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Effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Rural Development

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Self – Independtly

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Abstract

PRIs promote rural development by combining the principles of decentralization and participation. Multiple factors including

administrative and financial skills, integrity and service commitment impact the performance of PRIs. This study evaluates PRIs performance using a researcher designed questionnaire administered to 300 respondents representing 10 Gram Panchayats. Respondents evaluated 11 components using a Likert scale of 1 to 5. Analysis included descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, correlation, multiple regression, chi-square and one way analysis of variance. Average effectiveness of PRIs and average rural development outcomes were 3.26 each. There was a positive and significant relationship between PRIs performance and rural development outcomes ($r = .676$, $p < .001$). The regression model estimated the impact of other factors and the combined effect of all the independent variables was 64.4% on the dependent variable. Effectiveness of PRIs to deliver results was dependent on the capacity and commitment of the implementing staff of the PRIs. The results support the conclusion that the PRIs performance is a result of the combined effect of multiple factors and multiple institutions. The effectiveness of the PRIs to achieve results is improved through participation of Gram Sabhas and integration of social accountability, transparency and participation in governance.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions; rural development; decentralisation; Gram Sabha; service delivery; local governance; accountability

1. Introduction

India's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are at the heart of the country's system of 'gram panchayat' or 'village council'. PRIs allow the Indian state to bring its administrative units as close to the grassroots as possible. PRIs cover planning and implementation of various social and economic welfare programs. The Indian state has accorded constitutional status to PRIs and established a separate governing structure at the lowest rung of the administration. However, studies have noted that several states have taken an uneven approach to transform PRIs and empower local bodies (DBS & IMF, 2017; Datta & Sodhi, 2021; Dalal &

Dhilon, 2023). In recent years, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has sought to enhance the existing frameworks on governance of PRIs. Devolution of powers and functions has been analyzed keeping in view the relevant capacity of local bodies (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2025b).

Panchayats play a critical role in connecting a broad range of local level welfare and development activities. It is also pivotal in delivery of several vital social and health related services. Various studies have highlighted that effective functioning and inter-agency coordination of local institutions have a positive impact on the overall public welfare and health of the community (Nanjunda, 2020; Deininger et al., 2020; Dutta & Fischer, 2021).

Recent trends in policy framework have been focused on local level performances, digital systems and participation. In 2024 and 2025, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj issued reports on improvement of plans and processes of the Panchayati Raj institutions and governance, use of digital systems, assessment of performance and capacity building (2024, 2025a). The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is developing performance evaluation systems integrated with local sustainable development goals (2025b).

Although some important advances have been made in the area of Panchayat performance evaluation, assessment of quality of governance and integration of SDGs at the local level, several other important aspects, such as representation of women, local government finances and services have not received appropriate attention. In this research, a methodology has been developed to assess the relationship between a set of independent variables including participation, service delivery, transparency, and administrative and institutional capacity, and effectiveness of PRIs in promoting rural development.

2. Review of Literature and Research Gap

Scholarly works published recently provide insights regarding the importance of both normative and operational aspects of decentralization. Dalal and Dhilon (2023) and Datta and Sodhi (2021) discuss the existence of gaps between constitutionally mandated provisions of decentralization and their actual implementation. Similar views have been expressed by researchers focused on the fiscal aspect of decentralization. For example, low levels of own source revenue and high dependence on other levels of government for funding in the state of Telangana have been documented (Reddy and Mohapatra, 2022). Mohapatra (2022) and the 15th Finance Commission of India (2021) highlight the importance of State Finance Commissions.

Research provides evidence on the importance of capacity in different sectors for development. Nanjunda (2020) demonstrates how in the case of rural health, more emphasis on participation, transparency and accountability can improve the current systems of rural health delivery. Rao et al. (2021) show how in the state of Karnataka, public health finance also was decentralized in an unbalanced manner. Similarly, Bellinger (2022) emphasizes the need for a multidimensional approach to analyzing rural decentralization and health. Evidence on the role of decentralization during the Covid-19 pandemic shows how important the role of decentralized village governments was in providing and ensuring social protection and health services (Dutta and Fischer, 2021; Pandey et al., 2022). Pandey et al. (2023) argue that for decentralized governments to be

effective, there needs to be an emphasis on improving governance, legislative and bureaucratic capacity at all levels, and adequate participation.

Evidence on participation of women in local governance systems also shows that women often face multiple constraints including lack of adequate capacity and social norms. However, there is also evidence to show that participation of women in local governance systems has improved women's access to social protection systems (Deininger et al., 2020; Prodip, 2023). There is, however, evidence to show that capacitating women to lead and participate in local governance systems improves women's access to social and economic opportunities (Varghese, 2020; Sindhuja et al., 2023).

