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Putting People First in the Development Agenda: Micro-Level Planning for Village Development

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Abstract

Village development remains one of the most persistent challenges in the development agenda of emerging and developing economies. This paper advances the thesis that sustainable rural transformation must begin with people — their aspirations, capabilities, institutions, and lived realities — rather than with top-down planning frameworks that prioritise macro-level aggregates at the expense of micro-level realities. Drawing on an extensive body of literature from development economics, rural sociology, agricultural economics, human geography, and policy studies, this paper proposes a comprehensive framework for people-centred micro-level planning for village development. The study systematically examines eleven interconnected dimensions of village development: the conceptual foundations of people-centred approaches; historical evolution of rural planning in India and globally; participatory methods and grassroots institutions; livelihoods, agriculture, and natural resource governance; social infrastructure and human capability development; gender, inclusion, and social equity; local governance and decentralised planning; technological innovation and digital transformation; ecological sustainability and climate resilience; financing and resource mobilisation at the micro level; and pathways for mainstreaming people-centred approaches into national and international policy frameworks. Each section engages with empirical evidence from India and comparative international contexts, drawing on data from government reports, multilateral organisations, peer-reviewed journals, and policy evaluations. This paper concludes by outlining an integrated village development planning model that places human dignity, participatory democracy, and ecological sustainability at its centre. The framework has direct relevance for policymakers, planners, civil society organisations, academic researchers, and international development agencies engaged in the challenge of equitable rural transformation.

Keywords: *Village Development, Micro-Level Planning, Rural Governance, Participatory Development, Decentralisation, Human Development, Inclusive Development*

1.0 Introduction

The global approach to development is shifting away from broad, top-down economic models toward a "people-first" approach focused on individual villages. For a long time, traditional economic theories—like the Harrod-Domar and Lewis models—viewed villages simply as sources of cheap labour and raw materials for cities **(Lewis, 1954; Sen, 1999).** However, major global reports, including the Human Development Reports **(UNDP, 1990, 2020)** and the World Development Report **(World Bank, 2001),** show that national economic growth often hides deep poverty and a lack of basic opportunities at the local level. In India, a combination of agricultural struggles and rapid digital growth has led experts in the Economic and Political Weekly and the Journal of Rural Studies to argue that real change must start with local, community-led planning **(Chambers, 1994; Reddy, 2023).** Although the 1992 laws promised to give power to local village councils (Panchayats), reports from the Government of India Knowledge Commission (2007) and the World Bank Research Observer (2022) point out that these councils often lack the money and authority they were promised, as state officials still hold most of the control **(Mathew, 2000; Rao and Walton, 2004)**. Today's rural India faces three major threats: environmental damage, economic instability, and social unfairness. While organisations like the FAO (2021) and Down to Earth (2024) warn that we are using up our natural resources, news outlets like The Economist and Frontline report that major government programs for water and jobs often fail because the local community isn't truly involved **(Narain, 2024; Rajalakshmi, 2025).** Furthermore, researchers in the American Economic Review worry that new digital technologies might only benefit the wealthy unless local institutions ensure everyone is included **(Nilekani, 2020; Banerjee and Duflo, 2019).** As India approaches 100 years of independence, the **NITI Aayog (2021)** and the **OECD (2019)** emphasise that meeting global Sustainable Development Goals depends on the strength of the Gram Sabha (the village assembly). This paper introduces a "People-First Village Development Model," suggesting that true progress is measured by the freedom, safety, and voice of people living in India's 640,000 villages, rather than the height of city buildings **(Drèze and Sen, 2013; Sachs, 2021; Stiglitz, 2020)**. The big question remains: how do we connect national economic goals with the daily needs of our most vulnerable citizens?

1.1 Conceptual foundations: people-centred development and its theoretical roots

The idea that development must be centred on people rather than on abstract economic indicators has a rich and contested intellectual history. The dominant development paradigm for much of the post-Second World War era measured progress through the lens of gross national product, capital accumulation, and industrial output. Villages were treated as reservoirs of surplus labour to be transferred to urban industrial sectors, and rural communities were largely invisible in the dominant frameworks of **Harrod(1939), Domar(1946) and Lewis (1954)** dual-sector models, and **Rostow's (1960)**stages of growth. The intellectual revolt against this paradigm began in earnest from the 1970s and gathered momentum through the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in the human development revolution associated with Amartya Sen and the UNDP **(Sen, 1999; UNDP, 1990).** Today, the notion that putting people first is not only a moral imperative but an analytical and strategic necessity is broadly accepted across development scholarship and international policy discourse, though its operationalisation at the village level remains deeply incomplete **(World Bank, 2020; FAO, 2021).**

The Human Development Paradigm and Its Village-Level Implications: Amartya Sen's capability approach, which forms the intellectual foundation of the Human Development Index, reoriented development discourse from a focus on goods and income to a focus on what people can do and be **(Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011).** This paradigm shift has profound implications for village-level planning. Rather than asking how much a village produces or what its per capita income is, the capability approach asks: Can villagers live long and healthy lives? Do they have access to knowledge and education? Can they participate in the political and social life of their community? Can women exercise agency and choice? The answers to these questions, as documented in successive Human Development Reports and country-level analyses, reveal that aggregate economic growth frequently masks profound capability deprivations at the micro level **(UNDP, 2020; Planning Commission of India, 2012).** The **World Development Report 2000/2001**, Attacking Poverty, articulated a three-pronged framework of opportunity, empowerment, and security that remains influential in shaping people-centred development strategies at the village level **(World Bank, 2001).** This framework recognised that poverty is multi-dimensional — encompassing not only income but also voicelessness, vulnerability, and social exclusion — and that addressing it requires institutional reforms that give poor people genuine agency in shaping the development processes that affect their lives. Subsequent **World Development Reports on Agriculture (2008)**, service delivery (2004), and governance (2017) have reinforced and extended this framework in ways that are directly relevant to village-level planning **(World Bank, 2004; World Bank, 2008; World Bank, 2017).**

From Welfare to Rights: The Evolution of Development Thinking: A significant intellectual shift in development thinking has been the transition from welfare-based to rights-based approaches to development. Welfare approaches treat poor and marginalised populations as passive recipients of state benevolence, whereas rights-based approaches treat them as rights-holders with legitimate claims on state and societal institutions **(Sengupta, 2004; Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi, 2004)**. In the Indian context, this shift has been embodied in landmark legislation such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act **(Aiyar and Mehta**, **2005),** the Right to Information Act (2005), the Forest Rights Act (2006), the Right to Education Act (2009), and the National Food Security Act (2013). Each of these legislative milestones represents an attempt to give legal substance to the moral claims of rural communities **(Drèze and Sen, 2013).** The rights-based approach has been championed by UN agencies, civil society organisations, and academic scholars alike. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has articulated minimum core obligations that states owe to all citizens, including those in rural and remote areas, covering food, water, sanitation, health, and education **(UN, 2002).** However, as analysts writing in journals such as the Economic and Political Weekly and World Development have pointed out, the gap between legal entitlements and practical realisation remains enormous in most developing countries, partly because rights-based frameworks have not been adequately translated into operational micro-level planning tools **(Beteille, 2002; Rao and Walton, 2004).**

Participatory Development: Theory, Critique, and Renewal: Participatory development emerged as a major intellectual and practical movement in the 1980s and 1990s, associated with figures such as Robert Chambers, Paulo Freire, and the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methodology **(Chambers, 1994; Freire, 1970).** The central insight of participatory development is that poor and marginalised people possess sophisticated knowledge of their own circumstances and that effective development planning must begin by mobilising this knowledge rather than displacing it with expert-driven frameworks. PRA tools such as social mapping, wealth ranking, seasonal calendars, and matrix scoring have been widely used in village-level planning exercises across South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. However, participatory development has also attracted substantial criticism. Cooke and Kothari's influential. Edited volume, Participation: The New Tyranny? raised concerns that participatory approaches can be co-opted by powerful actors within communities and development agencies, that they can mask rather than address structural inequalities, and that they can deflect attention from the political and economic reforms necessary for genuine empowerment **(Cooke and Kothari, 2001).** These critiques have been taken seriously by scholars writing in journals such as the Journal of Rural Studies and World Development, who have called for a more politically engaged understanding of participation that goes beyond technique to address questions of power, accountability, and structural change **(Cornwall, 2003; Mosse, 2001).** The renewal of participatory approaches has been informed by this critical engagement, resulting in more nuanced frameworks that combine participatory methods with attention to political economy, institutional contexts, and rights-based frameworks.

Micro-Level Planning: Concepts, Methods, and Challenges: Micro-level planning refers to the process of formulating, implementing, and evaluating development plans at the level of villages, hamlets, watersheds, or other sub-district spatial units. It is distinguished from macro-level planning by its emphasis on specificity, context-sensitivity, and community ownership. The literature on micro-level planning in India dates back to the Community Development Programme of the 1950s, but the field was significantly transformed by the constitutional amendments of 1992-93 that mandated decentralised planning through Panchayati

Raj Institutions (PRIs) **(GoI, 2013; George, 2011).** The introduction of the District Planning Committees and the mandate for Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs) under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Finance Commissions has given fresh institutional impetus to micro-level planning **(GoI, Finance Commission, 2020).** The challenges of micro-level planning are well-documented in the literature. These include the weak technical capacity of local bodies, inadequate data at the village level, limited fiscal autonomy of gram panchayats, social capture of local institutions by dominant groups, poor coordination between line departments and local governments, and the lack of a culture of evidence-based planning at the grassroots level **(Mathew, 2000; Mohanty, 2011).** The OECD has highlighted similar challenges in decentralised planning across its member and partner countries, emphasising that the devolution of administrative responsibility without corresponding devolution of fiscal resources and human capacity frequently leads to unfunded mandates and planning failure **(OECD, 2019).** Addressing these challenges requires both technical reforms and deeper transformations in the political culture of development administration.

Global Frameworks and the Sustainable Development Goals: The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015 provided a new global framework that is highly relevant to people-centred village development planning. The SDGs differ from their predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), in important respects: they are universal rather than restricted to developing countries; they integrate economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development; they include goals related to reducing inequality, promoting inclusive institutions, and protecting ecosystems; and they explicitly emphasise the principle of leaving no one behind, which has direct implications for the most marginalised rural communities **(UN, 2015; Sachs, 2015).** Goals 1 (No Poverty), 2 (Zero Hunger), 6 (Clean Water), 7 (Affordable Energy), 11 (Sustainable Communities), 13 (Climate Action), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) are particularly relevant to village-level planning. The SDG framework has been localised in India through the NITI Aayog's SDG India Index, which maps district-level performance against SDG indicators and highlights the geographical concentration of deprivation in rural and tribal areas **(NITI Aayog, 2021).** Analyses published in journals such as the World Bank Economic Review, World Development, and the Economic and Political Weekly have pointed out that achieving the SDGs in India will require sustained attention to the most disadvantaged villages — those in aspirational districts, tribal belts, coastal and flood-prone areas, and regions with historically weak public service delivery **(Srinivasan, 2018; Kumar and Singh, 2019).** This is precisely where people-centred micro-level planning is most needed and most challenging to implement.

1.2 Historical evolution of rural planning in India and comparative international perspectives

India's engagement with rural planning stretches back to the colonial period and has evolved through successive phases marked by shifting ideological frameworks, institutional experiments, and policy reversals. Understanding this history is essential for appreciating both the achievements and the persistent gaps in India's approach to village development, and for drawing lessons from international comparisons. The history of rural planning in India is simultaneously a history of the relationship between state and society, between planning and democracy, and between efficiency and equity as competing developmental values.

