Rethinking Gram Swaraj: Decentralisation and Village Governance in India

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Abstract— **Decentralization is frequently assessed through the transfer of functions, funds and functionaries from higher levels of government to local institutions. Yet the existence of elected local bodies and the formal assignment of responsibilities do not, by themselves, produce meaningful self-government. This article revisits the idea of Gram Swaraj as a normative and institutional resource for rethinking decentralized rural governance in India. It examines the relationship between Gandhian self-rule, historical traditions of village-level administration, the constitutional framework established by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, and the contemporary limitations of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs). It argues that the central challenge is not simply incomplete administrative devolution but a wider democratic legitimacy gap: statutory Panchayats possess legal authority, while a range of community institutions often possess local knowledge, networks of trust and social influence, yet the two frequently operate in parallel. Building on this diagnosis, the article advances an Institutional Pluralism Framework for Gram Swaraj. The framework proposes five mutually reinforcing dimensions of local autonomy political, fiscal, functional, socio-cultural and ecological and a model of accountable collaboration between elected Panchayats, Gram Sabhas and community-based organizations. It also cautions against romanticizing pre-modern village institutions, many of which were hierarchical and exclusionary. Drawing on constitutional provisions, historical scholarship and recent official evidence, including the 2024 Devolution Index, the article develops a conceptual and policy-oriented argument for a form of rural self-government that is constitutionally grounded, socially inclusive, ecologically responsible and democratically accountable. The article contributes to debates on decentralization by shifting the focus from devolution as a transfer of administrative responsibilities to self-government as the construction of legitimate, capable and plural local institutions.**

Index Terms— **Gram Swaraj; democratic decentralization; Panchayat Raj; institutional pluralism; local self-government; fiscal autonomy; Gram Sabha; community institutions; rural governance; India**

I. INTRODUCTION: BEYOND ADMINISTRATIVE DECENTRALIZATION

Decentralization has occupied a central place in debates on democratic governance, public administration and rural development. It is commonly justified on the grounds that decisions taken closer to citizens are more likely to reflect local priorities, improve service delivery, strengthen accountability and encourage participation. These expected benefits, however, are not automatic. Local institutions may remain dependent on higher governments for finance, personnel and approval; elected representatives may have limited discretion; and participation may be reduced to procedural consultation. The critical question is therefore not whether governance has been decentralised in formal terms, but whether authority, resources and the capacity to make consequential decisions have genuinely moved to the local level.

In India, the constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj Institutions through the Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992, marked a major institutional step in the evolution of rural local government. Part IX of the Constitution provides for elected Panchayats, regular elections, reservation of seats, State Finance Commissions and a framework through which state legislatures may devolve powers and responsibilities. Article 243G envisages Panchayats as institutions of self-government responsible for preparing plans for economic development and social justice and implementing entrusted schemes, including matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule. Article 243H enables state legislatures to authorise Panchayats to levy, collect and appropriate specified taxes, duties, tolls and fees.

The constitutional design is significant, but the extent of actual devolution remains dependent on state legislation, rules, administrative practice and political commitment.

The philosophical roots of local self-rule in India are often associated with Mahatma Gandhi's idea of Gram Swaraj. Gandhi's village was not merely a lower administrative unit. It was imagined as a community capable of governing important aspects of its collective life through participation, responsibility, self-reliance and cooperation. Gram Swaraj therefore raises a deeper question: can a village be considered self-governing when its elected institution has limited control over resources, staff and development priorities, or when significant community capacities remain outside formal decision-making?

This article argues that the contemporary debate must move beyond a narrow understanding of decentralisation as the downward transfer of government functions. It proposes that meaningful Gram Swaraj requires the development of an institutional ecosystem in which constitutionally elected Panchayats, Gram Sabhas and community-based organisations interact through transparent, inclusive and accountable arrangements. The article calls this approach Institutional Pluralism in Rural Governance. Institutional pluralism does not mean replacing elected local government with customary authority. Rather, it means recognising the diversity of institutions operating in village society while ensuring that public decisions remain subject to constitutional rights, democratic procedures and social accountability.

