

Youth Participation in Panchayati Raj: A Study of three Gram Panchayats in Kakdwip Block, West Bengal

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Abstract: *The main means of governance in rural India are Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). They aim to promote democracy at the grassroots level and spread power evenly. Although young people are important, especially those aged 18 to 35, they are not very involved, especially where traditional hierarchies shape the public life. This research analyses the level, pattern, and effect of youth involvement in PRIs in the Kakdwip block of the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal.*

This research highlights the degree to which youth are informed about the organizational structure and operation of PRIs, how they contribute to village council meetings, decision-making, and village development, and how they employ resources such as the Right to Information (RTI) Act. Nevertheless, socioeconomic limitations, generational bias, political gatekeepers, and ignorance keep them from participating. In conjunction with a mixed methods strategy, 200 young people participated in the survey, with qualitative information drawn from focus groups, key informant interviews, and interviews with panchayat representatives. While approximately 65% of youth were aware of PRI at the primary level, only 38% had attended Gram Sabha meetings, and only 22% had participated in planning or development activities, according to the survey. There were weak panchayat communication and a belief among youth that their views were not valued.

In addition, very few respondents had submitted RTI applications, most were not aware of the objectives or procedures of the RTI Act. This demonstrates a gap between youth and the accountability system. Nevertheless, panchayats with greater youth involvement showed better community responsiveness, transparency, and service delivery, demonstrating the beneficial effects of youth involvement in governance. On the basis of these results, the study recommends implementing youth advisory councils in panchayats, teaching the public and providing leadership training in school and community settings, making Gram Sabha campaigning processes inclusive, making RTI more accessible through technology, and recognising youth participation with certificates, internships, or allowances. Finally, effective local governance and democratic strengthening hinge on the active participation of young people. Rural youth can become effective change-makers and agents of accountability, innovation, and transparency in PRIs through targeted initiatives and participatory reforms.

Key Words: Youth, Panchayati Raj System, Local Governance, Youth Participation.

The decentralisation of governance in India through the institution of local self government has placed the Panchayati Raj System (PRS) at the heart of rural democratic deepening and development (Trivedi, Yadav, Rai, & Asagar, 2024). Introduced constitutionally via the Seventy third Amendment to the Constitution of India in 1992 and further operationalised across the states, PRS were envisaged not only as vehicles for service delivery but also as platforms for inclusive and participatory governance (Trivedi et al., 2024; Nutan, 2023). Within this framework, the engagement of younger generations the ‘youth’ in rural India occupies a distinctive place. Although much research has explored women’s representation and marginalised communities in panchayats (Choudhary, Tiwary, Das, Raj, & Bharti, 2025), comparatively less attention has been paid to youth participation in the PRS despite the demographic dividend and potential generational renewal it offers (Kumar, 2019).

Youth involvement in village-level governance matters for three intertwined reasons. First, youth can bring fresh perspectives, energy, and innovation to rural local bodies. Second, their participation aligns local planning processes with the aspirations and needs of younger cohorts, thereby enhancing their relevance and responsiveness. Third, early engagement in local decision-making fosters political socialisation and builds a reservoir of active citizens and future leaders (Kumar, 2019). However, the question remains whether this potential is being realised in practice in the country’s vast and heterogeneous Panchayat system.

This study investigates youth participation in four Gram Panchayats of the Kakdwip Block in South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. By focusing on these micro units of rural governance, this study seeks to answer the following question: How do young people engage with Panchayat processes (for example, meetings, planning, and execution)? What structural, socioeconomic, and attitudinal factors facilitate or inhibit their participation? To what extent does youth involvement in the Gram Panchayats influence governance practices and development outcomes at the village level? In a state with a long history of grassroots reform and rural governance experimentation, and in a coastal block marked by unique socioeconomic dynamics, this study offers an opportunity to unpack both the potential and constraints of youth engagement in rural self-governance.

The article proceeds as follows: First, a review of the relevant literature and policy frameworks on youth participation and Panchayati governance is presented. Next, the research design, methodology, and sampling approaches are outlined. Thereafter, the empirical findings from the four selected Gram Panchayats are analysed. Finally, this study discusses the policy implications and offers recommendations for strengthening youth-inclusive Panchayat governance in West Bengal and similar contexts.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Panchayati Raj system (PRS) in India, institutionalised through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, is widely regarded as a foundational mechanism for grassroots democracy and participatory governance in rural areas. It created a three-tier structure of elected bodies at the village, block, and district levels to decentralise power and enhance local development planning (Nutan, 2023). However, while the legal framework encourages inclusive participation, the reality on the ground often reflects structural challenges, particularly in terms of actual engagement by various social groups. Trivedi, Yadav, Rai, and Asagar (2024) highlight that, despite the institutional scaffolding supporting democratic decentralisation in states like Uttar Pradesh, participation remains largely symbolic for many due to socio-economic constraints, lack of awareness, and institutional inertia.