Colonial Legacies and Post-Independence Planning Architecture: British colonial administration shaped rural India in ways that continue to influence village development to the present day. The colonial land revenue system, which displaced customary tenure arrangements and commodified land, the destruction of rural artisanal industries through deindustrialisation, the neglect of rural infrastructure and public health, and the administrative marginalisation of village communities all created structural conditions of rural underdevelopment that persisted well beyond independence **(Bose, 1975; Habib, 2006).** At the same time, the colonial census and survey apparatus created data infrastructure, however imperfect, that became the foundation for post-independence planning. The Indian National Congress's approach to rural development was shaped by the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, who placed the village at the centre of his vision of Swaraj, and by Jawaharlal Nehru, who sought rapid industrialisation with agriculture as a secondary priority. This fundamental tension between Gandhian village-centrism and Nehruvian industrial modernism shaped the compromises embedded in the Community Development Programme (CDP) launched in 1952, which sought to catalyse rural development through the mobilisation of community initiative and the extension of government services to villages **(Dube, 1958).** The CDP's mixed record — significant achievements in infrastructure alongside limited impact on poverty and inequality — set the tone for subsequent debates about the conditions under which state-sponsored rural development programmes can succeed **(Khilnani, 1997).**

Green Revolution, Agrarian Transformation, and Rural Inequality: The Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s transformed Indian agriculture in ways that had profound and ambivalent implications for village development. The introduction of high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice, combined with irrigation expansion, chemical fertiliser use, and institutional credit, achieved spectacular increases in food grain production and largely eliminated the threat of famine in India **(Dalrymple, 1986; Lele and Goldsmith, 1989).** However, as extensive scholarship in the American Journal of Agricultural Economics and Sociology, the Journal of Rural Studies, and the Economic and Political Weekly has documented, the benefits of the Green Revolution were highly uneven geographically and socially. They were concentrated in regions with irrigation infrastructure **(Punjab, Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh)** and among farmers with sufficient land and capital to adopt the new technology package **(Frankel, 1971; Byres, 1981).** The social consequences of the Green Revolution for village communities were equally complex. In regions of rapid agricultural commercialisation, traditional systems of patron-client relations between upper-caste landowners and lower-caste agricultural labourers were disrupted, often with ambivalent results: greater economic independence for labourers on the one hand, but the loss of customary social security arrangements on the other **(Breman, 1985; Harriss, 1982).** The feminisation of agricultural labour, the marginalisation of small and marginal farmers, and the ecological degradation associated with intensive chemical-based agriculture are all legacies of the Green Revolution that continue to shape rural planning challenges today **(Shiva, 1991; Agarwal, 1994)**; **Foster and Rosenzweig (1996,2011); Gollin et.al.(2021)** focused on agricultural economics, have published extensive analyses of the productivity-equity trade-offs embedded in the Green Revolution strategy.

Decentralisation and the Panchayati Raj Revolution: The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, which gave constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and mandated the devolution of functions, funds, and functionaries to elected village governments, represented the most significant institutional transformation in Indian rural governance since independence **(Mathew, 2000; Oommen, 1999)**. The amendment mandated the reservation of one-third of seats (subsequently expanded to one-half in many states) for women, and provided for reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population. Over the subsequent three decades, more than three million elected representatives have served in PRIs, including hundreds of thousands of women who have entered the political process for the first time **(GoI 2019).** The experience of Panchayati Raj since 1992 has generated an enormous body of research published in journals such as **Besley et al.(2004); Vaddiraju (2021); Rao and Singh (2007); World Bank (2017,2022).** This literature documents both the transformative potential and the severe limitations of decentralised governance. States like Kerala, which had a prior history of strong social movements and left political parties, demonstrated that PRIs could deliver substantial improvements in social services and development planning **(Isaac and Franke, 2000).** But in many other states, PRIs remained captured by dominant caste groups, starved of funds and functions by state governments reluctant to devolve real power, and overwhelmed by the technical demands of planning without adequate institutional support **(Besley et al.2004; Bhattacharyya, 2002).** The OECD's comparative research on decentralisation has identified similar patterns of promise and failure across countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, suggesting that decentralisation is a necessary but insufficient condition for people-centred development **(OECD, 2019).**

International Models of Village and Community Development Planning: India's experience with village development planning can be illuminated by comparison with models from other countries that have pursued similar objectives with varying degrees of success. China's village-level rural development strategy, pursued under the Socialist New Countryside programme since 2006, has achieved remarkable improvements in rural infrastructure and public services, though critics have pointed to the top-down character of the planning process and the displacement of communities through large-scale land acquisition **(Naughton, 2007; Ahlers and Schubert, 2009).** South Korea's Saemaul Undong (New Community Movement), launched in the early 1970s, combined state investment with community mobilisation to achieve rapid improvements in rural living standards, and has been extensively studied as a model for developing countries, though its replicability in different political and institutional contexts is debated **(Korea Rural Development Administration, 2010; FAO, 2020).** In sub-Saharan Africa, community-driven development (CDD) programmes funded by the World Bank and other donors have experimented with different approaches to putting communities in charge of local development planning and resource allocation. Evaluations published in the World Bank Economic Review and Journal of Development Economics have produced mixed findings: some studies find positive impacts on infrastructure and service delivery, while others document the capture of programme resources by local elites and the failure to reach the most marginalised groups **(Mansuri and Rao, 2013; Casey et al.2012).** These international experiences underline the importance of contextual factors — including the strength of civil society, the quality of local governance, the extent of social inequality, and the coherence of national policy frameworks — in shaping the outcomes of people-centred development initiatives.

India's Rural Development Programmes: A Critical Assessment: Independent India has implemented a remarkably large number of centrally sponsored schemes and state government programmes aimed at rural development, poverty alleviation, and village-level transformation. From the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) of the 1970s to MGNREGA, from the Indira Awas Yojana to the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Gramin), from watershed development to the Sansad Adarsh Gram Yojana, India's rural development policy landscape is characterised by an extraordinary proliferation of programmes that frequently suffer from poor coordination, weak monitoring, and inadequate convergence **(GoI, Planning Commission, 2011; Drèze and Sen, 2013)**. **Rajalakshmi (2025)** and **Srivastava (2026)** have extensively documented implementation failures in flagship rural programmes, while **Narain (2024)** has tracked the ecological dimensions of rural development policy. The Twelfth Plan's approach to rural development, with its emphasis on convergence, decentralised planning, and rights-based entitlements, represented a partial attempt to address these structural weaknesses. More recently, the Aspirational Districts Programme, launched in 2018, has sought to focus attention and resources on the most backward districts through a competitive, data-driven approach to development planning that monitors progress on 49 indicators across five domains **(NITI Aayog, 2019)**. International analyses by the ADB, the World Bank, and IFAD have commended aspects of India's rural development framework while highlighting persistent gaps in implementation, targeting, and the empowerment of village communities in the planning process **(ADB, 2020; IFAD, 2019; World Bank, 2020)**. The lessons of this long and complex history inform the framework for people-centred village development planning proposed in this article.

1.3 Participatory methods and grassroots institutions in village development planning

The translation of people-centred development principles into practical planning processes at the village level requires both appropriate methodological tools and functioning institutional frameworks. Over the past four decades, a rich repertoire of participatory methods has been developed, tested, and refined across diverse village contexts in India and globally. These methods range from relatively simple community appraisal tools to sophisticated digital platforms for participatory mapping and planning. Alongside methodological innovation, considerable experimentation has occurred with grassroots institutional design — the question of how to create, strengthen, and sustain local organisations that can genuinely represent the interests of the poor and marginalised in development planning processes.

Participatory Rural Appraisal: Tools, Applications, and Limitations: Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), developed primarily through the work of Robert Chambers and his colleagues at the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex, represents the most widely disseminated toolkit for community-based assessment and planning in rural development **(Chambers, 1994; Chambers, 2008)**. The PRA toolkit includes a wide array of

methods: semi-structured interviews; focus group discussions; social and resource mapping; transect walks; wealth and well-being ranking; seasonal diagrams and livelihood calendars; matrix scoring for priority setting; and Venn diagrams for institutional analysis. These tools are designed to be accessible to illiterate and semi-literate community members, to be conducted in local languages, and to produce outputs — usually visual maps, diagrams, and matrices drawn on the ground or on paper — that communities own and can use. The application of PRA in village development planning in India has been extensive, spanning watershed development programmes, forest management projects, rural health initiatives, and gram panchayat development planning processes. Studies published in the **Besley et al.(2004); Vaddiraju (2021); Rao and Singh (2007); World Bank (2017,2022)** have documented both the genuine insights generated by PRA processes and their significant limitations when applied without adequate attention to power dynamics within communities **(Mosse, 1994; Guijt and Shah, 1998).** A recurring finding is that PRA exercises conducted by external facilitators, including NGOs and government extension workers, frequently generate data and priorities that reflect the perspectives of more vocal, better-connected, and higher-status community members rather than the most marginalised. The critical literature has called for approaches that go beyond technique to engage with the political dimensions of participation.

Gram Sabha as a Democratic Institution: Promise and Practice: The Gram Sabha — the assembly of all adult voters in a gram panchayat — is the foundational institution of participatory democracy in Indian villages, mandated by the 73rd Amendment and given specific powers under various state Panchayati Raj Acts and central government schemes including MGNREGA, the Forest Rights Act, and the National Rural Livelihoods Mission **(GOI, 2013)**. The Gram Sabha is theoretically the most powerful expression of people-centred planning — a forum in which village communities can collectively assess their needs, prioritise interventions, scrutinise the performance of local government, and hold officials accountable. In principle, the Gram Sabha transforms villagers from passive beneficiaries into active citizens. In practice, however, the functioning of Gram Sabhas across India is highly uneven and frequently deeply disappointing. Research documented in journals such as the Economic and Political Weekly, the Journal of Rural Development, and Frontline magazine consistently finds that Gram Sabha meetings suffer from low attendance (particularly among women, the poor, and marginalised caste groups), that agendas are dominated by local power-holders, that decisions are rarely translated into concrete planning and resource allocation outcomes, and that the information necessary for meaningful participation — about entitlements, schemes, budgets, and performance — is not routinely made available **(Mohanty, 2011; Panchayat Raj Update, 2018)**. The Knowledge Commission Report of the Government of India identified information asymmetry as a fundamental obstacle to participatory governance in rural areas, recommending significant investment in village-level information systems and community radio as instruments of democratic participation **(GoI, Knowledge Commission, 2007).**

Self-Help Groups and Federations as Planning Actors: Self-Help Groups (SHGs), small informal associations of twelve to twenty women (and occasionally men) who pool savings and access credit, have become one of the most important institutional innovations in rural India. The National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), launched in 2011 and subsequently restructured as Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana (DAY-NRLM), aims to organise all rural poor households into SHGs and federate them into Village Organisations (VOs) and Cluster Level Federations (CLFs). By 2022, over 87 million women had been organised into SHGs under the programme, making it one of the largest social mobilisation initiatives in human history **(GoI, 2022; World Bank, 2014).** The development literature, including studies in the American Journal of Agricultural Economics and Sociology, Rural Sociology, and the Journal of Development Economics, has documented that well-functioning SHG federations can serve as effective planning actors at the village and cluster level, conducting participatory needs assessments, facilitating access to government entitlements, implementing livelihood promotion activities, and building social capital among marginalised groups **(Deininger and Liu, 2009; Sinha, 2011).** The Kerala experience, where SHG federations under the Kudumbashree programme have been formally integrated into the gram panchayat planning process, providing block grants to women's neighbourhood groups for local development activities, offers an influential model of how people-centred planning institutions can be built at the village level **(Isaac and Franke, 2000; Government of Kerala, 2019).** However, research also documents significant variation in SHG quality and performance across contexts, and cautions against treating SHGs as a universal solution to participation deficits in village planning.

