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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND GREEN GOVERNANCE THROUGH PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

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#### Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj underscores the significance of self-sufficient and autonomous village communities, with an emphasis on the provision of clean drinking water, sanitation, and healthcare as essential elements of sustainable development and progress. The Panchayat Raj Act of 1994 was enacted by states to strengthen participatory democracy in India by conferring constitutional legitimacy to gram panchayats and establishing a three-tier structure of local self-governance at the village, block, and district levels. The implementation of the Panchayat Raj Act has, however, faced numerous challenges. There exists a disconnect between the planners and the implementers, the visionaries and the executors, and the administrators and the community at large, which has undermined the efficacy of this system designed to ensure grassroots democracy. This article is an attempt to redress the issues of sustainable development from grassroot level, the hope is that this will be an eye opener for the government to effectively fund and realise that green governance is the key factor for sustainable development and it can be best achieved through the local self-government institutions.

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#### Introduction:-

Mahatma Gandhi's conceptualisation of India's development was rooted in the notion of grassroots democracy (Arun, 2019), emphasising a shift from indirect forms of representation towards more direct and participatory governance mechanisms (Gopika, 2020). This perspective challenged the existing model dominated by political elites, advocating for a fundamental transformation in the locus of power and decision-making processes (Behar, 2001). In recent years, the concept of sustainable development has gained significant prominence. This approach emphasises not merely institutional governance, but also the various facets of human well-being, encompassing domains such as sanitation, health, employment, and education. Sustainable development (Holden et al., 2014) is concerned with creating and maintaining the conditions that enable current and future generations to flourish, transcending a narrow focus on environmental considerations to include the fulfilment of fundamental human needs. This holistic perspective on development underscores the interconnected nature of socio-political, ecological, and individual factors in shaping the overall welfare of a population (Garg & Raut, 2015).

The Gandhian concept of Grama Swaraj envisions an environment for the growth of independent villages that are not only self-sufficient and autonomous but also foster interdependent relationships among their residents (Nair, 2014). At the core of this vision is Gandhi's profound comprehension and appreciation of the realities of rural Indian

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life(Sarin et al., 2016), as well as his belief that the path to a prosperous and equitable society lies in the revitalization and empowerment of the country's rural regions(Kakati, 2021).As metropolitan areas continue to expand, the imperative to harmonise economic growth with environmental sustainability has become increasingly apparent. The concept of "natural capitalism" has emerged as a promising approach to this challenge, providing a framework for integrating the value of natural resources and ecosystem services into urban development strategies.Cities are the epicentres of economic activity, consuming the majority of the world's resources and generating significant environmental impact(Maryman & Umbanhowar, 2008).

The escalating focus on environmental preservation among spatial planners, environmentalists, and local governance stakeholders has highlighted the necessity to systematically mitigate the waste of both natural and anthropogenic resources. Sustainable waste management furnishes a comprehensive interdisciplinary framework for addressing the challenges of urban solid waste management, particularly in resource-constrained developing contexts where service quality and cost recovery represent significant concerns(Lovins & Gummer, 1999).The growing interconnectedness of the world has presented both novel challenges and opportunities for environmental sustainability and socioeconomic development. The rise of new influential entities, such as multinational corporations and civil society groups, combined with advancements in digital technologies, have significantly transformed resource management and development outcomes. Yet, this deeper integration of people and places across the globe has also introduced new risks that necessitate careful evaluation(Elliott, 2013).

### **Sustainable Development**

The concept of sustainable development has garnered substantial attention in recent years, with various endeavours to define and implement it. One of the most frequently cited definitions is that provided by the World Commission on Environment and Development in their report "Our Common Future", which characterises sustainable development as ensuring that development satisfies the needs of the current generation without compromising the capacity of future generations to fulfil their own needs. While this definition has become widely accepted, it has also been subject to considerable critique(Mitlin, 1992).The imperative for sustainable growth has materialised as a pragmatic means of addressing contemporary challenges, representing a reimagining of the Enlightenment ethos. Although the overarching objectives of sustainable development have garnered widespread endorsement, critics have highlighted fundamental tensions and power dynamics that impede its effective operationalisation. Specifically, critics have argued that the emphasis on economic growth in developing countries, a central tenet of the sustainable development framework, is inherently at odds with the equally pressing need for enhanced ecological conservation(Sneddon et al., 2006).

Sustainable development constitutes a multifaceted concept that necessitates the equilibration of social, economic and environmental factors to ensure the well-being of present and future generations. The core principles of sustainable development are intergenerational equity, intragenerational equity, responsible resource use, and community participation in decision-making(Sachs, 2012). The principle of intergenerational equity underscores the importance of preserving the rights and opportunities of future generations to access and benefit from natural resources and a healthy environment, ensuring that current development does not compromise the ability of tomorrow's societies to meet their own needs. In contrast, the principle of intragenerational equity emphasises the fair distribution of the advantages and disadvantages of development among communities in the present, addressing matters of social justice and equality(Ibrahim, 2023).

