Advanced International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
E-ISSN: 2584-0487
editor@aijmr.com
Volume 4, Issue 2, March-April 2026
CrossRef DOI: 10.62127/aijmr.2026.v04i02.1532

Decentralization and Local Self-Governance: A Study of Panchayat Raj Institutions in Telangana

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Abstract:
Decentralization is widely regarded as a way of bringing government closer to citizens, but its promise depends on whether local institutions receive real functions, finances, and functionaries. This paper examines the working of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Telangana through the three-tier framework created by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the Telangana Panchayat Raj Act, 2018. Using a descriptive, secondary-data design that draws on statutes, legislative records, State Election Commission notifications, Finance Commission grants, the Panchayat Devolution Index 2024, and reputable press reporting, the study analyzes institutional evolution, electoral democracy, fiscal devolution, and administrative capacity. The findings show that Telangana has widened local democracy by creating nearly 4,000 new gram panchayats, reserving seats for women and disadvantaged groups, and investing heavily in capacity building. However, gram panchayats remained under special officers for about twenty-two months after their terms expired in February 2024, dues to former sarpanches remained unpaid, and executive supervision is strong. The 2024 devolution ranking shows a state that leads in capacity enhancement but scores low overall. The paper concludes that Telangana's decentralization is administratively ambitious but politically and fiscally incomplete as of early 2026, and it proposes reforms in election scheduling, fund flows, functional clarity, and accountability.

Keywords: Decentralization; Local self-governance; Panchayat Raj Institutions; Telangana; Devolution; Grassroots democracy; Reservation.

1. Introduction

Few ideas in the study of governance are as durable as the belief that decisions taken close to the people are more responsive, more accountable, and more legitimate than those taken far away. Decentralization, understood as the transfer of authority, resources, and responsibility from higher to lower levels of government, has been promoted by scholars, development agencies, and national governments since the late twentieth century (Manor, 1999; Rondinelli et al., 1983). In India, this belief acquired constitutional

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force through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, which recognized Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) as institutions of self-government and created a uniform three-tier structure of village, intermediate, and district bodies (Government of India, 1993). The Amendment made five-yearly elections, reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women, State Election Commissions, and State Finance Commissions mandatory. What it left to the discretion of the states was the more consequential matter of how many functions, how much money, and how many staff the panchayats would actually receive.

Telangana offers an instructive case. Formed on 2 June 2014 as India's twenty-ninth state, it inherited the panchayat framework of undivided Andhra Pradesh and then rewrote it through the Telangana Panchayat Raj Act, 2018, which consolidated earlier laws, created thousands of new gram panchayats, and introduced new duties relating to sanitation, greenery, and accountability (Government of Telangana, 2018). Roughly three-fifths of the state's population lives in rural areas (Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 2011) and depends on panchayats for drinking water, sanitation, village roads, and access to welfare schemes. Yet gram panchayats were run by government-appointed special officers from February 2024 until polling in December 2025, and the mandal and zilla parishads were still awaiting fresh elections in early 2026.

This paper asks whether Telangana's PRIs function as genuine institutions of local self-governance or as extended arms of the state administration. It examines four dimensions: the legal and historical evolution of the panchayat system; the quality of electoral and representative democracy; the devolution of functions, finances, and functionaries; and the capacity and accountability of the institutions. The contribution is threefold. First, it brings together recent developments, including the election delays and court interventions of 2025, the dispute over Backward Class reservation, the abolition of the two-child norm, and the 2024 Devolution Index, which are still absent from much of the scholarly discussion. Second, it presents consolidated data tables that let readers judge the scale and pattern of Telangana's local democracy. Third, it offers reform proposals grounded in the evidence.

2. Conceptual Framework and Review of Literature

2.1 Decentralization: Concepts and Debates

Scholars distinguish three broad forms of decentralization. Deconcentration shifts administrative responsibility to field offices of a central or state agency; delegation entrusts semi-autonomous bodies with specific tasks; and devolution transfers decision-making authority and resources to lower-level governments that are politically distinct and accountable to their own electorates (Rondinelli et al., 1983). Only devolution creates genuine local self-government, and it is the form envisaged by Article 243G of the Indian Constitution, which empowers state legislatures to endow panchayats with the powers and authority necessary for them to function as institutions of self-government.