Civil Society Organisations and People's Movements in Village Development: Beyond formal institutional structures, civil society organisations (CSOs) — including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), voluntary associations, people's movements, trade unions, and social welfare organisations — play a critical role in facilitating people-centred planning at the village level. India has one of the largest and most diverse civil society landscapes in the world, with a rich tradition of Gandhian constructive work, leftist peasant movements, Dalit rights organisations, women's movements, environmental movements, and community-based development organisations **(Thakkar, 2008; Srivastava and Tandon, 2005).** Organisations such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and thousands of smaller local organisations have pioneered approaches to participatory planning and rights-based advocacy that have had significant influence on national policy. The literature on civil society and rural development, published in journals including the Journal of Rural Studies, World Development, and the Economic and Political Weekly, emphasises the importance of a vibrant civil society ecosystem as a precondition for people-centred planning. Civil society organisations perform multiple functions: they build the organisational capacity of the poor, they provide technical support for participatory planning exercises, they hold governments accountable for the implementation of rural development programmes, they document violations of rural people's rights, and they generate and disseminate knowledge about effective development approaches **(Baviskar, 2004; Kohli, 2007).** However, the relationship between civil society organisations and the state in rural development is frequently contested, and the space for civil society action in some Indian states has been curtailed by restrictive administrative actions (FCRA regulations, tax scrutiny, and so on), a trend noted with concern by both Indian and international analysts.

Digital Platforms and Technology-Enabled Participation: The emergence of digital technologies — mobile telephony, the internet, geographic information systems (GIS), remote sensing, and social media — has opened new possibilities for participatory planning at the village level, particularly in the context of rapidly increasing rural connectivity in India. The BharatNet programme, which aims to extend optical fibre broadband connectivity to all gram panchayats, provides infrastructure for a range of digital

governance and participation applications **(GoI, BharatNet, 2021).** Applications such as the Gram Swaraj Portal, the eSamiksha platform for scheme monitoring, the Public Financial Management System (PFMS) for tracking fund flows, and state-specific platforms such as e-Gram Swaraj in Gujarat have begun to make village-level planning and expenditure data available to citizens in ways that were previously impossible. Researchers writing in journals such as Information Technology for Development, World Development, and Government Information Quarterly have documented both the potential and the pitfalls of digital participation in rural governance. On the positive side, digital platforms can reduce information asymmetries between officials and citizens, enable real-time monitoring of programme implementation, facilitate the aggregation of community feedback, and provide channels for grievance redressal that bypass local power structures **(Bhatnagar, 2014; Heeks, 2018**). On the negative side, digital participation risks exacerbating exclusion if not designed with attention to digital literacy, language, gender, and disability access. Research by the ADB and OECD on digital government in developing countries emphasises that technology is an enabler rather than a substitute for genuine participatory processes and accountable institutions **(ADB, 2021; OECD, 2020).** The most promising approaches combine digital tools with face-to-face community engagement, using technology to enhance rather than replace human interaction in village planning processes.

1.4 Livelihoods, agriculture, and natural resource governance in village development

Agriculture and natural resource management remain the economic foundation of village life in India and most of the developing world, even as rural economies are increasingly diversified through non-farm employment, migration, and the growth of rural service sectors. Any framework for people-centred village development must engage seriously with the agrarian question — the challenge of making agriculture economically viable and socially equitable — alongside the question of how natural resources (land, water, forests, biodiversity) are governed and the returns to their use distributed. These are fundamentally political questions, not merely technical ones, and their resolution requires the active participation of rural communities in planning and governance processes.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework: Applications and Adaptations: The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), developed initially by DFID and subsequently elaborated by researchers at IDS Sussex and practitioners in a range of international development organisations, provides a systematic approach to understanding and strengthening rural livelihoods **(Chambers and Conway, 1992; Ellis, 2000).** The framework focuses on five categories of capital assets — human, social, natural, physical, and financial — that rural households draw on to construct diverse livelihood strategies. It examines the vulnerability context (shocks, trends, and seasonality) that shapes livelihood outcomes, and analyses the institutional and policy environment (organisations, rules, and norms) that mediates access to assets and returns to their use. The SLF has been widely applied in village development planning in India, including in watershed development programmes, forest management projects, and the design of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission. Studies in the Journal of Rural Studies, Rural Sociology, and the American Journal of Agricultural Economics and Sociology have documented the SLF's strengths and limitations as a planning framework. Its holistic attention to multiple dimensions of livelihood vulnerability and its integration of household agency with structural factors make it well-suited to village-level analysis. However, critics have argued that the SLF underplays power relations and political economy, overemphasises household-level strategies at the expense of collective action and community-level planning, and provides limited guidance on the sequencing and prioritisation of interventions in contexts of deep deprivation **(Scoones, 2009; De Haan and Zoomers, 2005)**. These limitations suggest the need for complementary frameworks, including political ecology and social movement theory, in designing people-centred livelihood programmes at the village level.

Smallholder Agriculture: Challenges, Innovations, and Policy Frameworks: Smallholder agriculture — farming by households with limited land holdings, typically two hectares or less — is the dominant form of agricultural production in India, where over 86.0 per cent of operational holdings are smaller than two hectares (Agricultural Census, 2015-16). Smallholder farmers face a distinctive set of challenges that are well-documented in the literature of the American Journal of Agricultural Economics and Sociology, World Development, and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. These challenges include limited access to institutional credit, technology, market information, and extension services; high exposure to weather and price risks; limited bargaining power in input and output markets; and vulnerability to land acquisition, water scarcity, and environmental degradation **(Pingali, 2010; FAO, 2012; IFAD, 2019)**. Despite these challenges, smallholder agriculture can be highly productive and ecologically sustainable when supported by appropriate policies and institutions. Research has demonstrated that small farms frequently achieve higher land productivity than large farms when account is taken of multiple outputs and ecosystem services, a finding known as the inverse farm size-productivity relationship that has been extensively debated in the American Economic Review and other journals **(Dyer, 2004; Eastwood et al.2010)**. Policy frameworks that support smallholder agriculture include the provision of remunerative minimum support prices, investment in irrigation, rural roads, and storage infrastructure, the promotion of farmer-producer organisations (FPOs) and agricultural cooperatives for collective marketing, and the design of crop insurance schemes calibrated to smallholder risks **(GoI, NITI Aayog, 2021; ADB, 2018; World Bank, 2008)**. Village development planning must integrate these policy instruments into a coherent local strategy rather than treating them as separate sectoral interventions.

Water Resource Management and Participatory Irrigation Governance: Access to reliable water for agriculture and domestic use is among the most critical determinants of village welfare in India, where agriculture accounts for approximately 80.0 per cent of total freshwater use and where water scarcity is a growing challenge in the context of climate change and groundwater depletion **(GoI, 2020; World Bank, 2020; UNEP, 2021)**. The governance of water resources at the village level is a deeply contested political arena, shaped by caste hierarchies, class interests, gender dynamics, and the power of agricultural equipment suppliers and water market intermediaries. Traditional community-based water management institutions — including tank irrigation systems, kuhls, johads, and kund — represent examples of sophisticated local water governance that predate the modern state and continue to function in modified form in many villages **(Shah, 2009; Agarwal and Narain, 1997)**. The challenge of revitalising participatory water governance at the village level has been addressed through some policy frameworks and programmes, including the

Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) policy of the Ministry of Water Resources, the Jal Shakti Abhiyan, the Atal Bhujal Yojana for groundwater management, and watershed development programmes implemented by NABARD, state governments, and NGOs **(GoI, 2020)**. Research on these programmes, published in journals including Water Resources Research, the Journal of Rural Development, and Ecology and Society, documents that genuinely participatory water governance — where communities have real decision-making power over water allocation, maintenance, and conflict resolution — can lead to significantly better management outcomes than state-directed approaches. The conditions for success include strong social capital, secure land and water rights, transparent institutions, and supportive external agencies that facilitate rather than direct community action **(Ostrom, 1990; Agrawal, 2001)**.

Forest Rights, Common Lands, and Community Resource Management: Common-pool resources — forests, pasturelands, village ponds, rivers, and coastal fisheries — represent a critical component of the livelihood system of India's rural poor, particularly for Adivasi (tribal) communities and other forest-dependent populations. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006 represented a landmark attempt to correct historical injustices committed against forest-dwelling communities through the recognition of individual and community forest rights **(Sarin et al.2003; GoI, 2006)**. As of 2022, however, the implementation of the Forest Rights Act remains incomplete and contested, with millions of claims pending, significant variations across states in titling rates, and ongoing conflicts between forest departments and community claimants. The theoretical framework for understanding community management of common-pool resources draws heavily on the work of Elinor Ostrom, whose Governing the Commons (1990) challenged both the free-rider logic of the tragedy of the commons and the state management model by demonstrating that communities can and do develop effective self-governing institutions for managing shared resources. Subsequent research in journals including the American Economic Review, Ecology and Society, and World Development has substantially extended Ostrom's framework, identifying the conditions under which community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) succeeds and the circumstances under which it faces elite capture, free-rider problems, or state resistance **(Baland and Platteau, 1996; Agrawal, 2001)**. Village development planning must build on this literature to design institutions for common resource management that are genuinely participatory, equitable, and effective — recognising that the governance of commons is inseparable from the governance of power in village communities.

Non-Farm Rural Economy: Diversification, Migration, and Inclusive Value Chains: The non-farm rural economy — encompassing manufacturing, construction, trade, transport, services, and home-based enterprises — has grown rapidly in India over the past three decades, driven by agricultural stagnation, rural infrastructure development, expansion of rural credit, and the spread of mobile telephony. Non-farm employment now accounts for a substantial and growing share of rural household income across India, though with significant regional and social variation **(Lanjouw and Murgai, 2009; Himanshu et al.2011; Basant and Kumar, 1989)**. Research in the Journal of Rural Studies, Economic and Political Weekly, and Rural Sociology documents that non-farm diversification can reduce household vulnerability to agricultural risk, raise household income above subsistence level, and provide pathways out of poverty for landless and near-landless households. However, the rural non-farm economy is also characterised by significant market failures, institutional gaps, and social exclusion that limit its contribution to equitable village development. Small rural enterprises face barriers to credit access, market linkage, technology adoption, and skills development that are well-documented in the ADB's reports on rural enterprise development **(ADB, 2020; FAO, 2019)**. Caste-based discrimination restricts the entry of Dalit and Adivasi households into higher-value non-farm activities and confines them to traditional occupations with limited returns **(Shah et al.2006; Thorat and Newman, 2010)**. Women entrepreneurs face gender-specific barriers, including limited mobility, lack of collateral, social norms restricting engagement with markets, and the double burden of productive and reproductive work. Village development planning must actively address these structural barriers to non-farm enterprise development through targeted credit programmes, skills training, market linkage support, and institutional reforms that challenge caste and gender discrimination in the rural economy.

1.5 Social infrastructure and human capability development in villages

The development of human capabilities — the ability to live a healthy and productive life, to acquire knowledge and skills, to participate in social and political life — is both an end in itself and an instrument of economic development and social transformation. At the village level, the delivery of social services — education, health, nutrition, water and sanitation, social protection, and culture — determines whether human capabilities are nurtured or stunted from birth. India's record in social service delivery in rural areas is deeply mixed: remarkable achievements in expanding access alongside persistent quality deficits, wide inter-state and inter-district variations, and a systematic disadvantage faced by women, Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalised groups.

