



CENTRE FOR MULTI-DISCIPLINARY DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH (CMDR)

Dr.B.R.Ambedkar Nagar, Yalakki Shettar Colony, Dharwad – 580004

Invites you to the
Founder's Day Lecture

In Respectful Memory of
Vidyaratna Shri R S Panchamukhi

Founder President, CMDR, Dharwad



On

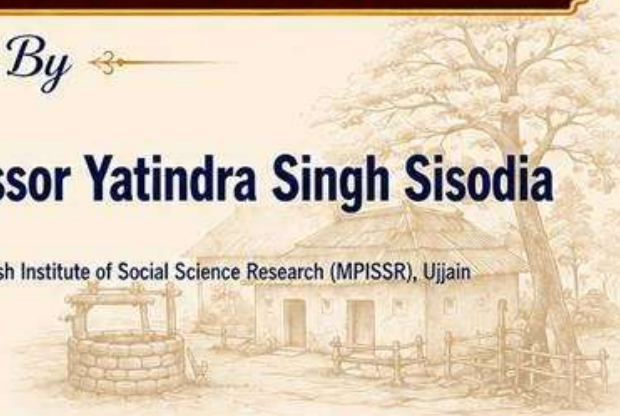
**Gram Swaraj in Bharat (Village Self-Rule in India): From Ancient Anecdotes to
Contemporary Context of Grassroots Governance**

By



Professor Yatindra Singh Sisodia

Director,
Madhya Pradesh Institute of Social Science Research (MPISSR), Ujjain



You are cordially invited to attend and participate in the event.

Prof.Basavaprabhu Jirli
Director



Venue :
CMDR, Seminar Hall



Date & Time :
September 25,2026 at 3.00 pm

Faculty, Researchers and Staff,

CMDR

Founder's Day Lecture on "Gram Swaraj in Bharat (Village Self-Rule in India): From Ancient Anecdotes to Contemporary Context of Grassroots Governance"

Abstract

The event was the Founder's Day Lecture organized by the Centre for Multi-Disciplinary Development Research (CMDR), Dharwad, held in respectful memory of its Founder President, R. S. Panchamukhi. The keynote lecture was delivered by Professor Yatindra Singh Sisodia, Director of Madhya Pradesh Institute of Social Science Research, Ujjain, on the topic of "Gram Swaraj in Bharat." The lecture traced the historical roots of decentralized village governance from ancient Indian literature through to the post-73rd Constitutional Amendment era. Key structural achievements of the 73rd Amendment (1993) were highlighted, including constitutional status for Panchayats, three-tier governance, mandatory reservations, and 29 subjects under the 11th Schedule. Significant gaps persist in the functioning of grassroots democracy, including weak Gram Sabhas, inadequate devolution of funds and powers, proxy women leadership, low tribal awareness of PESA, and insufficient capacity building. Participants engaged in a rich discussion covering civil society weakness, mutual distrust between governance tiers, women's leadership potential, and the need for substantive (not merely procedural) democracy. A positive development was noted: Karnataka's State Finance Commission devolution index was accepted by the state government and debated in the Assembly.

The event opened with a formal welcome and introduction of the occasion as the Founder's Day Lecture in memory of R. S. Panchamukhi, Founder President of CMDR, Dharwad. The Director provided context about the institution's history, including its establishment and prior endowment lectures. The Director, CMDR described R. S. Panchamukhi as a renowned epigraphist, historian, and cultural scholar who made significant contributions to the preservation of Indian heritage. Noted that the institution was formally established in 1980 with support from eminent scholars and celebrities. Mentioned that a previous endowment lecture focused on temple architecture of sites including Akashi, Bayar, and Balver. The Founder's Day lecture serves as an institutional mechanism to preserve and transmit the legacy of the founder to future generations. The event brought together Governing Council members, Research Advisory Committee members, faculty, and students from multiple colleges.