The case for devolution rests on informational and accountability advantages: local officials know local preferences better and can be held to account more easily (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006). The case against stresses the risks of elite capture, regional inequality, weak technical capacity, and fiscal indiscipline (Prud'homme, 1995). Empirical work suggests that outcomes depend on context rather than on design

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alone. Crook and Manor (1998), comparing experiences in South Asia and West Africa, found that decentralization improved responsiveness where elected councils commanded real resources and where political leaders at higher levels supported the reform. Manor (1999) similarly stressed that democratic decentralization needs adequate powers, adequate resources, and effective accountability of officials to elected bodies at the same time.

2.2 Panchayati Raj in India

India's experiments with panchayats long predate the 73rd Amendment. The Balwantray Mehta Committee recommended a three-tier structure with democratic election at each level (Mehta, 1957), and states began adopting it from 1959. By the 1970s the institutions had weakened under bureaucratic dominance and irregular elections, which prompted the Ashok Mehta Committee to recommend a two-tier system with a clearer political role for panchayats (Government of India, 1978). Mathew (1994) described the 1992 amendment as a shift from legislation to movement, that is, from provisions on paper to a mobilized citizenry, a transition that remains incomplete. The Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2007) emphasized the need for activity mapping among the tiers and for matching funds and functionaries to the functions assigned.

Empirical studies of outcomes are mixed but instructive. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004), studying West Bengal and Rajasthan, found that women leaders invested more in the public goods that women said they needed, such as drinking water, which shows that reservation can change the content of policy. Besley et al. (2005) studied village assemblies in four southern states, including Andhra Pradesh, and found that meetings of the gram sabha can improve the targeting of benefits, although less educated and landless households participate less. Rao and Sanyal (2010) showed that deliberation in Indian village assemblies can reproduce social hierarchies unless it is deliberately designed for inclusion. Together these studies suggest that formal institutions matter, but that their democratic value depends on who actually participates and on whether local bodies control real resources.

2.3 Analytical Framework

This paper adopts the six-dimensional frame used in the Ministry of Panchayati Raj's Devolution Index: framework, functions, finances, functionaries, capacity enhancement, and accountability (Alok, 2024). The first describes the legal and institutional environment, including regular elections and reservations. The next three, often called the 3Fs, capture the substance of devolution. The last two describe whether panchayats can use their powers competently and answer for them. The frame structures the reading of Telangana's experience without replicating the Index's scoring.

3. Objectives and Methodology

The study pursues four objectives:

(i) to trace the constitutional, legal, and historical evolution of the panchayat system in Telangana;
(ii) to analyze the structure, electoral democracy, and social representation of the three tiers;
(iii) to assess the devolution of functions, finances, and functionaries; and

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(iv) to identify persistent challenges and propose policy reforms.

The design is descriptive and analytical and rests on secondary sources. Legal texts, namely the 73rd Amendment, the Telangana Panchayat Raj Act, 2018, and its 2025 and 2026 amendments, were read directly. Electoral data were compiled from State Election Commission notifications as reported in official and press sources. Fiscal data were taken from replies of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj in Parliament, and devolution scores from the report prepared by the Indian Institute of Public Administration (Alok, 2024). Reports from All India Radio, The News Minute, Deccan Herald, and The South First were used to establish the sequence of recent events and were cross-checked where more than one outlet covered the same event.

Three limitations should be noted. The study has no primary survey component, so it cannot measure citizens' perceptions directly. Several figures, especially the 2025 results and the pending dues to former sarpanches, are provisional or contested. And because gram panchayat polls are formally non-party, party labels used in this paper reflect the affiliations reported by the press and are indicative only. All tables were compiled and, where percentages appear, computed by the author from the sources named in their notes.

4. Evolution of the Panchayat Raj Framework in Telangana

The territory that is now Telangana entered the modern panchayat system through the reorganization of states in 1956, when it was merged with Andhra State to form Andhra Pradesh. The Andhra Pradesh Panchayat Samithis and Zilla Parishads Act of 1959 created an elected system above the village that followed the recommendations of the Balwantray Mehta Committee (Government of Telangana, n.d.; Mehta, 1957). In 1986 the state replaced blocks with smaller mandals through the Mandal Praja Parishads and Zilla Praja Parishads Act, a reform that placed an elected intermediate tier closer to the village and that remains the basis of the present structure.

