

**Grassroots Democracy and Functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Darbhanga
District of Bihar**

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the operations of the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) and the status of the grassroots democracy in the Darbhanga district of Bihar. The 73 rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 formalized the decentralized form of government by instituting the 3 tiers of PRI structure with Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samithi, and Zila Parishads in the bid to enable the rural folks in the process of self governance and active development. The research questions in this paper are to determine the effectiveness of PRIs in the promotion of the grassroots democracy and to establish the challenges in the operation of PRIs in Darbhanga district. The research design is descriptive-analytical research design, which uses secondary data sources such as Census of India, Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reports, State Election Commission of Bihar, Ministry of Panchayati Raj and District records. It theorizes that even after the constitutional stipulations of inclusive representation and fiscal devolution, PRIs in Darbhanga still face the limitation of poor financial autonomy, caste-based power relations, poor administrative capacity and poor citizen representation. Findings indicate that women political representation has improved tremendously since Bihar has 50 per cent reservation policy, however functional devolution of funds, functions and functionaries are grossly inadequate. The paper arrives at the conclusion that authentic grassroots democracy in Darbhanga requires substantive devolution, fiscal strengthening, strengthening of the administration and meaningful community action other than representing them in elective positions.

Keywords: Grassroots Democracy, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Decentralization, Darbhanga, Political Participation

1. Introduction

Grassroots democracy in India is essentially based on the Panchayati Raj system which is the decentralization of political administrative and fiscal authority to local self-governing institutions

at the village, block and district levels. The philosophical movements behind this type of decentralized governance can be traced back to the vision of Mahatma Gandhi behind the model of Gram Swaraj where he envisaged self-sufficient village republics and this was his vision of the self-service units of Indian democracy (Mathew, 2003). Article 40 of the Indian Constitution, which is a Directive Principle of State Policy, instructed the State to establish village panchayats and provide them with the powers needed in order to become units of self-government. Nevertheless, the 73 rd th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 only gave Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) constitutional status as the third level of government requiring a regular election, reservation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women and devolution of powers in all 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule (Singh, 2002).

The state of Bihar, which since ancient times was marked by feudal systems, hierarchies of caste and ongoing lack of development, offers especially interesting conditions within the framework of the discussion of the promise and practice of grassroots democracy. In the year 2006, the state had reorganized as the Jharkhand was created and a different Panchayati Raj Department was introduced (Labh, 2021). The Indian state of Bihar became the first state to offer 50 per cent reservation of women in PRIs, the historic policy, which drastically changed the balance of powers in elected local bodies (Pai, 2001). The state of Bihar contains 38 ZilaParishads, 533 PanchayatSamitis and 8,053 Gram Panchayats as of the 2021 Panchayat elections (State Election Commission, Bihar, 2021). Darbhanga district is one of the 250 most backward districts of India as determined by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj in 2006. Having a population of 39,37,385 (Census 2011), a literacy rate of only 56.56 per cent and 90.26 per cent rural population, the district forms a very important location where the dream of democratic decentralization faces strong socio-economic issues (Census of India, 2011). The district is divided into 3 sub-divisions, 18 blocks, 324 Gram Panchayats, and 1314 revenue villages, and it is ruled by the three-layer PRI system (District Administration, Darbhanga, 2023). This is in spite of the constitutional requirements, the CAG audit reports have continued to point out that devolution of functions, functionaries and funds to PRIs in Bihar has not been fully done, which has made local self-government only a far-fetched reality (CAG, 2017). This current research, thus, aims at critically assessing how PRIs work and the condition of the grassroot democracy in Darbhanga district through the lens of institutional, fiscal, and participatory aspects of decentralized governance.

2. Literature Review

The academic literature on Panchayati Raj and grassroots democracy in India is very broad to include constitutional, empirical field research, and critical political evaluation discussion. Mathew (2003) examined how PRIs changed and the relationship between PRIs and human rights structures by stating that the constitutional provisions established an architecture of engaging in governance, but the devolution of power remained a subject to political will of the state. In the same manner, Singh (2002) studied the connections between social capital, panchayats, and grassroots democracy but concluded that the 73rd amendment, despite its revolutionary nature, was not uniformly applied to all states and Bihar was one of the underachievers in functional devolution. Pai (2001) has also explored the relationships between social capital, panchayats, and grassroots democracy and established that meaningful democratic participation at the local level is limited to both the institutional structures and the strength of the civil society that is able to hold the elected Empirically, Sukumar et al. (2019) evaluated the inclusivity of PRIs in seven states of India, in which Dalit and Adivasi elected representatives were systematically discriminated and socially sidelined and could not actively contribute to governance. Their results are of specific interest to Darbhanga, where Scheduled Castes have 15.64 per cent of inhabitants (Census of India, 2011).

