



Problems and Challenges of Indian Rural Local Governments in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals: An Analysis of the Viable Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

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Indian democracy has noble features of decentralization, devolution, and de-concentration. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) of the early 1990s is a landmark for democratic decentralization which accorded constitutional status to Panchayati Raj or Local Governance system within the country. Wherein Gram Panchayat (village level) is the basic unit of grassroots governance, Panchayat Samiti (block level) at the middle level and Zila Parishad (district level) is the highest level of local administration. With 73rd CAA, 29 functional items were put under Panchayats, relating to Sustainable Development Goals, such as Poverty Alleviation, Zero Hunger, Good Health & Well-being, Quality education, Gender equality, Clean water and Sanitation, Clean energy etc. The UNDP identifies Local Governments as vital partners in implementation. This paper analyzes the major challenges of Indian rural local government in achieving the sustainable development goals and examines its viable perspectives. The research methodology followed is descriptive research with narrative and qualitative analysis. The findings indicate significant challenges in attaining the SDGs in rural India and limited resources with rural local governments like. The silver lining, however, lies with the government willingness to translate the digital gains into productive information, mass awareness creation, and push for greater effective role of women the local governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The reasonable model of governance and development can be considered as one that arises in the form of collective aspirations of the people, emerging from their willingness, desires and community participation. The creation of local government in India is the reflection of the fact that the rural communities are aware of their needs and concerns and are willing to change and own their lives by themselves. Every rural local government has specific socio-economic uniqueness, historical features and cultural traditions. Hence, local government system is basically institutionalized for provisioning services to the local communities, which the Central and State governments are unable to provide due to its bureaucratic structures.

The Britishers in different parts of India started the concept of rural local government or institutionalized Gram Panchayats (Village Councils) in the late 19th century. However, these grassroots governments were not provided with adequate functions, power and finances. Moreover, these were not truly represent the local people nor they had any say in their functions. The rural local government got some

significance when India adopted its Constitution in 1950. The Part IV of the Constitution on Directive Principles of State Policy advised the states to enact suitable laws for creating gram panchayats as basic units of local governments. Towards this goal, in 1957, Balwantrai Mehta Committee made a significant recommendation stating that the various development initiatives of the Government must ensure that the desired welfare reaches the intended people with constructive participation of the communities, and the local governance system remains active and vibrant. Unfortunately, even after these recommendations, the panchayats remained unable to take shape as people's government with considerable failures in public service delivery to the people.

As the government was ineffective and was unable to fulfill the expectations of the people, the L.M. Singhvi Committee, 1986 made recommendations that for making the panchayats effective, they should be termed as "units of local governments" with "constitutional mandate on State Governments" to ensure these grassroots governments function with defined power and authority befitting as "units of self-governments".

India has achieved pseudo development for the last 70 years creating handful millionaires and ocean of paupers because it

is unable to fulfill the dream of Mahatma Gandhi from making Ram Rajya to Gram Rajya, making villages self-sufficient and self-reliant units with economic, social, and political freedom which has not been achieved in real sense. This sort of pseudo development has occurred due to lack of political will, more so in rural areas, created by the absence of appropriate local government. However, over the passage of time, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) was passed in 1992 and the Panchayati Raj Institutions have been accorded constitutional status and made local self-government as important as that of central and state governments [1]. India has 2,48,148 village panchayats, 6,595 intermediate panchayats and 618 district panchayats-the three-tier system established as part of democratic decentralization, all looked after by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj.

The policies of rural local government (RLG) have evolved since the British era till the present time. The transformation in the earlier period was limited and mostly top-down administrative control approach was seen. Currently, a more decentralized and empowered system of governance is observed. This ideal shift was marked because of policy reforms such as 73rd CAA which helped in enhancing democratic participation, accountability and development at the lowest rung of Indian democracy (Table 1).

It is however to note that despite many changes made in RLG system since independence, very small accomplishments are attained even though the government has been given enough powers and authority primarily because of a huge gap between the citizens' aspirations and deliverance from local administration. To achieve the development goals it becomes necessary for local governments to take up the designated task as "Drivers of change" for the disadvantaged masses because sustainable development is a critical issue in the present scenario. The sustainable and development-oriented approach of the local government has become necessary for providing proper services to the rural community which are the prerequisites for achieving sustainable development goals.

As noted above, local governments act as three-tier panchayats at the grassroots level, that can play a significant role in designing development programmes, implementing public schemes, fostering community participation, supporting collective decision making, managing basic infrastructure & natural resources, providing housing & sanitation facilities, gathering data on sustainable development issues and generating awareness in the rural communities on education, health, gender and other pertinent social issues.

Table 1. Policy changes in rural local government from British Era till post-1992 reforms

Act & Committees	Year	Description
The Bengal Village Chowkidari Act	1870	Established village watchmen who were paid from local funds, laying an early foundation for rural administration.
The Madras Local Boards Act	1884	Introduced local boards in rural areas with partially elected members, setting a precedent for local self-governance.
The Royal Commission on Decentralization	1907	Recommended the enhancement of local self-government, influencing the structure of rural governance.
The Government of India Act (1919)	1919	Introduced the concept of 'Dyarchy' and transferred the subject of local self-government to Indian ministers in the provinces.
The Government of India Act (1935)	1935	Expanded provincial autonomy and set the stage for further development of local governments, including rural areas.
Community Development Program	1952	Aimed at holistic rural development through the establishment of block-level administrative units.
National Extension Service	1953	Focused on creating a self-sustaining rural community by providing technical and administrative assistance.
Balwantrai Mehta Committee	1957	Recommended the establishment of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system (village, block, and district levels), which was implemented starting in Rajasthan in 1959.
Ashok Mehta Committee	1978	Suggested strengthening Panchayati Raj institutions with more powers and resources.
73rd Constitutional Amendment Act	1992	Provided constitutional status to Panchayati Raj institutions, mandating regular elections, reservation for marginalized groups, and the establishment of State Finance Commissions.
Post-1992 Reforms	Post-1992	Various state-specific reforms and central initiatives like the Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF), National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), and the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) aimed at strengthening rural governance and development.

