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The Genesis and Development of Khani Kote Panchayat, Reasi District, Jammu and Kashmir: A Historical, Political, Socio-Economic and Cultural Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Village Panchayats are the pillars of democratic decentralisation and rural governance in India. Although a lot of research has focused on the Panchayati Raj Institutions at the national and state levels, very few have investigated the historical development and developmental trajectory of a particular Panchayat. This research explores the story of Khani Kote Panchayat, its origin and growth, with historical, political, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, in Reasi district of Jammu and Kashmir. The study uses secondary data sources such as government publications, district gazetteers, census reports, and local records and documents available in the area to analyze the historical evolution, institutional development, governance, demographic profile, socio-economic changes, and cultural heritage of Panchayat. The study recommends that Khani Kote Panchayat is an important instance of rural democratic governance in the Duggar region which has undergone a gradual evolution of traditional community institutions in the ambit of constitutional decentralization. It also underscores the contribution of Panchayati Raj Institutions towards local development, participative governance, community welfare, and points out the challenges that remain to be addressed for sustainable development and rural administration. The paper is a contribution to the scarce academic literature on village level governance in Jammu and Kashmir and highlights the significance of recording the local history to improve democratic decentralisation and rural development.

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INTRODUCTION

In India, democratic decentralisation and participatory governance is the backbone of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Panchayats are perceived as institutions of local self-government under Part IX of the Constitution of India which have a significant role in fostering grassroots democracy, decentralising planning, rural development and citizen participation. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 gave Panchayats their constitutional status with enhanced financial responsibilities, administrative powers and democratic legitimacy (Mathew, 2003). The development of Panchayati Raj in Jammu and Kashmir has been very peculiar, influenced by the region's political, constitutional and administrative past. The existence of village-level governance—through customary institutions before the constitutional reform—conceived with elected Panchayats became more institutionalised through the subsequent enactments and the gradual development of democratic decentralisation. With the extension of constitution provisions relating to the local governance, Panchayats have taken up an ever-growing role in rural administration and services provisioning, and community development (Government of Jammu and Kashmir, 2020).

In this institutional landscape, the Khani Kote Panchayat of Reasi district of Jammu and Kashmir is an important case to examine in the context of the historical development of village governance and rural society in the Duggar region. The Panchayat is also a pivotal player not just for administrative reasons, but due to its historical settlement patterns, agrarian economy, cultural traditions and social institutions as well. Khani Kote, like many rural communities in the western Himalayan region, has been undergoing a process of transformation over a long period of time, brought about by a variety of factors in political, legal, institutional, educational, infrastructure and demographic spheres. Even if there is importance given to it, Khani Kote has not yet been a subject of much scholarly interest. Some of the literature available on Jammu and Kashmir covers constitutional politics, regional governance, conflict and macro level rural development, and individual Panchayats are under-documented. The information that can be found on Khani Kote is quite fragmented and resides in various district gazetteers, Census publications, revenue records, government reports and local oral history. Given these aspects, there is an important lacuna in the academic literature about the historical evolution of the Panchayat, its governance, socio-economic change and cultural identity (Hasnain, 1998; Government of Jammu and Kashmir).

The present study aims to fill that void by exploring inter-disciplinary aspects of the history, political science, rural governance and development studies of Khani Kote Panchayat. It discusses the socio-economic, political and cultural history of the Panchayat, its institutional growth and development and its socio-economic and cultural profile to place it in the context of democratic decentralisation in Jammu and Kashmir. Instead of depending solely on the oral history, it critically considers the available documentary evidence and local history about the Panchayat and draws a balanced and evidence-based conclusion about the evolution of the Panchayat.

The study posits that the establishment of Khani Kote Panchayat is a testimony to the overall shift in rural governance in Jammu and Kashmir and its movement towards constitutional democracy and decentralised governance. The learning gained from this local experience helps in documenting the history of a particular Panchayat and enriches the scholarship on "Governance in the Himalayas", "Community Development" and "Grass Root Democracy". In the process, the paper shows that village level studies can yield insights into the dynamics of the democratic institutions and socio-economic dynamics that shape rural society.

