

From Passive Beneficiary to Active Citizens

As India continues to grapple with complex developmental and governance challenges ranging from climate change to urbanisation, participatory democracy offers a pathway towards inclusive, accountable, and sustainable development. Active citizens, empowered communities, and responsive local governments form the foundation of this vision.

Over the course of India's post-Independence development journey, a profound shift has taken place from citizens framed as passive beneficiaries of state-led welfare to citizens recognised as active agents, co-creators, and stewards of development. This transformation was neither linear nor automatic; it emerged through historical traditions of subaltern participation, gradual policy reforms, institutional experimentation, and the growing demand for deepening democracy. India's early trajectory of development planning, centered around the Five-Year Plans, was shaped by the urgency of nation-building. The initial plans prioritised industrialisation, agricultural expansion, and large-scale infrastructure, efforts that positioned the state at the centre of development and citizens as recipients of its schemes. This centralised model, while necessary for a young nation's immediate needs, inadvertently created a culture of dependency, where expertise flowed from the top, and local knowledge was overlooked.

By the late 1960s and 70s, however, the limitations of this model became visible. Evidence from the ground pointed to issues of sustainability, lack of ownership, and ineffective utilisation of resources. At the same time, alternative traditions of participation rooted in folk culture, mutual aid, and collective decision-making began to receive recognition in development discourse. The emergence of community-led practices in literacy,

health, agriculture, and social mobilisation, influenced by thinkers such as Paulo Freire and Mahatma Gandhi, challenged the assumption that the poor were passive or incapable of shaping development. These ideas laid the intellectual foundation for participatory research and community-based development, enabling a new paradigm to take shape.

Participatory Development: Early Phase

A significant public policy shift towards participatory development emerged in the mid-1980s, when India began experimenting with community involvement in natural resource management across two major ministries, the Ministry of Environment & Forests (constituted in 1985) and the Ministry of Rural Development (constituted in 1980). National



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that such participation improved outcomes, strengthened accountability, and enhanced local leadership, particularly when women and marginalised groups were meaningfully included. Yet these structures often existed in parallel to formal governance institutions, creating tensions and raising questions about sustainability and alignment with democratic processes.

Participatory Governance

The second major turning point came with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992-93, which institutionalised decentralised local governance. These amendments affirmed the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies as constitutional bodies responsible for planning, implementation, and monitoring of development programmes. Their introduction marked the beginning of a deeper participatory development, shifting participation from temporary project-

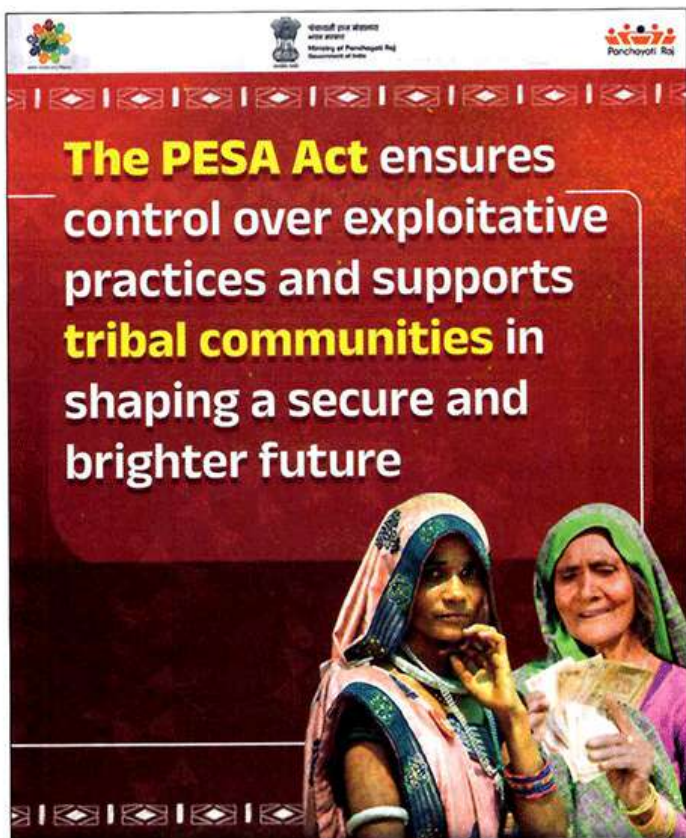
programmes such as Social Forestry (1976) and Joint Forest Management (National Forest Policy, 1988 and Joint Forest Management Guidelines, 1990) promoted community protection and regeneration of degraded forests by forming Village Forest Committees. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Rural Development piloted a watershed programme, culminating in the Integrated Wasteland Development Programme (IWDP, 1989) and National Watershed Development Programme for Rainfed Areas (NWDPA, 1990-91). These programmes institutionalised user groups, watershed committees, and community-based planning. At the same time, the education sector saw its first efforts in formalising community engagement through the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP, 1994), a major reform initiative encouraging Village Education Committees and School Management Committees. These initiatives reflected a gradual but clear shift from expert-led, top-down approaches to models that recognised communities as partners in development. They laid the foundation for participatory structures that later became central to democratic decentralisation.