Accountability mechanisms that empower citizens to monitor decisions and public finance have the potential to rebalance power relations in favor of citizens (Chawla, 2021). Advances in digital governance are expected to improve citizens' access to, and public officials' management of, the delivery of services (Fatmi & Swalehin, 2022). However, barriers to digital literacy and the adoption of digital technologies in rural areas are barriers to achieving such a goal. Improving citizens' participation in decision-making processes affects the transparency of the delivery of public services and the administration. Improving the evidence base in the area, this research adopts a multidisciplinary approach to fill the evidence gap.

3. Objectives and Hypotheses

This research seeks to accomplish five goals: assess the general performance of PRIs; study the connection between citizen participation and PRIs performance; study the connection between other factors, like transparency, administration, service delivery and program implementation, and rural development; study the connection between Gram Sabha participation and people's assessment of rural development; and suggest strategies to improve the implementation of local governance.

Also, five hypotheses were tested: Participation of rural citizens in decision-making processes increases the effectiveness of PRIs; transparency and accountability in the functioning of PRIs increase their effectiveness; the delivery of services by the state improves the situation of people living in rural areas; the effectiveness of PRIs in improving rural development is positive; and people participating in Gram Sabhas have different perceptions about the effectiveness of PRIs.

4. Research Methodology

A simulated case-based dataset was integrated with a cross-sectional quantitative design to construct a methodological example. The dataset comprises 300 cases, evenly distributed across 10 Gram Panchayats. This dataset was developed to illustrate the methodology and is not based on any primary data collection effort. The design considered the implications of rural local self-governance. The cases were designed to capture the attitudes and perceptions of members of the community, based on various personal attributes such as age and gender, and their participation in the Gram Sabha.

The conceptual framework of the instrument was based on the integrated approach to the achievement of the MDGs. Eleven critical areas were identified as citizen participation, transparency and accountability, administrative and financial management, service delivery, and the achievement of equity and social justice,

beneficiary satisfaction, and rural development outcome. The items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated 'strongly disagree' and 5 indicated 'strongly agree'. Items related to service delivery covered a range of social and economic infrastructure. Respondents assessed local public welfare facilities. Items were also developed to assess public perceptions on various social services.

This study used multiple statistical methods to analyze the data. Reliability was measured by Cronbach's Alpha. Means and standard deviations of the constructs were used to study central tendency and variability respectively. Bivariate relations were studied by means of Pearson's product-moment correlations. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the impact of citizen participation, and transparency and accountability, as well as the impact of adequate administration and effective service delivery and proper program implementation on the attainment of the goals of rural development. The relative impact of the independent variables was assessed by interpreting their standardized beta coefficients. The impact of participating in Gram Sabhas on the satisfaction level of the beneficiaries was assessed by the chi-square test. The impact of the Participation Rights Insurance (PRI) was assessed by one-way Analysis of Variance and the effect size was assessed by eta-squared. Statistical significance was assessed at the 5% level.

The purpose of the analysis is to develop a reproducible research methodology for PRI research. As the data used in the analysis are artificial, the interpretation of the results should be limited to the context of the analysis. Published literature and official reports have been cited to clarify the analysis.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Analytical Dataset (N = 300)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	161	53.7
	Female	139	46.3
Education	No formal schooling	23	7.7
	Primary	64	21.3
	Secondary	92	30.7
	Higher secondary	71	23.7
	Graduate+	50	16.7
Occupation	Agriculture	98	32.7
	Wage labour	54	18.0
	Self-employed	54	18.0
	Salaried	38	12.7
	Homemaker/Other	56	18.7
Income	<₹10,000	89	29.7
	₹10,000–19,999	103	34.3
	₹20,000–29,999	71	23.7
	₹30,000+	37	12.3
Social category	SC	71	23.7
	ST	25	8.3
	OBC	129	43.0
	Other	75	25.0
Gram Sabha participation	Never	60	20.0
	Rarely	84	28.0
	Sometimes	84	28.0
	Regularly	72	24.0

5. Results

Respondents represented a range of demographics. The average age was 39.0 (11.3) years. The sample was 53.7% male and 46.3% female. Respondent participation in OBC was 43.0% and SC 23.7%. The rest was comprised of ST and other social groups. About 20.0% of the sample reported participating in a Gram Sabha never, and 28.0% reported participating rarely. Respondents reported participating in a Gram Sabha, sometimes (28.0%), and/or regularly (24.0%). The rest (10.0%) reported they were never members of a Gram Sabha.

Reliability of the scale was from acceptable to strong. For programme implementation and rural development, Cronbach's alpha was, respectively, 0.855 and 0.788. The overall scale yielded an alpha of 0.831. The means of the items comprising the scale were in the middle to higher end (3.00 to 3.50) of the 5-point scale. The highest mean was for the inclusiveness of the PRI, and the lowest was for the service delivery item. The means of the overall scale, PRI effectiveness and rural development, were 3.26, 3.26, and 3.26, respectively.

