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PRAGATI NEWSLETTER



Professional Tax in India: Unlocking Local Fiscal Strength

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Professional Tax in India: Unlocking Local Fiscal Strength

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The Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) is playing a vital role in strengthening Panchayats as self-reliant (Atmanirbhar) institutions of local governance. Through policy guidance, capacity building and technical support, the Ministry is enabling Panchayats to better plan, implement and monitor development initiatives while responding effectively to local needs. These efforts are being reinforced through MoPR's key initiatives and campaigns such as the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), Sabki Yojana - Sabka Vikas, and Say No to Proxy Sarpanch, which seek to deepen grassroots democracy, promote participatory planning and strengthen the leadership and institutional capacity of Panchayats.

These advocacies have resulted in incentivisation through rankings, awards, documentaries and project financing. The initiatives have evolved into a vibrant movement, unlocking the potential of local self-governance. However, certain policy areas with immense promise remain untouched. One such example is the Professional Tax, which has not seen amendments since 1988, leaving significant revenue potential untapped.

In the article below, I will explore the framework, challenges and opportunities associated with professional tax.

Introduction

Professional tax (PT) is a state-level direct tax levied on individuals engaged in professions, trades, callings, and employment.

It applies broadly to salaried employees, self-employed professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and chartered accountants, traders and business owners, and freelancers, consultants, and contractors.

Income tax is levied on a person's income or earnings by the central government. On the other hand, PT is charged on a person's work and profession. It is imposed as a fee for the privilege granted by the state government to carry out one's profession under the law of the land.

In practice, employers usually deduct it from employees' salaries every month and remit it to the designated state authority. A self-employed person must register and pay PT directly to the authority in accordance with state norms. At present, 20 States and one Union Territory (Puducherry) impose PT, all of them adhering to a limit of Rs 2,500 per year. PT is not imposed in eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand.

There is a provision to empower Panchayats to either directly collect PT or claim a share of the revenue collected from the state government. However, most states fail to devolve the authority and assign a revenue share to panchayats. Hence, PT has emerged more as a state-level or Urban Local Body (municipal) tax. Exceptions are present in states such as Kerala, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu.



Historical Evolution

The origins of professional tax can be traced back to the Government of India Act, 1935, which empowered provincial governments to levy such taxes. This provision was later incorporated into the Constitution of India under Article 276. States are empowered to levy professional tax through Article 276, read with entry 60 of List II (State List).

During the Constituent Assembly Debates, it was contested whether the tax on income and the tax on professions are in conflict. Dr Ambedkar agreed with the conflict; however, he argued for the continuation of the PT since certain municipal administrations were heavily dependent on PT revenue, and its abolition would severely affect their functioning.

In the post-Independence period, PT was capped at Rs. 250 per annum. Later, the ceiling was revised to Rs. 2,500 through the 60th Constitutional Amendment in 1988 upon the recommendation of the Sarkaria Commission. However, this ceiling has not been revised, limiting the revenue potential of the tax. Various commissions, including the Santhanam Committee (1963) and the Sarkaria Commission (1988), have highlighted the importance of professional tax in strengthening subnational finances. The Sarkaria Commission highlighted low revenue collection arising from the low ceiling.

Current Administrative Framework

Senior citizens, pensioners, persons with disabilities, caste-based artisans, women-led SHGs, temporary workers, etc., are exempted as per the state norms. Occupational exemptions and PT rates differ by state, but they generally follow progressive salary slabs, profession types and socio-economic characteristics. In most states, employees earning below a prescribed threshold–typically ranging from ₹10,000 to ₹25,000 per month–are exempt from professional tax. In Maharashtra, the salary slabs are further categorised gender-wise, and the salary exemption limit for PT is Rs 10,000 for males and Rs 25,000 for females, as per the 2023 amendments.

The institutional reality in India is highly uneven:

o In 17 states, professional tax is levied and collected by the state government and only assigned/shared with the local bodies. The sharing agreement is mostly with the urban local bodies.

o Only three states legally empower rural local bodies to directly levy/collect professional tax.

Operational Mechanism	Examples	Revenue Sharing
State-controlled collection	Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana	Limited or no devolution
PT Shared with municipalities	**Andhra Pradesh, Tripura and Bihar**	**Partial sharing**
Local government-led collection	Kerala, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu	High retention at the local level

Potential and Challenges

Professional tax has strong potential as a stable and predictable source of revenue for local governments. Its broad base and relatively low compliance cost make it suitable for decentralisation. Evidence suggests that rationalisation of tax rates and improved administration could significantly enhance collections, potentially increasing revenues by multiple times (sevenfold, as per the IIPA 2025 report). Strengthening the role of Panchayats in professional tax collection can improve fiscal autonomy and accountability at the local level and improve service delivery.

A major constraint in professional tax administration is the outdated ceiling of Rs. 2,500, which significantly limits revenue generation, redistribution and local development. Adjusting for inflation, the effective value of this ceiling has eroded over time. As per the 6th State Finance Commission for Tamil Nadu, Sikkim, and Punjab, the ceiling should be increased from Rs 2,500 to Rs 12,000. Similarly, the 15th CFC advocates indexing the ceiling for cumulative inflation, which would increase the rate to approximately Rs 18,000 at 2019-20 price levels. The 16th CFC deliberation notes that several states argue for removing the Rs 2500 ceiling on PT.

Another challenge is the absence of comprehensive databases of taxpayers, leading to inefficiencies in identification and compliance. Fragmented institutional arrangements also contribute to inconsistencies in revenue sharing across states.

Way Forward

Revising the constitutional ceiling on professional tax is a critical first step. Introducing inflation indexing can ensure that the tax remains relevant over time. States should consider devolving greater authority to Panchayats for tax collection and retention. Capacity building and digital systems can support this transition. Developing integrated databases and linking professional tax systems with other administrative datasets, such as GST and payroll systems, can improve compliance and efficiency.

