

Article

# Local self-governments and SDG-16: a case for cross-region marriages in rural Haryana, India

by

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## **Abstract**

This paper makes a case for Gram Panchayats (or local self-governments) in rural Haryana to prevent violence and abuse against women in cross-regional marriages, and to promote inclusiveness. By using the notion of decentralization as the framework, the results of this research are based on a qualitative fieldwork conducted over two months in the Mahendragarh district, which included visits to seven villages, and interviews with women and village leaders. This paper attempts to answer the following research question: In what ways can strong local self-governments improve the social conditions for women and their children in cross-regional marriages in rural Haryana? Gram Panchayats are tasked with implementing Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which calls for developing inclusive and peaceful communities, ensuring that everyone has access to justice, and creating effective, inclusive institutions at all levels. The findings reveal that women, particularly those in cross-region marriages, are excluded from participating in Gram Panchayats, which have the potential to be the go-to institution for women in need of help. Women's participation at all levels will increase the transparency and accountability of Gram Panchayats.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, also known as the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for peace and prosperity for people and the earth, now and in the future, was approved by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 (UNDP, 2015). Goal 16 of these SDGs calls for the establishment of efficient, inclusive and accountable institutions at all levels, as well as the promotion of peaceful, inclusive societies for sustainable development. It can be broken down into four categories: peaceful societies, the rule of law and access to justice, inclusive and accountable institutions and human rights and basic liberties. They serve as the fundamental building blocks for supporting fair and equal governance, as well as institutions that safeguard and assist their citizens, especially the most vulnerable.

The mutually reinforcing nature of SDG-5, *gender equality and women's empowerment*, on the rule of law against increasing violence against women, trafficking, and all forms of exploitation, must be acknowledged. Nonetheless, the SDG-5 indicators are largely derived from the inherent patriarchy and masculinity in the world and can only be attained by transforming the social fabric of societies. For gender equality and women's empowerment to flourish, basic tenets include providing equality to all, establishing accountable institutions, upholding justice and safeguarding fundamental human rights. The SDG 16 is not only important in its own right, but also contributes to the wider delivery of the United Nations 2030 Agenda. Peace, inclusion and the delivery of basic services all rest on the effective and accountable management of power. Within the context of the SDGs, 'peace' has been broadly understood as freedom from violence, both at the hands of state and private actors, and from human trafficking. 'Justice' relates to the rule of law, non-discrimination and remedies; 'strong institutions' involve a lack of corruption, transparency, legal recognition and creating an enabling environment for public participation. It also calls for tolerance towards differing views, responsible leadership and a greater investment in transparent and accountable institutions.

The National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog), or the erstwhile Planning Commission in India, agreed to serve as the coordinator to maintain a liaison with the national and state governments. In rural areas, the decentralized forms of

governance, the gram panchayats, or the local self-governments, are a key ally for this implementation. Decentralization is a political process through which administrative authority, public resources and responsibilities are transferred from central government agencies to lower-level government organs (Meenakshisundaram, 1999). The argument for democratic decentralization is also based on the idea that an increased involvement in local politics will increase the effectiveness and accessibility of government services, particularly those designed to improve the lives of underprivileged and politically marginalized societal groups like women (de Souza, 2000).

The Panchayat Raj Institution (PRIs) system of rural local self-government in India was established with the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution establishing its lowest tier, the Gram Panchayats. Gram Panchayats act as the last mile delivery resort to the central and state governments, by ensuring all eligible people receive the schemes' benefits. The Gram Sabha, which consists of each village's voters, serves as a Gram Panchayat's main body. It is a permanent organization that controls how a panchayat does its work. Panchayats were envisioned to ensure local economic development, and uphold social justice for their people. The decentralized Indian approach to achieving the SDGs, which gives a lot of power to the states and other locally elected bodies of governance, is characterized by a close cooperation between the national and state governments (Theeuwes, 2019).

With the help of modern technology, high-yielding varieties of seeds and fertilizers, MS Swaminathan oversaw the 'green revolution' in India in the 1960s, which transformed agriculture into a contemporary industrial system. Haryana, a small state in north India, was at the forefront of this revolution (Swaminathan, 2006). The state's food grain output reached a record high, and thanks to other state governments' economic strategies, is now one of India's wealthiest states. In Haryana, the per capita net state domestic product income was INR 264, 207 in 2020–21, significantly more than the national average of INR 134, 226 (Ministry of Finance, Government of India, 2020–21).