Scholarly attention has focused extensively on the participation of women and marginalised caste groups in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Choudhary et al. (2025), for example, demonstrate that while gender-based quotas have increased the numerical representation of women in panchayats, genuine empowerment is often undermined by patriarchal norms, limited autonomy, and the persistence of proxy representations. Similar patterns are observed in tribal regions, where studies have reported that women's participation is constrained by low literacy levels, restricted mobility, and poor access to institutional support (Jatti Rajendar, 2024). These analyses suggest that inclusion in local governance structures alone does not necessarily translate into meaningful participation or policy influence.

In contrast, the literature on youth participation in PRIs remains relatively underdeveloped, even though young people constitute a significant proportion of India's rural population. According to Kumar (2019), youth engagement in Panchayati Raj has been increasing in some states, particularly in areas affected by conflict or political mobilisation, such as Bihar and Jharkhand. He argues that youth involvement in local governance can act as a counterbalance to political apathy and insurgency by providing channels for constructive engagement with the government. However, such participation is neither uniform nor guaranteed. Gangwar (2024) observes that while rural youth have the potential to drive innovative governance and socioeconomic change, their participation is often hindered by structural limitations such as lack of land ownership, unemployment, inadequate education, and weak exposure to democratic processes. These barriers limit their ability to influence governance despite their numerical strength.

Several studies have identified a set of common enablers and constraints that shape youth engagement in

local self-governance. Socio-economic status, educational attainment, and political awareness emerge as key determinants of participation. Bhagabanprakash (2011) argues that informed youth—those aware of Panchayat procedures, roles, and entitlements—are far more likely to engage meaningfully. Furthermore, institutional factors, such as the accessibility of Gram Sabha meetings, responsiveness of local leadership, and presence of youth clubs or civil society initiatives, significantly influence participation patterns. Conversely, cultural perceptions of youth as inexperienced or apolitical often result in their exclusion from serious decision-making spaces, reinforcing intergenerational hierarchies within panchayats (Gangwar, 2024).

Gaps in the Literature and Implications for the Present Study

Despite the growing interest in youth participation, three major gaps persist. First, most existing studies are state specific (for example, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Telangana) and do not focus on eastern states such as West Bengal, where the socioeconomic and political contexts are different. Second, while documentation exists on youth election participation, fewer studies have explored how youth engage in non electoral Panchayat processes (planning, implementation, and monitoring). Third, there is limited understanding of how youth participation influences governance outcomes at the village level. For example, whether increased youth involvement leads to more responsive service delivery or enhanced transparency.

By studying youth participation across four Gram Panchayats in Kakdwip Block (West Bengal), this paper aims to address these gaps by (i) focusing on a relatively understudied region, (ii) examining multiple dimensions of youth engagement beyond elections, and (iii) exploring how youth involvement may affect governance processes and outcomes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To analyse the extent of participation of youth in the Panchayats of the selected areas.
- 2) To assess the knowledge of the youth in the selected areas on Panchayati Raj systems.
- 3) To investigate whether there is any significant relationship between the youth participation and the performance of the panchayats in the selected areas.
- 4) To identify appropriate intervention strategies and approaches to enhance youth participation in local governance.
- 5) To assess the status of the RTI section of the panchayats in the selected areas.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine youth engagement with the Kakdwip Block Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) of South 24 Parganas, West Bengal. Conjoining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs), the study investigates youth participation levels, knowledge of how the Panchayat works, and youth participation and performance indicators of the Panchayat, such as responsiveness, transparency, and inclusiveness.

Quantitative data were gathered through systematically designed interview schedule with a sample of 200 youths (18-35 years) who were enrolled through stratified random sampling from three purposively chosen Gram Panchayats-Rishi Bankim Chandra, Swami Bibekananda, and Sri Sri Ramkrishna. The age group is as per the National Youth Policy (2014) and international practices and represents a demographically and legally significant population for governance research. The survey measured the intensity of participation, awareness of PRI institutions, and the use of democratic tools such as the Right to Information (RTI).

