

Gender-Inclusive, Community-Driven Climate Action in Raigad, Maharashtra: The Conference of Panchayats as a Methodological Pathway for Climate Governance in the Global South

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Abstract

This article examines the Conference of Panchayats (CoP-R) in Raigad, Maharashtra, as an innovative model of gender-inclusive and community-driven climate governance rooted in decentralised democracy. Anchored in the principles of Decolonisation, Indigenisation, and Localisation (DIL), the initiative repositions Panchayats as active co-designers of climate action rather than passive implementers. Drawing on participatory deliberations across Gram Panchayats, it demonstrates how indigenous knowledge, women's leadership, and local ecological priorities can shape resilient climate strategies. The article argues that integrating community agency, social justice, and institutional collaboration offers a replicable methodological pathway for climate governance across the Global South.

Keywords: Climate Governance; Panchayati Raj; Community-Led Adaptation; Gender-Inclusive Development; Decolonisation, Indigenisation and Localisation

1 Introduction

The Conference of Panchayats (CoP) represents a pioneering experiment in locally-led climate action, designed to reposition India's Panchayats as legitimate actors in climate governance. Inspired by the UN's Conference of Parties (COP), CoP was to create a decentralised, democratic platform where grassroots voices

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could deliberate on resilience and adaptation. It was conceived as a Global South response to Global North climate dialogues, foregrounding locally led action and strengthening the constitutional voices of Panchayats—the third tier of governance—as central actors in shaping climate plans. Building on this foundation, CoP (R) in Raigad 2026 has been designed by the School of Habitat Studies (SoHS) , Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), with Asar , and supported by the University of Toronto India Foundation (UTIF). It is one of Maharashtra’s first gender-inclusive, community-driven climate action plans, working under the aegis of the State Climate Action Cell (SCAC). CoP (R) is emerging as an important methodological intervention in formulating Raigad’s district climate action plan, strengthening and capacitating local governance institutions across multiple tiers. By embedding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into local planning and anchoring its philosophy in Decolonisation, Indigenisation, and Localisation (DIL), CoP demonstrates how community-centred pathways can serve as a Global South response to climate governance, rooted in justice and local agency.

2 The Initial Phase and Journey of CoP

The Conference of Panchayats (CoP) emerged as a pioneering experiment in locally-led climate action, initiated by Asar and the Policy & Development Advisory Group (PDAG) between 2022 and 2024. CoP sought to create a sub-national democratic platform where India’s Panchayats—the closest governance institutions to rural communities—could deliberate on climate resilience and adaptation. The initial phase, CoP 1.0, began in Jharkhand with state-level discussions in Ranchi (March 2022) and a national consultation in June 2022. These early dialogues highlighted pressing issues such as declining agricultural productivity, groundwater depletion, deforestation, and pollution from coal mining. Panchayats underscored the need for autonomy, technical support, and revitalisation of traditional practices, positioning themselves as legitimate actors in climate governance rather than mere implementers of top-down schemes. Building on this foundation, CoP 2.0 expanded across Bokaro, Dumka, Chaibasa, and Daltonganj, deepening the focus on just transitions and vulnerable communities. Evidence generation on climate-induced migration, capacity building for PRI leaders, and decentralised

renewable energy emerged as priorities. By 2024, the journey extended to Bihar, where consultations in Jamui addressed the dual crises of floods in the north and droughts in the south, stressing gender-sensitive approaches and utilisation of MGNREGA and DMFT funds. In Maharashtra's Beed district, over 30 PRI representatives convened to deliberate on agroecology, climate finance, and migration, with the Block Development Officer emphasising the importance of linking Panchayat planning with climate finance. Across these phases, CoP established Panchayats as legitimate actors in climate governance, documented indigenous practices, and amplified grassroots voices. Its journey demonstrated that resilience must be rooted in local realities, indigenous knowledge, and community ownership, laying the groundwork for the evolution of CoP (R) in Raigad 2026

3 The Conference of Panchayat [CoP (R)] in Raigad, Maharashtra

3.1 Philosophy - From Dil se to DIL

The philosophy of the Conference of Panchayats (CoP (R) in Raigad 2026, formulated by SoHS, TISS is anchored in the idea that climate governance must emerge dil se—from the heart. Unlike technocratic frameworks that reduce climate action to metrics and targets, CoP(R) insists that dialogue must begin with lived emotions, vulnerabilities, and aspirations. Communities speak of water scarcity, migration anxieties, and memories of forests not as abstract data points but as felt realities. This heartfelt grounding evolves into the DIL philosophy—Decolonisation, Indigenisation, and Localisation. Decolonisation challenges top-down, extractive models of governance by reclaiming Panchayats as producers of knowledge and co-architects of solutions. Indigenisation validates ecological wisdom embedded in oral traditions, tribal art, and sustainable practices, while critically recovering those that remain socially inclusive. Localisation reframes global frameworks like the SDGs through local socio-cultural realities, ensuring that climate action resonates with community aspirations (IPCC,2022). Together, DIL transforms CoP (R) into a philosophical project of justice, where climate resilience is inseparable from epistemic justice, gender justice, and ecological sustainability.