Dr. Prateek Mali provided a formal introduction of the keynote speaker, Professor Etinder Singh Sisodia. Noted that Professor Sisodia began his academic journey in 1993 as an Assistant Professor, representing over three decades of teaching, research, and academic leadership. Highlighted that Professor Sisodia has authored 26 books, 5 monographs, 65 research papers, and completed 65 research projects. Mentioned Professor Sisodia's specializations in decentralized governance, electoral politics, tribal issues, and development issues. Noted that Professor Sisodia received the Professor Jiram Reddy Social Scientist Award in 2007 and has presented at international forums in the USA, UK, South Korea, Malaysia, Dubai, and Bangladesh. Stated that Professor Sisodia has guided 22 PhD scholars to completion and is currently supervising PhD scholars at Vikramaditya University. Professor Sisodia was recognized as a distinguished scholar with extensive national and international academic engagement.

Professor Sisodia opened his lecture by tracing the concept of Gram Swaraj to ancient Indian civilization, drawing on classical literature. Stated that the idea of Gram Swaraj is as old as human civilization and that Panchayats have been an integral part of Indian society from ancient times. Referenced Vedic literature using the word "Jan" for territorial realms and "Janpads," with villages counted as "gramas." Professor Sisodia cited the works of A. Santekar, D. R., and Radha Kumud Mukherjee (Professor of Ancient History, University of Mysore) as key scholarly sources on ancient Indian village administration. Referenced ancient texts including the Vedas, Atharva Veda, Jatak Karnataka, Buddhist literature, Arthashastra (Kautilya), and Smritis as sources elaborating on local autonomy, grassroots democracy, and rural governance. Highlighted that ancient village administrative boards had three distinct roles: institutional duties, judicial roles, and loyalty to villagers and the state. Professor Sisodia quoted Radha Kumud Mukherjee's observation that Indian village communities were "little republics" that outlasted dynasties and revolutions. Villages have been the foundational unit of Indian governance and social organization since ancient times. Ancient literature provides extensive documentation of village self-sufficiency, water conservation, land management, judicial arbitration, and public welfare infrastructure.

With regard to evolution of Democratic Decentralization in Post-Independence India, Professor Sisodia traced the journey of grassroots democracy from independence to the present, identifying key milestones and periods of stagnation. He noted that the idea of democratic decentralization was present in the minds of the Constitution's framers, reflected in Article 40. Referenced Gandhi's principle that politics should be for the service of the people, not for mastery over them. Outlined the following timeline:

- 1952: Community Development Programme launched.
- 1957: Balwant Rai Mehta Committee recommended a Panchayati Raj system.
- 1959: Panchayati Raj system inaugurated in Rajasthan on 2nd October by the first Prime Minister.
- 1959–1964: Initial enthusiasm phase.
- 1965–1969: Stagnation period.
- 1969–1977: Dark period with minimal progress.
- 1977: Ashok Mehta Committee formed for revival.
- 1985: G. V. K. Rao Committee formed.
- 1989: 69th Constitutional Amendment Bill introduced but failed to pass.
- 1993: 73rd Constitutional Amendment enacted.

Professor Sisodia described the 73rd Amendment as "nothing less than a second revolution," enabling the largest-ever vertical recruitment in democratic participation. Noted that before the amendment, the total number of people's representatives was approximately 5,000; after the 73rd and 74th Amendments, this grew to 33 lakh elected representatives. The first 35 years post-independence saw minimal progress in grassroots democracy, with no significant popular movement demanding it. The 73rd Amendment (1993) was a landmark constitutional change that gave Panchayats constitutional status and introduced mandatory representation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, and women.

Professor Sisodia elaborated on the key provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the structural and institutional provisions introduced by the 73rd Amendment. Highlighted the three-tier system of governance (village, intermediate, and district Panchayats). Noted the establishment of State Finance Commissions, State Election Commissions, and District Planning Committees. Referenced the 11th Schedule containing 29 subjects devolved to

Panchayats, covering areas from water and sanitation to health and education. Emphasized that for the first time, Panchayats received constitutional status. The 73rd Amendment created a comprehensive framework for grassroots governance, though its full implementation remains incomplete.

