Measuring and Demystifying Self-Rule of Panchayats in West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Paper critically examines the extent to which Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in West Bengal (WB), India, exercise power & access resources as units of local-self-government in the true spirit of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. While existing Devolution-Index (DI) studies assessed decentralisation across states, their methodological limitations prompted the development of a new framework: the Self-Rule Index (SRI). Grounded in constitutional principles and institutional realities, SRI was applied across all three tiers of PRIs in WB using a mixed-methods approach combining policy analysis and field investigation. The findings are striking: WB has devolved only 13% of the constitutionally mandated powers and resources. Devolution is highest at the level of Gram-Panchayat and lowest at Zila-Parishad. Despite being a pioneer in Panchayati Raj since 1978 with a robust PRI structure, its PRIs remain functionally constrained and resource-deficient. The study concludes that SRI's framework offers a more accurate, practice-oriented assessment of decentralisation than conventional indices-DI.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, Devolution of Power & Resources, Devolution Index, Self-Rule, Local Self-Government, West Bengal

INTRODUCTION

India's tradition of democratic village self-governance predates Buddha. Ancient republics such as Lichhavi, Sakya, Videha, and Malla were inclusive and participatory (Kumar & Majumdar, 2013; Davids, 1931; Shah, 2016). Early texts like the Rigveda and Arthashastra describe self-governing village systems (Majumdar & Datta, 2006). British official Charles Metcalfe called Indian villages "Little Republics" (Srinivas & Shah, 1960), a view echoed by Marx (1853). However, British colonial rule eroded these institutions (Zamora, 1965), though some argue Mughal despotism had already weakened them (Pradhan & Joseph, 2013).

Mahatma Gandhi envisioned Gram Swaraj, where each village governs itself and power flows outward to higher levels (Agrawal, 1946; Kumar, 2004; Jana, 2017). The Constituent Assembly rejected this idea. Ambedkar warned it could entrench caste hierarchies (Geethika, 2022). As a compromise, the Constitution included Panchayats in the Directive Principles, urging states to organise Panchayats as units of self-government (India, 2023).

After 1952, many states introduced the Panchayati Raj System (PRS), but most remained powerless and under-resourced, with irregular elections. West Bengal was a notable exception, establishing a robust PRS in 1978 with regular uninterrupted elections since then. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) formalised PRS nationally, mandating a three-tier structure and reforms like five-year elections, one-third women reservations, and State Finance and Election Commissions. The 11th Schedule listed 29 subjects for Panchayats, but states retained discretion over actual devolution.

West Bengal (India) and Panchayati Raj System

Bengal was the first province in British India to introduce modern rural local governance through the Chowkidari Act of 1856 (Datta & Datta, 2002), followed by the Bengal Local Self Government Act, 1885, aligned with Rippon's 1882 resolution. The Bengal Village Self-Government Act, 1919 established two formal LSG institutions: District Boards and Union Boards (UBs) (Datta & Datta, 2002; Bhattacharya, n.d.). Traditional Panchayats came under direct colonial control (Webster, 1990). These undemocratic bodies granted voting rights only to rent payers—primarily the landed elite. By 1937, Bengal had over 5,000 UBs, which post-independence became Anchal Panchayats (APs) and functioned for nearly four decades.

Post-independence, initially, like other states PRS in West Bengal saw irregular elections, structural changes, minimal resources, and very limited authority. The 1957 Panchayati Raj Act introduced a two-tier system (GP and AP). The 1962 Zila Parishad Act added Anchalik Panchayat and Zila Parishad (Government of West Bengal, 1963). In 1975, a new law established the current three-tier structure: Gram Panchayat (GP), Panchayat Samiti (PS), and Zila Parishad (ZP).