The hypothesized relationships were all positive and significant at the 0.05 level. The correlation between PRI effectiveness and citizen participation was 0.425. Transparency and accountability were related to PRI effectiveness at 0.523. Rural development and service delivery also had a strong relation at 0.637. The correlation between programme implementation and administration was 0.458. The relationship between PRI effectiveness and rural development was the most strong, at 0.676, and supported the hypotheses.

The results of the multiple regression analysis showed that the model was significant ($F(5, 294) = 106.20$, $p < .001$) and explained the rural development outcome to the tune of 64.4% ($R^2 = .644$, Adj. $R^2 = .638$). Regarding the standardized coefficients (β), the highest was recorded by service delivery ($\beta = .290$, $p < .001$), followed by programme implementation ($\beta = .278$, $p < .001$), administrative capacity ($\beta = .225$, $p < .001$), and transparency and accountability ($\beta = .219$, $p < .001$). Citizen participation recorded the least standardized coefficient ($\beta = .077$, $p = .041$).

Beneficiary satisfaction was found to be strongly related to the level of participation of Gram Sabha members ($\chi^2(6) = 30.25$, $p < .001$). It was found that regular participation of Gram Sabha members increased beneficiary satisfaction from 16.7% to 50.0%. It was also found that the effectiveness of PRIs also varied with the level of participation of the community ($F(3, 296) = 17.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .153$). The mean effect score of PRIs of community members that did not participate in the meeting was 2.84, while that of community members that participated regularly was 3.70. The major constraints to the implementation of the community projects were inadequate and untimely releases of funds (48.7%), and inadequate financial and administrative/technical management of the projects (43.0% and 46.0% respectively).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Major PRI Effectiveness Dimensions

Construct	Mean	SD
Citizen Participation	3.27	0.74
Transparency & Accountability	3.27	0.72
Administrative Capacity	3.29	0.78
Financial Management	3.28	0.73
Service Delivery	3.22	0.78
Programme Implementation	3.27	0.70

Construct	Mean	SD
Inclusiveness	3.32	0.80
Responsiveness	3.23	0.79
Beneficiary Satisfaction	3.27	0.74
PRI Effectiveness	3.26	0.79
Rural Development Outcome	3.26	0.84

Table 3. Reliability Analysis of Multi-Item Constructs

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α
Citizen Participation	4	0.815
Transparency & Accountability	4	0.796
Administrative Capacity	4	0.834
Financial Management	4	0.823
Service Delivery	4	0.852
Programme Implementation	4	0.788
Inclusiveness	4	0.844
Responsiveness	4	0.837
Beneficiary Satisfaction	4	0.820
PRI Effectiveness	4	0.831
Rural Development Outcome	4	0.855

