

LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN TRIBAL- DOMINATED AREA OF INDIA- AN INVESTIGATION INTO ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EFFECTS

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Abstract

The paper aims to study the economic, social and political impact of rural decentralisation in Kesla, a tribal-dominated block of Madhya Pradesh. The analysis was done using the primary data gathered through the field visit. While the political impact was understood by assessing the working of Gram Sabhas, the economic and social impact was evaluated in terms of the status of delivery of public goods and services, and the working of government schemes. The findings draw attention to the fact that decentralisation in the surveyed areas has not delivered optimal results.

Keywords: Rural Decentralisation, Panchayats, Gram Sabha, Public Goods and Services.

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Introduction

The World Bank defines the term decentralisation as “the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the Central government to intermediate and local governments or quasi-independent government organisations and/or the private sector” (Olsen, 2007, p.4). UNDP (2004, p.4) refers to decentralised governance as “the restructuring or reorganisation of authority, so that there is a system of co-responsibility between the institutions of governance at the central, regional and local levels according to the principle of subsidiarity.” In plain terms, decentralisation means that the powers and responsibilities of governance are transferred to lower levels of government.

In India, the Panchayats form the local governance system in rural villages. The 73rd amendment of the Indian Constitution of 1992 was a landmark in India’s history of rural local governance under which Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were given constitutional status. Though Panchayats’ history in the rural local government in India is quite ancient (IIPA, 2013), the revival of Panchayats as envisaged in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment was not due to public movement (Buch, 2012). In fact, in India, one of the reasons for the decentralisation was to improve efficiency, responsiveness, and accessibility of quality public services rather than the pressure from the grassroots (Buch, 2012). Accordingly, the Panchayats have been entrusted with performing several functions related to the well-being of the individuals residing in the villages. These functions of Panchayats include contributing to the proper delivery of public goods and services in the villages. The Panchayats also play a role in running the government programmes in India that are meant to improve the welfare of society, especially the poor’s. Hence, the Panchayats can play an essential role in improving the people’s economic and social well-being and political participation in the rural parts of India.

Against this backdrop, this paper attempted to study the functioning of Gram Panchayats in a tribal-dominated district in Madhya Pradesh. The

authors examine the role of local governance in the economic and social well-being of the people and the political participation in Kesla block of Hoshangabad district, and the political impact is understood through the working of Gram Sabhas. The economic and social well-being was evaluated in terms of the delivery of public goods and services, and the working of the public schemes. The paper attains significance as the literature on the effects of decentralisation on marginalised communities is not adequately captured in the existing literature. Efficient Gram Panchayats are one of the policy objectives of improving governance in India. Therefore, the mode of functioning of these institutions in general and unique settings, such as in geographical areas with marginalised groups like tribes, becomes important. In this direction, our attempt is crucial to understand the relation between rural decentralisation and people’s well-being.

Literature Review

Decentralisation can be an effective way to eliminate the multiple deprivations in a society. There was a push for decentralisation as it was felt that centralised governance was not so efficient in providing public goods and delivering services (Ahmad et al., 2005). If implemented correctly, decentralisation can lead to increased local participation in decision-making. As decentralised institutions enjoy greater proximity to the people (Inman & Rubinfeld, 1997; World Bank, 1997), targeting the beneficiaries for public goods and welfare schemes can be performed in a better way. The marginalised groups and the poor can have increased say in the policy design and implementation. The groups of the society which have been suppressed historically, socially or ethnically, get an opportunity to voice their concerns. Decentralisation can improve public goods and services delivery, with local governments spending money on high-priority projects (Faguet, 2004). Better service delivery can lead to faster socio-economic development in the region.