The article addresses four questions: (i) How can Gram Swaraj be interpreted as a contemporary theory of democratic self-government? (ii) What is the relationship between historical forms of village-level administration and modern Panchayati Raj? (iii) Why does constitutional decentralisation often fall short of substantive local autonomy? and (iv) How can statutory and community institutions be connected without weakening constitutional democracy or reproducing local hierarchies?

II. CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This is a conceptual and interpretive article based on a qualitative analysis of constitutional provisions, selected historical scholarship, Gandhian political thought and official policy documents on Panchayati Raj. It does not claim to report original fieldwork, a representative survey or a causal evaluation of Panchayat performance. Its method is analytical synthesis: first, it clarifies the normative meaning of Gram Swaraj; second, it examines the institutional trajectory of local governance; third, it identifies structural constraints on contemporary decentralisation; and finally, it develops a conceptual framework and policy propositions for further empirical testing.

The analysis distinguishes three kinds of claims. Constitutional claims are grounded in the text of the Constitution and relevant legislation. Historical claims are treated as context-specific interpretations rather than evidence of a uniform or timeless village republic. Contemporary claims about the extent of devolution are linked to official reports and should be read in light of their stated indicators and reference periods. This distinction is important because the language of ancient autonomy can otherwise become an idealised contrast to modern governance, obscuring historical inequalities and variations across regions.

Conceptually, the article draws on democratic decentralisation and local institutional analysis. Decentralisation can improve responsiveness only when local institutions possess meaningful authority, adequate resources, administrative capacity and mechanisms of accountability. Institutional diversity may add local knowledge and social reach, but it can also reproduce exclusion if influential groups dominate decision-making. The proposed framework therefore combines institutional collaboration with constitutional safeguards.

III. GRAM SWARAJ: SELF-RULE AS AN ETHICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL IDEAL

Gandhi's conception of Swaraj extends beyond the transfer of political power from colonial rulers to national elites. It involves the capacity of individuals and communities to exercise responsibility over their own affairs. In this sense, self-rule has both an inward and an institutional dimension: it requires self-discipline and ethical responsibility, but it also requires social and political arrangements through which people can participate in decisions that shape their lives.

Gram Swaraj locates the village at the foundation of democratic life. The village is envisaged as a community capable of addressing essential local needs, deliberating over shared concerns and cooperating with other communities. Self-reliance in this framework should not be interpreted as isolation or the rejection of wider interdependence. Rather, it is the capacity to make locally relevant choices while participating in wider networks of economic, political and social cooperation. This distinction is particularly important in contemporary rural India, where villages are linked to markets, migration networks, state welfare systems, digital infrastructures and ecological systems that extend beyond administrative boundaries.

A contemporary reading of Gram Swaraj can therefore be organised around four principles. First, subsidiarity: decisions should be taken at the lowest competent level, while higher levels provide support for tasks that require wider coordination or redistribution. Second, participatory agency: residents should have meaningful opportunities to shape priorities, scrutinise expenditure and evaluate public services. Third, ethical accountability: public authority should be exercised transparently and for the common good, with safeguards against domination by local elites. Fourth, cooperative interdependence: village autonomy should coexist with coordination across Panchayat, block, district, state and national institutions.

This interpretation avoids treating Gram Swaraj as a nostalgic blueprint. Its value lies in providing a normative standard against which contemporary institutions can be assessed: do they enable people to shape local priorities, control or influence relevant resources, hold decision-makers accountable and cooperate across social and ecological boundaries?

IV. HISTORICAL TRAJECTORIES: LOCAL INSTITUTIONS WITHOUT HISTORICAL ROMANTICISM

The history of local governance in the Indian subcontinent is diverse and cannot be reduced to a single model of autonomous village republics. Different periods and regions contained varied arrangements for revenue administration, irrigation management, dispute resolution, landholding, religious endowments and community organisation. Their powers and social composition changed over time and were shaped by wider political authority, property relations, caste, gender and regional institutions.

