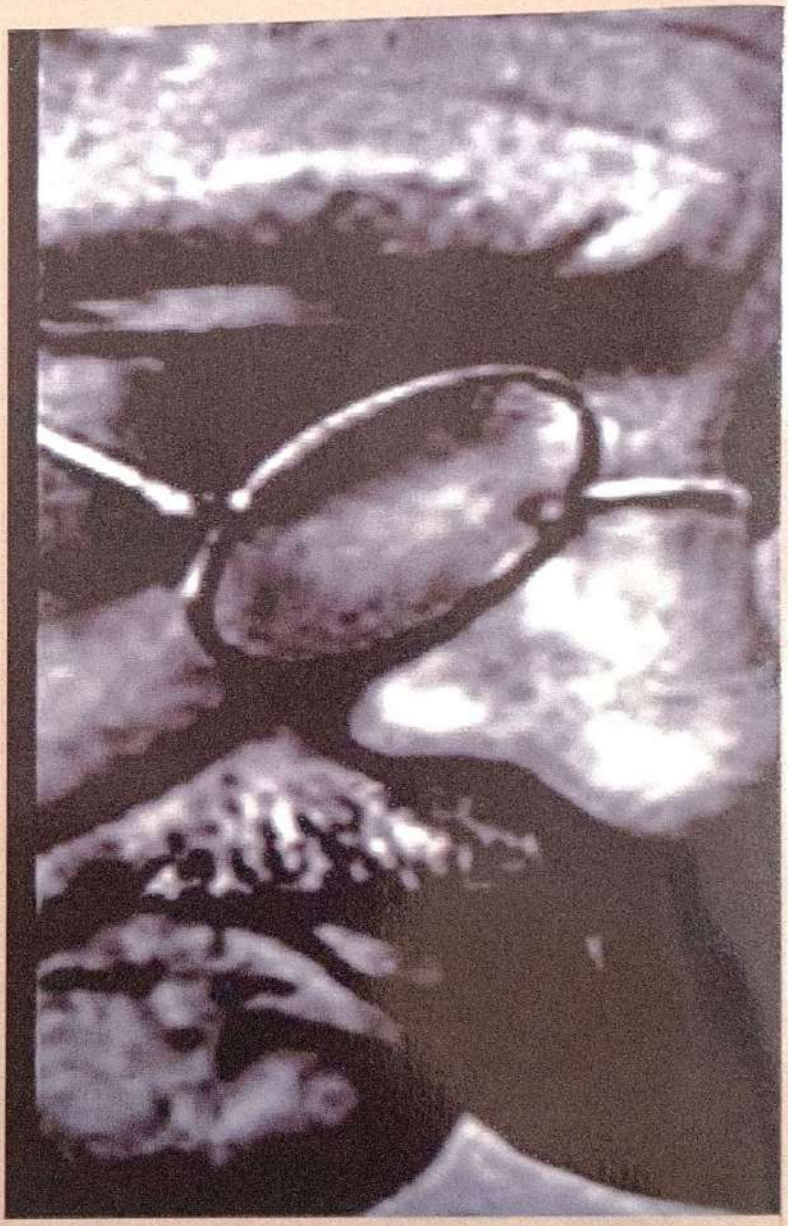
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Mahatma Gandhi:

Reflections, Practices and Relevance



Edited by
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Local Self-Governance in India: A Comparative Study of Approaches of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar

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Pooja Rao[16]

Abstract

India is the world's largest democracy and one of the reasons that the institutions of democracy thrived in India compared to the other post-colonial states, is the deliberations, discussions and its ability to accommodate the contrasting perspectives in the socio-political framework. The historic debate in the Constituent Assembly is a testimony to the diverse socio-cultural and linguistic landscape of India.

The founding fathers of Modern India, like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr BR Ambedkar, have often been quoted in academic discourses about their divergent views on the functional aspects of social justice. However, their differences towards other major issues in nation-building have rarely been taken into account by academia.

