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# Empowering Local Government for Development: ‘Asymmetric Localism’ in India

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# Empowering Local Government for Development: 'Asymmetric Localism' in India

Utsav Kumar Singh\*

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## Abstract

The concept of asymmetric federalism is well established in the literature on decentralization and public finance, but little attention has been paid to what I term 'asymmetric localism.' Such a system exists when some local governments enjoy more robust expenditure and revenue assignments than others of a similar size at the same tier. In this paper, I describe asymmetric localism in the Indian case through a systematic comparison of autonomous councils in Assam with the more common panchayat system elsewhere in the country. The study begins with the assumption that local demands are subject to change across geographies and times. Consequently, this variation requires an accountable local institution to synchronize local interest with national priorities. The concept of local government is rooted in the political philosophy of 'localism': addressing community-specific needs by bringing decision-making closer to the people. Asymmetries are built into the very nature of local government, particularly in multicultural countries such as India, but have received surprisingly scant academic attention. I apply asymmetric localism in this study to critically examine different types of local governance structures in India. Despite structural differences, local governments, at least ostensibly, share the objective of inclusive and sustainable development. However, on many fronts, local governments show differential progress in furthering people's aspirations. Some institutions are performing better while others are struggling to deliver on the local priorities, consequently delaying the development process. To some extent this limitation in local governance is grounded in local autonomy and intergovernmental relations. Motivated by this problem, the central question that undergirds my proposed research is this: In what way and to what extent do local autonomy and intergovernmental relations contribute towards the better functioning of local governments? I address this argument in light of asymmetric localism by comparing two forms of local governance—Autonomous Councils and Panchayati Raj Institutions—in India. Both the institutions are functioning within the same federation with differing levels of financial autonomy and legislative power endowed upon them.

**Keywords:** asymmetric localism, intergovernmental relations, autonomous district councils, Panchayati Raj institutions

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## I. Introduction

Development refers to the process of liberating people from the miseries that afflict them to help them lead long, healthy and fulfilling lives. A person's freedom to live a better life is dependent on available opportunity set—the range of available options including access to affordable healthcare, quality education and social protection. Stiglitz (2024) argues that people's opportunity set is crucial for her freedom to act. Poor and marginalized are less free to unlock their potential as their deprivation forces them to earn money to support their daily lives (Sen, Development as Freedom, 1999). Income plays an important role, but is not sufficient to flourish (Singh, 2022). Enabling poor to escape poverty is strongly linked with accessibility to services—health, education, safe water, clean fuel, rural roads and social security. (Sen, 1993). The responsibility of ensuring equitable access to basic services is shouldered by local governments. United Nations's Sustainable Development Goals has recognized the potential of local governments in advancing sustainable development.

Singh (2024) noted that “capabilities are not inherited, it is the duty of the state to ensure equal and unbiased opportunities to all, they are free *to do* or *to be*.” World Bank (2004) literature reported that “more often services fail people—in quality, quantity and access”. The performance of public service delivery depends on efficient and effective institutions. In turn, efficiency and effectiveness of institutions hinges on efficient decision-making by the local government leading to effective local service delivery. In this regard decentralization of power and responsibility from the top level of the government to the lowest level of the governance is a significant step. Decentralization is a tool to create space for governance below the central level to accommodate the diverse demand of heterogenous groups and empower them to formulate localized policy. In consequence, geographical diversity and social differences among the communities in a federation requires an asymmetric approach (Singh, 2024), similar to asymmetric federalism. I refer to this approach as asymmetric localism: a step to acknowledge the diverse need of a pluralistic society at the grass root level and recognizing the centrality of varying degree of local autonomy in localizing policy and service delivery on changing priorities across communities and solving their problem by employing local skill and knowledge. This paper will expand the concept of asymmetric localism and further test its competence in the context of India.

This paper serves two purposes: First, it introduces the concept of ‘asymmetric localism’ and discusses its uses for ensuring inclusive development in a multicultural and ethnically diverse country such as India. It also outlines the different forms of local governments and shows how the degree of local autonomy and intergovernmental relations are crucial in addressing local demands. Second, the paper briefly examines recent literature—empirical and theoretical—on the subject of local autonomy. Further, it assesses the impact of local autonomy in prioritizing local aspirations. Additionally, it also investigates the causality between women’s interaction with local government and the degree of local autonomy.

This paper is structured in the following manner: Section 2 addresses the following question: Why is asymmetric power distribution needed at the same level of governance? In answering this question, this study reviews the different theories on asymmetric federalism and philosophy of localism and attempts to provide a definition of asymmetric localism followed by its genesis. Section 3 reviews the concept of decentralization and local governance and assesses the differential impact of asymmetric decentralization on development indicators—poverty, inequality, ecology, gender equality, and externalities. Section 4 operationalizes the concept of asymmetric localism in the Indian context. This section is crucial to understand when and in what form asymmetric localism occurs along with its role in inclusive development and nation building. Finally, section 5 enlists some conclusions.

## **2. Why Asymmetric Power Distribution at the Same Level of Governance?**

Asymmetric federalism is a common characteristic of the broader polity in multiethnic and multicultural countries. Asymmetric federalism appears when the degree of autonomy in self-governance varies among the constituent entities (Watts, 2005). Theoretical literature classifies asymmetric federalism into two categories—*de facto* and *de jure* asymmetry. The first is a universal feature of federations and facilitates the establishment of formal asymmetric institutions, while the second is derived from constitutional consciousness (Watt, 1999). The asymmetry among the federated entities in terms of geography, resources, community and their language, culture and aspirations are referred to as *de facto* asymmetry. They are different from *de jure* asymmetry where constitutional consciousness treats federated units differently, transferring some higher or greater autonomy in self-governance to some federated entities over others (Burgess &

Gres, 1999). The constitutional polity of Canada, India, Russia, Belgium and Spain display strong characteristics of *de jure* asymmetry.

Debates around the further devolution of decision-making to the local governments are currently raging across federations such as Canada, Spain, and UK. Further demands for decentralization are also frequent at the subnational levels. Questions of territorial jurisdiction of subnational government are common to heterogeneous nations and their demands and challenges differs with geography, culture and resources distinctiveness. In consequence, local demands of some regions need special attention due to their geographical isolation, and unique civil practices of ethnic minorities. Heterogeneity across communities, such as ethnicity, race, language, and culture, has a significant influence on social and economic outcomes. Further, in the pursuit of addressing the needs of a pluralistic society, local policies are more efficient and more effective than a central response to neighborhood and people's demands (Łukasiewicz, Orenc, & Tripathi, 2023). Arguments in favours of decentralization is based on the principle of subsidiary (Chassé, Jacques, & Scott, 2024). The philosophy of subsidiary argues that problems should be addressed at the lowest level (Oates W. E., 2009). As Drew & Grant (2017) noted, the principle of subsidiarity in the theoretical literature on federalism rest on the assumption that a decentralized government, closer to the neighbourhood, can more effectively responds to local demands. It implies that to meet the specific preference of citizen and community, governance should be decentralized to the appropriate lowest level of governance with adequate capacity to act. In doing this, decentralization creates space for public *agency* at the local level. This agency is referred as a local government.

### **2.1. Local Government and the Philosophy of Localism**

The concept of local government is grounded in the philosophy of 'localism': addressing community-specific needs by bringing decision-making closer to the people, and offering greater opportunity for political inclusion and social cohesion. Localism acknowledges that the empowerment of local actors—politicians and officials—is necessary to act according to local circumstances. The language of localism is instrumental in organizing people in a territorial jurisdiction to address their common concerns (Fung & Wright, 2003; Bryso & Crosby, 2005; Briggs, 2008). Local government synchronizes local interests with national priorities. This institution inherits the fundamental feature of democratic polity; with limited sovereignty, they exercise a certain degree of autonomy in managing certain activities in their jurisdiction. As noted

by Agranoff (2014), local governments are at the forefront of policy implementation, where practice turns into policy, and where endless efforts are made to strengthen local democracy, improve the local economy, uplift people from poverty, and align local interests with national priorities. Local governments are crucial in unfolding global goals at the ground level (United Nations, 2024).