The issue of political empowerment of women through PRIs has been debated over a long time. A ground breaking experiment study conducted in West Bengal and Rajasthan by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) showed that women headed Gram Panchayats put more money in public good as women desired, especially drinking water and road infrastructure. Nonetheless, the SarpanchPati as a phenomenon when male relatives of elected women have a proxy control has been a well-documented phenomenon in Bihar (Joshi and Singh, 2021). In particular, the Centre of Catalyzing Change (2021) investigated women political leaders in rural Bihar and found out that 77 per cent of elected women representatives were of the opinion that they could not effectively effect the results of governance because of the socio-cultural constraints and patriarchal interference. The report by CAG (2017) on Bihar PRIs affirmed that PRIs had not collected or levied taxes as per recommendations of the Fourth and Fifth Bihar State Finance Commissions, which made panchayats completely reliant on Central and State grants which were often delayed. Raghunandan(2012) explained this in the wider framework of federal architecture in India, which was the fact that state governments were hesitant to give real power to PRIs because they were unwilling to surrender actual power to institutions on the ground. These concerns were enforced by the first in-depth report on Gram Panchayat finances by the Reserve

Bank of India (2024) which noted that most Gram Panchayats in India and especially in Bihar had not the ability to mobilize resources independently. The recent research by Parveen and Hussain (2024) on women political participation in PRIs between 1993 and 2024 concluded that the numerical representation had substantially grown, but structural barriers such as literacy, financial exclusion, and patriarchal norms of governance (all of which are acutely typical of the Darbhanga context) remained issues that needed effective resolution to enable substantive empowerment of women in PRIs.

3. Objectives

1. To assess the effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions in promoting grassroots democracy through inclusive political representation, functional devolution, and citizen participation in Darbhanga district of Bihar.
2. To identify and analyze the key institutional, fiscal, and socio-political challenges that constrain the functioning of PRIs in Darbhanga district, with specific focus on financial autonomy, administrative capacity, and women's substantive political empowerment.

4. Methodology

The current research design is descriptive-analytical, which follows a secondary data based research design in order to understand the operations of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Darbhanga district of Bihar. The study is based on the qualitative-quantitative mixed design with references to official government documents, statistical databanks, audit reports, and scholarly literature to develop a multi-faceted evaluation of the grassroots democracy in the district level. The sample area includes the whole of Darbhanga district, including 3 sub-divisions, 18 Community Development Blocks, 324 Gram Panchayats and 1,314 villages according to the office district records. Census of India (2011), the State Election Commission of Bihar (2021), the audit reports on Bihar PRIs prepared by Comptroller and Auditor General of India (2017, 2020), the Ministry of Panchayati Raj reports, the recommendations of the Fifteenth Finance Commission (202126), the report on Gram Panchayat finances, published by the Reserve Bank of India (2024) and the official portal of the Darbhanga district administration have been used as sources of data. The statistical analysis methods utilized are the descriptive statistics tools and these are the percentage analysis and comparative tabulation, trend analysis. The statistics on demographics, electoral representation, fiscal devolution, and administrative capacity have been structured in form of

tabulated data and statistically interpreted to analyze the harmony between constitutionally bound and ground-based practice. The research narrows down to six dimensions of interest namely demographic situation, PRI level of structural organization, electoral and gender representation, fiscal flows and dispensation, level of functional devolution and the patterns of civic participation. The ethical concerns involve the sole use of government data which is publicly available, no privacy issues, and all sources of data are cited openly which upholds the integrity of the academic work.