The 73rd Amendment, in force from April 1993, forced a rewrite. Andhra Pradesh enacted its Panchayat Raj Act in 1994, aligning state law with the constitutional requirements on regular elections, reservations, and finance commissions. That Act also carried a two-child norm that disqualified persons with more than two children from contesting (Government of Telangana, 2026). When Telangana was formed on 2 June 2014 it continued under the 1994 law until the Telangana Panchayat Raj Act, 2018 (Act No. 5 of 2018) was enacted on 30 March 2018. The Statement of Objects and Reasons invoked the state's people-driven programmes, Mana Vooru–Mana Pranalika and Gram Jyothi, and the wish to harness the enthusiasm of villagers and elected representatives (Government of Telangana, 2018).

The most visible effect of the 2018 Act was territorial. Before it, the state had about 8,700 gram panchayats, and the law provided for roughly four thousand villages and tribal hamlets to be constituted as panchayats in their own right (Outlook, 2018); by the 2019 elections the number stood at 12,751 (The South First, 2025a). Smaller units can bring a sarpanch and ward members within reach of tribal settlements that were earlier attached to distant villages and make such hamlets direct recipients of untied grants.

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The Act also has a dual character. It constitutes the three tiers, sets out their powers, and contains a separate part on reservation of seats and offices. At the same time, as its section headings show, it gives the Government, the Commissioner, and the District Collector emergency powers and powers of review and revision, declares sarpanches, presidents, and chairpersons to be public servants, and makes them personally liable for loss, waste, or misapplication of property (Government of Telangana, 2018). These provisions promote financial discipline, but they also give the executive considerable leverage over elected bodies.

The framework has remained fluid since 2025. Ordinances adjusted the schedule of villages, and on 31 October 2025 the Governor promulgated an ordinance omitting the two-child norm in section 21(3) of the Act. The Assembly replaced it with the Telangana Panchayat Raj (Amendment) Bill, 2026, passed unanimously on 3 January 2026. The government justified the change by pointing to a rural total fertility rate of 1.7, below the replacement level of 2.1 (Government of Telangana, 2026; The South First, 2026). Table 1 summarizes the main milestones.

5. Structure, Elections, and Representation

5.1 The Three-Tier Structure

Telangana follows the standard three-tier pattern. Each tier has its own electoral arrangement (Table 2). Sarpanches and ward members of gram panchayats are elected directly on a non-party basis, whereas polls for mandal and zilla parishad territorial constituencies (MPTCs and ZPTCs) are contested on party symbols (All India Radio, 2025a). The upa-sarpanch, the mandal parishad president, and the zilla parishad chairperson are chosen indirectly by the elected members (Government of Telangana, 2018). The number of higher-tier units grew with the creation of new mandals (Table 2).

Table 1

Milestones in the Evolution of Panchayat Raj Legislation and Practice Relevant to Telangana

Year	Legislation or event	Significance
1957	Balwantray Mehta Committee report	Recommends a three-tier system of democratic decentralization
1959	Andhra Pradesh Panchayat Samithis and Zilla Parishads Act	Introduces elected bodies above the village in the Telugu-speaking region
1986	Mandal Praja Parishads and Zilla Praja Parishads Act	Replaces blocks with mandals as the intermediate tier
1993	73rd Constitutional Amendment in force	Gives constitutional status to PRIs; mandates elections, reservations, SECs, and SFCs
1994	Andhra Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act	Aligns state law with the Amendment; introduces two-child norm
2014	Formation of Telangana (2 June)	State continues under the 1994 framework
2018	Telangana Panchayat Raj Act (30 March)	Consolidates law; creates about 4,000 new gram panchayats

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2019	Rural local body elections (January and May)	First round under the 2018 Act; 12,751 gram panchayats
2024	Terms expire on 31 January; special officers from 2 February	Elected village government suspended
2025	High Court directs polls (25 June); gram panchayat polls on 11, 14, and 17 December	Elected sarpanches restored after about twenty-two months
2026	Panchayat Raj (Amendment) Bill passed (3 January)	Two-child norm abolished for local body candidates

Note. Compiled by the author from Alok (2024), Government of Telangana (2018, 2026, n.d.), Mehta (1957), The South First (2025a, 2026), and Deccan Chronicle (2024).

