Sabha, influence of party politics etc. Regarding social challenges the report mentioned about the gender discrimination, disagreement and conflict among the members of the community etc. The finding of the report is that the PRI is a very effective mechanism to empower the rural people especially the women. The reservation of seats for women in the PRI gives an opportunity to the women to participate in the political decision making at the grass root level. It gives opportunity to women to emerge as a leader and change-maker for development.

### Rational of the study

From the above literature survey it is understood that the scholars have discussed various issues pertaining to the PRI in India from different perspectives. Every study reveals new facts and issues which contribute to the growth of the PRI in India. In Assam more than 80% people are living in the rural areas. As per the census record there are 26637 villages in Assam. Except the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule areas in Assam i.e. Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (DHAC) and Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), the PRI's are constituted. Thus the PRI system is a very important constitutional mechanism mandated for rural development in Assam. Hence, the study about the functioning of the PRI system in

Assam is always relevant to gain the new knowledge about it as well as to enhance its effectiveness.

### Objectives of the study

- a) To understand the constitutional structure of the PRI in India
- b) To understand the working of the PRI in Assam as an instrument of rural development
- c) To highlight the role of PRI in political empowerment of the rural people in Assam.

### Methodology

The study is a descriptive and analytical based on the secondary sources of data. The data which were discussed in the study were collected from the published books, reports and research papers published in various journals. Most of the resources are accessed through the internet available in the various website.

### Analysis

#### The 73<sup>rd</sup> constitution amendment, 1992

During the time of enactment of the constitution of independent India, there was no detail provision in the constitution regarding the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Rather there was simply a directive in the Article 40 which states that “The states shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.” But it was the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment of 1992 which gives a detail constitutional mandate to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The main features of the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of the constitution are given below.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution inserted the Parts IX and IX-A in the Constitution. While Part IX relates to the Paanchayats, containing Articles 243 to 243-O, Part IX-A relates to the Municipalities, containing Articles 243-P to 243-ZG. This amendment also inserted the 11<sup>th</sup> Schedule in the constitution containing 29 subjects to be transferred to the PRIs.

### Features of PRI

- **Three tier system:** Part IX of the constitution envisages a three-tier system of Panchayats i.e. Gram Panchayat at village level, the intermediate panchayat at the block level and the district level body at the top.
- **Election:** Part IX of the constitution provides that all the seats in a Panchayat shall be filled persons chosen by direct election.
- **Reservation of seats for ST, SC:** Article 243 D provides that seats are to be reserved for:
  - a) Scheduled castes
  - b) Scheduled tribes
 The reservation shall be in proportion to their population. Out of the seats so reserved, not less than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the seats shall be reserved for women belonging to S.C. and S.T. respectively
- **Women:** Not less than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the total number of seats to be filled by direct elections in every panchayat shall be reserved for women. State may by law make provision for similar reservation of the offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at the village and other levels also.
- **Terms of office:** The Act provided that every Panchayat shall have a term of 5 years from the date of

its first meeting. Election to be held before the expiry of the term. Panchayats can be dissolved before the completion of the term according to the provisions of the law enacted by the State Government. In such case election must be held within six months of its dissolution.

- **State election commission:** According to the Article 243 K of the constitution provides for the constitution of a State Election Commission to conduct, supervise and control of elections of the Panchayats.
- **State finance commission:** The Act provided for constitution of a Finance Commission by the state government. The Commission shall review the financial positions of the panchayats and shall make recommendations about the taxes, duties, tolls and fees may be assigned to the panchayats and also decides regarding grants-in-aid to the panchayats.
- **Powers and functions:** Regarding powers, authority and responsibilities of the Panchayats Article 243G & 243 H provided that Panchayats shall be entrusted with the responsibility of:
  - a) Preparing plans for economic development and social justice,
  - b) Implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice and
  - c) Executing matters listed in the 11<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the constitution.
 The 11<sup>th</sup> Schedule was inserted in the constitution by the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of the constitution which contains 29 subjects to be administered by the Panchayats. Thus the 11<sup>th</sup> Schedule distributes the powers between the state legislature and Panchayats.
- **District planning committee:** Article 243ZD and 243ZB provided for constitution of two Planning Committees by the State Government. Such Committees are - District Planning Committee (Art.243ZD); Metropolitan Planning Committee (Art.243ZB). In case of District Planning Committee at least 4/5<sup>th</sup> of the members shall be elected by the elected members of the district level Panchayat and of the Municipalities in the district from amongst themselves. The Committee shall prepare and forward the development plan to the State Government.
- **Gram sabha:** The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act provided for a meeting of all the adults (all the people in a village who are of whatever age and are registered as voters) who live in an area covered by a Panchayat is called a Gram Sabha. This could be only one village or few villages. The Secretary of the Gram Panchayat who is appointed by the Government is also the Secretary of the Gram Sabha. He is responsible for calling the meetings of the Gram Sabha and keep a record of the proceedings. The Gram Sabha prepares the plan of development for the Panchayats. It ensures the true grass root democracy by facilitating participation of each and every person in development planning process.

### Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) in Assam

Assam has a very strong historical background of local self-government. Assam was one of the pioneer States in India immediately after independence to enact Panchayat Act 1948 and establish Panchayati Raj Institution in the State. Subsequently the Act was amended and replaced by the



Assam Panchayat Act, 1959, the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1972, the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1986 and finally the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 which incorporated the provisions of the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 of the Constitution of India. The Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 received the assent of the Governor on the 22nd April 1994 and the first election was held in October 1996, for establishing a three-tier Panchayati Raj system in the State at the village, intermediate (Block level) and in district level (Zila Parishad). It is noteworthy that the Government of Assam through the Assam Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2011 made the provision for reservation of 50% seats for the women in all levels of the Panchayat. The present PRI in Assam is as follows-

Level	Name of PRI	Numbers	Representatives	Chairpersons
District Panchayat	Zila Parishad	27	420	27
Intermediate Panchayat	Anchalik Panchayat	185	2197	185
Village Panchayat	Gaon Panchayat	2197	24222	2201

### Significance of PRI in Assam in political empowerment of the rural people

- In Assam the PRI are constituted immediately after the dawn of independence. This effort of decentralization is the largest experiment in deepening democracy in Assam. Especially after the introduction of the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment Act the political participation of women in the political process of the state has been increased remarkably. In every Panchayat election a large numbers of voters are casting their vote in the state. In 2018 PRI election in the state the voting percentage was 78% and in the latest PRI election the voting percentage was 74%. It shows the interest of the people towards the PRI in the State. It has increased the political awareness of the voters especially in the rural areas of Assam.
- It ensures true democracy by the participation of all the sections of people in the governance. There are significant numbers of the SC and ST populations in Assam. Generally, these people are alienated from the political decision-making process of the state as their representation in the state legislature is very limited. The PRI includes all these sections of the people by the reservation of the seats. Through the PRI they got the opportunity to take part in the preparation of development plan as well as to implement such in an effective manner.
- In the State like Assam the PRI have a great political significance as it ensures true women empowerment by way of reservation of seats for women. It leads to the emergence of women leadership in the politics of the State. Earlier in the politics of the state women is getting very less opportunity to participate in the political decision-making process. In such a situation reservation of 50% seats in the PRI system of the state empowered women politically by ensuring their representation in the political decision-making process. The participation of the women in the electoral process have changed their status in the family as well as in the society. Now they are getting decision making power in the family as well as in the society.
- One of the great significance of the PRI in India in general Assam in particular is that it is an effective

mechanism to reach the real beneficiary by the Government. The PRI is connected with the people at the grass root level. Through the PRI the Government can reach to the people directly. Therefore, it can be said that the PRI establishes direct linkage between the government and the people. In Assam the PRI plays an effective role in implementation of the national welfare schemes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Pradhan Mantri Awas yojana (PMAY) etc.