Qualitative data were collected using FGDs, key informant interviews, and field observations at the Gram Sabha and youth programs. These instruments yielded rich data on youth participation barriers, motivational factors, and the influence of local political processes. The instruments used included semi-structured interview schedules, FGD guides, and observational checklists, which were pre-tested for cultural sensitivity and readability.

Data analysis comprised descriptive statistics and correlation tests in SPSS for quantitative data and thematic coding of qualitative transcripts. The findings were derived through triangulation and supplemented by a spatial comparison between the three Panchayats.

Ethical measures included informed consent, anonymity, gender-sensitive focus group discussions (FGDs), and culturally responsive communication. However, constraints include the narrow geographic scope, susceptibility to self-reporting bias, under-representation of socially isolated youth, and the narrow time frame, which constrained longitudinal analysis. Political sensitivity in the region has also stifled open participation. Despite these constraints, this study makes important contributions to grassroots governance and youth political engagement in rural India.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study provides a multifaceted understanding of youth participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in rural areas of the Kakdwip Block in the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal.

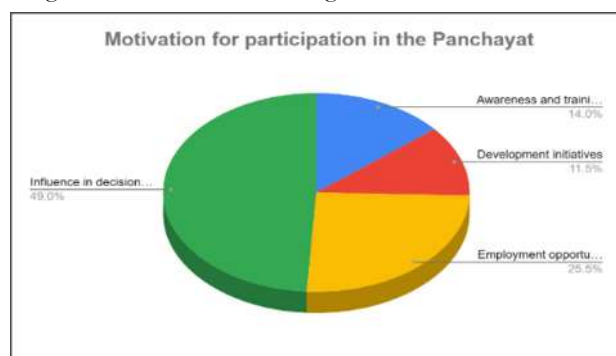


Figure 1: Motivation for Participation in the Panchayat

The quantitative findings and qualitative field observations reveal the complex interplay of awareness, willingness, and even actual participation of youth between 18 and 35 years old in local self-government. The results not only report the current state of youth participation but also reveal the underlying sociopolitical, economic, and institutional forces that frame such participation.

One of the most significant observations that come across from the research is that awareness among the youth about PRIs is growing. With approximately 85% of the respondents having general awareness of the roles, structure, and functioning of PRIs, one can conclude that civic awareness has percolated to a large chunk of rural youth.

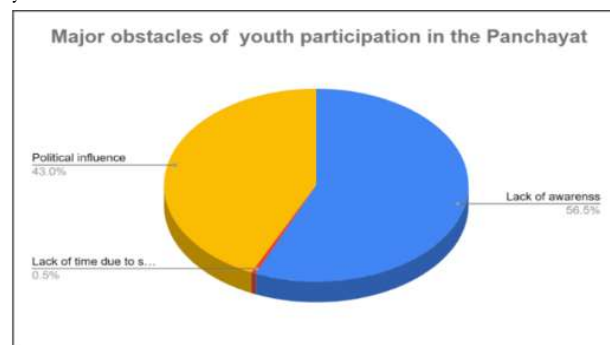


Figure 2: Major Obstacles of Youth Participation in the Panchayat

This is attributed to several factors, including greater access to education, online interaction, community-based advocacy schemes, and the increasing reach of governance-related content through media and civil society mobilisation. However, this hopeful level of awareness is not consistently maintained through active involvement. Although an estimated 65% of the sample had ever attended a Gram Sabha meeting, the overwhelming majority were not engaged, participating members but passive observers who did not shape the discussion or contribute to community decisions.

The demographic information gathered over the study period also offers insightful information on the social characteristics of youth in these rural regions. A generally gender-balanced pattern and high proportion of Scheduled Castes indicate that attempts at inclusive governance regimes have had an effect. However, the few youths with higher education after secondary school present a hindrance to effective participation. The majority of Panchayat governance processes, such as Standing Committees, budget preparation, and scheme monitoring, require higher degrees of technical expertise, familiarity with bureaucratic procedures, and confidence in public speaking—all of which are less accessible to those with low levels of literacy.