The present article will attempt to investigate the divergent perspectives of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Ambedkar on local self-government, especially about panchayat raj institutions, decentralization, and village governance in India. Gandhi advocated for *Gram Swaraj*, or self-sufficient, self-governing communities that would foster a non-violent and morally driven society. On the contrary, Ambedkar supported strong intervention by the federal government in bringing social justice and rights to downtrodden people. He blamed traditional village structures for fostering social injustice in the form of a discriminatory caste system. He was against the traditional village system and believed that the panchayat system would not serve the cause of the downtrodden. This article tries to give an in-depth understanding of the complications surrounding local governance in India by exploring the ideological variations between Ambedkar's pragmatic concern with the federal government and social inequality or, on the other side, Gandhi's idealistic vision of a village republic.

Keywords: *local self-governance, Gram Swaraj, decentralization, centralized government, village governance, social justice.*

Introduction

My idea of Village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus, every village's first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding ganja, tobacco, opium and the like [emphasis in original]. The village will maintain a village theatre, school and public hall. It will have its waterworks to ensure water supply. This can be done through controlled wells and tanks. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on a cooperative basis. There will be no castes such as we have today with their graded untouchability. Any village can become such a republic today without much interference, even from the present Government whose sole effective connection with the villages is the exaction of the village revenue. … To model such a village may be the work of a lifetime. Any lover of true democracy and village life can take up a village, treat it as his world and sole work, and he will find good results. (Gandhi, CWMG 76 (1979): 308)

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Gandhi, *Harijan*, 26 July 1942.

It is said that the new Constitution should have been drafted on the ancient Hindu model of a State and that instead of incorporating Western theories the new Constitution should have been raised and built upon village Panchayats and District Panchayats. Others have taken a more extreme view. They do not want any Central or Provincial Governments. They just want India to contain so many village Governments…. The love of the intellectual Indians for the village community is of course infinite if not pathetic. It is largely due to the fulsome praise bestowed upon it by Metcalfe who described them as little republics having nearly everything that they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. The existence of these village communities each one forming a separate little State in itself has according to Metcalfe contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of India, through all the revolutions and changes which they have suffered, and is in a high degree conducive to their happiness and to the enjoyment of a great portion of the freedom and independence. No doubt the village communities have lasted where nothing else lasts. But those who take pride in the village communities do not care to consider what little part they have played in the affairs and the destiny of the country; and why? Their part in the destiny of the country has been well described by Metcalfe himself who says:

"Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down. Revolution succeeds to revolution. Hindoo, Pathan, Mogul, Maratha, Sikh, and English are all masters in turn but the village communities remain the same. In times of trouble, they arm and fortify themselves. A hostile army passes through the country. The village communities collect their little cattle within their walls, and let the enemy pass unprovoked."

Such is the part the village communities have played in the history of their country. Knowing this, what pride can one feel in them? That they have survived through all viscisitudes may be a fact. But mere survival has no value. The question is on what plane they have survived. Surely on a low, on a selfish level. I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India. I am therefore surprised that those who condemn Provincialism and Communalism should come forward as champions of the village. What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism? I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit.

-Dr Ambedkar (Constituent Assembly Debates, 04-11-1948)[17]

Grassroots democracy in India is the decentralization process wherein the erstwhile centre of the decision-making process is decentralized to the local level, with citizens actively engaged in the processes of community management. The tradition developed from autonomous village assemblies in ancient India into modern Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). It delegated power to the people to participate actively in governance, providing a voice to even the smallest units in society. Thus, grassroots democracy represents a basic component of the country's democratic system and is functional in promoting ubiquitous participation and local development at different places in the country (Faheem, 2023, p. 3).

Local governance is the basic structure of India's three-tier governmental structure, placed subordinate to central and state governments. Local governance operates both in urban and rural territories; thus, all municipal corporations, municipal committees, and nagar panchayats come under urban local governance and zila parishads, panchayat samiti, gram panchayats, and gram sabhas belong to rural local governance (Sachdeva, 2011 p. 1). Several prominent

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individuals, such as *Jai Prakash Narain, Jawaharlal Nehru* and *Mahatma Gandhi*, said that the primary objectives of an independent India would be to introduce democracy to the rural masses and include them in the process of reconstructing the nation. Mahatma Gandhi thought a real democracy could not be run by twenty men sitting in the centre. The rural people themselves must find a solution, working their way down (Gogoi, 2023, p. 188). Lord Bryce believed that the greatest way to teach democracy and ensure its success is via the practice of local self-government. One of the most important tactics for achieving true representative and responsive democracy is decentralization (Faheem, 2023, p. 2–3).

