

INCLUSIVENESS, TRANSPARENCY AND PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN MANIPUR: CHALLENGES IN 21st CENTURY RURAL GOVERNANCE**Dr. Oinam Sadananda Singh^{1*}, Kshetrimayum Somen Singh²**¹Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal, Manipur²Research Scholar, Department of Political Science Dhanamanjuri University**Abstract**

The study examines how Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) act as the foundation of grassroots democracy, emphasizing a liberal, equitable society and good governance. As Decentralization and resource sharing are essential to bring inclusiveness in governance, it is crucial to make local-self government a self-reliant entity. The 73rd constitutional amendment Act 1992 is such an initiative enabling local bodies to function independently with accountability, participatory democracy and gender inclusiveness. While further globalization and neo liberalism reconnect regions and deepen economic integration, they also reshape democratic values by prioritizing market mechanisms resulting in expanded choices for some, but also creating complex challenges for local autonomy and socio-economic equity. Owing to the increasing importance of the digital age, Government initiatives like the e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project under the Digital India Programme are steps towards making local self-government accountable, participatory and transparent. Based on this, the study carries out a comparative analysis of the devolution of power, Inclusiveness and transparency across states of Manipur, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Interpretive research method and content analysis in a qualitative kind are carried out in the study. The gap between policy and implementation is a matter of concern to be looked at. The study outlines the challenges in implementing the provisions of the 73rd Amendment Act in valley districts of Manipur. This research paper adds value to the discussion as it covers the importance of e-governance and digital world in efficient working of PRIs in 21st century.

Keywords: 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Panchayati Raj Institutions, e-Panchayat Mission, Gender inclusiveness, Good governance.

Introduction

Panchayats are the foundations of grassroots democracy and good governance, empowering people's participation in decision making and policy formation for rural India. It is noteworthy that the Royal Commission in 1907 emphasized the necessary for power and administration decentralization empowering village Panchayats to manage village activities (Sukumar et.al., 2019, P. 73). Citizen empowerment correlates with the activities for their roles in rural development and rural management. PRIs as a constitutional entity are well defined in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992. Self government in rural area with people participation in decision making at grass-root level is just an important step towards

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people empowerment. Through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act which established the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), it was aimed to promote democratic accountability and equitable growth of the kind of development at the village level (Patel and Mahor, 2024). The passing of 73rd Constitutional Amendment outlines the inclusiveness and overall participation of people in decentralised decision making and political process in rural India. Having emphasized in Panchayats, as constitutional bodies of the local self-government system, have been a key participant in counselling rural management, development plans, and village empowerment. Ancient Rural Indian Society is accustomed to Village Panchayats which performs to solve many local disputes .in rural areas. However, the dynamic nature of the 21st century has required the need to move towards decentralization digitisation to enhance transparency, efficiency, and inclusiveness in the provision of services. Deployment of ICT in local self government incorporate in efficient delivery of services from Government to Citizens and further helps in planning and monitoring of projects (Bhatnagar Subhash, 2009).

The father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi in 1946 had aptly remarked that the Indian Independence must begin at the bottom and every village ought to be a Republic or Panchayat having powers. Gandhiji's dream has been translated into reality with the introduction of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system to ensure people's participation in rural reconstruction (T.N. Chaturvedi, 1996, 49). The importance of PRIs is clearly emphasized when our former Prime Minister could proudly say while inaugurating PR in Rajasthan in 1959: "We are going to lay the foundation of democracy or Panchayati Raj in our country" (B.L. Fadia, 2005, 575). The necessity of PRIs become more prominent when the government started emphasizing the need for decentralization and increase the participation of people in governance and rural development works so that the benefits reach the real beneficiaries. Moreover, rural areas of our country are enhanced in development activities proceeding towards making the rural areas well developed thus contributing to the overall development of our nation. The main objectives of PRIs endowed with powers of self-government as defined in Article 40 of the constitution of India are to promote economic development and social justice (D.D. Basu, 2005). The first organized concrete step to bring solution to the problems and issues of Rural India was through the Community Development Programme which was launched on 2 October 1952 emphasizing the need for people participation in rural development programmes and the importance of working through Panchayati Raj Institutions like Village Panchayat etc. Over the years, various committees like Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, Ashok Mehta Committee and Dr. G.V.K Rao Committee or L.V. Singhvi committee have been formed to restructure and strengthen PRIs. Balwant Rai Mehta Committee suggested for three-tier structure of local self government i.e. Village at lowest level, district level and intermediate level as link along with enough power and authority. Further, Ashok Mehta Committee suggested for two-tier structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions namely Zilla Parishad at the district and a Mandal Panchayat. However, the historic passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 which came into effect on April 20, 1993 in the eight five year plan precedes a new beginning in the federal democratic set-up of the country, it became mandatory on the part of state governments to establish PRIs as a unit of democracy or democratic institutions, guaranteeing constitutional status to the PRIs and devolution of functions, powers to enable to function as self-governing institutions

in rural areas. The Act added Part IX comprising of 16 articles and the eleventh schedule listing 29 subjects.