There is a need to build local tax registries at the panchayat level. Digital platforms can help integrate data for accountability and transparency. There is a need to revise guidelines for levy, sharing and administration. To avoid overlap with income tax, the policy of amending the PT rules rests with the Parliament. A special majority is required in both houses to revise the upper limit of PT. However, Parliament has not updated the PT rate and guidelines since 1988.

In this regard, it will be beneficial if the recommendations of the five-yearly constituted Central Finance Commission (CFC) are given due weightage in policy formulation and revision of rates by amending the constitutional rules and empowering CFCs. The CFC shall actively seek inputs from the State Finance Commissions (SFCs) for the revision in PT.

Secondly, the unused fiscal power related to professional tax needs to be harnessed by empowering panchayats to directly collect PT. The high unrealised potential of PT can enhance stable and predictable collection of OSR at a relatively low administrative cost. IIPA report (2025) estimate suggest that the potential collection of PT is seven times more than the present-day collection.

Finally, a UFC and SFC led PT policy framework can help standardise practices and reduce disparities in administration. PT holds immense potential for empowering local governments by increasing OSR and strengthening service delivery.

Training of Trainers (ToT) program on implementation permissible works under VB-G RAM G





Master Trainers and UTs with Mr Abi Abraham, Jr Project Officer, Rural Employment Division, Ministry of Rural Development, and NIRDPR faculties during the ToT Programme on implementation of permissible works

CIATSJ, in association with CWEL, organised a two-day Training of Trainers (ToT) program on 10th and 11th September 2026 at NIRDPR Hyderabad, with the objective of orienting the Master Trainers on the modules developed for the purpose of training the State, District and Block level officials on implementation of 375 permissible works under VB-G RAM G. A total of 82 Master Trainers from 29 States and UTs participated in this programme.

Six modules developed by NIRDPR to train stakeholders, particularly engineers, involved in implementing different categories of works under VB-G RAM G, were discussed in detail during this programme. As part of the Annual Action Plan for Capacity building of VB-G RAM G stakeholders, it is planned to organise 277 capacity-building training programmes to train 11089 stakeholders exclusively on Implementation of four categories of Permissible Works under VB-G RAM G across 34 States & UTs. Mr Abi Abraham, Junior Project Officer from the Rural Employment Division of the Ministry of Rural Development, participated in this programme and supported the NIRDPR faculty in orienting the master trainers.

Prof. Jyothis Sathyapalan, School Head, CIATSJ, participated in the inaugural session, and Prof. Ravindra Gavali, School Head-CWEL, participated in the valedictory session and addressed the participants. NIRDPR faculty team comprising Dr C. Kathiresan, Dr Ramesh Sakthivel, Dr V. Suresh Babu, Dr T. Vijaya Kumar, Dr P. P. Sahu, Dr Krishna Lohi Das, Dr M K Shrivastava, Er. Solanki, Er. P. P. Bhattacharjee, Dr Lakhan Singh, Dr Prabhakar and Er. K. Rajeshwar facilitated the discussions during the two-day ToT programme.















NIRDPR Organises Training cum Writeshop for Sikkim Officials





Smt. Rohini R. Bhajibhakare, IAS, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, and DDG (i/c), NIRDPR, interacting with participants during the Training-cum-Writeshop on Planning and Designing of Training Modules and Research Proposals

The National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR), Hyderabad, organised a five-day Training-cum-Writeshop on Planning and Designing of Training Modules and Research Proposals from 21 to 25 September 2026 for Master Trainers and officials of the State Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (SIRD&PR), Sikkim.

The programme was designed to strengthen the participants' capacities in training design, research proposal development, entrepreneurship, publication processes and the use of emerging Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools. The programme combined classroom sessions with practical exercises, hands-on writing and expert and peer review, enabling participants to develop outputs relevant to the training and research requirements of Sikkim.

The sessions covered key areas including Training Needs Assessment, competency-based training design, development of effective training modules, entrepreneurship development and business planning for rural technology products, research problem identification, research methodology, literature review, identification of research gaps and data analysis. Participants were also introduced to Artificial Intelligence, Generative AI and prompt engineering, along with their applications in training and research.

Other areas addressed during the programme included digital marketing and branding, preparation of research reports and journal papers, publication processes, publication ethics, responsible use of AI, open-source tools, and AI-enabled dashboards, infographics and data visualisation.

A major component of the writeshop was the practical development of Sikkim-specific training modules, research proposals and business plans. These outputs were subjected to expert and peer review to facilitate further refinement and finalisation.

The programme was inaugurated by Smt. Rohini R. Bhajibhakare, IAS, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, and DDG (i/c), NIRDPR. She interacted with the participants and emphasised the importance of strengthening institutional capacities through relevant, evidence-based and technology-enabled approaches.

The programme was coordinated by Dr M V Ravibabu, Associate Professor & Head, SIRD/ETC Networking Unit, Centre for ICT and Coordinator, Centre of Excellence in AI, NIRDPR, and Dr Prabhakar Kollapudi, Assistant Professor & Head, CPME, NIRDPR.

Strengthening Training and Assessment Capacities through RPL





Dr J. S. Reddy, Professor, NIRDPR and Executive Director, DDU-GKY Resource Cell, NIRDPR, with participants during the Training of Trainers – Pedagogy (RPL) and Training of Assessors (RPL) programmes

The National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR), Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, conducted a Training of Trainers – Pedagogy (RPL) from 31 August to 2 September 2026, followed by a Training of Assessors (RPL) on 3 September 2026 for professionals and experts from the Pest Management Industry.

The programmes were organised under the NCVET-approved qualification of Industrial General Pest Management Technician, with a focus on strengthening the capacity of industry professionals engaged in training and assessment under the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) framework.

The three-day Training of Trainers programme focused on enhancing the pedagogical competencies of trainers and supporting the delivery of structured, competency-based and standardised training aligned with the approved qualification. The programme aimed to strengthen trainers' capacity to effectively facilitate learning among candidates with existing industry experience.

The Training of Assessors held on 3 September focused on strengthening assessment competencies and promoting consistency and quality in the assessment of candidates under the RPL framework. The programme also highlighted the importance of robust assessment practices in recognising and certifying existing skills.