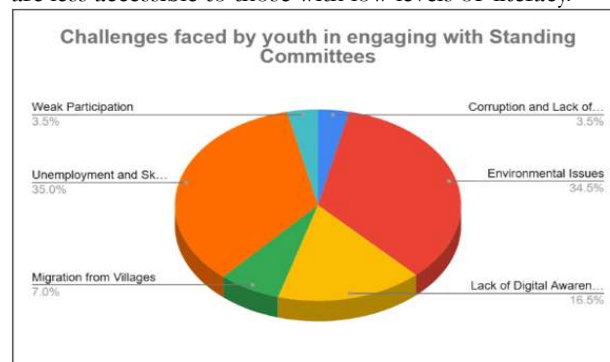


Figure 3: Challenges faced by Youth in Engaging with Standing Communities

The line graph illustrates the relationship between Panchayat performance and youth participation. The x-axis

represents the “Performance of Panchayat” and the y-axis represents the “Participation of Youth”, both seemingly scaled from 0.0 to 1.0. The blue line indicates a clear positive correlation: as the Panchayat’s performance increases, the youth’s participation steadily rises. For instance, when Panchayat performance is low (e.g. near 0.0), youth participation is minimal. Conversely, as Panchayat performance approaches higher levels (for example, 0.7), youth participation peaks, demonstrating that improved Panchayat performance is associated with greater youth engagement.

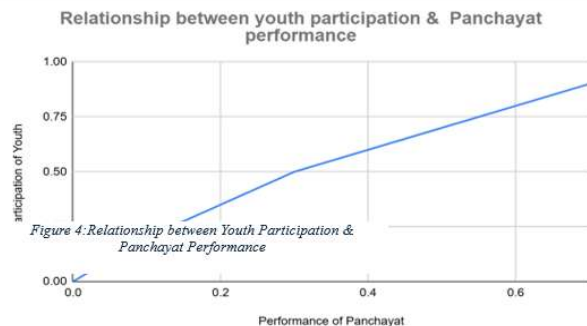


Figure 4: Relationship between Youth Participation & Panchayat Performance

Despite the constraints on participation, the study concludes that young people are not indifferent to governance. On the contrary, they are greatly motivated by certain incentives, most importantly, the chance to shape decisions impacting their lives and access employment or skills training. This result points to a remarkable change in rural young people’s attitudes, who are now looking at local government not only for their civic responsibility but also as a platform for their development and socio-economic progression. This overlap of governance and livelihood opportunities offers immense potential for policymakers and local institutions to harness the energy of youth to develop their communities.

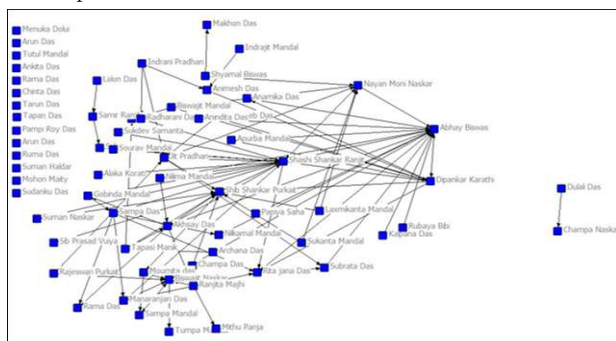


Figure 5: Social Network Analysis

Simultaneously, this research identifies several barriers to greater youth participation. A lack of knowledge regarding Panchayat business (mentioned by 56.5% of the respondents) remains a significant issue, as details regarding Gram Sabha meetings or scheme launches are usually not promoted effectively influence is also a common threat, where 43% of the youth respondents acknowledged that entrenched party politics at the grassroots level discourages

independent participation. More experienced, politically connected individuals controlling Panchayat activities often do not leave much room for youth, especially those without connections. Interestingly, time was a concern for only a few respondents, indicating that rural youth are willing participants if they feel involved and well-educated.