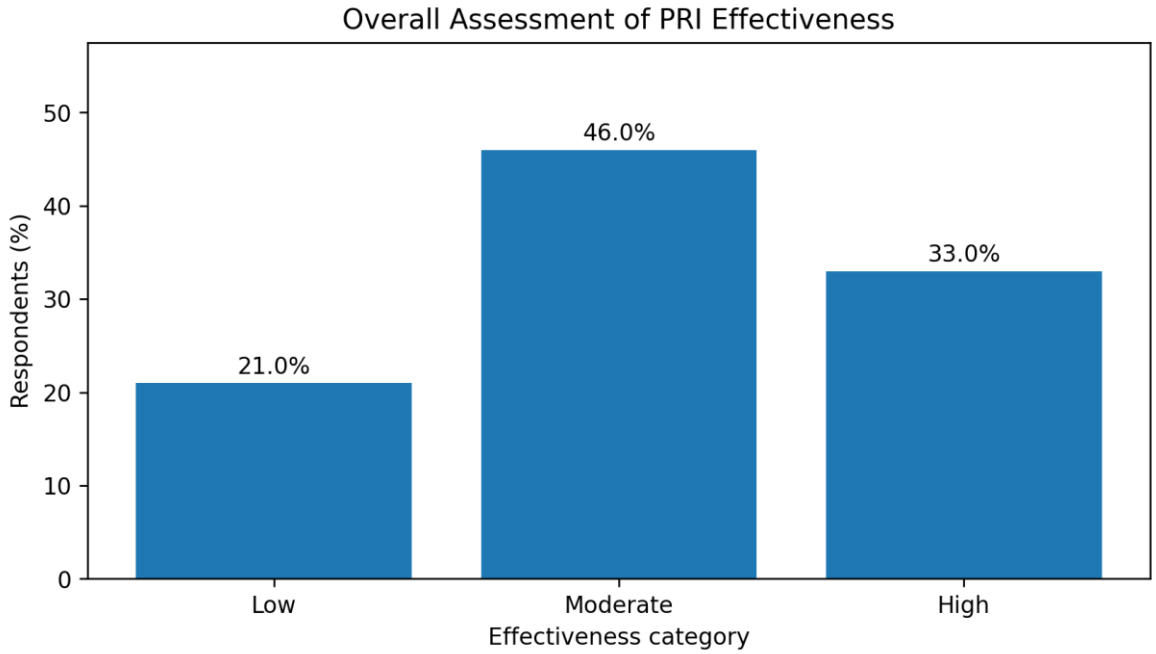


Figure 1. Distribution of overall PRI effectiveness categories derived from the analytical dataset.

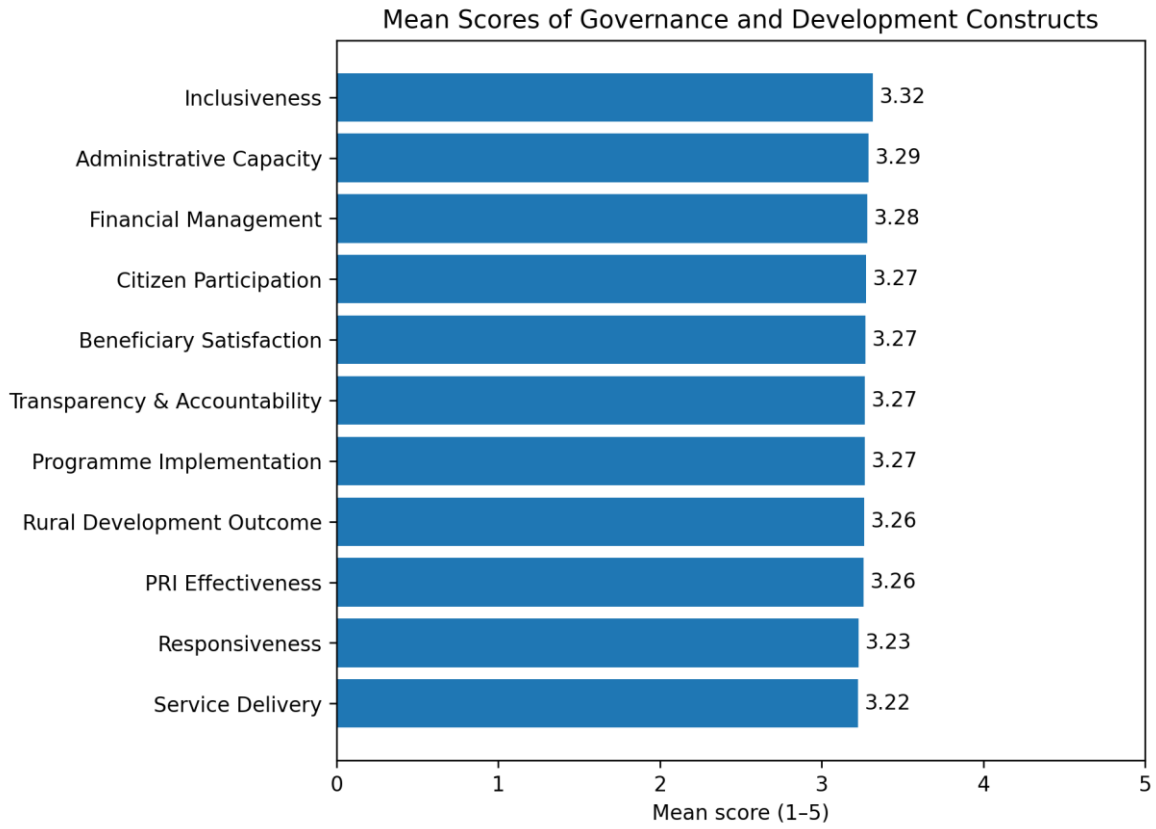


Figure 2. Mean scores of governance and rural-development constructs on the five-point scale.