Rao (2002) stated that cooperative federalism between the Central and sub-national governments

is vital for poverty alleviation as the decentralised government is proximate to the poor, and familiar with the varying institutional situation. Hence, they provide an advantage in designing and implementing anti-poverty policies. Rao (2007) argued that Panchayats could play a significant role in improving safety nets for the hard-core poor in rural areas of India by mobilising the poor and making the delivery system more accountable. Cheema and Maguire (2002) argued that decentralisation leads to higher accountability, responsiveness and lesser corruption. Secondly, mobilisation of communities can help strengthen social capital and, finally, the involvement of communities in decision-making leads to improved service delivery as their concerns are paid more attention. Jutting et al. (2004) mentioned that decentralisation can bring about significant political and economic changes in the institutional architecture. These reforms can influence governance and efficiency of the delivery of public services, which in turn, can impact poverty outcomes through social and economic channels.

In this context, the effect of decentralisation on poverty is worth examining. Braun and Grote (2000) developed a model based on multi-variant regression analysis to determine the effect of political, administrative and fiscal decentralisation on the Human Development Index (HDI) across countries. They found that larger countries are worse off than the smaller ones in reducing poverty and a higher contribution of sub-national expenditure lessens poverty, albeit the marginal effect diminishes. Gajwani (2005) studied 16 Indian States and found that State-level incomes are increasing with decentralisation level, but this effect is muted for those with initially poorer status. This result is similar to the one given by Bardhan and Mookherjee (2000) that the decentralisation effect will not be uniform and may provide fewer benefits to the poorest regions within a country, relative to wealthier ones. It is essential to mention that theoretical arguments in favour and against decentralisation are not watertight, as empirical papers have found contrasting evidence. The direct and positive effects of decentralisation on efficiency, democratisation and tailor-made policies

are far from obvious (Vries, 2000).

There have been several studies on decentralisation in rural settings in India. Rajasekhar et al. (2018) and Chaudhary (2017) found that Gram Sabhas were not functioning properly in Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh, respectively. On the other hand, Kumar (2019) found that Gram Panchayat played an important role in running MGNREGA in Ahana village, highlighting the significance of local institutions in rural villages. Mohapatra (2020) also found that decentralisation helped integrate tribal people in planning in Odisha. In respect of social outcomes, Kumar and Prakash (2017) found that decentralisation and female leadership in rural Bihar were linked to a drop in child mortality and an increase in institutional delivery. The studies on the working of Panchayats in tribal settings are few, like Chaudhary (2017) and Mohapatra (2020). In this context, our paper seeks to understand the political, economic and social effects of Gram Panchayats in a tribal-dominated block.

Data and Methodology

Data: The present paper's analysis is based on the primary data collected from the tribal-dominated Kesla block located in Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh. The survey covered 54 villages from previously 92 villages in 38 Panchayats out of formerly 49 Panchayats with a sample of 248 households. We used stratified random sampling to select 248 households to include four social groups (scheduled tribes, scheduled castes, other backward classes and general class). We also met Sarpanchs (Head of Panchayat), Panchayat members, sachivs (Secretary of Panchayat), school teachers, anganwadi workers and others to understand the varied perspectives of the stakeholders. We also conducted focus group discussions with the residents from distinct economic, social and demographic backgrounds to gather qualitative inputs. The study population also comprised women for a gendered focus.

Methodology: Decentralisation can act through economic, social and political channels. The political impact can be realised through better

participation in decision-making, especially by marginalised groups. In rural India's context, Gram Sabha is one such measure to empower the people politically and provide them with a forum to deliberate with the local authorities about the decisions and express their preferences regarding goods and services. As far as economic and social channels are concerned, the positive effect of decentralisation can reach people through increased efficiency and better targeting of services.