Meaning of Local Self-Government

Decentralization, which has now emerged as the prime condition for a democratic society, makes it possible for local self-governments to function autonomously, with the authority and resources needed to spur economic and social development. In the aftermath of independence, India undertook socio-economic reforms as enshrined in the Directive Principles of State Policy to make it a welfare state (Mohapatra, 2011 p. 804).

The term local self-government was first coined during the British colonial period to depict a system of local administration under colonial control. In contemporary India, where self-government occurs at multiple levels, this term has almost become superfluous and may even inadequately describe the current governance system. Local self-government often becomes ineffective in democratic representation and governance due to infrequent elections and long periods when local institutions are in prolonged inactivity (Sachdeva, 2011 p. 3–4).

Historical Background of Local Government in the Pre-Independence Era

The Panchayat Raj System is a very old system of India. The concept of Panchayat has been revealed in many oldest texts like: *Mahabharata*, *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra*. The concept of the village and the assembly, namely the sabhas and samitis, was executed in the chief government units in the Vedic era (Khidiya, 2015). The Indian village of the Early Vedic period was completely self-sufficient and ran with a great degree of autonomy. They were governed by sabhas and samitis, which controlled the day-to-day affairs of the village, disputes, and resources. These bodies developed into more structured panchayats over time, usually comprising five elected elders who gave the necessary guidance to administer the village. Archaeological and literary evidence continues to celebrate the efficient role played by the panchayats up to about 600 B.C.

Thus, local self-government in itself tied the agrarian economy to ancient India. Villages were independently managing land and water resources, thus having a decentralized administration. Even when central powers were present, villages operated mainly as independent units; there was a long line of collective governance in them. These villages were called, Sir Charles Metcalfe called these *"little republics*"; although showing a sense of autonomy, the feudal caste system imposed its rigidity, curbing inclusion and equality in the communities (Mathew, 2013 p. 71).

Since 1687, Local Self Government and Urban Local Bodies in particular took shape as an establishment within the system of government. The Municipal Council was founded in the Madras (present-day Chennai) Presidency in 1687. Local Self Government (LSG) at present is not a product of It's indeed continuous growth but a product of the convenience of the British Government. The introduction of local self-government in India was not what the British were interested in but to suit their interests rather than introducing the self-governing bodies (Mishra, 2017 p. 118).

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In the year 1850, a new act came into force and according to that, the governments themselves were to establish municipalities in their towns when necessary for their citizens. In the years that followed, the government realized that the local people needed to be involved to utilize the maximum public resources and finances. But in 1856, the situation was completely reversed as in Bombay the executive power of the nominated commissioner was concentrated. This procedure was also followed in Madras and Kolkata (Kumar et al. 2014, p. 31).

The British established a district local fund in 1869, which led to the establishment of local self-government in Bombay. Lord Ripon established district local boards in 1882, introducing local self-government in India. Following the 73rd constitutional amendment, this article makes a modest attempt to determine the operational features of panchayati raj institutions (Rather, 2021). During the British period, local administrations lacked constitutional requirements but practised democratic decentralization. This approach was made possible by Lord Mayo and Lord Rippon's essential contribution to the village panchayat administration to bring people together to address local concerns. (Mathew, 2013).

Lord Mayo introduced the financial decentralization program in 1870, primarily aiming to improve municipalities and include Indians in administration (Kumar et al., 2013).

Probably the earliest formal effort at devolution of administrative powers was made under Lord Ripon, often called the "Father of Local Self-Government" in India. In 1882, Ripon presented a resolution urging that Indians be given greater participation in local administration. Lord Rippon's resolution of 1882 laid the foundation for a municipal foundation widely considered the "Magna Carta" of local self-government in India (Maheshwari, 2019).

The establishment of the Royal Commission on Decentralization in 1907 gave decentralization a big boost. Instead of starting at the district level, the Commission suggested that decentralized government should begin at the village level. The Montague-Chelmsford Report (1919) advanced the process by designating local self-government as a "transferred subject" under the Dyarchy framework. The Government of India Act 1935 introduced provincial autonomy in place of the diarchy system. This signified yet another pivotal phase in the development of panchayats. Following the election of democratically elected governments in the provinces, nearly every provincial administration passed laws aimed at democratizing local self-government organizations, such as village panchayats (Mishra, 2017 p. 121).