Source: Compiled by Authors

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 aimed to empower local self-governments and facilitate grassroots democracy [2]. The Census of India 2011 highlights the critical role of PRIs in managing the vast rural population, indicating the importance of effective local governance structures [3]. Department of Economic Affairs [4] reports on the Fifteenth Finance Commission's recommendations, which aim to enhance financial devolution to PRIs, thereby strengthening their capacity to implement development programs effectively.

The alignment of rural development initiatives with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is crucial for holistic

progress. Elliott [5] emphasizes the need for sustainable development practices that incorporate economic, social, and environmental dimensions to achieve long-term benefits. The Goalkeepers Report 2022 underscores the progress and challenges in achieving SDGs globally, with specific insights into rural development [6]. Kapur [7] identifies four major challenges in achieving SDGs in India: poverty, infrastructure deficits, educational gaps, and limited access to financial services. The RDR document suggests that a synchronized approach, integrating existing rural development policies with community-specific innovations, is essential for sustainable transformations [8].

Chattopadhyay and Duflo [9] explored the impact of women's leadership in PRIs, revealing that women as

policymakers significantly improve governance outcomes and address gender-specific issues more effectively. However, Sivanna [10] points out persistent challenges in the form of corruption, inefficiency, and inadequate public service delivery at the local level. Sharma [11] discusses the constraints on achieving SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) in rural Bihar, highlighting the misalignment between regional priorities and global goals. Similarly, Telwala [12] demonstrates how agroforestry can serve as a Nature-based Solution (NbS) to localize multiple SDGs in rural India, providing ecological, social, and economic benefits.

However, Sahoo and Sriram [13] highlight the ongoing challenges in rural health infrastructure and public health initiatives like the Ayushman Bharat scheme.

The inclusion of women in local governance has been identified as a game changer. Mookherjee and Banerjee [14] argue that women's reservation in PRIs bridges the gender gap in political decision-making, fostering more inclusive and responsive governance. Mahadevan-Dasgupta [15] further supports this by illustrating the positive impact of women leaders in local governments.

Thus, there is a significant research gap emerges in understanding the practical implementation and effectiveness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from the perspective of local government officials within India's rural local governance structures. While existing studies highlight the importance of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and the critical role of women's leadership, there is limited empirical research on the specific strategies that local government officials believe can bridge challenges such as poverty, infrastructure deficits, and gender inequalities. Additionally, the impact of financial devolution on PRIs' capacity to achieve SDGs and the role of innovative, community-specific approaches in sustainable rural development from the officials' viewpoint remain underexplored areas requiring further investigation.

3. SUSTAINABILITY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Sustainability in rural livelihood would basically help the current and future populations to fulfill their needs but in today's era, the biggest challenge is that the people are unable to get even the basic necessities of life. The need for sustainable development is to alleviate poverty and provide a better living. Therefore, sustainable development goals are the only mechanism for evaluating inter-generational equity. India has not been successful in attaining prioritized socio-economic growth and equitable distribution of welfare for the rural poor. The rural population is basically dependent on agriculture and other connected farm and non-farm activities as their means of livelihood. These people struggle for their survival and constantly fight against poverty, illiteracy, inequality, precarious health, filthy environment, etc. It is also no denying the fact that the government of India had launched a series of rural development programmes to achieve the UN mandated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a view to eliminating poverty, illiteracy, etc. targeting the majority of the population.

Sustainable development in rural areas can be achieved only through decentralized planning at the national and state level, and they should also provide powers of decision making at the village level, where the grassroots needs can be realistically understood. If decentralized planning can be done through

community participation, only then this will lead to better development of the rural areas and the communities as well. Community participation means involving each and every person from the community in the decision-making process, in order to develop a sense of collectivism in the development process. This will further help the village panchayats in implementing the development plans. They would plan and frame their own development plans and sustainable environment, and realize the collective gains with solidarity and harmonic association. It would further assist them in organizing and increasingly reformulating the socio-economic and developmental activities, which in turn gradually eliminate poverty, improve health conditions, remove illiteracy, etc., thus making much better use of the government resources as well the ideas of the 73rd CAA and fulfilling the development goals.

4. ISSUES IN TODAY'S RURAL LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

More than seventy percent of India's population lives in rural areas, yet these rural communities remain utterly neglected in the country's mainstream development process. This paradox is visible from the fact that, despite the overall GDP and per capita income of the country rising over decades, the urban-rural disparities still remain appalling. India is also the fastest growing nation in terms of population size and set to overtake China in a short time. India is thus poised to face the rising necessity of food and resulting challenges if it continues to neglect the villages and the rural communities. According to the 2011 Census, only 30.80% of rural households get tap water, only 6% are connected to the closed drainage system and 55% of rural households have electricity [16]. Therefore, India has a lot of ground to cover in achieving sustainable goals. India being the next emerging power and more than 22 percent of its population reeling under poverty and an abysmal expenditure of 1.2% of GDP on health [17], the basic goals of eradicating poverty and improving health remain the major challenge for the government.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seem to be highly ambitious and run from Goal 1: Complete eradication of poverty, through Goal 10: "Reduce inequality within and among countries" to Goal 17: "Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development". Taking into account India's performance on the precursor Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), India needs to boost its resources to implement a vast range of 17 Goals and around 180 targets [18].