Literature Review

The study of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has received much scholarly interest, especially since the introduction of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 that introduced democratic decentralisation in India. The existing literature focuses mainly on the Panchayats' involvement in participative governance, rural development, local planning and empowerment of citizens. The constitutional process increased local self-government and political participation and accountability at the grassroots level, as noted in Mathew (2003). In a similar manner, Oommen (1999) states that Panchayati Raj has played an important role in decentralised governance, but the success of this has

differed from state to state due to the varying capacities of the administrative system and the varying political commitment.

The studies related to Jammu and Kashmir have concentrated mainly on the development of Panchayati Raj, governance reforms, and rural development in the post-constitutional and post-administrative changes. The District Gazetteer: Reasi and official government reports give a lot of information regarding the administrative history of the region, the demographic profile and socio-economic conditions, but are not detailed enough to include information about individual Panchayats. Hasnain (1998) also briefly notes the historical development of the Jammu region and its rural population's influence on the socio-political context.

There have been a number of scholars who have studied the linkages between Panchayati Raj Institutions and rural development. Effective local governance promotes inclusive development by providing better public services, creating infrastructure, developing agriculture and engaging communities, Singh (2009) posits. In the same way, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2023) has highlighted the Panchayats as central institutions for the implementation of rural development programmes, rural participatory planning and the realization of the goals of sustainable local governance. One such study indicates that the success of Panchayats is not just due to the constitutional provisions but also due to institutional capacity, financial autonomy and active public participation.

A second body of literature emphasizes the need for local and micro-level history for the understanding of regional development. The socio-political transformation of Jammu and Kashmir cannot be comprehended in isolation from the history of the villages and their local communities as highlighted by scholars like Bamzai (1994) and Pathik & Sharma (1980). The village-level studies are useful in elucidating settlement patterns, traditional institutions, culture and grassroots governance which will complement the macro-level regional history studies. Though of academic interest, systematic academic research on a specific Panchayat in Jammu remains sparse with a definite gap between the available literature.

While there is a good amount of literature available on Panchayati Raj and rural governance, the study of villages in history does not feature prominently. The study of individual Panchayats like Khani Kote has not received much attention in the scholarly literature, despite its importance in the study of grassroots democracy, local governance and community development. To address this lacuna, the present study aims to present a detailed historical, political, socio-economic and cultural study of Khani Kote Panchayat, which will be helpful to the emerging body of research on rural governance in Jammu and Kashmir.

Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine the historical origin and evolution of Khani Kote Panchayat in Reasi district.
- To analyse the political and administrative development of the Panchayat within the framework of Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- To assess the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of Khani Kote Panchayat.
- To identify the major challenges and developmental prospects of the Panchayat.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design based primarily on secondary sources. Data have been collected from District Gazetteers, Census of India reports, government publications, Panchayati Raj documents, statistical handbooks, scholarly books, and peer-reviewed journal articles. Wherever available, local administrative records and published reports relating to Khani Kote Panchayat have also been consulted. The collected information has been analysed using the historical and descriptive method to examine the Panchayat's origin, institutional development, governance structure, socio-economic transformation, and cultural heritage. The study relies on documentary evidence and critically evaluates available historical sources to present a balanced account of the evolution of Khani Kote Panchayat.

Historical Evolution of Khani Kote Panchayat

The history of Khani Kote Panchayat is linked with the historical development of the Reasi area, which is one of the oldest inhabited area in Jammu division. Reasi is situated in the western foothills of Himalayas and it was a vital geographical gateway between plains of Jammu and mountainous region of Kashmir and neighbouring hill states in the past. The region has been a witness of successive migration, settlement, trade and political changes under the rule of the local chieftains, Rajput principalities, Dogra rulers and modern Indian state, due to its strategic position. These historical developments were important in shaping the settlements of rural areas, particularly Khani Kote which slowly developed into an organised village community in the socio-cultural environment of the Duggar region (Hasnain, 1998; Hutchison & Vogel, 1933).