In theory, localism ensures democracy at the grassroots level and prioritize local demands in public spending and policy making and therefore it should be protected and promoted by the governments at upper levels as a democratic institution. Wilson et al. (2011) contend that localism is an attempt to ‘free up’ local people and institutions to perform better, which in turn depends on the openness and capacity of the local institution. Clarke (2013) argued that localism is a desire to maximize insider’s benefits and enhance the effectiveness of governance by minimizing the distance between the government and beneficiaries. The function of localism goes beyond the needs of specific communities, villages, or towns. Boogers & Voerman (2010) find it a more pragmatic way of doing local politics over the partisan and ideologically driven politics at the national level. The prime objective of local political parties is fulfilling the specific needs of local people; they are concerned about the day-to-day problems of local people (Copus & Wingfield, 2014). Hess’s (2009) systematic study on the United States indicates that localism contributes to the attainment of justice, democratic values, and sustainable politics.

Local government serve the goal of localism. They act as the first resort of call for the people to raise their demands, and employ policies tailored to community-specific needs could possibly deliver effective governance (Gherhes, Brooks, & Vorley, 2020). Local governments are responsible for managing basic services essential for human development, such as schools, health services, social security, waste management, and local development. Representatives and government officials are closely associated with local people. Thus, these institutions serve as a development destination by prioritizing local development demands in policymaking at the national level. The functioning power of local government solely depends on the constitutional arrangement, while its implementation is the responsibility of the governments at the national or subnational level. The extent of local government is defined by the relationship between a community and the local territory. Thus, the performance of local government is highly dependent on coordination and intergovernmental relations (Chou, 2023).

Akin to localism, the meaning of local government also varies across geographies. It includes villages, blocks, municipalities, districts, counties, and public-private partnerships. In federal countries like Australia, India, Malaysia, and South Africa, local governments are designed as one of the three tiers of the government. A similar arrangement is seen in Spain, Italy, Brazil, Nigeria, Mexico, and Nepal, which is the newest on the list. The existence of local government is not dependent on the layers of governance, it also exists in two-tier federations, for instance, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Argentina. In unitary states, the level of local governments varies according to the constitution, like in the United Kingdom, where the existence of local bodies depends on parliamentary legislation, as the arrangement for local government is not mentioned in the national constitution.

## ***2.2. Concept of Asymmetric Localism***

As discussed above, local governments require certain degree of autonomy to deliver on the promises of localism. In consequence, uneven geography and socio-economic diversity at the local level is bound to present differential demand and aspiration. Employing uniform degree of autonomy to asymmetric local condition could possibly leads to doleful consequence and it will not be sustainable politically (Singh, 2022). To ensure inclusive development, context specific challenges require tailored solution. Driving on constitutional consciousness, the federation may create local governments with differential autonomy. Put differently, to a certain degree, a diverse country inherits the subnational regime variation in terms of ethnicity, economy and demography. This variation across regions shows different factual situations, and differences are determined by local factors. The unique needs of a locality require natural and pragmatic treatment in the local context. To address unidentical problems of unidentical neighborhoods, local governments should have a certain level of autonomy specific to local conditions. I refer to this phenomenon as asymmetric localism.

## ***2.3. Genesis of Asymmetric Localism***

Asymmetric localism stem from the philosophy of localism. Diversity and asymmetry are the core of localism. Diversity requires a tailored approach, and localism prioritizes diversity in policymaking. Despite the crucial role of heterogeneity in shaping localism from the bottom, it has received little less attention. The philosophy of localism is about handing power to local institutions, empowering locals, and mainstreaming the left-out communities. In doing so, the objective of a sustainable future—a vibrant democracy, people’s well-being, and societal

progress—can be attained. Diversity denotes the existence of plurality in any of the following areas: cultural, ethnic, religious, and political. (Sahadžić, 2020). Heterogeneity across communities, such as ethnicity, race, language, and culture, has a significant influence on social and economic outcomes. And this must be addressed with asymmetric policies. Further, in the pursuit of addressing the needs of a pluralistic society, local policies are more efficient and more effective than a central response to neighborhood and people's demands (Łukasiewicz, Orenc, & Tripathi, 2023). This underscores the centrality of diversity in designing welfare policies by public and private institutions in response to plural needs across communities, shaped by diverse socioeconomic challenges and local conditions. Localism argues for local autonomy while asymmetric localism is a demand for differential local autonomy to perform efficiently on delegated responsibilities in local circumstances. Localism promotes the democratization of policies. Asymmetric localism creates space for the local to actively participate in policymaking. In this regard, localism strives to empower local communities to manage their local affairs—political, administrative, and judicial—by bringing decision-making closer to the people (Pratchett, 2004; Briffault, 2000; Clarke & Cochrane, 2013). In this way, it is an argument about the extent of central government authority to include the demands of every section of societies (Wills, 2016). In other words, asymmetric localism offers opportunities to include diverse groups in decision-making, and it has been argued that the delegation of power to communities serves the common interest. It emphasizes that policies designed for the people should not be far from the people. In particular, asymmetric localism is a demand for furthering a bottom-up approach, oriented more toward the idea that local challenges should be addressed with common consensus and at the local level. It demonstrates the way in which people interact in the democratic process by leveraging their local identity. In this way, localism is a recipe to solve local problems by using local potential on local terms. It's about locating people in the democratic process and freedom for local actors. The success of asymmetric localism heavily depends on the structure and capacity of democratic institutions.

The concept of asymmetric localism is nascent, but it has the potential to evolve. It thrives by employing local human capabilities like a sense of belongingness and a collective response to externalities and has the capacity to deliver on the promises of shared prosperity. Local governments play crucial role in policy localization that is directly linked to societal progress. In turn, orientation toward policy localization is driven by two factors: service delivery at the local

level and policy coherence with local conditions (Oster, 1996). Asymmetric localism involves local indigenous methods, practices, institutions, and actors in advancing people's welfare. While functioning on delegated responsibilities, local governments function as an agent of a higher level of government (Valdesalici & Nicolini, 2024).

### **3. Conceptual Framework**

#### ***3.1. Decentralization: Empowering Local Government***

Empowering citizens by creating multiple political institutions is at the core of decentralization. It is seen as a significant reform in the public service delivery system, practiced by countries across the world to create a more inclusive democratic institution. Over the past half a century, several countries—Brazil, Nepal, China, South Africa, Indonesia, India, United Kingdom and many others—have restructured their polity by applying decentralization (Hankla, 2009; Dillinger, 2010; Hankla & Downs, 2010; Hooghe et al., 2016; Ponce-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Singh, 2024).

It is a political process of instilling sense of belongingness by involving citizens in decision-making. In theory, decentralization refers to the transfer of power, resources, and responsibility from the central government to the lower levels of governance (Pierson, 1995; Shrestha & Hankla, 2025). The theoretical and empirical literature indicates the mix response of decentralization on development outcomes. Certainly, decentralization improves service delivery by creating democratic political and economic institutions (Khemani, Devarajan, Khemani, & Shah, 2005; Ghuman & Singh, 2017). Several studies noted the increasing role of local governments in managing local affairs (Walker & Andrews, 2015; Beeri, 2023); this phenomenon is demonstrated in the enhancement of institutional capacity by endowing more administrative responsibilities and political powers or by expanding fiscal responsibilities (Arzaghi & Henderson, 2005; Garman, Haggard, & Willis, 2011; OECD, 2019).

Interaction between national and local priorities is indispensable for inclusive and sustainable development, and decentralization contributes to aligning local interests with national priorities. Oates (1999) noted that the central government has the responsibility to stabilize macroeconomic functions as well as to ensure the welfare of the poor through income redistribution. Decentralization serves both purposes. In turn, income redistribution ensures political stability by increasing trust in government and institutions (World Bank, 2017). In that sense, decentralization

is at the core of good governance and accountability (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999). This process has been gaining momentum since the early 2000s (Mauri, 2024).