India also lagged behind in achieving some of the MDGs and it must be aware of the correct reasons while starting to work on the SDGs so as to improve upon the means of implementation and review and monitoring mechanisms as well as coordinated efforts. Again, there also exists disparity among various states and their capacity to implement the SDGs in the near future. Its success will also be dependent on the strengthening of local bodies in rural areas for effective implementation of SDGs.

As mentioned before, the SDGs should be implemented through close coordination between the governments at the local, state and central level as well as the civil society and the industries. India needs to ensure a coordinated working approach among all these Stakeholders. The SDGs need active participation of the local governments and in India, the

Panchayati Raj System is very weak, which needs to be strengthened to achieve the overall development goals. Awareness about the SDGs needs to be brought among the community and its collective participation is a must in order to achieve them [19]. In order to mobilize efforts on such a huge scale, enormous funds will be required. Thus, the government must ensure uninterrupted supply of funds to the RLG and it has to take up a critical role in ensuring inclusion at the local level. More so, the local administration has to work effectively and efficiently to achieve the defined developmental goals. The success of India in achieving the goals will henceforth play a vital role in determining the success of the project as a whole.

A. Challenges for India in attaining the SDGs:

India faces severe challenges in attaining the SDGs, particularly in the following areas:

- 1) Uplifting masses reeling under poverty and hunger
- 2) Economic growth trickling down to the bottom with mass job creation
- 3) Enhanced investment in social sectors and basic services
- 4) Targeted approach and robust implementation of development programs
- 5) Improvement in basic infrastructure for education, health and other primary services
- 6) Removal of bottlenecks in social discrimination and injustice
- 7) Removal of gender inequalities and progressive empowerment of women

High economic growth and redistribution alone may not be sufficient to address the poverty and social sector challenges. As per Goldsmith [20], one-third of the world's extremely poor lived in India in 2010, that's whopping 400 million people. Economic growth has not been enough to uplift these poor from below the poverty line and it has not resulted into broad-based job creation for the masses. The cost of implementing SDGs in India by 2030 is projected to be around US\$14.4 billion [21]. However, some years have seen reductions in social sector spending by central government, and hence, there might be resource scarcity unless states allocate a sizable amount of expenditure to the social sector.

Likewise, India has peculiar social sector issues like education, drinking water and public health. The government schools are devoid of quality education, especially in rural areas. Also, India's so called safe water from tube-wells is not as safe as piped water supply. This results in high incidence of waterborne illnesses and deaths despite government reports of a very high proportion, more than eighty percent, of access to safe drinking water. Moreover, India's health expenditure is mostly out-of-pocket, which is exorbitantly costly. Good quality health services come at a premium from the private sector and public health still lacks better health infrastructure. India has to enhance public health insurance coverage for larger groups of people.

Lastly, monitoring the progress of SDGs would require NITI Aayog to play a critical role in it. However, there are reservations about its ability to manage this colossal task, as it has to coordinate between both the centre and states. States get their share of tax devolution for social sector spending and hence they have to play a critical role as well, in achieving the SDGs. States have to share judicious share of funds with the local governments and keep track of the progress with NITI

Aayog's advisory. The top-to-bottom feedback mechanism has to be really robust for any viable success of the vision- especially in identifying local priorities, framing suitable policies, and advancing innovation & enterprising spirit for effective implementation.

B. Issues of Indian Rural Local Governments in Attaining SDGs

Local governments in rural India face several challenges in the accomplishment of the Sustainable Development Goals. These challenges are in varied forms- institutional, financial, human resource constraints, limited access to technology & information, limited ability for framing the plans for development and lack of visions for sustainable developmental models, etc. Some of the prominent challenges encountered by the local governance in rural India towards achieving sustainable development goals are as follows:

4.1 Institutional capacity

- a. As per Ministry of Panchayati Raj, as of 2022, there were over 2.48 lakh Gram Panchayats in India, out of which over 1.5 lakh are in rural areas. Many of these local bodies lack the institutional capacity to frame developmental plans and implement sustainable development models.
- b. The key tool for local planning and development is the Village Development Plan (VDP). Estimates by National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) Hyderabad and Ministry of Panchayati Raj found that less than 20 percent Gram Panchayats in India have a functional Village Development Plan, thus, limiting their abilities to formulate sustainable development initiatives.
- c. These institutional initiatives should flow through top-to-bottom and bottom-to-top feedback loops. The top developmental think tank like Niti Aayog should not only coordinate with the state level development bodies, but also with the district, block and village local bodies. This two-way institutional feedback mechanism is virtually non-existent in India, which severely restricts the ability to achieve the SDG targets.

4.2 Financial resource constraints

- a. According to the 15th Finance Commission Report, the allocation of funds for RLG in India is insufficient to meet their basic needs. In this scenario undertaking sustainable development initiatives is far away from reality [4].
- b. Moreover, local bodies face delays in receiving funds from state and central governments. Between 2019 to 2022, local bodies in the states of UP, West Bengal complained of delays in funds release under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREGA) scheme (various news daily reports). The Standing Panel on Rural Development in March 2021 found the "inordinate delay" in release of funds (particularly the 40% funds for rural workers) under MGNREGA scheme as 'discouraging' [22].
- c. Additionally, other problems also plague the rural income and employment generating schemes in India, like under-utilization of development funds, high

numbers of fake job cards, callousness in implementation of unemployment allowance by the states and absence of a swift redressal mechanism for accident claims, as noted by the Standing Panel on Rural Development. The Panel noted overall Rs. 40,293 crores of unspent balance in rural development funds under the Rural Development Ministry in 2021.