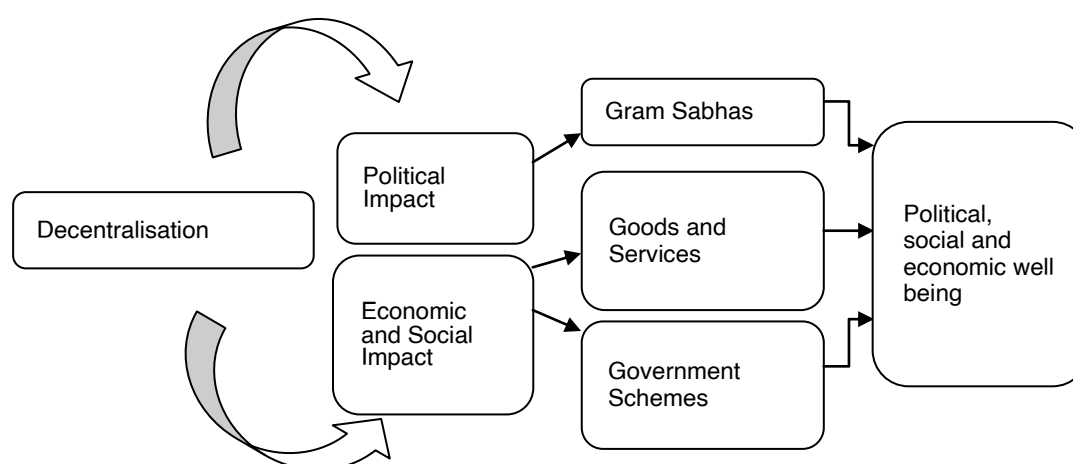
Article 243 of the Indian Constitution defines Gram Sabha as "a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of Panchayat at the village level." It goes to say that it "may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the Legislature of a State may, by law, provide." It is a forum that provides an opportunity for discussing the critical issues related to their village, and strengthening people's opinions and views to improve the governance. Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Raj Avam Gram Swaraj

(Sansodhan) Adhiniyam passed in 2004 directed that the Gram Sabha should be convened at least four times a year and required that timings and places be informed to the people well in advance. It also has the provision for more such gatherings if the need arises. The elected representative, i.e., Gram Pradhan (village head) and other officials, can be asked questions regarding their decisions and actions. At the same time, people can give suggestions on the local government's working decisions and present their grievances.

The social and economic well-being in rural India can be realised through two channels, viz., improved delivery of public goods and services and better functioning of the government schemes (Figure 1). Firstly, the Panchayats can ensure better provision of public goods and services and be more responsive to the problems faced by the people. Also, given the number of important schemes being run by the government at the village levels, the Panchayats can contribute to its better implementation by leveraging their knowledge of the ground realities.

Figure 1

Role of the Decentralisation in Public Well-being



Source: Based on Jutting et al. (2004)

We created some indicators to assess the various aspects outlined above and see how these two channels work. As far as the political channel is concerned, the success of Gram Sabhas can be gauged from the increased participation of the people, especially women, and the different issues raised in these meetings. We use three indicators to assess it, as explained in Table 1. For the economic and social channel, the availability of public goods and services and the proportion of households rating their quality as good are taken as indicators. The 73rd Amendment of the Indian

Constitution inserted an Eleventh Schedule listing goods and services where Panchayats can play a role in their provision. We merged some goods and services and dropped a few, in which the Panchayats play a limited role or no part. We also dropped goods and services with limited availability (like libraries, small-scale industries, including food processing industries, among others). The services considered in our paper include drinking water, government schemes, school, electricity, roads, irrigation, health, extension services, husbandry and sanitation.

Table 1*Gram Sabhas - Indicators*

Sub-theme	Indicators
Participation	Proportion of households participating in all four meetings
Women Participation	Proportion of households having women participation in the meetings
Empowerment	Proportion of households raising issues in the meetings

Source: Field Survey

The working of various major government schemes has been assessed by gathering information on the availability and extent of their benefits (Table 2). We selected five flagship public welfare schemes that address various economic and social issues like children's nutrition, school attendance, women's health, food availability,

employment and childcare. These are Public Distribution Scheme (PDS), Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Anganwadi Centre (AWC) and Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY).

Table 2*Economic and Social Indicators*

Schemes	Indicators
PDS	Proportion of households having ration card
	Proportion of households satisfied with service of PDS shops
MGNREGS	Proportion of households having the job card
	Ratio of actual man-days work to designated work
MDMS	Proportion of households indicating eligible children benefitted from the MDMS
AWC	Proportion of children from eligible households attending anganwadi
JSY	Proportion of eligible households benefitting from JSY

Source: Field Survey

We further divided the indicators into five categories depending on the range of their values (Table 3). We categorised the indicators into quintiles for an easier understanding of the data

and comparison across the indicators. We used the quintiles as they are commonly used and easy to interpret. The paper adopts a descriptive method using a case study for the analysis.

