GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE ISSUES:
PERPECTIVE FROM RURAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This paper aims to focus on grassroots democracy in India and also to find out the role local self-government for the development of rural India and its challenges to govern.

Methods: The methodological path taken by using the secondary based data to find out the local government system and governance in India. The method approach was qualitative descriptive research.

Results and conclusion: The Panchayati Raj system of local self-government was introduced by the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution of India which influenced the village life extensively as one of the most important units of democratic decentralization. Seventy-third Constitutional Amendment Act, ‘Empowering People for Prosperity’, brings out a significant change in the attitude, behavior and performance of the rustic folk in India. There are more than 250,000 local government bodies across India with nearly 3.1 million elected representatives. This paper reveals forward states provide good governance through the local government in the core areas of development with execution of plans in rural India and on the other hand, backward states are lack in governance due to nature the corruption laden politics exist in those states.

Implication of the research: This study sums up with the significance of grassroots democracy and its role in the development of rural India and at the same time to highlights the hurdle in the governance ecosystem of local governments in rural India.

Originality/value: The value of this study lies in its focus on a relatively aspect of grassroots governance system in India. It addresses a significant gap in the current literature, providing fresh insights into governance system in rural India and the strengthen the grassroots democracy.

Keywords: Grassroot Democracy, Governance, Panchayati Raj System, Rural India.

DEMOCRACIA DE BASE E QUESTÕES DE GOVERNANÇA LOCAL: PERSPECTIVA DA ÍNDIA RURAL

RESUMO

Objetivo: Este documento tem como objetivo focar na democracia de base na Índia e também descobrir o papel do autogoverno local para o desenvolvimento da Índia rural e seus desafios para governar.

Métodos: O caminho metodológico seguido pelo uso de dados de base secundária para descobrir o sistema de governo local e governança na Índia. A abordagem do método foi a pesquisa qualitativa descritiva.

Resultados e conclusão: O sistema Panchayati Raj de autogoverno local foi introduzido pela 73ª Emenda da Constituição da Índia, que influenciou a vida da aldeia extensivamente como uma das mais importantes unidades de descentralização democrática. A 73ª Lei de Emenda Constitucional, "Empoderamento das Pessoas para a Prosperidade", traz uma mudança significativa na atitude, comportamento e desempenho do povo rústico na Índia. Há mais de 250 mil órgãos do governo local em toda a Índia, com quase 3,1 milhões de representantes eleitos. Este documento revela que os estados avançados proporcionam boa governança através do governo local nas áreas

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centrais de desenvolvimento com a execução de planos na Índia rural e, por outro lado, os estados atrasados têm falta de governança devido à natureza, a corrupção carregada de políticas existe nesses estados.

Implicação da pesquisa: Este estudo resume o significado da democracia de base e seu papel no desenvolvimento da Índia rural e, ao mesmo tempo, destaca o obstáculo no ecossistema de governança dos governos locais na Índia rural.

Originalidade/valor: O valor deste estudo está em seu foco em um aspecto relativo do sistema de governança de base na Índia. Ele aborda uma lacuna significativa na literatura atual, fornecendo novas percepções sobre o sistema de governança na Índia rural e o fortalecimento da democracia de base.

Palavras-chave: Democracia Grassroot, Governança, Sistema Panchayati Raj, Índia Rural.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a phrase that is fundamentally based on contest and has a variety of meanings (Cliff duRand , 2005). Although the word's Greek origins (demos, the people, and kratein, to govern) translate to "ruling by the people," (Terrence Ball & Richard Dagger, 2004) and this is not a very descriptive definition when you consider the other connotations it has. A wide range of political systems are referred to as "democratic" throughout the world. It would be difficult to find a single definition that would fit all of these arrangements. If we translate the Greek word democracy literally, it means "direct governance by the people." Some assert that it is a system of governance where the majority of the people rule, while others assert that it is a system where the entire population governs, and yet others assert that it is a system where the people have the majority of the political power. Grassroots democracy is a propensity to construct political systems that devolve as much decision-making power to the organization's lowest social or geographic level as is conceivable.