The functioning of Gram Sabha and Grassroots Participation is a significant portion of the lecture and discussion focused on the underperformance of Gram Sabhas as the primary institution of direct democracy.

Stated that the Gram Sabha was intended to be the vehicle for direct democracy, with all village elders participating in decision-making. Noted that mandatory Gram Sabhas are required four times a year (2nd October, 15th August, 26th January, and 14th February) but participation remains very low. Referenced a recent report by the National Institute of Rural Development (Chhattisgarh, Jaipur), published as late as June 2026, finding no meaningful participation in Gram Sabhas. Cited Ranjay Bhutani's observation that Gram Sabhas are always caught between village society and the nexus of local bureaucracy and local politics. Noted that Gram Sabhas have been reduced to venues for enrolling beneficiaries in government schemes rather than genuine deliberative bodies.

A participant (student/faculty) raised the paradox that villagers are well-informed about international affairs (e.g., Trump, Putin, Netanyahu) but remain unaware of their rights and roles in Gram Sabhas. Responded that awareness of political events differs from the technical and procedural knowledge required to run a Panchayat, including understanding bidding processes, procurement, and legal frameworks. The Gram Sabha has not achieved the momentum envisioned by the 73rd Amendment. Low awareness, apathy, and the dominance of Sarpanches have undermined the institution of direct democracy at the village level.

Social audit and accountability at the village level were explained with examples as the social audit was intended to allow local communities to audit village-level activities and check corruption and pilferage. Noted that in practice, social audits are largely non-functional, with Gram Sabhas primarily attended by beneficiaries seeking enrollment in schemes. Social audit as a mechanism for accountability has not been effectively operationalized in most Panchayats.

Professor Sisodia discussed the inclusion of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and OBCs in Panchayati Raj institutions highlighting representation of marginalized communities. Noted that before the 73rd Amendment, both SC and ST communities had negligible presence in village governance. Acknowledged that numerical representation has improved at village, intermediate, and district Panchayat levels. Observed that in North Indian states, rural power structures historically dominated by upper castes showed initial reluctance to accept SC/ST leadership, but studies suggest gradual acceptance is growing. Identified poverty, low education, economic backwardness, and limited exposure to Panchayat functioning as barriers to effective leadership by marginalized communities. Numerical representation has improved, but substantive empowerment of marginalized communities in Panchayati Raj remains a work in progress.

While deliberating on PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, Professor Sisodia explained that PESA applies to 10 states with scheduled (tribal) areas, including Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Jharkhand.

Noted that PESA was intended to make Gram Sabhas the most powerful institution in tribal areas, with Gram Panchayats working under their superintendence. Highlighted that PESA grants tribal communities control over natural resources, minor forest produce, village planning, and the right to follow their own customs and traditions. He criticized the delayed framing of rules by state governments, Madhya Pradesh framed rules only in 2022, and Jharkhand (a predominantly tribal state) only in 2024. Very low awareness of PESA among tribal communities. PESA is a progressive law that has not been adequately implemented or disseminated, largely due to state government reluctance and delayed rule-making.

With regard to women's representation and leadership in Panchayati Raj, Professor Sisodia indicated that women's reservation started at one-third and has been increased to 50% in 18 states.

Identified the phenomenon of "proxy leadership," where women elected representatives are controlled by male family members (husbands, fathers-in-law, brothers, or sons). Emphasized on the cases of financial misconduct charges against family members acting on behalf of women Sarpanches. Highlighted positive examples of women leaders effectively addressing health, education, and liquor prohibition issues at the village level. Argued that if women's leadership is allowed to function independently, villages will transform significantly within two electoral cycles. Stated that several states have surpassed the 50% threshold, including Assam, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka (slightly above 50%), Kerala (52%), and Maharashtra (53.5%). Emphasized that women leaders must become confident, assertive, decisive, focused, fearless, and ambitious to overcome patriarchal power structures. Women's representation has grown significantly, but proxy leadership remains a major challenge. Genuine women's leadership at the grassroots level has demonstrated positive outcomes in social welfare domains.

