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Revitalizing Gram Sabha in India- Higher Quorum and Shared Responsibility for Informed Participation

Dr. Vikas Jha¹ & Nasir Hussain²

Introduction: Gram Sabha in the National Context

Gram Sabha is the foundation of the Panchayati Raj system as envisaged under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The Amendment mandates that the Gram Sabha shall exercise functions related to planning, consideration of budgets and income and expenditure, and scrutiny of schemes and activities of the Gram Panchayat.

Across India, organizing Gram Sabha meetings and ensuring meaningful participation has remained a challenge. While some states have demonstrated relatively better performance, many others struggle with low attendance, limited awareness, and weak follow-up on development priorities. In this national landscape, recent reforms in Haryana offer an instructive example of how states are attempting to strengthen participatory local governance.

Haryana as an Example: Panchayati Raj Amendment, 2025

To enhance people's participation, the Government of Haryana amended the Panchayati Raj Act in 2025, raising Gram Sabha quorum requirements to 40% for the first meeting, 30% for the second meeting, and 20% for the third meeting. This change is commendable, as it seeks to motivate citizens to take a lead role in local development. At the same time, community mobilization requires sustained efforts by Gram Panchayats with active support from the state government. High quorum and participatory local governance are two sides of the same coin, and both must be strengthened simultaneously.

Lessons from States with Strong Gram Sabha Practices

States such as Kerala and Sikkim have been relatively successful in organizing Gram Sabha meetings due to coordinated efforts of Gram Panchayats, women's Self-

Help Groups (SHGs), and proactive state support.

In Kerala, Kudumbashree—the Kerala Poverty Eradication Mission—and Community Development Societies mobilize people for Gram Sabha meetings. Neighborhood groups prepare village poverty reduction plans that are presented in the Gram Sabha. Kudumbashree also functions as an implementation partner in social security and livelihood programmes, thereby linking participation with tangible outcomes.

In Sikkim, a Gram Sabha meeting on the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) 2026–27 of Chalamthang Pacheykhani Gram Panchayat in January 2026 drew significant public turnout. The presence of the Panchayat President, senior officials, the Chief Medical Officer, the Block Development Officer, and line department representatives created an energized atmosphere. Villagers could voice concerns, offer suggestions, and seek clarifications directly from officials. The institutional presence enhanced credibility and seriousness.

National Mobilization Efforts: Gram Uday se Bharat Uday Abhiyaan

The Government of India launched the Gram Uday se Bharat Uday Abhiyaan in April 2016 to strengthen Panchayati Raj institutions and promote rural development. The campaign achieved high mobilization through coordinated efforts of Panchayat Secretaries, Sarpanches, National Rural Livelihood Mission staff, ASHAs, Anganwadi workers, and civil society organizations. Door-to-door visits, ward meetings, and public announcements significantly increased participation.

¹Principal Lead, Local Participation and Sustainability, S M Sehgal Foundation.

²Asst. Program Lead, Local Participation and Sustainability, S M Sehgal Foundation

However, subsequent local mobilization efforts by Gram Panchayats alone could not replicate this scale of engagement. These experiences indicate that progressive legislation must be backed by sustained, multi-stakeholder grassroots efforts.

People's Perception of Gram Sabha and Development Outcomes

To understand stakeholder perspectives, group discussions with villagers and interviews with Sarpanches were conducted in five Gram Panchayats in Nuh district, Haryana, in January 2026. While not representative statewide, the findings provide useful insights.

Villagers stated that development priorities included in the Gram Panchayat Development Plan were often not implemented, reducing their motivation to attend meetings. Many were unaware of the new legal provisions. At the same time, they acknowledged that Gram Sabha meetings gave them a sense that their presence “matters” and enabled access to information on schemes and beneficiary selection.

Villagers considered the new quorum norms a positive initiative. They felt higher participation would pressure Gram Panchayats and line departments to complete infrastructure works on time and improve quality, as public questioning would increase accountability. Larger gatherings could also provide space to discuss social issues and plan corrective actions, interactions that rarely occur otherwise.

Ward members showed uneven awareness of the amendment. Sarpanches were generally aware through official communication. They noted that villagers often raise extensive demands that cannot be fulfilled within short timeframes, and that the absence of visible benefits contributes to low participation. Migration and daily wage work further restrict attendance, especially among economically weaker sections.