The political and institutional procedures used to make and carry out decisions make up governance. The best forms of governance are those that are inclusive, accountable, transparent, efficient, participatory, and uphold the rule of law. At the local level, where governments often interact with residents and communities, good governance is especially crucial. A key strategy for maintaining peace, fostering economic growth, increasing administrative effectiveness, and ensuring social inclusion and environmental sustainability need local governance is in effective mode. In general, successful local governance determines by the function of local democracy, local finances, gender equality, and access to basic services, all of which are crucial components.

India is a country of rural folks where majority of its population live in villages. The democratic government of India is divided into three levels: the national, or federal, the state, or regional, and the local level, or Panchayati Raj and Nagar Palika systems. The Nagar Palika system serves towns and cities, whereas the Panchayati Raj system governs villages, sub-districts, and districts. If democracy is defined as the engagement of the people in the management of their own affairs, then democracy is nowhere more direct, clear, and significant than at the local level, where the interaction between the governed and the rulers is more constant, vigilant, and manageable. The practice of local self-government, according to Lord Bryce, is the best classroom for democracy and the best assurance of its success. Decentralization is a key strategy for making democracy really responsive and representative. Only the effective operation of a local government system can ensure the democratic goals of decentralization, growth, and increasing ongoing and active citizen engagement in the process.
of nation-building. No democratic political system can be expected to develop into anything stable and fully functional without a well-organized local government system. This paper attempts to explain what grassroots democracy with reference to India and find out the scenario of local governance in rural India and its related issues.

2 GRASSROOT DEMOCRACY IN INDIA: AN EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE

Popular participation is the very backbone of democracy. It is the key concept of self-governance, because in one democracy, decision making process begins and ends with the people. In modern democracy, it rests in the hands of the elected representatives. (Samantray J.P, 2015) Therefore essence of the democratic system prompted Abraham Lincon to say, it is of the People, by the People and for the People.

Only democratic decentralization can ensure the achievement of Popular Participation in a democratic system. The aspirations, desires, and goals of a vast number of people cannot be achieved without decentralization of authority. It had to be figured out from the bottom up and by the residents of every village (Prasad, 2004) which means democracy and democratic governance must be started from the bottom up at the grassroots level by involving the residents of villages in the decision-making process and managing the democratic administration of numerous villages through elected bodies. These grassroots institutions give the populace the ability to choose their representatives and opportunity to address local issues. India is hardly a newcomer to grassroots democracy. Both the idea and the experience of western political thought being operationalized in Indian soil are not new. (Mathew-2011) The village communities in India known as village panchayats could be compared to the Russian Mir, the German Mark, and the ancient Manor of England, but they have existed in India for more than a century and have become an integral part of Indian culture. (Saxena-1989). These institutions became the center of social life, administration, the economy, and social unity (Santh-1995). Inscriptions on Ashokan Pillars, the Rig Veda, Aitaraya Brahman, Panini's Astadhyai Kautilya's Arthasatra, and writings by Buddhist and Jain scholars. The extant material unequivocally demonstrates that Janapada, Paura Sabha, and Gram Sabha existed in classical India. (Mathew-2011).

Local self-government did not advance very much while under British rule and British rulers never made it a priority. Before the 1857 rebellion, rural development was not on their agenda but Samuel, a member of the Vice-Council, Roy's suggested a policy perspective on local government. Viceroy Mayo's call for decentralization of power to improve administrative effectiveness didn't receive the appropriate push until 1870. With the sole purpose of serving their colonial interests, Lord Rippon established it as a standard of government policy in his resolution on local government on May 18, 1882, and it was only limited to urban areas and large cities.