3.2 The redefined Vision of CoP - Towards Deliberative Democracy

The vision of CoP (R) marks a departure from the earlier CoP, moving beyond dialogue into deliberative democracy and activating the meso tier of governance at the block level. Panchayats, historically limited to implementing schemes, are repositioned as legitimate actors in climate governance, capable of designing, monitoring, and evaluating local climate plans. This vision is rooted in the principle of subsidiarity, where decisions are made at the lowest competent level, ensuring that ‘governance is not imposed but co-produced’ (MoPR,2019). By embedding deliberation into the organisational structure of Local Governance Institutions (LGIs), CoP (R) envisions LGIs as laboratories of democratic innovation. Here, climate justice, resilience, and sustainability are woven into everyday governance. The vision also emphasises inclusivity: women’s leadership in Gram Sabhas, youth participation in resilience strategies, and tribal communities’ rights in forest stewardship. By localising SDGs—such as poverty alleviation, gender equality, clean water, and climate action— CoP (R) assures that global commitments are translated into practical, community-owned interventions. This vision positions Raigad’s Panchayats not as passive recipients of policy but as co-designers of transformative climate governance.

4 Methodology - Structured Pathways of Co-Production

The methodology of CoP (R) is designed to operationalize deliberative democracy through a structured, replicable process. It begins with Pre-CoP Mapping, where Gram Panchayats within the selected block identify priority issues such as water scarcity, migration, forest governance, and gender equity. These issues are then brought into Block-Level Deliberation, where facilitated discussions distil common thematic areas. A Detailed Issue Analysis links local experiences with structural challenges, while Indigenous Practices & Resources are documented to ensure solutions are rooted in cultural memory and ecological heritage. The process culminates in a Solution Matrix, integrating GP activities with block-level interventions, which is then presented to block officials for alignment. Collaborative program design follows, where administrators, Panchayats, and communities co-develop replicable development programs. Finally, consensus is

achieved among officials, elected LGIs, Village Development Committees, and community representatives, moving from dialogue to actionable interventions. This methodology ensures that CoP(R) is not a one-time event but a continuous process of co-production, embedding resilience into democratic structures.

5 The Sudhagad Block-Level Conference of Panchayats CoP 1 (R),

5.1 Setting the Context

The Sudhagad Block-Level Conference of Panchayats, convened on 29 April 2026 at the Maratha Hall in Pali, organised by TISS, Asar, and Waatavaran marked a significant milestone in participatory climate governance. Session II, the core deliberative space of the day, brought together representatives from fifteen Gram Panchayats into structured breakout groups on forests, water, gender, and livelihoods. This format moved beyond token participation, enabling elected representatives and community members to articulate lived experiences of climate stress, diagnose structural barriers, and co-produce actionable demands. The methodology—issue mapping, root cause analysis, documentation of indigenous solutions, and democratic formulation of action points—ensured that the voices of tribal wadis, forest-dependent households, and women's collectives were not only heard but translated into governance mandates. The session demonstrated that communities in Sudhagad possess both the knowledge and agency to articulate precise, evidence-based demands. The responsibility now lies with block and district administrations to receive these demands as serious governance priorities, co-designing implementation pathways in the spirit of decentralised democracy.

5.2 Integrative Framework - The Role of the 5As and Justice Orientation

CoP (R) operationalises its vision through the **5As framework**—Academicians, Activists, Administrators, Artists, and Amplifiers. Each group plays a distinct but interconnected role in shaping participatory climate governance.

- **Academicians** - At Raigad, the School of Habitat Studies, TISS, represented the academic community, co-designing the vision, methodology, and structure of CoP (R). Their role was to provide analytical depth, policy framing, and methodological rigor.

- **Activists** - Organisations like Waatavaran and Asar facilitated the convening of meetings and discussions, mobilising voices and ensuring accountability.
- **Administrators** - Local officials including the Tehsildar, Agricultural Officer, and Block Development Officer of Pali actively engaged with community deliberations, signalling readiness to work with Panchayats in addressing issues raised at the block level.
- **Artists** - Community groups, especially Katkari tribal collectives, brought indigenous and creative expressions into the climate dialogues, ensuring cultural resonance.
- **Amplifiers (Media)** - Baimanus, the community media team, documented and amplified voices through digital spaces, extending narratives into the public sphere.