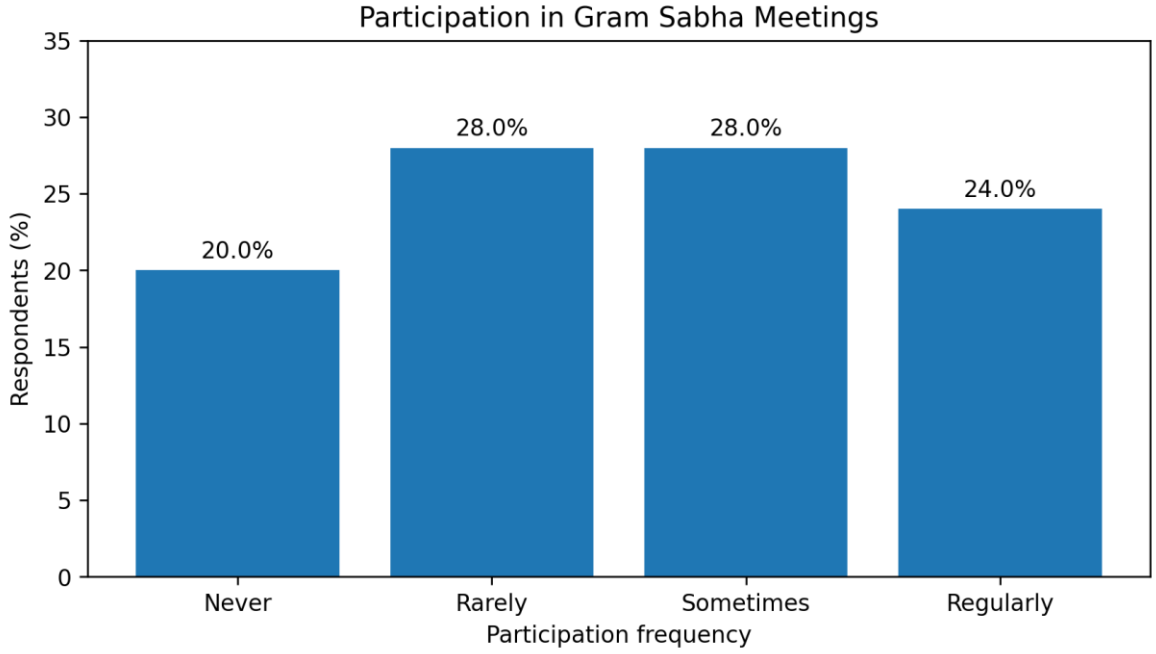


Figure 3. Distribution of Gram Sabha participation frequency in the analytical dataset.

Table 4. Pearson Correlation Matrix for Key Study Constructs

	CP	TA	AC	SD	PI	PE	RDO
CP	1.000	0.290	0.198	0.256	0.303	0.425	0.343
TA	0.290	1.000	0.381	0.461	0.432	0.523	0.580
AC	0.198	0.381	1.000	0.455	0.458	0.532	0.582
SD	0.256	0.461	0.455	1.000	0.449	0.563	0.637
PI	0.303	0.432	0.458	0.449	1.000	0.551	0.628
PE	0.425	0.523	0.532	0.563	0.551	1.000	0.676
RDO	0.343	0.580	0.582	0.637	0.628	0.676	1.000

Note. CP = Citizen Participation; TA = Transparency & Accountability; AC = Administrative Capacity; SD = Service Delivery; PI = Programme Implementation; PE = PRI Effectiveness; RDO = Rural Development Outcome. All displayed off-diagonal correlations are positive; the five prespecified relationships reported in the text were significant at $p < .001$.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Model Summary for Rural Development Outcome

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	df	p
0.802	0.644	0.638	106.20	5, 294	< .001

Table 6. Multiple Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	-0.748	0.188	—	-3.99	< .001
Citizen Participation	0.087	0.042	0.077	2.06	0.041
Transparency & Accountability	0.254	0.049	0.219	5.24	< .001
Administrative Capacity	0.242	0.045	0.225	5.40	< .001
Service Delivery	0.313	0.046	0.290	6.77	< .001
Programme Implementation	0.334	0.052	0.277	6.48	< .001

Table 7. Gram Sabha Participation, Satisfaction, and PRI Effectiveness

Participation	Low sat.	Moderate sat.	High sat.	PE Mean	PE SD
Never	24	26	10	2.84	0.84
Rarely	31	36	17	3.08	0.68
Sometimes	14	39	31	3.36	0.66
Regularly	14	22	36	3.70	0.76

Note. Chi-square: $\chi^2(6) = 30.25$, $p < .001$. One-way ANOVA: $F(3, 296) = 17.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.153$.