- d. These problems related to financial resources in rural areas restricts the capabilities of village panchayats and local bodies, limit the adoption of sustainable practices for achievement of SDGs like removal of poverty, attainment of zero hunger, access to clean water & sanitation, access to good health and well-being, and decent work and economic growth. For instance, farmers in India's rural areas face immense challenges in adopting sustainable farming practices due to the high cost of agricultural inputs- which is far from attainable without sustained income and employment growth in the rural areas.

4.3 Human resources constraints

- a. In many parts of rural India, especially lesser developed states like Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh, several Gram Panchayats are unable to employ key human resource requirements, such as Gram Rozgar Sevak (village employment workers), who are crucial for implementing the rural employment generating programs. In many states like Maharashtra, there are protests by Gram Rozgar Sevaks against undue pressure on them to implement NREGA scheme, wherein half of the task lies with the local administration which act very callously [23].
- b. Even local administration does not provide technical assistance to the Gram Sevaks on agricultural practices, plantation know-how which lead to poor quality of human resources development and programme failures [24]. Less than 50% of elected representatives of panchayats were provided with any inputs on their role on NREGA implementation [25].
- c. Lower agricultural productivity is a bigger problem as agriculture being a major source of livelihood in rural India. Low agricultural productivity is an outcome of poor infrastructure, insufficient access to institutional credit and markets, and climate change effects. These issues can aid to the already existing problems of poverty and hunger. Apart from the financial and institutional constraints, inadequate rural skilled manpower to address these issues remains a crucial challenge for the rural local governments. RLG and local bodies can play a vital role in introducing sustainable agriculture practices, improving access to formal credit and markets, and building agro-related infrastructure like irrigation, food processing and cold storage facilities. Developing and channelizing skilled manpower and human resources in these areas should be taken up with targeted focus for attainment of SDGs under the Skilled India programme under the aegis of village panchayats and local bodies.
- d. Adequate infrastructure and trained manpower are also crucial for attainment of education gender equality and health related goals of SDGs. RLG can

play an indispensable role in promoting gender equality through larger women's participation in local governance, provisioning better access to education & healthcare, and promoting women's economic empowerment.

4.4 Issues in women centric governance

- a. Women participation in local governance in India that provided a minimum of 33% women reservation in village panchayats and local governments [26]. Over the years this has been increased to 50 percent in many states of India. By the year 2022, over a million women elected representatives were there in the local governments in the country [27]. Despite this enhanced leadership roles for women in local governments, women issues are still addressed little in rural India- for instance, gender equality, better women education & healthcare, and women economic empowerment. Gender equality is still to be achieved in India. India's overall human Development Index (HDI) rank was 132nd in 2021 among 191 nations- with male HDI rank at 119th and female HDI rank at 131st showing stark gap in gender equality in India [28].
- b. Among other reasons, this situation probably is the outcome of the issue of 'proxy governance' and 'male dominance' in local governance systems in rural India. The women elected representatives in the local bodies are forced to act as dormant and actual governance is taken over by the dominant male leaders typically, their husbands, fathers or other male family members. In rural parlance, they are addressed as 'Pradhan-Pati' (or Pradhan-husband). This leads to distorted decision-making process in the local governance, often unfavorable to the women in general.
- c. These challenges in the women-centric governance system in rural India are to be addressed by the local governments with initiatives taken from the Central and State governments and Niti Aayog- then only gender related SDGs will be achievable. Many studies on women centric local governance in India have confirmed silent role of women representatives (despite being proxies) in delivering better public goods & services, and lesser corrupt practices [29]. Moreover, women leaders affirmatively impact in framing women-related policy decisions and they are crucial in raising hopes & aspirations among girls, as confirmed by randomized research in West Bengal and Rajasthan by J-PAL Poverty Action Lab [30]. This generates increased hope that if women are given more leg-room in rural local governance, there would be better chances of attainment of Sustainable Development Goals.

4.5 Limited access to technology and information

- a. It is pushing for more use of "Digital Public Goods (DPGs)" and "Digital Public Infrastructure (DPIs)" for achieving SDG targets [31]. India has already taken giant leaps in the penetration of Digital Public Infrastructure in the country, through Aadhar personal digital IDs, UPI digital payment system,

Jandhan zero balance bank accounts for the poorest of the poor for financial inclusion, and significant mobile & internet penetration even in the rural areas. Even in the public health area, DPI penetration has been globally remarkable- like the Co-WIN digital vaccination registration and certification system during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- b. According to the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), in 2017-18, only 14% of rural households in India had access to a computer, and only 4% had access to the internet. But over a few years, internet and digital penetration in the country has jumped manifold- aided by mobile and mobile internet penetration. Out of 692 million internet users in 2021, 351 million were rural users and 341 million urban users. This showed internet penetration of 37% in rural areas & 69% in urban areas, as per Report [32]. This study projects total Indian internet users to be about 900 million by 2025.
- c. Despite significant internet and mobile penetration in India, especially rural India remains at the crossroad of the digital divide resulting into lack of access to technology and information, which hampers the adoption of sustainable practices, such as renewable energy and waste management. For instance, many rural households still rely on kerosene lamps for lighting, as 24-hour electricity is not available, even if electricity connection is present. Renewable energy like solar lamps have hardly entered in the rural areas despite availability of the technology in the country.
- d. Digital divide in the rural areas can be seen from the fact that majority of the leapfrogging in digital payments in the country belongs to the urban India. Same with the online gaming and digital commerce- wherein rural areas lack immensely. Mobile and internet penetration in rural areas is not translating into more of technological development or information usage- rather it goes more into

entertainment and social media usage.

