

Analytical Study of Panchayati Raj and Local Governance in Jammu and Kashmir: A Case Study of North Kashmir

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Abstract

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) form the base of India's decentralised democratic structure. In Jammu and Kashmir, this system has a distinct history because the region followed its own Panchayati Raj Act of 1989 rather than the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, which applies to the rest of the country. After the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, the 73rd and 74th Amendments were extended to the Union Territory, and the first-ever District Development Council (DDC) elections were held in November-December 2020. This paper analyses the structure, functioning, and effectiveness of Panchayati Raj and local governance institutions in Jammu and Kashmir, with special focus on the North Kashmir districts of Baramulla, Bandipora, and Kupwara. The study looks at the three-tier system, the 2020 DDC election results, patterns of voter participation, the representation of women, and the fiscal and administrative challenges faced by elected representatives in border and conflict-affected areas. The paper uses secondary data from government reports, the State Election Commission of Jammu and Kashmir, and published academic research (2021-2025). Findings show that while grassroots democracy has expanded on paper, real power sharing, regular elections, and devolution of funds and functions remain incomplete in North Kashmir. The paper ends with suggestions to strengthen local governance in the region.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, Local Governance, Jammu and Kashmir, North Kashmir, District Development Council, Decentralisation, Grassroots Democracy

I. Introduction

Local self-government is the base level of democracy. It brings decision-making close to the people and allows villagers to take part in planning their own development. In India, this system is called the Panchayati Raj system. It works through three levels: the Gram Panchayat at the village level, the Block or Panchayat Samiti at the middle level, and the Zila Parishad or District Development Council at the top level.

Jammu and Kashmir has a different history from the rest of India in this matter. Because of the special status given under Article 370, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 did not apply to the state. Instead, the state passed its own law, the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989, to set up local governance. For many years, elections to panchayats were irregular. Militancy, boycotts by mainstream political parties, and administrative delays meant that large numbers of panchayat seats stayed vacant for long periods.

After the abrogation of Article 370 on 5 August 2019 and the reorganisation of the state into two Union Territories, the 73rd and 74th Amendments were extended to Jammu and Kashmir. This led to an important change: the creation of District Development Councils (DDCs), whose members are directly elected by the people. The first DDC election was held in eight phases between 28 November and 19 December 2020, and it was the first major political exercise in the region after 2019.

North Kashmir, made up mainly of the districts of Baramulla, Bandipora, and Kupwara, is a border region that has faced decades of conflict and militancy. It also has a young population, a farm and horticulture-based economy, and areas that are hard to reach in winter, such as Gurez and Karnah. Studying Panchayati Raj in this region gives a clear picture of how local governance works, or does not work, in a border and conflict-affected setting.

II. Review of Literature

A body of research has grown around Panchayati Raj in Jammu and Kashmir, especially after 2019. Sheikh (2017, 2018) traced the early history of Panchayati Raj Institutions in the state and pointed to weak devolution of funds and functions as a long-standing problem. Hussain and Ahmed (2018) listed the issues and challenges facing the Panchayati Raj system, noting that militancy and poor infrastructure held back rural development work.

More recent studies have looked at the post-2019 period. A study published in the Quest Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science (2023) examined public participation in rural local governance in Jammu and Kashmir and found that geopolitical factors and cultural diversity shape how much people take part in decision-making. A paper on the three-tier Panchayati Raj system (2024) studied how DDCs and panchayats

function on the ground, and found that public participation in preparing the Gram Panchayat Development Plan has improved accountability at the village level, with residents in districts such as Ganderbal reporting that they are consulted before local plans are finalised.

A study on the institutionalisation of Panchayati Raj before the abrogation of Article 370, based on field surveys in Anantnag district, found that the lack of direct elections, weak fiscal powers, and conflict-related disruption had weakened panchayats for decades. The same study noted that after 2019, the introduction of BDC and DDC elections marked a structural change, though it also found that the change did not fully solve older problems of gender exclusion and bureaucratic control.

Research on women's role in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Jammu and Kashmir shows a mixed picture. A study on women's empowerment through the Panchayati Raj Institution in Rajouri district found that reservation policy has helped women win a large share of panch seats, but very few women have been able to win the more powerful post of sarpanch. Similar findings appear in wider Indian literature on women representatives in PRIs, which points to the problem of a 'proxy' representative, where a male family member takes the real decisions while a woman holds the elected post on paper.

A separate line of research has looked at the policy framework for local governance reform. A 2025 study titled 'Strengthening Local Governance in Jammu and Kashmir: A Multi-Tiered Approach' proposed District Planning and Development Boards to bring urban local bodies and Panchayati Raj Institutions under one coordinated structure, and recommended a 33 percent reservation for women across all tiers of governance. Taken together, the literature shows growing academic interest in Panchayati Raj in Jammu and Kashmir since 2021, but relatively few studies focus specifically on North Kashmir districts, which is the gap this paper tries to address.