Texts such as the Arthashastra provide evidence of a differentiated administrative order in which village-level officials performed responsibilities within a larger state structure. Inscriptions and regional historical studies also document local assemblies, corporate bodies, temple institutions and arrangements for managing land and water in particular settings. Studies of South Indian history, including work on the Chola and Vijayanagara periods, demonstrate that local institutions could exercise important functions while remaining connected to royal authority, taxation systems and unequal social relations. Such evidence supports the argument that local governance has a long history, but it does not justify the claim that all ancient villages enjoyed comprehensive political, fiscal and administrative autonomy.

The Vijayanagara period is particularly useful for examining the relationship between local institutions and larger political systems. Temples could operate as religious, economic and social centres, managing endowments, land, irrigation-related resources and community activities. Village functionaries and local bodies contributed to administrative continuity. Yet these arrangements should not be equated with modern democratic local government: authority could be hereditary, status-based or embedded in unequal structures of landownership and social power.

The analytical lesson from history is consequently not that contemporary Panchayats should reproduce ancient institutions. It is that local governance has often depended on a combination of formal authority, community organisation, local knowledge and resource management. Modern democratic institutions can learn from the coordinating capacity and place-based knowledge of historical arrangements, while rejecting exclusionary practices and ensuring that authority is derived from constitutional and democratic principles.

V. CONSTITUTIONAL DECENTRALIZATION AND THE PANCHAYAT RAJ FRAMEWORK

Article 40 of the Constitution, located among the Directive Principles of State Policy, directs the state to organize village Panchayats and endow them with powers and authority necessary to function as units of

self-government. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) provided an important impetus to the institutional development of Panchayat Raj by recommending democratic decentralization through a three-tier structure. Subsequent state-level experiments and reforms produced uneven institutional arrangements.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which came into force in 1993, established a common constitutional framework for rural local government. It provides for Gram Sabhas, a three-tier Panchayat structure subject to specified exceptions, periodic elections, reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and not less than one-third of seats for women, State Election Commissions and State Finance Commissions. The Eleventh Schedule identifies 29 subjects that may be devolved to Panchayats. However, Article 243G is enabling in form: state legislatures are empowered to endow Panchayats with powers and responsibilities by law. The listing of subjects in the Eleventh Schedule should not be confused with an automatic, uniform transfer of all corresponding powers.

This constitutional architecture creates a democratic foundation, but it also leaves substantial discretion to state governments. The actual authority of a Gram Panchayat depends on the state-specific legal and administrative framework, the assignment of functions, control over functionaries, access to predictable funds and the discretion available in planning and expenditure. The result is a system in which the constitutional status of Panchayats is common, while the depth of operational autonomy varies across states.

The Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, 1996, adds a further dimension by recognising the importance of Gram Sabhas and customary practices in Scheduled Areas, subject to the statutory framework. PESA is relevant to the present argument because it illustrates that decentralisation in a diverse society cannot be designed solely through uniform administrative templates. At the same time, customary authority must be interpreted consistently with constitutional guarantees, individual rights and protections for vulnerable groups.

VI. THE CONTEMPORARY AUTONOMY DEFICIT: POLITICAL, FISCAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CONSTRAINTS

Political and functional autonomy

Political autonomy concerns the ability of elected local institutions and Gram Sabhas to deliberate and make decisions without arbitrary interference. Functional autonomy concerns whether Panchayats have clearly assigned responsibilities and the discretion to plan and implement them. In many settings, responsibilities are transferred in fragmented ways: Panchayats may be expected to implement schemes but lack control over programme design, technical approvals, relevant staff or the timing of funds. This produces a distinction between responsibility and authority. Where the local body is answerable for outcomes but cannot control the means of delivery, accountability becomes blurred.

A meaningful functional settlement requires activity mapping for each devolved subject. Such mapping should identify the specific responsibilities of Gram Panchayats, intermediate Panchayats, district Panchayats and line departments. It should also specify who controls budgets, technical approvals, assets, personnel and performance review. Without this clarity, overlapping mandates can create duplication, administrative delay and the displacement of elected local priorities by departmental instructions.