The issue of devolution of powers and finances to panchayats was criticized state governments for not adequately devolving the 29 subjects listed in the 11th Schedule to Panchayats.

Professor Sisodia noted that recommendations of State Finance Commissions are frequently not accepted by state governments, limiting financial resources available to Panchayats. Highlighted that without untied funds, Panchayats cannot respond to local emergencies or undertake independent planning. Observed that Members of Parliament and Members of Legislative Assemblies resist devolving power to intermediate and district Panchayats to protect their own political influence.

Director (CMDR) shared a positive development that, the Karnataka's State Finance Commission commissioned CMDR to develop a devolution index, which was debated in the Assembly and accepted by the state government for implementation from the current financial year. Inadequate financial and functional devolution remains one of the most critical barriers to effective Panchayati Raj. Karnataka's devolution index represents a positive step toward evidence-based fiscal devolution.

Professor Sisodia noted that in 2019, the Government of India mandated Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP) to shift planning from top-down to bottom-up. He Identified key gaps: Panchayat members are unaware of available resources, lack skills for perspective planning (1-year, 3-year, 5-year, 10-year plans), and do not connect planning to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or climate change. Noted that the GPDP process is supposed to

flow from Gram Sabha to block level to district budget, with the District Planning Committee playing a coordinating role, but District Planning Committees have become largely inactive. GPDP has the potential to transform village-level planning but requires significant capacity building and awareness generation to be effective.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Panchayati Raj was argued that the road to Viksit Bharat 2047 runs through India's villages, and SDGs must be localized to the Panchayat level. He linked SDG goals (poverty elimination, hunger, health, education, local economic development, climate resilience) directly to the functioning of Gram Panchayats. Referenced multidimensional poverty data showing significant variation across states, with Central and Northern Indian states lagging behind Southern states. Noted urbanization disparities, Tamil Nadu at approximately 50% urban, UP at 75% rural, against a national average of 62% rural. Panchayats must be empowered and capacitated to serve as the primary vehicle for achieving SDGs and the Viksit Bharat 2047 vision.

Professor Sisodia referenced the Devolution Index and State-Level Performance. The Devolution Index study, with the latest edition conducted by the Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), New Delhi, published in 2024. Noted that the index evaluates states on six criteria: framework, function, finance, functionaries, capacity building, and accountability. Stated that Kerala has historically ranked first, with Karnataka having improved from fifth to first in one edition, and Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Sikkim also performing well. Cautioned that high rankings do not mean perfection — grey areas exist even in top-performing states. Southern states generally perform better on the Devolution Index, but significant room for improvement exists across all states.

Professor Sisodia presented a SWOT analysis of the Panchayati Raj system.

- Strengths: Constitutional status, regular elections (despite delays), mandatory representation of women and weaker sections.
- Weaknesses: Lack of awareness, limited decision-making capacity, dominance of government officials, lack of coordination with line departments, prevalence of proxy leadership, caste dynamics, lack of cooperation from line departments.
- Opportunities: Growing women's participation, increasing representation of marginalized sections, bottom-up development planning, increasing sense of responsibility among village leaders.
- Threats: Resistance from state governments and traditional social elites, caste and gender disparities, reluctance to share power, resistance from rural dominant classes.

The Panchayati Raj system has significant structural strengths but faces deep-rooted social, political, and administrative challenges.

With regard to capacity building and training for elected representatives, Professor Sisodia identified capacity building as the most critical grey area for grassroots political institutions, encompassing training, sensitization, and validation. The existing State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs) are insufficient in number and commitment to train 33 lakh elected representatives. Recommended a cluster-based training approach, time-to-time refresher training, and separate training modules for women and reserved category representatives. Shared experience from Bangladesh, where NGOs were engaged to provide 3–5 day training to Panchayat functionaries. Recalled that in 1995–1996, he was involved in training manual preparation at the district level and found that lecture-mode pedagogy was ineffective, necessitating alternative pedagogical approaches. Raised the comparison with ICAR's claim

of training 4 crore farmers annually, questioning why similar scale and outcomes are not achieved for Panchayat representatives. Acknowledged the gap between training outputs (numbers trained) and outcomes (behavioral and governance change), noting that intangible outcomes are rarely measured. The Director (CMDR) Shared CMDR's experience of conducting separate training sessions for male and female Panchayat members and taking them on exposure visits to model Panchayats.