Table 3

Categories of Economic, Social and Political Indicators

Indicator Value	Category
0.0 < Value < 0.2	Very Poor
0.2 < Value < 0.4	Poor
0.4 < Value < 0.6	Average
0.6 < Value < 0.8	Good
0.8 < Value < 1.0	Very Good

Source: Author's calculations

Results

This section will first discuss the political impact of decentralisation, followed by results on the economic and social impact. At the end of the

section, we will present the values of the indicators discussed above. The descriptive statistics of the sample are given in Table 4.

Table 4

Socio-economic Indicators of the Sample

	ST	OBC	SC	General	Total
Households (%)	44.8	30.2	21.8	3.2	100.0
Female-headed households (%)	4.5	5.3	3.7	0.0	4.4
Own (%)	65.8	72.0	51.9	37.5	63.7
Land					
Mean (acres)	3.0	11.3	2.4	1.4	5.3
S.D. (acres)	3.9	31.8	4.3	2.3	18.1
Irrigated land					
Mean (acres)	1.5	9.7	1.3	0.2	3.9
S.D.	2.9	31.9	3.8	0.5	18.0
Pucca House (%)	6.3	28.0	9.3	37.5	14.5

Notes. S.D.-Standard Deviation; % means the proportion of households out of total sample in percentage terms.

Source: Field Survey

Political Impact: Gram Sabhas

As far as the organisation of the Gram Sabhas is concerned, around 31.5 per cent of households had little idea about the number of Gram Sabhas held in their Panchayats. However, about 26.2 per cent of the people were aware that these meetings are organised four times a year (Table 5). The

proportion of households that attended all the four Gram Sabhas was 14.9 per cent. Further, 43.6 per cent of the households shared that they didn't participate in Gram Sabhas. The participation of women in these meetings remained even lower as only 25.4 per cent of households reported attendance of their female family members.

Table 5
Organisation and Attendance in Gram Sabhas

No. of meetings	0	1	2	3	4	> 4	Unaware
Organised (%)	-	1.2	23.0	16.9	26.2	1.2	31.5
Attended (%)	43.6	9.3	28.2	4.0	14.9	-	-

Note. Organised refers to the percentage of households that stated a given number of meetings were organised. Attended shows the percentage of households that participated in the given number of meetings.

Source: Field Survey

We also examined how the people who attended Gram Sabhas contributed to their proceedings. It was revealed that 75.7 per cent of those who attended at least one meeting stated that they raised some issues in these meetings. The females participated more actively as 82.5 per cent raised issues despite their low attendance.

During FGDs and interaction with different stakeholders, we found that the issues raised in these meetings were very individualistic, as most people used these meetings to seek individual benefits under various government schemes. In contrast, the village-level issues take a back seat during these meetings. There are hardly any fruitful discussions on issues like prioritisation of village work, demand for the betterment of public services and other such topics of general interest. UNDP (2012) also mentioned that participation in Gram Sabha meetings in Madhya Pradesh seemed limited for seeking benefits from schemes. Regarding non-attendance, many people felt there was no advantage to attending these meetings as their demands for benefits under different schemes go unheard. They also cited lack of time and interest.

We found that the performance of the Gram Sabha as a forum for deliberation and decision-making body remained sub-optimal. These results are in line with the findings of Rajasekhar et al. (2018) and Chaudhary (2017). The realisation that these forums can question all the decisions and provide inputs for community-level issues was

missing. The lack of interest in active participation in these meetings indicated that democratic devolution at the grassroots levels needs more effort and awareness. UNDP (2012) cited the limited power of Gram Panchayats as one of the reasons for such performance of these meetings. We also found that the power of the Panchayat officials is limited compared to the upper level of government organs and officials. They could not issue below poverty line (BPL) cards, authorise pension dispersal or allot funds under Indira Awas Yojana, and hence were unable to take any concrete action to address even their genuine complaints. As the problems of the public remain unresolved and they feel unheard, the above-cited issues dilute their confidence.