Table 2

Three-Tier Structure of Panchayat Raj Institutions in Telangana

Tier	Units in 2019	Units notified for 2025	Mode of election of head
Gram panchayat (sarpanch and ward members)	12,751	12,733	Sarpanch directly elected on a non-party basis; upa-sarpanch elected by ward members
Mandal parishad (MPTC members)	5,817	5,749	MPTC members directly elected on party symbols; president elected by members
Zilla parishad (ZPTC members)	538	565	ZPTC members directly elected on party symbols; chairperson elected by members
Wards in gram panchayats	n.a.	112,288	Ward members directly elected on a non-party basis

Note. Compiled from The South First (2025a, 2025b), Wikipedia contributors (n.d.), and Government of Telangana (2018). A February 2026 press report (South India Times, 2026) still cited the 2019 counts of 538 ZPTCs and 5,817 MPTCs; n.a. = not available

5.2 Electoral Cycle and the Democratic Deficit of 2024–2025

Regular elections are the most basic test of local self-government. The Constitution requires that elections to a panchayat be completed before its five-year term expires, or within six months if it is dissolved. The terms of gram panchayats elected in January 2019 ended on 31 January 2024, and the government appointed special officers from 2 February 2024 (Deccan Chronicle, 2024). They stayed in office for about twenty-two months. The government attributed the delay to the need to finalize reservations for Backward Classes, but on 25 June 2025 the High Court questioned the inaction and directed the government and the State Election Commission to complete the process within three months (The South First, 2025a).

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The Commission announced a five-phase schedule on 29 September 2025 (The South First, 2025b). Days later, an interim High Court stay on the government's decision to raise Backward Class reservation to 42 per cent, which would have taken total reservation to 67 per cent against the Supreme Court's 50 per cent ceiling, led the Commission to put the process in abeyance (All India Radio, 2025b). Gram panchayat polls were finally held in three phases on 11, 14, and 17 December 2025, after the government issued fresh guidelines that capped total reservation for SC, ST, and BC seats at 50 per cent and applied a 50 per cent quota for women with rotation (The South First, 2025c). Elections to the mandal and zilla parishads had not been held at the time of writing. A February 2026 report noted that the government planned a single-phase poll and that elected bodies were needed to draw pending Fifteenth Finance Commission funds of more than Rs 500 crore (South India Times, 2026).

The delay had a fiscal as well as a democratic cost. Central grants are released only to duly constituted rural local bodies (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2024), so a village without an elected body can lose access to untied funds. The episode shows how the constitutional guarantee of timely elections protects not only representation but also money.

5.3 Electoral Outcomes and Party Alignment

Table 3 compares the reported outcomes of the 2019- and 2025-gram panchayat rounds. In 2019, when the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (now Bharat Rashtra Samithi, BRS) governed the state, its supporters won 61.0 per cent of sarpanch posts. In 2025, with the Indian National Congress in power, Congress-backed candidates won 53.7 per cent of the posts declared, while BRS retained 27.7 per cent. The 2019 results for the higher tiers show the same pattern: the ruling party won 446 of 538 ZPTCs (82.9 per cent) and 3,556 of 5,817 MPTCs (61.1 per cent) (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.).

Table 3

Party-Backed Sarpanch Results in Gram Panchayat Elections, 2019 and 2025

Party affiliation	2019 posts	2019 %	2025 posts	2025 %
TRS/BRS	7,774	61.0	3,503	27.7
Indian National Congress	2,709	21.2	6,794	53.7
Bharatiya Janata Party	163	1.3	697	5.5
Others and independents	2,105	16.5	1,651	13.1
Total	**12,751**	**100.0**	**12,645**	**100.0**

Note. Gram panchayat elections are non-party; affiliations are those reported by the press. The 2019 total is the number of gram panchayats; 'Others' for 2019 is the residual computed by the author. The 2025 total covers 12,645 results declared by 18 December 2025 out of 12,727 notified units (51 results awaited and 29 villages where polling could not be held). Sources: Wikipedia contributors (n.d.); The News Minute (2025b).