Robust, adequately resourced, and pedagogically appropriate capacity building programs are urgently needed for elected Panchayat representatives. Training infrastructure must be expanded and made more systematically committed to grassroots governance improvement.

Discussion participants raised the critical role of civil society in strengthening grassroots democracy. A participant (faculty/professor): Argued that civil society in India is weak and must be nonpartisan and objective to provide appropriate policy input. He emphasized that interest articulation and interest aggregation (referencing Gabriel Almond's framework) are not being performed effectively by political parties or other institutions. In response, Professor Sisodia agreed that civil society has become partisan and therefore less relevant, weakening its ability to support grassroots institutions. Clarified that civil society does not mean only registered organizations, it includes enlightened citizens, educated youth, retired persons, government employees, and socially and economically influential groups who should collectively engage with Panchayats. He expressed that the Sarpanch has become an overly powerful figure, making decisions unilaterally on behalf of the village, reducing community engagement to near zero. A participant suggested that strengthening Panchayat institutions would itself strengthen civil society at the grassroots level. A vibrant, nonpartisan civil society is essential for holding Panchayats accountable and ensuring meaningful democratic participation. The current apathy of citizens toward local governance processes is a significant concern.

Professor panchamukhi PR (joining online) offered observations on the role of mutual distrust in undermining decentralized democracy. Recalled a seminar organized by CMDR in the 1990s on the 73rd and 74th Amendments, with the DC of Dharwad District as chief guest. Shared an anecdote narrated by the then-DC about a World Bank team visiting a village and finding villagers content with their current state of happiness, illustrating that villagers' responses and aspirations are as important as top-down initiatives. Argued that mutual distrust, between state government officials and Gram Sabha members, and between central and state governments, is the fundamental barrier to effective decentralized democracy. Referenced his own research on the "coefficient of distrust" between the Planning Commission and state governments, noting it was highest for BIMARU states, resulting in inadequate plan grants. Drew a parallel between Planning Commission distrust of state governments and state government distrust of Gram Sabhas. Emphasized that reforms introduced without ground-level endorsement (endogenous endorsement) are unlikely to succeed, drawing on his five-volume study on educational reforms presented to the Planning Commission.

Building mutual trust across all tiers of governance, central, state, and local, is a prerequisite for effective democratic decentralization. Reforms must be grounded in grassroots endorsement to achieve lasting impact.

A student raised a question about the merging of small villages under single Gram Panchayats. The student mentioned that small villages are often merged under a single Gram

Panchayat, making it difficult for facilities and governance to reach all constituent villages. Professor Sisodia acknowledged the issue, noting that Panchayat size varies enormously across states (from 500 to 20,000 population) and that decisions on clustering are made by state governments based on administrative and financial considerations. Agreed that ideally, if a village is large enough, it should be an independent Gram Panchayat, but noted that administrative manageability and citizen convenience must both be considered. The clustering of villages under single Panchayats is a state-level administrative decision that should balance administrative efficiency with citizen accessibility.

A brief discussion arose regarding the historical role of religion and dharma in village administration. Prof. Shadaksharaiah, Rtd. Professor of Ancient Indian History, KUD raised the question of whether religious institutions played a role in ancient village administration and whether dharma should be considered in the context of governance. Professor Sisodia clarified that in the Indian context, political administration and religious institutions were historically separate, and that Hinduism's approach differs from other religions in this regard. Distinguished between "dharma" (ethical/moral order) and "religion" (organized institutional religion), suggesting dharma played a role in maintaining harmonious village life. While dharma as an ethical framework influenced ancient village governance, organized religious institutions did not directly control political administration in the Indian historical context.