Economic and Social Impact: Public Goods and Services: We will start the discussion with public goods and services provision. Drinking water facility was available to around 97.2 per cent of the households in the sample, with 70.6 per cent registering satisfaction (taking good and average service delivery together). It was shared that people faced severe difficulty during summer as the water in the wells dries up. Also, the number of drinking water sources was less in some villages forcing people to travel long distances to fetch water. Despite being aware of the issues faced by people, the Panchayat officials were not fully capable of addressing these as they depended on block and district level officials to allocate hand-pumps and other drinking water sources. At most,

they could request the allocation and decide the appropriate places for installing hand pumps and other sources post allocation.

The availability of benefits under various government schemes was around 97.2 per cent, but 44.4 per cent were satisfied (taking good and average service delivery together). According to Panchayat and other officials, people complain about not getting the benefits under schemes without knowing the exact eligibility criteria. The awareness about the eligibility and benefits of various schemes was low among people. The inability of the Panchayats to help the people was due to this low awareness, which raises the public's expectations to benefit from schemes and limited power with the Panchayats.

Around 97.2 per cent of the households were in the vicinity of the schools, hence having access to them. Three out of four people were satisfied with the availability and number of schools but felt that the education was optimal. They felt the teachers did not devote much attention to imparting quality education. The teachers, on their part, shared that additional administrative responsibilities related to government schemes targeted at school children put an extra burden on them.

Electricity was available to around 95.6 per cent of the population, but 58.2 per cent considered the quality of service inadequate. People complained about the irregularity in the supply along with long power cuts. Access to roads was available to around 87.5 per cent of the population, but one out of three people considered the roads' quality terrible, as some villages had kutcha roads. The condition of roads worsened during the rainy seasons, hampering commutation. Irrigation facility was unavailable to even half of the population (only 47.2 per cent), and one out of four considered the quality of service sub-optimal. Irrigation can help reduce poverty in agricultural societies (Kumar, 2018). But many did not have irrigation facilities for

the whole agricultural season. Some of them could only manage inadequate irrigation for one crop season. Some had benefited from government schemes like Khet-Talab Yojana and Balram-Tal Yojana for building irrigational sources within their agricultural fields, while some depended on borewells. But they faced severe problems during the summers. They relied on rain for their agriculture, making them vulnerable to weather vagaries.

Less than half of the households (46.0 per cent) had access to government health services, with 43.0 per cent considering their quality bad. There were issues like non-availability of health personnel at these centres, long distances as many villages did not have health centres, mismatch between the centres' timings and the working hours of the villagers, etc. Due to these, people went to private doctors and approached hospitals (both government and private) in the nearby cities. The agriculture extension services were available to around 42.3 per cent of the population, with 85.7 per cent satisfied. In most cases, the big farmers or the farmers having networks were getting proper benefits. The animal husbandry service was available to around 35.9 per cent of the population, and 73.1 per cent were satisfied with the quality of service. This service had limited availability, and people were unfamiliar with their benefits. Sanitation service was available to around 27.0 per cent of the population, with 89.5 per cent satisfied with the quality of service. However, there was a lack of awareness about its benefits. Most people tried to keep their surroundings clean themselves. However, the situation worsened during the rains due to the lack of a proper drainage system. The above data is summarised in Table 6. The analysis shows that while the availability was good in the case of some public goods and services, the quality remained a concern across most of them. This mixed result is in line with the findings of Ahmad et al. (2005) and Ghuman and Singh (2013).

Table 6*Public Goods and Services Provision-Availability and Satisfaction (% of Households)*

Good/Service	Availability	Quality		
	Households	Good	Average	Poor
Drinking Water	97.2	51.5	19.1	29.5
Government Schemes	97.2	13.3	31.1	55.6
School	97.2	46.1	28.2	25.3
Electricity	95.6	8.9	32.9	58.2
Roads	87.5	33.2	32.7	34.1
Irrigation	47.2	39.3	35.9	24.8
Health	46.0	34.2	22.8	43.0
Extension Services	42.3	69.5	16.2	14.3
Husbandry	35.9	51.7	21.4	27.0
Sanitation	27.0	55.2	34.3	10.5

Source: Field Survey.