### ***3.2. What is the Extent and Degree of Decentralization?***

Local government's functioning capacity and freedom to respond on context specific demands is dependent on the extent of decentralization. The decision about the extent and degree of decentralization are made at the top-most echelons of governance, by the political leadership and senior bureaucrats at the top. Responsibilities in the governance structure are allocated according to convenience of public administration. Primarily, decentralization involves three core dimensions: political, administrative, and fiscal (Schneider, 2003; World Bank, 2024). Political decentralization arises when constitutional power and decision-making are shifted to the elected governments at regional and local levels (Hooghe & Marks, 2013; Tselios, 2023). Administrative decentralization refers to the degree of autonomy transferred to local governments to perform certain responsibilities in their jurisdiction (Gong, Liu, & Wu, 2021). Fiscal decentralization includes assigning power from the national government to its sub-entities related to fiscal policy (Fedelino, 2010).

The degree of decentralization is denoted by the degree of autonomy to act. Considering the extent of transfer of power, Rondinelli (1981) proposed three types of decentralization—deconcentration, delegation, and devolution. Among these, deconcentration is considered the weakest, delegation is in the middle, and devolution is the strongest form of decentralization. According to World Bank literature (2024), deconcentration refers to the degree of competence transferred from the central government to the subordinate offices within the hierarchies of central ministries or agencies. Delegation denotes handing over certain managerial responsibilities to execute specific programs or functions beyond the purview of the established administrative structure, under the oversight of the central government. Devolution refers to the legitimate transfer of power from the central government to the subnational government to manage administrative, political, and fiscal affairs in its territorial jurisdiction.

### ***3.3. Impact of Decentralization on Local Service Delivery and People's Well-being***

Decentralization is an instrument for freeing local authorities from central interference. The multidimensional features of decentralization offer an opportunity for scholars from multiple disciplines to analyze the concept accordingly. For instance, political scientists argue that

decentralization contributes to the consolidation of democratic values by handing over authority to local government (Siegel, 2021). For economists, decentralization is a means to improve the local economy by employing local knowledge and optimal allocation of resources (Oates W. E., 1972; Rodríguez-Pose & Muštra, 2022). On the contrary, some scholars raise concerns regarding its detrimental impact on infrastructure (Schillinger, 2025), that it may exacerbate authoritarianism (Witesman, 2020), and favoritism (Dai & Ye, 2025).

World Bank literature shows that enhancement in public sector efficiency, along with transparency and accountability in decision-making and service delivery, is dependent on policy. Conversely, some studies also indicate that countries with multi-level governance are more prone to perceived corruption and less efficient in delivering health services (Treisman, 2002). Zarychta, Benedum, Sanchez, & Anderson (2024) held that decentralization opens a gateway for corruption to local officials and may leave the institution in the hands of a few influential elites. A systematic study by Shrestha, Martinez-Vazquez & Hankla (2022) argued that corruption is dependent on the degree of accountability of local government, and the efficiency of local government could possibly improve with an enhancement in accountability, by empowering locals to nominate and elect their leaders.

*Political inclusion:* The notion behind decentralization is to enable citizens to become decision-makers in their own right and to strengthen a sense of belongingness, nation-building, and “democratic suppleness” from the lowest level of democracy (Faguet, Fox, & Pöschl, 2015), empowering local government to achieve development targets (Smoke, 2015). It is generally assumed that decentralization has the potential to improve the effectiveness of government services (Dick-Sageo & Andraz, 2020) and provide them with an opportunity to participate in decision-making (Agrawal & Gupta, 2005; Dzakakl, Hlovor, & Dah, 2023). It improves the effectiveness of the public delivery system and provides a platform for collective decision-making through local elected representatives (World Bank, 2021). Decentralization may be simply understood as the formal devolution of power to local decision-makers (World Bank, 2003), by bringing decision-making closer to the people (Dick-Sageo & Andraz, 2020). However, a recent study by Holum (2023) on Norwegian municipalities shows the limitation of local government in increasing people’s participation in local governance.

*Institution's effectiveness:* Decentralization provides a better match between local demand and supply by local government. It is an effective process to meet the heterogeneous demands arising within the same federation. Bahl & Bird (2018) argue that to some degree, the efficiency of service delivery depends on effective institutions at subnational and local levels of governance. Chanchani (2023) held that decentralization provides a broader scope and vouched for its extension in the implementation of welfare schemes.

*Fiscal autonomy:* Financial freedom for local governments serves multiple development targets of rural and marginalized areas, which is indispensable for inclusive development. Fiscal decentralization helps in aligning regional demands with national priorities in a well-functioning national government, but in countries with poor governance, it can also amplify regional disparity (Kyriacou, Muinelo-Gallo, & Roca-Sagales, 2015). However, studies also show that improved local finances play an important role in addressing regional development demands (Onofrei, Oprea, Iașu, Cojocariu, & Anton, 2022).

*Poverty alleviation:* Decentralization is strongly linked with poverty alleviation. When the poor get an opportunity to participate in decision-making, they can influence policymaking and possibly make it more inclusive. For instance, fiscal decentralization in Indonesia unfolded into poverty reduction (Siburian, 2022). Tselios & Rodriguez-Pose (2024) noted the potential of decentralization in poverty reduction in European countries. They argue that if local governments have the freedom to design pro-poor policy, considering the local needs, it could possibly uplift people from poverty and enable them to have a good life. Conversely, in the context of African countries, there is no positive impact of decentralization on poverty reduction due to less transparency and accountability in the functioning of local and national governments (Crook, 2003). A recent study on Kenya argued for the inclusion of asymmetric local factors in pro-poor policy targets (Harris & Posner, 2022).

*Reducing Inequality:* Literature on the relationship between decentralization and inequality is inconclusive (Bojanic & Collins, 2019; Canare, Francisco, & Caliso, 2020). Decentralization has a differential impact on inequality reduction, depending on governance quality (Tselios, 2023) and economic indicators (Cavusoglu & Dincer, 2015; Hung & Thanh, 2022). For example, an empirical study on 183 regions across fourteen OECD member countries revealed that at the

regional level, a 1-percent increase in the proportion of a person's income tax over the total taxation turns into 0.002 points drop in the Gini index (Petrovito et al., 2023).

*Gender equality:* Women's role in decision-making at the local level drew the attention of several scholars (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Agarwal, 2010; Kumar & Prakash, 2017). The full participation of half the population at local levels of governance is instrumental in aligning gender sensitivity into local priorities (Hicks, 2011; United Nations, 2015; Berevoescu & Ballington, 2021). In this way, women exert more influence over planning and service delivery. In doing this, decentralization contributes to promoting gender equality and gender-sensitive communication in policymaking at the local level. Despite the opportunities to improve gender representation through localized democracy, women are underrepresented in decision-making at the local level due to structural biasness and cultural norms (Hussein, 2021). To ensure substantial gender representation at the local level, several countries like Rwanda, India, South Africa, Uganda, and Tanzania have introduced gender-specific quotas (Beall, 2005; Lassébie, 2020; Singh, 2022).

*Response to externalities:* In economics, externalities denote the consequence of an economic agent's decision on a person's economic well-being, for example, a recession (Chavas, 2022). Political scientists see it as an unprecedented event that influences the majority of people, such as COVID-19, pollution, etc. (Trantidis, 2024). In geography, externalities are extreme climate events, for instance, floods and extreme weather (Bell et al., 2018). Underscoring all definitions, we can define an externality as a sudden change that requires an immediate response. In this way, the close proximity of local government to the community and access to local information make them the first public office to respond to externalities. However, the efficiency of the response is highly dependent on the coordination and collaboration of all stakeholders (Lago-Peñas, Martínez-Vázquez, & Sacchi, 2022; Herrero-Alcalde, Martín-Román, & Moral-Arce, 2025).