This alignment is consistent with a ruling-party advantage in local elections, though it is not proof of one. The non-party format, the presence of independents, and the many unanimous elections make party

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attribution imprecise. The pattern does, however, raise a question about how far village government can act as a counterweight to the state government when its composition so closely tracks the state's political tide.

Participation, by contrast, was high. Turnout ranged from about 81 to 86 per cent across the three phases, and women formed 51.2 per cent of the electorate in the first phase (The News Minute, 2025a). A little under one in ten sarpanch posts, 1,205 of 12,728, was filled unopposed (Table 4). Unanimity can reflect village consensus, but it can also signal pressure or informal bargaining, and it merits monitoring by the Election Commission.

Table 4

Phase-Wise Profile of the December 2025 Gram Panchayat Elections

Phase	Date	Gram panchayats notified	Sarpanch posts polled	Sarpanch posts unanimous	Turnout (%)
I	11 Dec	4,236	3,834	396	84.3
II	14 Dec	4,333	3,911	415	85.9
III	17 Dec	4,159	3,752	394	about 81
Total		**12,728**	**11,497**	**1,205**	

Note. Sources: The News Minute (2025a, 2025b); All India Radio (2025c, 2025d, 2025e). Totals computed by the author. Posts notified but neither polled nor unanimous include villages with no nominations or court stays.

5.4 Reservation and Social Representation

Reservation is the main instrument through which the 73rd Amendment seeks inclusion. The Telangana Panchayat Raj Act contains a dedicated part on the reservation of seats and offices for SCs, STs, BCs, and women (Government of Telangana, 2018), and women are guaranteed half of the seats and offices (The South First, 2025c). The politically sensitive question in 2025 was the share of Backward Classes. The Election Commission provided 17.08 per cent reservation for BCs in gram panchayats, or 2,176 of 12,735 units (The News Minute, 2025a). The state's 2024 caste survey, released in February 2025, put BCs at 56.33 per cent of the population, including Muslim backward classes (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). The gap between these two figures explains the political pressure for a 42 per cent quota, and the judicial resistance shows the constraint imposed by the 50 per cent ceiling.

The debate matters for local self-governance because reservation determines who holds village power and how far the promise of inclusion is realized. A durable settlement will probably require reliable caste data, transparent rotation rules, and a legal route that survives judicial scrutiny. The abolition of the two-child norm in January 2026 removes another barrier to candidacy, one that had disproportionately affected poorer and less educated families.

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6. Functions, Finances, and Functionaries

6.1 Functions

Article 243G and the Eleventh Schedule list twenty-nine subjects that states may transfer to panchayats, from agriculture and drinking water to sanitation, roads, and social welfare. The Telangana Panchayat Raj Act assigns gram panchayats a range of obligatory duties, and the state has used flagship missions, most prominently the Palle Pragathi (village progress) programme, to drive standards in sanitation, greenery, and infrastructure. Such missions can mobilize the system quickly, but they are designed and monitored from above. In the language of Rondinelli et al. (1983) they resemble deconcentration more than devolution, because the state sets the agenda and panchayats implement it.

The national Devolution Index suggests that functions are among the weakest dimensions of devolution across India. The Index found that functional devolution scored lower in the latest round than a decade earlier even as functionaries and capacity enhancement improved (Factly, 2025). Telangana fits this broader pattern: the elected panchayat is an implementer of state and centrally sponsored schemes rather than an independent planner. The Second Administrative Reforms Commission's call for activity mapping, which would specify the exact responsibilities of each tier, has not been fully realized (Second Administrative Reforms Commission, 2007).

6.2 Finances

Finance is the most decisive dimension of devolution. Panchayats draw on own-source revenue, State Finance Commission transfers, state schemes, and Central Finance Commission grants. The last has grown sharply. The Fifteenth Finance Commission recommended Rs 236,805 crore for rural local bodies for 2021–26, compared with Rs 200,292 crore under the Fourteenth and Rs 64,408 crore under the Thirteenth (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2025). Table 5 shows the trend. In 2025–26 the Centre released Rs 247.94 crore as the first instalment of untied grants for 12,600 eligible gram panchayats in Telangana (Deccan Chronicle, 2025).