Economic and Social Impact: Government Schemes: The Government Schemes form our second area of study under the economic and social channel as well-functioning schemes can raise the people's well-being.

Public Distribution Scheme (PDS): Targeted PDS is a major public scheme aiming to ensure the supply of food items like rice, wheat, etc., and fuel in the form of kerosene to the poor at subsidised prices. The ration card is the prerequisite for benefits as the ration is only given to the cardholders, and 87.5 per cent of respondents shared that their households had the ration card. Four out of 11 households without ration cards had misplaced/lost their ration cards.

The foodgrains under the scheme are sold through fair prices shops (FPS). About nine out of the ten respondents claimed they were satisfied with the quality of service rendered by the FPSs. Those unsatisfied with the service complained

about the long queues, underweighing of goods, quality of goods and frequency of opening the **stores**.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS): MGNREGS is one of the biggest employment schemes launched by the government. It guaranteed 100 days of wage employment per annum to a household in which one of the adult members is eager to contribute unskilled-manual labour (Ministry of Rural Development, 2012-2013).

Getting a job card is the foremost step for getting work under MGNREGS, and 80.2 per cent of the households owned job cards. Among the 49 households without a job card, only 12.2 per cent applied for it, while others did not want to work under it. About 47 per cent of job cardholders got work under the scheme. Only eight households got work for over 60 days. (Table 7).

Table 7*Workdays Provided under MGNREGS*

Number of days	0	1-15	15-30	30-45	45-60	60-100	>100
Job card holders (%)	53.3	16.6	12.6	3.5	5.0	8.0	1.0

Note. % means the percentage of the MGNREGS job card holders.

Source: Field Survey.

Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS): MDMS is the world's most extensive school feeding programme providing meals to students of primary and upper primary classes in government schools/ Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) centres across the country (James, 2013). The aim is to enhance enrolment, increase attendance and improve children's nutrition. Wards of 90.7 per cent of the households attending public schools took meals under the MDMS. The reasons for not taking benefits included bad quality and preference for home-cooked food by the well-off families. The scheme was successful in providing regular food, but there was scope to improve food quality and service. While Khera (2013) discussed the scheme's positive impact on enrolment and nutrition, Shukla (2014) highlighted hygiene and quality issues as found in our study.

Anganwadi Centre (AWC): Anganwadi programme is a part of the Integrated Child Development Scheme to provide pre-school education and address malnutrition, reduced learning capacity and mortality among young children of 0-6 years (Ministry of Women and Child Development, undated). Some main activities are ensuring vaccination, providing supplements to children suffering from malnutrition, serving hot meals, and organising pre-school activities. The anganwadi workers run AWC with the support of anganwadi helpers. In our study, out of the total households having children below the age of 6, 73.7 per cent have their children enrolled in AWC.

AWC was a well-run place in most villages as almost all respondents shared that it was open every day. The children from different social and economic groups were admitted to AWC without issues. Around 80 per cent of the respondents

shared that anganwadi workers had visited their house. Overall, the anganwadi scheme was quite successful in rural areas by playing a role in the health-related issues of infants and children. However, there was scope to improve pre-school activities, which were not organised efficiently in many AWCs. Jain et al. (2020) found that children receiving supplements from AWCs had better nutritional outcomes.

Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY): JSY promotes institutional delivery among poor pregnant women to reduce maternal and neonatal mortality. In M.P., women delivering at government hospitals were eligible for the benefit of Rs.1400, irrespective of the number of births or availability of BPL card, at the time of the survey. If the delivery took place in a private hospital in low-performing States (States where maternal mortality is high, M.P. being one), only BPL and SC/ST households were eligible for the benefits under the scheme.