The initiatives are expected to contribute to the standardisation of training and assessment practices, expansion of the pool of trainers and assessors, recognition of existing skills through RPL, and development of a larger pool of skilled Pest Management Technicians. These efforts are also aimed at supporting improved quality and professionalism in the Pest Management sector.

At the valedictory session, Dr J. S. Reddy, Professor, NIRDPR and Executive Director, DDU-GKY Resource Cell, NIRDPR, addressed the participants and discussed the way forward. The programmes marked an effort towards strengthening the skills ecosystem by connecting industry requirements, competency-based training and quality certification.

Promoting Livelihood through Rural Tourism and Homestay





Dr Partha Pratim Sahu, Associate Professor & Head i/c,CEDFI;Dr Ravindra Gavali, Professor & Head, CNRM, CCDM NIRDPR, with participants of ToT Programme on Promoting Livelihood through Rural Tourism and Homestay

Rural tourism and community-based homestays are gaining attention as potential avenues for livelihood generation and local enterprise development. In this context, NIRDPR, Hyderabad, is conducting a five-day Training of Trainers (ToT) Programme on "Promoting Livelihood through Rural Tourism and Homestay" from 28 September to 2 October 2026, sponsored by DAY-NRLM.

The programme is aimed at strengthening the capacities of officials from State Rural Livelihood Missions (SRLMs), particularly those working in the Non-Farm vertical, to promote rural tourism and homestays as viable livelihood opportunities. The focus is on enabling SHGs, collectives, local entrepreneurs and community institutions to participate in tourism-related enterprises.

Participants are being introduced to rural tourism models and good practices, mapping and profiling of tourism potential, homestay planning and business models, community-based tourism, SHG engagement, marketing and digital promotion, value - chain development and enterprise promotion. Government schemes and institutional frameworks relevant to rural tourism are also being discussed.

The five-day programme combines classroom sessions, expert interactions, case studies, group exercises, practical sessions and exposure visits. Sharing of successful models and peer learning among SRLMs are also integral to the programme.

Dr Ravindra Gavali, Professor & Head, Centre for Natural Resource Management, Climate Change and Disaster Mitigation, NIRDPR, welcomed the participants and highlighted the importance of strengthening capacities to promote sustainable rural tourism and livelihood opportunities.

The programme is coordinated by Dr Partha Pratim Sahu, Centre for Entrepreneurship Development & Financial Inclusion (CEDFI), NIRDPR, and Mr Ashutosh Dhami, YP – NRLM Resource Centre. The programme seeks to support SRLMs in developing rural tourism and homestays as sustainable livelihood and local enterprise opportunities.

Strengthening Biodiversity Management Committees for Effective Grassroots Governance



Participants with Dr Surjit Vikraman, Associate Professor & Head, CAS andresource persons during the Capacity Building Programme for Members of Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs)

The DDU-GKY Resource Cell, National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR), Hyderabad, with the support of the National Biodiversity Authority (NBA), Mahatma Gandhi State Institute of Rural Development & Panchayati Raj (MGSIRD&PR), and the Madhya Pradesh State Biodiversity Board, organised a one-day Capacity Building Programme for Members of Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs) on 7 September 2026 at Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh.

The programme was attended by 52 Panchayat Secretaries and BMC members involved in grassroots-level biodiversity governance and the preparation of People's Biodiversity Registers (PBRs). The training focused on strengthening their understanding of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002, and its 2023 Amendments, biodiversity governance, institutional mechanisms, PBR preparation, Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS), community rights, conservation planning and sustainable use of biological resources.

Sessions covered practical aspects of biodiversity conservation and community - based management. Mr Abhishek Nagavanshi, Faculty, MGSIRD&PR; Ms Shivani Sharma, Technical Expert, PBR; Mr Shubham Singh Pankaj; Mr Vivek Kumar Pandey, Technical Expert, NRM, Madhya Pradesh State Biodiversity Board; Sri Manoj Solanki, Assistant Member Secretary, Madhya Pradesh State Biodiversity Board; and Dr Surjit Vikraman, Associate Professor and Head, Centre for Agrarian Studies, NIRDPR, facilitated sessions on various aspects of biodiversity conservation, governance and community participation.

Shri Govind Singh Patel, recipient of the State Award of the Madhya Pradesh State Biodiversity Board in 2023, shared his experiences in biodiversity conservation and highlighted the importance of strengthening BMCs and supporting their activities at the Gram Panchayat level.

The programme concluded with a valedictory session chaired by Shri Aakash Sahu, IFS, SDO, Jabalpur. Participants were awarded certificates and shared their observations and suggestions for strengthening and expanding capacity-building initiatives for BMCs across Madhya Pradesh.

The programme emphasised the role of local institutions and communities in biodiversity conservation, protection of community rights and sustainable management of biological resources, thereby contributing to effective biodiversity governance at the grassroots level.

NIRDPR Conducts Capacity Building Programme for Biodiversity Management Committees in Karnataka





Dr Pratyusna Patnaik, Assistant Professor, CPRDP&SSD, NIRDPR, with the participants of the Capacity Building Programme for Biodiversity Management Committees.

A Capacity Building Programme for members of Biodiversity Management Committees BMCs was organised by NIRDPR Hyderabad with the support of the National Biodiversity Authority NBA and the Karnataka State Biodiversity Board on 29 September 2026 at Chikkaballapur Taluka Karnataka.

The programme brought together 41 BMC members and Panchayat Secretaries, along with Taluk-level officials, Gram Panchayat Administrators and Presidents of Gram Panchayat-level federations. The programme focused on strengthening the understanding and functioning of BMCs in biodiversity governance and conservation at the grassroots level.

The sessions covered key areas including the Biological Diversity Act, 2002 and the 2023 Amendments, biodiversity governance, preparation and maintenance of People's Biodiversity Registers (PBRs), Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS), conservation planning and sustainable use of biodiversity.

