

united in applauding the action across political lines.

another theatre for political posturing

supposed to be that both sides understand that the other is as committed to the national interest as itself, even if they disagree on how best to

bipartisanship be the force that unites us? — not just in words, but in action. The promise of a secure, stable, and resilient India depends on it.

Getting the 'micropicture' at the panchayat level

Evidence-based decision-making has been the buzzword for the government for quite some time now. However, the extent of data-based decision-making in practice remains an open question.

Critics point to the delay in conducting Census operations and releasing Census data to researchers. They also highlight the other surveys carried out by the government and/or the change in methodology, thereby making the availability of time series data difficult, as obstacles to overcome in evidence-based decision-making at all levels of government. But government officials point to the availability of mammoth data in the portals of different Ministries and also the National Data Sharing and Accessibility Policy (NDSAP), 2012 of the Government of India. This policy intended to make non-sensitive government data available to the public in an open, accessible, and reusable format (<https://data.gov.in>).

However, researchers complain that the data made available are not in a format which can be easily understood by the public or elected representatives. Citizens and even trained researchers feel overwhelmed by the voluminous data. Data visualisation tools on <https://data.gov.in> as well as other government portals are relatively under-developed. Data analytics leaves a lot to be desired. Consequently, decisions continue to be made based on experience and/or the intuitions of Ministers and senior bureaucrats at the Union and State levels.

Data generation and use

At the grassroots level — the gram panchayats, blocks and districts — data are only generated and fed into the system for use by senior officials at the State and national headquarters. Generally, portals are designed to meet the requirements of the heads of departments and secretaries and certainly not of government functionaries and elected representatives at the district, block or gram panchayat levels. Thus, we always get the 'mega picture' and not the 'micro picture'. Data at the gram panchayat level gets linked to a household and family and so becomes difficult to ignore if presented in an easily understandable



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form to residents.

On the PAI

It is in this context that the magnitude of the work that has gone into the making of Panchayat Advancement Index (PAI) Baseline Report 2022-23 (officially released in April 2025 by the Ministry of Panchayat Raj) needs to be understood. PAI is a composite Index and has been compiled based on 435 unique local Indicators (331 mandatory and 104 optional) with 566 unique data points across nine themes of LSDGs (Localization of Sustainable Development Goals) aligned with the National Indicator Framework (NIF) of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. Validated data relating to over 2.16 lakh gram panchayats have been analysed and presented in a form where even a sarpanch or ward member can understand (with some support) not only where their GP stands in relation to the nine LSDGs but also what needs to be done to achieve them. Data relating to a little over 11,000 GPs were not included in PAI as they could not be validated as in laid down procedure. While 25 States/Union Territories provided validated data of almost 100% GPs, it is a matter of serious concern that Uttar Pradesh provided data for only 23,207 GPs (40%) out of its 57,702 GPs. This omission raises serious questions about the state of development in U.P. The PAI portal (www.pai.gov.in) can serve as a useful tool for officials of line departments. A constituency-wise report generation facility can prove very useful for even Members of Parliament and Members of the Legislative Assembly if they wish to make a specific intervention in respect of any LSDG.

It is a dramatic shift that data have now been linked to outcome. For instance, is the GP really a healthy panchayat? Based on the scores of GP on Healthy Panchayat indicators, gaps can now be easily identified and plugged in a short period. Further, the role of all stakeholders such as the individual, community, elected representatives and frontline workers of the health department would also suggest themselves. Excellent coordination between the frontline workers of development departments such as rural

development, panchayat raj, education, health, drinking water and elected panchayat representatives and civil society organisations (CSOs) is seen as a very important factor in the performance of GPs on PAI.

It would be ideal if over 4,000 institutions linked with the Umat Bharat Abhiyan undertake a study of at least five gram panchayats in their vicinity and explain to the community the implications of their PAI score and what could be done by them to improve their score. Hand-holding of GPs by these institutions and CSOs would go a long way in supplementing the role of departmental officials and attaining the SDGs. The PAI score card also has implications for how corporate social responsibility funds, the Prime Minister's Mineral Area Fund administered by the District Mineral Foundation (DMF), Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS) and Member of Legislative Assembly Local Area Development Scheme (MLALAD) among others can be used for realisation of SDGs by 2030.

Need for analysts

There is an urgent need to provide trained data analysts at the block and district panchayat levels who can prepare and provide regular report cards for various stakeholders. More than the Union Government, PAI can be a gamechanger for State and local governments. A Similar Achievement Index should also be formulated for urban local governments. A baseline PAI report should be followed by publications of reports at regular intervals especially after the difficult groundwork has been done.

PAI is much more than a ranking of GPs. Districts or States. It is a call for action. GPs facing poverty are in need of support. We need to not only understand where funds are going or how they are being used (or misused). We need to use the latest data visualisation tools to make all stakeholders understand their critical role and ensure that the goal of making India march forward on the path of development becomes a reality.

The views expressed are personal