*Corruption:* It has also been argued that decentralization is more likely to limit coordination and intensify bribery for officials at different levels (Fan, Lin, & Treisman, 2009). On the contrary, Wang's (2023) findings suggest that centralization is likely to reduce the provision for public goods and have an intense adverse effect on those public goods and services that are heavily dependent on local government functioning. Evidently, scholars have divergent opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of decentralization.

Brazil is among the few countries that shows the potential of decentralization in furthering inclusive democracy and people's progress. The Brazilian constitution (1998) transfers significant autonomy fiscal autonomy to state and municipalities. More power to municipalities translated into effective delivery at the local level. Acemoglu & Robinson (2012) in their seminal work, *Why Nations Fail: The origin of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*, noted the success of a “participatory budget.” In 1988, after gaining control over local city administration of Port Alegre, Worker's Party invited local people in the formulation of municipality budget, this was an attempt to include local in decision-making, simultaneously prioritizing local aspirations in budget spending. The success of Worker's Party at local level unfolded into mass political mobilization at national level. Brazil model has shown the world that heterogeneous nations can build inclusive economic institutions through inclusive political institutions. This model emerged as a global model of local government. Several scholars however argue that the current system is over decentralized (Selcher, 1998; Falletti, 2012; Rich & Gómez, 2012). Other researchers have also raised concerns over intervention from top level of governance in local affairs, particularly in health sector (Rich & Gómez, 2012).

#### **3.4. What is the Limitation of Traditional Approach of Decentralization?**

To serve asymmetric localism local government governments require adequate support from the governments at higher levels, intergovernmental relations, and is driven by the degree of autonomy derived from decentralization. The degree of autonomy of the frontline public officials—appointed and elected—is more important and has serious implications on the values and local interest. Allocating responsibility in governance order is crucial for administrative efficiency and capacity to act on varying demands and changing local condition (Aucoin & Bakvis, 1988). A traditional approach to decentralization neglects a key feature—dynamism—of localism. Studies have shown that implementing uniform decentralization in countries with a high level of diversity has significant limitations (Nasution, 2016; Jamil et al., 2024). Shrestha & Hankla (2025) noted that ignoring the diversity of a heterogeneous community and treating it uniformly is a threat to peace and prosperity, particularly in a region with strong ethnic and linguistic identities that aspire to enhance local autonomy. Several studies have outlined the uneven characteristic of decentralization (Fenghua Pan, Wójcik, & Wójcik, 2016; Xu & Warner, 2016; Dick-Sagoe & Andraz, 2020; Afonso, Alves, Jalles, & Monteiro, 2024; Xu & Warner, 2024) and its significant impact on development outcomes (Cahyaningsih & Fitriady, 2019; Lingyan et al., 2021).

To address the gap in the traditional theory of decentralization, countries are shifting toward asymmetric decentralization: this is an instrument to serve asymmetric localism. Numerous countries have created local government with varying degrees of local autonomy (Bahl & Martinez-Vazquez, 2006; Allain-Dupré, Chatry, & Moisiso, 2020; Shreshtha & Hankla, 2025). Studies highlight that the outcomes of asymmetrical delegation of state power go either way: it may eradicate or expand the existing regional inequalities, depending on the action and capacity of the local government (Tan & Avshalom-Uster, 2021; Lele, 2023; Wang, Wu, & Zhang, 2024). This could possibly unfold in varying institutional incentives and may create space for mixed local government responses (Xu, Liang, & Wu, 2024).

China exhibits the characteristic of asymmetric decentralization; researchers referred to it as ‘Chinese Style decentralization’ (Wang et al., 2024). The fiscal decentralization in China is a mix of economic decentralization and a vertical management system, which is light on public administration and heavier on revenue generation (Li & Li, 2024). To some extent, asymmetric decentralization in China has reduced the incentive for local government (Li, 2019) and could broaden the fiscal disparities (Xu, Liang, & Wu, 2024).

Spain’s decentralization is extremely asymmetrical (Carreras, 2016). Central financing—common system and autonomous system—to the local institutions is highly asymmetric. Autonomous regions have the power to collect taxes in their jurisdiction, while in the ‘common’ area, taxes are collected by the government. Autonomous institutions have more control over public service delivery. The study of the autonomous region with significant fiscal autonomy is performing better on economic indicators (Aparicio-Pérez et al., 2025).

The Italian constitution of 1948 adopted an asymmetric approach to govern its two distinct regions—the autonomous region under a ‘special statute’ and an ordinary region with limited administrative and legislative power (Giovannini & Vampa, 2020). This arrangement was reformed in 2021 (Palermo & Wilson, 2014); more legislative power was extended to the ordinary area, akin to the autonomous region. Despite that, in practice, there is a huge difference in the ability to perform delegated power due to the incompetency of the ordinary region to deliver on new power. This situation has exacerbated the existing regional inequality (Newman & Hoole, 2024). It makes the ordinary region more dependent on central grants.

In Indonesia, asymmetric decentralization has been implemented to prevent secession and improve people's lives. A study by Gabriel Lele (2019) indicates that the provinces with special fiscal power are still struggling to ensure well-being and are among the worst performers on governance quality. On the secession issue, the province that includes the characteristic of secessionist power in its strategies has accomplished its goals (Lele, 2023).

Iraq's constitution of 2005 recognizes local government; power delegates from the central power seated in Baghdad to the governorates (provinces). The power distribution among the provinces is highly asymmetric. Underscoring the historical reasons and its role in the formation of Iraq, special autonomy has been extended to the Kurdistan region to exercise legislative, administrative, and fiscal powers (Bammarny, 2019). Because of this, the Kurdistan region is more stable than the others and attracts more foreign investment, which contributes to the prosperity of the Kurdish region.

The Malaysian style of decentralization demonstrates the significant characteristics of asymmetric decentralization (Sulaiman et al., 2025) Local government falls under the state subject, while the legislative power of the three federal territories—Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and Labuan—is centralized. Harding's study (2025) noted that, in 1963, special rights were granted to the indigenous community living in two provinces—Sabah and Sarawak—which contributed significantly to the integration of these two provinces into Malaysia. However, due to progressive political interference from the central government, there has been a negative impact on the autonomy of these provinces and consequently on the people's well-being, too.

Bosnia uses an asymmetric approach to accommodate ethnic diversity through the Dayton Accords. The Dayton agreement extends ethnic recognition to only these three groups, and they are the only groups having the right to represent. Srzic (2013) held that Bosnia is governed by a weak central government and two sub-units with a strong ethnic identity: Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats dominate the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Republic of Srpska is inhabited by Bosnian Serbs. The Republic of Srpska has a two-tier local government, while the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina has a three-layer arrangement. Minority communities such as the Roma or Jews, and even those who don't want to be recognized in the listed ethnic groups, have no right to representation (Gordy, 2016). Consequently, the political representatives from

listed ethnic groups have no incentive for minorities, which certainly exacerbates the demographic divide.

The Federation of Canada demonstrates all the characteristics of asymmetric decentralization; it has traveled a long journey from being centralized to a highly decentralized polity (Bakvis & Skogstad, 2025). Inarguably, the Canadian federation has been significantly decentralized in the fiscal aspect along with some policy areas, yet centralization exists in some key policies, such as social welfare (Lecours, 2017). In Israel, legislative changes in 2014 paved the way for asymmetric decentralization. New local governments were formed with different degrees of autonomy and revenue-generating competence (OECD, 2025). Tan & Avshalom-Uster (2021) assessed the impact of a varying degree of fiscal and administrative autonomy on fiscal outcomes; their findings indicate that autonomous councils in Israel largely benefited from the asymmetric decentralization.