The programme was inaugurated by Mr Athik Pasha, Deputy Secretary, Zilla Panchayat, Chikkaballapur. He emphasised the importance of strengthening BMCs for effective biodiversity governance and conservation at the grassroots. Mr Srinath Gowda, CS, Executive Officer, Chikkaballapur Taluk, and Ms V. Rashmi, Tahsildar, Chikkaballapur Taluk, also attended the inaugural session.

The programme featured sessions by resource persons including Mr Prasanna K.R., Technical Executive, Karnataka Biodiversity Board, Bengaluru; Mr Shiva Swamy, Traditional Nati Vaidya, Dibburu Gramam, Chikkaballapur Taluk; and Sri Swami Lavana, Project Coordinator, Green Chikkaballapur, Isha Outreach Centre. Their expertise provided participants with practical insights into biodiversity conservation, traditional knowledge and sustainable use of local biological resources.

The programme served as a platform for enhancing grassroots-level understanding of biodiversity conservation, community participation and sustainable biodiversity governance. It was coordinated by Dr Pratyusna Patnaik, Assistant Professor, NIRDPR, Hyderabad.

The programme concluded with a renewed commitment to strengthening BMCs and promoting community-led conservation and sustainable management of India’s rich biodiversity.

NIRDPR and BAIF Sign Three-Year MoU to Strengthen Inclusive and Child-Friendly Panchayats





Representatives of NIRDPR and BAIF Foundation during the signing of the three-year MoU for strengthening inclusive and child-friendly Panchayats at NIRDPR, Hyderabad

The National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR) and the British Asian India Foundation (BAIF), an affiliate of the British Asian Trust, signed a three-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on 23rd September 2026 at NIRDPR, Hyderabad. The renewed partnership builds on the collaboration between the two institutions during 2025–26 to foster Child-Friendly Villages and strengthen child-protection mechanisms within Panchayati Raj Institutions.

The MoU was signed by Dr Pranab Kumar Ghosh, Assistant Registrar (Establishment) in-charge, NIRDPR, and Mr Bharath Visweswariah, Executive Director – India, British Asian Trust, representing BAIF, in the presence of Dr Rupika Chahal, Lead, Government Engagement, BAIF; Dr Ravindra S. Gavali, Professor and Head, Centre for Natural Resource Management, Climate Change and Disaster Mitigation; Dr R. Ramesh, Associate Professor and Head, Centre for Gender Studies and Development & CRI, NIRDPR; Dr Jyoti Prakash Mohanty, Deputy Director, NRLM Resource Cell; and Ms Shruti Apsingiker, SBCC Coordinator, UNICEF-CRU, NIRDPR.

The MoU provides an institutional framework for piloting, demonstrating and validating convergent, Panchayat-centred approaches aimed at strengthening community-level social protection mechanisms, improving vulnerable households' access to government entitlements and services, and enhancing community participation in local development planning. The initial areas of collaboration include technology-enabled facilitation of social protection entitlements through community cadres, identification and referral of vulnerable households through Panchayats, and Social and Behaviour Change Communication interventions to strengthen participation in the People's Plan Campaign and Gram Panchayat Development Plan processes.

The partnership complements BAIF's KAWACH programme, which seeks to strengthen Panchayat-led systems for child protection, social protection and inclusive local governance through a family-centred approach. It envisages closer convergence among Panchayati Raj Institutions, community institutions, and the National Rural Livelihoods Mission to facilitate early identification of vulnerabilities, access to social protection and livelihoods, and the inclusion of the needs of children and vulnerable families in local planning and budgeting.

During the discussions following the signing, it was agreed to organise a one-day workshop at NIRDPR to deliberate upon the proposed activities and develop project-specific work plans, timelines, institutional responsibilities, expected outputs and implementation arrangements under the MoU. The participants also explored the scope for extending the partnership to other areas of mutual interest, particularly natural-resource conservation and sustainable livelihoods.

One Spark, Fifty-One Donors: A Gift of Life at NIRDPR







Every collective movement begins somewhere. Sometimes, it begins with just one person and one compelling idea. The Blood Donation Camp held at NIRDPR on 3 September 2026 began exactly that way. The thought first occurred to one student: Why not organise a blood donation camp on the campus? It was a simple idea, but one backed by conviction. She shared it with fellow students. The idea caught on. What began as one students thought soon became a shared aspiration of the Student Volunteer Committee.

Then came the ripple effect.

Students rallied around the proposal. Faculty members encouraged it. The administration came forward to facilitate it. The Registrar, the PRO and other officials helped translate the idea into action. The Institute of Preventive Medicine, Hyderabad, joined hands with NIRDPR to provide the medical arrangements. And what had begun as a spark in the mind of one student eventually brought together 51 blood donors.

That was perhaps the most powerful story behind the Blood Donation Camp–not merely the number of units collected, but how one person's initiative could mobilise an entire institution around a worthy cause.

The camp was organised at the NIRDPR Health Centre with the facilitation of the Institute of Preventive Medicine, Hyderabad. Students from the PGDM-RM and PGDRDM programmes played an active role through the Student Volunteer Committee, supported by faculty members and the Institute's administration. Students, faculty and staff came forward to donate blood, turning the campus into a space of voluntary service and collective responsibility.

Shri Manoj Kumar, Registrar; Dr Pranab Kumar Ghosh, Assistant Registrar; and Shri K. C. Behera, PRO, extended administrative support to the initiative. Academic guidance and encouragement were provided by Dr Jyothis Sathyapalan, Head, CPGS; Dr Aryashree Debapriya, Associate Professor, Centre for PG Studies and Distance Education; and Dr R. Ramesh, Centre for Rural Infrastructure.

Blood donation is, quite literally, a gift of life. Donated blood supports patients during emergencies, accidents, surgeries and other critical medical situations, and its availability ultimately depends on people voluntarily coming forward to donate. The camp therefore served not only an immediate public-health purpose but also helped reinforce awareness about voluntary blood donation.

For the students, however, the experience meant something more. It demonstrated that volunteerism is not merely about participating in an activity organised by somebody else; it is also about seeing a need, taking initiative and inspiring others to act. The Student Volunteer Committee turned an individual idea into an institutional effort, bringing students, faculty and staff together around service, compassion and social responsibility.