- e. Limited access to technological know-how and information restrains the development of local enterprises. Many rural producers, artisans and weavers struggle to access better markets for their products due to the lack of information on market demand and prices. RLGs can foster technological know-how and information to the local producers- but they are lacking with political will and vision for it.
- f. The gains in digital penetration can be used in spreading technological know-how and raising awareness among masses about climate change and its impact on agricultural productivity and food security. RLGs can promote climate-resilient agriculture practices, assist reforestation efforts, and build climate-robust infrastructure in irrigation & water management. This in turn would help in reduction of poverty, hunger and economic inequality.
- g. Awareness levels are typically low among the workers in the unorganized sector. Channelizing better access to information and awareness for the masses is thus needed with involvement of voluntary agencies and community participation [33, 34], in the rural areas, particularly in matters of public health, education, social awareness, and financial inclusiveness, can go a long way in achieving many SDG targets. RLGs and panchayats have a critical role to play here- particularly in usage of digital public goods like e-governance platforms, public e-portals, etc.

5. METHODOLOGY

The study used a constructivist paradigm of research, with a mixed research method. The research flow chart is given below in Figure 1.

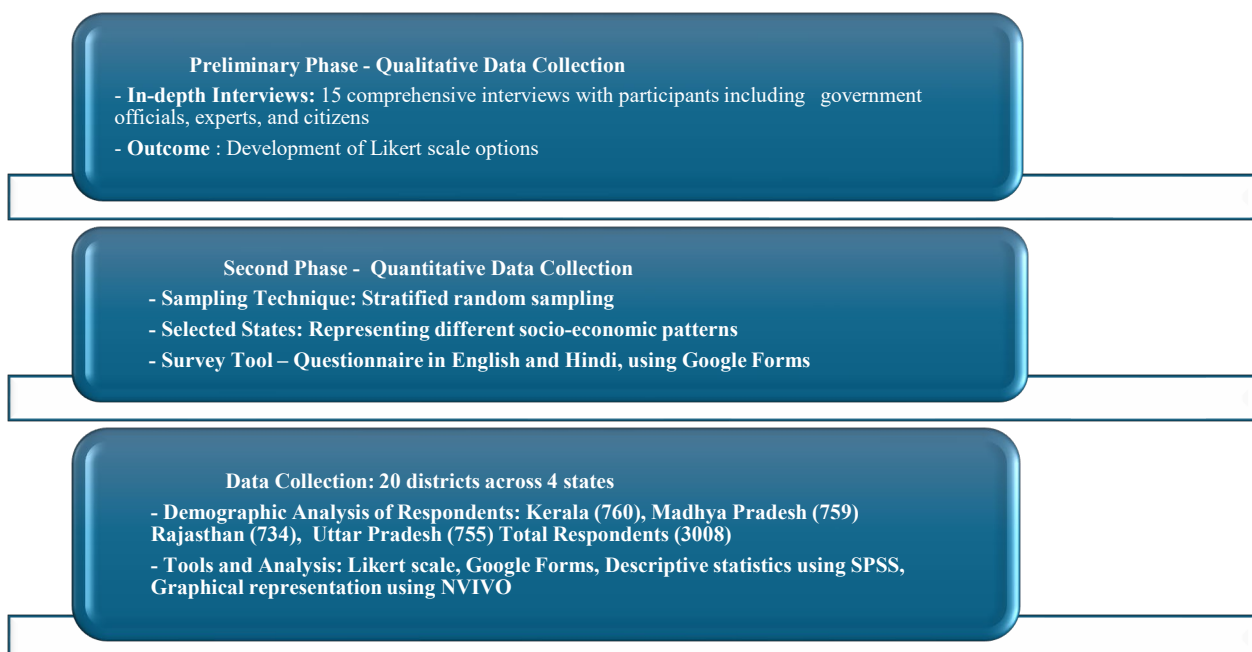


Figure 1. Research design of the study

Source: Compiled by Authors using Micro

Preliminary during the course of the study the qualitative data was collected using in-depth interview which resulted in the development of the second stage of the research study. The in-depth interview analysis helped in further development of second stage intervention tool (questionnaire). During the first phase of the research study, a total of 15 comprehensive interviews were carried out. These interviews consisted of eight government officials from the states of Rajasthan (3), Kerala (3), and Uttar Pradesh (2). Additionally, there were five experts, including two from research centres (with transcriptions of video interviews), one academican who specialises in SDG goals in rural areas, and three citizens from both Kerala and Rajasthan. The qualitative analysis helped in the development of the Likert scale options.

In the second phase the study utilized the stratified random sampling technique to determine the sample size. Four states symbolise different parts of the nation, each exhibiting unique rural socio and economic pattern. During the phase of the second stage of research the data was collected across 20 districts spread in four states of the country.

Thus, primary data collection was done through a questionnaire which was designed in both English and Hindi languages. The data collection was administered through google forms to deploy ecofriendly strategy of data collection. Additionally, the data is also collected through literature review, government reports, other research studies and secondary data.

The distribution of the questionnaire was done in ten sections to identify challenges and issues in achieving SDG goals in RLGs in India. The questionnaire contains identification of factors affecting the achieving of seven SDGs namely zero hunger (SDG 2), good health and well-being (SDG 3), quality of education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), clean energy (SDG 7) and women involved in local administration (SDG 5). The data collected through the questionnaire tool was further analysed using descriptive statistics analysis and thus following analysis it was interpreted.

The 3008 respondents' data was analysed using NVIO for the graphical representation and SPSS software for descriptive analysis. The demographic analysis reveals a consistent distribution of respondents across the four project states, with Kerala having the highest number of respondents at 760 (25.37%) and Rajasthan the lowest at 734 (24.40%) out of 30008 total respondents (Figure 2).