Fiscal autonomy

Fiscal autonomy is not synonymous with financial independence from the state. Local governments require a combination of own-source revenue, formula-based transfers, assigned revenues and grants. The key issue is whether resources are adequate, predictable and sufficiently flexible to permit local priority-setting. Heavy dependence on tied grants can narrow the space for local choices, while weak tax bases and limited revenue administration constrain own-source mobilisation.

Article 243H provides a constitutional basis for state legislatures to authorise Panchayats to levy and collect specified taxes, duties, tolls and fees, assign certain state revenues and provide grants-in-aid. Article 243I provides for State Finance Commissions to review the financial position of Panchayats and make recommendations. The effectiveness of these provisions depends on timely constitution of commissions, consideration and implementation of

recommendations, reliable transfer schedules and transparent fiscal reporting. Strengthening local revenue should also be designed with sensitivity to rural poverty and unequal fiscal capacity; revenue mobilisation must not impose disproportionate burdens on low-income households.

Administrative autonomy and capacity

Administrative autonomy concerns the ability of Panchayats to manage day-to-day functions and access the personnel and technical expertise needed to deliver services. In practice, staff may be appointed, transferred, supervised or paid through line departments, limiting the authority of elected representatives. Panchayats may also lack engineers, accountants, planning professionals, data personnel and social-sector expertise. Devolution without capacity can create an unfunded or unmanageable mandate; capacity-building without authority, by contrast, trains institutions to perform responsibilities over which they have little control.

The policy response must therefore link the transfer of functions to the transfer or assured provision of functionaries, operating funds, technical support and decision-making authority. Shared technical cadres at the block or cluster level may be useful where individual Gram Panchayats cannot sustain specialised staff. Such arrangements should be accountable to the Panchayat system and should not become another channel through which line departments bypass elected institutions.

Contemporary evidence

The Ministry of Panchayat Raj's report, Status of Devolution to Panchayats in States—An Indicative Evidence-Based Ranking, 2024, released in February 2025, assesses devolution across six dimensions: framework, functions, finances, functionaries, capacity enhancement and accountability. Official reporting indicates that the overall extent of devolution increased from 39.9 per cent in 2013–14 to 43.9 per cent in 2021–22. Karnataka ranked first among the general-category states in the reported ranking. These findings indicate progress, but also show that the devolution process remains incomplete. The index should be treated as an official comparative diagnostic rather than a direct measure of the lived quality of democracy in every village.

The evidence reinforces the central argument of this article: constitutional recognition and institutional expansion are necessary but insufficient. The quality of decentralisation depends on the substantive distribution of decision-making power, resources, personnel, capacity and accountability.

VII. THE DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY GAP: STATUTORY PANCHAYATS AND COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

Village governance is not conducted exclusively through statutory institutions. Alongside Gram Panchayats and Gram Sabhas, rural communities contain self-help groups, farmer organisations, water-user groups, youth associations, cultural organizations, temple or religious management committees, cooperatives, voluntary organisations and other community networks. Their roles vary considerably. Some mobilise voluntary labour, preserve cultural practices, transmit local knowledge, support welfare activities or organise collective action around common resources. Others may be informal, unrepresentative or exclusionary.

This institutional landscape creates what this article terms a democratic legitimacy gap. Panchayats derive legal authority from constitutional and statutory arrangements, elections and public mandates. Community organizations may derive social influence from trust, continuity, specialised knowledge, voluntary participation or customary recognition. Neither form of legitimacy is sufficient on its own. Legal authority without meaningful participation can become bureaucratic and distant; social influence without democratic safeguards can reproduce hierarchy, discrimination or opaque decision-making.

The gap is particularly visible where community institutions are active in areas such as water management, cultural life, local welfare and collective action, but have no regular, transparent channel for contributing to Panchayat planning. Conversely, Panchayats may possess formal responsibility for local development but fail to draw upon the knowledge and networks of groups already working in the village. The result is parallel institutional activity, missed opportunities for coordination and, at times, competing claims over authority.