There is a familiar idea expressed in The Secret (authored by Rhonda Byrne): when a desire is held strongly enough and pursued with conviction, people, opportunities and circumstances can begin to align around it. Whether one describes it as conviction, positive intent or simply the power of initiative, the NIRDPR Blood Donation Camp offered a small but striking illustration.

One student had an idea.
A few others believed in it.
An institution stood behind it.
And 51 people came forward to give the gift of life.

Sometimes, that is all a meaningful change needs to begin—one spark.







Strengthening Community-Led Accountability: Advanced Audit Training and Field-Level Progress in Assam



Dr R. Murugesan, Professor & Head, NERC-Guwahati, with Community Auditors posing for photo

The strengthening of community-led systems of accountability is an important pillar of effective institutional governance under DAY-NRLM. Recognising the critical role that community institutions play in managing financial resources and implementing livelihood and social development interventions, NRLM Resource Cell (NRLM RC), NIRDPR-NERC has been supporting the capacity building of Community Auditors in Assam.

As part of this effort, nine batches of Advanced Audit Training have been successfully completed, covering 304 Community Auditors from all 35 blocks of Assam. The training initiative has helped create a pool of trained community professionals with enhanced knowledge and skills to undertake internal audits of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Village Organisations (VOs) and Cluster Level Federations (CLFs).

From CapacityBuilding to Field-Level Action

The true significance of the training is reflected in its translation into field-level practice. Following the capacity-building initiative, Community Auditors have started undertaking internal audits of community institutions across Assam. The progress as of 13 August 2026 provides an encouraging picture of the institutionalisation of community-led audit processes.

S. No.	Types of CBO	Total CBO	Internal Audit Completed for FY 2025-26 (as on 13-08-2026)	Achievement %
1	Self-Help Group (SHG)	363,370	**35,412**	**10%**
2	Village Organisation (VO)	**19,552**	**5,186**	**27%**
3	Cluster Level Federation (CLF)	**752**	**601**	**80%**

Source: ASRLM data

The data demonstrate particularly strong progress at the CLF level, with 601 of 752 CLFs–80%–having completed their internal audits for FY 2025-26.At the VO level, 5,186 out of 19,552 VOs, or 27%, have completed their audits. At the SHG level, 35,412 out of 3,63,370 SHGs, representing 10%, have completed the internal audit so far.

Beyond Compliance: Enabling Better Governance



Community-led auditing is not simply a mechanism for checking financial records. It provides an opportunity for community institutions to reflect on their systems, identify gaps, strengthen documentation and financial management, and take timely corrective measures.

The availability of trained Community Auditors at the grassroots level can therefore contribute to creating a culture where transparency and accountability become an integral part of community institution management.

The initiative also demonstrates the value of investing in community capacities. Rather than relying solely on external audit mechanisms, developing trained Community Auditors from within the community institutional ecosystem helps promote local ownership, sustainability and continuous institutional learning.

A Significant Milestone for Assam

The completion of nine batches of Advanced Audit Training, covering 304 Community Auditors across all 35 blocks, marks an important milestone in strengthening the audit ecosystemof Assam. The field-level audit results indicate that the capacity developed through the training is progressively translating into action across the three-tier community institutional structure.

The 80% achievement at the CLF level provides a strong foundation, while



the audit coverage of VOs and SHGs presents significant scope for further expansion. Going forward, continued handholding, quality assurance and timely follow-up of audit findings will be important to ensure that audits result not only in compliance but also in measurable improvements in institutional governance.

Looking Ahead

The journey from training 304 Community Auditors to establishing a functional community-led audit system across Assam represents an important step towards strengthening the sustainability and accountability of community institutions.

With trained auditors now available across all 35 blocks, the focus can progressively shift towards increasing audit coverage,improving audit quality,strengthening follow-up mechanisms and ensuring that audit findings lead to corrective action and institutional improvement.

The initiative aims to further strengthen the community audit system and reach the target of 422 trained Community Auditors across Assam, ensuring wider coverage and sustained community-led auditing practices.

Through this concerted effort, NRLM RC, NIRDPR-NERC and ASRLM are contributing to the institutionalisation of community-led accountability, strengthening the foundation for more effective and self-reliant community institutions across Assam.

This report is prepared by Ms. Sangita R. Barthakur, Mission Manager, NRLM RC, NIRDPR-NERC, Guwahati

NRLM-RC Officials Attend Zone 3 National Workshop on Supportive Supervision Framework Held in Srinagar



State Mission Director, J&K SRLM, and the Minister for Rural Development, Government of Jammu and Kashmir, with officials during the Zone 3 National Workshop

Re-centring Social Inclusion as a core mission priority

The National Mission Management Unit (NMMU) of DAY-NRLM, with the Jammu & Kashmir State Rural Livelihoods Mission as host, convened the Zone 3 National Workshop on the National Supportive Supervision Framework (NSSF) at Srinagar from 21 to 24 September 2026. Sixty-one participants from Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh took part in the four-day cross-learning exercise. The NRLM Resource Cell (NRLM-RC) represented NIRDPR at the workshop.

At the inaugural session, the State Mission Director and Additional Mission Director of J&K SRLM welcomed the delegates. The NMMU then presented the rationale for the NSSF and for organising the workshop as a peer-learning platform among States. The presentation set out Vision 2047 for Cluster-Level Federations (CLFs): institutions that are community-led, community-governed, and financially self-reliant. It also described a four-tier maturity trajectory. As of March 2026, assessments had been completed in six States, yet no Immersion Site had been declared. This gap was cited as the main reason to develop a shared, cross-State reading of institutional maturity.

The first day centred on the Round-1 field assessments of CLFs conducted by National Resource Persons (NRPs). Participants worked in groups around four NSSF lenses: CLF as a Social Entity; Goal-Directedness towards Self-Reliance; Horizontal Coordination over Rigid Verticality; and CLF as an Open System. The assessments examined five key pillars—Institutional and Governance Foundations; HR and Cadre Development; Financial Self-Reliance; Member-Level Outcomes; and Social Agency and Peer Learning.

