



RESEARCH ARTICLE

GANDHI'S CONCEPT OF GRAM SWARAJ AND ITS RELEVANCE IN STRENGTHENING PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Jiarul Miah

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 27th March, 2026
Received in revised form
24th April, 2026
Accepted 25th May, 2026
Published online 30th June, 2026

Keywords:

Gram Swaraj, Gandhi, Panchayati Raj,
Decentralization, Rural Governance,
Democracy.

*Corresponding author: Jiarul Miah

Copyright©2026, Jiarul Miah. 2026. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Jiarul Miah, 2026. "Gandhi's Concept of Gram Swaraj and Its Relevance in Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions in Contemporary India". *International Journal of Current Research*, 18, (06), 37548-37550.

ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi's idea of Gram Swaraj basically sits at the center of conversations around democratic decentralization and rural administration in India, even now. Gandhi imagined villages that are almost self-contained, self run in a way where people are not just spectators but the real holders of power. In his view this whole thing builds a democratic society in a more organic way. The thrust of the concept is political devolution, economic steadiness from within, social parity and governance that involves people in a real and steady manner. Even though India later adopted the Panchayati Raj system, the one meant to push local self government, still quite a lot of hurdles keep showing up and they limit how well it works on the ground. In this article, Gram Swaraj is looked at again, and its usefulness for strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions or PRIs, in today's India is assessed too. The work draws from secondary material—books, journal articles, government documents and relevant constitutional clauses. Overall, the results point to the fact that Gandhian thinking can still act like useful direction, for instance to deepen grassroots democracy, widen local involvement, improve social justice and also help reach rural development that stays long term and doesn't fade quickly.

INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi kinda holds this unique position in India's political and social thinking. His understanding of India was very deeply connected with village life and he saw that as the backbone of the whole country. He also thought that India's progress should not really lean on centralized institutions alone, but more on village communities that are empowered and can basically govern themselves. What Gandhi called Gram Swaraj was meant to create semi self sufficient village republics, where people take part in choices and in a collective way handle local business (Gandhi, 1948). After independence the Indian government actually acknowledged the relevance of local self-government, so it introduced the Panchayati Raj system as a method for democratic decentralization. Then, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992 made Panchayati Raj Institutions even stronger by giving them constitutional status, and by clearly laying down their powers along with their functions (Government of India, 1992). Still, even with these changes there are ongoing issues like bureaucratic domination, financial dependence, corruption and citizen involvement that stays rather limited, which makes local governance less effective in practice. So in this setting Gandhi's Gram Swaraj is still very relevant today. His views give some useful guidance on how to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions and how to support real grassroots democracy

that actually works. This article will, in that sense, look into the philosophical roots of Gram Swaraj and also evaluate how significant it remains for contemporary rural governance.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- To examine the idea of Gram Swaraj of M.K. Gandhi.
- To analyze the relationship between Gram Swaraj and Panchayati Raj System.
- To assess the relevance of Gandhian principles in contemporary local governance.
- To identify measures for strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions through Gandhian ideals.

METHODOLOGY

The work is of descriptive and analytical kind. It is completely based on secondary data and author has gone through various books, journal articles, Government reports, constitutional documents and other scholarly pieces of work available on concepts of Gandhi and Panchayati raj institutions. The literature available on Gram Swaraj has been reviewed and analyzed.

Gandhi's Concept of Gram Swaraj: "Gram Swaraj" is a Sanskrit word that translates as village self-rule or village governance. Gandhi conceptualized an ideal society in which each village would be a fully sovereign and self-governing republic. Gandhi (1948: 45) believed that Swaraj, or self-rule, could not be attained until the masses had been empowered and enabled to rule at the grassroots level. Gandhi said of Gram Swaraj that it would be based on the idea that democracy should be rooted in the village. He added that democracy should be firmly rooted in villages and the power should go from the lower level to the higher and not vice versa. Every village should have the capacity to settle and decide on issues related to its administration, welfare and development on its own (Gandhi, 1962). The concept was not merely about the decentralization of political power, but also about the economic independence, social harmony, moral fabric and ecological sustainability of a village community (Mishra & Singh, 2011).

Major Features of Gram Swaraj

Decentralization of Power: Decentralization: Among the most vital characteristics of Gram Swaraj is decentralization. Gandhi was very much against monopolization of political power by a few individuals or institutions. According to him, local communities were in a better position to understand their problems (Gandhi, 1948). Decentralized governance would provide higher accountability, transparency and make governments more responsive.

Participatory Democracy: Gandhi felt that in a true democracy everyone should participate in decision making rather than in voting once in every three or four years and having nothing more to do with it. Everyone should have the opportunity to participate in decision-making affecting their lives. This would induce a sense of responsibility and ownership (Gandhi, 1962).

Economic Self-Reliance: Economic sustainability was a key aspect of Gram Swaraj. Gandhi supported the development of village industries, agriculture, traditional arts and crafts and self reliance at village level. He felt that rural areas should be encouraged to generate employment domestically by minimizing the investment in cities (Mishra and Singh, 2011).

Social Justice and Equality: The ideal village was to be completely abolished of the caste system, castes and untouchability that divided societies. Gram Swaraj was to ensure that all citizens had equal rights and opportunities regardless of their social caste, status or profession. Gram Swaraj aimed at creating an integrated socially equal society (Narayan, 2000).

Ethical Governance: Another key feature of the Gram Swaraj was the moral and ethical leadership. Gandhi advocated honesty, truth, non-violence, and service to the public as foundational principles for governance. He said that in a Gram Swaraj "the public officials have to be the servants of the people and not their Masters" (Gandhi, 1948).