Significant reform came under the CPI(M) government, which held elections in 1978 after a 14-year gap. These introduced direct elections at all three levels with party symbols—a first in India (Government of West Bengal, 2009). The Panchayat term was extended from four to five years in 1982 (Bhattacharya, 2002). By the time of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992, West Bengal had already institutionalised a functioning three-tier PRS. PRIs were active in local governance and key reforms, including land redistribution (Drèze & Sen, 2002). The CPI(M) made over 30 legal amendments to strengthen the system; after 2011, AITMC retained the core structure with some minor procedural changes.

Devolution Index and Score of West Bengal

Following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, most Indian states—barring a few like Bihar—established Panchayati Raj Systems (PRS) immediately. However, State Governments (SGs) often remained reluctant to devolve meaningful power and resources to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). To assess and incentivise such devolution, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR), Government of India, initiated the Devolution Index (DI) study in 2005–06. The first round was conducted by MoPR itself, aligned with the Panchayat Empowerment and Accountability Incentive Scheme (PEAIS). From 2006–07 to 2015–16, annual assessments were carried out by independent Indian research institutions, as shown in Table 1. After an eight-year gap, the study resumed in 2023–24.

Initially, the DI study focused on the 3Fs—Funds, Functions, and Functionaries—across the 29 subjects in the 11th Schedule. In 2008–09, a fourth dimension, Framework, was added to assess compliance with constitutional mandates such as women’s reservation, periodic elections, and State Finance Commissions. In 2010–11, the study introduced incremental devolution, comparing year-on-year performance. By 2012–14, Accountability and Capacity Building were also included. The 2014–16 cycles introduced both policy-level and field-level indices, averaged into the Aggregate Index of Policy adjusted against Practice. The 2023–24 study followed the 2013–14 methodology.

West Bengal consistently ranked among the top three states in DI assessments until 2008–09. However, as shown in Table 1, its scores declined steadily from 2009–10 onward and continued through 2015–16 and 2023–24, marking a significant and consistent drop over time.

Table 1- Devolution score of WB over the years

Devolution Study Year	Research Agency	Score	Remarks	Rank of WB	1st Rank State & Score	2nd Rank State & Score
2005-06	MOPR	3.95 (≈80)	Out of 5	3rd	Kerala (4.51)	Karnataka (3.98)
2006-07	NCAER	4.32 (≈87)	,,	3rd	Tamil Nadu (4.68)	Kerala (4.45)
2007-08	NCAER	87	Out of 100	2nd	Tamil Nadu (95.7)	WB

2008-09	NCAER	87.38	„	2nd	Madhya Prades (88.73)	WB
2009-10	IIPA	66.51	„	4th	Kerala (74.73)	Karnataka (69.45)
2010-11	IIPA	59.56	„	3rd	Kerala (70.01)	Karnataka (62.39)
2011-12	IIPA	55.27	„	7th	Kerala (63.07)	Karnataka (62.15)
2012-13	IIPA	49.81	„	6th	Maharashtra (64.04)	Karnataka (62.22)
2013-14	IIPA	52.09	„	7th	Maharashtra (70.21)	Kerala (68.00)
2014-15	TISS	0.46	Out of 1	5th	Kerala (0.77)	Sikkim (0.56)
2015-16	TISS	0.49	„	7th	Kerala (0.72)	Maharashtra (0.54)
2021-2022	**Researcher**	**0.13**	**„**	–		
2023-24	**IIPA**	**56.2**	**Out of 100**	**8th**	**Karnataka (72.3)**	**Kerala (70.59)**

MOPR- Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, NACER– National Council of Applied Economic Research, IIPA– Indian Institute of Public Administration, TISS– Tata Institute of Social Sciences

Compiled from (Bhide, 2007) (Bhide, 2008) (Sinha, 2009) (Alok &Choubey, 2010) (Alok, 2011) (Alok, 2012) (Alok, 2013) (Alok, 2014) (Unnikrishnan, 2015) (Unnikrishnan, 2016) , Analysis based on findings of PhD study of the Researcher & (Indian Institute of Social Sciences, 2024)

* Original score - 3.59 out of 5 (2005-6) & 4.32 out of 5 (2006-07), then converted to out of 100

Self-Rule Index (SRI) - Improvisation From Di

The researcher found existing devolution indices inadequate for comprehensively assessing the actual transfer of power and resources to PRIs. Eight key limitations prompted a redesign of the framework.