The solution is not to incorporate every traditional body into the statutory structure or to treat all

customary institutions as legitimate representatives of the community. Instead, Panchayats should create open and issue-specific channels through which community organizations can contribute information, proposals and voluntary capacity. Participation should be based on transparent criteria, public disclosure, conflict-of-interest rules and the right of all residents to contest decisions. Organisations that discriminate on grounds prohibited by the Constitution, restrict participation or exercise coercive authority should not be granted public decision-making powers.

This approach also requires careful attention to gender and social inclusion. Women's self-help groups, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe organisations, landless workers, persons with disabilities, young people and minority communities must have meaningful opportunities to participate. A village institution cannot claim democratic legitimacy merely because it is longstanding or culturally influential. Its legitimacy must be tested against inclusion, accountability and constitutional rights.

VIII. AN INSTITUTIONAL PLURALISM FRAMEWORK FOR CONTEMPORARY GRAM SWARAJ

To address the autonomy deficit and democratic legitimacy gap, the article proposes an Institutional Pluralism Framework. The framework treats Gram Swaraj as an outcome of five mutually reinforcing dimensions of autonomy, supported by accountable relationships among public and community institutions. It is a conceptual proposition intended to guide policy design and future empirical research.

Dimension	Core question	Institutional requirement
Political autonomy	Who sets local priorities and makes public decisions?	Empowered Gram Sabha; elected Panchayat discretion; transparent deliberation and social audit.
Fiscal autonomy	Who controls and allocates the resources?	Predictable transfers, meaningful untied funds, fair own-source revenue powers and public budgets.
Functional autonomy	Who is responsible for which public functions?	Clear activity mapping, subsidiarity and defined intergovernmental responsibilities.
Socio-cultural autonomy	How are local knowledge, identities and community capacities recognised?	Inclusive consultation with community organisations, without delegating coercive or discriminatory authority.
Ecological autonomy	Who governs shared natural resources and long-term sustainability?	Participatory management of water, land, commons and biodiversity across relevant jurisdictions.

Political autonomy: from consultation to consequential participation

Gram Sabhas should function as deliberative forums rather than merely formal meeting requirements. They should be provided with accessible information before meetings, including proposed works, budgets, beneficiary criteria, progress reports and audit findings. Meeting schedules should accommodate women, wage workers, persons with disabilities and residents of remote habitations. Decisions and dissenting views should be recorded, and the Panchayat should publish a reasoned response to major proposals. This creates a traceable link between citizen deliberation and public action.

Fiscal autonomy: predictable resources and public choice

A reformed fiscal architecture should combine formula-based transfers with a protected component of untied funding for locally identified priorities. State Finance Commission recommendations should be tabled, considered and acted upon within a defined timetable, with public explanations for deviations. Panchayats should maintain accessible, standardized accounts and disclose expenditure at work and activity level. Own-source revenue systems should be strengthened through updated property and asset records, fair user charges where appropriate, improved collection systems and safeguards for poor households.

Functional autonomy: clear assignment and subsidiarity

States should prepare and periodically update activity maps for the 29 subjects in the Eleventh Schedule. For each function, the map should specify the decision-making authority, funding source, implementing agency, staffing arrangement and accountability

mechanism. The principle of subsidiarity should guide assignment: decisions should be located at the lowest level capable of performing them effectively, while technical support and inter-village coordination should be provided at higher levels where necessary.

Socio-cultural autonomy: collaboration with constitutional safeguards

Gram Panchayats may establish Village Institutional Consultation Forums as advisory platforms. Such forums could include representatives of self-help groups, farmer and water-user associations, youth groups, cultural organizations, cooperatives and other locally active bodies. Membership should be open, plural and periodically reviewed; representation should not be based solely on inherited status, caste authority, wealth or religious office. The forum should advise on community priorities and local knowledge, while statutory decisions, public expenditure and enforcement remain with legally authorized bodies.