Nevertheless, Haryana's largely patriarchal and gender-regressive society has kept it in the national spotlight for many years. In the entire history of Haryana, the overall

sex ratio (measured as the number of females per 1,000 males) has never surpassed the elusive threshold of 900. In fact, its sex ratio of 879 females per 1,000 males was the lowest of all Indian states, according to the most recent census (Census of India, 2011). Prior research into the causes of Haryana's low sex ratio has identified the following key factors: (a) a cultural preference for sons over daughters because boys are expected to light funeral pyres and care for the elderly (John, Kaur, & Palriwala, 2009); (b) the need for a dowry to obtain desired grooms, or to adhere to the existing 'honoured' norms of marriage (Kaur, 2008b); (c) the ease with which technology for the techniques of female infanticide can be obtained through locally known doctors (Kaur, 2008a); and (d) girls are constantly at risk for security as cases of molestation, rape, and gang rape dot every nook and cranny of the state on a regular basis (Kaur, 2008b). Due to Haryana's economic growth over the years not translating into social and cultural developments, it is frequently referred to as a 'state of paradoxes' (Ahlawat, 2009).

Demographers refer to the phenomenon of 'marriage squeeze,' when it is nearly impossible for males to get married locally due to the lack of an equivalent number of women, as a result of the high male to female sex ratios at birth (Hudson & Boer, 2002). The institution of monogamous, heterosexual marriage, which is nearly universal and required in many regions of Asia, is directly threatened by unbalanced sex ratios (Mishra, 2013). Accordingly, the state of Haryana has seen an increase in long-distance, cross-region marriages as a result of the lack of women in marriageable cohorts (Ahlawat, 2009). Rural men are breaking traditional caste-based endogamous marriage norms. Contrary to traditional marriage, which adheres to caste and community traditions within a relatively close distance, a cross-region marriage crosses traditional barriers like caste, language and state boundaries, and necessitates long-distance migration inside India (Kaur, 2004; Mishra, 2013; Chaudhry, 2016). These women frequently hail from eastern states such as West Bengal, Assam, Bihar or Tripura, which are considerably less developed. Poverty and dowry are the two major factors pushing these women to migrate from their areas to Haryana (Kaur, 2010a). These marriages are common among the strong landholding castes, including 'Jats' in the northern and eastern parts, and 'Ahirs' in the southern part of rural Haryana, which are affluent.

Women who are brought up in a culture that is often more patriarchal than their own bear the burden of adjustment in cross-regional relationships (Mishra, 2013). They arrive in a strange society, a strange culture and a foreign area, where few of them have any support systems. According to Chaudhry (2019), the cross-regional bride experiences physical abuse and violence from her husband more frequently than the regional bride. She depends on her spouse in social and economic aspects, which is why she is unable to make the decision to leave him. The local kin group does not favour families who marry such brides (Kukreja, 2018). Due to their perceived low caste, these women from remote, impoverished areas are associated with primitiveness, uncleanliness and ritual impurity because of their dark skin or 'untouchable' status (Ayyar & Khandare, 2013). According to Kukreja (2018), the stigma extends to their offspring as well; she refers to them as 'unwanted weeds.' In a two-year study conducted in 2019, it was discovered that almost 133,000 brides had been 'bought' from outside the state (Singh, 2019). According to Mukherjee (2013), there is strong opposition to such marriages from those who do not support them, with a special policy design urgently needed for the protection and improvement of the current situation of these women and their children. With the proper application of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly *peace, justice and strong institutions*, or SDG-16, as envisioned by the state's SDG 2030 programme, the condition of these women in Haryanvi society could be addressed.

The primary focus of SDG-16 is on governance, justice, peace, human rights and security. In cross-regional marriages, it is crucial to understand how local self-governments (gram panchayats) can positively affect the social conditions of both women and their children. The focus of this paper is therefore on the possible role of strong local democratic institutions, i.e., gram panchayats, in the specific case of cross-regional marriages in rural Haryana, in achieving SDG-16's goal of peaceful and inclusive societies. Drawing upon my observations in the field and data obtained from village leaders and women in cross region marriages, in this article I make a case for these local institutions of governance, specifically in southern Haryana, to secure the safety and address other concerns of violence and abuse against these women in cross-region marriages through women's involvement in overall decision-making and other participatory platforms such as the Gram Sabhas.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Cross-regional marriages are a common occurrence in Haryana. These unions are 'arranged marriages' and not 'love marriages', thereby demonstrating a pattern of rural, frequently illiterate people marrying outside of their own ethnic and cultural communities. When a single marriage occurs, it creates a network of subsequent marriages, not all of which are necessarily happy unions (Kaur, 2004). In the media since the early 2000s, numerous reports of a phenomenon described as 'bride buying' have emerged (Chaudhry, 2016). It was about wives being 'sold' to men in north India. What also appeared were reports of NGOs involved in rescuing trafficked women coerced into marriage, who described the phenomenon as akin to mediaeval sex slavery (Empower People, 2010; Kant & Pandey, 2003). However, numerous researchers have refuted these claims made by NGOs and the media (Chaudhry, 2016; Kaur, 2004). According to them, cross-regional marriages do not include bride-price marriages, in which the bride's family is compensated for the loss of the bride's labour, or sex trafficking, which is done solely for financial gain (Kaur, 2004). The couple is married in a 'formal' wedding ceremony, which gives the relationship legal status, in either the bride's or the groom's village.