First, DI studies viewed devolution primarily as a state government obligation, not a constitutional mandate. The measurement of devolution of Funds, Functions, and Functionaries (3Fs) lacked an objective comparison with what SG departments managed across the 29 subjects of the 11th Schedule.

Second, assessments did not adequately position PRIs as Local Self-Government (LSG) institutions operating under the principle of subsidiarity.

Third, the inclusion of PRI performance and duties as metrics shifted the focus away from what power and resources states actually devolved.

Fourth, DI emphasised Panchayats' transparency, whereas it would be more appropriate to examine how transparently state governments devolve powers and resources.

Fifth, capacity building—though a positive initiative—was treated as an indicator of devolution, this does not reflect actual power transfer.

Sixth, the inclusion of incremental devolution (2012–14) and qualitative inputs like GPDPs and Panchayat innovations compromised objectivity. The dual assessment model (policy and practice indices) introduced in 2014–16 further complicated evaluation.

Seventh, several core dimensions of real devolution were omitted, such as PRIs' control over 3Fs, their planning and implementation roles, departmental authority, and control over institutions (schools, anganwadis, hospitals, etc.) corresponding to 29 subjects.

Eighth, no component-wise devolution scores were provided for each PRI tier.

To address these, the researcher developed the **Self-Rule Index (SRI)**, structured around eight core principles:

- Autonomy and power to PRIs as independent LSGs
- Transfer of 29 subjects and related functions
- Transfer and control of corresponding departments and institutions related to 29 subjects
- Transfer of community assets and natural resources
- Financial allocation aligned with functional responsibility
- Transfer and control of relevant functionaries
- Status and facilities of elected representatives vis-à-vis officials
- Special Powers to PRIs in the 5th Scheduled areas under the Panchayat Extension Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act (not applicable to West Bengal)

The SRI uses **11 components, each having certain indicators**: 7 core (75% weightage) and 4 supplementary (25%). Marking is done from 0 to 1 for each indicator.

Core components:

i. Autonomy (17 indicators)
ii. Devolution of Government Departments (1)
iii. Institutions (1)
iv. CSS (Central Sponsored Schemes)/ SSS (State Sponsored Schemes) & Programmes (1)
v. Funds (1)
vi. Assets (1)
vii. Functionaries (1)

Supplementary components:

i. Functional control (14 indicators)
ii. Financial control (17)
iii. Control over functionaries (64 department-level, 30 PRI-level)
iv. Status of elected representatives (24)

The 'Autonomy' component is calculated for the three tiers collectively; scores for the remaining ten components are calculated separately by tier. The **overall index** is a weighted average of all 11 components, using **17 state-level indicators**, **73 indicators at each PRI tier**, and **102 department-level indicators** for the 29 Panchayat subjects.

For the ten states with Fifth Schedule areas (Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan and Telangana a separate PESA component (25% weightage) applies, using 55 indicators (29 overlapping, 26 exclusive). This does not apply to West Bengal.

SAMPLING AND METHODOLOGY

The researcher developed the **Self-Rule Index (SRI)** and used it to assess the devolution of power and resources to PRIs in West Bengal as part of a doctoral study, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods.

A purposive stratified sampling approach was adopted. One district with more than 75% non-tribal population was designated a 'General District', and another with two to three times the state's average tribal population was treated as a 'Tribal District'. Birbhum and Purulia were selected accordingly. Two blocks from each district were chosen, and three Gram Panchayats (GPs) from each block were sampled, totalling 12 GPs.

Data collection involved 94 elected representatives and 44 PRI officials across the three tiers. Additionally, 152 officials from various government departments and agencies working at the district and block levels—corresponding to the 29 Panchayat subjects—were interviewed.