State presentations brought out both challenges and promising practices. Ladakh highlighted emerging CLFs and an SHG enterprise generating net profits for its members. Jammu & Kashmir reported a high level of social-security enrolment among its assessed CLFs. Uttarakhand demonstrated strong LokOS updating and completion of statutory audits, while Himachal Pradesh showcased

Ujjwal MCLF as an advancing federation with strong performance in social agency and peer learning. Haryana's assessment pointed to gaps in member outcomes and social agency, while Punjab highlighted the need to strengthen digital transaction capture and CLF-level institutional systems. NSSF Workshop Srinagar.

The second day brought the State teams together to consolidate the findings. Of 42 cross-cutting issues identified across the assessments, 27 were evidenced in four or more States and were therefore prioritised. Common concerns included weak ownership of CLF-level vision and planning, limited CLF-owned staffing and HR systems, inadequate financial tracking, insufficient documentation of member-level livelihood gains, and limited translation of strong agency at SHG and VO levels into CLF-level institutional action.

A major feature of the workshop was the introduction of an offline-capable digital planning tool for CLFs and States. The tool enables preparation of CLF-level and State-level plans using the NSSF's four-tier framework and a criteria matrix covering governance, planning, staffing, financial performance, livelihoods, social protection, gender, community action and other indicators. A bank of 230 activities across the five pillars, along with a RACI matrix, was incorporated to clarify responsibilities and strengthen accountability across the CLF, State and national levels.

On the third day, State teams populated the digital planning tool and developed their Supportive Supervision Plans for Swavalambi CLFs. The planning exercise translated identified gaps into specific interventions, timelines, responsibilitis and expected results, while also defining State-level strategies and the support required from the NMMU. The workshop thus moved beyond assessment towards a structured, action-oriented approach to strengthening CLFs. NSSF Workshop Srinagar

The workshop concluded on 24 September with the valedictory address by Dr Shubhra Sharma, State Mission Director, J&K SRLM, followed by a guiding note from the Joint Secretary, Rural Livelihoods-I, Ministry of Rural Development. The discussions emphasised the need to position the CLF as the epicentre of activities, lay the foundation for one Model CLF Immersion Site per block, and explore a scoring and self-assessment mechanism for CLFs. Each State also outlined its plans for strengthening capacity and taking forward the NSSF approach.

The NRPs then presented the overall takeaways of the workshop, and each State outlined how it would build capacity for this assignment on returning home. In the Vote of Thanks, the Deputy Secretary, MoRD, thanked participants for a reflective discussion and observed that the approach was more dialogue-oriented than the earlier one.

Overall, the Srinagar workshop provided a common platform for States to reflect on CLF performance, identify shared institutional gaps and translate the NSSF framework into practical State- and CLF-level action plans. The emphasis on peer learning, evidence-based assessment, digital planning and clearly defined accountability marked an important step towards building stronger, self-reliant and community-owned rural institutions.

(Report prepared by Mr R. Ravi Naidu, Mission Executive – IBCB & MIS (i.c.) & Mr Venkateshwar Rao, Mission Manager, IBCB-SISD NRLMRC, NIRDPR)to strengthen capacity and advance

Mahua: India's Hidden Forest Economy

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Before my internship in Chikaldara Block of Amravati District, Maharashtra, I had heard about Mahua as a forest produce collected by tribal communities. I knew that people collect Mahua flowers and sell them in their raw form for around ₹40–50per kg. Interestingly, I had little idea of what could happen if the same Mahua were processed, packaged, and sold as a value-added product.

It was when I met Shanta Tai, who was making Mahua laddoos as part of her livelihood. She sells laddoos under the brand name Akansha for around ₹300 per 250 grams through the UMED outlet Vaidharba in Amravati. She earns lakhs through this activity, which I feel is a significant achievement for an SHG woman from a small village like Madki.

For me, this was surprising. I had always seen Mahua as something to be collected and sold for a relatively insignificant return. But here was a woman taking the same forest produce and turning it into a completely different product with much higher value.

Along with Mahua laddoos, Shanta Tai also sells honey, priced at around ₹315 for 250 grams. And she is not the only woman doing this. Shanta Tai also holds a certificate from the Indian Institute of Packaging and has access to modern packaging machinery.

However, value addition is not as easy as it may appear from the outside. The investment required for an individual can be quite high, approximately ₹3–5 lakh or more, depending on the particular machine. But when an entire group takes up the activity together, the burden can become more manageable, and UMED also provides support through subsidies for machinery costs.

Mahua Is SlowlyEntering the Formal Market

What I found even more interesting was that Shanta Tai's story is not an isolated one.

Value-added Mahua products are increasingly reaching formal retail and online markets. Tribes India (TRIFED) sells productssuch as Mahua cookies, laddoosand Mahua tea through its e-commerce platform. Universal Tribes markets Mahua Jam and Mahua-based combo packs. Chhattisgarh Herbals also offers products such as Mahua pickle, laddoos, RTS, and chutney through its website and on online marketplaces like Amazon and ONDC.

These examples show that Mahua is gradually moving from being a locally consumed forest product towards becoming a branded, packaged and commercially marketed value-added food.

There is also a brand called DesmondJi from Goa that sells Mahua spirits. I came across this while reading a BBC article titled "Mahua: The Indian Liquor the British Banned" by Sugato Mukherjee. The article provides an interesting perspective on Mahua's historical reputation and the British concern surrounding the popularity of Mahua liquor.

From ₹50 Raw Mahua to Value-Added Products

Another example that caught my attention comes from Gondiya, Maharashtra.

A Van Dhan Vikas Kendra at Uikey Shilpgram, Salekasa, collected 510 quintals of Mahua flowers and processed them into products such as Mahua Rab, Jam and Sharbat/Juice. TRIFED reports that value addition increased the reported market price from around ₹50 per kg for raw Mahua to ₹100–150 per kg for processed products.

This changed my perception of Mahua entirely. The opportunity may not always be about collecting more. Sometimes, the opportunity lies in adding more value to what is already being collected.