Elementary Education in Villages: Access, Quality, and Equity: The Right to Education Act of 2009 gave constitutional force to the commitment to universal elementary education in India, building on the earlier Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the mid-day meal programme. By the mid-2010s, near-universal enrolment in primary education had been achieved, with the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) documenting enrolment rates above 95.0 per cent for 6-14 year olds **(ASER Centre, 2019).** This achievement, which represents a genuine success of the Indian state's commitment to educational access, has been widely cited by the UNDP, UNESCO, and UNICEF as a model for developing countries. However, as the same ASER reports — along with analyses in journals such as the Economic and Political Weekly, The Economist (Development section), and the Times of India's education coverage — consistently document, enrolment gains have not translated into commensurate learning outcomes. The learning crisis in rural India — where a majority of Class V students in many states cannot read a Class II text or perform basic arithmetic — has been analysed extensively in both academic and policy literature. Contributing factors include teacher absenteeism, multi-grade teaching in single-teacher schools, lack of teaching-learning materials, inadequate teacher training, the social distance between

teachers and students from marginalised communities, the poor quality of school infrastructure (particularly for girls, who require functional toilets), and the mismatch between the curriculum and the linguistic and cultural context of rural children **(Kremer et al.2005; PROBE Report, 1999; Muralidharan and Sundararaman, 2013)**. Village development planning must treat education quality — not merely enrolment — as a central priority, and must include mechanisms for community monitoring of school performance, support for mother-tongue medium instruction, and investment in pre-school education through Anganwadi centres.

Rural Health Systems: Strengthening Primary Health Care at the Village Level: The National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), launched in 2005 and subsequently incorporated into the National Health Mission (NHM), represented a major policy commitment to strengthening rural primary health care in India. The mission's innovations included the deployment of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) as community health workers at the village level, the strengthening of the network of Sub-Centres, Primary Health Centres (PHCs), and Community Health Centres (CHCs), the introduction of institutional delivery incentives through the Janani Suraksha Yojana, and attention to the social determinants of health through cross-sectoral convergence **(GoI, 2019)**. The NHM has contributed to significant improvements in maternal and child health indicators, including declines in infant and under-five mortality rates and increases in institutional delivery rates. However, significant gaps remain in the quality, accessibility, and equity of rural health services, as documented in analyses published in The Lancet, the Indian Journal of Medical Research, the Economic and Political Weekly, and The Hindu. The shortage of trained health professionals willing to serve in rural areas is acute, with vacancy rates in PHCs and CHCs running at 30.0 per cent - 50.0 per cent in many states. The quality of clinical care in public facilities is frequently poor, driving the poor to seek care from private providers at catastrophic out-of-pocket costs. WHO and UNDP analyses highlight that India's per capita public health expenditure remains well below the global average and far below the levels achieved by comparator countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka, which have built effective rural health systems through sustained public investment **(WHO, 2020; UNDP, 2020).** The Ayushman Bharat programme's Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) addresses the financial dimension of access but does not substitute for the strengthening of primary care infrastructure and human resources at the village level.

Nutrition Security and the Integrated Child Development Services Programme: India continues to bear a disproportionate share of the global burden of child malnutrition, with the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) of 2019-21 documenting that 35.5 per cent of children under five were stunted, 19.3 per cent were wasted, and 32.1 per cent were underweight **(GoI, 2021).** These aggregate figures mask even more alarming conditions in specific regions and among specific population groups — Adivasi children, children from Scheduled Caste households, and children in central and eastern Indian states have malnutrition rates significantly above the national average. The FAO's State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World reports consistently rank India poorly on nutrition outcomes relative to its per capita income, pointing to a nutrition paradox that has been extensively analysed in the American Journal of Agricultural Economics and Sociology and in IFAD's rural nutrition reports. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme, operating through a network of approximately 1.4 million Anganwadi Centres across India, is the primary vehicle for addressing malnutrition at the village level. ICDS provides supplementary nutrition, preschool education, health check-ups, immunisation, and referral services for children under six and pregnant and lactating women. However, evaluations documented in journals including the Economic and Political Weekly, Frontline, and the World Bank Economic Review have identified persistent quality gaps: irregular supplementary nutrition supply, poor quality of pre-school education, inadequate training of Anganwadi workers, and the exclusion of the most malnourished children in remote and tribal areas. Village development planning must treat nutrition as a cross-sectoral priority, integrating ICDS with agriculture (kitchen gardens, dietary diversity), water and sanitation (WASH), women's empowerment, and local food systems.

Drinking Water, Sanitation, and the WASH Challenge: Access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities is a fundamental determinant of village health and dignity. The Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen), launched in 2014, has achieved a remarkable physical expansion of toilet infrastructure in rural India, with the government claiming open defecation-free (ODF) status for all rural areas by 2019. While the scale of construction represents a genuine achievement, questions have been raised by researchers and journalists — in publications including The Hindu, Down to Earth, the Economic and Political Weekly, and international journals — about the usage rates of toilets constructed under the programme, the quality of construction, the coverage of the poorest households, and the adequacy of behaviour change communication **(Coffey et al.2017; Spears, 2020).** The UNICEF WASH monitoring framework identifies both access and use as dimensions of sanitation coverage, and emphasises that lasting behaviour change requires sustained community engagement beyond construction targets. On drinking water, the Jal Jeevan Mission, launched in 2019 with the ambitious target of providing piped water supply to all rural households by 2024, represents the largest rural water supply investment in India's history. The UNDP and UNEP have highlighted the alignment of this mission with SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and its potential to transform rural health outcomes, particularly for women and girls who bear the burden of water collection **(UNDP, 2020; UNEP, 2021).** However, analysts writing in journals such as Economic and Political Weekly, Water Policy, and the World Bank Economic Review note that physical infrastructure alone is insufficient — without community ownership of water supply systems, trained local mechanics, reliable power supply, and adequate tariff structures for operations and maintenance, pipe water connections will deteriorate quickly. Village development planning must embed water and sanitation infrastructure in community management frameworks that ensure sustainable operation beyond the construction phase.

Social Protection at the Village Level: Coverage, Adequacy, and Dignity: Social protection — encompassing social insurance, social assistance, and labour market programmes — is a critical component of human capability development at the village level, providing security against income shocks, life-cycle risks, and structural deprivation. India's social protection system has expanded substantially over the past two decades, encompassing MGNREGA employment guarantee, the Public Distribution System (PDS), the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi income transfer, the PMJAY health insurance scheme, old age, widow, and disability pensions under the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), and a growing array of state-specific schemes **(Drèze and Sen, 2013; ILO, 2020)**. The Food Corporation of India, NABARD, and the Ministry of Rural Development administer overlapping programmes that together constitute a complex but imperfect safety net for rural households. Research published in the Economic and Political

Weekly, the American Economic Review, and the Journal of Development Economics has generated important insights on the impact of social protection on village welfare. MGNREGA has been shown to reduce rural poverty and distress migration, raise agricultural wages, and empower women workers in states where it is well-implemented **(Dutta et al.2012; Zimmermann, 2012; Muralidharan et al.2016)**. The PDS, despite its well-documented leakages and corruption in earlier years, has been substantially improved in many states through biometric authentication, direct benefit transfers, and digitisation of beneficiary databases **(Khera, 2011; Economic Times reports on PDS digitisation)**. International comparisons drawn from the ADB's Social Protection Index and the ILO's World Social Protection Report show that India's social protection coverage, while expanding, remains below that of East Asian middle-income countries and considerably below what would be needed to meet the standards of adequacy and dignity called for in human rights frameworks.

1.6 Gender, Inclusion, and Social Equity in Village Development

Development that is genuinely people-centred cannot be gender-blind or socially exclusive. Gender inequality, caste discrimination, tribal marginalisation, religious minority exclusion, and the intersecting disadvantages faced by disabled people, the elderly, and sexual minorities are not peripheral concerns to be addressed after the 'main' development agenda; they are central to whether development transforms or replicates existing structures of power and deprivation. This section examines the gender and social equity dimensions of village development, drawing on feminist political economy, Dalit studies, Adivasi rights scholarship, and disability-inclusive development frameworks.

Women's Empowerment and Gender-Responsive Village Planning: The case for women's empowerment as both an intrinsic development goal and an instrumental strategy for broader village development is among the most strongly supported findings in development research. Studies published in the American Economic Review, the Journal of Development Economics, and World Development have demonstrated that women's education, economic independence, and political participation are positively associated with improved child health and nutrition, reduced fertility, lower domestic violence, and stronger community social capital **(Duflo, 2012; Kabeer, 1999; Agarwal, 1994).** In the village context, women's participation in Gram Sabhas, SHGs, and local planning processes has been shown to shift resource allocation toward health, education, water, and sanitation — public goods with particularly high returns for the poor and for children. Despite this evidence, gender-responsive planning remains the exception rather than the rule in Indian village development. NFHS and census data document pervasive gender discrimination in asset ownership, paid employment, political representation, and access to justice. Women own less than 13.0 per cent of agricultural land in India, a figure that profoundly constrains their economic security and bargaining power within households and communities **(Agarwal, 1994; FAO, 2011).** The feminisation of agriculture — as men migrate to urban areas, leaving women to manage farm operations — has increased women's labour burden without commensurate improvement in their access to extension services, credit, or decision-making authority **(Boserup, 1970; Swaminathan, 2008)**. Gender-responsive village development planning requires not only including women in planning processes but transforming the norms, institutions, and resource flows that perpetuate gender inequality — a more demanding and politically contested objective.

Scheduled Castes, Caste Discrimination, and Dalit Rights in Village Planning: Caste discrimination remains one of the most pervasive and persistent forms of social exclusion in Indian villages, despite constitutional protections and decades of affirmative action. The economic and social marginalisation of Scheduled Caste households is documented in a wealth of data from the NSS surveys, SECC census, and academic studies published in journals including the Economic and Political Weekly, World Development, and the Journal of Development Economics. Dalit households are disproportionately concentrated among the landless and near-landless, confined to low-wage and stigmatised occupations (manual scavenging, carcass removal, leather work), excluded from common village resources (wells, public spaces, temples), and subjected to violence and humiliation when they attempt to exercise their legal rights **(Deshpande, 2011; Thorat and Newman, 2010; Shah et al.2006).** The implication for village development planning is not simply that programmes should target Dalit households for resource allocation, but that the planning process itself must actively challenge the caste power structures that perpetuate exclusion. Research by B.R. Ambedkar, whose analysis of the relationship between caste and democracy remains foundational for Dalit studies, and contemporary scholars such as Gopal Guru, Sukhadeo Thorat, and others writing in the Economic and Political Weekly, argues that genuine empowerment of Dalit communities requires transformative approaches to village planning that go beyond technical exercises to engage with caste power. Practical recommendations include ensuring separate ward-level meetings for Dalit communities within Gram Sabha processes, supporting Dalit-led community organisations, implementing the provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) in tribal areas, and using social audit processes to document and address caste-based exclusion from development programmes **(Mohanty, 2011; Ambedkar, 1944).**