Primary data tools included in-depth interviews using semi-structured schedules and participant observation. Secondary data sources comprised relevant laws, rules, executive orders, and reports from international, national, and regional agencies related to PRS. Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Standing of West Bengal on SRI

West Bengal scored **0.13 out of 1** on the Self-Rule Index (SRI), indicating that the State Government (SG) has devolved only **13%** of constitutionally mandated powers and resources to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This severely limits their capacity to function as autonomous and effective units of rural local self-government (LSG), as envisioned by the Indian Constitution (Table 2). The highest devolution occurred at the Gram Panchayat (GP) level (15%), followed by the Panchayat Samiti (PS) level (12%), and the lowest at the Zila Parishad (ZP) level (10%).

Among the 11 SRI components, the **'Devolution of Autonomy'**—based on 17 indicators—scored 0.28. Several structural and political constraints undermine PRI autonomy. PRIs remain under tight control of the SG and the ruling political party. In Birbhum, the ZP President concurrently served as an MLA, contrary to the constitutional spirit of the PRS. The state's Panchayat Act is silent on this, providing no prohibition. MLAs and MPs also enjoy substantial authority, including equal voting rights in meetings and in the election of Chairpersons of the 10 Standing Committees (Sthayee Samitis) at ZP and PS levels.

PRIs lack a mandated share in state taxes or budget. Their few revenue sources—road tolls, property tax, trade licences—are strictly regulated by the SG, which sets the rates. The irregular functioning of the State Finance Commission (SFC) has further weakened resource flows. Despite Central Government (CG) directives, the District Rural Development Cell (DRDC) remains SG-controlled and has not been merged with ZPs.

In villages, several user groups and committees—such as farmers', fishermen's, and women's groups—are directly managed by SG departments, bypassing the GPs. The researcher refers to these as "parallel people's bodies." Although, such entities are not found at the PS and ZP levels, which is seen positively.

At the ZP level, a notable enabling factor is the dedicated bureaucratic head—an Additional District Magistrate (ADM–Panchayat) also named as Additional Executive Officer—who works full-time with the elected body. While GPs have a Panchayat Secretary, the PS level is served by a dual-role Block Development Officer (BDO), also serving as the ex-officio Executive Officer of PS ,reducing administrative focus on PRI affairs.

PRI officials often face dual political accountability—towards elected PRI heads and SG political leaders, who may be from opposing parties. This leads to operational difficulties. One ZP official noted: *"...we got completely sandwiched when the present ruling party came to power in 2011. Panchayats were still run by CPI(M). Balancing both parties was very difficult. Thankfully, the ruling party later won the Panchayat elections too."*

Even under single-party control, tension exists. In a sample PS from Purulia, the President of PS had a strained relationship with the BDO. Despite complaints to senior officials and party leaders, the issue remained unresolved, indicating a structural issue of split accountability. No independent forum exists to resolve conflicts between elected representatives and officials or among PRI leaders themselves.

The **'Devolution of Department'** component assessed the transfer of administrative units relevant to Panchayat subjects. Of 32 departments at ZP level, 22 at PS, and 12 at GP, only sanitation is fully devolved at all tiers. Rural roads and drinking water are partially devolved (approx. 25% and 10% respectively). Rural housing is devolved fully at ZP and PS levels, not at GP.

Preventive healthcare and AYUSH dispensaries under the Panchayat & Rural Development Department (P&RDD) are facilitated by ZP and PS; GPs play no role. About 30% of social welfare (widow, disability, and old age pensions) is managed at PS level. School education devolution (via Sishu Shiksha Kendra and Madhyamik Shiksha Kendra) is about 5%, handled by PS alone. MGNREGS is implemented by GPs, while administrative control remains with DC and BDO with no role of ZP and PS. Overall, only 13% of departments are devolved to PRIs.