Sarpanches felt that the amendment has increased pressure on Gram Panchayats and made mobilization more resource- and time-intensive. They suggested appointing one nodal officer for each Gram Panchayat to document concerns and forward them to relevant departments. The presence of government officials, they argued, would enhance seriousness.

However, many Sarpanches pointed out that achieving 40% quorum may be difficult in Haryana due to joint family structures, where attendance by one member is considered sufficient. Some felt that the earlier 10% quorum was more practical. They emphasized that mere physical presence does not ensure transparency; data

disclosure, explanations for unimplemented GPDP priorities, and monitoring of sanctioned works are equally critical. Gram Panchayats currently receive Rs 4,000 per Gram Sabha meeting for arrangements such as refreshments.

Development Priorities and Community Ownership

In Gram Sabha meetings held in two Panchayats in January 2026, villagers highlighted concerns regarding roads, wastewater management, solid waste disposal, cremation grounds, community halls, and safe drinking water. Responsibility for these issues was largely attributed to the Gram Panchayat and state government, while community-level initiatives were rarely discussed. Sanitation-related challenges particularly require community ownership. Influential local leaders, along with Gram Panchayats, should initiate regular sanitation drives to build a sense of collective responsibility. Without such ownership, mobilization risks remaining top-down and unsustainable.

Gram Sabha Meetings under the New Quorum Norms

In January 2026, three of the five selected Gram Panchayats were unable to meet the new quorum norms even after three attempts, while two managed to achieve 20% quorum in the third meeting. This reflects limited awareness, constrained mobilization capacity, and insufficient involvement of SHGs and line departments.

Shared Responsibility for Participatory Local Governance

The responsibility for organizing Gram Sabha meetings should not rest solely with Gram Panchayats. Active engagement of line departments, SHGs, civil society institutions, and state-level campaigns is essential. Legislative reform must be complemented by policy support and sustained mobilization.

Higher quorum norms may serve as a catalyst but are not sufficient in isolation. Participatory local governance depends on: (i) Institutional coordination, (ii) Data transparency and accountability, (iii) Follow-up action on GPDP priorities, (iv) Community ownership of development and sanitation initiatives and (v) Inclusion of migrant and absent Gram Sabha members through legally enabled virtual participation

Haryana's amendment contributes meaningfully to the national discourse on strengthening Gram Sabhas. The broader lesson for India is clear: numerical participation must be matched by institutional responsiveness, transparency, and sustained collective effort. Only then can the Gram Sabha function effectively as the foundation of grassroots democracy.

IN THIS ISSUE ...

The Sixteenth Finance Commission report was tabled in Parliament earlier this month. Read on about the allocation of grants to panchayats including among other key recommendations, linking local body performance component to growth in own source revenue, for grant eligibility. Recent developments in the rural local governance landscape in India reflect its commitment to building on its institutional strengths and highlighting self-reliance. Find out how panchayats are undergoing rapid digital evolution through means of various initiatives like the launch of PANCHAM chatbot, digital Aadhaar services and the digital preservation of tribal cultural heritage. Also read about various benchmarks achieved by panchayats across the country like excelling in PESA rankings or the National Panchayat Index, increasing space for more accountability and excellence at grassroots level.

Promoting Grassroots Excellence

Tripura tops national panchayat index, sets benchmark in grassroots governance

Tripura's panchayats have achieved a remarkable feat by earning the first rank in the Panchayat Advancement Index (PAI) 2.0. This achievement highlights the state's commitment to strengthening governance and service delivery at the village level. Tripura stands as an example for other states as it achieved 100% data submission and verification across levels, showcasing exceptional standards of decentralized governance. Tripura's success brings forward its commitment to placing panchayats at the forefront of local development and participatory governance.

PESA Rankings

Maharashtra stood first among the ten states with Fifth Schedule Areas, in the PESA ranking released last month. The other front runner states are Madhya Pradesh followed by Himachal Pradesh. The states of Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Telangana come next under the performer category. The PESA rankings are a measure of the performance of the states on mutually agreed indicators that were formally released during the PESA Mahotsav in December 2025. The 100-point indicators assess implementation across key domains envisaged under the Act.