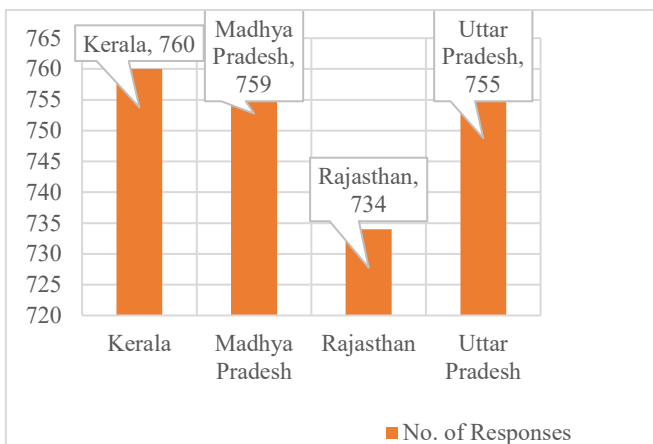


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents among the selected states

Source: Compiled by Authors using Tableau

6. RESULTS

The second phase of the study was the collecting of quantitative data, which took place over a span of 2 months from December 7th, 2023 to February 5th, 2024. This data collection was carried out in five specific states of India. The pilot study was only carried out in the state of Kerala from December 7th, 2023 to December 15th, 2023. The data gathering instrument was modified throughout the initial phase of the research project, as a mixed method research design was adopted. Therefore, no significant fluctuations were noticed in the data gathering tool following the pilot trial.

The gender distribution analysis suggests males dominate the study. Both Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan have 95% and 94% male participants. Kerala has 67% males despite the largest female proportion. Madhya Pradesh has 84% men. Although Wayanad in Kerala and Udaipur in Rajasthan have increased female involvement, districts are male-dominated. This shows a gender gap in study engagement, reflecting socio-cultural factors. Further, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan districts like Varanasi and Jodhpur have over 90% male involvement. Wayanad and Palakkad have more women, yet men still outnumber them. Social and cultural factors make Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan male-dominated. Some districts have nearly all male respondents, suggesting demographic biases (Figures 3 to 7).

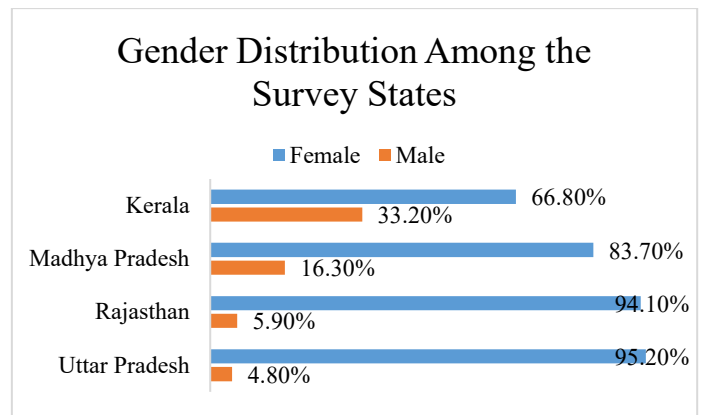


Figure 3. Gender-wise distribution of respondents among the selected states

Source: Compiled by Authors using Tableau

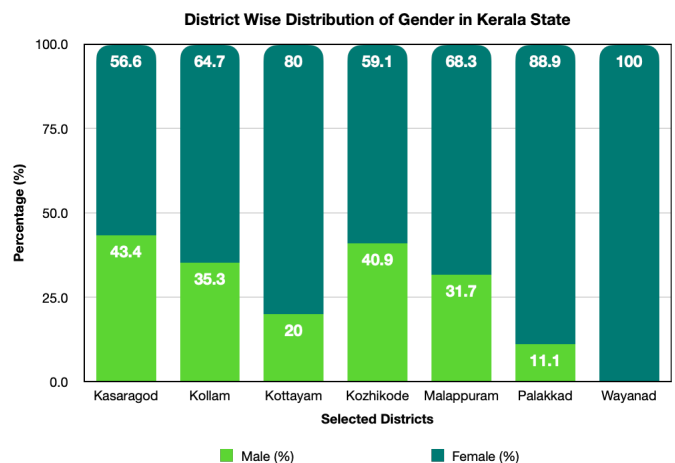


Figure 4. Gender-wise distribution of respondents among the districts of the Kerala State

Source: Compiled by Authors using Tableau

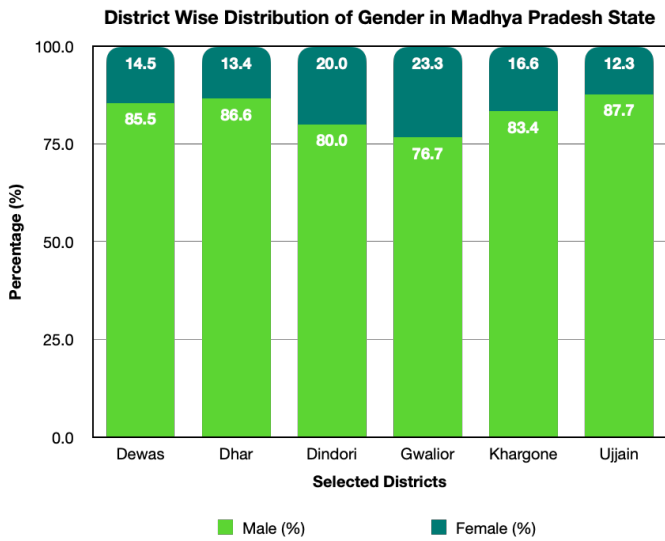


Figure 5. Gender-wise distribution of respondents among the districts of the Madhya-Pradesh State
Source: Compiled by Authors using Tableau