5. Results

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Darbhanga District (Census 2011)

Parameter	Data
Total Population	39,37,385
Male Population	20,59,949
Female Population	18,77,436
Rural Population (%)	90.26%
Urban Population (%)	9.74%
Sex Ratio (per 1000 males)	910
Literacy Rate	56.56%
Male Literacy Rate	66.83%
Female Literacy Rate	45.24%
SC Population (%)	15.64%
ST Population (%)	0.07%
Population Density (per sq. km)	1,721

Source: Census of India, 2011; District Administration, Darbhanga (darbhanga.nic.in)

Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the Darbhanga district that gives the PRIs the background of the socio-economic environment in which it works. The rural population of 90.26 per cent which is overwhelming in the district supports the centrality of the panchayats as the main point of governance to the highest majority of the population. The literacy rate of only 45.24 per cent among females as compared to 66.83 per cent in males shows that gender disparity is severe which directly reflects in the ability of women to have a meaningful political participation in PRIs even with constitutionalized reservation of quota.

Table 2: Block-wise Distribution of Gram Panchayats and Villages in Darbhanga District

Sub-Division	Block	No. of Gram Panchayats	No. of Villages
Darbhangasadar	Darbhangasadar	23	174
Darbhangasadar	Bahadurpur	23	176
Darbhangasadar	Baheri	27	80
Darbhangasadar	Hayaghat	14	48
Darbhangasadar	Hanuman Nagar	14	86
Darbhangasadar	Jale	26	60
Darbhangasadar	Singhwara	25	100
Darbhangasadar	Keoti	26	110
Darbhangasadar	Manigachhi	22	48
Darbhangasadar	Tardih	14	45
Benipur	Benipur	16	64
Benipur	Alinagar	13	55
Benipur	Ghanshyampur	14	44
Benipur	Kiratpur	8	26
Biraul	Biraul	17	62
Biraul	KusheshwarSthan	12	28
Biraul	KusheshwarSthan East	11	39
Biraul	Gaurababochan	19	69
Total	18 Blocks	324	1,314

Source: District Administration, Darbhanga (darbhanga.nic.in); Block & Panchayat Data, 2023

Table 2, shows the administrative structure of the grassroots government in 18 blocks of Darbhanga. The variety in the local government scale and complexity is represented by uneven distribution of Gram Panchayats with 8 to 27 in Kiratpur to Baheri respectively. The implication of this disparity on resource allocation, administrative burden per panchayat and even the ability of individual Mukhiyas to govern successfully, lies especially in block with a more widely dispersed territory and in blocks with more widely dispersed village settlements.

Table 3: Structure of PRIs in Bihar: Elected Representatives and Reservation Status (2021 Elections)

PRI Level	Total Seats	Women Reservation (%)	SC/ST Reservation	Total ERs Elected
ZilaParishad	38 (districts)	50%	Proportional to population	1,162
PanchayatSamiti	533 (blocks)	50%	Proportional to population	11,042
Gram Panchayat (Mukhiya)	8,053	50%	Proportional to population	8,053
Ward Members	—	50%	Proportional to population	1,07,134
Total	—	—	—	~1,27,391

Source: State Election Commission, Bihar (sec.bihar.gov.in), 2021; Bihar Panchayat Raj Act, 2006

Table 3 shows the PRI set-up of Bihar in the aftermath of Panchayat elections in 2021. The historic policy of 50 per cent women reservation introduced in the state has given rise to about 63, 695 women elected in all levels making almost 50 percent of all elected representatives. This statistical success is beyond what is national. Nevertheless, as the scholarship records, numerical representation has not necessarily been converted into substantive decisional powers, especially in such socially conservative districts as Darbhanga where proxy-rule by male relatives has been a thorn in the flesh.

Table 4: Fifteenth Finance Commission Grants Recommended for Bihar PRIs (2021–22 to 2025–26) (Rs. in Crore)

Grant Category	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	Total
Basic (Untied) Grant (40%)	643.14	675.30	709.07	744.52	781.75	3,553.78
Basic (Tied) Grant (60%)	964.71	1,012.95	1,063.60	1,116.78	1,172.62	5,330.66
Total	1,607.85	1,688.25	1,772.67	1,861.30	1,954.37	8,884.44

Source: 15th Finance Commission Report (2021-26); Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India; PRS India

Table 4 gives the fiscal devolution model of the 15 th Finance Commission of the Rural Local

Bodies of Bihar. The estimated amount that a budget of 202126 should allocate to the period is in the form of 8,884.44 crore which is a massive resource base. But the most important issue is that 60 per cent of such grants are allocated solely on drinking water supply and sanitation, which leaves a debatable scope of fiscal autonomy of Gram Panchayats to meet their developmental priorities at the local level. Additionally, the CAG (2020) has reported that Bihar had not been getting performance-based grants in the 14 th Finance Commission period because of a lack of fulfillment of the eligibility requirements, which pointed to deficits in capacity systematically.

