



Empowering Panchayats, SHGs and Youth

India's journey towards *Viksit Bharat@2047* begins at the grassroots, where Panchayats translate policies into local action, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) strengthen livelihoods and youth bring energy, innovation and leadership to community development. Together, these three pillars can make rural governance more participatory, inclusive and responsive. Their effective convergence can deepen democratic participation, strengthen local institutions and unlock community potential. Empowering them through greater devolution, capacity building, digital tools and meaningful participation can transform villages into active partners in India's development journey.

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The journey towards *Viksit Bharat@2047* runs through India's villages, the deliberations of Gram Sabhas, the activities of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and the first vote cast by a young Panchayat member. But how far can vibrant grassroots institutions, community participation and youth leadership translate this national vision into tangible outcomes at the village level? This is precisely the question this article examines.

Grassroots democracy was given constitutional shape through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, which came into force in 1993, placing Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) at the centre of rural planning and accountability. Three decades later, with over 2.5 lakh Panchayats and 24.04 lakh elected representatives, including 49.75 per cent women, Panchayats form one of the widest networks of elected local governments in the world.

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Under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), 10.05 crore rural households have been organised into 92 lakh SHGs across the country. ‘Panchayats, SHGs and Youth’ therefore does not indicate three separate beneficiary groups; rather, it highlights three interconnected pillars of rural transformation, on which participatory and convergence-driven rural development must be built.

Importance of ‘Sabka Prayas’

Empowered grassroots institutions are the shortest route between policy intent and village-level outcomes. They are also a key mechanism through which India builds social capital—the trust, reciprocity and collective action that enable communities to solve problems together, rather than wait for solutions to be provided from outside.

A well-devolved Panchayat can sanction a village building without a file travelling to a distant office; a federated SHG can turn a woman’s weekly thrift into working capital and a lasting support network; an engaged young Gram Sabha participant can grow into tomorrow’s Sarpanch.

Where these three actors are weak or disconnected, even well-designed schemes can lose their last-mile impact. As India moves towards developed-nation status by 2047, whether growth will be genuinely inclusive will depend not only on the central outlay of funds but also on the capability of local institutions to convert it into tangible outcomes on the ground.

Contemporary Government Efforts

The Indian Institute of Public Administration’s Status of Devolution to Panchayats in States report (2024) benchmarks states on Framework, Functions, Finances, Functionaries, Capacity Enhancement and Accountability, revealing wide variation in the extent to which the 29 subjects of the Eleventh Schedule have actually been devolved under Article 243G. Regarding finances, the Fifteenth Finance Commission (2021–26) recommended ₹2.368 lakh crore, while the Sixteenth Finance Commission has recommended around ₹4.35 lakh crore for 2026–31.

Digitally, in the financial year 2025–26, Panchayati Raj Institutions transferred ₹53,342 crore through the eGramSwaraj–PFMS interface, while 2,55,254 Gram Panchayats uploaded their development plans on the

platform. Overall, 2,59,798 PRIs have been onboarded, with 2,50,807 PRIs making online payments through eGramSwaraj. The platform has also registered 1,60,79,737 vendors.

As of 29 January 2026, 1.11 lakh Gram Panchayats were using the eGramSwaraj portal to upload summaries of their meetings through SabhaSaar, an AI tool available in 23 languages. The portal further indicates that more than 18.13 lakh Panchayat Development Plans, comprising Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDs), Block Panchayat Development Plans (BPDs) and District Panchayat Development Plans (DPDs), have been uploaded since 2019–20. During 2025–26, 2.51 lakh GPDs were uploaded on the eGramSwaraj portal, along with information about SHG federations contributing to Village Prosperity and Resilience Plans (VPRs).

With regard to livelihoods, a total of 10.05 crore rural households and 92 lakh women’s Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are mapped on the DAY-NRLM digital platform. It also maintains data on the financial linkages and credit access of SHGs through the SHG Bank Linkage Portal. The total credit disbursement to SHGs stood at ₹13,41,852.66 crore as of July 2026.