As Mahatma Gandhi often pointed out, India lives in villages and unless village life can be revitalized the nation as a whole can hardly come alive. When India became independent in 1947, perhaps one-third of the villages of India had traditional Panchayats and many of them were far from flourishing conditions. (Menon, Sudha Venu, 2007)

In the year following the independence (1947), in article 40 of the Directive Principles of State policy, which is the non-justifiable section of the constitution, the opinions of Mahatma Gandhi were taken into consideration. Both the Community Development Programme and the National Extension Service were started shortly after independence to deal with rural rehabilitation. According to the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee's (1956) recommendation, these three levels of democratic grassroots institutions—Zilla-Parisa at the top, Panchayat Samiti in the middle, and gram Panchayats in the villages—were dubbed Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI).
In order to categorize the operations of these institutions into three periods, the Ashok Meheta Committee was created in 1978 and these three were - Period of ascendancy (1959-64), Period of Stagnation (1965- 1969) and Period of decline (1969-77). The Committee suggested that planning, coordination, and resource allocation be done at the district level. In their report from 1986, the G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985) suggested giving these PRI Institutions constitutional status. Rajiv Gandhi, the late prime minister of India, took the bold step of introducing the 64th Constitutional Amendment Act, which had the goal of giving PRI institutions constitutional status. As a result of the opposition's limited political considerations, the bill was not approved by Parliament and was defeated in Rajya Sabha.

3 PANCHAYATI RAJ UNDER THE 73RD CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which was approved by Parliament on December 23, 1992, and went into effect on April 24, 1993, was finally implemented by P.V. Narasimha Rao's administration. The Indian Constitution now includes Part IX as a result of this Act. Its title is "The Panchayats," and articles 243-243D make up its provisions. The Act grants the Panchayati Raj Institutions a constitutional status and gives Article 40 of the Constitution a concrete form. The Constitutional Amendment guarantees a three-tier structure at the district, block, and village levels, an election commission to conduct elections on a regular basis, a state-level finance commission to investigate ways to increase funding for local bodies, a reservation of 1/3 of seats for women in all positions of the three tiers, a reservation of seats for SC/ST in proportion to their population in all positions of the three tiers, and the establishment of Gram Sabha for enhancing local government and an earmarked list of 29 items under 11th schedule.

India is the largest democracy in the world has the 630 Zilla (District) Panchayats, 6614 Block Panchayats, and 253163 Gram (Village) Panchayats as of 2019. For panchayats at all levels, there are currently more than 3 million elected representatives, of which more than 1 million are women.

4 LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

Governance implies those institutions and processes through which government, civil society organizations and private sector interact in shaping public affairs and through which citizens articulate their interests, mediate their differences and exercise their political, social and economic rights. (UNDP, 1997) The village-level governance can be assessed using benchmarks like the provision of essential services, the degree of transparency in the operation of the Gram Panchayat and local government department, the prevalence of corruption, and the availability of participation opportunities for citizens, primarily to ensure accountability. (Hiskey, Jonathan T, 2010)

The citizens of free societies receive relevant political education through the democratic local government. The management of group concerns and the pursuit of public goals are two things that local government teaches. As nations transition to democracy, McCarnery observes that local governments frequently change their structures. There is a notion that local government is a training ground for democracy or simply from the assumption that government closer to the people is part and parcel of democratic reform." (McCarney, 1996).

There are local governments control the abuses of concentrated power and its anti-democratic inclinations. This is crucial during periods of authoritarianism shift. There is an argument that the normative case for local government based on the values of liberty and participation should be qualified by other values, namely the rule of law, geographic redistribution, and macroeconomic steering, all of which involve central interventions and are equally crucial to the political system's legitimacy.
Involvement in local democracy is of a higher caliber than in national government. It allows for more meaningful participation because it is based on community and acquaintance with the wider society and its people. Teune contends that because the effects are more immediate and evident at the local level, there are larger incentives for participation. Political coalition formation and compromise are easier when there are fewer competing interests to be balanced (Teune H, 1995).

In 1993, the seventy-third constitutional amendment became law, granting local governments in rural India constitutional status and requiring frequent local elections. The objective was to provide local governments adequate authority and funding to run their own affairs. Importantly, the duty of local governments to deliver public services, carry out poverty alleviation initiatives, and advance distributive equality has received a lot of attention. (Bardhan and Mookherjee) (2006).