According to Kaur's (2010a) observations on the Bengali bridal diaspora, two factors—poverty and dowry in local marriages—are the primary drivers of cross-regional bride movement for marriage from Bengal, or other eastern regions, to northern India. When their daughters are of a certain age, most Indian families view it as a matter of honour to marry them off, either with or without their consent (Mishra, 2021). The local grooms' lack of appeal to brides from other areas is another reason. Importantly, the long-distance marriages that these women get into are 'dowry less', and even the wedding expenses are paid for by the needy husband, saving her parents' honour, who must still be willing to give up their daughter. This trend is likely to continue (Kaur, 2004), as it may be a result of women's desire to find better opportunities for themselves as they move from economically disadvantaged regions to economically prosperous regions in distant locations to marry.

In Haryana, it is customary for women to cover their faces with a '*ghoonghat*' or 'veil' if they come across elderly males. Long established in Haryana's cultural landscape

is the *ghoonghat*. Women who observe the custom are seen as obedient and responsible, as covering one's face is seen as a sign of respect for elders (Hindustan Times, 2019). A 'veil' covering their faces is as foreign to cross-regional brides as are their husbands. They do not have it in their houses back home in eastern India. The food is also distinct. In the vegetarian society of Haryana, foods other than meat include vegetables, grains, wheat, milk, ghee and other dairy items. Women from Bengal or Tripura typically include chicken or fish in their regular diets, and find it quite challenging to alter their diets after such a long time. North India, where the family-household unit is the most important institution for the elderly's welfare and security, is experiencing a lot of stress due to the disruption of household formation brought on by the lack of brides (Mishra & Kaur, 2021). The families of unmarried men worry about a variety of issues, including their inability to help their sons get married when the time comes, who will do what jobs around the house, whether the family will survive and how to care for the elderly.

Cross-regional relationships are an issue worldwide, and not only in India. In recent years, there has been an increase in funding and new measures to address the 'foreign bride problem' in Taiwan and the 'international family issue' in South Korea (Belanger, Lee, & Wang, 2010). Due to a lack of marriageable women, extreme measures are being taken to obtain girls in China and South Korea, two nations with low gender ratios. It is also probable that these women face domestic abuse more frequently than other brides from the region, because no one is present in their relationship to protect them. These women have less independence, mobility and access to social safety networks (Larsen & Kaur, 2013).

In order to better comprehend the condition of cross-region brides, scholars have used a number of sociological ideas, including intimacy and agency. Chaudhry (2016) uses Duncan's (2015) notion of agency as relational and constrained in her doctoral research on the lived experiences of regional and cross-regional brides in a village in western Uttar Pradesh to demonstrate that women's agency, particularly in situations of marital crisis, is not independent but instead dependent on- and mediated by other people (mainly male kin). When women seek respite from work and the *sasural* via visits, especially in times of crisis and conflict—marital



disagreements, breakups and widowhood—their contact with natal relatives is crucial in the maintenance of affinal bonds during festivals and daily existence rituals.

Inter-caste unions are frowned upon in local unions, and may lead to violence or honour killings. Chowdhry (2005) argues that it is ironic that society is prone to inflicting tremendous violence upon its own youth who violate traditional marital standards by bringing in local women from other caste groups, but permit women from faraway regions and unknown castes. *Majburi*, or the need or pressure felt by the majority of males to marry, was said to be the cause of the tolerance of cross-regional marriage. It appears that there is a massive disconnect between those who only advocate local traditional marriages to maintain the purity of their caste groups, and those who support the import of faraway women for the sake of marriages (Mishra, 2013). Due to strong patriarchal and caste beliefs, the majority of Haryana society does not view these arrangements as marriages in the traditional sense of the word. However, these unions are accepted since they pose no challenge to the village's established power structures (Chaudhry, 2016). She argued that cross-region brides were awarded the very same status as wives and mothers in Barampur, the setting for her doctoral study, and that their children were accepted as legitimate. Nonetheless, acceptance only exists on a moral and social level; it has nothing to do with legitimacy or legality. These unions are legal, and the offspring are the successors (Mukherjee, 2013).