'Devolution of Institution' scored **zero**. No public institution—schools, hospitals, anganwadis, libraries, ration shops—has been transferred to PRIs. All continue to be operated directly by SG departments.

Table 2. Devolution Score (in %) of West Bengal (WB) on SRI

S.N.	Components of Devolution	Weightage	Score-Wb	Wtd# Score -Wb	Score-Zp	Wtd Score-Zp	Score-Ps	Wtd Score-Ps	Score-Gp	Wtd Score-Gp
1	**Devolution of Autonomy**	11%	28%	3.1%	28%	3.1%	28%	3.10%	28%	3.1%
2	**Devolution of Line Department / Agency**	11%	13%	1.4%	7%	.80%	13%	1.40%	20%	2.20%
3	**Devolution of Institution**	11%	0%	0.00%	0%	.00%	0%	0.00%	0%	0.00%
4	**Devolution of CCS/ SSS Schemes & Programmes**	11%	13%	1.40%	7%	.80%	12%	1.30%	20%	2.20%
5	**Devolution of Function and Functional Control**	6%	24%	1.40%	19%	.10%	22%	1.30%	31%	1.90%
6	**Devolution of Fund**	11%	8%	0.90%	4%	.40%	12%	1.30%	NA	NA
7	**Devolution of Financial Control**	6%	21%	1.30%	14%	.80%	30%	1.80%	20%	1.20%
8	**Devolution of Asset**	11%	2%	0.20%	2%	.20%	2%	0.20%	2%	0.20%

9	**Devolution of Functionaries**	11%	4%	0.40%	2%	.20%	2%	0.20%	7%	0.80%
10	**Devolution of Functionaries' Control**	6%	14%	0.80%	9%	.50%	11%	0.70%	22%	1.30%
11	**Status and facilities to Elected representatives vis-à-vis officials**	6%	33%	2.00%	39%	.30%	18%	1.10%	41%	2.50%
Overall Devolution Score (Rounded -off)		**WB**		**13%**	**ZP**	**10%**	**PS**	**12%**	**GP**	**15%**

 # WTD Score – Weighted Score

In terms of **'Devolution of schemes',** PRIs implement only 5 out of 107 CSS/SSS schemes related to Panchayat subjects. ZP and PS implement rural housing (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna/Bangla Aawas Yojna) and toilets/ sanitation (Swachha Bharat Mission/Nirmal Bangla). PS administers social pensions at block level; P&RDD manages them at district level. GPs implement MGNREGS in villages, but block/district-level operations are led by DC and BDO. The state scheme 'Paray Samadhan' is implemented by ZP and PS. Some drinking water and rural infrastructure projects are implemented partially across all tiers. Most other schemes, including Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojna, are implemented directly by the SG.

'Devolution of Functional Control' assesses the extent to which PRIs exercise functional authority over departments related to Panchayat subjects, spanning planning, implementation, and monitoring. This control is largely confined to three areas: providing general consent, selecting beneficiaries, and conducting monitoring and review—without decision-making power. Substantive functional control is evident only in cases where administrative units or schemes have been devolved to PRIs—such as rural housing and sanitation (ZP and PS), MGNREGS (GP), or partial responsibilities in drinking water and rural roads. In these cases, PRIs undertake limited planning, implementation, supervision, beneficiary selection, and review. Overall, the extent of functional control devolved to PRIs is approximately 24%.

'Devolution of Funds' evaluates the share of financial allocations received by PRIs relative to SG expenditure on Panchayat subjects. The calculation excludes allocations for electricity, welfare (direct benefit transfers), and similar expenditures. In 2020–21, the estimated total allocation for Birbhum district was approximately ₹2056 crore, and for Purulia, ₹2176 crore. In contrast, the respective Zila Parishads (ZPs) received around ₹91 crore and ₹75 crore. At the block level, average allocations ranged between ₹43 crore and ₹58 crore, of which the Panchayat Samiti's (PS) share was about ₹6 crore. This reflects an approximate fund devolution of 4% to ZPs and 8% to PSs. Fund devolution at the Gram Panchayat (GP) level could not be calculated, as the SG's departments below the block level do not have Drawing and Disbursing Officers (DDOs), through whom payments are made and accounts maintained. However, GPs do have their own DDOs.