III. Objectives of the Study

- To trace the historical and legal development of Panchayati Raj in Jammu and Kashmir.
- To study the structure and working of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system after the 2020 District Development Council elections.
- To analyse voter participation, seat-sharing, and representation patterns in North Kashmir districts (Baramulla, Bandipora, Kupwara).
- To examine the representation and role of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in North Kashmir.
- To identify the administrative, fiscal, and security-related challenges facing local governance in North Kashmir.
- To suggest measures for strengthening grassroots democracy in the region.

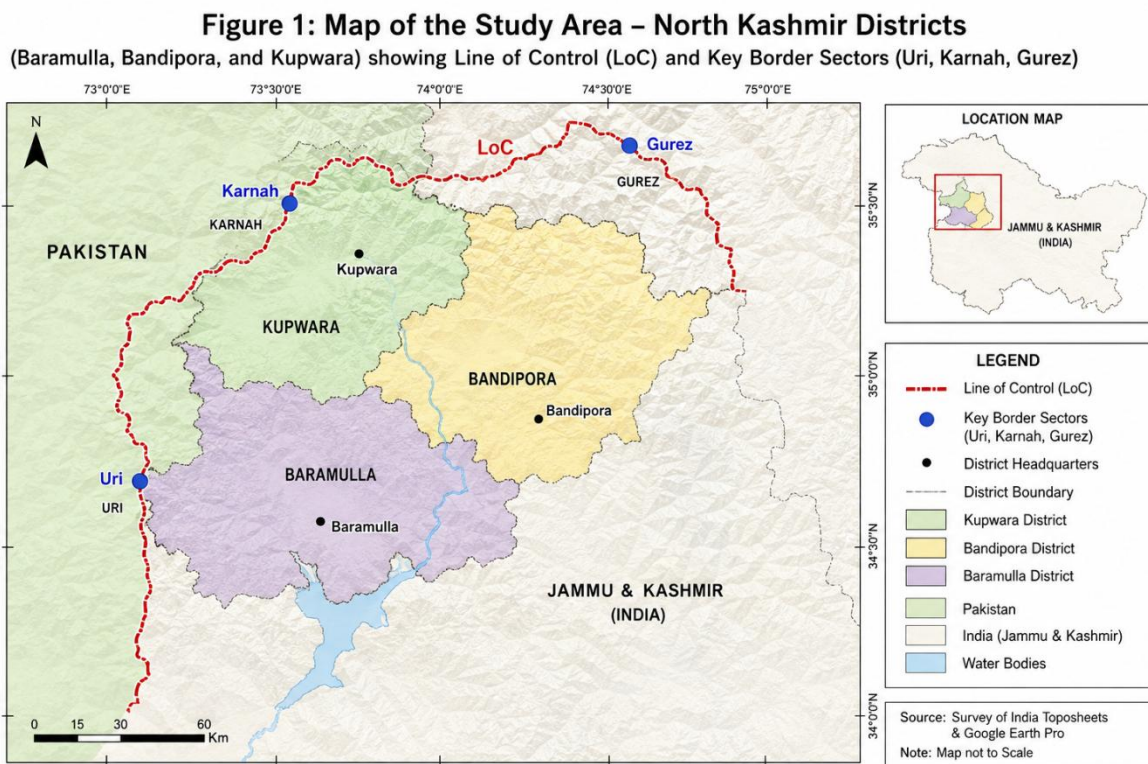
IV. Research Methodology

This paper is descriptive and analytical in nature and is based entirely on secondary data. Information has been collected from official sources such as the State Election Commission, Jammu and Kashmir, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, and the Rural Development Department of Jammu and Kashmir. In addition, the study draws on peer-reviewed research papers, government press notes, and reports published in newspapers and news agencies between 2021 and 2025. Election data on the 2020 District Development Council polls and panchayat vacant-seat figures have been organised into tables to allow comparison across North Kashmir districts and the wider Union Territory.

V. Profile of the Study Area: North Kashmir

North Kashmir is one of the three administrative divisions of the Kashmir Valley, along with Central Kashmir and South Kashmir. It mainly covers the districts of Baramulla, Bandipora, and Kupwara, which together share a long international border and Line of Control with Pakistan-administered Kashmir, including sensitive sectors such as Uri, Karnah, and Gurez.

The region is largely rural, and agriculture, horticulture (especially apple orchards), and handicrafts form the backbone of the local economy. North Kashmir has historically recorded high voter turnout in parliamentary and assembly elections; the Baramulla parliamentary constituency, which covers Baramulla, Bandipora, and Kupwara districts along with parts of Budgam, recorded an all-time high turnout of about 59 percent in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, its highest since the constituency was formed in 1967. This shows a growing willingness among people in the region to take part in the electoral process, which is an important background factor for understanding participation in local body elections as well.