These women are seen as 'internal others' by the North Indian variant of ethnoracism, which fosters racism against an ethnic group and behaves in a prejudicial and degrading manner, including acts of physical assault (Kukreja, 2018a). This further othering of brides is exacerbated by the inclusion of 'gendered colourism', a phrase for the prejudice towards women with darker skin tones held by people with lighter skin. Despite the fact that a huge portion of India's population has a dark complexion, and that the nation is primarily tropical, casteism links dark skin with a low caste or 'untouchable' status, and consequently with primitivism, uncleanness and ceremonial impurity (Ayyar & Khandare, 2013). Those who do not participate in such unions have a tendency to stigmatize the children as having 'low self-esteem', and to portray the spouses as outcasts (Mukherjee, 2015). Their potential to socialize within the kin group and community is negatively affected, which

in turn impacts their mental health. This personal stigma also has a long-term effect on their life alternatives.

These unrecognized cross-regional unions' first generation has begun to emerge in good numbers. Children face 'othering' on several levels, whether it be in the 'safe' sanctuary of their homes, or in public areas like playgrounds, schools or the community as a whole. Such children, Kukreja (2018a) says, have two distinct burdens. One is that they see their mothers being subjected to insults and/or prejudice by members of their own family in their houses' private spaces, as well as by villagers and their peers in the village's open spaces. Second, they experience a variety of restrictive and discriminatory attitudes and behaviours as adults (which begins in early childhood). According to interviews with cross-region brides and villagers, name-calling is the most prevalent form of prejudice against such a group of children. The presence of a mother who comes from an unclear caste or socioeconomic background can have a wide range of implications for a child (Chowdhry, 2005). As a result of witnessing everyday casteist and ethnoracist discrimination against their mothers, their children may also reproduce these biases and, consequently, may have a lowered sense of self-worth.

Niti Ayog held a National Conclave on SDGs in December 2017 with a broad range of stakeholders, including civil society organizations, and announced the decentralized strategy that Gram Panchayats (elected village councils) will play in the implementation of SDG 16, with support from centrally sponsored/central sector schemes, including the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA, aimed at developing capacities of Gram Panchayats ((Niti Ayog, 2017–18)). Elections are held every five years to elect the governing body of the gram panchayats, with the 'Sarpanch' (village head) as their head. Twenty-nine subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution have been identified for devolution to the PRIs, including agriculture, safe drinking water, rural housing, the public distribution system and family welfare.

According to the SDG India Index (UN and NITI Aayog, 2018), India tracks the progress and performance of the SDGs on a national and state level for the SDGs as a whole, and for each SDG separately, thereby yielding a national score and for each state separately. Each state is assigned to one of four groups based on their score:

front-runner, performer, achiever or aspirant. The SDG India Index gives Haryana a total score of 55 out of 100, which is just a little lower than the country's average. Haryana ranks 26th out of 29 states in terms of gender equality, with a score of 31. Inequality in education, unemployment rates and crimes against women and girls are listed as Haryana's top gender issues. According to data from the Government of Haryana's Home Department, there was a 259% increase in kidnappings between 2011 and 2015, as well as a 382% increase in molestation charges. Spousal violence increased from 27.3% to 32% among women who were married between 2005 and 2015. (Government of Haryana, 2015–16).

For the government of Haryana, the major focus areas under SDG-16 include the administration of justice, monetary relief to the victims of atrocities, the strengthening of police stations, special women police volunteers, the protection of women from domestic violence and the modernization of prisons. Several new schemes have been launched by various state departments under the SDG-16 implementation. For example, Women and Child Development (WCD) launched a juvenile justice fund, provided relief and rehabilitation for women acid victims, set up special cells within police stations [m4] for women seeking protection from domestic violence, and developed a scheme for setting up a one-stop crisis centre for women (Government of Haryana, 2020–21).