Gender justice ensures women's leadership is central; epistemic justice values lived knowledge alongside scientific data; and climate justice recognises differentiated vulnerabilities and historical responsibilities. Community resilience, therefore, is not passive coping but active intervention, rooted in collective agency and counter-hegemonic consciousness. By mobilising Gram Sabhas, SHGs, and VDCs, CoP (R) revitalises indigenous practices like rainwater harvesting, seed conservation, and forest stewardship. In doing so, CoP (R) transforms climate governance into a participatory, rights-based process that empowers communities to shape equitable and sustainable futures. This integrative framework ensured holistic participation, "making climate discourse culturally resonant and politically accountable" (UNFCCC, 1992). At its core, CoP (R) embeds **justice as a non-negotiable element**. Climate action must embody a just transition, equitably sharing burdens and benefits (IIED, 2019)

6 Community Knowledge and Forest-Water Nexus

The breakout groups revealed the depth of community ecological knowledge and its relevance to climate resilience. In Chive Tribal Wadi, participants highlighted the absence of rainwater harvesting infrastructure despite adequate rainfall, underscoring the need for contour trenches, bunds, and forest ponds. Simultaneously, they lamented the erosion of seed sovereignty, with traditional

millets like Nachni reduced to marginal cultivation. Forest livelihoods—wild vegetables, fruits, and seasonal produce—are increasingly threatened by deforestation and recurrent fires. Women, as custodians of traditional ecological knowledge, bear disproportionate burdens of water collection and resource gathering, yet their knowledge transmission remains unsupported (UN Women, 2020). Vandroshi Tribal Wadi echoed similar concerns, demanding solar-powered water systems, filtered supply, and storage tanks, while also foregrounding gendered vulnerabilities such as child marriage, inadequate maternity care, and lack of vocational training. These narratives illustrate how water insecurity, forest degradation, and gender inequality intersect to produce compounded vulnerabilities, while simultaneously offering pathways rooted in indigenous practices and community solidarity.

7 Agriculture, Health, and Gendered Vulnerabilities

The deliberations from Aptawane, Siddheshwar, and Thanale villages highlighted the paradox of high rainfall coupled with post-monsoon water crises. Communities demanded deepening of lakes and bund construction through *Shramdaan* to retain runoff. Restrictions on forest access and confiscation of tribal tools undercut constitutional entitlements, while pending land claims perpetuate insecurity. Women's health crises—linked to firewood dependence, indoor air pollution, and poor menstrual hygiene—were foregrounded alongside calls for solar stoves and LPG connections. Thanale's repeated forest fire losses underscored the urgency of equipping Community Forest Rights Management Committees with machinery and protocols for prevention and rapid response. Across these villages, women's livelihoods remain precarious, with limited vocational training and absence of small enterprise development. The proposed action points—ranging from soil conservation and agro-ecological farming to vocational programmes for women—reflect a holistic understanding of climate vulnerability that integrates ecological, social, and gendered dimensions.

8 Towards Participatory Climate Governance

The final presentations from Kavelawadi, Dudhani, and Pachhapur reinforced the urgency of participatory climate governance. Erratic rainfall patterns have disrupted agricultural calendars, driving migration and eroding community cohesion. Forest degradation and recurrent fires compound vulnerabilities, while post-Diwali water crises persist due to inadequate storage infrastructure. Women's participation in Gram Sabhas remains structurally limited, risking gender-blind climate planning. Communities demanded rain gauges for evidence-based agriculture, RCC bunds and percolation tanks for water security, and quotas for women's voices in governance. Pachhapur's proposals—mobilising participatory funding for watershed works, vocational training to reduce migration, and equalising wage rates—illustrate the integration of social justice into climate action. Taken together, the Sudhagad CoP (R) demonstrates that grassroots communities are not passive recipients of policy but active co-designers of climate solutions. Their negotiated agendas—rooted in lived experience, ecological knowledge, and gendered realities—offer a transformative pathway for decentralised climate governance.

9 Conclusion

The Conference of Panchayats (CoP R - Raigad 2026) demonstrates that climate governance must be re-imagined as a community-centred pathway, where resilience is co-designed and co-produced with those most affected. By anchoring its philosophy in Decolonisation, Indigenisation, and Localisation (DIL), CoP (R) challenges technocratic, top-down models and restores agency to Panchayats as self-governing republics. Decolonisation dismantles extractive governance frameworks, positioning local institutions as producers of knowledge and architects of solutions. Indigenisation validates ecological wisdom embedded in oral traditions, seed conservation, and forest stewardship, ensuring that adaptation strategies are rooted in cultural memory and ecological sustainability. Localisation reframes the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through the lived realities of communities, translating global commitments into practical interventions on poverty, hunger, gender equality, water security, and climate action

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