There is little specific historical record for the Khani Kote Panchayat, however, evidence gathered from the district gazetteers, revenue records and Census publications suggests a long tradition of permanent rural settlement and an agrarian economy. Traditionally, agriculture, animal husbandry and reliance on natural resources were the backbone of the local economy, while kinship groups and customary laws had a strong influence on social relations and resource management. The villages of the Jammu region have developed much like Khani Kote, a village that has grown incrementally in population and size rather than being planned as a city. The pattern of rural settlement in the western Himalayas generally is that of Khani Kote, one of the villages of the Jammu region, which has grown in size and population over time rather than planned as a city.

In pre-Panchayati raj era, most of the governance in the villages was through customary systems. Local elders and prominent members of the community settled conflicts between other community members, handled shared resources, coordinated communal work, and lobbied on behalf of the village to other administrative levels. These were traditional institutions, but had a role in maintaining social cohesion and local governance, even though they did not have constitutional status. In general, informal village governance has been observed in other parts of the rural Jammu, as well as in various other regions of northern India, where customary authority typically complemented formal state authority (Bamzai, 1994).

The advent of Panchayati Raj Institutions was an important milestone in the administrative history of rural Jammu and Kashmir. The Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989, followed by further amendments, put the Gram Panchayats as institutions of local government and devolve their developmental, administrative and welfare functions. The constitutional provision of democratic decentralisation provided for increased local involvement by giving villagers a direct voice in governance through the Gram Sabha and giving them a chance to elect their representatives. As time went on, the Khani Kote Panchayat emerged as a democratic institution, constitutionally established, to plan and develop the village, slowly transforming the traditional village community into a democratic village community (Government of Jammu and Kashmir, 2020).

The extended history of Khani Kote Panchayat also underlines the socio-economic development of the post-Independent rural period in Jammu as a whole. The socio-economic profile of the Panchayat was changed as a result of the expansion of the road network, the electrification of rural areas, schools, healthcare centres, drinking water schemes, and communications. The implementation of government poverty alleviation programmes, employment creation, rural housing and development of agriculture also helped to enhance rural living standards and strengthen local governance. These programmes slowly opened up avenues for work outside of farming and more people started to work in government, education, small businesses and other non-farm jobs.

Periodic elections to Panchayats further strengthened democratic governance at the local level, contributing to the democratic transformation. The democratic change in local governance continued to grow through periodic Panchayat elections, which improved the level of public participation in village management. Women and people from socially disadvantaged communities are more represented within local governance and democratic accountability has been increased as a result of this. The institutionalisation of the Gram Sabha has enabled villagers to involve directly in the process of setting priorities for development, keeping a check on public expenditure, and assessing the implementation of

welfare schemes. These participatory approaches have helped to increase transparency and responsiveness in local government.

However, a number of historical issues remain to affect the functioning of Khani Kote Panchayat. Inadequate financial resources, interdependence with superior administration, migration of young people to urban areas and disparities in infrastructure development persist in rural administration. Despite these challenges, the Panchayat has shown its institutional strength of adapting to changing political and administrative landscape, while maintaining most of its social and cultural values.

The history of Khani Kote Panchayat thus shows the evolution of rural society in the state of Jammu and Kashmir in general. It has changed from an agrarian settlement where development is largely based on customary laws to a key institution of democratic decentralisation that monitors local development, citizen participation and rural governance. Though more detailed archival research and field investigations are needed to establish its early history in more detail, the available evidence clearly establishes the fact that Khani Kote Panchayat has a significant role in the socio-political development of the Reasi district.

Political Development and Local Governance

Political development of Khani Kote Panchayat has been a gradual process of the evolution of grassroot democracy in Jammu and Kashmir. The Panchayat as a component of decentralised governance, is the lowest rung in the rural governance system and thus is a powerful institutional tool for increasing democratic engagement, decentralised governance and inclusive development. The institutionalization of Panchayati Raj has brought a paradigm shift in the governance of villages by giving them a direct say in planning, implementing and monitoring developmental activities. This has enhanced accountability in the democratic system and pushed government closer to the rural masses (Mathew, 2003).