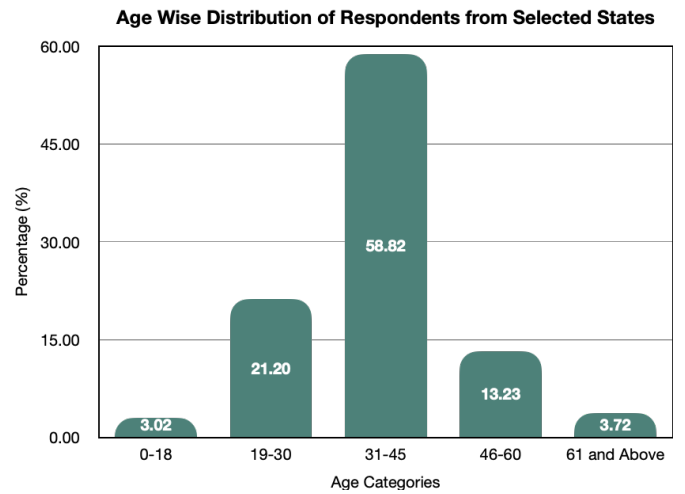


Figure 8. Age-wise distribution of respondents among the selected states
Source: Compiled by Authors using Tableau

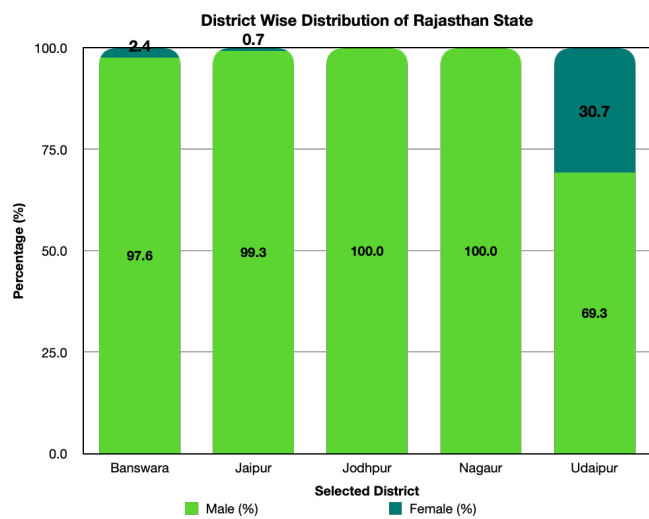


Figure 6. Gender-wise distribution of respondents among the districts of the Rajasthan State
Source: Compiled by Authors using Tableau

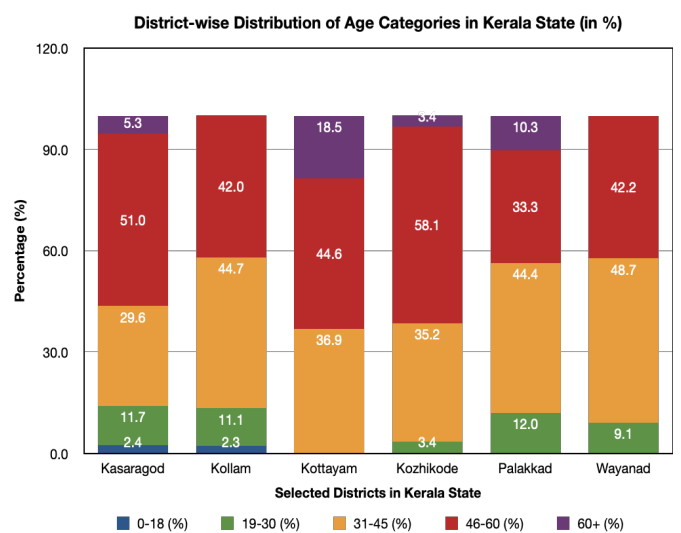


Figure 9. Age-wise distribution of respondents among the districts of the Kerala State
Source: Compiled by Authors using Tableau

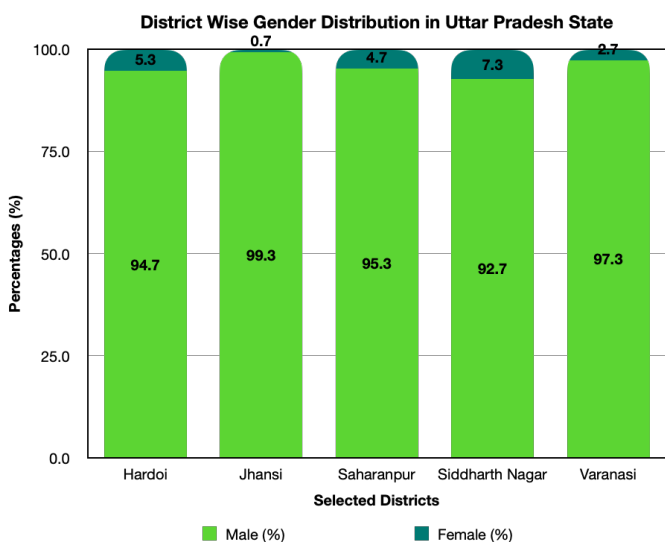


Figure 7. Gender-wise distribution of respondents among the districts of the Uttar-Pradesh State
Source: Compiled by Authors using Tableau

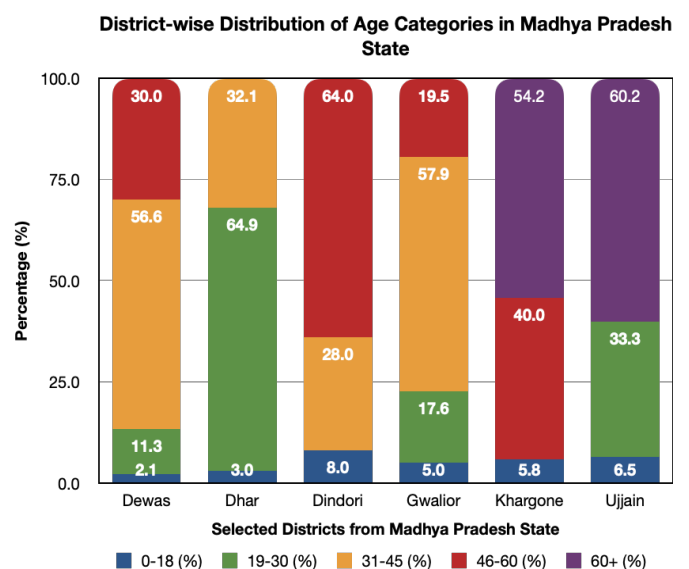


Figure 10. Gender-wise distribution of respondents among the districts of the Madhya-Pradesh State
Source: Compiled by Authors using Tableau