The major recommendations of the seventy-third Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 are as follows:

- i. Establishment of PRIs and duration is five years.
- ii. Constitution of state finance commission in every five year and to recommend to the states on sharing of fund between state and the PRIs.
- iii. Elections of PRIs are to be held every five years and the constitution of the State Election Commission.
- iv. Not less than one -third reservation for women in every PRI.
- v. Reservation of seats for SCs/STs in proportion to their population at each tier. Not less than 1/3 seats shall be reserved for SCs/STs women out of total number of reserved seats.
- vi. The state governments have been specified to authorize the PRIs to levy, collect and appropriate local taxes and give grant- in aid to PRIs.
- vii. Legislature of a state may, by law, provide the Panchayats with such powers, functions and authority so as to enable them to function as an institution of self- government.
- viii. Constitution of Gram Sabha: it is the foundation of PRIs and statutory institution.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of Decentralization involves not only the inclusion of communities and people participation in rural areas but also financial inclusion and transparency. PRIs are the engines that run and regulate the activities of rural development. Introduction of 73rd Constitutional amendment enhances the perspective of gender inclusion in local decision making in village governance level. The gap in implementation of authority, power and function makes the PRIs intricate to work efficiently. Implementation of ICTs can reduce the gap between theory and reality.

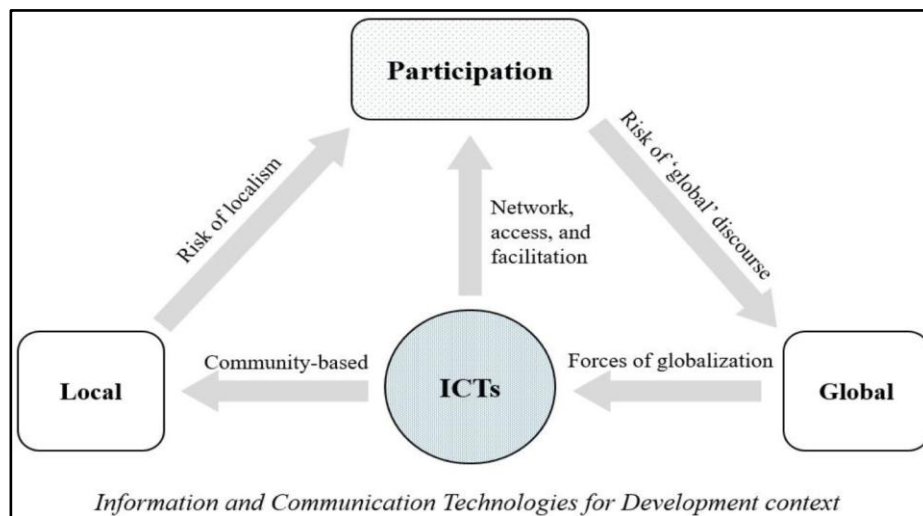


Figure1:ICT4D Framework

(Source: Behera, 2021)

To support thereof, The Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) framework can be utilize to examine how digital technologies can maximize and accelerate work performance particularly in resource-limited rural regions. Collectively, these theoretical foundations form the basis of rural development that pursues the decentralization of power, functions and authority.

Objectives of the study

1. To discuss the overall inclusiveness in Rural Governance.
2. To evaluate the delegation of functions and powers.
3. To analyze the importance and challenges of Digital Technology in Rural Governance.

Methodology

The study is based on the interpretive research method and content analysis in a qualitative kind. It is based on a study that carries out a comparative analysis of the devolution of power; inclusiveness and transparency across states of Manipur, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. It uses secondary data comprising of Scopus-indexed journals, Government Publications, journals, articles etc. The materials used are suitable to the objective as it covers digital initiative and Government policies.

Ethical Consideration

The work is purely done solely on publicly accessible data. No animal or human subject was used in the study. Hence there was no necessary to seek formal ethical approval .It has highlighted proper referencing of sources. The study was conducted with a commitment to academic integrity and transparency.

Opportunities of Technological Transformation and Digital Evolution

Such transformation to digital governance in PRIs is not only technological transformation but structural transformation in the functioning of grassroots democracy. As it is mentioned by Patel and Mahor (2024), the Panchayati Raj system has traditionally focused on the communication in face-to-face negotiations and keeping the records (manually). Such processes require redefinition with the use of ICT, which allow higher speed, traceability, and access to information in the open space. This change justifies the view of Khan (2024) regarding the importance of the ICT-based governance approach in supporting trust among citizens by increasing transparency and eliminating leakages in the delivery of the public services.