To motivate young people as future voters, the Model Youth Gram Sabha (MYGS), a joint MoPR–DoSEL–Tribal Affairs initiative, was launched in October 2025. MYGS aims to educate youth about the three-tier Panchayati Raj system, encourage their participation in Gram Sabhas, develop leadership skills and promote a better understanding of local issues.

Key Challenges

A National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR) study on *Low Participation in Gram Sabha across States and Union Territories (UTs)*, released in mid-2026, examines factors discouraging citizens, particularly women, youth and marginalised groups, from participating in Gram Sabha meetings. The study identifies livelihood and occupational constraints, weak awareness and inadequate communication as major barriers. Meetings often coincide with agricultural activities, daily-wage employment, market schedules and other livelihood responsibilities, making participation difficult for economically vulnerable households. Notice-based communication alone is insufficient, particularly in geographically dispersed and socially vulnerable communities.





Participation also depends on whether citizens perceive the Gram Sabha as a functional and outcome-oriented institution. Weak grievance responsiveness, limited transparency, absence of line-department officials and inadequate follow-up can reduce public confidence and interest. Women continue to face barriers, including household responsibilities, social hesitation and male dominance during discussions. Capacity gaps among women elected representatives and limited Own Source Revenue (OSR) further constrain Panchayats' ability to respond effectively to local development needs.

Beyond the Gram Sabha, convergence among Panchayats, SHGs and youth remains a challenge. SHGs often remain focused on thrift and micro-credit, while VB-GRAM G, NRLM and Panchayat planning may operate in institutional silos. Limited market linkages, technology access and enterprise support can constrain the transition of SHGs towards sustainable livelihoods. Similarly, youth engagement remains largely episodic rather than evolving into a sustained pathway for civic participation, leadership and local governance.

Reforms and Opportunities

The above challenges also open avenues for reform. The Sixteenth Finance Commission has recommended ₹4.35 lakh crore, a substantial increase over the ₹2.368

lakh crore recommended under the Fifteenth Finance Commission for 2021–26. This gives Panchayats an opportunity to address financing gaps, while digital infrastructure makes real-time financial management more feasible.

The Panchayat Advancement Index provides an evidence base for targeted interventions, while Lakhpati Didi and the newly announced SHE-MART roadmap can help SHGs graduate into enterprise federations with stronger market linkages. For youth engagement, MYGS, alongside the **NEP 2020** emphasis on constitutional values, can create a pipeline linking classrooms to Gram Sabhas and strengthening community participation.

Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions

Panchayats sit at the intersection of all three pillars of this sub-theme, and their institutional choices determine whether convergence remains on paper or becomes a living practice. As the constitutionally mandated planning body, the Gram Panchayat anchors the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) prepared each year under the People's Plan Campaign, with SHG federations as active co-authors of Village Prosperity and Resilience Plans (VPRPs) rather than passive beneficiaries. The Gram Sabha is where SHG members, youth and marginalised groups raise demands, monitor works and build social capital. Panchayat functionaries and frontline workers such as ASHA and Anganwadi workers form the operational bridge to line departments. By convening SHG federations, mainstreaming youth into planning and using eGramSwaraj, SabhaSaar and Panchayat NIRNAY for transparency, Panchayats can become genuine engines of participatory, citizen-centric governance.

Best Practices

An NIRD&PR study documented several best practices across the country. To strengthen convergence among SHGs and youth, Panchayats need to involve them in every Gram Sabha conducted in their respective villages. Increased participation of youth and women in Gram Sabhas can lead to greater awareness. The report highlights several low-cost measures that increased Gram Sabha attendance, particularly among women, youth and marginalised groups.

For example, Chembilode Gram Panchayat, Kerala, routed Gram Sabha notices through Kudumbashree neighbourhood groups, enabling trusted women leaders to communicate with villagers more effectively.