Capacity-Building Series on consumer rights for Gram Panchayats

To strengthen consumer awareness and protection mechanisms at the local level, a nation-wide virtual capacity building program for gram panchayats was convened this month. This is second in the series of capacity building measures, the first one conducted in 2024-25. Organized by the Department of Consumer Affairs (DoCA) in collaboration with the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, the initial interactions were with the states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa. During the interactive sessions, various stakeholders were sensitized on key consumer rights, emerging consumer issues and institutional mechanisms available for grievance redressal. It further highlighted panchayats as important actors in promotion of consumer rights, reducing unfair trade practices and enabling access to grievance platforms like the National Consumer Helpline

and the e-Jagruti Portal. The sessions were conducted in regional languages to ensure clear understanding and meaningful engagement by participants. The programme has fostered the building of a more informed and empowered rural consumer base.

Transforming waste into resources

Gram panchayats in Uttar Pradesh are propelling innovative and environment-friendly developmental initiatives. Villages in multiple districts are undertaking new experiments such as road construction from plastic waste, generation of income through compost production and door-to-door waste collection. In accordance with the Master Plan for waste management, door-to-door waste collection and vermicompost production have already started. These along with the plastic waste management units have aided substantial revenue generation. In addition, using plastic waste, 75 kms of road were constructed in the districts of Lucknow, Rampur, Amethi, Lalitpur, and Etah.

Panchayat Finances

Sixteenth Finance Commission: grants to rural local governments

The Sixteenth Finance Commission has recommended an allocation of Rupees 4,35,236 crores as grants for rural local governments for the award period spanning 2026-27 to 2030-31. The grants are classified into basic and performance-based components in the ratio of 80:20. The performance-based grant is further sub-divided into two equal halves comprising the rural local body performance component and the state performance component. Three eligibility conditions have been recommended before any local body grant is awarded: a duly constituted body in place as required in Part IX and Part IXA of the constitution; publication of provisional and audited accounts of the rural and urban local bodies of the state; and, constitution of State Finance Commission (SFC) and ATRs to be tabled in the state legislature within six months of submission of SFC report. While the basic component grant is recommended to be made available to the states on fulfilling these three eligibility conditions, the qualifying condition for the local body performance component is linked to own source revenue growth as specified by the Commission.

Collection of property tax via SAMARTH portal

Recently, the Dhamtari district of Chhattisgarh became

the first in the country to initiate online tax collection through the SAMARTH Panchayat portal. This initiative was launched in the Sankara gram panchayat in Nagri block. The portal permits rural residents to pay taxes from the comfort of their homes, helps in streamlining panchayat administrative processes and reducing pending arrears. After successful implementation in Dhamtari, the online system is in works to be expanded further across the state according to officials. This move marks a significant stride towards making panchayats technology-driven and self-reliant.

Technological Innovations in Panchayats

Aadhaar services launched in UP Gram Panchayats

In a significant step towards ensuring easy citizen access to services, Aadhaar services were successfully launched in Bhatganwan Pandey and Sairpur gram panchayats in Lucknow, by the Panchayati Raj Department, Uttar Pradesh. This digital provision has become a boon to the people who otherwise would have had to travel far to cities for Aadhaar-related services. The department plans to launch the services in more than 1,000 gram panchayats of the state in the first phase. This will be progressively expanded to all 57,694 gram panchayats. Additionally, a comprehensive training programme is being organised by the Panchayati Raj Department for panchayat assistants for effective implementation of the scheme, with 800 panchayat assistants already been covered under this initial training.

Launch of PANCHAM-Panchayat Assistance & Messaging Chatbot

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj in collaboration with UNICEF has launched the Panchayat Assistance and Messaging Chatbot, PANCHAM. The chatbot is aimed to create a direct digital connection between government and over 30 lakh panchayat functionaries by providing timely and contextual guidance, easier access to information and streamlined workflows to assist in routine governance and service delivery tasks. The user interface for PANCHAM is delivered through WhatsApp which is familiar and easily accessible to the panchayat elected representatives and functionaries. The language-tool BHASHINI is also integrated with the chatbot to widen the reach for representatives who can interact with the bot in their preferred local language. PANCHAM is envisaged as a digital companion tool that will help in broadcasting updates, circulars, letters directly to PRIs as byte-sized messages easy to understand, address FAQs through a dedicated Chatbot, disseminate short training modules (30-50 seconds) on diverse topics as video links to PRIs, among others. Currently, PANCHAM has been availed by around 18 lakh panchayat representatives. By reducing the need for intermediaries, PANCHAM would pave the way for swifter decision-making and real-time resolution of ground-level issues making grassroots governance more responsive and accountable.