Khani Kote Panchayat has an elected Sarpanch and Panches from various territorial wards. These elected representatives are the first point of contact between the district administration and the population. Their duties are not mere administrative, but also involves preparation of village development plans, implementation of welfare plans, maintenance of public infrastructure, promotion of sanitation and environmental conservation and resolving local grievances. The Panchayat helps in effective delivery of public services by regular interaction with the government departments and helps in enhancing the quality of life of the rural people.

The key element of local governance is the role of Gram Sabha as the building block of participatory democracy. The Gram Sabha is a platform where the villagers can deliberate on the development priorities, approve the local plans, discuss public expenditure and demand accountability of elected representatives. This is a participatory process that increases transparency, increases citizen trust in democratic institutions, and promotes a greater role of citizens in governance. Successful Panchayat administration is thus not solely reliant on elected individuals but also on the engagement of the community in decision-making initiatives (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2023).

In the past, Khani Kote Panchayat has been contributing significantly in the areas of implementation of various rural development programmes, sponsored by the Union and the Union Territory governments. Various schemes have been implemented to enhance the rural infrastructure, employment generation, housing, sanitation, drinking water facilities and livelihood opportunities such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Pradhan Mantra Awas Yojana (Gramin), Jal Jeevan Mission, Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin), and National Rural Livelihood Mission. The Panchayat is the main implementing agency of many such programmes and plays a significant role in ensuring that the benefits of development reach the eligible beneficiaries and in line with the Government guidelines.

With strengthening of the grassroots democratic institutions in recent years, the political relevance of Panchayats has grown significantly in Jammu and Kashmir. The conduct of Panchayat Elections and District Development Council Elections has increased opportunities to participate in elections, especially for women, youth, and socially disadvantaged groups. Increased political

awareness and education, and access to information have led to increased participation in democratic processes at the local level. The developments have helped build the legitimacy of local government and foster inclusive political engagement.

However, there are some institutional constraints that remain to impact the effectiveness of Panchayat governance. The implementation of development projects at the local level is frequently constrained by financial dependence on the higher level governments, delays in the release of development funds, lack of technical expertise, lack of administrative personnel and limited fiscal autonomy. In the same way, inter-departmental and inter-parties coordination is not always effective in implementing public works and welfare programmes timely. To enhance the effectiveness and responsiveness of grassroots governance, it is necessary to tackle these institutional challenges. To make Khani Kote Panchayat more effective in the future, it is essential that institutional capacity is strengthened, increased financial decentralisation, increased transparency by digital governance and increased participation of the community in local decision-making. Training of elected leaders, especially women and new members, on capacity building can also enhance governance and democratic accountability.

Hence, the political evolution of Khani Kote Panchayat is an example of the transformative power of democratic decentralisation in rural Jammu and Kashmir. Despite some institutional hurdles, Panchayat has proved to be a valuable tool in participatory governance, local development and democratic empowerment. It has provided a good example of the role of grassroots institutions in advancing sustainable rural development by combining the principles of the constitution with engagement and responsiveness of the citizens and local leadership.

Table 1. Structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Jammu and Kashmir

Institution	Number
District Panchayats	20
Block Development Councils (BDCs)	285
Gram Panchayats	4,291
Elected Panchs	23,629
Elected Sarpanchs	4,291

Source: Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Government of Jammu & Kashmir; Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India.

Table 1 demonstrates the extensive institutional framework of Panchayati Raj in Jammu and Kashmir. The large number of Gram Panchayats and elected representatives reflects the importance of decentralised governance in promoting rural development and citizen participation. Khani Kote Panchayat functions within this institutional structure, where local elected bodies play a central role in implementing development programmes and strengthening grassroots democracy.