### ***3.5. Dose Asymmetric Decentralization Serve Asymmetric Localism?***

Over the years, asymmetric decentralization has been making inroads in policy frameworks across the developing and developed world (Investigación, 2020) and in both forms—federal and unitary—of governance (Martinez-Vazquez, Lago-Peñas, & Sacchi, 2016). However, in most cases, reforms are more tilted toward fiscal devolution and less toward political and administrative. These reforms are yielding mixed outcomes (Sohail, Ullah, & Javid, 2022). Some countries used it as an instrument to accommodate diversity and prevent secession; outcomes are diverse, depending on the capacity of local institutions. It might be early to make a conclusion, and there are many reasons to remain hopeful. In Malaysia and Indonesia, asymmetric decentralization helps in preventing secession and also outlines the negative impact of central interference on people's lives.

Asymmetric decentralization is instrumental in advancing public policies, meeting the needs of a specific community. In an asymmetric arrangement, subnational governments have the power to create different forms of local governments, with different levels of autonomy, in their jurisdiction. This helps in accommodating existing diversity across the region. For instance, the North-Eastern Region of India is home to diverse communities; the asymmetric setting of the Indian federation provides power to subnational governments to design local government as per the requirement of particular local communities—state autonomous councils and autonomous hill areas—to accommodate the diversity, with varying levels of autonomy. The State Autonomous Councils and

Panchayati Raj Institutions are governed by the subnational governments and function in parallel with different degrees of autonomy in each subnational jurisdiction. This is called ‘menu federalism’—the ability to design fiscal autonomy for each subnational government (Blöchliger & Montes-Nebreda, 2024).

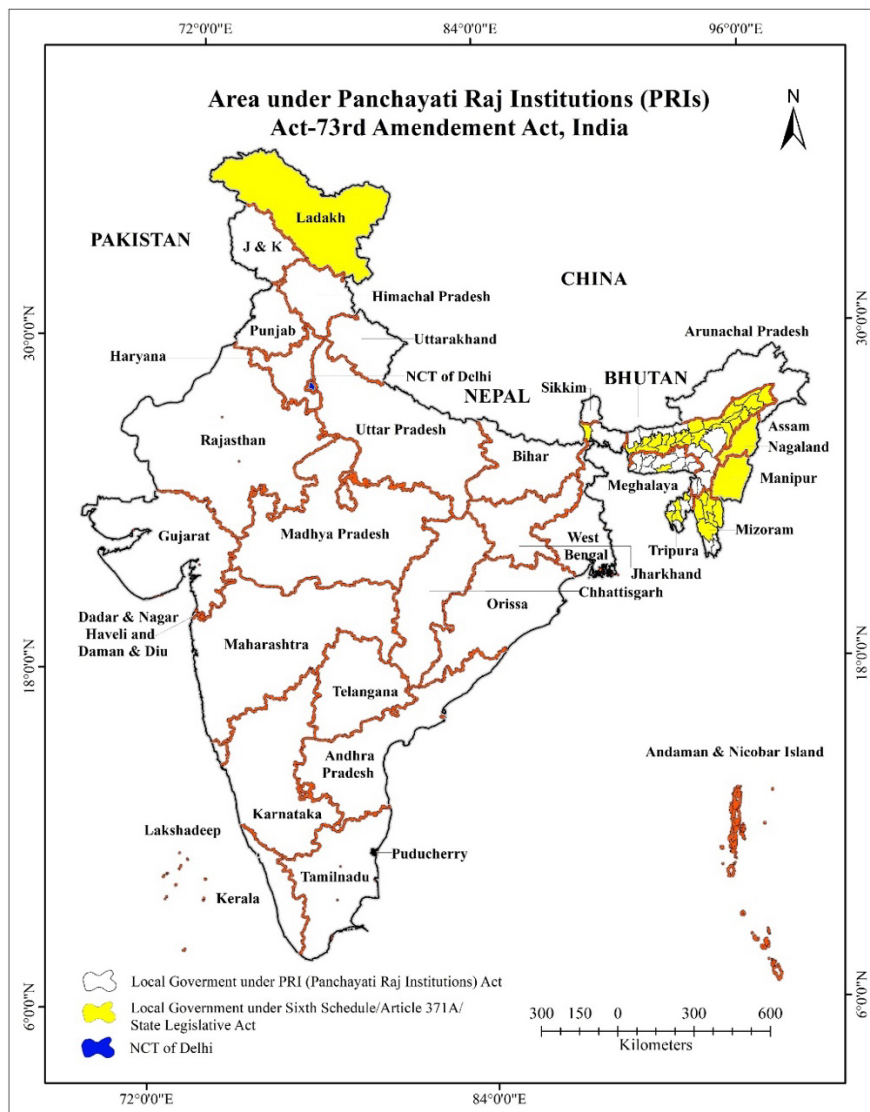
In multilevel governance, the implementation of government programs and policies at different levels of governance is dependent on trade-offs between the risks and rewards of a centralized versus a decentralized system (Tommasi & Weinschelbaum, 2007). Considering the regional asymmetries, power allocation across local institutions could be asymmetrical; treating them identically and consequently assigning a uniform policy could possibly lead to an unsustainable future. Asymmetric decentralization is a flexible approach that creates an open space to design overarching policy for the specific needs of a particular community or region, based on its local circumstances. For instance, following decolonization, the constitutions of most Asian countries adopted the principle of holding together to prevent secession (Breen, 2017); India is one of them (Yimenu, 2024). India strives to hold together multiethnic communities and regional inequalities arising from demography, development, and geography, including the protection of minority groups and the mainstreaming of indigenous communities. In pursuit of equalizing imbalance and inclusive development, India applies asymmetric decentralization: preferential treatment to geographically isolated regions, minority groups, and marginalized and indigenous communities. In other words, the asymmetric decentralization approach provides strength to hold unbalanced regions and simultaneously delegates power to make special provisions in regard to ethnic, linguistic, and geographical differences. Asymmetric decentralization shapes the functioning of democratic institutions; it can deliver a more effective response to local needs, optimize resources, and lead to sustainable development. Asymmetric decentralization is the sheltering carapace under which localism flourishes. Considering its potential for a shared future, I consider asymmetric decentralization as an approach to serve asymmetric localism.

#### **4. The Context of Asymmetric Localism in India**

I test the idea of asymmetric localism on the Indian polity, where variety of local governments are operating with varying degree of autonomy. India is one of the ancient republics of the world. Shared sovereignty within a multilayered governance system is indigenous to Indian federation (Bhattacharjee, 2023). Multilevel governance is not a modern invention in India but has a much