VI. Legal and Historical Framework

The roots of local self-government in Jammu and Kashmir go back to the Dogra period, when the Jammu and Kashmir Municipal Act was passed in 1886 to manage civic affairs in Srinagar and Jammu cities. Village-level panchayats were introduced later, and the modern legal basis for rural local government is the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989, along with the Panchayati Raj Rules of 1996.

Because Article 370 gave Jammu and Kashmir a separate constitutional position, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, which created a uniform three-tier Panchayati Raj structure for the rest of India, did not apply there. As a result, the state's own Panchayati Raj Act governed local bodies, and there was no constitutional guarantee for regular elections, reservation for women, or a State Finance Commission, unlike in other states.

After the abrogation of Article 370 and the reorganisation of the state into the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh in October 2019, the Central Government amended the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989, in October 2020 to add a new, third tier: the District Development Council (DDC). This extended the spirit of the 73rd Amendment to Jammu and Kashmir and created, for the first time, a complete three-tier structure of elected local government in the region.

Table 1: Three-Tier Structure of Panchayati Raj in Jammu and Kashmir (Post-2020)

Tier	Name of Body	Level	Basis of Selection
First (Village)	Halqa Panchayat / Gram Panchayat	Village / group of villages	Direct election of Panch and Sarpanch
Second (Block)	Block Development Council (BDC)	Block	Indirect election by Sarpanches and Panches of the block
Third (District)	District Development Council (DDC)	District	Direct election of DDC members from territorial constituencies

Source: Compiled from the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989 (as amended, 2020), and State Election Commission, J&K notifications.

VII. The 2020 District Development Council Elections: An Analysis

The first District Development Council election in Jammu and Kashmir was held in eight phases between 28 November and 19 December 2020, covering 280 constituencies across 20 districts, with 14 seats reserved for each district regardless of its population. This meant that Srinagar district, with a population of

about 1.2 million, and Kishtwar district, with a population of about 250,000, both received 14 seats each, a point that some analysts flagged as a representation imbalance. Overall voter turnout across the eight phases was around 51 percent, and results were declared for 2,178 candidates.

Table 2: DDC Election 2020 Results – Party-wise Seats Won (Jammu and Kashmir, All Districts)

Party / Alliance	Seats Won
People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD)	110
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	75
Indian National Congress (INC)	26
Jammu and Kashmir Apni Party and other regional parties	Remaining seats
Independents	Remaining seats
Total constituencies	280

Source: State Election Commission, Jammu and Kashmir; Business Standard, 23 December 2020.

In North Kashmir, the results reflected the wider Valley trend of a strong PAGD presence, though with local variation. In Bandipora district, the PAGD-backed candidates won control of the DDC. In Kupwara district, the People's Conference secured the DDC chairperson's post, while in Baramulla district, which was a woman-reserved constituency, an independent candidate, Safeena Baigh, was elected chairperson after the PAGD's own candidate lost the contest for the post despite the party's strength in the district. This shows that even within North Kashmir, the balance of power at the district level did not always follow the state-wide pattern, and local factors, including defections and cross-voting among DDC members, played a role in the final outcome.

VIII. Panchayat-Level Representation and Vacant Seats

At the village level, panchayat elections in Jammu and Kashmir have often struggled to fill all seats. Boycotts by mainstream political parties in 2018, along with security concerns in border and conflict-affected blocks, left thousands of panch and sarpanch seats vacant. Data shared by the state's Chief Electoral Officer showed that a very large share of seats in Kashmir division remained vacant after the 2018 panchayat election, compared to a much smaller share in Jammu division, because the two main regional parties active in Kashmir did not contest that year.

By-elections were later held in 2019 and again around 2020-21 to fill many of these vacant seats, and about 27,281 panches and sarpanches were reported to be in office across the Union Territory following the 2018 exercise and subsequent by-polls. Most of these representatives completed their five-year term on 9 January 2024. Since then, the Union Territory has been without an elected State Election Commissioner for a period, which has delayed fresh panchayat elections. As of early 2026, the government has revised panchayat electoral rolls with 1 January 2025 as the qualifying date and has stated that panchayat and urban local body polls will be held once the vacant post of State Election Commissioner is filled and other preparations are complete.