Ecological autonomy: the village as a socio-ecological system

Local self-government must include the capacity to deliberate on ecological assets and risks. Water bodies, grazing lands, forests, soil, biodiversity and common property resources often cross household and administrative boundaries. Panchayat planning should therefore integrate participatory resource mapping, water budgeting, climate-risk assessment, maintenance responsibilities and inter-village coordination. Ecological autonomy does not mean that each village can independently control resources with wider effects; it means that local communities have a meaningful role in decisions and stewardship arrangements that affect their livelihoods and environment.

IX. A HYBRID VILLAGE GOVERNANCE MODEL: INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

The proposed framework can be operationalized through a Hybrid Village Governance Model built around four institutional principles. First, the Gram Sabha remains the foundational deliberative space for residents. Second, the elected Gram Panchayat retains statutory authority and responsibility for public decisions, budgets and implementation. Third, community organizations contribute expertise, local knowledge, voluntary capacity and issue-specific proposals through transparent consultation. Fourth, block and district institutions provide technical support, redistribution, coordination and review without routinely displacing local decision-making.

A practical institutional cycle could proceed as follows. Community organizations and residents identify needs and submit proposals through an open process. The Gram Panchayat consolidates these proposals into a draft village development plan, with technical support where required. The Gram Sabha deliberates on priorities, beneficiary selection principles and proposed allocations. The Panchayat adopts decisions in accordance with law and publishes the approved plan, budget and implementation responsibilities. Progress is reviewed through public meetings, social audits and accessible digital disclosures. Community organizations may assist with monitoring or service feedback but do not replace statutory audit, elected oversight or grievance mechanisms.

This model should be governed by a clear boundary between consultation and public authority. Advisory participation must not create parallel executive power. No community organisation should control public funds, determine entitlements or impose sanctions unless a lawful mandate and adequate safeguards exist. All public decisions must remain reviewable under applicable law. The model is therefore plural in its sources of knowledge and participation, but unified in its constitutional accountability.

Digital tools can support this model through public dashboards, online work registers, local-language budget summaries, grievance tracking and disclosure of meeting decisions. However, digital governance should supplement rather than replace face-to-face deliberation. Digital exclusion, connectivity gaps, literacy barriers and data privacy must be addressed. The measure of digital innovation is whether it makes local government more accessible and accountable, not simply whether it digitizes administrative procedures.

X. POLICY PROPOSITIONS AND RESEARCH AGENDA

The framework generates a set of propositions that can be examined through comparative research across states and Gram Panchayats:

Proposition 1: Gram Panchayats with greater control over predictable and discretionary funds are more likely to align local expenditure with priorities expressed in Gram Sabha deliberations.
Proposition 2: Clear activity mapping and access to accountable technical personnel are associated with stronger functional performance and reduced overlap between Panchayats and line departments.
Proposition 3: Structured, inclusive consultation with community organisations can improve the use of local knowledge and collective action, provided that statutory authority remains with elected institutions.
Proposition 4: The relationship between community participation and democratic outcomes is conditional on safeguards against caste, gender, class and other forms of local domination.
Proposition 5: Panchayat planning that integrates ecological mapping and inter-village coordination is better equipped to address shared natural-resource challenges than planning confined to administrative schemes.
These propositions suggest a comparative research design involving Gram Panchayats across states with different levels of devolution. Researchers could combine analysis of state laws and budgets with Panchayat-level expenditure data, interviews with elected representatives and community organizations, observation of Gram Sabha meetings and household surveys. Relevant indicators could include the proportion of discretionary expenditure, frequency and inclusiveness of Gram Sabha participation, responsiveness to citizen proposals, staff availability, completion and maintenance of public works, grievance resolution and the representation of marginalized groups. Such research would help test whether institutional pluralism improves governance outcomes and under what conditions.
For policymakers, five reforms follow. First, states should adopt time-bound devolution roadmaps covering functions, funds and functionaries. Second, State Finance Commissions should be constituted regularly and their recommendations acted upon transparently. Third, Panchayats should receive predictable untied resources and stronger fiscal-management support. Fourth, Gram Sabha processes should be made more deliberative, inclusive and consequential. Fifth, states should issue model guidelines for advisory collaboration between Panchayats and community organizations, with explicit constitutional safeguards and accountability standards.