Tribal (Adivasi) Rights, Autonomy, and PESA: India's Scheduled Tribe (Adivasi) population of approximately 104 million, representing about 8.6 per cent of the total population, is concentrated in the central Indian belt of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, as well as in the northeastern states and parts of western and southern India. Adivasi communities face a distinctive pattern of marginalisation characterised by historical land alienation (the loss of tribal lands to non-tribal moneylenders, landlords, and state acquisition), dependence on forests for livelihoods, cultural marginalisation, and the impact of large-scale development projects including mining, dams, and industrial corridors **(GoI, Tribal Sub-Plan, 2013).** The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996 (PESA) represents a significant legislative recognition of Adivasi rights to self-governance and natural resource management in Fifth Schedule areas. PESA empowers Gram Sabhas in tribal areas to exercise mandatory consultation rights over land acquisition, natural resource exploitation, and the implementation of development programmes, and gives them authority over the management of minor forest produce, water bodies, and village markets. However, the implementation of PESA has been systematically undermined by the failure of most Fifth Schedule states to frame conforming rules, the resistance of powerful mining and industrial interests, and the administrative culture of state agencies that continues to

treat tribal communities as passive objects of welfare rather than active rights-holders **(Kumar, 2018; Padel and Das, 2010).** Village development planning in tribal areas must be fundamentally reoriented around PESA's rights framework and the principle of free, prior, and informed consent mandated by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Persons with Disabilities and Inclusive Village Development: The inclusion of persons with disabilities in village development planning is a relatively neglected dimension of the people-centred development agenda. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016 significantly expanded the legal framework for disability inclusion in India, extending the scope of disability to 21 categories and mandating reasonable accommodation, accessible infrastructure, and proportional reservation in education and employment. However, the Rural Development Ministry's own assessments acknowledge that persons with disabilities — who constitute approximately 2.2 per cent of the rural population, and a higher proportion when under-reporting is accounted for — remain systematically excluded from the benefits of major rural development programmes **(GoI, 2021; ILO, 2017).** UNDP and WHO reports on disability-inclusive development emphasise that inclusive village planning requires attention to both social protection (ensuring that persons with disabilities receive targeted transfers and assistive devices) and systemic inclusion (ensuring that village institutions, infrastructure, and services are accessible and welcoming to persons with diverse abilities) **(WHO/World Bank, 2011; UNDP, 2018).** Research published in journals including Disability and Society and the Journal of Rural Studies documents that disability is closely associated with poverty in rural areas, creating vicious cycles of exclusion that require targeted policy interventions. Village development planning should integrate disability-sensitive assessment tools, ensure the participation of disability rights organisations in planning processes, and earmark resources for accessible infrastructure in all public works programmes.

1.7 Local governance and decentralised planning: building capable gram panchayats

Gram Panchayats — the elected local governments at the village level — are the institutional cornerstone of people-centred village development planning in India. Their effective functioning is essential not only for the delivery of local public services but for the realisation of participatory democracy and grassroots accountability that give substance to the people-first agenda. However, as three decades of experience with the 73rd Amendment has demonstrated, the mere existence of elected local governments is far from sufficient. Building genuinely capable, accountable, and inclusive Gram Panchayats requires sustained investment in institutional strengthening, fiscal decentralisation, human resource development, and the cultivation of a democratic political culture in which citizens exercise their rights and officials respect their obligations.

Fiscal Decentralisation and Gram Panchayat Finance: The fiscal dimension of decentralisation is the most critical and most contested aspect of Panchayati Raj reform in India. A gram panchayat without adequate fiscal resources cannot plan or deliver development; it becomes an instrument of local political mobilisation without corresponding developmental substance. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Finance Commissions have significantly increased the quantum of devolution to gram panchayats, with the Fifteenth Finance Commission allocating Rs 2.36 lakh crore to gram panchayats over the period 2021-26, of which 50.0 per cent is tied to basic grants for water and sanitation and the remainder is untied **(Finance Commission of India, 2020).** This represents a major enhancement of gram panchayat financial capacity, though the per capita annual grant remains modest in relation to the scale of development needs.
Research published in journals including the Economic and Political Weekly, the Journal of Rural Development, and the World Bank Economic Review has consistently documented that gram panchayats derive very little own-source revenue from property taxes, professional taxes, and service fees, relying almost entirely on grants from higher levels of government **(Rao and Singh, 2007; Besley et al.2004).** This fiscal dependence limits local autonomy and accountability, because panchayats are more accountable to the agencies that fund them than to the communities they serve. The OECD's comparative research on fiscal decentralisation emphasises that genuine local autonomy requires a combination of own-source revenues, predictable and adequate transfers, and the freedom to prioritise local expenditure in response to community preferences **(OECD, 2019).** Building this framework for gram panchayat fiscal autonomy is one of the most important institutional reforms for advancing people-centred village development planning.

Gram Panchayat Development Plans: Design, Quality, and Convergence: The Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP), mandated under the Fourteenth Finance Commission's guidelines and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj's framework, is the primary instrument of village-level planning in India. The GPDP is supposed to be prepared based on a participatory needs assessment, covering all development functions assigned to gram panchayats across the 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution. It is intended to serve as a convergence platform for the planning and implementation of centrally and state-sponsored schemes as well as panchayat own-fund investments **(GoI, 2018; NITI Aayog, 2021).** In practice, the quality of GPDPs varies enormously. Studies conducted by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, academic researchers, and civil society organisations document that a significant proportion of GPDPs are prepared in a perfunctory manner, based on copied formats rather than genuine participatory needs assessment, focused on physical infrastructure to the exclusion of service delivery and governance issues, and disconnected from the actual budget allocations of the panchayat and line departments **(Narayanan, 2014; Bairagya, 2012; Mathew, 2000).** A World Bank review of gram panchayat planning in India found that less than a third of GPDPs examined included any environmental or climate-related considerations, and that very few had mechanisms for monitoring implementation **(World Bank, 2017).** The GPDP process needs fundamental reform to become a genuine instrument of people-centred planning — moving from a compliance exercise to a substantive community-owned vision for village development.

Accountability Mechanisms: Social Audit, Citizen Score Cards, and RTI: Accountability — the obligation of local governments and public officials to explain and justify their decisions, and to face consequences for poor performance or malfeasance — is the cornerstone of people-centred governance. In the Indian context, several accountability mechanisms have been institutionalised at

the village level with varying degrees of effectiveness. The social audit, institutionalised under MGNREGA through mandatory state-level Social Audit Units (SAUs), involves systematic verification of programme records against physical implementation and community feedback, followed by public hearings in which irregularities are disclosed, and officials are required to respond. Research by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan and academic scholars published in the Economic and Political Weekly has demonstrated that well-conducted social audits can deter corruption, improve programme implementation, and empower communities **(Pande and Sane, 2012; Aiyar and Mehta, 2015).** The Right to Information Act of 2005, which gives every citizen the legal right to request information from any public authority, including gram panchayats, has transformed the landscape of local accountability in India. Down to Earth and The Hindu have documented thousands of cases where RTI applications filed by villagers have uncovered corruption, illegal land acquisition, and discrimination in the delivery of government services. However, RTI activists in rural areas frequently face harassment and intimidation, and the Information Commissions are severely burdened by pending cases, reducing the effectiveness of the Act in practice **(Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 2016).** Village development planning must invest in RTI literacy among rural communities, support RTI activists, and create local accountability institutions — including Lokpal mechanisms at the gram panchayat level — that make accountability a lived experience rather than a legal aspiration.

Capacity Building for Gram Panchayat Elected Representatives and Officials: The capacity of elected gram panchayat representatives and panchayat officials to plan, manage, and deliver village development is a critical determinant of development outcomes. Most gram panchayat members are first-generation political actors with limited formal education, no prior administrative experience, and minimal technical knowledge of the planning processes they are expected to lead. Women elected through reservation often face particular challenges in exercising their authority, in the face of patriarchal social norms, the proxy functioning of husbands and male relatives, and the gender bias of government officials **(Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Beaman et al.2009)**. Capacity building for elected representatives — covering rights and responsibilities, financial management, planning processes, scheme implementation, and leadership skills — is therefore a priority investment for all state governments. The State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs), the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR), and the network of Extension Training Centres (ETCs) provide training and capacity building support for gram panchayat functionaries, reaching hundreds of thousands of elected representatives and panchayat secretaries annually. However, evaluations of these training programmes, including assessments by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj and academic researchers, suggest that their impact on actual planning behaviour and service delivery is limited, partly because training is too short and generic, partly because it is not followed up with on-the-job support, and partly because it does not address the political and institutional obstacles to effective planning **(Narayanan, 2014; NIRDPR Annual Report, 2020).** A more effective approach to capacity building would combine training with mentoring, peer learning networks, the use of model panchayats as demonstration units, and the creation of technical support institutions at the block level that provide on-demand advisory services to gram panchayats.

Inter-Governmental Coordination and Multi-Level Planning: Village development does not occur in an institutional vacuum. Gram panchayats operate within a multi-level governance structure that includes block panchayats, district panchayats, state governments, and the central government, with each level controlling significant resources and administrative authority that affect village outcomes. The effectiveness of village-level planning depends critically on the quality of vertical and horizontal coordination across this multi-level system — on whether line department programmes are aligned with Gram Panchayat Development Plans, whether block officials support rather than supplant local planning processes, and whether state and central policies create enabling conditions for people-centred village development. The OECD's regional development framework and the World Bank's work on decentralisation both emphasise that multi-level governance arrangements that clarify responsibilities, ensure fiscal resources follow functions, and create platforms for inter-governmental dialogue are essential for effective local development **(OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2017).** In India, the District Planning Committees (DPCs), which were supposed to integrate panchayat and municipal plans with district-level plans, have largely failed to perform this function, with most remaining inactive or dominated by state government nominees **(Mathew, 2000; Panchayat Raj Update, 2019).** Institutional reforms that activate DPCs, create block-level convergence platforms, and establish grievance redressal mechanisms for village communities against line department failures are essential complements to the strengthening of village-level planning processes.

Religious Minorities and Communal Harmony in Village Planning: While caste and gender are the most extensively documented dimensions of social exclusion in Indian villages, religious minority status — particularly for Muslim, Christian, and other minority communities — is also a significant factor shaping access to village development resources and services. The Sachar Committee Report of 2006 documented the socio-economic marginalisation of the Muslim community across most indicators of development, including literacy, educational attainment, government employment, and access to formal credit **(GoI, Sachar Committee, 2006).** In the village context, minority communities may face exclusion from dominant caste-dominated local institutions, discrimination in the allocation of government scheme benefits, and violence in periods of communal tension. Village development planning must actively promote communal harmony and the inclusion of minority communities in local governance processes. Researchers writing in the Economic and Political Weekly, the Indian Express, and The Hindu have emphasised that development deprivation and communal tension are frequently interlinked, and that investment in equitable development and inclusive local governance is among the most effective long-term strategies for preventing communal violence **(Varshney, 2002; Wilkinson, 2004).** Practical instruments include the formation of inter-faith development committees within Gram Panchayats, active outreach to minority communities in Gram Sabha processes, and the monitoring of scheme delivery to ensure that minority households receive their entitled benefits without discrimination. The UN's sustainable development framework emphasises that peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16) are both a precondition and an outcome of equitable village development.

1.8 Technology, digital transformation, and innovation for village development

The rapid diffusion of digital technologies — mobile phones, the internet, artificial intelligence, remote sensing, and biotechnology — is transforming the possibilities for village development in ways that were unimaginable two decades ago. India has emerged as a global leader in digital infrastructure development through initiatives like BharatNet, the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), the Aadhaar biometric identification system, and the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC). These technologies have the potential to radically reduce transaction costs in rural markets, improve the targeting and delivery of social protection, expand access to knowledge and market information for farmers, and create new economic opportunities in the rural non-farm economy. However, technology is neither socially neutral nor automatically inclusive, and its benefits for village development are highly contingent on institutional context, digital literacy, and equitable access.