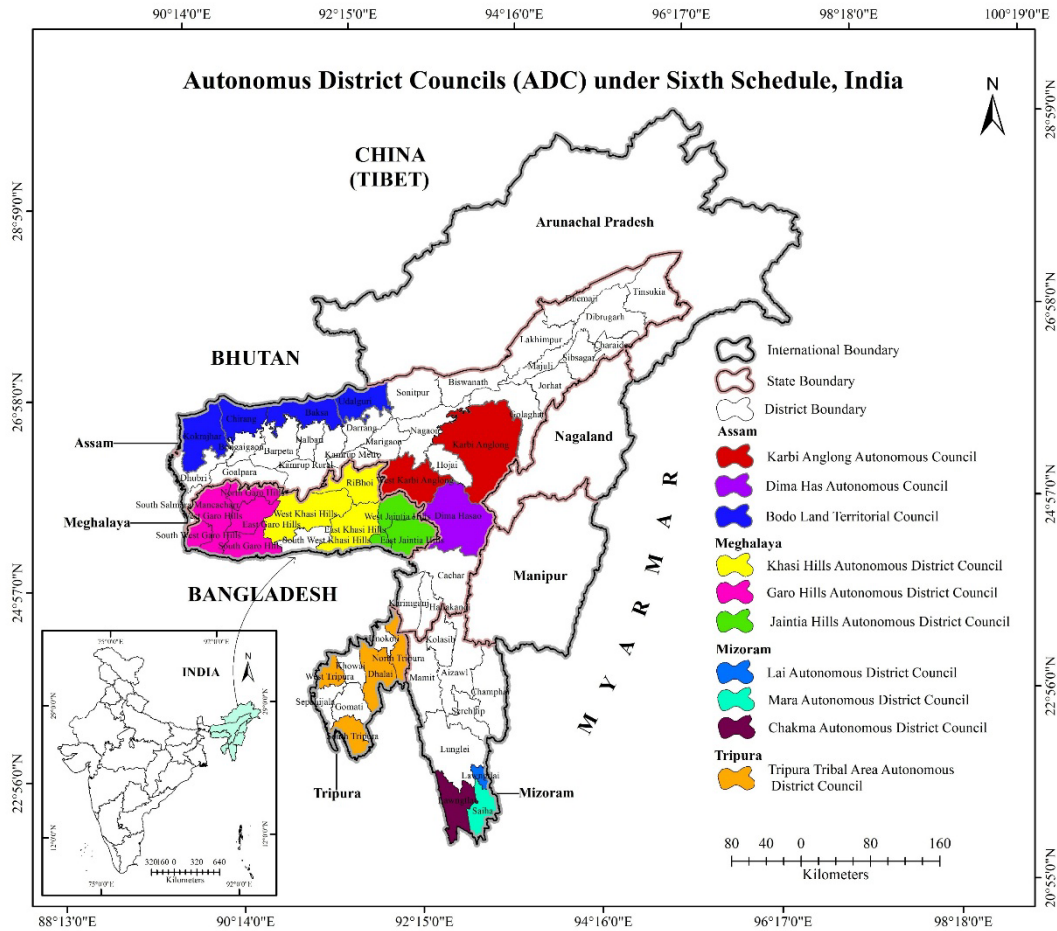
longer history. The central empires were built on diverse polities (Kaul, 2015), while the regional kingdoms were less heterogeneous than central empire (Kulke & Rothermund, 2016), with local government (village councils) at the bottom representing relatively more homogeneous communities (Vajpeyi & Arnold, 2003). At present, local government in the majority of India is governed by the Panchayati Raj Institution Act (PRI)-1992 (see Map.1). The provision of PRI has been extended to the Fifth Schedule through the PESA Act-1996. Meanwhile, Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) operates with significant autonomy in the area mentioned in the Sixth Schedule to the Indian Constitution. In Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, and some parts of Assam, local governments were created through state legislation (See Map.2).

**Map 1. Area under PRI Act (73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, India)**



Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj Institution, Government of India

**Map 2. Autonomous District Council (ADC) under Sixth Schedule to Constitution of India**



Source: Sixth Schedule, Constitution of India

My research focuses on two distinct forms of local governance—PRIs and ADCs—functioning with different level of autonomy (see Table. 1). In this regard, I apply the concept of asymmetric localism to explore the rationale for differential power distribution at third tier of governance. My research focuses on two distinct forms of local governance—PRIs and ADCs—functioning with different levels of autonomy (see Table. 1).

**Table 1. Differential Power Distribution between PRIs and ADCs**

<i>ADC</i>	<i>PRI</i>
<b><i>Administrative Autonomy</i></b>	
Empowered to hire and fire employee	Subject to state legislation
<b><i>Financial Autonomy</i></b>	
Grants from Central and State government	Grants from state governments
Mandate to levy and collect any or all of the following taxes:	Subject to state legislation
Taxes on employment, calling, trades and profession	
Taxes on livestock's, water ferries and vehicle	
Taxes on goods and passenger.	
Taxes for maintain social infrastructure	
Share in royalties associated with lease on minerals and other natural resources	
<b><i>Legislative Autonomy</i></b>	
Empowered to make law on forest management, traditional agriculture practices, establishment of village/town committee/councils, property inheritance law, matrimonial laws and any other civil law under the preview of customary law	Limited to legislative laws related the provision of basic service delivery
<b><i>Judicial</i></b>	
Three-layer Judicial System to operating as custodian of customary laws	<i>Gram Nyayalayas— Village Level Court</i>

Source: Constitution of India, 1950

*ADCs*: ADCs are enacted under the Sixth Schedule—Article 244(2) and 275 (1)—of the Indian Constitution in order to protect the rights, culture and customs of indigenous—tribal—communities living in the territorial jurisdiction of ten ADCs spread over the state of Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram as shown in Map-1. They have certain degree of sovereignty in internal affairs—legislate laws in regard to civil affairs, and design, implement, and collect taxes. The three-layer judicial system operates under customary law. Some special provisions have been granted in regard to land transfer; for example, without the permission of the empowered executive committee, land cannot be transferred, leased, or gifted from tribal to non-tribal. Only permanent residents have the right to vote in the council elections. It may be extended to non-residents under specific conditions.

*Panchayats Raj Institutions (PRIs)*: James Jeffe (2015) in his seminal work *Ironies of Colonial Governance* noted the contribution of Sir Thomas Munro in popularizing the term ‘republic’ in the context of India. In 1860, Sir Munro was the first to refer to Indian villages as a ‘little republic’

and India as ‘a mass of such Republics’. In the context of the village republic, he emphasizes the historical autonomy of local bodies, which derive autonomy from an ancient constitution to manage law and order. This ‘little republic’ represents a model of self-governance referred to as Panchayats in India, which have historically existed for thousands of years. The literal term Panchayat refers to the ‘seating together of five people’ to solve disputes or create a policy by common consensus.

Despite existing for a long time, the traditional Panchayat system in India was not constitutionally recognized and considered unfit for forwarding affirmative action, consequently, inimical to inclusive development. Institutionalization of Panchayats as a model of self-governance took forty-three years since the inception of the Indian Constitution (1950). The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments provided constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to constitute a uniform structure (3-tier PRIs). Panchayats refer to an institution of self-governance founded on the provisions of Article 243B. Article 243B mandates the formation of three tiers—District level, Block Level, and Village level—PRIs. A state with less than 20 lakh population may skip the block level. As shown in Map-2, PRIs are functioning in the majority of Indian states. The implementation of PRIs is barred in the following areas: the Sixth Schedule area of the Indian constitution and the territorial jurisdiction of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya, including the hill area under the district council of Manipur and the district-level provision in Darjeeling, West Bengal (see map.1). According to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, the number of functional local bodies in India stands at 279,114 (Village Panchayat: 255,623; Intermediate Panchayat: 6,697; District Panchayats: 665; Traditional Local Bodies: 161,129).

*Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Area—PESA Act—1996*: Fifth Schedule to the Indian Constitution includes the names of tribal territories spread across India. Article 5 of the Fifth Schedule states:

*notwithstanding anything in this constitution, the governor may by public notification (declare) that any particular Act of the Parliament or of the Legislature shall not apply to a Scheduled Area...*

Considering the limitation of PRI, the Government of India has extended the PRI-Act to the Fifth Schedule area through the Parliament legislation—Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Area—PESA Act—1996. The provision of the PESA-Act created space to accommodate diverse tribal civil practices, customary laws, and traditional methods of managing community resources into

the PRI Act. This applies to Panchayats in the Fifth Schedule area, except for the tribal territory mentioned in the Sixth Schedule. At present, the PESA-Act covers 108 districts: 45 are fully covered and 63 are partially covered districts (see map. 2). This Act promotes self-governance among the indigenous communities and safeguards indigenous culture and social practices.

#### **4.2. Hypothesis Setting**

I apply the concept of asymmetric localism to the given context to address the following hypothesis:

1. The Indian Constitution empowers the parliament to create new constituent units by changing the territorial boundaries of existing states, and in light of asymmetric federalism may grant differential autonomy in governance. However, there is little clarity in the rationale for creating local self-governance institution with autonomy similar to federated unit. Thus, I hypothesize H1. Considering the territorial geography and multiethnic diversity, creating a local government with greater autonomy is more viable than creating a new subnational unit.
2. The Indian Constitution promotes equality, prohibiting state from making any discriminatory laws on the basis on sex, race, religion, caste and place of birth, and also allows states to transfer higher degree of autonomy to certain groups to manage their local affairs. I believe: H2: Underscoring the unique life styles and diverse civil practices of indigenous communities, employing asymmetric power distribution among the local self-governance could promote equitable growth.
3. The Constitution of India safeguards the customary practices and inheritance laws of minority groups and tribal communities and enables them to enact civil laws under the veneer of customary of laws. Therefore, I contend that: H3. Considering the higher degree of legislative power of local government, it could be possible that they may devise ‘repressive laws’.