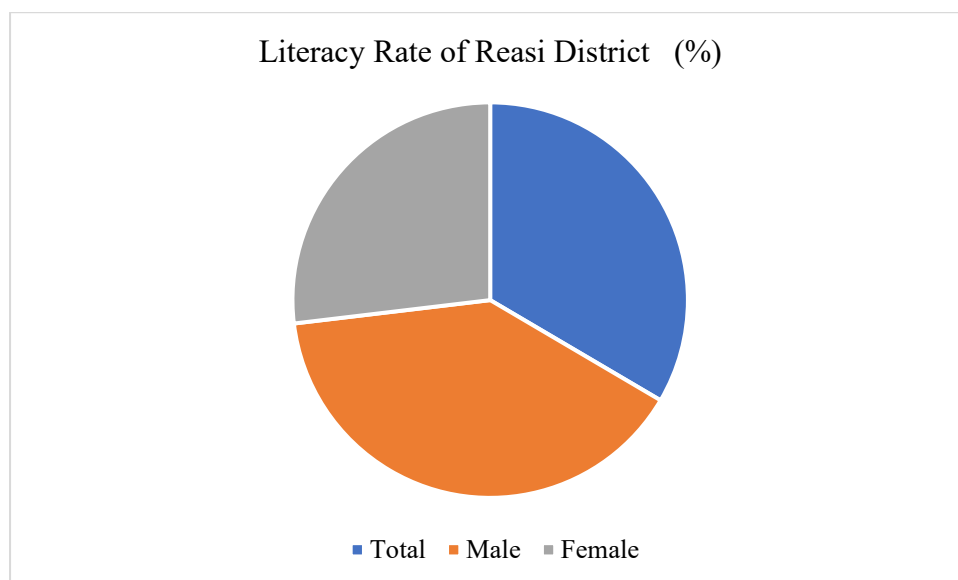
Socio-Economic Development of Khani Kote Panchayat

The socio-economic development of Khani Kote Panchayat mirrors the socio-economic changes of the rural community within Reasi district in the last few decades. The Panchayat traditionally has been predominantly agrarian and agriculture and livestock rearing have been the main economic sources of livelihood. The small and marginal land holdings have been affecting the agricultural productivity; the need of seasonal rain and low level of irrigation facilities have also affected the agricultural productivity in the past. Food grains, vegetables and fodder crops are still grown along with dairy farming and animal husbandry contributing economically to significant part of rural population. The socio-economic profile of Panchayat has been changing slightly in recent years. The improved road infrastructure, increased capacity of educational institutions, electrification of rural areas, access to digital communication and governmental welfare programmes have provided new opportunities to

agricultural activities. There is a greater reliance on non-agricultural jobs by the residents of the area, including those in the public service, private industry, education, security and small-scale business. Seasonal migration to nearby urban centres for jobs has also helped to increase household income and alter occupational patterns.

Education is one of the most important factors contributing to socio-economic transformation. Improved literacy rates and higher educational aspirations of the younger generations are due to the expansion of primary and secondary education and higher awareness of higher education. The increased access to education has been instrumental in bringing the rural youths out of the village for jobs and also in ensuring greater involvement in village governance and community development. Simultaneously, the government measures initiated for skill development and vocational training have led to human resource development being strengthened in the rural areas (Census of India, 2011).

Figure 1. Literacy Rate of Reasi District (Census 2011)



Source: *Census of India, 2011.*

From the above figure, it is seen that literacy rate was gradually improving in Reasi district but there is a noticeable gender gap. Improving educational levels, especially among women, is crucial to build up human capital, and to ensure inclusive rural development and effective participation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

The government sponsored rural development programmes have been a major factor in the socio-economic situation of Khani Kote Panchayat. Financial schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) have created wage jobs and accompanied the development of rural assets, and the Pradhan Mantra Awas Yojana (Gramin) is helping to reach the betterment of rural housing for economically weaker families. Likewise, the Jal Jeevan Mission has helped improve drinking water facilities, Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) has helped improve sanitation, and the National Rural Livelihood Mission has helped in livelihood generation, all in the name of women self-help groups. These have led to better rural infrastructure and enhanced the overall quality of life (Ministry of Rural Development, 2023).

The involvement of women in socio-economic development has also gone up considerably. Under the National Rural Livelihood Mission, the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have promoted financial inclusion and entrepreneurship, as well as community engagement of women in rural areas. They have participated actively in activities of the Panchayats, rural decision-making and in income generating programs, which show a progressive trend towards more inclusive rural development. While the problems of employment opportunities and economic independence continue, women are now contributing to the welfare of the house, as well as to the development of the community.