'Devolution of Financial Control' measures the extent to which PRIs can exercise financial authority over their own affairs and over departments related to Panchayat subjects. PRIs have substantive control over their own funds and over funds received from the State Government (SG) and Central Government (CG) when acting as implementing agencies. Funds for rural housing and sanitation, as well as partial allocations for drinking water, rural roads, and infrastructure, are transferred directly to the respective PRIs and are spent under their control. Tender committees are typically chaired by elected heads of standing committees and include substantial representation from elected leaders. Although bureaucratic heads and gazetted officers receive their salaries directly from the SG, the executive officers and other staff are paid by the PRIs. In other relevant departments, financial control is largely limited to receiving information about 'welfare materials' distributed to beneficiaries.

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Details regarding allotments, expenditures, and transactions are typically not shared with PRIs. Even in the case of salaries for PRI officials and staff, PRIs have no control. The overall **devolution of financial control** stands at approximately **21%.**

'Devolution of Assets' assesses the extent to which immovable community assets—such as common land, water bodies, minor forest produce, minor mines, and markets/fairs—have been transferred to PRIs. Although quantifying the value of these assets is extremely challenging, inputs from Land and Revenue Department officials suggest that the devolution can be roughly estimated at **2%**. Vested water bodies (up to 5 acres), markets, and fairs have been devolved to the respective PRIs, though this is observed only at the ZP and GP levels. Minor forest produce falls under the jurisdiction of GPs. All other community assets remain under the control of the SG.

'Devolution of Functionaries' stands at merely 4%. Out of an average of 2,400 functionaries working in various departments and institutions related to Panchayat subjects (excluding electricity and renewable energy) at the district level in Birbhum, and 2,914 in Purulia, only 64 and 29 are working with the respective Zila Parishads (ZPs). Similarly, only 4 to 9 out of an average of 435 functionaries at the block level are devolved to Panchayat Samitis (PSs), while 4 to 13 out of an average of 175 functionaries at the Gram Panchayat (GP) level work directly with the GP.

'Devolution of Functionaries' Control' assesses the degree to which PRIs can control the personnels under their jurisdiction. PRIs have considerable authority over staff directly employed by them. Except for the bureaucratic head and gazetted officials, Zila Parishads (ZPs) are empowered to appoint, suspend, and terminate permanent, contractual, and daily wage employees, and to oversee their attendance and leave. However, the remuneration of all PRI personnel—except daily wagers—is determined by the State Government (SG). Panchayat Samitis (PSs) and Gram Panchayats (GPs) are not authorised to appoint or dismiss any staff, apart from daily wage workers funded from their own budgets. Nevertheless, they do supervise leave and attendance for personnel working under them. Functionaries from other departments and institutions remain entirely outside PRI authority. Overall, the functional control exercised by PRIs is estimated at 20%.

'Status and facilities of PRIs elected representatives vis-à-vis officials' is quite low. Although ZP President has the official status of a State Minister, his honorarium is just Rs 10,000 per month i.e. about 7% of the salary of AEO. To quote a ZP President, *"...leave the comparison with officials, my contractual Personal Assistant (PA) and the driver get a much higher salary than me. At times I feel whether this ₹10,000 is to humiliate or help. Ours' is a 24-hour job, people knock on our door day and night, not the officials'. This paltry sum doesn't even meet the expenses of tea for visitors".* Similarly, the honorarium of PS-GP Presidents is about 5% to 8% of the salaries of the BDO and Panchayat Secretary respectively.

The honorarium of the Vice President and Chairpersons of the various standing committees of ZP, PS and Upa-Samiti (sub-committees) of GP is just 5 % to 6% of the salaries of their administrative counterparts i.e. convening secretaries. Their facilities, offices, utilities are much inferior too.