E-learning and Digital libraries in panchayats of Pilibhit district

In a step towards making quality education more accessible and equitable, the Uttar Pradesh state government is implementing an initiative where digital libraries would be set up in each of the 720 village panchayats in Pilibhit district. These libraries are to be established at existing spaces in panchayat bhawans. Each library is to have two computers and e-books of the NCERT syllabus for classes 6-12, in addition to other books. The initiative will be launched in a phased manner, initially starting with 113 village panchayats where digital libraries are intended to be established by 31st March, 2026. Officials have been directed to ensure proper facilities like safe drinking water and lighting, and adequate maintenance of hygiene. Village heads, assistant development officers and panchayat secretaries are to ensure compliance. Proper implementation of this initiative can help foster a tech-driven, eco-friendly and cost effective way of disseminating quality education in gram panchayats.

Documentation and digital preservation of tribal heritage

"*Meri Parampara – Meri Virasaat*", is an initiative aimed at documentation and digital preservation of the cultural heritage of tribal communities in scheduled areas. It includes folk songs, festivals, worship practices, oral traditions, art forms, and customary governance systems. Supported by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, the initiative is implemented in collaboration with state governments. This year's effort has been taken up by the government of Chhattisgarh, the first one having been launched by the Department of Panchayati Raj, Government of Jharkhand in January 2025. Two key themes formed the focus of the brain storming session on *Meri Parampara – Meri Virasaat* held this month: documentation and digital preservation of tribal cultural heritage in scheduled areas of Chhattisgarh and finalization of the implementation framework for execution of the project. The event also included a presentation on the upgradation of *Mera Gaon Mera Dharohar* (MGMD) portal under the National Mission of Cultural Mapping. Under this initiative, the gram sabha has been adopted as the primary platform for village level cultural documentation ensuring systematic data collection and validation through gram sabha meetings across the panchayats.

AI-enabled grassroots governance solutions at India AI Impact Expo

AI enabled solutions developed to strengthen grassroots governance, administrative efficiency and accountability were the key highlights showcased by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) in the India AI Impact Summit that took place from 16th-20th February, 2026. The MoPR pavilion presented live demonstrations of AI-enabled platforms such as *Sabha Saar*, a tool that facilitates AI-enabled recording, transcription

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Artificial Intelligence Enabled Panchayats: Next Frontier

Dr. Polly Datta*

The India AI Impact Summit (16–20 February 2026) held in New Delhi marked a strategic inflection point in India’s development trajectory. Anchored around the pillars of *People, Planet and Progress* and guided by the principle of “AI for All,” the Summit emphasized that Artificial Intelligence must generate measurable, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable outcomes. For Panchayats—the constitutional foundation of decentralized governance—this vision opens unprecedented opportunities, while simultaneously posing structural and institutional challenges.

AI as a Governance Multiplier at the Grassroots

Panchayats, especially Gram Panchayats (GPs), are the closest governance institutions to citizens. AI, if embedded thoughtfully, can transform planning processes, public service delivery, monitoring systems, and participatory decision-making.

1. Education and Human Capital Development

The Bharat EduAI Stack developed by Indian Institute of Technology Madras offers AI-driven personalized tutoring and teacher support systems. Since Panchayats oversee primary education through Village Education Committees, AI-based learning analytics can help identify learning gaps, monitor attendance trends, and support evidence-based interventions. However, the effectiveness of such integration depends on digital infrastructure, teacher preparedness, and local ownership.

2. Linguistic Inclusion in Scheduled Areas

“Adi Vaani,” developed by Indian Institute of Technology Delhi in collaboration with BITS Pilani and IIIT Hyderabad, enables real-time translation between Hindi, English, and several tribal languages. For Panchayats operating under PESA in tribal-dominated regions, such tools can enhance inclusivity, facilitate communication, and strengthen the capacity of elected representatives. Yet challenges of awareness, device penetration, and digital trust must be addressed before these tools can become routine governance instruments.

3. Climate and Disaster Governance

AI-powered predictive models for climate adaptation and disaster management align with Panchayat-level instruments such as District Environment Plans (DEP), Local Climate Action Plans (LCAP), and Panchayat Disaster Management Plans (PDMP). Integration with platforms like Gram Manchitra and geo-tagging initiatives supported by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj can enable data-driven planning and real-time monitoring of assets. This would strengthen environmental governance and resilience planning at the grassroots.