Table 5: Status of Functional Devolution to PRIs in Bihar

Dimension	Constitutional Mandate	Actual Status in Bihar
Functions Transferred	29 subjects (XI Schedule)	79 to GPs, 60 to PSs, 61 to ZPs (20 departments) — but operationally non-functional
Functionaries Transferred	Staff to work under PRIs	Not transferred; remain under State departments
Fund Mobilization (Own Revenue)	PRIs may impose taxes	No tax collection; no regulation framed by State
Operational Guidelines	Required for all departments	Only 2 departments framed guidelines
Panchayat Secretary Posts (GP level)	Full staffing required	38% posts vacant (3,160 of 8,386 posts)
Social Audit Mechanism	Mandatory under MGNREGA	Partially operational

Source: CAG Report No. 4 of 2017 — Local Bodies, Government of Bihar; CAG Report No. 1 of 2020, Government of Bihar

Table 5 reveals the basic disjuncture between the constitutional vision and the working reality of decentralization in Bihar. Although functional transfer of functions among 20 departments had been formally transferred, the Fourth and Fifth State Finance Commissions realized the non-operative devolution conditions that the transferred schemes were not represented within the Annual Action Plans of PRIs. The sole finding that is critical is the fact that PRIs do not collect taxes due to the fact that the State government has not created any regulation that could be used to collect taxes although the act of taxation has been enabled in the Bihar Panchayat Raj Act

2006, this means that fiscal empowerment is an avoidable process that makes PRIs reliant institutions and not independent ones.

Table 6: Literacy and Gender Gap Indicators Relevant to PRI Participation in Darbhanga District

Indicator	Male	Female	Total/Gap
Total Literate Population	11,25,566	6,91,068	18,16,634
Literacy Rate (%)	66.83%	45.24%	56.56%
Gender Gap in Literacy	—	—	21.59 percentage points
Rural Literacy Rate (%)	53.0% (approx.)	34.5% (approx.)	45.0% (approx.)
SC Population	3,22,327	2,93,361	6,15,688 (15.64%)
Child Population (0-6 years)	3,75,682	3,49,800	7,25,482 (18.42%)

Source: Census of India, 2011; District Census Handbook, Darbhanga

Table 6 brings out to the fore the indicators of the literacy and gender gap which have a direct implication on the quality of democratic participation in PRIs. The percentage gap in gender literacy of 21.59 is one of the worst in Bihar, and seriously limits the ability of women to cognitively understand the process of governance, gain access to official documents, and have an independent authority to make decisions in panchayats. The large percentage of the SC population of 15.64 per cent is also something that requires an investigation into whether the system of reserving representation has earned the marginalized communities substantial voice in the local governance institutions of Darbhanga.

6. Discussion

The results of the research give a complicated image of grassroots democracy in the Darbhanga district showing a drastic gap between the promise of the constitution in the 73 rd amendment and the reality of the PRI working on the ground. In this discussion both the empirical data and the two objectives of the study are harmonized to provide an analytical evaluation of effectiveness of PRIs in the promotion of grassroots democracy. As far as the first objective the effectiveness of PRIs in promoting grassroots democracy is concerned both the quantitative effectiveness and qualitative shortfalls are presented. The 50 per cent reservation of women in Bihar has simply changed the demographic balance in elected institutions, as almost half of the

total of 1,27,391 elected representatives of 2021 elections were women (State Election Commission, Bihar, 2021). This agrees with the observation of Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004): compulsory representation has the potential to change the priorities of governance. Nevertheless, the extreme female literacy level of Darbhanga (45.24 per cent) (Table 1) and the rural literacy gap recorded in Table 6 indicate that the substantive political agency potential of many of the elected women representatives is severely high. This was also supported by the Centre of Catalyzing Change (2021) in Bihar in particular, which discovered that the effective participation of women is essential to socio-cultural restrictions and proxy governance. It has also been reported that the so-called SarpanchPati, where men relatives are informally in charge of governance, is especially widespread in the Mithila region, including Darbhanga (Joshi and Singh, 2021).