Status and Facilities of Elected PRI Representatives vis-à-vis Officials' remains notably low. Although the Zila Parishad (ZP) President holds the official status of a State Minister, the monthly honorarium is only ₹10,000—about **7%** of the salary of an Additional Executive Officer (AEO). As one ZP President observed: *"...leave the comparison with officials, my contractual Personal Assistant (PA) and the driver get a much higher salary than me. At times I feel whether this ₹10,000 is to humiliate or help. Ours is a 24-hour job; people knock on our door day and night, not the officials'. This paltry sum doesn't even meet the expenses of tea for visitors."*

Similarly, the honorarium for Presidents of PSs and GPs is about 5% to 8% of what the Block Development Officer (BDO) and Panchayat Secretary earn, respectively. Vice Presidents and Chairpersons of various Standing Committees at ZP and PS levels, and Upa-Samitis at GP level, receive only 5% to 6% of the salaries of their administrative counterparts (i.e., convening secretaries). In addition, the facilities, office infrastructure, and utilities available to elected representatives are significantly inferior.

DISCUSSION AND WAY FORWARD

The saying "What Bengal does today, the rest of the country follows tomorrow" has long characterised the state's reform-oriented and progressive governance trajectory. A prominent illustration is the early and sustained establishment of a strong Panchayati Raj System (PRS) in 1978. Even before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment mandated decentralisation in 1992, West Bengal had institutionalised PRIs as active agents of grassroots governance. PRIs played a key role in planning, implementing public schemes, and fostering democratic participation. In the early years of nationwide assessment, West Bengal was widely regarded as having one of the strongest PRIs in the country, consistently scoring above 80% in the Devolution Index (DI) between 2005 and 2009.

From 2009 onward, however, West Bengal's DI scores declined—falling to 46% and 49% in the third-last (2014–15) and second-last (2015–16) studies. In 2021–22, the Researcher's Self-Rule Index (SRI), using a deeper, practice-based methodology, showed a sharp dip to 13%, highlighting major institutional gaps. The 2023–24 DI score (latest study) rose to 56%, nearing 2010–14 levels but still well below the earlier peak. These fluctuations raise a critical question: do they reflect real shifts in devolution—or simply changes in the frameworks used to assess it? Four key explanations help clarify this trajectory.

First, the change lies in the scale used for assessment**.** The declining scores are largely due to continuous refinement of the evaluation framework and progressively deeper scrutiny of decentralisation in successive studies. In 2008–09 (study by NCAER), West Bengal ranked second in the DI with a score of 87.38, behind Madhya Pradesh (88.73) and ahead of Tamil Nadu (86.05) and Kerala (80.72). In 2009–10, Kerala topped the list with 74.3, followed by Karnataka (69.45) and Tamil Nadu (67.06), in the study by IIPA. In the second-last DI study by TISS (2015–16), Kerala led with a score of 76, while Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and Sikkim followed with scores ranging from 60 to 50. West Bengal ranked seventh with 49. In the latest IIPA study (2023–24), Karnataka led (72.3), Kerala stood second (70.59), and West Bengal ranked eighth with 56.

Even the highest scores have shown a downward trend over time. This decline is directly linked to incremental refinements in the components and frameworks of DI assessments conducted by different institutions, as summarised in Table 1. Interestingly, West Bengal's average DI score across the five years from 2009–10 to 2013–14—when IIPA conducted the assessments—was 56, the same score it received a decade later in 2023–24. Notably, IIPA used the same decade-old framework in the 2023–24 study, whereas TISS introduced a slightly deeper index during its 2014–15 and 2015–16 studies.

In contrast, the state's score dipped sharply to 13% on the Researcher's Self-Rule Index (SRI) in 2022. This contrast underscores the decisive role of the evaluation framework in shaping outcomes. While DI captures policy-level structures, SRI integrates both policy and practice, penetrating deeper institutional layers across tiers and departments. The discrepancy in scores suggests that earlier high performances may not reflect sustained or comprehensive devolution.