Digital Agriculture: Precision Farming, Market Linkages, and AgriTech: Agricultural technology is at the frontier of innovation for rural development in India. The e-NAM (National Agriculture Market) platform, which connects farmers directly to buyers across state borders through an electronic trading system, has the potential to significantly improve the price realisation of smallholder farmers by reducing the market power of intermediaries. By 2022, over 1,000 mandis across 18 states had been integrated with e-NAM, and the platform had facilitated trading worth hundreds of billions of rupees **(GoI, 2022).** Research published in the American Journal of Agricultural Economics and Sociology and journals on agricultural markets has documented positive impacts on price transparency, though challenges remain in last-mile connectivity, commodity grading, and the digital literacy of small farmers **(Aggarwal and Jain, 2020).** Precision agriculture technologies — satellite and drone-based crop monitoring, soil health testing, AI-powered advisory services, and Internet of Things (IoT) sensors for irrigation management — are increasingly accessible to Indian farmers through smartphone applications and digital platforms provided by agricultural universities, research organisations like ICAR, and agritech startups. NITI Aayog's digital agriculture mission envisages a Digital Ecosystem for Agriculture (DEIA) that would create a unified data platform integrating soil health, weather, market, and credit data to support precision decision-making by farmers **(NITI Aayog, 2021).** However, the ADB and FAO have cautioned that the adoption of precision agriculture technologies by smallholder farmers in developing countries faces structural barriers, including land fragmentation, limited financial capital for equipment investment, weak extension services, and inadequate technical skills **(ADB, 2021; FAO, 2019).**

E-Governance and Digital Service Delivery in Village Administration: E-governance initiatives — the use of digital technologies to deliver government services, manage public finances, and facilitate citizen engagement with the state — have proliferated rapidly at the village level in India over the past decade. Common Service Centres (CSCs), now established in virtually every gram panchayat, provide digital services ranging from Aadhaar enrolment and biometric authentication to the submission of applications for government schemes, banking transactions, and certificates from government departments. The JAM (Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile) trinity, which combines universal banking access, biometric identity, and mobile connectivity, has enabled direct benefit transfers that have eliminated many of the middlemen who previously extracted rents from the social protection system **(Banerjee et al.2020)**. OECD and ADB reports on digital government in developing countries emphasise that the realisation of digital governance benefits requires not only technical infrastructure but institutional reform, capacity building, and strong data governance frameworks **(OECD, 2020; ADB, 2021)**. Research in journals including Information Technology for Development and Government Information Quarterly documents that poorly designed e-governance systems can create new forms of exclusion, particularly for those without digital literacy, identity documents, or reliable internet connectivity. Issues of data privacy and security are particularly salient in the village context, where the aggregation of biometric and financial data in centralised systems raises questions about state surveillance and the rights of rural communities. Village development planning must navigate these tensions between the efficiency gains of digital governance and the rights-based concerns of data sovereignty and digital inclusion.

Renewable Energy and Electrification for Village Development: Universal access to affordable and reliable energy is a foundational condition for village development, enabling productive enterprises, improving quality of life, powering social services, and reducing the burden of energy poverty on women and children. India's achievement of near-universal village electrification through the Saubhagya scheme, completed by 2019, represented a historic milestone after decades of effort **(GoI, 2019).** However, electricity access statistics mask significant quality gaps: intermittent supply, low voltage, and the economic barrier of connection and consumption costs mean that many formally electrified households derive limited productive benefit from the grid **(IEA, 2019; Mint, rural electrification coverage).** Renewable energy — particularly solar power — offers transformative potential for village development in India, given the country's abundant solar irradiation and the rapid decline in solar panel costs. Decentralised solar systems, including rooftop solar for households and institutions, solar irrigation pumps, solar-powered cold storage, and mini-grids for remote villages, can address the quality and reliability gaps of grid electricity while providing environmental benefits and energy security **(TERI, 2020; MNRE, 2021; IRENA, 2021).** The International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) and UNEP have highlighted India's solar energy programme as one of the most ambitious in the developing world and a model for achieving SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) **(UNEP, 2021; IRENA, 2021).** Village development planning must integrate energy access planning with the broader development agenda, recognising that electrification enables multiplier effects across agriculture, small enterprise, health, and education.

Communication Technologies and Knowledge Dissemination at the Village Level: The spread of smartphones and mobile data connectivity in rural India has created unprecedented opportunities for knowledge dissemination, market information access, and citizen engagement at the village level. By 2022, India had over 600 million internet users, a significant and growing proportion of whom were in rural areas, using smartphones as their primary device for information access **(TRAI, 2022; Times of India, internet penetration data).** Applications in local languages, voice-based interfaces, and video content adapted to low-bandwidth conditions are expanding the reach of digital knowledge to populations with limited formal literacy. Research by institutions including the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), and several IITs has documented that access to weather information, market prices, and agricultural advisories through mobile platforms can significantly improve farm management decisions and income outcomes for smallholder farmers **(Cole and**

Fernando, 2021; Aker and Mbiti, 2010; Financial Express coverage of agri-tech). Community radio — still an important medium in areas with limited smartphone penetration — continues to play a critical role in disseminating development information, including Gram Sabha agendas, entitlement information, and health advisories, in local languages and dialects. The Government of India's Knowledge Commission Report recommended significant expansion of community radio licensing and the integration of community radio with village planning processes **(GoI, Knowledge Commission, 2007)**. People-centred village development planning must actively leverage these communication technologies as instruments of knowledge democratisation and participatory governance.

Traditional Knowledge Systems and the Innovation-Tradition Interface: People-centred village development must not reduce 'technology' to modern digital and scientific instruments, but must equally recognise and build on the enormous repository of traditional ecological knowledge, indigenous farming practices, community health systems, craft traditions, and cultural practices embedded in village communities across India. Traditional knowledge systems — including indigenous seed varieties maintained by farmers, traditional water harvesting systems, community forest management practices, Ayurvedic and folk medicine systems, and traditional craft and artisanal techniques — represent accumulated intergenerational wisdom about managing local environments and sustaining community livelihoods **(Gadgil and Guha, 1992; Agarwal and Narain, 1997; Shiva, 1997).** The relationship between traditional knowledge and modern science is not one of simple succession but of complex interaction, and the most effective approaches to rural technology often combine the two. Journals including the American Journal of Agricultural Economics and Sociology, the Journal of Rural Studies, and Ecology and Society have published extensive research on agro-ecological approaches that integrate farmer knowledge with modern science to develop sustainable, context-sensitive, and low-external-input farming systems **(Altieri, 1995; Pretty et al.2006).** UNEP's reports on traditional knowledge and biodiversity emphasise that the intellectual property rights of communities over their traditional knowledge — protected in principle under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) — are frequently violated by pharmaceutical and agricultural corporations engaging in biopiracy, and that village development planning must incorporate the documentation and protection of traditional knowledge as a priority **(UNEP, 2020).** The challenge is to create innovation ecosystems at the village level that respect and build on traditional knowledge while remaining open to beneficial external technologies.

1.9 Ecological sustainability and climate resilience in village development planning

Village development in India and across the developing world is increasingly inseparable from the challenge of ecological sustainability and climate resilience. Agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and water — the natural resource foundations of village livelihoods — are under multiple and escalating environmental pressures: climate change, deforestation, groundwater depletion, soil degradation, biodiversity loss, and pollution. The IPCC's reports on climate change impacts in Asia document that India's rural communities, particularly those in rainfed agricultural regions, coastal areas, the Himalayan river basin, and the arid and semi-arid zones, face increasing exposure to extreme weather events, irregular monsoons, heatwaves, flooding, and sea-level rise **(IPCC, 2021; UNEP, 2021).** People-centred village development must integrate ecological sustainability not as an optional add-on but as a foundational design principle.

Watershed Development and Integrated Land-Water Management: Watershed development — the integrated management of land and water resources within a hydrologically defined area — has been one of the most extensively implemented approaches to ecological restoration and sustainable rural livelihoods in India. Beginning with the Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP) and the Desert Development Programme (DDP) in the 1970s, and gaining momentum through the Integrated Wasteland Development Programme (IWDP), the Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission, and subsequently the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana's Watershed Development Component (PMKSY-WDC), watershed development has been implemented across tens of millions of hectares in India, with substantial investments by the central government, state governments, NABARD, and NGOs **(GoI, 2019; GoI, Common Guidelines for Watershed Development Projects, 2008).** The evidence on the impact of watershed development on rural livelihoods and ecological conditions is generally positive, though with important caveats about implementation quality and equity. Reviews published in journals including World Development, the Journal of Rural Development, and Ecology and Society, as well as assessments by the World Bank and IFAD, document improvements in groundwater levels, increased agricultural productivity in treated areas, reduced soil erosion, and improvement in biomass cover in well-implemented watershed projects **(Joshi et al.2004; GoI, Joint Review of Watershed Guidelines, 2011; World Bank, 2002).** Equity concerns are significant: without explicit design features that ensure marginalised households capture a fair share of benefits, watershed projects can exacerbate inequality, as richer and better-connected farmers divert watershed water and credit resources to their private advantage **(Kerr, 2002; Agarwal and Narain, 1997)**. People-centred watershed planning must include strong equity provisions, community-led governance of watershed assets, and attention to women's and Dalit communities' access to watershed resources.

Climate Change Adaptation at the Village Level: Climate change adaptation at the village level involves building the capacity of rural communities to anticipate, prepare for, and respond to the impacts of changing climate patterns on their livelihoods, assets, and well-being. India has developed a National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) with eight national missions, including the National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA) and the National Water Mission, that have direct relevance to village-level adaptation **(GoI, NAPCC, 2008).** At the sub-national level, State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs) are supposed to translate national frameworks into state-specific adaptation strategies, though their implementation has been uneven **(Rai et al.2015; Down to Earth, climate adaptation coverage).** Research published in journals including Global Environmental Change, Nature Climate Change, and World Development identifies a range of village-level adaptation strategies that have demonstrated effectiveness in Indian and comparative contexts: diversification of crop varieties including drought and flood-tolerant cultivars, conservation agriculture practices that improve soil water-holding capacity, community-based early warning systems for extreme weather events, diversification of income sources beyond agriculture, migration as a risk management strategy, and the strengthening

of social protection systems to provide a safety net during climate shocks **(Smit and Wandel, 2006; Adger et al.2003; World Bank, 2010).** UNEP's adaptation finance reports emphasise that rural communities in developing countries face a massive adaptation finance gap — between the scale of climate risks they face and the resources available to manage them — that requires substantial additional support from international climate finance mechanisms, including the Green Climate Fund **(UNEP, 2021; GCF Reports, 2022).**

Agroecology and Sustainable Agriculture for Ecological Restoration: Agroecology — the application of ecological science to the design and management of food systems — offers a comprehensive framework for transforming agriculture from a driver of ecological degradation into a contributor to ecological restoration and climate mitigation. Agroecological approaches include organic farming, integrated pest management, mixed and multiple cropping systems, agroforestry, System of Rice Intensification (SRI), natural farming (zero-budget natural farming, as promoted in Andhra Pradesh and other states), and traditional crop-livestock integration systems. Research in journals including the American Journal of Agricultural Economics and Sociology, Ecology and Society, and the Journal of Peasant Studies demonstrates that agroecological systems can achieve high productivity with lower environmental impact, reduced external input dependence, and greater resilience to climatic variability than input-intensive conventional farming **(Altieri, 1995; Pretty et al.2006; IAASTD, 2009).** The FAO's international assessment of the contribution of agroecology to sustainable food systems, and the UNEP's TEEB (The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity) for Agriculture and Food report, both make a strong case for mainstreaming agroecological approaches into agricultural development policy **(FAO, 2018; UNEP, 2018)**. In India, the government of Andhra Pradesh's conversion of approximately 600,000 farmers to zero-budget natural farming has attracted international attention as a large-scale experiment in agroecological transition, though independent evaluations of its economic and environmental impact are still limited and contested **(Khadse et al.2017; Down to Earth, natural farming coverage).** Village development planning must engage with the agroecological transition agenda, supporting the shift from input-intensive to ecologically sustainable farming systems through participatory technology development, farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange, and aligned public investment in extension services and agricultural research.