Table 5

Central Finance Commission Grants to Rural Local Bodies (All States)

Finance Commission	Award period	Grant (Rs crore)	Multiple of Thirteenth FC
Thirteenth	2010–15	64,408	1.00
Fourteenth	2015–20	200,292	3.11
Fifteenth	2021–26	236,805	3.68

Note. Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2025). Multiples computed by the author. Figures rounded to the nearest crore; the Fifteenth Commission also recommended Rs 60,750 crore for the interim year 2020–21.

The increase in central money has not eliminated local fiscal stress. In the state Assembly the Panchayat Raj Minister put pending payments to former sarpanches, for works carried out up to 1 November 2024, at more than Rs 691 crore and said that the bills would be cleared soon, while the opposition alleged that

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state releases under Palle Pragathi had stopped (Press Trust of India, 2024). Former sarpanches later put dues at about Rs 1,300 crore and staged protests, saying they had borrowed heavily to build cemeteries, playgrounds, and dumping yards (Indo-Asian News Service, 2025). The two governments dispute responsibility, but the episode illustrates a structural weakness: sarpanches were expected to deliver state-designed works while depending on reimbursements that were slow and uncertain.

6.3 Functionaries and Capacity

Panchayats can exercise powers only if they control staff who are answerable to them. Nationally, the Devolution Index found that the functionaries dimension improved from 39.6 to 50.9 per cent between 2013–14 and 2021–22 (Alok, 2024). During 2024–25 in Telangana, the government-appointed special officers who replaced sarpanches answered to the administration, which turned village government into an extension of the district bureaucracy and blurred the line between elected and appointed authority.

Capacity enhancement is Telangana's strongest dimension. The 2024 Index ranks the state first on capacity enhancement with a score of 86.19, even though its overall devolution score is low (Factly, 2025). Table 6 places this result in context. The strength may partly reflect the state's investment in training institutions and its hosting of national training bodies, but the point to stress is that capacity without autonomy has limits: well-trained representatives can achieve little if functions and funds remain with the state.

Table 6

Panchayat Devolution Index 2024: Selected Scores

State or benchmark	Overall score	Remarks
Karnataka	72.23	Ranked first overall
Kerala	70.59	Ranked second
Tamil Nadu	68.38	Ranked third
Maharashtra	61.44	Ranked fourth
Uttar Pradesh	60.07	Ranked fifth
Gujarat	58.26	Ranked sixth
All-India average	43.89	Up from 39.92 in 2013–14
Telangana	Low overall	Not among the top six; first in capacity enhancement (86.19)

Note. Sources: Alok (2024); Factly (2025). Telangana's overall score is reported only qualitatively in the secondary sources consulted; its capacity enhancement score is as reported by Factly (2025).

6.4 Accountability and Participation

Accountability operates through the gram sabha, audits, and the courts. The Telangana Act makes gram panchayat office-bearers personally liable for misapplication of property, and the courts have shown willingness to enforce electoral timelines, as the June 2025 High Court order demonstrates. The gram sabha is the natural forum for downward accountability, but the literature warns that attendance and voice are unequal (Besley et al., 2005; Rao & Sanyal, 2010).

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Table 7

Assessment of Telangana's PRIs Across the Six Devolution Dimensions

Dimension	Principal evidence	Assessment
Framework	Modern Act; reservation for SC, ST, BC, and women; but about twenty-two months without elected village bodies	Mixed
Functions	Duties listed in the Act; state-driven missions; wide executive powers of review	Weak to mixed
Finances	Rising Finance Commission grants; delayed payments; grants tied to elected bodies	Mixed
Functionaries	Special officers in 2024–25; staff largely under state control	Weak to mixed
Capacity enhancement	Ranked first in the 2024 Index (86.19)	Strong
Accountability	Personal liability of office-bearers; judicial oversight; unequal gram sabha voice	Mixed

Note. The assessment column is the author's qualitative judgment based on the evidence cited in Sections 4 to 6; it is not an official rating.

7. Discussion

The evidence supports a cautious reading. Telangana has strengthened the outer shell of local democracy: smaller and more numerous gram panchayats, high voter turnout, guaranteed representation of women and disadvantaged groups, a training system that leads the country, and a legislature willing to amend outdated rules such as the two-child norm.