SRI offers a detailed assessment of both policy and practice at all three PRI levels, across departments covering the 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule. Had other states been evaluated using SRI, their scores would likely have been similarly low—as was the case with Jharkhand. When reassessed using SRI, Jharkhand's devolution score fell from 0.30 (≈30) in the 2015–16 DI to 0.07 (≈7), and further to 0.05 (≈5) when adjusted for the PESA-specific 25% weightage. Notably, its DI score in 2023–24, using older framework is 0.28 (≈28). This underscores the limitations of both earlier and recent DI frameworks and reinforces that high DI scores did not reflect actual levels of devolution.

Second, the initial high performance of West Bengal in devolution rankings must be understood in the context of timing and historical advantage. In 1978, well before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, West Bengal had already established a functioning three-tier PRS. At the time, there were no central guidelines or binding frameworks mandating how states should devolve power and resources to PRIs. Whatever decentralisation West Bengal undertook in those early years was entirely voluntary and, relative to other states, appeared exemplary.

This can be better understood through an analogy: a bright student in a class of 35 begins studying an optional subject and completes 3–4 chapters independently. Later, the subject becomes compulsory and the full syllabus includes 29 chapters. Early assessments are based on simple questions, and the few who studied early score well and are recognised as top performers. Had the exam been more rigorous, their absolute scores might have been lower—but they still would have ranked highest, as others had not studied the subject at all. In this analogy, West Bengal's early decentralisation—though limited in absolute terms—was significantly ahead of others and thus rated highly.

Thirdly, although West Bengal initiated a strong PRS as early as 1978, several states pursued decentralisation more aggressively following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992 and, in many respects, moved ahead. The remarkable progress made by Kerala in this regard is well-established and widely recognised, particularly for its emphasis on participatory governance. States such as Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Sikkim are also reported to have devolved greater power and resources to their PRIs. However, a systematic reassessment using framework like SRI is needed to evaluate the actual depth and quality of devolution in these states.

Fourthly, there has been some degeneration in the functional authority and resource access of PRIs in West Bengal. While functional powers and financial allocations have declined in some areas, this alone does not explain the steep drop in devolution scores. Several schemes previously run by PRIs are now handled by state agencies. For example, the National Rural Livelihood Mission (Anand Dhara in West Bengal), once involving Zila Parishads, is now managed exclusively by the District Rural Development Cell (DRDC). Similarly, MSK and SSK schools and various Cooperative and Agriculture schemes no longer engage PRIs. The shift to Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT) has reduced funds entering PRI accounts. Other discontinued schemes—such as adult night schools—have further narrowed their role. Many bureaucrats and PRI leaders, across party lines, have expressed concern about growing administrative control and centralisation. However, these shifts are neither "major" nor structural. Rather, they reflect gradual changes in programme implementation and governance styles—often linked to political transitions at both state and PRI levels or guidelines of CSS. While core PRI functions and mandates remain formally intact, these subtle but persistent operational changes have contributed to the perception of weakened decentralisation.

Thus, three final takeaways emerge. First, assessment frameworks critically shape our understanding of decentralisation. SRI, by integrating both policy and practice, reveals structural gaps that conventional indices have long overlooked. It offers a more rigorous and comprehensive tool—one that could serve as a national standard for evaluating devolution in real terms. Second, the devolution of power and resources to PRIs in West Bengal remains severely limited, preventing them from functioning as genuine local self-governments under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. Third, despite these constraints, the state has a deeply rooted and participatory Panchayati Raj System—backed by public trust, administrative experience, and technical capability. The potential to take on full responsibility across all 29 subjects is evident; what's missing is the state government's will to devolve. A new phase of Panchayati Raj reform is calling. Bengal once again has the opportunity to lead where others may follow.

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