Mahua Is More than Just an Economic Opportunity

The potential of Mahua also goes beyond its economic value.

Mishra and Poonia (2019), in their review published in Nutrition & Food Science, reported that Mahua flowers are naturally rich in glucose, fructose and sucrose, supporting their use in food and beverage products. A study by Singh et al. found that Mahua flowers and fruits contain polyphenols and flavonoids and exhibit antioxidant activity in laboratory assays, suggesting potential as functional food ingredients.

Similarly, Kumar et al. (2020/2021) assessed Mahua flowers and fruits for minerals, polyphenols and antioxidant activity and reported measurable antioxidant potential and bioactive compounds. Research by Bakhara et al. also demonstrated that Mahua can be converted into products such as RTS beverages, squash, jam, bars, laddoos, and cakes, which received positive consumer appreciation.

So, when we look at the available research and the products already being made, the potential seems quite clear. But then comes the bigger question:

If Mahua has so much potential, why is it still not popular across India?

Where Are We Actually Lacking?

All of this sounds quite good when we read about it. But if we think carefully, Mahua still largely remains within the informal economy, as it is mainly sold in raw form or consumed locally. The brands I mentioned are still very few in number, and Mahua has not yet gained significant popularity at the pan-India level.

So, where are we lacking?
Is it marketing?
Is it a lack of demand?
Or is it something else?

My interactions with SHG women during my research revealed one important factor behind their success: their remarkable willingness to put in sustained hard work. People are often scared to take up such activities because they involve investment, effort and uncertainty. But they do not always see the outcomes that can come from it. I've seen a significant

increase in income from a little value addition.

At the same time, marketing and demand creation are important factors. At the district level, UMED Mart is doing quite well, but I also observed some inconsistencies.

The SHG women generally make products according to the demand they receive. But sometimes, when demand is high, they are unable to fulfil it because they do not have enough stock. These are some of the irregularities that I observed during my interaction with them.

The Challenges at the Ground Level

The difficulties are not limited to marketing. Local and tribal communities face challenges at both the collection and value-addition stages.

During collection, seasonal availability, labour- intensive harvesting, poor storage facilities, low bargaining power, limited market access and dependence on local traders can create difficulties.

At the value-addition stage, communities face challenges such as high initial investment, limited technical knowledge, inadequate working capital, lack of proper machinery, inconsistent production and difficulties in maintaining quality and standardisation.

Marketing and demand creation remain challenges,as many consumers are still unfamiliar with Mahua-based products. At the same time, SHG members may hesitate to invest in value addition because they are uncertain about the demand and the returns they will receive.

The Opportunity Is Already There

Despite these challenges, I believe the opportunity is already there.

Some platforms are doing quite well, and people like Shanta Tai are already showing what is possible. What we need now is greater investment in research and development, better market creation and, most importantly, the willingness among people to explore the opportunity.

Sometimes, people need to see the outcome before they are willing to take the risk.

For me, Shanta Tai was that outcome.

I went into the field thinking of Mahua simply as a forest product that tribal communities collected and sold for ₹40–50 a kilogram. I came back having seen how the same Mahua could be transformed into a branded product worth ₹300 for 250 grams–a remarkable shift from raw produce to value-added enterprise.

That experience made me realise that Mahua may not be lacking in potential. What may be missing is the recognition, investment and market support needed to unlock that potential and take Mahua beyond local markets.

Beyond the Training Hall: Rebuilding Capacity for India's Gram Panchayats

Mr Dnyanraj
PhD Scholar, NIRDPR



Mr Dnyanraj, PhD Scholar, interacting with a local artisan during Field interaction with a local artisan during a community visit



Mr Dnyanraj, PhD Scholar, NIRDPR, with officials and participants during a capacity-building initiative

I understand my village," a woman sarpanch in Akola told me, "but whenever the discussion turns to budgets, rules, or government procedures, I have to depend on the village secretary." Her statement captures one of the central dilemmas confronting Panchayati Raj today.

She was not inexperienced. She was the only woman in her community to have studied up to Class XII, had managed a micro-planning programme through her self-help group (SHG) for more than a decade, and had defeated four male candidates to win the sarpanch's seat on the strength of community trust alone. Yet once elected, she discovered that confidence and community connections were not enough. To lead effectively, she also needed to understand budgets, government guidelines, digital portals, planning processes, procurement norms, and departmental procedure – the grammar of the state itself.

Her experience is not an isolated one. Across India, elected representatives of gram panchayats are expected to function as local governments. Yet, the systems meant to support them continue to treat capacity building as a one-time training event rather than a continuous institutional process.

A Democracy of Numbers, Not Yet of Capability

Three decades after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, India has built one of the world's largest systems of grassroots democracy: more than three million elected representatives serve in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), nearly half of them women, and a substantial proportion drawn from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other historically marginalised communities. Electoral reservation has opened unprecedented spaces for local leadership. But representation, however historic, does not automatically translate into the

managerial and leadership capability required for a gram Panchayat to perform.

Consider the dual role every elected representative must reconcile. As a leader, she must read a diverse and often competing set of community aspirations and help residents access their entitlements within the Panchayats limited resources, ensuring no one is left behind. As a manager, she must simultaneously command a working knowledge of budgets, scheme guidelines, procedures, and systems governing the use of public funds. Few training curricula are designed to build both capacities at once.

The stakes are rising sharply. The Sixteenth Finance Commission has recommended INR 4.35 lakh crore for rural local bodies for 2026–31, a significant share of which will flow directly to Gram Panchayats. Critically, a portion of this grant is performance-linked: panchayats will be expected to raise their own-source revenue, maintain accounts, comply with audit requirements, and demonstrate institutional performance. In effect, they are being asked to function as accountable local governments – a mandate that presupposes capacities many gram panchayats, particularly in poorer, remote, and tribal regions, are still struggling to build.