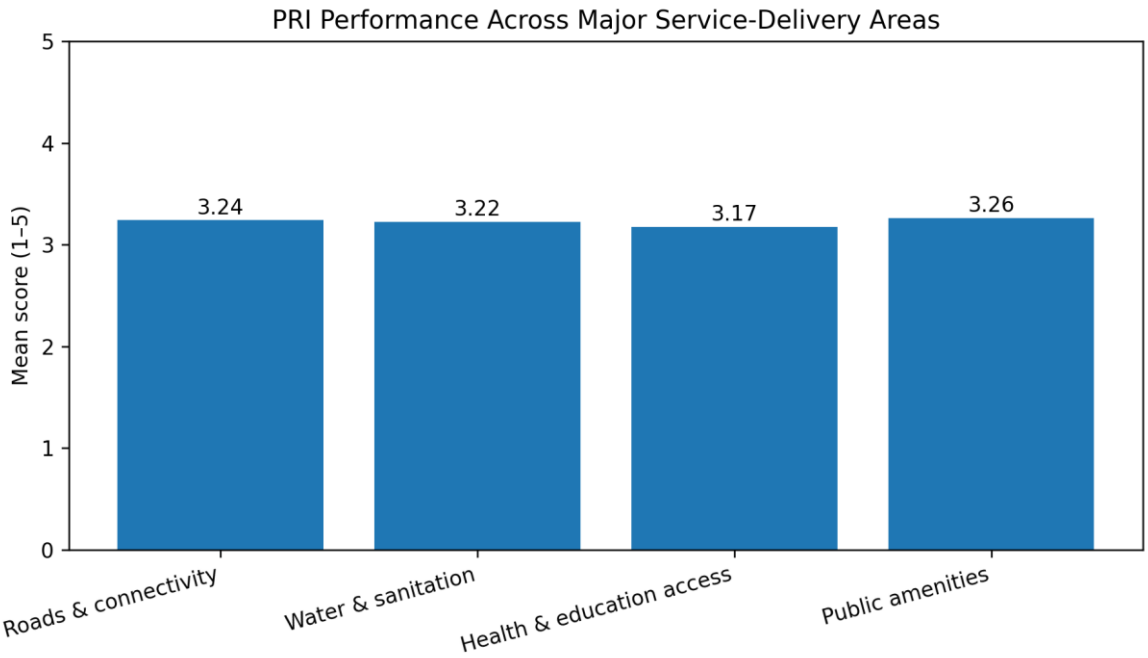


Figure 4. Mean perceived performance across four service-delivery areas.

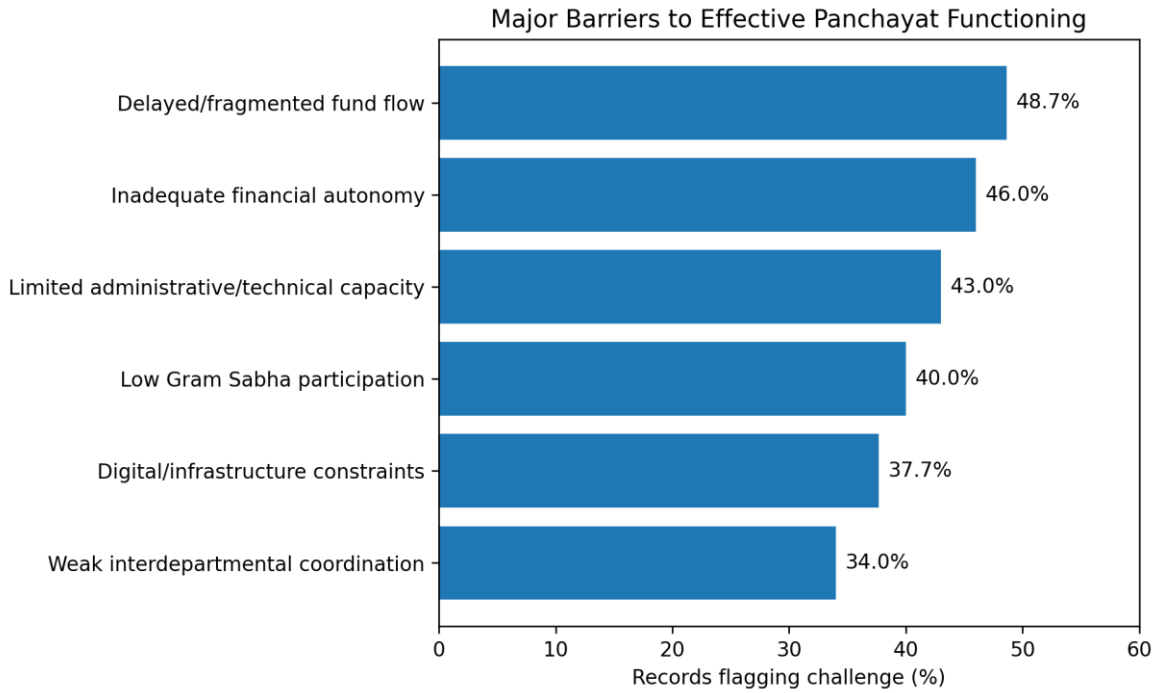


Figure 5. Percentage of analytical records flagging major implementation challenges.