The Constitution of India defines Panchayats as institutions of local self-government in rural India. With the exception of the states whose population is less than 2 million, the three-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) system is mandatory for all states. The tiers consist of: Gram (Village) Panchayats at village or cluster of villages levels, Block Panchayat at sub-district or block level and the District Panchayat at the district level. For smaller states such as Sikkim, only two tiers, namely Village Panchayat and District Panchayats, have been constituted. The Constitution also mandates that democratically elected Panchayats should prepare for local economic development and social justice. They should also implement the schemes for local economic development and social justice as entrusted to them by Central and State governments. The aim was to establish democratic, independent, financially sound local organizations that could develop and carry out programs for their individual regions and provide decentralized governance to the populace. It is predicated on the ideas that people should have a say in choices that have an impact on their lives and that local issues should be addressed locally.

Every state in the nation has a similar PRI structure, with the exception of the reserved and tribal territories, which are not required by law to use the Panchayati Raj system. The 73rd Amendment is extended to tribal and forested areas in 10 states of India under the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act of 1996 (with some modifications and exceptions), with the exception of tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram, which are administered by District or Regional Councils. These clauses have been placed in place to safeguard traditional methods of managing communal resources, social and religious customs, and customary law.

Representatives who have been directly or indirectly elected serve in local government agencies. Given that there is no reservation for women at the central or state level, a minimum of one-third of the seats in all municipal bodies are designated for them on a rotating basis. The percentage of women in rural local bodies has increased over time in states like Odisha, Punjab, and West Bengal, reaching 50%. In proportion to their numbers, seats are also set aside for members of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other backward sections. A least 30% reservation for women is required under each of these headings.

The functions of local government deals with in promoting local economic development and social justice, local government bodies have the power to prepare development plans for the areas they serve. Implement a wide range of schemes relating to 29 core areas for rural local governments, these include health, education, poverty alleviation, housing, and the promotion of small-scale industries, among others. However, since individual state governments (rather than the centre) are responsible for the functioning of their respective local governments, the actual powers and functions of these institutions are highly dependent on the laws of the state in which they operate. PRIs are essential to rural development and carry out tasks including building, maintaining, and repairing roads, tanks, wells, and other administrative tasks like...
keeping track of village records. Enhancing socio-economic and well-being also involves in promoting rural industries, health, education, and the welfare of women and children, among other things. In addition, gram panchayats or distinct law panchayats handle judicial tasks like hearing minor civil and criminal issues such minor thefts and money disputes.

In democracy, there are various sources of funding for the local administration. In order to guarantee that local bodies have enough financial resources to operate, states are mandated to establish a State Finance Commission once every five years to examine the financial status of local government institutions and to provide recommendations to the state governments. Generally speaking, a rural local body's two primary sources of income are internal and external. Internal (or own-source) revenue is that which an organization generates on its own, whether through taxes like real estate or land taxes or through non-tax sources like rentals and user fees.

Assigned revenue, which is made up of levies that the state and federal governments collect on behalf of municipal and rural governments, is one example of an external source of income. Through the recommendations of State Finance Commissions, the precise percentage of these funds is allocated. There are loans and grants-in-aid from national organizations, financial intermediaries, capital markets, and/or donor organizations. The precise sources of income for rural local bodies vary due to the different nature of the services carried out. For instance, although smaller towns and rural organizations continue to rely on conventional sources like central and state government tax shares, loans, and grants.

Panchayats are associated in the implementation of most schemes of rural development. Other departments/ministries like Agriculture, Health, Water, Sanitation, Women and Child Development, Tribal Development and other social sector ministries also implement programmes at Panchayat level. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Grameen (PMAY-G) and Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) are among the top five centrally sponsored schemes which involve Panchayats. Other major programmes implemented at Gram Panchayat level include: Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, National Health Mission and Swachh Bharat Mission. Beside these schemes, the Fourteenth Finance Commission provided over Rs 2 hundred thousand for 2015-20 to Gram Panchayats. Panchayats are supposed to spend this funding on basic civic functions of water supply, sanitation, street lighting, playgrounds and crematorium. Many of the states also implement their social sector schemes at Gram Panchayat level. The respective State Finance Commissions can also provide funds for Panchayats for various works. All these have implications on capability building of Panchayats. (Kurukshetra, 2018)

PRIs in some states are doing very well in terms of devolution of funds, functions and functionaries (3Fs), infrastructure, governance and transparency. The annual study 2015-16, the Panchayat Devolution Index (PDI), the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India and Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai ranked Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Karnataka as first four states in India while, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Jharkhand are the low performers.