#### **4.3. Descriptive Evidence**

Rudolph & Rudolph (2010) noted two different visions for the future of India at the time of independence: Mahatma Gandhi’s dream of grassroots-up—localism—approach and Nehru's controlled, centralized approach, aligning with his pursuit of accomplishing economic goals. The Constitution of India (1950) is a fusion of both ideas. It is a progressive document in accommodating diversity through “power-sharing system” (Roluahpuia, 2021). Sholars on Indian

constitution attempted to map the Indian federation in the definition of asymmetric federalism (Saxena, 2012; Hausing, 2014; Saxena, 2021; Bhattacharyya, 2023) and quasi federalism (Wheare, 1951; Gangal, 1962; Chandio, Tunio, & Korai, 2024). Contemporary Indian polity inherits the characteristics *de facto* asymmetry and constitutional provisions turn it into *de jure* asymmetry.

The asymmetries among the subnational entities are more aligned with the Nehruvian model. The subnational entities in India refer to States and Union Territories (UT). States and UTs are sovereign in internal affairs but not in external affairs. Both entities differ in their degree of autonomy in governance; states have full autonomy in administration and legislative power, while UTs are centrally administered territories, existing in either form, with or without legislative assemblies. The Indian constitution endows special provisions to various states with varying levels of autonomy. Until its abrogation in August 2019, Articles 370 and 35A provided special status to the Jammu and Kashmir region to manage their affairs except for defense, communication, and foreign affairs. Special arrangements also exist for the states in Northeast India; Article 371A and 371G provide significant autonomy to Nagaland and Mizoram, respectively, to manage their civil and judicial affairs according to their customary laws (Constitution of India, 1950). Considering the unique features of Indian constitution, Alexandrowicz (1954) referred to India as a *sui generis* case. For Shashi Tharoor (2025), the Indian Constitution is a living document. Singh (2021) finds it as a way to ensure inclusive development. The prominent example of constitutional consciousness is creation of Autonomous District Councils to accommodate the ethnic diversity of indigenous communities living in the north-eastern region of India. This model emerged as a tool for conflict resolution, political stability and welfare of historically disadvantage people.

#### 4.3.1. Reason for Autonomous District Councils

The Constitution of India empowers Parliament to configure the federated units and create a new sub-unit by altering the territorial jurisdiction of existing sub-units and may grant higher degree of autonomy to any of the sub-unit, not all. States are reorganized on the recommendation of the State Reorganization Commission Report (SRCR) (1955). Sub-units are reorganized on the following criterion: national security, administrative convenience, and linguistic and cultural homogeneity. SRCR recorded that they received a proposal containing the demand for a hill state by unifying the hill districts of north-eastern region of India. In the colonial period, hill districts were open to some, not to all. The mobility between tribal land and non-tribal land was regulated by the “inner line permit” (Dzüvichü, 2014; Thejalhoukho, 2024). Inner line permit was a colonial instrument

to segregate hill area from the “mainland” India. To some extent, this segregation helped missionaries in spread of Christianity and creating a new class in the hills. As Rev. Federic S. Downs (2016) noted, the colonial period also marked the beginning Christianity in the hill areas of Assam. This was noticed by the SRCR, too:

*“The broad effect of throwing the Tribal area open to some but not all external influences during the period of the British occupation has been to divide the tribal people themselves, and to create, as a result of British and missionary influences, a new class, which has so far remained quite distinct from the general population either in the hills or in the plains. The creation of a hill state will, in our opinion, accentuate these distinctions. It will, therefore, prove, in the long run, against the interest of the scheduled tribe.”*

The proposal of a separate hill state in north-eastern region was rejected by the SRCR on the following grounds: trust deficit between people living in tribal and non-tribal area, uneven socio-economic development of tribal communities which is inimical to fair competition, communication gap between isolated tribal territory and rest of India, and the economically disadvantaged region. The hill districts are not homogenous, either. The inhabited of hill districts are divided into multiple tribal groups, language and culture within hill districts vary from tribe to tribe (Mukerjee, 1969). In latter period new states emerged—Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura—from the hill districts, but the constitutional arrangement of ADC remains unchanged. Nagaland is operating without ADCs and studies indicate that secessionist tendencies in asymmetrical territories are stronger than in a symmetric arrangement (Rode, Pitlik, & Mas, 2018). Studies indicate that asymmetric arrangements among the subnational entities may exacerbate secessionist tendencies. Local issues play a central role in the formation of regional parties (Otjes, 2018), which are prone to secessionist agendas (Sorens, 2012), particularly when they are dominating the public offices. Despite special provision, Nagaland is still experiencing the Naga movement for an independent *Nagalim* (Greater Nagaland), widely regarded as the world's longest-running 'insurgency' (Baruah, 2003) (Wouters, 2018). Another telling example of asymmetric federalism in Indian polity is Jammu and Kashmir region before the abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35A (Zeeshan & Aliefendioğlu, 2024).

Previous literature paid significant attention to the contestation between central and peripheral power (Dasgupta, 1997; Tillin, 2006; Tillin, 2017; Saxena, 2012). However, the question of ethnic diversity below the district level in broader polity is still unexplored. As Thejalkhoukho (2018)

commentary outlined the strong connection ‘Naga’—a dominant tribal of north-eastern India—to their ethnic civil practice, despite assimilating in Christianity. Growing body of literature are including the crucial role of local autonomy in self-governance in managing ethnic diversity and maintaining “federal spirit” of Indian Constitution (Roluahpuia, 2021; Hausing, 2023). Taking cognizance of the above discussion, hypothesis H1 can be safely established; considering the territorial geography and multiethnic diversity, creating a local government with greater autonomy is more viable than creating a new subnational unit.

#### 4.3.2. Ethnic Divide in Local Governance: Tribal vs. Non-tribal

In the context of local governance, India is broadly categorized into tribal and non-tribal systems. Rodrigues (2021) argues that the categorization of ‘tribal’ is understood through the lens of ancient, primitive, or traditional. The procedures of constitution drafting recognize the tribal community through their habitation in autonomous or partially autonomous areas. The degree of autonomy demonstrates that territories inhabited by tribal communities’ function with internal sovereignty, governed by varying degrees of autonomy, adhering to civil practices and customary laws. Central law applies to ensure national sovereignty over the autonomous area.

Tribal categorization, with its legal implications, is a colonial legacy, rooted in the Indian Forest Act 1865. This law was implemented to regulate the revenue generated from forest produce and the transfer of land (Indian Forest Act, 1865). Agnihotri (1994) noted that, the Indian Forest Act 1865 was the foundation for the Scheduled District Act of 1874. This act describes “Scheduled Area” as the territory inhabited by people categorized as tribes (Rodrigues, 2021); the demarcation of territorial boundaries was the responsibility of the local government (Rao, 2011). The concept of the Scheduled Area was being extensively discussed and debated in the House of Commons of the British Parliament, under the Government of India Bill (1935). Lord Eustace Percy referred to the Scheduled Area as a ‘neglected garden’; he described the area with an impression of the ‘Jungle Book,’ stating:

*“We never get on to this subject without somebody talking about the ‘Jungle Book’; but the chief impression left on my mind by the “Jungle Book” is precisely that of an aboriginal population existing in a semi-settled, semi-nomadic condition in the midst of an ordinary agriculture population.”*

Lord Percy proposed the division of the Scheduled Area into the following categories: Excluded Area (The North East Tribal Region) and Partially Excluded Area (Other Backward Region).

These areas were under customary laws and indirect rules; ‘regular laws and legislation of elected provisional bodies’ were completely barred in the excluded areas and, to some extent, applicable in partially extended areas. The Constitution of India (1950) recognized these areas as “autonomous regions” under the Sixth Schedule and laid special provisions regarding the local governance.