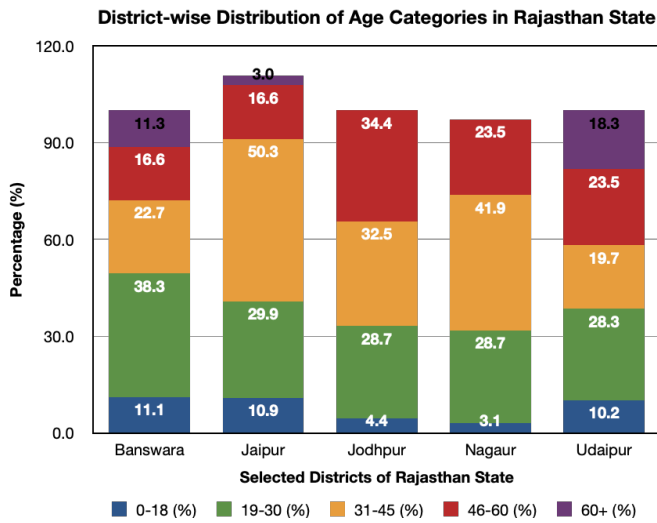


Figure 11. Age-wise distribution of respondents among the districts of the Rajasthan State
Source: Compiled by Authors using Tableau

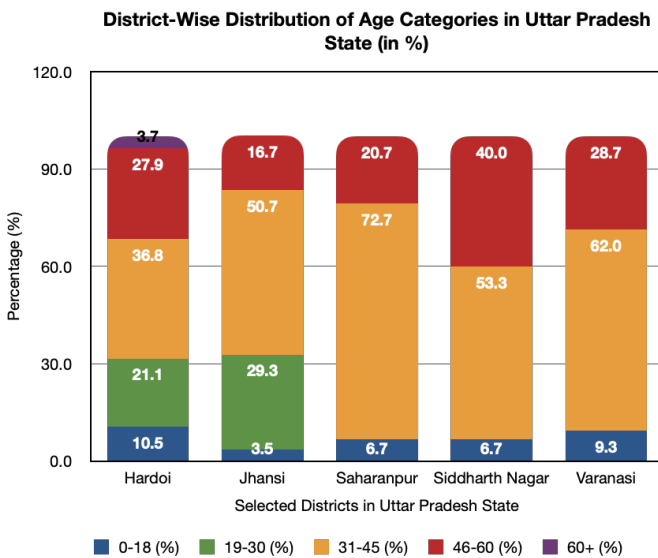


Figure 12. Gender-wise distribution of respondents among the districts of the Uttar-Pradesh State
Source: Compiled by Authors using Tableau

The demographic analysis of age distribution across districts in Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh highlights a predominance of middle-aged participants. The districts of Kerala, such as Wayanad and Palakkad, exhibit a notable representation of individuals in the age category of 46-60. The districts of Dewas and Dhar in Madhya Pradesh primarily consist of people between the ages of 19 and 45. The districts of Rajasthan, such as Udaipur and Jodhpur, contain a significant population of individuals aged between 31 and 45. The districts of Uttar Pradesh, such as Varanasi and Hardoi, demonstrate a significant representation of individuals aged 31-45, suggesting a predominant participation of middle-aged individuals (Figures 8-12).

7. THE WAY FORWARD

Putting things in perspective, achieving Sustainable Development Goal targets for overall India seems immensely difficult, seeing the fact that globally possibly none of the

goals might be achieved, as per Goalkeepers Report 2022 from [24, 25]. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has wiped out the progress in SDG achievements of last six years, as per UNDP reports. In this scenario, rural India's options to achieve the SDGs targets are far limited. Hence, India has to take seriously the "SDG Push" call given by UNDP, whereby four key areas needed concerted focus- "governance, social protection, green economy and digitization".

India has already taken significant steps in social protection like livelihood protection for the poor in terms of employment guarantee (MGNREGA scheme), food security measures (PDS ration distribution), direct benefit transfers to the small & marginal farmers (Kishan Samman Nidhi scheme) and old age/widow pensioners, and health insurance protection (Ayushman Bharat-ABPMJAY scheme) and so on. Moreover, India has taken good steps in enhancing digitization in the country, including rural digitalization.

India's efforts would be required more in the areas of green economy and governance- more so in RLG to achieve SDG targets. India has to transform the local governments as agents of effective governance and developmental bodies. With focused programme formulation, developmental model designing, adequate resource provisioning, and access to technological know-how these grassroots systems can work towards effective attainments of the SDG goals.

8. CONCLUSION

Despite several challenges, local governments in India have tremendous potential to become the developmental change agents. The findings indicate significant challenges in attaining SDGs in rural India and limited resources availability with RLGs like, lesser capabilities, financial resources, manpower and technological know-how. The silver lining, however, lies with government willingness to translate the digital gains into productive information, mass awareness creation and push for greater effective role of women in local governance. Effective development governance will require concerted efforts from top to bottom and the reverse way. From visionary programme formulation to effective implementation and monitoring along with greater participation of rural masses especially women folks will go a long way in hassle-free attainment of SDG goals for India.

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