5 RURAL GOVERNANCE ISSUES IN INDIA

Nearly 60% of Indians live in rural areas, which contribute significantly to the country's economy. A significant portion of the population in rural areas depends on agriculture for their income. All of these rural areas are equally important for the country's sustainable development, even though different countries have different definitions of rural for statistical and administrative purposes, and the development of the rural system should be taken into account as part of the country's development. However, due to a lack of care for the democratic development of the rural system, where Panchayat Raj Institutions play a crucial role, and the fact that people in these areas are afflicted with several issues, the rural system of the nation is...
becoming more and more crippled. The implementation of policies and development initiatives must pay more attention to the rural areas if the nation is to experience general development. There are various obstacles to the development of rural areas, so it is important to research the issues in order to warn decision-makers, politicians, and planners about the difficulties facing the rural system.

The creation of local government entities in India has successfully facilitated political decentralization, but the real transfer of tasks, resources, and personnel to these institutions has not been completed. This weakens the system and prevents it from operating properly. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj produced a Devolution Report in 2015–2016 that provides an estimate of the degree to which states have devolved authority over functions, resources, and personnel. It comes to the conclusion that while some states, including Kerala, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, have given local bodies a comparatively greater amount of power, meaningful decentralization still needs to take place throughout India.

Due to a functional issue caused by the power split between the state and local governments, states frequently fail to delegate sufficient responsibilities to local government entities, which has a negative impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of the system. For instance, state governments have been known to set up alternative organizations to carry out projects in the fields of agriculture, health, and education, weakening jurisdictions that belong to local entities by law.

Many local organizations also lack the infrastructure needed to carry out their mandates. In order to consolidate and integrate the development plans created by the panchayats and urban local authorities, the 74th amendment mandates the creation of a District Planning Committee in each district. District Planning Committees, on the other hand, were found to be non-functional in nine states and to have failed to produce integrated plans in fifteen of them.

The financial challenges are also one of the issues related to rural governance in India. As devolving functions is meaningless without providing adequate funds to carry out said functions. After nearly 25 years of decentralization, local government expenditure as a percentage of GDP is only two percent—a number that is extremely low when compared to other major emerging economies such as China (11 percent) and Brazil (seven percent).

Most local governments, whether urban and rural, struggle to raise enough money internally and are consequently heavily reliant on outside financing sources. According to studies, between 80 and 95 percent of money comes from outside sources, notably loans and grants from the state and central governments.

Effective local leadership and rural governance are crucial for directing rural residents in their efforts to serve the community. Unfortunately, rural areas really need more of that kind of leadership. Therefore, in the absence of capable leadership, rural residents’ efforts to serve the community would be wasted. There is a need for effective leadership in rural regions because the bulk of rural residents are extremely impoverished and unable to maintain themselves. Many of the leaders in rural regions take their positions of authority for granted, are idle and don't care about their constituents' well-being, and use their influence to take advantage of others.

These leaders lack the necessary qualifications since they are so ineffective that the populace does not benefit. This explanation explains why, over the previous ten years, little has changed in the lives of those who live in rural areas. Additionally, there are leaders in rural areas who act in their own self-interest and support those who share those interests. Some residents of rural areas may receive additional assistance, while others remain in poverty. The people in rural areas are in charge of choosing the right leader and holding them accountable if they are not doing their jobs properly.