The concept of sustainability has been a topic of scholarly discourse, with divergent viewpoints on its connection to development. Sustainability is often characterized as a process or state that can be perpetually maintained, underscoring the significance of environmental conservation. Conversely, development necessitates environmental modification and the depletion of natural resources, creating a fundamental contradiction. Initially, the notion of sustainability emerged in the ecological domain, denoting an ecosystem's capacity to persist over time with minimal disturbance. Nevertheless, the introduction of the development concept shifted the focus from the environment to societal needs and the capital-driven economy.(Jabareen, 2008).

Sustainability has emerged as a vital consideration in economic decision-making, presenting challenges to the conventional emphasis on maximizing discounted utility. While sustainability can be perceived as a constraint on the traditional optimality criterion, establishing an ethical basis for sustainability necessitates acknowledging that individuals possess distinct preferences for private and social choices. In reality, governments may not prioritize sustainability to a greater extent than individual citizens. Instead, the robustness of decision outcomes under

conditions of uncertainty, rather than the maximization of anticipated utility, has been suggested as an alternative normative standard for rational decision-making in ambiguous circumstances (Pezzey, 1989).

The 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro designated sustainable development as a top priority for international policy, as evidenced by the endorsement of UN Agenda 21 by 150 participating nations (Chichilnisky, 1997). Over the past few decades, the field of environmental management has undergone a significant transformation, characterized by an increased emphasis on the social aspects of environmental concerns and their deepening ties with related disciplines like human geography, environmental economics, environmental law, environmental politics, and business management. Sustainable development commonly requires striking an equilibrium between prioritizing current enjoyment and investing in the future well-being of subsequent generations. Many people struggle to relinquish personal gratification in order to altruistically benefit their descendants as well as those unaffiliated with them (Barrow & Barrow, 2006). In the context of sustainable development, strategies centered on 'optimisation' and 'improvement' to address environmental issues have been extensively implemented and advanced in recent decades, bolstered by policy initiatives and industry-driven development in a post-Brundtland world (Jansen, L., 2003).

The steadily increasing energy demand could potentially strain the existing energy infrastructure and adversely impact environmental health through the release of greenhouse gases and other pollutants. In this context, renewable energy resources emerge as one of the most efficient and effective solutions to address these challenges, given their strong association with the principles of sustainable development (Omer, 2008). Sustainable development has become a critical focus in the global economic landscape, as policymakers and researchers work to safeguard the well-being of current and future generations. The notion of inclusive wealth, which serves as a metric for a country's intergenerational prosperity, has emerged as a pivotal indicator for assessing sustainable development (Dasgupta, 2007).

The magnitude of the global sustainable development challenge cannot be overstated. Despite significant progress in the fight against poverty, more than a billion individuals continue to endure extreme poverty. Additionally, inequality and social exclusion are expanding within numerous countries, both wealthy and developing. The world's population has reached 7 billion, with an annual GDP of US\$70 trillion, resulting in detrimental environmental consequences that have surpassed certain planetary boundaries. By the year 2050, the global population is projected to range from 8.1 billion to 10.6 billion, with a GDP exceeding US\$250 trillion (Network, 2012).

We are experiencing extraordinary technological advancements; the Fourth Industrial Revolution has brought about significant transformations in the global economy, leading to the disruption of institutions, industries, and individuals. The potential of technology to drive sustainable development is immense, presenting an opportunity for the world to achieve progress in areas such as people, peace, and prosperity, as well as enhancing environmental sustainability (UNCTAD, 2018, pp. iii, xi). However, this potential can only be realised if technology is accessible to all nations and individuals. Additionally, finance plays a critical role in sustainable development, as resources are necessary for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change. As Demosthenes stated in the 5th century BC, "We need money, for sure, Athenians, and without money nothing can be done that ought to be done" (Kosolapova, 2020).

### **Participatory Democracy**

The theory of participatory democracy, as proposed by G.D.H Cole, J.S Milland Rousseau, posits that participation in the issue-agenda, decision-making, and implementation leads to popular control (Bass et al., 1995). The educational function is of paramount importance to the theory since it is through participation that an individual's character is transformed by enhancing their psychological and practical capacity for political involvement (Wolfe, 1985). In 1962, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) advocated for participatory democracy, where decisions are made by those impacted by them. While SDS did not originate the consensus-based decision-making and decentralized leadership practices now synonymous with participatory democracy, these methods had been employed by groups like Quakers, abolitionists, and women's suffrage advocates. When SDS referred to participatory democracy, they meant a macro-political system, not internal organisational practices (Polletta, 2014).

Governments in Brazil, India, Venezuela, South Africa, and Indonesia have implemented participatory institutions to enhance accountability, cultivate informed citizens, and achieve social justice. Early studies on these programs have highlighted their positive impacts, noting that such institutions effectively produce social and political advancements

that improve democratic quality. This research indicates that social capital is being developed, citizens are empowered, and governments are increasingly transparent (Wampler, 2008). The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have significantly transformed India's democracy from a representative to a participatory model. The 73rd Amendment, in particular, highlights the importance of beneficiaries actively engaging in development. Economic development is a community responsibility, with the government facilitating community initiatives. Participation implies local autonomy, allowing individuals to make choices and manage their development; through this process, individuals discover their potential and become capable of managing their development (Palanithurai, 2007).