XI. DISCUSSION: REINTERPRETING SELF-RELIANCE IN AN INTERDEPENDENT RURAL WORLD

A contemporary theory of Gram Swaraj must respond to transformations that were not central to earlier village-centered formulations. Rural communities are shaped by migration, remittances, changing agrarian relations, market integration, digital platforms, climate variability and multi-level welfare systems. A village cannot be self-sufficient in every economic or administrative sense, nor should it be expected to provide all public goods independently. The relevant objective is democratic capability: the capacity of local institutions and residents to influence decisions, mobilize resources, manage shared assets and negotiate effectively with higher levels of government.
This perspective also clarifies the relationship between autonomy and equality. Unqualified local autonomy can entrench local elites, while excessive central control can suppress local initiative. Democratic decentralization must therefore combine local discretion with constitutional rights, redistributive transfers, independent oversight and accessible remedies. The state is not simply an obstacle to Gram Swaraj; it is also responsible for ensuring equal citizenship, minimum service standards and redistribution across regions with unequal resources.
Institutional pluralism offers a way to recognise the social complexity of village governance without treating all institutions as equivalent. Elected Panchayats provide the legally authorised structure of local government. Gram Sabhas provides a constitutionally recognised space for direct participation. Community organisations contribute differentiated knowledge and organizational capacity. Higher levels of government provide finance, technical support, coordination and rights protection. The challenge is to design relationships among these institutions so that collaboration strengthens rather than fragments accountability.
The framework also reframes sustainability. Local development cannot be evaluated only through infrastructure creation or scheme expenditure. The long-term quality of self-government depends on whether villages can maintain common assets, protect

ecological systems, manage climate risks and negotiate trade-offs between immediate needs and future generations. Ecological autonomy thus becomes an essential dimension of contemporary Gram Swaraj.

XII. LIMITATIONS

This article is conceptual and policy-oriented. It does not provide original field evidence or establish causal relationships between institutional arrangements and governance outcomes. The historical discussion is selective and does not offer a comprehensive account of local institutions across all regions and periods of the subcontinent. The proposed Institutional Pluralism Framework and Hybrid Village Governance Model require empirical testing, legal review and adaptation to state-specific contexts. Future studies should examine how these arrangements function across rural settings with different social structures, resource endowments, administrative capacities and constitutional protections.

XIII. CONCLUSION

The constitutionalisation of Panchayat Raj marked a major advance in India's democratic architecture, but the promise of local self-government remains dependent on the depth and quality of devolution. The persistence of fiscal dependence, fragmented functional assignments, limited control over personnel and uneven participatory practices demonstrates that decentralization cannot be measured solely by the existence of elected Panchayats. It must be assessed by the extent to which local institutions can make consequential decisions, mobilize and manage resources, secure administrative support and remain accountable to residents.

Gandhi's idea of Gram Swaraj offers a valuable normative lens for this task, provided it is interpreted critically rather than nostalgically. Historical experience demonstrates the long-standing importance of local institutions and community resource management, but it also reminds us that local authority has not always been inclusive or egalitarian. The task for contemporary India is therefore not to restore an idealised village past, but to construct democratic institutions capable of combining local knowledge with constitutional rights and public accountability.

This article has proposed Institutional Pluralism as a framework for moving from administrative decentralisation to substantive self-government. By integrating political, fiscal, functional, socio-cultural and ecological autonomy, and by creating accountable channels of collaboration between Panchayats, Gram Sabhas and community organisations, the framework seeks to address both the autonomy deficit and the democratic legitimacy gap. Ultimately, Gram Swaraj should be understood not as village isolation or the substitution of customary authority for elected government, but as the democratic capacity of communities to shape their collective future within a constitutional, cooperative and socially just polity.

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