Gram Panchayats of Bokaro and Dhanbad, Jharkhand, celebrated Panchayati Raj Day as a 'Festival of Democracy', promoting health and awareness camps on issues such as child marriage and gender inequality. Gandhar Gram Panchayat, Punjab, treated villagers as co-planners, with community monitoring of approved works—the "Drain First, Road Later" principle—helping sustain trust between meetings. Meral East Gram Panchayat, Jharkhand, combined traditional outreach—leaflets, miking and wall writing—with digital tools such as WhatsApp groups, Facebook networks, the Meri Panchayat App and the Nirnay App to ensure wider outreach.

Recommendations

- **Deepen fiscal devolution:** Expedite the transfer of Sixteenth Finance Commission grants and encourage Own Source Revenue through the SAMARTH portal.
- **Promote convergence among Panchayats, SHGs, and youth:** Every GPDP under the People's Plan Campaign should formally include the SHG federation VPRP at the drafting stage.
- **Make Gram Sabhas genuinely participatory:** Take suitable measures such as providing advance notice, scheduling meetings at accessible times, and undertaking outreach to women, youth, and marginalised groups.
- **Scale youth engagement beyond schools:** Extend MYGS through youth clubs, NSS/NYKS units, and college NCC cells to build a leadership pipeline for future elections.
- **Strengthen women's leadership pathways:** Extend the Sashakt Panchayat–Netri Abhiyan, Model Women-Friendly Gram Panchayats, and "Nirbhay Raho" to every district, with peer mentoring by experienced women Sarpanches. Create dedicated leadership, mentoring, and exposure programmes for women representatives, including opportunities to learn from and interact with women MLAs/MPs and other experienced women leaders.
- **Use digital tools for last-mile accountability:** Pair wider adoption of SabhaSaar, Meri Panchayat, and Panchayat NIRNAY with digital literacy drives.
- **Institutionalise continuous and mandatory capacity building:** Establish structured, regular, and need-based training through NIRD&PR, SoEPR, SIRD&PRs, and SPRCs, with greater emphasis on

vernacular-language training and competency development of elected representatives and Panchayat functionaries.

- **Leverage strategic partnerships for advanced leadership development:** Collaborate with IIMs, IITs/NITs, international development agencies, and other Institutes of Excellence to strengthen leadership, governance, management, digital capabilities, and evidence-based decision-making among Panchayat representatives.
- **Measure and reward convergence:** Assess Panchayats through the Panchayat Advancement Index explicitly on SHG and youth participation in planning, so that capable, technology-enabled, and citizen-centric institution-building is rewarded.

Way Forward

The path ahead calls for treating Panchayats, SHGs and youth as one interlocking rural governance ecosystem, in keeping with the Government's emphasis on *Sabka Prayas* and convergence-driven development. Fiscal empowerment, digital infrastructure and social capital built through SHG federations together create the scaffolding; what remains is to connect them consistently at the Gram Sabha, where plans are approved and accountability is enforced. Sustained multi-ministry convergence, as in the People's Plan Campaign and the Model Youth Gram Sabha, should become the operating norm rather than the exception.

Conclusion

Empowered Panchayats, vibrant SHGs and civically engaged youth together represent the most durable foundation for *Viksit Bharat@2047* because they build not just infrastructure but also the social capital and participatory habits that make development self-sustaining. What rural India now needs is deeper devolution, sustained capacity building, and capable, technology-enabled, citizen-centric institutions, so that every Gram Sabha becomes a living forum where empowered Panchayats, SHGs and youth jointly author the story of participatory governance and an inclusive, self-reliant India by 2047. Aligning schemes, stakeholders, and resources into a unified development ecosystem can unlock transformative potential for rural communities. When pursued with foresight and grounded in local realities, this approach can ensure that no person is left behind on the path to *Viksit Bharat@2047*. □