Writing in *Young India* on 13 October 1921, Gandhi asserted:

"Our cities are not India. India lives in her seven and a half lakhs of villages, and the cities live upon the villages. They do not bring their wealth from other countries. The city people are brokers and commission agents for the big houses of Europe, America and Japan. The cities have cooperated with the latter in the bleeding process that has gone on for the past two hundred years." (Gandhi, *CWMG* 21 (1966): 288–89)

Gandhi's oft-quoted dictum stated in a letter to Jhaverbhai Patel (1944) that 'For me, India begins and ends in the villages; that is, what I find in one village I would apply to all villages in similar conditions' (Gandhi *CWMG* 78 (1979): 45). turns out to be founded not so much upon the immediate reality of rural existence, but upon a distillation of the ideal village that might become a model for the nation. In July 1946, he stated: 'Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or *panchayat* having full powers' (Gandhi, *CWMG* 85 (1982): 32).

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Post-independence Era and Local Self-Government in India

After gaining independence on August 15, 1947, India had just three municipal corporations—Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay—along with several towns, town area committees, cantonment boards for cities, and district boards for rural regions. In 1947, Mahatma Gandhi declared that "independence must begin at the bottom". Every village will therefore have complete power as a panchayat or republic (Kumar et al., 2014, p. 32). The Constituent Assembly began deliberations on the draft Constitution for the new India, and in February 1948 the Assembly's appointed Drafting Committee published its report, where no mention of the local panchayats was made. of several leaders, most notably K. Santhanam and Shriman Narayan, succeeded in getting panchayats included in the Indian Constitution. Article 40 of the Indian Constitution, titled "Directive Principles of State Policy," directs the state to establish village panchayats and provide them with the essential rights and authorities to allow them to act as autonomous self-governing bodies. (Gogoi, 2023, p. 188).

After struggling for about 30 years to implement Panchayati Raj, the Balwant Rai Mehta committee was appointed in 1957 to study the implementation of Article 40 of the Indian Constitution. The committee recommended the establishment of decentralisation, which eventually became known as the Panchayati Raj System. (Lakshmi, 2016 p. 1017). The first Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) in free India was inaugurated on October 2, 1959, by the then prime minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, at Nagaur, Rajasthan, and simultaneously a panchayat in Andhra Pradesh. During the mid-1960s, PRIs were constituted all over India. Panchayat elections were started for decentralized democracy. Till 1963, Panchayat Samities and Zila Parishads had been constituted in ten states, while twelve states had enacted Panchayati Raj acts.

Much importance was given to the rural sector under the Five-Year Plan (1961-1966), which aimed at making India self-sufficient in food items. During the first two years of Panchayati Raj, much importance was given to its administrative and functional components (Alok. 2011, p. 10-11). Following Rajasthan, several other states passed legislation establishing their PRIs for development and power transfer. In 1964, the state of Odisha enacted its first PRIs and granted rural panchayats ultimate power (Malik & Mahavidyalaya, 2024, p. 450). The Janata Party expressed interest in bringing back the Panchayati Raj system for local planning and execution as soon as it took centre stage. In 1978, the Janata administration formed the Ashok Mehta Committee to examine and recommend appropriate steps to reinforce the Panchayati Raj. The committee had suggested a two-tier Panchayati Raj system with Mandal Panchayati at its grassroots level and Zilla Parishad to be the district planning as well as administrative body. It had further suggested that unless and until Zilla Parishad was taxed it could not be made self-finance and bestowed powers over all development functions (Brahmanandam, 2016 p. 86). After over 11 years of struggle, the Indian government finally adopted a new strategy to address all of the shortcomings of Panchayati Raj in the form of the 64th Amendment to the Constitution (Hirway, 1989, p. 1663).