Yet the inner core of self-government, meaning the power to decide, spend, and staff, remains thin. Four features stand out. First, the electoral lapse of 2024–25 showed that local democracy in the state depends on political convenience as much as on constitutional duty. The delay was ended by judicial pressure rather than by institutional design. Second, the pattern in Table 3 suggests that village government tracks the state's political cycle, which weakens its potential to act as an independent tier. Third, the reliance on state-led missions and supervisory powers keeps decisions with the executive, and the payment disputes show that panchayats bear the financial risk of state programmes without commensurate fiscal control. Fourth, reservation politics has become entangled with litigation, which delays elections and creates uncertainty for citizens and officials alike.

These findings echo the wider literature. Crook and Manor (1998) and Manor (1999) argue that decentralization succeeds when powers, resources, and accountability arrive together, and Telangana illustrates the risks of unbalanced progress. Capacity is high, but powers and resources are mediated by the state. The state also shows the tension identified by Prud'homme (1995) between local autonomy and the wish of higher governments to secure uniform standards and fiscal discipline.

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Two caveats apply. The analysis relies on secondary and press data that may be revised, and the mandal and zilla parishad tiers, whose elections were pending in early 2026, deserve separate study once fresh mandates are in place.

8. Policy Recommendations

The analysis points to six practical reforms.

1. **Protect the electoral calendar.** Notify reservation and rotation well before a term ends, and adopt a statutory timetable so that polls do not depend on political discretion. The State Election Commission should be given the administrative autonomy to hold elections on schedule.
2. **Stabilize fund flows.** Release State Finance Commission grants and Finance Commission funds on a fixed monthly or quarterly calendar, publish a schedule for clearing pending bills, and use digital payment tracking so that sarpanches are not forced to borrow to finish works.
3. **Map activities to tiers.** Complete an activity map that specifies which functions belong to gram panchayats, mandal parishads, and zilla parishads, and route state missions through panchayat plans rather than parallel channels.
4. **Place functionaries under panchayat control.** Make panchayat secretaries and village-level staff accountable to the gram panchayat for day-to-day work, and avoid prolonged rule by special officers by filling vacancies through elections within the constitutional period.
5. **Build a defensible inclusion framework.** Use the 2024 caste data and dedicated commission findings to design reservation that respects judicial limits, and explore constitutional routes for any increase in quotas.
6. **Strengthen social accountability.** Monitor unanimous elections, publish gram sabha minutes and expenditure online, ensure quorum with representation of women and marginalized groups, and expand social audits.

9. Conclusion

This paper examined whether Telangana's Panchayat Raj Institutions function as genuine institutions of local self-governance. Using a six-dimensional framework and secondary evidence up to early 2026, it found a system that is broad in reach and strong in capacity but incomplete in autonomy. The Telangana Panchayat Raj Act, 2018 expanded the number of gram panchayats and consolidated the law; elections in December 2025 showed high participation; and the abolition of the two-child norm widened eligibility. At the same time, elected village government was absent for about twenty-two months, fiscal relationships between the state and panchayats were marked by delay and dispute, and the executive retained wide supervisory powers.

In short, Telangana has built the machinery of decentralization faster than the substance of devolution. The most urgent priorities are an assured electoral calendar, predictable finances, a clear division of functions among the tiers, and inclusive rules of representation. If these reforms are undertaken, the state's investment in training and institutions could be converted into real local decision-making. Without them, panchayats will remain well-trained implementers of decisions taken elsewhere. Future research should

Advanced International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
E-ISSN: 2584-0487
editor@aijmr.com
Volume 4, Issue 2, March-April 2026
CrossRef DOI: 10.62127/aijmr.2026.v04i02.1532

combine field surveys of gram sabhas and elected representatives with fiscal data on own-source revenue and transfers, and should evaluate the mandal and zilla parishads once they are reconstituted.

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Advanced International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
E-ISSN: 2584-0487
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Advanced International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
E-ISSN: 2584-0487
editor@aijmr.com
Volume 4, Issue 2, March-April 2026
CrossRef DOI: 10.62127/aijmr.2026.v04i02.1532

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