Though all this is good, there are still some challenges that hinder the socio-economic development of the Panchayat. Industrial development is limited; agricultural parcels are small; unemployment of educated youth is a concern; lack of irrigation facilities is a concern; and skilled people are going to other countries. Therefore, balanced socio-economic development in rural areas can be realized through enhancing agricultural productivity, fostering entrepreneurship in rural areas, strengthening digital infrastructure and developing sustainable employment opportunities. In general, the socio-economic development of Khani Kote Panchayat demonstrates the development of a gradually diversified rural economy and a more development-oriented society from the level of subsistence economy. Sustainable rural development and better living standards for the local population will depend on continued investments in education, infrastructure, agriculture, and livelihoods.

Cultural Heritage and Community Identity

The cultural heritage of Khani Kote Panchayat is a part of the larger cultural tradition of Jammu, Duggar. The Panchayat is a product of the rich historical background of the Dogra area where social life has developed as a result of the interaction between the indigenous Dogra culture, religious beliefs, kinship and rural institutions. While the village has experienced various changes through modernisation, its traditional values and practices still remain significant in defining the village identity. Most of the inhabitants are Hindu in religion and the local temples are used not only for worship, but also as centres of social and cultural activity. Social cohesion and commonality in cultural values is reinforced through the celebration of religious festivals like Navratri, Diwali, Dussehra, Shivratri, Janmashtami and Baisakhi with great fervour. These festivals highlight the sense of community and help in maintaining the old traditions which have been passed down from generation to generation. (Pathik & Sharma (1980))

Language is another important sign of cultural identity. Dogri is one of the official languages of India and is the main language of communication amongst the locals, though education and administration are conducted in the Hindi language. The Dogri language has been used in the daily life, folklore, folk songs and folk stories of the Panchayat, which is a significant factor of preserving the cultural inheritance of the Panchayat. Oral histories, sayings, and local lore remain to pass down memories, values, and experiences of the community from one generation to the next (Bamzai, 1994). Family and kinship remain important in the social organisation of Khani Kote Panchayat. The shared-family, the elderly, community harmony and mutual assistance are still important aspects of rural society. Despite the shifting attitudes in the society due to educational and economic developments, traditional institutions still affect marriage practices, social rituals, and decision-making processes. With higher levels of education, more movement and access to new communication technology, aspirations have evolved while respecting local traditions.

The Panchayat also safeguards aspects of the intangible cultural heritage of the region through its traditional music, folk dance, regional cuisine, handicrafts and seasonal fairs. These cultural expressions foster togetherness and continuity of rural society in the Duggar region historically. The opportunities for social interaction continue to be available at agricultural festivals and religious events, which help strengthen the connections between various parts of the community. Concurrently, the cultural heritage is exposed to new challenges due to the processes of urbanisation, migration, shift in occupation and the rising impact of digital media. Younger generations are more and more moving to urban areas in search of education and jobs, decreasing the chances of the passing on of traditional knowledge and cultural practices. In order to protect local heritage, the oral history of the community should be preserved in the systematic way, the Dogri language and literature should be promoted, the historic sites should be protected and participation of the educational and cultural institutions should be maintained. The Khani Kote Panchayat's cultural identity is a reflection of the interplay between historical tradition and social change. The Panchayat is still going through the process of adapting to the modern ways of developmental processes but, at the same time, the cultural heritage of the Panchayat is playing a significant role in building social cohesion, resilience of the communities, and cultural identity of the region. It is important that this heritage is preserved for the continuation of the local traditions and to enrich the cultural heritage of the Duggar area as a whole.

Challenges and Prospects

Although democratic decentralisation and rural development programs have made some progress, Khani Kote Panchayat still has some structural and administrative issues which affect its development trajectory. The effectiveness of local governance is not just a matter of constitutional provisions, but also of financial resources, administrative capacity, public participation and institutional coordination in the local organization of state affairs, like many Panchayats in rural areas of Jammu and Kashmir. The continued reliance of Panchayat on agriculture and its susceptibility due to the shifts in climate, land fragmentation and inadequate irrigation facilities are one of the most significant challenges. Government programs have helped to boost agricultural production and livelihoods in rural areas, but the volatility of agricultural incomes has remained a challenge for many families. Skill development, entrepreneurship and the promotion of small-scale rural businesses, which provide diversified income sources, will continue to be an important developmental priority.