During the regime of Rajiv Gandhi, two more committees, the G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985) and the L.M.˜: Singhvi Committee (1986), were constituted reviewing to the then-existing local administration system as well as restoring the PRI system. The G.V.K. Rao Committee had suggested the efficacy of the Panchayat bodies. In contrast, the L. M. Singhvi Committee (1986) recommended the constitutional status to PRI and 'Gram Sabha' should form a basis of decentralized

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democracy (Venkatraman, 1989, p. 403). The new government in 1990 passed the 1989 bill that applies to both municipalities and Panchayati Raj institutions. When the next government took over, they did not bring this into Parliament. Eventually, two separate amendment bills; one for municipalities and the other for panchayats were passed in 1991. They became the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution in 1993 after they passed both houses of parliament in late 1992 and a majority of state assemblies. The amendments required states to make laws since local administration is still a state subject under the Constitution (Singh, 1997, p. 191). The Ministry of Panchayati Raj was established in May 2004 and is responsible for all affairs regarding Panchayati Raj and its PRIs. Ensuring that the administrations of the state governments' union territories distribute resources, duties, and personnel to the PRIs with following the letter and spirit of the Constitution will be a key responsibility of the ministry. The advocacy activity for the provisions of the Panchayats (extension to scheduled areas) Act, 1996 falls within the purview of this Ministry (Lakshmi, 2016 p.1091).

Gandhi's views on *Gram Swaraj*

Gram Swaraj represents decentralization in India and is playing an elaborative role in the social, economic, and political life of independent India. For example, in his blueprint, he remarked that the village would be the basic unit with adequate power to manage affairs. The ultimate goal of decentralization will not be served by merely framing a political structure for managing village life. He sought to break up the concentrated political authority of the state to save individual swaraj (Khimta, 2020).

The village was, in Gandhi's opinion, a perfect place to live. His ideal village is represented by his works published in Harijan and Young India, along with some of the private letters he has written to various people (Kakati, 2021). Gandhi believed that a village was the fundamental unit that constitutes a republican society built upon Indian civilization. Gandhi considered villages much more than the physical location of people's former dwellings. Apart from that, a village represents the hub of Indian civilization, on which everything about Indian society is concentrated (Chakrabarty, 2006).

Mahatma Gandhi concentrated on the village civilization, the root of true Swaraj and self-rule. Several references and guidelines were provided to rejuvenate the village community to attain self-sufficiency through handicrafts. For the abolition of untouchability and for sanitation, Gandhi advised politically independent villages through the management of Panchayat institutions. He also stressed the revival of village civilization along with the attainment of political freedom, demonstrating the crucial significance that both play in obtaining true autonomy and advancement (Jodhka, 2002).

Criticizing modern civilization, Mahatma Gandhi drew special attention to Indian civilization, a civilization of plough and cottage industry. He wanted citizens to lead a life of village independence and agricultural occupation rather than becoming slaves to the machinery of the modern age. Everything that was associated with patriotism and Home Rule, he seemed to believe, was to be located in the virgin village, far from the reach of modern civilisation. To Gandhi, all real civilization was to be found in the villages (Gandhi, 1909).

Most of his writings spoke about Gandhi's love for the villages of India. Many people rightly refer to him as the ideologue of villages. The emphasis in this regard engendered opposition to centralized governance. He invoked the idea of the village as a political symbol. Gandhi was against centralized forms of planning and thought that under decentralization, eventually the end to be sought, human

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happiness combined with complete rental and moral growth could be reached. In his opinion, centralization as a system was incompatible with the non-violent structure of society (Waghmore, 2004).

In Gandhian philosophy, the term self-government as it is used in Hind Swaraj has two divergent meanings: first, and most importantly, it means personal autonomy or self-rule; on an individual basis, swaraj is a condition for a good human life. Secondly, 'self-government' makes the correct political ordering of modern nations. Gandhi made morality the basis of governance and *'Swarajaya'*. All this made him believe that people in Surajya, meaning a good state, would live after independence (Viswanadham, 2016).

Gandhi envisioned the self-sufficiency of a village of villages and the growth of cottage industry as a means of reviving society. Additionally, a village panchayat should be established, to be governed by the people of villages themselves. There would be no caste and class distinction in that hamlet where everyone should be treated equally and this society will be stateless (Mamta & Sharda, 2022).

From a political point of view, Swaraj means self-rule, where each one is self-regulated and self-obedient, having self-effectiveness and self-governing due to involvement in decision-making. In other words, the political Swaraj acceptance represents the organization wherein most of the power vests with the people, and the state machinery has lesser importance. He believes that the best form of government is one that has very minimal power effect. For this reason, Gandhi highlighted the economic linkages between the individuals and the economic micro groups, such as villages in which minimal work has to be done by the state for the process of development (Kakati, 2021).