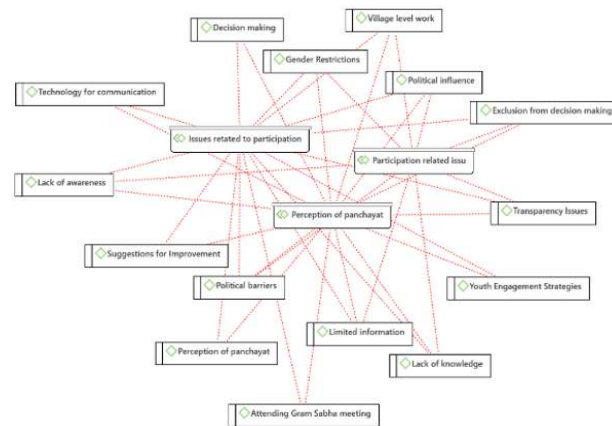


Figure 6: Atlas-ti analysis

One of the research findings is that young people’s participation and Panchayats’ performance are positively related. Panchayats that are transparent in governance, have good communication with the people, and are responsive to the needs of the community, interact more actively with the youth. Systemic issues such as digital illiteracy, seasonal migration, and environmental vulnerability (particularly pertinent within this coastal area) diminish regular participation. Most regions lack the infrastructure to enable youth to engage in digital governance or receive information regarding rights, schemes, or forthcoming meetings. Overall, this analysis offers a balanced picture of youth participation in the PRIs. It presents a generation that is growing more educated, mobilised, and willing to engage in governance but is bound by systemic loopholes and structural hindrances.

Their involvement is not missing; instead, it is being suppressed by a lack of access, low institutional trust, and a deficiency in targeted approaches to engagement. However, where the Panchayats work efficiently, are clear in their communication, and create space for youth expression, participation is markedly increased. This supports the notion that good governance and youth participation are complementary. Pursuing this momentum with institutional reform, capacity building, and inclusive planning can turn youth from passive spectators into active stakeholders in rural democracy.

This study identifies several intervention strategies to enhance youth participation in local governance. Key among them is the need for awareness campaigns about the roles and rights of youth within Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), especially regarding tools such as the RTI Act. Establishing youth governance forums, integrating civic education into local institutions, and ensuring youth representation in Gram Sabhas can create structured platforms for engagement. Additionally, capacity-building workshops and digital tools for governance participation were suggested by 73% of respondents as effective means of bridging the knowledge and access gaps. These approaches aim to transform rural youth from passive

beneficiaries into active agents of democratic governance in the following ways.

One of the critical objectives of this study was to explore the extent to which rural youth are aware of and actively utilise the Right to Information (RTI) Act within the Panchayat system. Field data and qualitative interviews conducted with youth participants across the selected Panchayats revealed a complete lack of awareness and application of the RTI mechanism among rural youth. Of the 200 respondents, none had ever submitted an RTI application, and only two were aware of the existence of an RTI box in their Panchayat office. The remaining 198 youth (99%) were either unaware of the RTI box or misunderstood its purpose. Despite the presence of RTI boxes in some Panchayat offices, the mechanism remains largely unused due to the absence of basic knowledge about the RTI Act and its procedures among rural youth. This highlights a serious gap in civic education and participatory grassroots governance.

CONCLUSION

The current research examines the evolving participation of rural youth in local government in the form of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Kakdwip Block, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal. While PRIs aim to achieve democratic involvement and participatory development at the doorstep of rural youth, they represent an untapped resource within the local government. Encouragingly, about 85% of the young people surveyed demonstrated awareness of Panchayats, and a significant number of them had attended Gram Sabha meetings, signifying increasing access to information through digital channels, education, and awareness campaigns. However, meaningful participation in decision-making remains restricted.

Structural barriers, such as the embedded hierarchies of politics, caste, class, and age, prevent youth from engaging in governance. Socio-economic restrictions, inadequate civic education, and political vendetta are also deterrents. The study highlights the absence of institutional mechanisms in PRIs for bringing in the youth and the underutilisation of tools like the Right to Information (RTI) Act, mainly because of procedural uncertainty and fear of backlash.

Despite these problems, the study found a strong motivation among youth to participate in community development. More transparent, outreach-based, and effective panchayats that deliver services are capable of tapping into more youth participation, suggesting a virtuous cycle of trust and participation. Social Network Analysis also indicates that informal power structures disempower excluded young people and that targeted outreach is needed through youth clubs, online, and local consultation.

Key recommendations include setting up Youth Advisory Councils within Gram Panchayats, making civic education and digital literacy part of the curriculum, opening Gram Sabhas to the participation of youth, and linking state-level programmes for youth with panchayat plans. Certification and leadership roles for youth can further instil civic responsibility.

Finally, rural youth are not passive observers; they are eager to participate. In this study, over 85% of the 200

respondents expressed a desire to be more actively involved in local governance processes, including village meetings, decision-making forums and development planning. However, only 12% reported ever being invited to attend a Gram Sabha, and only 6% had participated in any panchayat-related activity. These findings indicate a clear gap between interest and opportunity. The aspirations of rural youth highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms and more inclusive and participatory governance. Recognising youth as equal stakeholders in the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) can make these institutions more democratic, responsive, and empowering—outcomes that are crucial for driving stronger and more sustainable rural development in the future.

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