The challenges for achieving Gram Swaraj in Bharat (Village Self-Rule in India) include

- Weak Gram Sabhas: Low participation and awareness among villagers undermine direct democracy at the grassroots level.
- Inadequate devolution: State governments have not sufficiently transferred the 29 subjects, funds, and functionaries to Panchayats as mandated by the 73rd Amendment.
- Proxy women leadership: Male family members continue to exercise de facto control over women elected representatives, preventing genuine women's empowerment.
- PESA implementation failure: Delayed rule-making by state governments and low tribal awareness have rendered PESA largely ineffective.
- Insufficient capacity building infrastructure: SIRDs and other training institutions lack the scale, resources, and pedagogical innovation needed to train 33 lakh elected representatives effectively.
- Weak and partisan civil society: The absence of a strong, nonpartisan civil society limits accountability and policy input at the grassroots level.
- Mutual distrust across governance tiers: Distrust between central government, state governments, and Gram Sabhas impedes effective decentralized governance.
- Resistance from dominant social and political elites: Rural power structures and state-level politicians resist genuine devolution of power to Panchayats.
- Inactive District Planning Committees: The decline of District Planning Committees has broken the link between village-level planning and district budgets.
- Apathy among citizens: A general disengagement from local governance processes reduces the effectiveness of democratic institutions.

The suggested action items include the following

State Governments (General): Frame and implement rules under PESA without further delay, particularly in states that have not yet done so. Accept and implement State Finance Commission recommendations to ensure adequate financial devolution to Panchayats.

Devolve all 29 subjects under the 11th Schedule to Panchayats in letter and spirit. Revitalize District Planning Committees to integrate village-level plans into district budgets.

Ministry of Panchayati Raj / Government of India: Scale up capacity building programs for elected Panchayat representatives using a cluster-based approach and differentiated training modules for women and reserved category members. Ensure adequate dissemination of PESA provisions to tribal communities across all 10 scheduled area states. Strengthen the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) process by ensuring Panchayat members are informed of available resources and trained in perspective planning.

CMDR and Academic Institutions: Continue and expand research on grassroots governance, including studies on Gram Sabha participation, PESA implementation, and women's leadership effectiveness. Develop and disseminate training manuals using participatory and non-lecture-based pedagogical approaches for Panchayat functionaries. Engage with state governments to replicate the Karnataka devolution index model in other states.

Civil Society Organizations and Enlightened Citizens: Actively and nonpartisanly engage with Gram Panchayats to strengthen accountability and citizen participation. Organize awareness campaigns to inform villagers about their rights, roles, and the functioning of Gram Sabhas and Panchayati Raj institutions.

Professor Yatindra Singh Sisodia: Continue advocacy for robust capacity building frameworks and policy inputs to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj and state governments based on ongoing research.

CMDR Director and Faculty: Follow up on the Karnataka State Finance Commission devolution index implementation to monitor outcomes and document lessons learned for wider dissemination.

Dr. Dundappa YB delivered vote of thanks. CMDR thanks Professor Yatindra Singh Sisodia for his illuminating lecture, special thanks were due to Prof. P. R. Panchamukhi for his online presence and eye-opening remarks. Dr. Vijayalakshmi Amminabhavi, Dr. VS Korikantimath, Dr. SS Patagundi, Prof. Manoj Dolli, Dr. BR Badiger, Dr. Ganachari, Prof. Shadaksharaiah, Dr. Rangaswamy, Dr. Rajendra Dani, Dr. Jagadeesha, Dr. Jai Prabhakar and Dr. AR Kulkarni, and various faculty and about 54 scholars from Karnataka University, Karnataka State Law University, Government PG College, Satya Sai College, Mruthyunjaya College participated in the Foundation Day Lecture. Dr. Dundappa extended thanks for their roles in the programme, the Governing Council, collaborating institutions, and all delegates for their participation and engagement.