- In Assam, the PRI transform the social system in a very significant way. It increases the role of the marginalized sections like women as well as the backward sections i.e. Schedule Tribe (S.T.) and Schedule Caste (S.C.) in the Assamese society. Like other parts in India, Assam also has a patriarchal society. Thus, there is always male domination in the family as well as society. The PRI increases the role of the women in the politics as well as in the society. It is observed that in rural areas of Assam, women are showed more interest to the panchayat election than the other elections. It is due to the 50% reservation of seats for the women in the every levels of the PRI. On the other hand the reservation of seats for the backward communities also politically empowered the people of those communities. Usually these people are socially and economically very backward in Assam as compared to the other sections of the people. Therefore, their participation in the development process is necessary to establish justice in the freater Assamese society. The opportunity given by the PRI by way of reservation is a moral boosting for the women as well as the backward communities (S.C. & S.T.) of Assam.

### Challenges

From the above analysis it is understood that the PRI in Assam is an important mechanism for the political empowerment of the rural peoples of Assam. Though the Governments in Assam took various steps to execute the Panchayati Raj system in the state yet it is suffering from many shortfalls which affected its credibility as an institution of grass root democracy. Some of its shortfalls of the PRI in Assam are discussed below:

- **Lack effective leadership:** As it is already discussed that Assam is a pioneering state in India to introduce PRI. Accordingly, after the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of the constitution, the Assam government constituted the PRI as per the provisions of the constitution. But the functioning of the PRI is not so effective as compared to the other states of India due to lack of effective leadership of the elected representatives of the PRI. In many cases the elected representatives don't have the sufficient knowledge about the constitutional provisions as well as the PRI. The PRI elections are dominated by the party politics of the states. The influential leaders of the political parties decide about the candidates in the panchayat elections and subsequently they influence the working of the elected party workers. On the other hand, although the women are getting elected due to reservation of the seats, they are not taking actual decisions of their official functions. Rather they are guided by their male guardians or party leaders. In such a situation, the whole purpose of the PRI is being affected.

- **Lack of power:** The experts in rural development have argued that the PRI in Assam is lacking the real political and administrative power. The state government still not transferring the legislative power over all the 29 subjects given to the PRI by the 11<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the constitution. Rather they have to follow the law and administrative orders given by the state government over those subjects. Moreover, the PRI don't have any administrative authority over the departments aligned with the developmental work to be implemented through PRI. As a result they cannot ensure the efficiency and accuracy of the developmental works. In such a situation the PRI's are merely a formal mechanism instead of a real grass root administration.
- **Insufficient funding:** Financial constraints also affected the functioning of PRI in Assam. Despite the provisions in the constitution the powers to collect revenue by the PRI is not yet transferred by the state government. The PRI in Assam are simply implementing the schemes undertaken by the State or Central Government. The PRI cannot undertake development schemes as they don't have the financial power. Thus the PRI in Assam are merely functioning as a department of Central and State Government.
- **Corruption:** Corruption is a big issue at every level of government in India. The PRI in Assam is also no exception. There is allegation of misuse of funds sponsored by the central and state government by the PRI. It is also alleged that the elected representatives are involved in corrupt practices in selecting beneficiaries of the central or state government sponsored schemes.

### Suggestions

From the above analysis it can be said that though the PRI in Assam are affected by many shortfalls yet no one can deny the role of PRI in strengthening grass root democracy in the state. Therefore, the PRI should be strengthened to establish strong grass root democracy in the state. Following points can be considered to strengthen the PRI in Assam.

- Adequate power should be transferred to the PRI.
- There should be provision for mandatory training to the elected representatives of PRI.
- Adequate funds should be transferred.
- Adequate transfer of authority as per the provisions of the constitution to make PRI a "real self-governing mechanism instead of delivery mechanism".
- PRI election should be free from the party politics

### Conclusion

The success of any scheme or programme depends on a number of factors like, how best the schemes are operationally conceived, how best the schemes are actually perceived by the personnel who implement them and how best it is actually understood by the beneficiaries. PRI is a very useful mechanism to bridge the gap between the Government at the centre or state and the people at the grass root level. Now the need of the hour is to recognize the capacity of the people at the grass root level. The people at the grass root level can contribute a lot towards the good governance. Many scholars have argued that the maladies in the existing administrative system can be set right with the

participation of the people at the grass root level. The PRI is important to solve the local problems effectively as well as to establish justice with the participation of the local people.

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