4. Natural Resource Management

The Community-Oriented Resource Empowerment

(CoRE) Stack developed by Indian Institute of Technology Delhi demonstrates how AI can support participatory natural resource planning. By combining community-level data with scientific modeling, Panchayats can improve watershed management, land-use planning, and sustainable resource allocation.

Institutional Convergence: The Missing Link

The policy architecture for academia–rural engagement already exists through Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA), which mandates technical institutions to adopt villages and establish UBA Cells. However, experience suggests that technology institutions often find it institutionally and culturally challenging to engage directly with rural communities and Panchayats. Faculty and researchers may excel in technological innovation but may lack sustained field presence, participatory methodologies, and socio-political contextual understanding required for grassroots engagement.

This is where social science and development institutions can play a catalytic role. Social institutes possess field networks, participatory research expertise, and long-standing engagement with Panchayats and community institutions. They understand local governance dynamics, social hierarchies, behavioral constraints, and institutional bottlenecks.

Therefore, a structured joint research and action framework between technology institutes (IITs, IIITs, NITs, IISERs) and social institutes can significantly enhance AI integration in Panchayat governance. Technology partners can design AI tools; social institutes can contextualize, pilot, facilitate adoption, and evaluate impact. Panchayats, in turn, become co-creators rather than passive recipients of innovation.

Such tripartite collaboration—Technology Institute + Social Institute + Panchayat—can:

- Translate AI prototypes into locally usable governance tools
- Build digital literacy and institutional capacity
- Ensure ethical data governance and community consent
- Generate evidence for policy scaling

Without this bridging mechanism, even the most sophisticated AI solutions risk remaining confined to demonstration projects rather than becoming embedded in routine Panchayat functioning.

Structural and Operational Challenges

Despite the promise, several constraints persist: (i) *Digital*

* Senior Researcher, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi.

Divide: Inadequate broadband connectivity, limited hardware access, and unreliable electricity remain systemic barriers, (ii) *Capacity Gaps*: Many Panchayat representatives lack exposure to data analytics, AI systems, and digital governance tools, (iii) *Dormant Institutional Mechanisms*: Several Centres for Rural Development and Technology (CRDTs) and UBA Cells are not fully operational, weakening technology transfer pipelines, (iv) *Data Privacy and Governance Concerns*: Panchayats must be equipped with protocols to manage data securely and ethically, and (v) *Contextual Customization*: AI systems must reflect local socio-economic diversity rather than rely solely on generalized datasets.

The Way Forward

Drawing on lessons from the AI Impact Summit, recommended steps include establishing district/block-level AI facilitation cells, incorporating mandatory AI literacy into Panchayat training, and formalizing MoUs

between technology and social science institutes to support rural AI initiatives. Pilot AI projects should be launched in select Gram Panchayats with clear metrics, financial incentives provided under central schemes for AI-driven governance, and community input ensured through Gram Sabhas for effective deployment.

Conclusion

Artificial Intelligence has the potential to make Panchayats data-driven, transparent, and outcome-oriented. However, technology alone cannot transform governance. Institutional mediation, contextual understanding, and participatory engagement are indispensable. By fostering collaborative partnerships between technology institutes and social institutes, India can ensure that AI innovations showcased in national forums translate into tangible improvements in local governance and rural service delivery. Only through such integrated approaches can AI truly become an instrument of inclusive and sustainable rural transformation.

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and automated preparation of structured minutes of Gram Sabha meetings, PRAMAN, a tool that uses image analytics for automated validation and quality checks of asset photographs under different schemes, and eGram Saathi a tool that provides real-time information support

to the citizens as well as panchayat officials. Additionally, a Nukkad Natak titled, "Sarpanch ki Chaupal, AI ka Kamaal" was also showcased at the summit, depicting how Gram Sabha functioning can be strengthened through AI with the help of structured documentation.

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UPI ID: instituteofss@idfcbank

Coordinating Team : Prof. Ranbir Singh, Dr. Dinoo Anna Mathew, Sanjai Sharma, and Ms. Eshana Wahi

PANCHAYATI RAJ UPDATE

Institute of Social Sciences

8 Nelson Mandela Road
New Delhi - 110 070
Phone: 011-20904308

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