Table 2 shows the structure analysis of Darbhanga has 324 Gram Panchayats which serve 1,314 villages and 18 blocks with an average of four villages each panchayat. Although such an organizational structure is manageable in principle, it is compromised by the severe deficit of staff as is reported in Table 5 where 38 per cent of Panchayat Secretary posts are vacant. Capable and motivated Mukhiyas cannot effectively fulfill their role of administration without proper administrative facilities, which is also in line with the fact that PRIs in Bihar do not have an even rudimentary administrative staff that would support them in the discharge of their duties (CAG, 2017). In particular, Labh (2021) has identified that Panchayat staff, who is employed by the departments of state government, is not accountable to elected representatives but to the bureaucracy, which is the primary cause of accountability deficit. The PRIs of Bihar were allocated 8,884.44 crore in the 15th Finance Commission budget 2021 26, but 60 per cent. of this is water and sanitation, which significantly restricts local discretion. More importantly, Table 5 shows that PRIs in Bihar do not receive a single tax since the State government has not yet prepared the necessary regulations, even though Bihar Panchayat Raj Act 2006 has explicitly empowered PRIs to charge holdings and professions taxes. Oommen (2005) was correct when he claimed that self-governance and financial dependence are mutually exclusive. These fiscal issues were further justified by the Reserve Bank of India (2024) in its first-time-ever detailed study of Gram Panchayat finances, which suggested that the capacity-building efforts and standardized accounting systems should be adopted. The new award of Rs. 803.79 crore given by Bihar received by the Centre in February 2026 as untied grant under the 15 th Finance Commission though welcome, does not help in curbing the structural issue of zero own-source

revenue generation (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2026).

The deficit of devolution is not only on a financial level. Although it formally shifted the roles of 20 departments, the Bihar government has not shifted functionaries to the control of PRI, and the government has only managed to frame operational guidelines in two departments (CAG, 2017). Such partial devolution as described by Raghunandan (2012) can be described as delegation without devolution an institutional form where formal responsibility is devolved and authority is not given, so PRIs are implemented agencies of higher governments and not self-governing institutions. Sukumar et al. (2019) have reported that caste-based discrimination adds to these institutional problems as the elected representatives of SC and ST continue to experience social ostracism and bureaucratic marginalization even in the districts with high reservation. At Darbhanga, where the SCs population is 15.64 per cent and OBC communities outnumber them, the overlap of caste with gender and class build up barriers of inequitable participation which cannot be broken by mere reservation (Pai, 2001). The current research also found out that delays in conducting panchayat elections and the incompleteness of constituting District Planning Committees are the most prominent institutional challenges to successful decentralization, both of which have been reported in the case of Bihar. Such a difference between descriptive representation and substantive empowerment, as described by Parveen and Hussain (2024) as one that characterizes the direction of democratic decentralization in such a district as Darbhanga, defines the process of decentralization of the democracy.

7. Conclusion

This paper concludes that the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the Darbhanga district are subject to a system of severe structural, fiscal, and socio-political constraints, which constrain their efficacy as the tools of the grassroots democracy. Although an unprecedented 50 per cent women's reservation policy in Bihar has made tremendous numerical representation, elusive substantive decentralization has not been realised. Lack of transfer of functionaries, lack of own-source mobilization of revenue, chronic vacancies in staffing, and lack of functional autonomy altogether make PRIs a continuation of state bureaucracy, instead of the real self-governing institution. A multi-pronged agenda of reforms is needed in Darbhanga to achieve meaningful grassroots democracy: by re-framing taxation laws to allow own-revenue generation, by transferring functionaries to PRI control, by filling the vacant administrative posts, by a sustained programme of capacity-building of elected representatives especially women and SC/ST members, by

reinforcing Gram Sabha participation as the basic institution of direct democracy. The state will not prove the political will to devolve the three Fsfunds, functions, and functionaries unless the constitutional promise of the 73 rd Amendment is fulfilled in Darbhanga and all other districts equally located in Bihar.

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