Why the Training-Hall Model Falls Short

The prevailing model of capacity building is not equal to this new phase of decentralisation. Newly elected representatives typically attend a handful of sessions at the block or district level, oriented around schemes, official instructions, reporting formats, and targets. Far less attention goes to participatory planning, gram sabha facilitation, financial decision-making, gender-responsive governance, community mobilisation, or problem-solving under uncertainty – precisely the competencies that determine whether a panchayat merely complies or genuinely governs.

By the time elected representatives begin to internalise institutional relationships and procedures, a substantial part of their five-year tenure has already elapsed. In practice, many become dependent on panchayat secretaries and block-level functionaries for even routine tasks such as fund release and benefit transfer. These officials perform a vital function in executing the panchayat's mandate under elected supervision, but their work is itself shaped by administrative compliance, scheme targets, and reporting pressure. The result is that the leadership role of elected representatives remains underdeveloped, crowded out by the weight of straitjacketed programme guidelines.

Building Capacities, Building Institutions: Lessons from the Field

My fieldwork on gram panchayat governance and disaster resilience – conducted at Vevaji gram panchayat, Talasari block, Palghar district, and across the drought-prone talukas of Marathwada – points to a similar conclusion from a different angle: capacity building becomes meaningful only when it moves beyond the training hall and becomes embedded in everyday governance.

In Marathwada, participatory planning exercises on drought preparedness and water security raised concerns that extended well beyond infrastructure. Much like a toilet built but not used, or a water scheme installed but not maintained, a disaster-resilience investment sanctioned through the GPDP does not confer resilience merely because a structure exists. A check dam, an early-warning system, or a shelter requires ongoing local monitoring, drills, maintenance funds, and – above all – a gram panchayat that understands its own role within the wider Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) architecture.

This is where the coordination gap becomes visible. Gram panchayats are formally expected to integrate disaster risk reduction (DRR) into their GPDPs. Yet, the institutional linkage between the DDMA and the Gram Panchayat is frequently weak, procedural, and episodic rather than continuous. Elected representatives are rarely trained to read a hazard map, sequence a mitigation plan against GPDP financial ceilings, or negotiate convergence between DRR funds and other scheme heads – skills that are every bit as much "governance skills" as facilitation or negotiation are for social protection delivery.

These are governance challenges, not merely technical ones. They cannot be resolved through technical training alone; village-level leaders require sustained support in facilitation, negotiation, risk communication, and inter-institutional coordination.

Five Pathways for Reform

For capacity building to evolve from an event into an institution-building process, the ecosystem around the gram panchayat – panchayat secretaries, rozgar sahayaks, frontline workers, water and sanitation committees, SHGs, youth volunteers, and local technical service providers – must be strengthened as a whole. Five priorities stand out.

1.Provide high-quality, contextual training materials: Civil society organisations and academic institutions should be identified as panchayat knowledge centres, tasked with producing practical handbooks, videos, case studies, model gram sabha agendas, and financial decision tools in local languages. These materials should be continuously updated against emerging ground evidence of success, constraint, or failure, hosted through MoU-based arrangements with government, university, and civil society systems that combine resourcing and autonomy with built-in accountability. CSR funders and other donors are well placed to support such hubs.

2. Prioritise contextual mentoring over one-off training: District-level resource teams – combining experienced practitioners, former sarpanch's, women's federation leaders, retired officials, civil society members, academics, and technical experts – should provide sustained mentoring grounded in the local context. District-level degree and agriculture colleges could anchor this role alongside CSOs with a strong grassroots presence. Cluster-level mentors, in particular, should be available to women, SC/ST representatives, and first-time sarpanches, many of whom cannot easily travel for residential training owing to household responsibilities, mobility constraints, or wage loss. Utilising the existing infrastructure of gram panchayat meeting halls for cluster-level peer learning would substantially widen access.

3. Invest in AI and digital literacy for Panchayats: Elected representatives need multilingual, AI-enabled advisory systems capable of answering practical questions: Can this grant fund the repair of a drinking water system? What records are required for an audit? How should a gram sabha resolution be drafted? What steps govern the collection of user charges? A multilingual chatbot combined with human verification could make such guidance far more accessible – while remaining alert to the limits of rural internet connectivity and the need to verify AI-generated information against authoritative sources.

4. Promote collaboration across the Panchayat ecosystem: As panchayats assume growing responsibility for public assets and services, the entire Panchayat team – not the sarpanch alone – must build capacity together. Absent such technical understanding, procurement skill, tariff collection systems, and trained local human resources, infrastructure may exist on

paper while services remain unreliable in practice.

5. Make judicious CSR investments in institutional capacity, not just infrastructure: Over the last two decades, CSR funding has supported schools, drinking water systems, health facilities, livelihoods, natural resource management, and community infrastructure across rural India, and several such initiatives have produced high-quality models. Yet CSR projects typically build parallel implementation systems, on the assumption that Gram Panchayats lack the capacity to plan, procure, supervise, and sustain investments themselves. This may deliver good assets in the short run, but it rarely strengthens the underlying institution.

The Architecture of Learning

Capacity building is not a peripheral activity appended to the business of governance. It is the invisible infrastructure that determines whether public investment produces lasting outcomes. India has invested heavily in the architecture of decentralisation – constitutional reform, regular elections, fiscal transfers, and digital platforms. The next generation of reform must invest with equal seriousness in the architecture of learning, so that the sarpanch in Akola, and the thousands like her across Maharashtra and the country, need no longer choose between being trusted by her community and being competent within the state.



The National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR), an autonomous organisation under the Union Ministry of Rural Development, is a premier national centre of excellence in rural development and Panchayati Raj. Recognised internationally as one of the UN-ESCAP Centres of Excellence, it builds capacities of rural development functionaries, elected representatives of PRIs, bankers, NGOs and other stakeholders through inter-related activities of training, research and consultancy. The Institute is located in the historic city of Hyderabad in Telangana state. The NIRDPR celebrated its Golden Jubilee Year of establishment in 2008. In addition to the main campus in Hyderabad, this Institute has a North-Eastern Regional Centre at Guwahati, Assam, a branch at New Delhi and a Career Guidance Centre at Vaishali, Bihar.

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