The Government of Haryana's 2017 report, Vision 2030, outlined current SDG 16 interventions and projects and strategies for success in the future, and acknowledged the importance of NGOs and other institutions as 'valuable partners in efforts to make residents more aware of their rights, as well as shepherding particularly those from vulnerable communities through the legal process for obtaining justice' (p. 125). The institutions of Haryana's Gram Panchayats are regarded as weaker than those of other states, despite the fact that the state ranks among states in SDG-16 implementation with a score of 78. This has been demonstrated by numerous studies conducted across time on the local self-governments in Haryana (Nandal, 2013; Panwar & Kumar, 2012; Singla, 2007).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper draws its inspiration from both my past experience working with self-help groups (SHGs) and gram panchayats with Kerala's Kudumbashree mission in the South Tripura district, Tripura, and my current doctoral research on the adult children of cross-regional marriages in rural Haryana and their subjective biographical narratives. I researched a range of secondary literature sources, including journal articles, books on interregional marriages, and SDG reports from Haryana, in order to write about the literature on women.

A grant from my university allowed me to visit villages and interview elected panchayat members in Haryana's southernmost district, Mahendragarh. I conducted unstructured interviews with six sarpanches and 10 other elected members, and visited seven villages to interview 14 women in cross-regional unions in two blocks in Mahendragarh over a period of two months (see Table 1 below). Visits to these villages were a way to collect data by observing people, events or physical characteristics. In the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, unstructured interviews are used to elicit people's social realities (Wildemuth, 2009). In this method, questions do not have to be arranged in advance in order to generate captivating responses from participants. But the permission for an informal discussion or an interview was taken prior from the panchayat elected members, either over the phone or setting up a date in person. They were aware that they are going to speak for an interview regarding cross-regional families.

**Table 1:** Details of interview participants with categories

<b>Participants/categories</b>	<b>Total</b>
Number of elected representatives of local-self-governments (gram panchayats) interviewed	16
Number of cross-regional women interviewed	14
Number of villages/panchayats visited for data collection	7
Number of NGOs assisted in the process	2

In order to reach out to the elected representatives of the panchayats, two local NGOs, the BMD Foundation and the Sarvodaya Foundation, assisted me and introduced me to the locally elected representatives. It was decided which villages to visit based on how convenient they were for these NGOs. Before choosing each

village, the number of cross-regional marriages was also carefully considered. I chose this district because it has a low child gender ratio of 775 girls for every 1,000 boys in the 0–6 age range (Census of India, 2011), second only to the neighbouring Jhajjar district, and there are few studies on cross-regional marriages that are pertinent to the district.

Being a native, visiting villages and speaking with sarpanches was not a logistical or linguistic challenge, but it invariably brings up the subjectivity question. Student researchers working towards their PhD are often required to identify and articulate their 'own positionality.' The term 'positionality' both describes an individual's worldview and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context (Foote & Bartell, 2011; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). I used the knowledge that I came from the other 'typical' set of marriages (regional marriages) to my advantage when I was interviewing. For instance, I would use phrases such as 'Like in our families, our maternal uncles visit us on every major festival, but this is not the case in such and such families due to the distance' when an elected leader wanted examples of what I was specifically trying to address with them. I believed that because I was a local and spoke the research participants' language, they were more likely to trust me and provide me with the information needed. Also, because the interviews were with elected local officials whom the NGO teams knew prior to my research, that also worked in my favour. Although their participation was voluntary, a consent form was also signed by these members who wished to talk. During the time of the discussions, the NGO teams had left to pursue their own projects.

Reinharz advocates using researchers as research instruments in human research (Reinharz, 1979). Personal experiences, creative identification and emotion are part of these instruments, and are increasingly accepted as legitimate sources of scholarly knowledge (Riessman, 1994). Nevertheless, as Kanuha (2000) also states, where the researcher is identified as 'being native' from the outset, the potential benefits of privileged understanding require a careful balancing if one is to avoid dominant discourse blind spots pervading the analysis. Since I had lived outside of Haryana for the previous 11 years, this research was more of an opportunity for me to connect with- and learn about the local community.

A phone recorder was used to record the interviews, which were then saved on a pen drive. Using the transcribe feature of Microsoft Office, which is accessible to us through our university's login system, I translated and transcribed them. My supervisor and I worked together to conduct a thematic analysis of the data gathered after sharing the interview transcripts with each other. Thematic analysis is a method for analysing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns (Braun & Clark, 2006). Those themes were traced across stories, across people and across contexts to allow larger patterns to emerge. The interview data was analysed manually, as their number was small, although the interview recordings were played several times before drawing any conclusions out of them. The field notes were carefully referred to further write about the emerging themes discussed in the findings section. These themes and patterns were then interpreted to produce the results of the findings.