These institutions not only improved service delivery but also created new spaces for local leadership. PRIA's (Participatory Research in Asia) evaluation studies during this period demonstrated

that such participation improved outcomes, strengthened accountability, and enhanced local leadership, particularly when women and marginalised groups were meaningfully included. Yet these structures often existed in parallel to formal governance institutions, creating tensions and raising questions about sustainability and alignment with democratic processes.

Scaling Women's Collectives and Livelihood Institutions

The third major public policy shift occurred between 1998 and 2003, when the participatory orientation of livelihood programmes expanded dramatically. This period saw the formalisation of women-led financial and social collectives through



the strengthening of the Self-Help Group (SHG) and the emergence of SHG clusters and federations. Policies such as *Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana* (SJGSY, 1999) institutionalised SHGs as the primary vehicle for poverty alleviation and women's economic empowerment. SHGs grew from thrift and credit groups into platforms for social mobilisation, local leadership, and political engagement. Their federations acquired bargaining power with markets and banks, contributing to the rise of women as public actors capable of influencing *Panchayat* decisions and public programmes. This era marked a major shift in public policy, recognising women's collectives as instruments of both economic development and democratic deepening. Their federations and clusters provided scale and bargaining power, allowing women to engage in markets, negotiate with banks, and influence local decision-making. The emergence of Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) in the 2000s further institutionalised collective action among small land-holders, enabling farmers to aggregate produce, access new technologies, and strengthen market linkages. These institutions marked a shift from individual livelihood struggles to collaborative economic resilience.

The Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP), mandated since 2015, required every *Gram Panchayat*

to prepare annual plans through participatory processes involving *Gram Sabhas*, SHG federations, and community groups. The agricultural sector simultaneously witnessed the rise of Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), particularly after the 2013 National Policy on FPOs and subsequent scaling through the 10,000 FPO Scheme (2020). These institutions strengthened smallholder bargaining power, promoting collective economic citizenship. Together, GPDP, social audits, and FPOs institutionalised participation at scale, transforming the everyday interface between citizens and the state.

As participatory institutions became more widespread, their integration with local governance structures generated deeper democratic gains. When SHG federations collaborated with *Panchayats* to prepare village development plans, or watershed committees aligned their micro-plans with *Gram Sabha* decisions, the boundaries between citizen participation and governance began to dissolve. Participation shifted from being a separate activity to an integral function of governance. This integration enhanced accountability, transparency, and responsiveness of local institutions. Importantly, it also catalysed the rise of new local leaders. Women in SHGs, tribal youth in forest committees, SC community representatives in *Panchayats*, and grassroots innovators in watershed programmes began to enter decision-making spaces with confidence and legitimacy. Participation thus became a vehicle for social justice and political empowerment, enabling historically marginalised groups to influence public systems (Planning Commission of India, 1951-2012).

Engendering Participation, Confronting Power and Social Hierarchies

A deeper understanding of community engagement in India, as Farrell and Tandon (2016) argue, requires confronting the hierarchies that structure everyday social relations particularly patriarchy, caste, class, and the power of state institutions. Participation in governance is not merely a technical exercise but an inherently political process in which spaces such as *Gram Sabhas*, *Ward Sabhas*, Standing Committees, and local user groups become arenas of contestation and negotiation. Treating participation as just an activity often reproduces dominant social norms unless intentionally transformed, especially in relation to gender. Women may be physically present in participatory forums yet remain silent or sidelined due to entrenched patriarchal expectations, symbolic

representation, or control by male family members. Engendering the politics of participation, therefore, requires much more than creating a space through reservation; it demands deliberate facilitation, leadership development, and the creation of safe women-led platforms, such as SHGs, *Mahila Mandals*, and their collectives. Democratic decentralisation alone does not guarantee inclusion, without attention to gendered power dynamics, as decentralised institutions may simply mirror existing inequalities. True community engagement must therefore strengthen collective agency, enabling women and other marginalised groups to claim rights, participate autonomously, and negotiate power.

Jan Bhagidari and Democracy

India's experiences in promoting participatory development over the past five decades demonstrate that participatory development can be meaningful for ensuring inclusion, accountability, and ownership of public and private investments in socio-economic development. As Tandon (2001, 2008) argues, citizenship is not merely a legal identity, but a lived experience shaped by voice, recognition, and everyday negotiations with public institutions. Participatory structures strengthen democratic culture when they cultivate agency, leadership, and collective ownership. Ensuring that participatory structures complement, rather than bypass, local governance is essential for coherence, legitimacy, and long-term democratic sustainability.

Looking ahead, making participatory democracy work for all requires further consolidation of the capacities and resources of local governance institutions. While much investment has been made in *panchayats*, similar efforts for municipalities and other urban local bodies (ULBs) need scaling up. Investing in citizenry education and awareness programmes are particularly relevant for the new generation of youth. With their facility in using digital technology, further efforts in integrating technology with participatory governance can deepen their participation. Such efforts must be complemented and promoted by philanthropists and civil society. While governments launch national programmes, local, bottom-up facilitation needs to be strengthened by civil society, CSR, and other philanthropic investments to complement the government's initiatives.

As India continues to grapple with complex developmental and governance challenges ranging from climate change to urbanisation, participatory democracy offers a pathway towards inclusive, accountable, and sustainable development. Active citizens, empowered communities, and responsive local governments form the foundation of this vision. Participation is therefore not only a tool for development but a cornerstone of democratic life itself. □

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