Introduction of national platforms like e-Gram Swaraj has provided the PRIs with digital means of development planning and monitoring project. On the same note, initiatives implemented at the state level such as Digital Panchayat have realised that digitisation can help simplify the functions of financial management, disbursing welfare schemes and reporting processes.

Owing to the increasing importance of the digital age, Government initiatives like the e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project under the Digital India Programme are steps towards making local self-government accountable, participatory and transparent. Decentralization in governance and Proper structural changes facilitate towards involvement of lower-level

functionaries in decision making and implementation of rural-focused development programmes.

However, Singh, Chauhan, and Singh (2024) warn that the growth in such gains is skewed among states because of asymmetries in signs of preparedness and technical expertise. On territories, where broadband internet connections are weak or hardware is old, digital solutions cannot work at optimal efficiency.

In addition to that, according to Ghosh and Guha (2024), human component is important in the success of e-governance practices in PRIs because there must be trained staff that would make these systems functional and maintained successfully. Unless there is continuous investment in digital literacy and capacity building, there will be the danger of ICT systems in ICT intensive countries not being used effectively even though they have been procured at a high cost mainly perpetuating the status quo instead of lowering inequalities.

This is the dual reality promise on one side and continuing obstructions on the other and the foundation on which critical consideration of rural/e-governance may be based. Consequently, it is vital to not merely assess the infrastructural and administrative aspects but also to analyse the social, cultural, and political aspects of adopting and maintaining these systems because they often affect adoption and sustainability of the digital systems. These are some of the issues discussed in this paper, and the purpose consists in making policy recommendations capable of being used to act towards the challenges of narrowing the gap between digital potential and a reality of rural governance.

Financial Constraint

Balan (2023) suggests that the unpredictability of financial flows leads to project implementers being compelled to reduce the amounts of services rendered, postpone updating of infrastructures or restrict community outreach programs. Such financial weakness does not encourage the partners in the private sector and the NGOs to commit resources thus limiting the scope on which the partners are able to learn to interrelate in e-governance in the rural setting. These problems are increased by bureaucratic obstacles that cause problems with procurement, recruitment, and training. As Khan (2024) remarks, it can take months, and even years, on multi-level approval schemes combined with entrenched bureaucratic structures, to roll out digital platform at all. These delays undermine the trust of the members of the community and diminish the perceived significance of these services to the citizens in the rural areas. Also, it can be seen that without interdepartmental coordination there is the tendency to allow duplication of efforts and wastage of limited resources. To overcome these difficulties, it is necessary to develop not only financial and but institutional reforms as well. Balan (2023) proposes multi-year funding and decentralised financial autonomy of PRIs as the way to enhance its stability. Khan (2024) also champions the idea of simplifying the process of decision-making with the help of electronic management of files and well-defined accountability processes. Finally, synergy between fiscal stability and administrative swiftness plays most important role in making the rural e-governance projects sustainable and successful at the same time.

Structure and powers of Panchayati Raj in Manipur

Manipur Government has passed Manipur Panchayati Raj (MPR) Act in 1994 in accordance with 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992. Moreover, State Government clearly mentioned an activity map of 16 line departments to be transferred to PRIs as stated in MPR Act 1994. The Government of Manipur issued an order on 9 September 2005 transferring some functions, funds and functionaries in respect of 16 departments.

Sixteen departments to be transferred to PRIs as stated in MPR Act 1994 are as given following Table:

Table 1.1

1) Transport	9) Horticulture
2) Health	10) Tribal Development
3) Veterinary	11) Co-operation
4) Fisheries	12) Minor Irrigation
5) Rural Development	13) Social Welfare
6) Education (S)	14) Arts & Culture
7) Industries	15) Science & Technology
8) Agriculture	16) Family Welfare

Source: Manipur Panchayati Raj Act 1994.

Comparative Case Examples and Suitable Practices

Kerala is exceptional in digitalization of panchayats owing to decentralization of planning, implementation of ICTs to improve accountability, transparency. Combining decentralization with digitalization has improved service delivery through the E-Gram initiatives thereby increasing people participation.