## **FINDINGS**

The following were the key themes that emerged from the interview data:

### *Lack of support and acceptance of women*

Due to the cultural differences between their natal and their husband's cultures, nearly all of the cross-regional brides told me that they miss the festivals they celebrated in their home states. Cross-regional brides do not have the advantages of celebrating festivals and other special occasions with the proximity of a natal kind. Their brothers or fathers are unable or unwilling to visit them due to the great distance. They also lacked social support, as the vast majority lacked friends due to the difficulty of making friends with regional brides.

One bride from Tripura described her feelings as:

In Tripura, the majority of men and women are short in stature. Here, however, both men and women are of average height, and as a result, whenever I go outside, other women make fun of my short stature and skin tone. What am I to blame for this? I too wish to make friends here, but it is so challenging. Even my children prefer playing indoors to outdoors. They are also aware of my situation. (Tigra village, Ateli block, Mahendragarh)

There was disappointment all around when a cross-regional bride from Maharashtra gave birth to twin girls in a village I visited during my fieldwork. For the mother who gave birth, other ladies felt poor and pity. One of them told me that 'we all recognize how difficult it can be for her who already faces a lot of difficulties being from far away, and does not enjoy the acceptance socially from other women.' Now she has two daughters, but '*ladka hota hai tabhi ham barabar ke hote hai*' (only when a boy is born to a woman is she equal to other mothers). This observation is in line with already conducted qualitative research, where it is found that having a daughter is a curse for a mother, and they are made to feel guilty while their status goes down in the family (Sudhakar, 2018-19).

### *Lack of women's public participation*

During a conversation, one female elected member revealed to me that she knows a woman from Assam who is close to her. However, she does not fully understand the background of this Assamese woman because 'neither her brother nor her father have ever visited her in our village, and she has never disclosed any other information about her natal background in contrast to our regional situations, where our brothers and fathers frequently visit us at home and our children could travel to their maternal uncles' homes. I have never seen her conversing on the phone with her maternal family, and in emergency situations, she has no one to fall back on.' According to Chaudhry's (2016) doctoral thesis, regional brides need access to their natal relatives just as much as cross-regional brides.

The lady 'sarpanch' of the same village succinctly stated her position on the problem cross-regional brides face in her panchayat as '*sab khush si ure, bahar aali bhi, ura aali bhi*' (everyone is happy here, the one from the far and from the near). One possible reason for her saying this is that these faraway brides are 'notorious' in some places for fleeing with money or jewellery after only a few months of marriage, as reported in the local media, but no such cases have been reported in her village so far. Another 'sarpanch' of a village informed:

Local women play significant roles in several of our Haryanvi celebrations. It can be difficult for these cross-regional brides to establish friends in our villages if they do not take part in or learn the 'bhajans' (local songs) sung by the women at night. Additionally, there is a language barrier. These women find it challenging because

they do not speak Haryanvi or even Hindi. These women hardly ever leave their homes, in fact. (Bharaf village, Kanina block, Mahendragarh)

It is of no surprise that the public participation of these women is minimal. The Panchayati Raj Act provides for a 33% reservation of seats for women in all tiers of local governance, but it is very hard to find women from these cohorts getting elected due to a lack of social acceptance.

### *Not 'reported' cases of violence against women*

These women frequently become the target of their husbands' abuse and violence, and typically receive no external support (Chaudhry, 2016). according to one of the elected members of a panchayat, the condition of these women from distant locations greatly depends on the status and reputation of the family of their husbands:

If their family has a good reputation, these ladies are often embraced by the other villagers, who assist her in assimilating to our community's values and conventions. In other instances, if the family is already not well-liked and the woman does not exhibit a desire to learn about the local way of life, they will be shunned.

When questioned about whether any of these ladies had ever come to her to report domestic abuse or violence, she firmly denied this. Possible explanations for her response include the fact that even regional (or local) brides experience domestic violence or abuse at the hands of their husbands, and that few women are able to report such incidents. In fact, women are encouraged to keep their domestic affairs private.

### *Lack of knowledge on the numbers of cross-regional marriages*

Even though there have been more than 100 such marriages estimated (out of which 14 women were interviewed) in all seven of the villages combined, not a single panchayat has any specific efforts or programmes for cross-regional brides or for their children. No special gram sabhas—an assembly of all eligible voters in a panchayat—have ever been held, and from looking at the attendance registers, it appears that few women attend them. In addition, panchayats do not maintain a registry specifically for cross-regional brides; instead, they just give ration cards to families without having any information regarding their natal residence, which is of importance in emergency situations. No one in the village knows how to get in touch with the cross-regional brides' natal families in an emergency. It was rather alarming



to learn that none of the village 'sarpanches' or other elected officials are aware of the precise number of cross-regional brides in their own villages. One of the 'sarpanches'" was alarmed by the rise in cross-regional unions in his village and other surrounding villages. According to him:

If these marriages continue to take place for a few more years, all of our villages will be full of brides from unknown regions, and the area where we were born will lose its originality. I do not think if we would be able to feel belonging to our own villages in such case. (Nangla Harnath village, Kanina block, Mahendragarh)

## **DISCUSSION**

At the end of the 1990s, approximately 95% of the countries with democratic political systems had decentralized units of administration or governance (Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007), but that has not always resulted in success. In many developing countries, decentralization often fails due to low levels of administrative and management capacity in local governments, or is undermined by their inability to raise funds to provide their services efficiently (Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007). In India, the tendency on the part of the higher structure to treat the lower structure as its subordinate is markedly visible, and there is a lack of proper cooperation and coordination between the elected members and government officials at the district level (Singh, 2019).

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), a grassroots organization working in Haryana villages, found that the reality of many of the villages it worked with revealed that panchayats primarily concentrate on implementing hardware projects for economic growth, and have hardly given social justice issues any consideration (Tandon & Preisler, 2013). The United Nations (2006) defines social justice as the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth. Panchayats are not thought to have a role in bringing attention to violence against women in general. For these women, it is quite challenging to bring up the acts of violence against them in the family or community. It is considerably harder to bring up such objections with panchayats. According to research on panchayats, women are more likely to come forward and report crimes when there is female political representation in local governments (Iyer et al., 2012). Furthermore, female leaders are more likely to prioritize women-specific concerns. The state PRI Act mandated a 33% reservation of seats for women in Gram Panchayats, though on the other hand Mahi Pal (2004)

found that women elected representatives lacked awareness about the powers and functions of the Panchayats, and were resource-limited to fully run their panchayats. He made intensive training for women elected representatives as one of the suggestions from his research findings.

Generally, women lack economic independence, family encouragement and communication skills in rural areas to get out of their houses and participate in panchayat meetings or Gram Sabhas. Other cultural norms, such as the 'veil', or the necessity to put on a 'ghoonghat' when among the elderly males of the village, make women feel uncomfortable in public. The entire political structure is unfavourable for them with its high rate of predominantly male incumbency. One of the lady sarpanches whom I interviewed for this paper during my visit to her panchayat area learned that her husband had run a successful campaign in his name on her behalf during the elections as the election seat was reserved for a woman, and that voters chose him and not her directly, as is customary when a woman is nominated for the local office. Her spouse now handles all of the panchayat's administrative duties. This demonstrates how local government participation by women is not taken seriously. Singla's (2007) study on local administrations in the Gurgaon district corroborated this observation very well.

According to Panwar and Kumar (2012), 81% of women in the Karnal district of Haryana did not attend the Gram Sabha (meeting of the general body of panchayats) because they were not made aware of it. It is considered that the participation of women in such meetings is not required, as the powerful forces of patriarchy discourage public participation by women (Bhuyan, 2012, p. 72). All seven Gram Panchayats lacked village-level participatory governance platforms, as there are no ongoing gram sabhas or other gatherings for public participation and decision-making. Villagers must travel to the 'Sarpanch's' house rather than the Gram Panchayat office to do any administrative tasks for Gram Panchayats. Without prior knowledge of the location of the 'sarpanch's' home in the village, it would be nearly impossible for an outsider to even contact them.

Interestingly, women's self-help groups (SHGs) were established under the national rural livelihood mission (NRLM) initiative in each of these seven villages. SHG

operations include convergence between these groups and the gram panchayats to work as a village unit for the betterment of the villagers helping panchayats in delivering social justice benefits to the last people of a panchayat. Through financial and social activities, SHGs can bring socially excluded women, often poor and uneducated, into their fold and connect them to other women in groups. All panchayats were discovered to not be connected to these SHGs at this time in any convergence initiatives.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The SDG-16 goals and targets will never be met if institutions of governance, such as gram panchayats, are weak and lack the participation of people, particularly women. I suggest the following based on the understanding of rural SHGs and field research conducted for this paper:

### *Convergence model*

The convergence of women's self-help groups (SHGs) as community-based organizations (CBOs) with Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been central to the success of the Kerala government's Kudumbashree experience (Devika & Thampi, 2007). In 2012, the Ministry of Rural Development recognized Kudumbashree as a National Resource Organization (NRO) in the convergence domain to provide technical support to the other State Rural Livelihood Missions (SRLMs) in the implementation of the convergence project. The extraordinary visibility of women in Kerala's development space can be replicated in other states. Haryana also has its own State Rural Livelihood Mission (SRLM), under which all SHGs are organized. Cross-regional brides should be the first to join SHGs, so that they can begin gaining financial independence and interacting with other women in their communities. Alongside Gram Panchayats, SHGs possess a vast amount of social capital to promote rural development.