Ambedkar's view on village panchayat and federal structure

According to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the village symbolized a repressive and underdeveloped India. He was opposed to the panchayats because they saved Hindu caste power. Apart from this, according to him, Indian villages were created by caste and they had little prospect of becoming sound institutions of self-government (Rather, 2021). Contrary to Mahatma Gandhi's view, B.R. Ambedkar gave villages and village organizations a different importance. According to the findings of Ambedkar, the touchable and untouchable classes did not live together in the same hamlet. It talks about the untouchables—being a separate community, that used to reside outside the circle of the village (Ambedkar, 1946).

Ambedkar rejected the group ideology proposed by some concerning the value of villages in Indian civilization: "I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India." What is a village but a den of ignorance, communalism, narrow-mindedness, and localism? (Sharda & Mamta, 2022).

Dr Ambedkar was against the traditional village system, which socially sustains inequality. During the Bombay legislative assembly debate in 1932–33, he expressed concern about the marginalized communities in the new panchayat legislation. Ambedkar thought that several social, economic and cultural differences in villages between Hindus and Dalits would prohibit the downtrodden from having equal representation. He contended that traditional village systems, which were controlled by wealthy people would use panchayats as a means of retaining control over the marginalized population (Pradhan & Joseph, 2013).

Gandhian concepts of panchayat raj and democratic decentralization weren't included in the final draft of the constitution when it was unveiled in November 1948. This omission led to criticism from the supporters of Gram Swaraj.

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Ambedkar replied by quoting Charles Metcalfe, who praised the resilience of Indian village communities, pointing out that these villages stayed independent and unaltered through multiple dynasties and invasions, including the Pathans, Mughals, Marathas, Sikhs and the British (Sharma, 1987).

According to Ambedkar, the caste structure that underpins Hindu social order is the foundation of the village. He asserted that society cannot be restored until and unless the caste system is not annihilated. (Mamta & Sharda, 2022).

For Ambedkar, the village represented an oppressive, dark India. The modern state had to erect barriers against such a level of social injustice, and that could only be achieved by embracing parliamentary government and rejecting the "oceanic circle" idea (DeSouza, 2002).

Conclusion:

The historical framework of the 'panchayat' system, as envisioned as 'village republics' by Charles Metcalf in 1830, has been an important part of shaping local governance in India. However, the idea of Metcalf had already laid a foundation for the viewpoint that villages were indispensable units of self-governance. That idea was strengthened even further by Mahatma Gandhi, who thought that empowering the villages would help them be self-sufficient and enable democratic values. For Gandhi, villages are building blocks, an effective foundation meant to power holistic development--reflecting, of course, his commitment to grassroots democracy.

However, contrary to this, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had the view to be just the opposite and argued that governance should shift focus from villages to individual people, as making village-centric governance could promote the very hierarchies and inequalities in castes thus defeating the principles of equality and justice. Dr Ambedkar was against this vision of rights and freedoms for individuals as enshrined by the Constitutional Framework and thus an emphasis on individual dignity and autonomy.

Setting up a constitutional base for local self-governance through Panchayati raj institutions, the Seventy-third Constitutional Amendment of 1992 promised to strengthen the local communities and enhance the potential of participatory democracy. Coming down to a legitimate balance between the pictures painted by Gandhi through the idea of the empowerment of the village and Ambedkar's emphasis on the rights of the individual, the evolving discourse on governance reflects a dynamic interplay between collective self-governance and individual empowerment and refers to the complexities of India's democratic journey.

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Mahatma Gandhi's thought of Democracy and Its Impact in Contemporary Voting Behavior: An Analysis

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Abstract

One of the most significant figures in modern history, Mahatma Gandhi, who was born Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on 2nd Oct 1869, is particularly significant in the context of democracy and nonviolent resistance. The struggle for independence in India was profoundly influenced by Gandhi's philosophy and actions, as were democratic movements all over the world.

Mahatma Gandhi's approach to democracy was deeply rooted in his belief in Swaraj, or self-rule. Swaraj stressed personal and community self-governance in addition to political independence from colonial rule. In keeping with his belief in grassroots democracy, he envisioned a decentralized form of government in which power would be distributed among villages. For Mahatma Gandhi, true democracy meant more than just having a government elected by the people; it also meant making sure that every person could live with dignity and respect for them.