A case study of people's participation in Panchayat elections was conducted in Tairenpokpi village under the Phayeng Gram Panchayat in Manipur. There has been proper representation in the village through the Phayeng Gram Panchayat since the implementation of Manipur Panchayati Raj Act 1994 with elections conducted under the new act from 1997 onwards. Prior to MPR act 1994, there was some dissatisfaction among Tairenpokpi villagers due to lack of specific provision for the exact electoral strength to elect a member of Panchayat (Mangoljao Maibam and Sharatchandra Sharma B, 2023, pp 472-474). PRIs prepare evidence-based policy to enhance transparency and accountability relating to programmes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana Gramin (PMAYG) and Jai Jeevan Mission (Reena Kshetrimayum, 2025, p. 85). Initiative like Digital Agriculture in 2025 to keep land records, farming patterns is step of paramount importance for accountability, inclusiveness.

Advanced Management Information System (MIS) Panchatantra model in Karnataka allows working evidence based decisions and assists financial transparency and promotes inclusion. In the state of Tamilnadu, Executing social justice and economic development programmes of PRIs has been among top performing states. Existence of "Panchayat Pati"

can be seen as one of challenges in the state. It is noteworthy to state that 29 subjects stated in 11th schedule being devolution to rural local bodies. Innovative and community driven initiative at the Panchayat level has a positive impact towards effective rural development. Further Implementation of e-governance effectively increases service delivery and also minimizes administrative hurdles (Erulandi A, 2026, P. b179).

Comparative analysis reveals that the models show varying tools of digitalization of rural development and decentralization impact. The participatory model of Kerala, Evidence –based policy in Manipur and MIS efficiency in Karnataka are considered to be effective tools to increase accountability and work performance. Gender Inclusiveness among representative of Panchayats with a reservation of one-third seat at all three tiers is seen across states. Manipur’s evidence based policy increases accountability, inclusiveness and transparency. Innovative and community involvement, e-governance has improved overall service delivery.

Challenges and Way forward

To enhance inclusiveness and transparency, there is need of sincerity among grass-root functionaries and PRI representatives. They must be provided with technical training on modern digital and Communication Technology equipment. Besides the training to the elected members and other supporting staff, proper implementation of the provisions under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is need of the hour in order to devolve the necessary powers and functions to make PRIs a self reliant. To ensure better accountability and transparency in implementing rural development projects, it is essential to strengthen capacity –building mechanisms such as digital literacy and computer record keeping. In case of Manipur, there is a need to ensure the full transfer of funds, functions and functionaries for the sixteen departments already assigned under the MPR Act 1994 to rural local bodies, allowing them to work independently with responsibility.

E-Governance emphasizes the importance of Digital Technology in channelizing decentralization and inclusiveness of communities and gender in decision making and their participation in rural development. Over the years, the Question of gender equality has been a area of concern in society. National Schemes like Swachh Bharat, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao are government sponsored programmes shall further enhance towards empowering women to fight for their justice and social equality. Policy makers need to understand the ground realities of rural Manipur in particular and India in general. Feminists question the domination of male folk, thus fighting and promoting for gender equality in the Patriarchal society. Digitalization of structure and technological transformation in local self Government like e-Gram Swaraj are proven improvements in their work efficiency with accountability and transparency.

Conclusion

The potential for decentralization of powers and the role of digital platforms in minimizing gap of inclusiveness in PRIs have been the central themes of this study. Moreover, as the demand for financial autonomy grows among PRIs’ elected members, the state federal democratic set up can be strengthened with the devolution of powers and

functions to rural local bodies as prescribed in the Act. Such Transfer of Powers can sustain local self- government along with self -sufficiency, reliability and accountability.

Digitalization of services and structure enhances transparency, accountability, Gender participation in decision making and rural development activities. ICT acts as a tool for development in today's world. It improves e-delivery and e-payment services, facilitates direct benefit transfer and streamlines communication from government to citizens. The provision of at least one-third reservation for women in all tiers of PRIs constitutes a practical implication of gender inclusion. Further, Digitalization of Panchayats can ensure effectiveness and devolution of powers and functions of 16 line activities in the hands of PRIs as stated in MPR Act 1994 in the state of Manipur. Kerala, Tamil nadu, Karnataka and Manipur successful practices of digitalization of services and implementation women reservation are proven examples of gender inclusion. The necessity of the hour is the sincerity of Authorities such as Central Government and State Government to work in coordination with PRIs. Panchayat functionaries must be trained with digital awareness and computer literacy and capacity building to promote rural e-governance and e-panchayats. It is necessary to ensure the financial efficiency and the mobilization of financial resources for PRIs to make local self-government self-sufficient, thereby enhancing productivity. Notwithstanding its limitations, the enactment of the 73rd constitutional amendment has partially institutionalized covered inclusiveness, neutralizing the gender exclusion theories that historically existed.

Some Limitations

1. Area of study is confined to secondary data and comparative study
2. The study is of qualitative research in nature.

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