As a result of the lessons learned from the Kudumbashree programme, the relevant state government officials could take the convergence project seriously, thereby fostering the necessary cooperation between women's community-based organizations and village self-governments for the benefit of all. To learn how the

convergence project altered the course of rural development in Kerala's gram panchayats, Haryana's elected local self-government leaders must travel to Kerala's gram panchayats.

### *Formation of Social Justice Committees (SJs)*

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have been mandated to work towards economic development and social justice. To help facilitate the work of panchayats on social justice issues, the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act (1994) provided for Social Justice Committees (SJs) at three tiers (village, block and district) specifically formed to address injustices against marginalized populations. The foremost responsibilities of the SJs are to address caste-based discrimination and injustices, promote women's welfare and prevent anti-social activities in their respective jurisdictions. The activation and functioning of the SJs have been rather weak in Haryana. The SJs have not yet been constituted at all three tiers of PRIs in most districts; there has been no special effort made to orient members of the PRIs or SJs to make these committees function effectively. The formation of these committees could lead to favourable conditions for women to function in villages, as seen previously in Kerala's gram panchayats (Devika & Thampi, 2007). The experience of PRIA demonstrates that both the orientation of elected members of Gram Panchayats and the orientation of Gram Sabhas can help SJs function more efficiently (Tandon & Preisler, 2013).

### *Special Gram Sabhas*

Gram Sabhas may serve as institutional mechanisms for networks of self-help groups (SHGs) to engage with panchayats and address a variety of issues (Nambiar, 2001). They can serve as a forum for SHG women to advocate for their rights and privileges. Once or twice a year, a special Gram Sabha may be held. Moreover, increased participation in Gram Sabhas, and the quality of the discussions and demands raised there, can improve their leadership abilities and self-confidence. By means of these special Gram Sabhas, issues pertaining to regional and cross-regional brides could be discussed, and the panchayats could take on new steps or initiatives. In order to improve the conditions of women in rural areas, Gram Sabhas must become the norm for women's participation in large numbers.

### *Awareness campaigns*

In Assam, literacy campaigns that focused on the school dropout and reablement of students were initiated by the women's self-help groups (SHGs) and incorporated under the Social Development Plan in Gram Panchayats' Annual Action Plans (AAP) and long term five-year plans (Kudumbashree NRO, 2021). Campaigns for plastic-free panchayats have also been given priority by the gram panchayats. Similarly, in rural Haryana, campaigns on the prevention of abuse and violence against women and children in cross-regional marriages can be taken up by SHGs or panchayats, and relevant steps can be taken. Local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), schools and other government departments can also become part of such campaigns, and special funds can be allotted by Gram Panchayats to make these campaigns a success.

### *Maintenance of registers*

Cross-regional brides come from faraway places with no known natal background in rural Haryana. Not many women are able to visit their maternal families frequently, nor can their family members visit them in Haryana. For Gram Panchayats as rural self-government institutions, it becomes necessary to have the background details of these women, such that their maternal families can be contacted in cases of emergencies. Registers can be maintained at the office of a Gram Panchayat, either by the secretary of the panchayat or by the self-help groups (SHGs) together with the Gram Panchayat. Children of such families can be monitored through these registers, and their enrolment in Anganwadi centres must be ensured

## **CONCLUSION**

The future research on Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) has to address the specific concerns of violence and abuse issues pertaining to cross-regional women particularly in rural Haryana, drawing from how such governments have fared in the case of cross-border marriages in Japan or South Korea. A clear policy framework is needed from the state government side to encourage the public participation of these women, such that they come out in large numbers, voice their concerns and start participating in local politics.

Gram Panchayats are the implementing agencies for the governmental programmes. PRIs can create awareness among the communities about the entitlements through SHGs, interface with line departments and advocate for the delivery of entitlements and rights. SHGs, with their immense social capital, can thus ensure social justice and economic development alongside gram panchayats. With increased participation in such programmes, SHGs build a sense of equity and social justice. They can also work against prevalent social evils such as alcoholism, domestic violence, discrimination and marginalization, and help in socio-cultural development, accessing rights, strengthening demands and acting as the communication channel to the panchayats. Cross-regional brides can receive a lot of help by being part of SHGs and working together with panchayats.

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