Another major challenge is to find employment for rural youth. The rising levels of education have led to high expectations among the youth, but job scarcity in the Panchayat and other states has resulted in urbanization and movement to other states. Migration generates income in the form of remittances, but it can also cause a loss of trained and skilled human resources for local development and a decrease in the participation of the communities in the long-term. The Panchayat also has institutional limitations which have an impact on the implementation of the development programmes. Impediments in the delivery of financial aid, low technical capacity, insufficient administrative capacity and reliance on higher level government can impact efficiency of local government. Regular training programmes, better digital governance and more fiscal decentralisation would help build the institutional capacity of the Panchayat to effectively plan and implement development activities.

Another challenge is about the preservation of cultural heritage and adaptation to the rapid socio-economic change. The traditional social structure has been disrupted and traditional local customs, oral traditions and cultural practices have not been passed on to younger generations due to urbanisation, technological change and increased migration. Detailed record of local history, encouragement of the Dogri language, and community-oriented cultural development can help to maintain the Panchayat's historical and cultural identity. However, the future of Khani Kote Panchayat is bright despite these difficulties. The road, digital infrastructure, education and public awareness have been enhanced, which has paved the way for inclusive rural development. As women and youth are becoming more involved in Panchayat institutions, the democratic representation of women and youth has also improved and opportunities for more participatory governance are being provided. Moreover, successful execution of the national and Union Territory development programmes, coupled with community engagement, can enhance the infrastructure, livelihoods, provision of public services and quality of life. Balancing economic growth with social inclusion, environmental sustainability and cultural preservation will be critical factors for the long-term development of Khani Kote Panchayat. Increased cooperation among government departments, Panchayat members, civil society and the community will play a key role in promoting sustainable and people-centred rural development.

CONCLUSION

The rural local government of Khani-Kote Panchayat is an important historical development and a current example of the local government system functioning in J&K. It has been studied from various perspectives like historical, political, socio-economic and cultural aspects, and it is found that the growth of the Panchayat is a mirror image of the changing scenario of the rural society in the Duggar region. While the specific history of Khani Kote is not well documented, there is evidence that the Panchayat, over time, has transformed from a traditional agrarian community to a formally established body of democratic local governance. The study points out that the establishment and strengthening of the Panchayati Raj Institutions have resulted in large scale opportunities for the engagement of citizens, decentralisation of planning and rural development. The socio-economic status of Panchayat has been improved through the government schemes on infrastructure, education, health, employment generation and social welfare. Meanwhile, cultural heritage, community institutions and local identity is being preserved, thereby further fostering and reinforcing social cohesion and the unique cultural heritage of

the Duggar area. However, the analysis also shows that significant issues remain to be addressed. The economic reliance on agriculture, migration of the youth, administrative restrictions, financial difficulties, and the slow decline of traditional culture are still affecting the pace and quality of local development. Solving these problems will need to enhance institutional capacity, increase financial decentralisation, broaden livelihood options and promote increased community involvement in governance and development planning.

The results of this research reveal that the effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions is not only because of the constitutional or legal provisions but also because of their flexibility and responsiveness to the local needs and their capacity to mobilise the communities. In the absence of active citizenship and accountable governance bodies, Khani Kote Panchayat has been able to demonstrate its role in inclusive governance, rural development, and social change. Last but not least, this study helps add to the scarce research on village governance at the local level in Jammu and Kashmir, and provides an account of the historical evolution and the developmental trajectory of a single Panchayat. It highlights the need for micro-level studies to promote democratic decentralization and rural governance as well as regional history. Future studies based on archival research, field surveys, oral history and empirical socio-economic data would further support the knowledge of Khani Kote, and other Panchayats in the region, leading to better informed scholarship and evidence-informed formulation of rural policy.

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