Of the total eligible households, 77.2 per cent with children of age five or below received the scheme's benefit. Out of 22 households that didn't receive benefits, only two had institutional deliveries. The remaining households opted for home delivery. Some of these households had BPL cards but did not get any financial assistance, even though they were eligible to get Rs. 500 to meet the incidental expenses related to the delivery as per norms. The scheme's effect was visible as many women were opting for institutional delivery due to this scheme. This result is in line with Powell-Jackson et al. (2015).

Summary of Indicators

We now present the results of the indicators for two channels. Under Gram Sabha, the empowerment indicator based on raising issues

during the meeting was rated good. However, the indicators rated average or below. The indicators for other indicators were poor and very poor. The public schemes highlighted that MGNREGS was the indicators for goods and services reflected a high laggard (Table 8). level of non-satisfaction, with most of the satisfaction

Table 8*Indicator Study - Results*

	Gram Sabha	Goods and Services	Schemes
Very Poor	Participation	Electricity-S, Government Schemes-S,	MGNREGS-Man Work-Days,
Poor	Women Participation	Sanitation-A, Animal Husbandry-A, Health-S, Irrigation-S, Roads-S	
Average		Sanitation-S, Animal Husbandry-S, Extension Services-A, Health-A, Irrigation-A, Drinking Water-S, School-S	
Good	Empowerment	Extension Services-S,	AWC-A, JSY-A
Very Good		Road-A, Electricity-A, Drinking Water-A, Government Scheme-A, School-A	PDS-Ration Card, PDS-Quality of Service, MGNREGS-Job Cards, MDMS-A

Note. A-Access, S-Satisfaction

Source: Field Survey.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In this paper, we tried to understand the impact of Panchayats through economic, social and political channels. The economic and social channels were studied by evaluating the public goods and services and some major government schemes. The access to drinking water, government schemes, school, electricity and roads remained high. Vital services like irrigation, health, extension services, and sanitation had low availability. However, the level of satisfaction was sub-optimal. With regard to the schemes, PDS was utilised by most eligible families, whereas MDMS, JSY and AWC were well-run in these villages with good coverage. However, MGNREGS' enrolment lagged. For the political channel, we studied the working of Gram Sabhas, which was also sub-optimal. The analysis supplemented with the qualitative inputs indicated that decentralisation in

the surveyed areas has not been able to deliver the optimal results so far, and a part of the problem is found to be the limited power of Panchayats.

Our analysis and findings show that policy actions are required to strengthen the local governance in rural areas. First, it is suggested that Panchayats' role and power in various government schemes and allocating public goods and services must be increased. This can lead to better utilisation of public resources and improve the responsiveness of government welfare measures. Liwanag and Wyss (2018), in their study conducted in the Philippines, also highlighted the importance of good relations between local service providers and elected local officials for better decentralisation. Secondly, the local government's efficacy depends on deliberation and discussions with the public. The conduct of Gram Sabhas needs to be improved by spreading more

awareness about this forum and encouraging people to discuss the issues important to communities. Tantoh et al. (2021) found that in Cameroon, the involvement of rural communities in decisions and management related to water supply led to better outcomes. Hence, the Panchayats can involve communities in various issues related to public goods and services. Third, coming to the provision of public goods, a robust and efficient grievance redressal system seemed to be lacking on the ground. The local governments can play a pivotal role here by acting as a link between the public and service providers. The mechanisms to address public concerns over public goods and services need to be evolved using the Panchayats' closeness to the people. Seth et al. (2021) suggested that social audits can be extended to assess the grievance redressal at the Gram Panchayat level. Fourth, as regards public

schemes, we found a lack of awareness regarding criteria for beneficiaries and the assistance in many cases. Here also, we discovered that Gram Sabhas could be utilised to increase the understanding of these schemes, including their eligibilities and entitlements. Given the increasing internet penetration and mobile phone usage, information and communications technology can play an important role, as in the case of Indonesia (Adnan et al., 2021). Overall, we find that Gram Panchayats have greater scope to improve the well-being of the people, and the policy changes can help realise this potential.

Coming to the limitations of the present study, as it is a case study, the generalisation of the results is incorrect. However, one can draw important insights to understand the link between local governance and the people's well-being.

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