Biodiversity Conservation and Ecosystem Services in Village Landscapes: Village landscapes across India support rich biodiversity — in agricultural fields (agro-biodiversity of traditional crop varieties and associated flora and fauna), in forests and fallows (diverse wild plant and animal communities), in water bodies (aquatic biodiversity), and in the cultural landscapes maintained by traditional management practices. This biodiversity provides critical ecosystem services — pollination, pest control, water purification, carbon sequestration, soil fertility maintenance — that underpin village livelihoods and food security **(Gadgil and Guha, 1992; MEA, 2005; IPBES, 2019).** However, biodiversity is declining rapidly across India's rural landscapes due to habitat destruction, chemical-intensive agriculture, invasive species, climate change, and overexploitation, with serious long-term implications for livelihood sustainability and ecosystem stability. People-centred village development planning must incorporate biodiversity conservation as a core concern, recognising that rural communities are both the primary custodians and the primary beneficiaries of local biodiversity. Community Biodiversity Registers (CBRs), supported by the National Biodiversity Authority, provide a framework for documenting local biodiversity and traditional knowledge and for asserting community rights over genetic resources **(National Biodiversity Authority, 2021).** Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) schemes — whereby communities that conserve forests, wetlands, or traditional crop varieties receive compensation from beneficiaries of the ecosystem services they provide — offer a promising but technically and institutionally challenging mechanism for aligning conservation incentives with livelihood needs **(Muradian et al.2010).** UNEP and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) framework for Post-2020 Biodiversity Targets, adopted as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, have given fresh urgency to the integration of biodiversity concerns into village development planning.

Disaster Risk Reduction and Village-Level Resilience Planning: India is among the world's most disaster-prone countries, with approximately 59.0 per cent of its land area exposed to moderate to severe seismic risk, 40 million hectares prone to flooding, 8 km of cyclone-prone coastline, and vast areas vulnerable to drought, landslide, and forest fire **(National Disaster Management Authority, 2019; Down to Earth, disaster reports).** Villages in disaster-prone areas face repeated cycles of disruption that devastate livelihoods, destroy assets, and undermine development progress, often disproportionately affecting the poorest and most marginalised households. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, adopted by the UN General Assembly, calls for a shift from post-disaster response to pre-disaster risk reduction, with an emphasis on community-based approaches that build local resilience **(UNDRR, 2015).** Research on disaster risk reduction at the village level, published in journals including the International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences, and the Journal of Rural Studies, emphasises that genuinely people-centred approaches to disaster risk management — based on participatory risk assessment, community-led early warning systems, locally appropriate preparedness planning, and the integration of risk reduction with village development planning — outperform top-down, agency-driven disaster management in terms of both preparedness behaviour and post-disaster recovery **(Mercer et al.2010; Pelling, 2011).** The National Disaster Management Authority's guidelines for village-level disaster management planning provide a framework for preparing Village Disaster Management Plans (VDMPs) that identify local hazards, capacities, and preparedness needs. Integration of VDMPs with Gram Panchayat Development Plans is essential for ensuring that disaster risk reduction is mainstreamed into the village development planning process rather than treated as a separate sectoral concern.

1.10 Financing village development: resource mobilisation, credit, and micro-level investment

The implementation of any village development plan depends ultimately on the availability of adequate financial resources and the effectiveness of financial institutions in channelling those resources to the right places and people. The financial landscape for village development in India is complex, encompassing government budgetary transfers, NABARD financing, commercial bank credit, microfinance, self-help group funds, remittances from migrant workers, and private investment in rural enterprises. Each of these

sources has distinctive characteristics in terms of accessibility, cost, conditionality, and governance, and village development planning must strategically leverage the full range of financing options while addressing the structural exclusions that prevent the poor from accessing formal financial services.

Government Transfers and Fiscal Architecture for Village Development: Government budgetary transfers — through centrally sponsored schemes, state plan schemes, Finance Commission grants, and MGNREGA wages — constitute the primary source of development financing in most Indian villages. The Fifteenth Finance Commission has mandated Rs 2.36 lakh crore to gram panchayats over 2021-26, with 50.0 per cent tied to water and sanitation and the remainder available as untied grants for other development priorities **(Finance Commission of India, 2020)**. The MGNREGA wage bill, which varies from year to year in response to demand and budgetary allocations, adds a substantial additional flow of purchasing power into rural areas, with multiplier effects on local consumption and investment. Major central schemes — PMAY-G for housing, PMGSY for rural roads, PM-KUSUM for solar energy, and the PM-KISAN income transfer — add further layers of development financing targeted at rural areas. However, the translation of budgetary allocations into effective village-level investment is frequently impeded by administrative delays, fund diversion, procedural complexities, and weak absorption capacity at the panchayat level. Research in the Economic and Political Weekly, Mint, and the Financial Express has documented persistent delays in the release of Finance Commission grants to gram panchayats, often stretching beyond the financial year, and significant variation in utilisation rates across states and districts. The introduction of the Public Financial Management System (PFMS) and its integration with gram panchayat accounts have improved financial transparency and reduced some forms of fund diversion, but the systems continue to be complex and demanding for gram panchayat staff with limited accounting training **(GoI, PFMS, 2021; World Bank, 2017).** Simplification of financial reporting systems and investment in panchayat accounting capacity are essential reforms for improving the effectiveness of government transfers as a village development financing instrument.

Agricultural Credit and Rural Banking: Inclusion and Innovation: Access to institutional credit is a critical constraint on farm investment, livelihood diversification, and household resilience for rural households, particularly small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers, rural artisans, and women entrepreneurs. Despite the massive expansion of the banking network in rural India through bank nationalisation (1969), lead bank scheme, regional rural banks, and more recently the Jan Dhan Yojana, a large proportion of rural households continue to depend on informal moneylenders for credit, paying interest rates far above what formal institutions charge and suffering severe consequences from over-indebtedness **(Ramaiah, 2011; India Ratings, rural credit data; Reserve Bank of India, BSR Reports).** The Kisan Credit Card (KCC) scheme has improved short-term credit access for farmers, but medium and long-term investment credit for land improvement, irrigation, and on-farm infrastructure remains inadequate. NABARD — the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development — plays a central role in the rural credit architecture, refinancing agricultural loans by commercial banks, regional rural banks, and cooperative credit societies; funding watershed development and tribal development programmes; and supporting SHG-bank linkage through the SHG Credit Linkage Programme **(NABARD Annual Report, 2022; Ramaiah, 2011).** Researchers writing in the American Journal of Agricultural Economics and Sociology, the RBI's Occasional Papers, and the NABARD Research Journal have documented the multiple barriers to agricultural credit access for small farmers, including the requirement for collateral, the complexity of loan application processes, the social distance between bank officials and rural borrowers, and the seasonality of credit demand in rainfed agriculture. Innovations in agricultural credit — including satellite-based crop monitoring for credit disbursement, weather-index-based insurance linked to credit, and fintech platforms for rural credit assessment — offer promising directions for expanding inclusion, but their reach to the most marginalised remains limited **(Financial Express, agricultural fintech coverage; ADB, 2021).**

Microfinance, SHG-Bank Linkage, and Inclusive Finance: Microfinance — the provision of small loans, savings services, insurance, and other financial services to low-income households — has transformed the financial landscape for rural women in India and globally. The SHG-Bank Linkage Programme, pioneered by NABARD since the early 1990s, has mobilised over 87 million women into savings and credit groups and channelled hundreds of billions of rupees in bank credit to rural women, making India home to the world's largest microfinance movement **(NABARD, 2022; World Bank, 2014).** Microfinance institutions (MFIs) operating on the Grameen Bank model have added another tier of credit access, particularly in states like Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, where MFI penetration is high **(Srinivasan, 2011; Economic and Political Weekly, microfinance special issues**). The microfinance sector in India experienced a severe crisis in Andhra Pradesh in 2010-11, triggered by over-indebtedness, coercive recovery practices, and multiple lending by competing MFIs, resulting in government intervention, a collapse of the sector in the state, and significant regulatory reform under the Reserve Bank of India's revised microfinance guidelines **(MFIN, 2011; EPW Research Foundation, 2011).** This crisis, extensively covered in the Economic Times, Business Standard, and academic journals, highlighted that microfinance is not a panacea for rural poverty and that effective financial inclusion requires not only credit but savings, insurance, payment services, and financial literacy **(Bateman, 2010; Karlan and Morduch, 2010).** The UNDP and IFAD have emphasised that inclusive rural finance frameworks must go beyond microcredit to encompass the full spectrum of financial services, and must be embedded in broader livelihood promotion and social protection strategies.

Public-Private Partnerships and Corporate Social Responsibility in Village Development: Beyond government transfers and formal financial institutions, private sector investment and corporate social responsibility (CSR) represent additional financing streams for village development. India's Companies Act of 2013 mandated CSR spending of 2.0 per cent of average net profits for eligible companies, significantly expanding the resources potentially available for rural development from the private sector. CSR-funded initiatives in rural areas span a wide range: skill development, sanitation, education, health care, livelihood promotion, renewable energy, and natural resource management. Some of India's largest corporations — Tata, Infosys, Mahindra, and others — have established substantial CSR programmes with significant rural footprints, and their experiences have been documented in journals including the Indian Journal of Industrial Relations and case studies published by business schools **(KPMG, CSR in India, 2019; Frontline, CSR special reports).** The effectiveness of CSR as a village development financing mechanism is limited by several structural factors. CSR investments tend to be geographically concentrated near corporate headquarters and factory locations

rather than in the most deprived areas; they are subject to corporate decision-making rather than community priorities; they lack the continuity of government programme funding; and they frequently lack accountability to the communities they ostensibly serve **(Sahasranamam and Nicholas, 2019; The Hindu, CSR analysis)**. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) in rural infrastructure — rural roads, cold storage, rural connectivity, agri-processing — face the challenge of limited commercial viability in low-income and remote areas, requiring carefully designed risk-sharing arrangements and viability gap funding from the government. The World Bank's analytical work on PPP design for rural infrastructure emphasises that incentive-compatible contract design, strong regulatory oversight, and genuine community involvement in project planning and monitoring are essential conditions for PPPs to deliver development value at the village level **(World Bank, 2017).**

Community Financing and Local Resource Mobilisation: Community financing — the mobilisation of local resources through gram panchayat own-source revenue, community contribution to public works, SHG corpus funds, and informal community savings institutions — represents a relatively underdeveloped but important dimension of village development finance. When community members contribute resources — whether labour, land, cash, or in-kind materials — to village development projects, they build ownership, accountability, and long-term commitment to maintenance that externally financed projects frequently lack. The Participatory Budgeting initiative pioneered in Porto Alegre, Brazil — in which community members directly decide how a portion of the municipal budget is spent — has been adapted in various forms in Indian states, including in Kerala's people's plan campaign, with positive results for community ownership and development effectiveness **(Isaac and Franke, 2000; OECD, 2019).** Gram panchayat own-source revenue generation through property taxes, professional taxes, user charges for water and sanitation services, and fees from village markets and common facilities remains extremely low across most of India, averaging only 3.0 per cent - 5.0 per cent of total gram panchayat receipts **(Finance Commission of India, 2020; Rao and Singh, 2007).** This dependence on external transfers weakens local accountability and limits the responsiveness of gram panchayats to community preferences. Reforms that strengthen gram panchayat fiscal capacity — including simplified property tax systems, technology-enabled revenue collection, and the ring-fencing of local revenue for local priorities — can enhance the resources available for community-determined development investments. The broader lesson of international comparative research, cited extensively in OECD and World Bank literature on local finance, is that communities that contribute resources to their own development make better investments, maintain assets more effectively, and develop stronger institutions than communities that are primarily recipients of externally determined transfers.