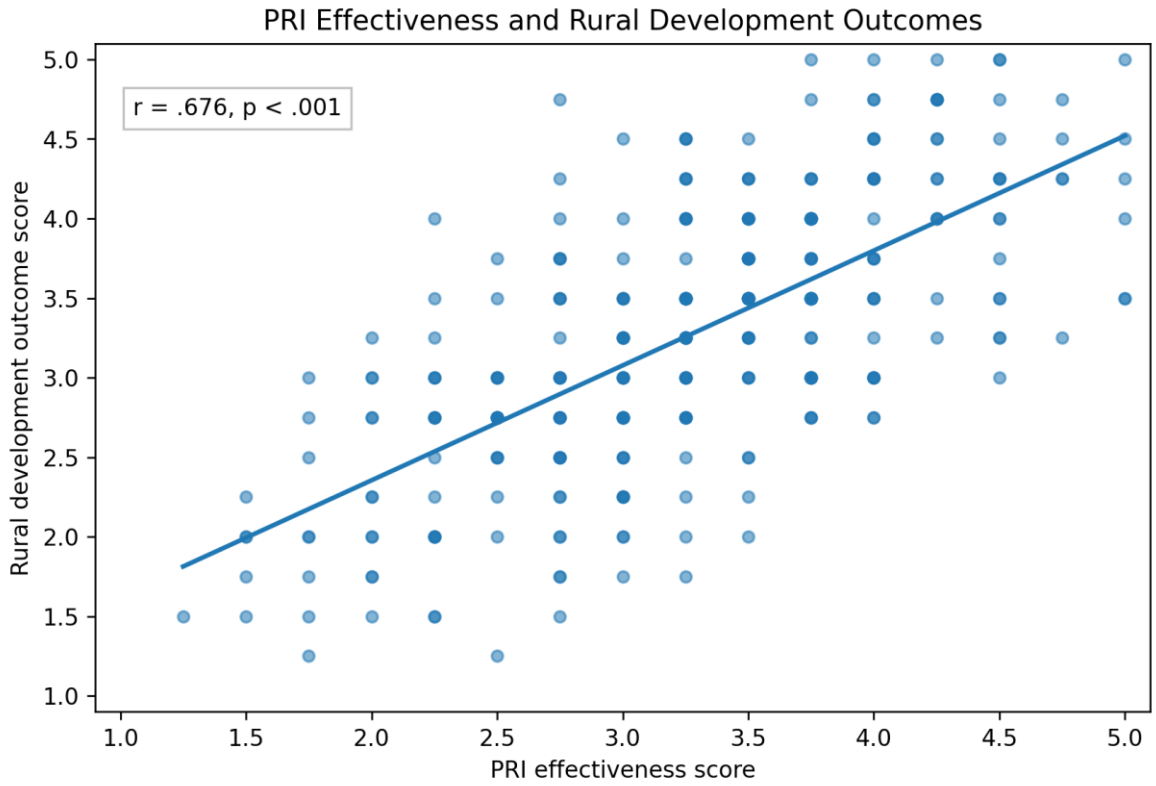


Figure 6. Relationship between PRI effectiveness and rural-development outcome scores with fitted linear trend.

6. Discussion

The analysis suggests that the role of the PRIs is not as narrow as the comment suggests. Regression results show participation was not the largest factor. Evidently, factors like the capacity of the PRIs, and the transparency of the process, were of greater importance. This matches the body of literature that argues that decentralisation will only be effective if local institutions are empowered, including the capacity of local leaders to implement policies, and adequate resources (Datta & Sodhi, 2021; Reddy & Mohapatra, 2022; Mohapatra, 2022).

The association between the implementation of development programs and the outcomes of the programs is particularly strong in the case of rural development. This has been documented in the body of academic work in this field. It is equally important to mention the role of local governance in rural development. In this regard, there is a wealth of evidence that strengthening the governance and accountability of local institutions can strengthen the rural health delivery systems (Nanjunda, 2020; Rao et al., 2021).

There is ample evidence to suggest that the operationalization of decentralization is positively correlated with improvement in health outcomes and overall welfare. This was especially the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. The evidence suggests that decentralization strengthened the ability of local authorities to implement coordinated inter-sectoral responses to provide welfare services to the most vulnerable (Dutta & Fischer, 2021; Pandey et al., 2022).

Transparency independently improved many development outcomes. This may be attributed to social audits. Transparency can also be facilitated with technology. However, due to inequalities in computer and Internet access and usage, transparency should be combined with other means to ensure citizen participation, such as Gram Sabhas. The overall results suggest that an integration of various governance reforms may be more effective than a focus on a single governance reform.