Participatory democracy plays a crucial role in enhancing political efficacy and reducing a sense of estrangement from power centres, leading to the development of human beings and a concern for collective problems. By encouraging an active and knowledgeable citizenry that takes a keen interest in government affairs (Sachs et al., n.d.), it promotes the formation of an informed population that can actively participate in the formulation and implementation of public policies. The ultimate objective of participatory democracy can only be achieved through decentralisation (Mishra, 2009), a process that empowers people to have control over collective decisions. Participation in decision-making has been increasingly accepted in Western societies since the 1950s. The British Ministry of Housing and Local Government launched Community Development Projects in 1969 to revitalize impoverished urban areas by involving disadvantaged groups. In Italy, many municipalities created neighbourhood councils to enhance communication between local residents and city councils, while the Dutch Municipal Law of 1964 legalized a similar entity. Although these initiatives were not fully participatory democracy, their often-disappointing outcomes contributed to the rise of participatory democracy. However, public authorities and private stakeholders generally used participation instrumentally or symbolically to serve their own interests rather than to increase citizen influence on public policy (Bartels, 2015).

### **Green Governance through Local Governments**

Local governments have often been referred to as 'First Responders', as they are able to react swiftly to the needs of economically disadvantaged individuals and historically marginalised groups in society, thereby promoting social equality (Gooden & Rissler, 2017). In the 1990s, despite the absence of a policy framework, several American cities signed up for the Cities for Climate Protection (CCP) initiative, with the goal of curbing excess greenhouse gas emissions (Blair & Starke, 2017). The importance of Green Governance has risen in light of complex economic and social conditions both within and between nations. Green Governance not only promotes 'Global Environmental Governance' (GEG) but also aims to address past failures in this area (du Plessis, 2015). Prior to the Rio Summit, local governments were given minimal attention at UN conferences and were treated as non-governmental organisations. However, the post-Rio scenario recognized the importance of local governments in pursuing sustainable development with the objective of preserving resources for future generations while also benefiting from them in the present (Verchick, 2003).

The Johannesburg World Summit in 2003 aimed to provide basic sanitation and affordable safe drinking water to the majority of the population by 2015, but the summit's report lacked specific implementation timelines and was hindered by challenges of globalisation. Furthermore, two major obstacles were the mode of implementation and the executive institutions (La Viña et al., 2003). In the context of sustainable development, the focus of nations is often concentrated on participating in summits and conferences rather than implementing practical measures. A notable exception is Mexico, where some states have taken steps to protect water reservoirs, conserve energy, and engage in reforestation, while others have introduced environmental awareness programs (de la Cruz, 2013). Local governments are pivotal in sustainable development due to their capacity to mobilize and regulate resources efficiently, maximising output. They optimise available resources by utilising indigenous knowledge and can monitor resource usage more effectively at the local level. Furthermore, local governments are better positioned to manage shortages without complicating outcomes. Local communities significantly influence behavioural patterns, which local governments can leverage to promote sustainable development (Uphoff, 1992).

In urban areas, where the population is growing, poor and marginalised people are more likely to be forced to live in environmentally hazardous areas, such as flood and earthquake-prone terrain (Iied, 2016). The concept of "Green" refers to both the integration of natural elements into urban planning and the exploration of green measures for economic growth (Broto, 2018). The Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-city (SSTEC) is a prime illustration of a green urban center, designed to establish an eco-friendly atmosphere with efficient resource utilisation (Tan-Mullins, 2018). These projects have displaced communities previously residing in the acquired properties for city

development. Countries like China, Germany, and the United States have integrated 'Clean Technology' into their industrialisation processes (Thacker et al., 2019), while India has incorporated the National Solar Mission into its climate policy. The United States and Europe lead in research and development expenditure for industrialisation. Brazil and India are emerging as significant players, but China has outperformed both. (Never, 2013). A green economy strives to enhance human prosperity by minimising environmental hazards and scarcity, (Barbier, 2016).

### Conclusions and Suggestions:-

Sustainable development is a crucial topic that is often undermined by inadequate implementation. International organisations widely recognise that local governments at the grassroots level are the most effective implementers of sustainable development initiatives, as they are indigenous, familiar, and well-suited for tasks requiring local understanding. Local governments have played a vital role in providing basic amenities to households and ensuring resilience during times of calamities, making them the most effective solution for sustainable development in the long run. Popular participation and indigenous adaptability are both essential components of sustainable development, and local governments are well-equipped to handle such situations with the help of these factors. To ensure the success of sustainable development initiatives:

1. Local governments should be equipped with the necessary infrastructure,
2. Assured financial packages in the country's budget,
3. Trained personnel involved in voluntary and honorary work to be appointed.
4. Expert advisory committees to be constituted with eminent jurists, NGO's and other experts;
5. Public -Private Participation to be encouraged for creating a sustainable linkage between key players, beneficiaries.
6. Emergency funds to be made available in the nature of 'Contingency Fund'.

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