The Sixth Schedule serve four purposes: freeing the tribals from the dominance of the non-tribal groups, grants certain degree of sovereignty in local self-governance, facilitate democratic decentralization and promotes equitable growth. Put differently, for India, the Sixth Schedule as a policy strive to integration of indigenous communities into the multiethnic country. In turn, for indigenous communities, Sixth Schedule is an offer of local self-governance to empower locals to align their interest with national development priorities through democratic decentralization (Dasgupta, 1997). Weisskopf (2006) argued that post-colonial countries of south Asia introduced the policy of positive discrimination to mitigate the “persistent lag” in socio-economic development of poor and marginalized. The special provisions aim at the inclusion of relatively poor and marginalized communities in key area of development—education, health, employment—which is elusive to them (Herring & Henderson, 2011; Mallick, 2017). This is a device to safeguard the social and cultural practices and traditional skills and knowledge, which is “transmitted from generations in the form stories, song, dance, paintings” (United Nations, 2019). In consequence, integration of indigenous communities is complicated but a necessary action for “productive co-existence”. Ensuring diversity is crucial for national prosperity, contrary to sameness, diversity drive innovation (Morris, 2024). This explanation supports my hypothesis H2, higher degree of autonomy in local self-governance is leeway to design policy for inclusion and welfare of indigenous communities.

#### 4.3.3. Repressive Law and ‘Legal Pluralism’

Throughout Indian history, India was governed by more refined law—Hindu law or Muslim law. These laws are not unified textual laws like the Western legal system. To some extent, textual law influenced the local laws but did not replace them (Baxi & Galanter, 1979). ‘Legal pluralism’ operates parallelly with statutory law (Ezer, 2016). Customary and religious law includes civil matter: marriage, divorce, inheritance right and have particular implication on gender interaction in society. To address the diverse customary practices of multiple communities, India inherits ‘legal pluralism’ in civil affairs. While there is uniform set of law for criminal matters, the

constitution of India safeguards the variety of customary and religious laws of religious and ethnic minority. On many occasions, the so-called custodians of customary laws make repressive laws to regulate the private life of their community member. Baxi (1985) contends that “...every society has its own sets of repressive features”. For example, in pre-independent India, the practice of polygamy was common in India (Seligson & McCants, 2021), quickly after independence this practice was turned into a punishable act for Hindus, while freedom for religious practice provides immunity to the Muslim, and it is still in practice among the Muslim community (Ghosh & Chakrabarti, 2021). Another telling example is from Bohra community—subset of Muslim community—who weaponized the religious right for continuance of inhumane practice of ‘genital mutilation’ (Deshpande, 2022).

Substates with greater degree of autonomy weaponized their autonomy to legislate repressive laws for instance, in J&K, before abrogation of Article 370, affirmative policies for schedule caste and schedule tribe were not implemented. If a female citizen of J&K marries outside the jurisdiction of state, she loses her inheritance right, but the male citizen was immune from this regulation (Chandran, 2017). ADCs are also empowered to legislate civil laws. In June 2023, Dima Hasao District Council (DHAC) issued a notice to regulate the marriage of their citizens. The notice read:

*“In order to preserve/protect the land of indigenous tribal people of Dima Hasao District and to ensure non-alienation of indigenous people Tribal land to non-Tribal, the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council Haflong is pleased to order that henceforth person (male/female) belonging to indigenous community, if married to a person (male/female) belonging to Non-Tribal community all the rights on land as a tribal in district of Dima Hasao shall be ceased.”*

Unlike J&K, DHAC regulation is non-discriminatory, but still, it is infringement on the freedom of choice. As Kaveri Daulaguphu, a legal expert describes, for any specific dispute, local council norms matter. By custom there was no widely recorded rule automatically disinheriting a person who married outside the community; they still retained their limited customary rights (mother’s property and household items). Under the rights granted by the constitution, a citizen of India has the right to challenge any discriminatory regulation in court of law under Articles 14 and 15 of the Indian Constitution.

#### [4.3.4. Gender Equality in Decision Making at the Local Level](#)

As we have seen the weaponization of customary laws in enacting repressive laws, more often community leaders use it to limit the role of women in decision-making. Studies suggest that

gender equality in decision-making is indispensable to inclusive development (Sell & Minot, 2018; Singh, 2022; Das et al., 2023). Local government plays central in bringing women on the table of decision-making. In policy making, men and women have different priorities (Clayton et al., 2018; Lambert & Amaury, 2025). With 33 percent reservation of seats for women in election of local bodies, along with the institutionalization of panchayats and urban bodies under 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment, today majority of states gender quota has reached to 50 percent, and globally, India has joined the group of 20 countries, where share of women in local governments are more than 40 percent (UNFPA, 2024). However, the provision of gender is limited to PRIs only. Women who live in jurisdiction of ADCs are still waiting for similar reservation in local bodies election. In Nagaland a strong resistance of joint Naga groups under the banner of Naga Tribal Bodies, delayed the implementation of a thirty-three percent reservation for women in urban local bodies' elections for nearly two decades. For opponents of women's reservation, it was a central intervention in customary laws of Naga people, and in consequence an attack on the promise of special autonomy under Article 371 A (Baruha, 2024; Buragohain, 2024; Thejalkhoukho, 2025). The implementation of women's reservation require amendment in provision of Sixth Schedule and customary laws, too. In turn amendment of Sixth Schedule depend on political will of central government and local leaders while changes to customary law need community consciousness, as seen in case of Nagaland. The given evidence is consistent with Hypothesis 3.

## **Conclusion**

In the pursuit of development, localizing policy is a common aspiration of political leaders and policy makers. In turn, localization calls for inclusive decision-making, every concern of every citizen needs to be addressed. In doing this, local institution needs autonomy to act with agility to fulfil the local demands in local conditions. In consequence, autonomy derives from national policy or constitutional arrangement. In this effort, decentralization facilitates multilevel governance, while constitutional consciousness allows national government to grant asymmetric degree of autonomy at federated and local levels. The process of asymmetric power distribution among the federated units is referred to as asymmetric federalism and at local level, asymmetric localism. Unlike asymmetric federalism, asymmetric localism is addressing heterogeneity at

grassroot level, this approach serves the development goal better: inclusive and sustainable development.

To some extent this study addresses the central question: *In what way and to what extent do local autonomy and intergovernmental relation contribute towards the better functioning of local governments?* This study attempts to do that by reviewing the existing forms of local governance and their implication of local autonomy to local government and by drawing lesson from asymmetric federalism and experience for localizing policy to enhance person's ability to thrive. The concept asymmetric localism presented here, certainly not set in stone, is envisioned to synthesize what is known about constitutional conscious, with a focus on heterogeneity at the optimum lowest level for those political leaders and policy maker in multiethnic countries considering welfare of the last person by transferring certain degree of sovereignty to the lower tier of governance.

In conclusion while this study indicates that asymmetric localism is key to empowering local government, as it is effective in-service delivery and efficient in promoting people's welfare, the future research should investigate the quality of local governance. Quality of governance reflects in citizen's degree of satisfaction and level of trust in service delivery and agility to respond on externalities. Trust is key to effective governance and the binding force to hold society together (Cerna, 2014). And satisfaction is core to efficiency and effectiveness of local governance in service delivery (Favero, Walker, & Zhang, 2024). The degree of trust relies on transparency and accountability in service delivery and agility to respond on externalities. In turn, level of satisfaction drives from the gap between the promises and delivery of local governance. Ryzin (2004), who introduced a theory on citizen satisfaction, found that satisfaction and disconfirmed satisfaction are positively associated. Satisfaction of a person in her local government evolves with time through a continuous interaction between the stakeholders of development (Ryzin et al., 2004). Citizens opinion is key to assess the quality of local government. Therefore, it should be factored into future research as well that apply asymmetric localism in two distinct forms of local government operating with varied degree of autonomy within a common federation.

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