Panchayati Raj Institutions in India: The Panchayati Raj system is a reflection of the liberal shift towards democratic decentralization and local self-government in India. The recommendations of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee in 1957 contributed to the foundation of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

The committee recognized the importance of local voices in the development administration and suggested the establishment of a three-tier system of governance (Maheshwari, 2018). Another landmark step in the growth of Panchayati Raj was the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992. The step accorded constitutional recognition to Panchayats and introduced a common administrative and constitutional framework for local rural governance across the nation (Government of India, 1992). The constitutional amendment, introduced several groundbreaking provisions such as election every five years, reservation of seats for women and SCs/STs, constitution of State Finance Commissions and modernizing Gram Sabhas. All of this aimed at encouraging grassroots level democracy (Jain, 2019).

Relationship between Gram Swaraj and Panchayati Raj: The Panchayati Raj system of governance is based on many of the ideals set out in Gandhian Gram Swaraj concept. Both are based on principles of decentralization, local regulation of resources, popular participation and development of the community. While Gandhian Gram Swaraj is a philosophical ideal, the institutions of Panchayati Raj serve as the structural instruments of democratic decentralization. The Gram Sabha (Gram is the Hindi word for village) comprising all the adult members of the village population, is instituted to closely parallel Gandhian Gram Swaraj. It conducts issues of local significance, approves development activities, keeps check on the working of elected representatives and oversees services to the community (Mathur, 2013). The Panchayati Raj system also protects the Gandhian paradigm of rural development and popular participation through promoting local community development. The constitutional initiative was aimed at providing the means to transform the traditionally passive village society into active components of development.

Contemporary Relevance of Gram Swaraj

Strengthening Grassroots Democracy: Today democratic governance also means people's participation and accountability. Gandhi's thrust on participation of the people in governance is still relevant in invigorating of Panchayati Raj Institutions. An increased role of the citizens of Panchayat will increase transparency, accountability, reduce corruption and bring efficiency to the functioning of local government (Jain, 2019).

Promoting Inclusive Development: Despite high economic growth levels in the country large portions of the rural population continue to be unable to escape the vicious cycle of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and social exclusion. Gandhi's ideas on social justice and village welfare offer a ray of hope to address these issues. Panchayati Raj Institutions have the potential to ensure that development reaches the most excluded sectors of society (Narayan, 2000).

Enhancing Local Autonomy: Most Panchayats are still heavily relying on the State governments for funds and administrative back-up. The concept of self-generating villages as envisaged by Gandhi requires decentralization of powers of both finances and administration to make Panchayats more responsive to the local priorities of the village community (Maheshwari, 2018).

Sustainable Rural Development: Environmental sustainability has emerged as a new concern in the modern developmental discourse. The emphasis laid by Gandhi on simple living, local production and sustainable utilization of natural resources is significant for 'villagization of development'. Rural development policies should seek community-participation and village organizations such as panchayats, such as tools for promoting environmental consciousness and sustainable growth (UNDP, 2016).

Women's Empowerment: By reserving one-third and even in many states fifty percent of Panchayat seats for women, Indian local governance has begun to change. This move was in tandem with Gandhi's path toward gender justice and community empowerment through equal participation of women and men. It has led to better governance and more responsive community representation from women representatives (UNDP, 2016).

Challenges in Realizing Gram Swaraj: Despite the notable achievements of the Panchayati Raj Institutions there are various challenges still faced by these institutions. Panchayats face financial difficulties in executing various development programs. Excessive control by the bureaucrats has continued to impede local people's ability and unnecessarily delay processes (Maheshwari, 2018). Political influences and corruption have led to a loss of people's trust in these local institutions. There is generally poor attendance of Gram Sabha meetings thus curtailing people's participation. Social disparities based on caste, class and sex continue to affect local people's ability to shape government decisions in many areas (Singh, 2015). These reports show that realization of the Gram Swaraj remains a success still to be achieved.

Suggestions for Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions: In order to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions following Gandhian way, the following possible steps could be adopted. First, ensure more financial decentralization by empowering Panchayats with financial resources and powers to raise revenue. Second, take measures to strengthen Gram Sabhas and promote people's participation. Third, scale up transparency through social audits and provision of information; strengthen capacity-building of elected representatives; promote village industries, self-help groups and local enterprise; promote a culture of local self-rule based on moral values such as truthfulness, accountability and service.

CONCLUSION

The Gandhian notion of Gram Swaraj continues to be a compelling ideal for energising Panchayati Raj Institutions in India. It provides a framework for furthering such an agenda as participatory democracy, decentralised governance, economic self-sufficiency, social justice, and ethical leadership. Despite the progress achieved with the Panchayati Raj system subsequent to the passage of the 73 rd Constitutional Amendment Act, there remain several setbacks limiting its effectiveness. Gandhian principles being incorporated into local governance and public policy, India can build further on democratic decentralisation and further inclusive, sustainable, and participative development at the grassroots level.

REFERENCES

- Gandhi, M. K. (1948). *Village Swaraj*. Navajivan Publishing House.
- Gandhi, M. K. (1962). *The selected works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Vol. 6). Navajivan Publishing House.
- Government of India. (1992). *The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992*. Ministry of Law and Justice.
- Jain, R. B. (2019). *Public administration in India: 21st century challenges for good governance*. Sage Publications.
- Maheshwari, S. R. (2018). *Indian administration* (7th ed.). Orient BlackSwan.
- Mathur, K. (2013). *Panchayati Raj and rural governance in India*. Oxford University Press.
- Mishra, S. N., & Singh, S. S. (2011). *Rural development and Panchayati Raj*. Concept Publishing Company.
- Narayan, J. (2000). *Community and Panchayati Raj*. Rawat Publications.
- Singh, K. (2015). Panchayati Raj and democratic decentralization in India. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 61(3), 456–470.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2016). *Local governance and sustainable development in India*. UNDP India.