1.11 Mainstreaming people-centred village development: policy frameworks, scaling, and future directions

The preceding sections have analysed the multiple dimensions of people-centred village development planning — conceptual foundations, institutional frameworks, sectoral strategies, ecological imperatives, and financing architecture. This concluding section addresses the overarching challenge of mainstreaming people-centred approaches into national and international policy frameworks at the required scale. Individual programme successes and local institutional innovations are important, but they are insufficient in themselves to transform the development experience of India's 640,000-plus villages and the hundreds of millions of people who live in them. Mainstreaming requires both policy reform and institutional transformation — changing the rules, incentives, and culture of the development system to make people-centred planning the norm rather than the exception.

National Policy Framework: Towards an Integrated Village Development Act: India's approach to village development is currently fragmented across dozens of central and state government programmes, each with its own guidelines, targeting criteria, financial rules, and implementation agencies. While the diversity of approaches reflects the complexity of the development challenge, the fragmentation imposes enormous costs: duplication of effort, coordination failure, contradictory signals to local governments and communities, administrative overload for gram panchayats, and the diffusion of accountability. Leading policy scholars and practitioners, writing in the Economic and Political Weekly, the Hindu Business Line, and Development Policy Review, have argued for a fundamental rationalisation of rural development programmes around a unified framework that puts gram panchayats at the centre of planning and implementation, with line departments playing a facilitating rather than a directing role. One direction for institutional reform is the development of an Integrated Village Development Act that consolidates the legal and policy framework for village development, defines the role of gram panchayats as the primary planning authority at the village level, mandates community participation in needs assessment and plan preparation, establishes minimum standards for social service delivery at the village level, and creates accountability mechanisms that communities can use to hold government accountable. Such an act would build on the legal architecture of the 73rd Amendment, MGNREGA, the Forest Rights Act, and the Right to Information Act, synthesising their provisions into a coherent framework for people-centred village governance. Comparative international experience — including the Local Government Act in South Africa, the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala, and the Community Reinvestment Act in the United States — suggests that legislative frameworks can create powerful enabling conditions for people-centred local development when they are combined with strong implementation mechanisms and civil society engagement.

State-Level Innovations and Models for People-Centred Planning: India's federal structure provides scope for significant state-level experimentation in village development approaches, and several states have developed innovative models that offer lessons for national mainstreaming. Kerala's People's Plan Campaign, launched in 1996 under the Left Democratic Front government, mobilised hundreds of thousands of community members in a participatory planning process that devolved 40.0 per cent of the state development budget to gram panchayats and created a culture of democratic planning that has persisted and evolved over more than two decades **(Isaac and Franke, 2000; Government of Kerala, 2019).** The Kudumbashree mission has extended this by integrating women's SHG networks with gram panchayat planning processes, creating a model of gender-responsive local governance that has been studied and partially replicated in other states. In Andhra Pradesh, the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) and its successor organisations have built a strong institutional infrastructure for SHG-based community development, integrating village-level organisations (VOs) with gram panchayat planning and implementing a model of community-managed social programmes that

has attracted international recognition **(Deininger and Liu, 2009; World Bank, 2014).** Sikkim's achievement of 100.0 per cent organic farming certification, Himachal Pradesh's HIMCARE health scheme, and Rajasthan's social audit programme under the MKSS all represent state-level innovations that have pushed the frontier of people-centred village development in specific domains. The challenge for national policy is to create incentives and platforms for inter-state learning and adaptation, recognising that what works in Kerala may not work in Rajasthan and vice versa, but that the underlying principles of people-centred planning are universal even if their institutional expression must be contextually tailored.

International Development Cooperation and the People-Centred Agenda: International development cooperation — through bilateral aid, multilateral lending, technical assistance, and South-South cooperation — plays an important role in shaping the development agenda for India's villages, both through direct programme funding and through the policy dialogue that accompanies international financial flows. The World Bank, ADB, IFAD, UNDP, FAO, UNICEF, and bilateral donors (including USAID, DFID/FCDO, GIZ, JICA, and the EU) have all funded rural development programmes in India that have piloted and scaled innovations in watershed development, rural livelihoods, social protection, local governance, and community health. The quality of international development cooperation — in terms of alignment with government systems, country ownership, and genuine community participation — has varied enormously, and the aid effectiveness agenda **(Paris Declaration, 2005; Accra Agenda for Action, 2008; Busan Partnership, 2011)** has sought to move international cooperation away from donor-driven modalities toward genuine partnership. South-South cooperation — the sharing of development experiences and technologies among developing countries — offers an increasingly important complement to North-South aid. India's development cooperation through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, the India-UN Development Partnership Fund, and the Indian Development and Economic Assistance Scheme (IDEAS) line of credit provides technical assistance and financing to developing countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America that can draw on India's own development experience. The ADB's South-South knowledge exchange platform, the UN Development Cooperation Forum, and the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation all provide platforms for sharing people-centred development approaches across developing countries **(ADB, 2021; UN DESA, 2019)**. Village development planning in India can both draw from and contribute to this global knowledge commons.

Research, Monitoring, and Evaluation for People-Centred Development: Advancing people-centred village development requires not only better policy and better institutions but better knowledge — about what works, why it works, and for whom. The research agenda for village development planning is vast: it encompasses questions of institutional design, political economy, technology adoption, social norms, climate adaptation, financing, and governance, all of which require rigorous empirical investigation in diverse village contexts. India has a rich research ecosystem for rural development, encompassing universities, research institutions (ICAR, IARI, CESS, ISEC, NCAER, IEG, IIM, IIT), civil society research organisations (Centre for Science and Environment, PRIA, ActionAid), and international research institutes with India programmes (IFPRI, ICRISAT, IWMI). The challenge is to ensure that research findings are translated into policy and practice — that the insights generated in journals like the Economic and Political Weekly, the American Economic Review, and the Journal of Rural Studies actually reach the planners and practitioners making decisions at the district, block, and gram panchayat level. Impact evaluation — the rigorous assessment of programme outcomes using experimental or quasi-experimental methods — has become increasingly influential in international development policy, driven by institutions including the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), and the International Growth Centre (IGC). Indian village development programmes have generated an important body of impact evaluations, including the celebrated studies of MGNREGA, microfinance, teacher incentives, and Gram Panchayat elections published in the American Economic Review and related journals **(Banerjee and Duflo, 2007; Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Muralidharan et al.2016).** However, critics writing in Development and Change and the Journal of Development Studies have cautioned that the RCT (randomised controlled trial) approach to impact evaluation, while valuable for establishing causal effects of specific interventions, is limited in its ability to capture systemic change, long-term institutional evolution, and the political dimensions of development that are central to people-centred planning **(Deaton and Cartwright, 2018; Ravallion, 2009).** A pluralistic research methodology — combining experimental evaluations with qualitative political economy analysis, participatory research, longitudinal studies, and administrative data analysis — is needed to generate the full range of knowledge required for evidence-based people-centred village development planning.

Towards an Integrated Framework: The People-First Village Development Model: Drawing together the analysis of the preceding ten sections, this final sub-section proposes an integrated framework for people-centred micro-level planning for village development — the People-First Village Development Model. This model rests on five foundational principles that should guide all village development planning processes and institutions: (1) People as agents, not beneficiaries — treating rural communities as rights-holders with the capability and authority to shape their own development trajectories; (2) Convergence — integrating sectoral programmes, financial flows, and institutional mandates around a community-owned village development plan; (3) Inclusion — actively addressing the structural exclusions of gender, caste, tribe, disability, and religious minority status that fragment communities and concentrate development benefits among the already advantaged; (4) Ecological sustainability — embedding natural resource conservation, climate resilience, and biodiversity protection as non-negotiable dimensions of village development; and (5) Accountability — creating mechanisms at the village level that make government officials, local leaders, and development agencies genuinely answerable to the communities they serve. The People-First Village Development Model envisages the Gram Panchayat as the primary institution of village development planning, supported by an ecosystem of community organisations (SHGs, farmers' groups, youth clubs, women's groups), civil society organisations, technical support institutions at the block level, and accountable line departments at the district level. The planning process begins with a participatory needs assessment that reaches all sections of the community, particularly the most marginalised, and produces a multi-year Gram Panchayat Development Plan that integrates social, economic, environmental, and governance dimensions of village development. The GPDP serves as the convergence platform for all government scheme investments, own-fund panchayat investments, CSR and community contributions, and technical assistance at the village level. Implementation is managed through strengthened gram panchayat institutions with adequate fiscal resources, trained staff, and digital systems for transparency and accountability. Outcomes are monitored against

agreed social indicators using both administrative data and community-based monitoring systems, and the plan is revised annually on the basis of this performance review. This is not a novel framework in all its parts; it draws on the best existing practice from Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, and international comparators. What is needed is the political will, institutional commitment, and sustained investment to implement it consistently across India's 640,000-plus villages over the decades required to achieve the people-centred village development vision. The global development community — through the SDG framework, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Convention on Biological Diversity's Kunming-Montreal Framework, and the financing pledges of developed countries under various international agreements — has committed, at least in principle, to a people-centred, ecologically sustainable, and inclusive development agenda. Translating these commitments into reality at the village level in India and across the developing world requires exactly the kind of micro-level planning framework proposed in this article: one that starts with people, their capabilities and rights, their institutions and knowledge, their environments and cultures, and builds development from the ground up rather than imposing it from above. As Amartya Sen observed, development is ultimately about expanding human freedom — and that expansion must begin, and remain rooted, in the villages where the majority of humanity still lives.

1.12 Conclusion

The multidimensional analyses presented in this article lead to the definitive conclusion that the future of rural transformation in India and the Global South depends on a fundamental shift in the developmental paradigm, moving from viewing the village as a passive reservoir of surplus labour to recognising it as an active "Village Republic" where development is rooted in the aspirations and lived realities of the people. For decades, the dominant discourse prioritised macro-level aggregates at the expense of micro-level deprivations, creating a "paradox of access" where physical infrastructure exists but substantive capabilities remain stunted; therefore, the agenda must now embrace a rigorous, micro-level planning framework that prioritises human capabilities, democratic agency, and ecological integrity as the three pillars of prosperity. While India has laid a formidable foundation through legislative milestones like the 73rd Amendment and a "digital spine" powered by BharatNet and Digital Public Infrastructure, the realisation of these benefits remains contingent on the "political muscle" of the Gram Sabha to prevent elite capture and ensure the inclusion of the most marginalised. The next frontier must be "institutional convergence," where siloed sectoral schemes are integrated into community-owned Gram Panchayat Development Plans that blend diverse funding streams—from Finance Commission grants to Corporate Social Responsibility—to address multi-dimensional poverty. Furthermore, in the face of climatic volatility, micro-level planning must become "eco-centric," merging traditional ecological knowledge with modern data to safeguard the vital natural capital upon which the rural poor depend. Ultimately, as India approaches its centenary of independence, the true measure of national success will not be found in urban skyscrapers but in the resilience and flourishing of its 640,000 villages. By placing human dignity and participatory democracy at the heart of the process, development becomes a genuine expansion of human freedom rather than a top-down transfer of resources, ensuring that the "Village Republic" serves as the primary site of both democratic vitality and economic progress in the 21st century.

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