One of the major contributing elements to poor rural governance in India is administrative issues. According to the 2011 census, India has 6,40,867 villages. Panchayat Raj
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is the local government system in Indian villages. Agriculture, agricultural input supply and processing, infrastructure, marketing of agricultural goods, social development processes, education, training, alleviation of poverty, housing, and empowerment of rural women are significant areas that make up the framework of rural administration. Political meddling, insufficient budget, a lack of enthusiasm, and a lack of supervision are obstacles to the execution of administration.

Another reason for poor administration in rural areas, which has a direct impact on governance, is political pressure. A simple project strategy or a sectorial approach is insufficient to promote the general development of the area and the distribution of benefits to the local population, especially the poorer members of society, as various rural development programs have demonstrated in their earlier designs. Political meddling has led to the partial abandonment of many initiatives.

The main obstacle to implementing policies, programs, and strategies is a lack of funding. Rural areas typically receive little attention from budgets, and even when they do, implementation and allocation of this expenditure are never coordinated properly. The local population must be involved in the administration of the rural regions in order to understand their needs and ensure that it is ideal and beneficial for the rural residents. The management of rural areas depends heavily on public participation; however, this participation is very low due to a lack of education and motivation. The government has a duty to involve the rural population, and there may be employment prospects for the locals as well.

Although there are many programs in the nation for the administration of rural areas that have been put into place, there is no proper monitoring of these policies, which results in the waste of resources for these schemes and policies. Proper monitoring of these programs is completely beneficial to the people and creates a pause between their implementation. In remote places, these monitoring initiatives are often nonexistent.

The fact that, despite the 73rd Amendments, Panchayat Raj plays little to no role in Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) is one of the major reasons why systems of governance fail to make "the poorest feel it is their country, in whose making they have an effective voice," in addition to the factors listed above for poor governance in rural areas. (Mani Shankar Aiyar, 2013).

The rural governance system is harmed by vices including corruption and bribery, as seen by the villagers' limited access to the public distribution system, the Indira Awas Yojana, the Swachh Bharat Mission, and the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act. Numerous government programs experience these issues. To receive benefits under government programs, villagers must pay bribes. People, particularly the impoverished, are severely impacted by corruption in communities. The majority of India lacks opportunities for citizen engagement like Gram Sabha, social audits, and community monitoring. As a result, civic engagement has generally been limited to voting, and rural areas have few opportunities for post-election participation.

Local bodies such as Gram Panchayats do not have enough funds, functions and functionaries except in four–five states of India, so people regard it as symbolic institution, a vehicle without engines. Hence, they do not take much interest in its functioning which is cause of serious concern in democracy.

6 CONCLUSION

India is a country where democracy is vibrant and functional since the country have taken the democratic path to govern the nation. India is second most populous nation in the world where majority of the people live in the villages. The democracy as such is part of India since ancient period of time and time to time different rulers put the democratic system to
govern for the welfare of the society at the grassroots level. Due to diverse nature of the country in geography, society, economies and politics after the independence, the policy makes have given recommendations to establish grassroots democracy in order to provide political empowerment to rural society for their inclusive development. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which was approved by Parliament on December 23, 1992, and went into effect on April 24, 1993, was finally implemented by P.V. Narasimha Rao’s administration for having rural local government ‘Panchayati Raj Institutes’ (PRIs) in order to have India comes under the category of three-tier democracy which is quite unique in terms of function and implementation of policies and programs due to diverse nature of society and polity.

In India, PRIs have not failed, but for a variety of reasons, they appear to be failing or functioning poorly. Except in some parts of India, design failure is the main cause of the external failure of decentralized institutions like Panchayati Raj Institutions (elected local authorities). It denotes a poorly thought out political, administrative, and financial decentralization plan. The decentralization in India has been purposefully planned to fail because state governments have withheld administrative and fiscal authority out of a fear of losing control to locally elected authorities. The forwarded states do well by using of Panchayati Raj Institutions to focus on the development of rural areas through strong political and leadership will in order to implement policies and programs in a very transparent and effective manner particularly Center Sponsored Schemes (CSS) and in vice versa backwards states where corruption mind set of implement stakeholders, improper utilization of budget, political interference, and lack of motivation and interest by elected leadership lead to failure of rural governance through the local governments.

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