Table 3: Panchayat and Local Body Election Timeline in Jammu and Kashmir (2018-2026)

Year	Event
2018	Panchayat elections held; large number of seats left vacant due to boycott by mainstream parties in Kashmir
2019-2020	By-elections held to fill vacant panch and sarpanch seats
Oct 2020	J&K Panchayati Raj Act amended to create District Development Councils
Nov-Dec 2020	First DDC election held in eight phases; 280 constituencies
9 Jan 2024	Five-year term of panches and sarpanches elected in 2018-19 comes to an end
2024	Lok Sabha and Legislative Assembly elections held in J&K
2025	Panchayat electoral rolls revised with 1 January 2025 as qualifying date
2026 (expected)	Fresh panchayat and urban local body elections planned, pending appointment of State Election Commissioner

Source: Compiled from State Election Commission, J&K notifications; news reports, 2021-2026.

IX. Representation of Women in North Kashmir's Panchayats

Reservation for women is one of the main features of the Panchayati Raj system in Jammu and Kashmir, in line with the wider Indian model. Under the applicable rules, one-third of panch and sarpanch seats are reserved for women, and this rotates between different wards over successive elections. Studies of Panchayati Raj Institutions in the Union Territory show that women make up close to a third of all elected panches, since reservation directly guarantees this share. However, the picture is very different for the more powerful post of sarpanch, where women's success has been much lower, showing that reservation alone has not been enough to break long-standing patterns of male control over village-level leadership.

This pattern is visible in North Kashmir too. The Baramulla DDC seat, reserved for women, was won by an independent woman candidate, Safeena Baigh, in 2021, which was seen locally as a notable moment. But at the panchayat level in border blocks such as Uri, Karnah, and Gurez, elected women representatives often face extra barriers: difficult terrain, conservative social attitudes, and, in some cases, security restrictions on their movement, which can limit how actively they take part in Gram Sabha meetings and development planning. Researchers studying women's empowerment through Panchayati Raj elsewhere in Jammu and Kashmir, such as in Rajouri district, have also pointed to the problem of male family members effectively taking decisions on behalf of elected women panches and sarpanches, a pattern often called proxy representation.

X. Key Challenges Facing Local Governance in North Kashmir

- Irregular elections: Long gaps between elections, as seen between 2018 and 2020, and again after January 2024, weaken continuity in local governance and delay development work.
- Limited devolution of funds, functions, and functionaries: Elected panchayat and DDC members often say they lack full control over budgets and staff, with many decisions still resting with line departments and bureaucrats.
- Security concerns in border blocks: Areas such as Uri, Karnah, Gurez, and parts of Kupwara face special security challenges that can restrict the free movement and public activity of elected representatives, especially women.
- Representation imbalance: Giving every district the same number of DDC seats (14), regardless of population, means that more populated districts such as Baramulla have less representation per person than smaller districts.
- Weak capacity and training: Many newly elected panches and sarpanches, particularly first-time women representatives, need better training in financial management, planning, and local administration.
- Coordination gap between tiers: Because DDCs, BDCs, and panchayats were created through different phases of reform, coordination between the three tiers, and between panchayats and urban local bodies, is still developing.
- Vacant State Election Commissioner post: The delay in appointing a State Election Commissioner since early 2024 has held up fresh panchayat and municipal elections, leaving many local bodies without a fresh popular mandate.

XI. Suggestions

- Hold panchayat and urban local body elections on a fixed and predictable schedule, and fill the post of State Election Commissioner promptly to avoid future delays.
- Strengthen fiscal devolution by transferring a clear and adequate share of funds directly to panchayats and DDCs, with simple and transparent utilisation reporting.
- Provide regular capacity-building and leadership training for elected representatives, with special modules for women representatives in border and remote blocks.
- Review the seat-allocation formula for DDCs so that more populated districts, such as Baramulla, receive representation closer to their population share.
- Set up a functioning coordination mechanism, such as the proposed District Planning and Development Boards, to link panchayats, block development councils, DDCs, and urban local bodies.
- Take specific steps to support women representatives in border blocks, including safe transport and communication support for attending panchayat and block meetings.
- Use technology, such as e-governance platforms and direct benefit transfer systems already introduced for schemes like MGNREGA, more widely to improve transparency and reduce delays in fund release.

XII. Conclusion

Panchayati Raj in Jammu and Kashmir has gone through a major change since 2019. The extension of the 73rd Amendment's spirit through the creation of District Development Councils has, for the first time, given the region a complete three-tier structure of local self-government. In North Kashmir, high voter turnout in

recent elections shows that people are willing to take part in democratic processes, even in a region long affected by conflict along the border. At the same time, the study finds that real decentralisation, in the sense of full transfer of funds, functions, and functionaries to elected local bodies, is still incomplete. Vacant panchayat seats, delays in holding fresh elections, weak fiscal powers, and the extra difficulties faced by women representatives in border blocks all point to unfinished work. Strengthening local governance in North Kashmir will require regular elections, better devolution of resources, and sustained support for elected representatives, especially women, so that grassroots democracy can deliver real development benefits to the people of the region.

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