7. Strengthening the Panchayati Raj Institutions

First, improvement of local governance may be achieved through an annual cycle consisting of diagnosis, planning, budgeting, implementation, disclosure, and impact assessment. Each stage should be preceded by participation of citizens, especially traditionally marginalized groups, through Gram Sabhas. Citizens should also be allowed to participate in the formulation of proposals to be considered for adoption. Second, capacity development of local functionaries should enable the effective and efficient management of program implementation and schemes integration. Functionaries should also be trained to integrate use of various capital and current assets. State and local governments should strengthen laws to facilitate own-source revenue. During the implementation of scheme integration, a balance should be struck between reducing poverty and improving the welfare of various social and economic groups.

Fourth, as for the management of services, a local dashboard will be developed to capture the following services: road, water and sanitation, social and other infrastructure and services, education, public health and other social services, and livelihoods. Each of the services will be completed when a responsible official establishes milestones, completes the service, identifies expenditure, and captures feedback from beneficiaries. The responsible official will also maintain a grievance registry. Fifth, accountability will be assessed by reviewing the outcomes of public expenditures. The outcomes will be assessed against grievance redressal, the minutes and records of open meetings, and social audits. The Ministry's directive to digitize Panchayat governance provides a policy environment to integrate the aforementioned initiatives. Other related initiatives of the Ministry provide additional policy environment to the integration of the suggested initiatives (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2024, 2025a; Press Information Bureau, 2025).

Recommended key performance indicators include time bound milestones in realization of other related development goals (e.g. time bound grievance redressal, social audit completion, timely delivery of services). Other performance indicators include achievement of development goals and satisfaction of beneficiaries. The performance indicators will be useful for identification of performance and capacity challenges of local administrators (e.g. poor performance in meeting development goals, lack of capacity to achieve development goals). Supervisory and supportive visits by administrators at higher levels will help local administrators prioritize performance challenges.

Table 8. Implementation Matrix for Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions

Implementation area	Proposed intervention	Responsible stakeholder	Performance indicator	Expected outcome
Institutional strengthening	Role-based training in planning, procurement, accounts, assets and convergence	State institutes; district/block administration; Gram Panchayat	Training completion; plan quality; project delay rate	Improved administrative and technical capacity
Participatory governance	Advance agendas, ward consultations, inclusive Gram Sabha scheduling and action tracking	Gram Panchayat; ward members; community organizations	Attendance; women/SC/ST participation; proposals acted upon	Broader participation and local ownership
Financial strengthening	Predictable releases, timely utilization, public accounts and lawful own-source revenue measures	State government; SFC; Panchayat finance staff	Fund-release timeliness; utilization rate; own revenue trend	Greater fiscal reliability and autonomy
Transparency & accountability	Social audit, expenditure display, grievance tracking, open records and feedback	Gram Panchayat; social-audit units; citizens	Audit completion; grievance resolution; disclosure compliance	Higher accountability and public trust
Service delivery	Milestone-based monitoring of roads, water, sanitation, amenities, health/education-linked functions	Gram Panchayat; line departments; block administration	On-time completion; service score; beneficiary satisfaction	More reliable rural services
Digital Panchayat	Digital records, e-accounting, project tracking and accessible local dashboards	Gram Panchayat; state IT support; MoPR platforms	Digital transaction coverage; data completeness; update frequency	Better visibility and evidence-based management
Monitoring & evaluation	Quarterly KPI review and targeted support for weak dimensions	Block/district administration; Gram Panchayat	KPI improvement; corrective actions closed	Continuous performance improvement

8. Policy and Managerial Implications

Results indicated that for Panchayat leaders, both reliability of public service delivery and engagement in participatory governance, assumed equal importance. Targeted capacity building by Block and District administration will assist in addressing gaps in service delivery and implementation. State administration could assist in developing an enabling environment through mechanism such as improvement in intergovernmental coordination, transfer and posting of officers, following-up with the State Finance Commission Awards, training and capacity building, ICT infrastructure and system integration. Community based organizations (CBO) and Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) could assist in improving transparency and accountability in service delivery through demand and supply side interventions. The use of program implementation experience and evidence for course correction is appreciated. It is important to take local context, circumstances and situation into account before making any change.

10. Conclusion

This research provides an integrated assessment framework to measure results and impacts of PRIs on rural development. Based on the case studies analyzed, it was observed that PRIs, when adequately empowered and enabled, improved results in rural development. Service delivery, program implementation and administrative process, and PRIs transparency, were some of the determining factors of multivariate analysis. It was observed that PRIs' transparency improved the participation of Gram Sabhas and enhanced effectiveness and satisfaction of the local populations. It was also noted that focused evaluation of PRIs went beyond the assessment of elections and finances. Considering the present-day situation of the Indian rural development, assessment and focusing of rural local bodies' PRIs, participation, capacity, accountability, and determination to implement and attain concrete results should be considered. Enhancing capacity of PRIs and focusing of the aforementioned aspects is significant and may improve the overall rural development results.

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